

Terrorism Monitor

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IRAN: SUICIDE ATTACK IN CHABAHAR UNDERSCORES LOCAL TURMOIL

Brian M. Perkins

A suicide bomber detonated an explosive-laden vehicle at a police headquarters in the Iranian port city of Chabahar on December 6. The bombing left at least two individuals dead and injured more than a dozen others ([PressTV](#), December 6). The incident follows an earlier attack in Ahvaz on September 22, when several gunmen attacked a military parade, killing at least 29 and injuring more than 60 others (See [TM](#), October 19).

Ansar al-Furqan—a Sunni Baloch militant group—claimed responsibility for the attack in Chabahar the following day ([SITE](#), December 6). Ansar al-Furqan is based in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province and has claimed responsibility for several anti-regime attacks over the past several years, including an attack on an oil pipeline in Ahvaz in December 2017. Iranian authorities have reportedly arrested 10 individuals suspected of involvement in the attack and stated that more arrests would follow ([PressTV](#), December 9).

While the attack was not particularly devastating in terms of the death toll or destruction of property, it underscores the anti-regime sentiment boiling under the surface in provinces such as Sistan and Baluchestan and Khuzestan, as well as security vulnerabilities in Chabahar and beyond. The attack came at a time when security was reportedly heightened in preparation for Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Ground Force Commander Brigadier-General Mohammad Pakpour's visit to Chabahar.

Chabahar serves as a symbolic target, as it is the country's only port with direct access to the ocean and is largely exempt from U.S. sanctions. Chabahar, a Free Trade Industrial Zone, is also a symbol of economic and political inequality for the Sunni population in Sistan and Baluchestan Province. The Sunni community frequently speaks out about the marginalization of their group. The Iranian regime has typically maintained a tight grip on security throughout the country, but recent attacks in the past year have highlighted security vulnerabilities within the country and growing resentment toward the regime. The attack in Chabahar—while not devastating or an indication of an impending surge in attacks—is noteworthy both for being a rare suicide attack and because Chabahar is Iran's primary means of circumventing

U.S. sanctions. This places the regime in a complicated position in terms of how it frames the narrative of the attack.

Immediately following the attack, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif seemingly placed the blame on the UAE, and the regime frequently points to the Gulf nations as the source of insecurity within the country rather than acknowledging its local roots. [1] Although Ansar al-Furqan likely also operates or trains in the Pakistan border region—which was not mentioned by authorities—the group and the attack are rooted in local grievances that will only grow as the port comes closer to being operational, further fueling the economic disparity in the province and claims of political marginalization.

Notes

[1] Tweet posted by Javad Zarif on December 6 <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1070666069575122944>

MOZAMBIQUE: JIHADIST VIOLENCE CONTINUES TO RISE IN CABO DELGADO

Brian M. Perkins

Islamist attacks have quietly been on the rise in Mozambique over the past year, with dozens of attacks and upwards of 100 fatalities to date. Militants launched a series of attacks in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado in early December, killing more than a dozen and injuring several others. Although the assailants were not definitely identified, authorities believe the local Islamist militant group, Ansar al-Sunna, is responsible.

Ansar al-Sunna is hardly known outside of Mozambique and reportedly began as a religious organization before moving toward militancy in 2015 ([Club of Mozambique](#), May 23). Islamist attacks have historically not been a feature of Mozambique's security environment. The first confirmed Islamist attacks took place in 2017, when the group attacked three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia, Cabo Delgado province. There have been dozens of fatal attacks concentrated in Cabo Delgado since 2017, with an emphasis on the Palma district, which is expected to become the hub of a \$49 billion offshore liquified natural gas operation.

Until recently, little was known about the group's command structure other than it seemingly operated on a decentralized model. Mozambique's security forces, however, identified six individuals in August that they believe to be key leaders within the group—Abdul Faizal, Abdul Remane, Abdul Raim, Nuno Remane, Ibn Omar and a sixth individual known as Salimo ([Club of Mozambique](#), August 13). The group seemingly does not have an extensive operational network, and thus far has not expanded much beyond Cabo Delgado province. Ansar al-Sunna, however, should not be underestimated in its nascent stage, before it becomes more difficult to counter.

Mozambican security forces have cracked down on the region and have arrested hundreds of Muslim men and youth in Cabo Delgado since 2017, with 189 suspected members or collaborators on or awaiting trial. It is unclear if there is a broader security strategy that will be implemented in the wake of the most recent string of attacks, but security forces have already been accused of countless abuses ranging from arbitrary detention to

executions. President Filipe Nyusi has urged communities of Cabo Delgado to remain vigilant and warned against recruitment efforts stating, “don’t let yourselves be deceived by people who are using religious pretexts” ([Club of Mozambique](#), December 10). Nyusi also emphasized recent efforts to improve living conditions in the historically economically marginalized province; such as the opening of a new hospital, road improvements, and plans to establish a bank. Efforts to improve conditions for locals can be a good hedge against militant recruitment but can also easily be overshadowed by security forces abusing local civilians.

The lack of public claims and propaganda from the group has caused considerable speculation as to whether the group is more of a violent group of smugglers dealing in timber, rubies, and other local resources, or a more insidious Islamist extremist group akin to al-Shabaab or Boko Haram. The group’s origins as a religious organization, its alleged involvement in local mosques, and tactics such as beheading or burning civilians—including women and children—indicates the latter. It remains to be seen whether Ansar al-Sunna can successfully appeal to potential recruits in Cabo Delgado and whether it is resilient enough to withstand security operations that are likely to expand in the near future.

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Jihadists Are Making Gains in Idlib

Nicholas A. Heras

The de-militarized zone (DMZ) agreement reached by Russia and Turkey in Sochi on September 17—intended to stabilize the “Greater Idlib” region of north-west Syria (which includes all of Idlib governorate and parts of northern Hama, eastern Latakia, and western Aleppo governorates)—has been tested recently by the activities of the most prominent militant Salafist organization in Syria. Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS—Organization to Liberate the Levant)—which includes a large part of the former Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda Jabhat al-Nusra (JN—Victory Front)—continues to conduct attacks against the Assad government, despite the Sochi agreement ([Horrya](#) [Idlib], December 15; [Okaz](#) [Riyadh], November 2). The continued military activities of HTS in the Idlib DMZ has created tensions between Russia and Turkey; led to a large mobilization of Assad government forces on the periphery of the zone; and resulted in significant kinetic activity by the Syrian military inside the DMZ since September ([ETANA](#), December 10; [al-Monitor](#), December 5; [Enab Baladi](#) [Idlib], December 2).

Developments on the ground inside Greater Idlib, which are empowering HTS, are further challenging the spirit of the DMZ deal reached at Sochi. According to Syrian opposition sources, HTS is utilizing the pause in the conflict provided by the Sochi agreement to expand its social, political, economic and military power inside Greater Idlib. The militant Salafist organization is expanding its ability to shape events in Greater Idlib because it fields a more disciplined and coherent army than any of its competitors—particularly the Turkish-backed, Jabhat al-Wataniyya al-Tahrir (NLF—National Liberation Front), which is a coalition of mainly militant Sunni Islamist armed opposition groups. [1] HTS and the NLF periodically clash, although these battles are short-lived and highly localized due to the comparative advantage in fighting capabilities that HTS has over the NLF forces ([al-Dorar al-Shamiya](#) [Beirut], December 4; [Arabi 21](#) [Idlib], October 5).

Although the NLF has an estimated 80,000 fighters among its constituent groups, it suffers from a lack of coherent command, coordination, and rivalries among the different groups to attract Turkey’s support. [2] HTS

has a standing force of approximately 15,000 fighters of whom an estimated 90-95% are Syrian. Despite having approximately one-fifth the active forces as the NLF, HTS still enjoys superior institutional organization, chain of command and esprit de corps compared to other rebel groups in Greater Idlib. [3] This reality buttresses HTS' ability to win most battles against its NLF competitors, and supports its ability to exert strong social, political, and economic influence within Greater Idlib.

HTS' social and economic power in Greater Idlib is a product of the military capabilities that it can field. Turkey and the international community have sought to enact a strategy to isolate HTS from access to international humanitarian assistance and other types of support from foreign actors to erode HTS' power and influence vis-a-vis other armed opposition groups. This strategy, however, has thus far been frustrated by the power dynamics within the armed opposition in Greater Idlib (Middle East Eye [Idlib], December 8; IRIN, October 2). HTS controls most of the Syrian-Turkish border in Idlib governorate. Through its proxy opposition governance authority, the Salvation Government, HTS can shape governance and administration in Greater Idlib, including the ability to extract taxes from trade moving into and out of Idlib governorate through the Bab al-Hawa border point (al-Araby al-Jadid [Idlib], December 11; al-Modon [Idlib], November 2). [4]

The Bab al-Hawa border point is the main and most direct way for trade to move into and out of Idlib governorate, and although Turkey does not allow HTS an armed presence at Bab al-Hawa, the Salvation Government acts as HTS' agent at the border point. [5] Once beyond the border zone, HTS controls large parts of the vital M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Damascus) inter-governorate highways that cross through Greater Idlib, which allows the organization, rather than its proxy Salvation Government, to directly tax commerce, control the flow of humanitarian assistance, and when needed, freely move its forces around Greater Idlib to counter threats against it. [6] Despite international efforts to limit its power, HTS' control over the M4 and M5 in Greater Idlib allows it to control the lines of commerce and movement of people within, into, and out of Idlib governorate. HTS also dominates the throughways that the Turkish military must use to reinforce and resupply its 12 military outposts that monitor the DMZ. [7]

HTS' influence has developed further as the Salvation Government has sought to aggressively preclude competing authorities. These include local councils for individual communities, and the Turkish-backed, Syrian Interim Government (SIG) from running institutions—especially civil administration and the provision of services, that are not run by the Salvation Government. [8]

HTS' governance strategy, however, is not dependent on the Salvation Government. The militant Salafist organization has been steadily increasing the energy it has put into another line of effort, which is to build relationships and influence over local majlis al-a'yaan (council of notables)—the traditional, high-status and often wealthier landowning and merchant families in Greater Idlib. [9] Idlib governorate—a socially conservative region built on a primarily agricultural economy—has seen a large influx of people. More than 1.5 million of Idlib governorate's current population of more than 3 million people are internally displaced people (IDPs) from other regions of Syria. The governorate has also seen a boom in both trade from Turkey and the amount of inflow of humanitarian assistance (al-Jazeera [Doha], September 9).

While it is estimated that more than 2 million people in Idlib governorate need humanitarian assistance, the boom in the local economy is believed to have disproportionately benefited notable families throughout the governorate (United Nations, September 18). [10] It is also believed that a significant number of the local councils in Idlib are run as de facto social clubs for local elites, allowing them to control how humanitarian and other foreign assistance is distributed. [11] With international efforts to prevent HTS from benefiting from assistance aid, HTS has focused on marrying its Syrian commanders into local notable families and otherwise building close relationships with them. This allows the group the opportunity to try to circumvent efforts to frustrate it by gaining access to local councils and communities run by these notables. This strategy also allows it to draw from their community resources and humanitarian aid. [12]

HTS is developing a safe haven in Idlib that allows the organization to perform da'wa (proselytizing) among the local population and become tightly woven into the local politics, society, and economy of northwest Syria. [13] Although it is under pressure from its opponents—both Syrian and foreign—there are likely to be no credi-

ble competitors to HTS, except in the event of a major Turkish or Assad government military operation against it, for the foreseeable future. Further, HTS is digging roots deep enough into Greater Idlib, particularly Idlib governorate, that it would likely be able to regenerate itself from local recruits. Even if confronted by its opponents or if the Assad government invaded Greater Idlib, it would likely be the main force to lead a future, resurgent militant Sunni Islamist insurgency against Damascus.

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Notes

[1] Information comes from author's ongoing collaboration with PDC, Inc., which is an organization that has a large network of Syrian informants in Greater Idlib.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

Burkina Faso and the Looming Jihadist Threat to Coastal West Africa

Jacob Zenn

Ten years ago, the prospect that Nigeria would become a jihadist hotspot—let alone the world's third "most terrorized" country after Iraq and Afghanistan—received hardly any consideration (Africanews.com, December 6). Nevertheless, much has changed in ten years. Today the situation in northeastern Nigeria is worse than any predictions made a decade ago. Moreover, the violence from Nigeria has spilled over into neighboring Chad, Niger and Cameroon. This begs the question—are there "peaceful" countries today in West Africa that ten years from now could spiral into jihadist violence?

This article examines the security situation in southern Burkina Faso, which shares borders with "peaceful" countries on the West African coast, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. Those countries have largely been spared from jihadist violence, with the exception of the 2016 Grand Bassam attack in Côte d'Ivoire that left 16 dead. Now, however, they appear to be on the verge of suffering from jihadist spillover from Burkina Faso into the northern regions of their countries. This article first reviews recent attacks that have occurred in southern Burkina Faso and discusses the networks of groups operating there. It then highlights certain structural factors in coastal West African countries that jihadists could exploit to launch attacks similar to what they have done in Nigeria, if not Burkina Faso and Mali as well.

Attacks Spreading Towards Coastal West Africa

Geographically, Burkina Faso is the only country that borders all of the following coastal West African countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Therefore, those countries' border security inevitably depends on Burkina Faso. A sampling of recent attacks in southern Burkina Faso demonstrates that jihadists in the country are gradually becoming stronger and moving closer towards those countries' northern borders. For example:

- On August 22, militants attacked a customs post in Batié, Nounbiel province, which is at the far tip of Burk-

ina Faso and in between the borders of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (fasozine.com, August 22).

- On August 28, a roadside bomb that, “bore the hall-mark of attacks attributed to jihadists,” killed seven members of the security forces in Pama, Kompienga province, Burkina Faso, which is only a few kilometers from the borders with Togo and Benin ([Gulf Times](http://GulfTimes.com), August 28).

- On August 31, militants attacked a police office in Galgouli, Poni province, Burkina Faso, which sits directly on the border with Côte d'Ivoire; the police compared the militants' tactics to the operation in Batié one week earlier (Lefaso.net, August 31; Twitter.com/Menastream, August 31).

- On November 15, militants in Pama, which is near Togo and Benin, erected a checkpoint on a road for several hours to inspect for indicators of government personnel but let passengers travel onwards if they were civilians, which led to apprehension among civilians in the area about a lack of government presence ([Actuburkina](http://Actuburkina.com), November 15).

- On December 12, militants engaged in gunfire with the Burkinabe police in Nadiagou, Kompienga province, which, like Pama, is near Togo and Benin (Twitter.com/Menastream, December 12).

- On the same day, on December 12, a police post in Bourom Bourom, Poni Province, which is less than 50 kilometers to the border with Ghana, was attacked (Lefaso.net, December 12).

Who is Behind the Attacks?

Most of these attacks have been unclaimed and reported to be carried out by “unidentified armed men” (hommes armés non encore identifiés). In theory, the attacks could have been carried out by regular bandits. The targets, frequency, and tactics, however, suggest a level of capability and organization similar to more formal jihadist groups or networks. Moreover, an arrested militant from Burkina Faso in Mali, Adama Konate, was described as a “coordinator” on the tri-state border between Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Burkina Faso. Another militant, Abdallah Sawadogo, had been ordered by Ansar Dine in Mali to set up a branch in

Burkina Faso (Fasozine.com, December 13; Twitter.com/Menastream, December 13).

Another cell that was broken up in Koutiala, Mali led to the arrest of Sawadogo's brother. That cell had reportedly been targeting the capitals of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso ([crossainceafrique](http://crossainceafrique.com), December 12; Twitter.com/Menastream, December 12). Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its respective Fulani-oriented Malian and Burkina Faso-based affiliates, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and Ansaroul Islam, have already been involved in attacks on foreigners near Abidjan (Grand Bassam), Bamako, and Ouagadougou ([Terrorism Monitor](http://TerrorismMonitor.com), February 10, 2017). Notably, however, these arrested militants were from the majority Mossi ethnic group in Burkina Faso that does not have the same historical narratives of jihad as Fulanis, who have been the primary recruitment targets of jihadists in Mali and Burkina Faso to date ([Terrorism Monitor](http://TerrorismMonitor.com), November 13, 2015).

It becomes evident, therefore, that AQIM networks have begun penetrating Burkina Faso and probably have cells that have reached the borders of coastal West African countries or operate there. Nevertheless, there are also Islamic State in Greater Sahara (ISGS) militants active in those areas, with that group having, among others, attacked a school and a bar not far from the border with Benin in Tapoa province, Burkina Faso, in November and December (Twitter.com/Menastream, November 23; Lefaso.net, November 24; Twitter.com/Menastream, December 9). Those attacks, like the ones frequently seen in northern Burkina Faso on schools of Western education—which have led to the closure of 220 schools—appear to be ideologically oriented ([Jeuneafrique](http://Jeuneafrique.com), October 23). That again would suggest jihadists, not bandits, are involved, although in some cases jihadists may double as bandits and vice-versa. Crossover between militants in ISGS and AQIM groups in Burkina Faso also likely exist, considering they do not appear to be fighting each other; they come from a similar historical lineage with AQIM; and are operating in the same places.

The Operational Environment

It is also worth bearing in mind that the populations in the northern regions of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin are predominantly Muslim and some people—especially in northern Benin and parts of the other three countries—are ethnically and linguistically linked with

northern Nigerian Hausas. These populations could enable not only positive trade exchanges but also the spread of negative jihadist ideologies. Shaykh Jaafar Mahmud Adam, who was a mentor of former Boko Haram leader Muhammed Yusuf, for example, conducted preaching (dawa') in Benin, Togo, and Ghana (kubanni.abu.edu, 2009). Such exchanges have certainly continued with other less prominent Wahhabist preachers since his assassination by Boko Haram in 2007 after he fell out with the group. Ghana, for example, has also witnessed similar trends to Nigeria since the 1990s where hardline Wahhabist groups, such as one called Ahl as-Sunna, which was incidentally the same name as Adam's group in Nigeria, have clashed with Sufis. [1] Jihadist groups, therefore, could find ideologically similar Wahhabist adherents in the northern regions of these countries even if such adherents have not been prone to violence yet.

In Burkina Faso, it is also important to recall that jihadist activities only occurred after the country's political turmoil in 2015. Prior to then, the Burkinabe leader, Blaise Compaoré, had dealings with AQIM mediators. The country, however, lost those relationships after the coup. The breakdown of "deals" with jihadists may have contributed to the spike in terrorist attacks since 2015 (Jeuneafrique, November 26, 2014).

The spillover and expansion of jihadist activity from Mali into Burkina Faso and now from there toward the borders of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin is a trend worth monitoring. Once across the borders, the jihadists will likely seek their fellow kin ethnically or ideologically as well as other communities that are alienated or politically marginalized where jihadist narratives of Muslim-Christian rivalry can resonate. In Mali, for example, jihadists have exploited intra-Muslim ethnic tensions between Fulanis and Dogons. Even more apparent religious differences would presumably be easier for them to exploit, especially because—like in Nigeria—the country's coastal Christian populations tend to be better off economically than the Muslim populations (rfi.fr, May 4, 2016).

Ten years ago, few suspected Nigeria would become a land of jihad, and only several years ago Burkina Faso was off the jihadism radar. Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, and Benin are currently considered to be relatively immune from jihadism, but it appears, on the contrary, that

they are on the cusp of being on the receiving end of attacks.

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Notes

[1] David Owusu-Ansah's Interview with al-Hajj Ibrahim Umar, Accra, Ghana, July 14, 2005: kora.matrix.msu.edu

Mauritania—Will Islamist Crackdown Make It a Terrorist Target?

Andrew McGregor

When Mauritania's President Mohamed Ould Abd al-Aziz identified political Islamists as extremists and national enemies last August, his bluntness surprised some observers: "Proponents of political Islam are all extremists... Islamists, who practice politics and wear ties, can take up arms if they cannot achieve their goals via politics" ([Saudi Gazette](#), August 31).

Faced with what authorities believe is religious and political interference in Mauritania by Iran and Qatar and the threat posed by jihadists lurking along the border with Mali, the president has undertaken several steps to scale back Islamist activities in Mauritania. These include the closing of Islamic universities and moving towards a ban on the Muslim Brotherhood. Mauritanian troops are also now operating with the French-backed Sahel Group of Five (G5S—a regional security and development alliance that includes Mauritania, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) to tackle Islamist terrorism throughout the Sahara-Sahel region. Mauritania's poverty and an unemployment rate of 40 percent, however, make it an inviting target for political interference and religious agitation.

The Presidential Succession

Elections last September gave the ruling Union for the Republic (Union pour la République —UPR) party a majority in Mauritania's National Assembly. The president has promised to step down at the end of his second term in 2019, though some suspect he may still be considering a third term. Abd al-Aziz is expected to choose his own successor and may select a military official as Mauritania's next president with the support of the reliably loyal UPR. Abd al-Aziz is a former UPR leader but was required to officially step away from the party when he became president. The Mauritanian opposition has warned that the nation's stability, "will suffer if the next president again comes directly from the army ranks" ([Arab Weekly](#), November 4).

General Mohamed Ould al-Ghazouani is considered a favorite to succeed Abd al-Aziz, but his November 4 appointment as Minister of Defense may be a sideways move intended to derail his succession. It is suggested that Abd al-Aziz fears his post-presidential influence will evaporate under a strong president like Ould al-Ghazouani, while the more pliable Colonel Cheikh Ould Baya—currently speaker of parliament and a UPR stalwart—might be more acceptable as Abd al-Aziz's successor ([Arab Weekly](#), November 4).

Mauritania's Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Education

Leading Mauritania's political opposition is the National Rally for Reform and Development (Rassemblement national pour la réforme et le développement —RNPRD), better known as "Tewassoul." Mohamed Mahmoud Ould al-Sidi leads the party, which is closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Abd al-Aziz claims that the Muslim Brotherhood has caused the destruction of several Arab countries," adding that the Brothers are working inside the political opposition to divide and destroy Mauritanian society ([Saudi Gazette](#), August 31). The Tewassoul leader has rejected charges of religious-political extremism:

"[The authorities] are extrapolating the reality of other Islamists upon us. It is better for them to give proof and facts to back their accusations. The difference between us and the others is that we are inspired by Islamic values in our political activities while others are exploiting Islam for their political benefit" ([Arab Weekly](#), September 30).

In late September, authorities shut down two Islamic higher education institutions in Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital. These institutions—the University of Abdullah ibn Yasin and the Center for Training Islamic Scholars—were both believed to be closely tied to the Tewassoul Party. Mauritanian Muslim Brotherhood leader and prominent preacher Mohamed al-Hassan Ould Dadou was a leading faculty member at both institutions. The action resulted in student demonstrations and the arrest of two academics ([University World News](#), October 2).

The day after the closures, Ould Dadou did not attack the government directly, but used his Friday sermon to warn that Arab countries were being, “destroyed by despotism and injustice, the main causes for the destabilization of nations,” swept up in the Arab Spring ([Qantara](#), September 26).

In preference to the opposition-affiliated schools, Ould Abd al-Aziz has stated his support for establishing an Islamic education center in Mauritania that would be affiliated with al-Azhar University in Cairo, a bastion of anti-extremism closely watched by the Egyptian government ([Egypt Today](#), March 19).

Mauritania and the Struggle for the Middle East

Mauritanians are overwhelmingly followers of the Sunni Maliki madhab (school of Islamic jurisprudence), but there are fears amongst top clerics and other officials in Mauritania of an Iranian campaign to convert Mauritani-ans to Shi’ism. [1]

Relations between Iran and Mauritania began to warm in 2008, after the military coup led by Abd al-Aziz and the consequent severing of relations with Israel. Since then, however, Mauritania has been pulled into the Arab-Iranian dispute in the Middle East and relations with Iran have suffered as a result.

Iran’s ambassador to Mauritania was called into the Mauritanian Foreign Ministry on May 25, where he was informed that the government would not accept any activities by the Iranian embassy intended to, “change the doctrine or creed of Mauritanian society.” The ambassador was further informed that the state was appointing a new imam for the Shiite Imam ‘Ali mosque in Dar Naim (a suburb of Nouakchott), where scholarships were arranged for young Mauritanians to study at Shiite institutions in Iran and Lebanon ([Sahara Media](#) [Nouakchott], May 29). For its part, Iran denied the meeting ever took place, claiming Saudi Arabia was behind the, “rumors,” published in Mauritanian media ([Fars News](#) [Tehran], May 30).

In early June, Mauritania was one of several Arab nations to join the anti-Qatar, “Quartet,” of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in cutting diplomatic ties with Qatar over its alleged support for terrorism and religious extremism. A Mauritanian government spokesman, Mohamed Ishaq al-Kenti,

claimed that Qatar was funding both Tewassoul and the Mauritanian Muslim Brotherhood ([Egypt Today](#), September 8). UPR chief Sidi Mohamed Maham stated in October that, “all Qatari attempts at intervention in [Mauritania] have failed... their bad intentions are clear towards the state of Mauritania” ([al-Arabiya](#), October 5).

The Military Dimension

Mauritania’s military struggle with modern jihadism began in June 2005, when militants belonging to Algeria’s Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat—GSPC) crossed the border and attacked the Lemgheity military camp in Mauritania’s far north, killing 17 soldiers before withdrawing with prisoners, weapons and vehicles.

Only weeks after the 2008 military coup, gunmen from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) captured a Mauritanian patrol at Tourine. All 12 members of the patrol were decapitated and mutilated ([RFI](#), September 16, 2008). The incident spurred General Ould Abd al-Aziz (then President of the High Council of State) and his old comrade, General Ould al-Ghazouani, to embark on an energetic program of reforms in the military designed to increase its efficiency, skills and operational capability. The two officers first met in 1980 at the Meknes military academy in Morocco and have operated closely ever since.

The most important step in the military reforms was to create small but highly autonomous and mobile Special Intervention Groups (Groupements spéciaux d’Intervention—GSI) led by energetic junior officers. The GSIs, each consisting of about 200 men, are capable of finding and destroying jihadist groups from advanced positions. Arms that were once directed to presidential security units were diverted to increase the firepower of the GSIs ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 8, 2017; [Le Point Afrique](#), July 18). American weapons and coordination with the Mauritanian Air Force’s Brazilian-made A-29 Super Tucano light attack aircraft gave Mauritanian counter-insurgency operations a new punch.

According to General Ould al-Ghazouani, military action is not enough: “We need development, to fight against the extreme poverty of a population that has no water, no food... There cannot be a rich army and a poor population” ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 8, 2017). The general has identified several areas where military efficiency

could be improved, including the provision of updated maps, a computerized operations room and technological training for recruits ([Jeune Afrique](#), November 8, 2017).

General Hanena Ould Sidi, who was also heavily involved in the post-2009 military restructuring, has noted it was also necessary to simultaneously strengthen the judiciary, promote development and intervene in Islamic education to discourage extremism and, “to disseminate the good teaching of Islam” ([Le Point Afrique](#), July 18).

Improvements in military performance became visible in June 2011, when the army destroyed an AQIM base in Mali’s Wagadou Forest (70 km from the border) in an attack that left 15 militants dead (See [TM](#), July 7, 2011). AQIM followed up with a retaliatory raid on the Mauritanian military base at Bassiknou, in the southeast corner of the country in July 2011, but a decisive Mauritanian air-strike the following October on the Wagadou Forest destroyed two vehicles loaded with explosives in preparation for another attack on Mauritanian positions. Local AQIM commander Tayyib Ould Sid Ali was also killed, and after that AQIM operations against Mauritania tapered off.

The G5 Sahel

Though Mauritania’s military is still short of funding, training, and advanced arms, it is fully committed to participation in the French-backed G5S anti-terrorist alliance. The total force consists of seven battalions—two each from Niger and Mali, and one each from Mauritania, Chad and Burkina Faso. France provides intelligence and logistical assistance through its Operation Barkhane, a French counter-terrorist operation in the Sahara-Sahel region. Unlike its G5S partners, Mauritania does not allow French troops on its soil.

The G5S has three zones of operation. The first is the Mali-Mauritania border region, the second is the triangular border region shared by Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, while the third zone is along the Niger-Chad border. Mauritania and Mali each contribute a battalion to the G5S’s Western Zone of operations. Mauritania has a history of cross-border military operations in northern Mali, endured with varying degrees of acquiescence from the weak Malian government.

After a series of successful jihadist attacks in Mali and Burkina Faso (including a suicide bombing that destroyed the G5S headquarters), Mauritanian general Hanena Ould Sidi succeeded Mali’s General Didier Dacko as the G5S Joint Force commander in July. Ould Sidi studied at the Meknes military school in Morocco, commanded Mauritanian units in Côte d’Ivoire and the Central African Republic (CAR) and is a former director of military intelligence in Mauritania ([RFI](#), July 18). The new G5S second-in-command is U.S.-educated Chadian general Oumar Bikimo, who has commanded Chadian troops in northern Chad, Mali, and the Central African Republic.

After the attack on its HQ, the G5S decided to move its headquarters from Sévaré to Bamako, but is still awaiting an exact location from the Malian government. Funds pledged to the G5S have been slow to arrive, and the force is still short of vitally needed equipment ([L’Indicateur du Renouveau](#) [Bamako], November 14).

Conclusion

Typical of a career military man, President Ould Abd Aziz is taking a direct approach to the problem of political Islam, attempting to eliminate armed Islamists beyond Mauritania’s borders while forcing domestic Islamists to the political and religious sidelines of Mauritanian society. Meanwhile, the nation’s economic weakness, high unemployment, and deep Islamic traditions make it attractive to extremists. The combination of a potential state-wide ban of the Muslim Brotherhood, an aggressive military stand against jihadism and uncertainty over the presidential succession could make Mauritania a target for exploitation from regional jihadist groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa'l-Muslimin, which is highly active just across the border with Mali.

However, there are reasons why Mauritania might survive this period of uncertainty. There appears to be little internal support for armed Islamism at this time, and regional jihadists do not appear to consider Mauritania a priority since their 2011 defeat in the Wagadou Forest. Much will depend on how far the president or his successor will go in attempting to root out Islamist influence in politics and education. The emergence of a significant degree of religiously-based internal dissent could act like a beacon for the region’s armed jihadists.

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Notes

[1] United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report for 2017, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/281008.pdf>.