SOMALIA: RISE IN AL-SHABAAB ACTIVITY IN CENTRAL SOMALIA

Brian Perkins

Al-Shabaab has made a notable resurgence over the past several months, conducting numerous attacks across the country, including in the capital, Mogadishu. The majority of the group's recent operations have centered on areas in southern Somalia—however, there has been a notable uptick of activity in central Somalia, where the group has not been particularly active in the past year.

Al-Shabaab's Shahada News Agency released a report claiming responsibility for 17 attacks in central Somalia over a nine-day period, which is particularly significant given the lack of al-Shabaab activity in the region over the past year (SITE, November 19). A significant number of the attacks took place in Mudug and Glamudug, primarily targeting government forces and aligned militias. The group, however, has also conducted numerous successful attacks on civilians in central Somalia. Most notably, on November 26, al-Shabaab members conducted a complex attack on a religious center in Galkayo, Mudug region. The militants detonated an explosive-

laden vehicle to breach the perimeter before gunmen opened fire on those inside, killing 20 people including prominent Sufi leader Sheikh Abdiweli Ali Elmi Yare (Garowe, November 26).

The United States has taken notice of al-Shabaab's increased frequency of attacks and operations in central Somalia. At least six U.S. drone strikes have occurred in the Mudug region since November 19, the highest frequency of strikes in Somalia since U.S. President Donald Trump ended policy limitations on drone strikes in March 2017. According to AFRICOM reports, the drone strikes have killed more than 50 al-Shabaab fighters and destroyed numerous operational bases and weapons caches. The highest number of casualties occurred during the first strike on November 19 near the Debatscile area of the Mudug region. The strike reportedly targeted an al-Shabaab camp and killed an estimated 27 militants. (AFRICOM, November 20). Other strikes have taken place in Qeycad, Haradere, and near Galkayo.

In addition to the strikes, AFRICOM Commander General Thomas D. Waldhauser made a rare visit to Somalia on November 28 for high-level talks with Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed and other top Somali defense officials on security in the country

(AFRICOM, November 27). The meeting suggests further cooperation and likely a continued increase in U.S. efforts against al-Shabaab.

Drone strikes have been relatively successful in degrading al-Shabaab's leadership and resources in the past few years—however, the group's operations in the past year are evidence of its resilience. Al-Shabaab has demonstrated a significant ability to move about the country and relocate to areas where security is lacking. Until AMISOM and Somali ground forces can improve their ability to capture and hold territory without leaving significant swaths of territory unsecured, drone strikes will likely only push the group into hiding in other areas of the country.

MALAYSIA: ABU SAYYAF ACTIVITY IN MALAYSIA INCREASES AS GROUP LOSES GROUND IN PHILIPPINES

Brian Perkins

Despite persistent military operations, Abu Sayyaf Group remains resilient and is reportedly increasing activities within and along the coast of Sabah, Malaysia. The Eastern Sabah Security Command (Esscom) issued an alert in late October that Abu Sayyaf Group was operating in Sabah's waters. The warning stated that the organization was looking to loot foreign vessels and kidnap high-value individuals and vessel crew members (Daily Express, November 1). The threat, however, is not limited to Sabah's waters, as evidenced by recent security operations on the ground in Sabah and Putrajaya.

Abu Sayyaf Group has faced stiff resistance from the Philippine army—particularly in its stronghold of Jolo—over the past several years. The organization has lost both significant territory and revenue streams. The group, however, remains resilient and is looking toward Malaysia for revenue and recruitment, including the recruitment of young children.

Esscom's alert followed an incident off the coast of Semporna Town in Sabah on September 11, when two unidentified kidnappers with M-16s captured two Indonesians from a fishing vessel. The incident was the first confirmed kidnapping in the area in more than two years. Authorities noted that while the kidnappers remain unidentified, it is likely that either Abu Sayyaf Group was behind the incident or that the kidnappers delivered the individuals to the group. Police officials also believe that local illegal immigrants—likely from the Philippines—supplied the kidnappers with information on the targets (Channel News Asia, September 18).

Malaysian security forces have carried out numerous security operations in recent months to crackdown on terrorist groups and sympathizers. During operations between October 30 and November 12, Malaysia arrested eight militants, the majority of which belonged to Abu Sayyaf Group (Channel News Asia, November 16). Inspector General of Police, Fuzi Harun, noted that among those arrested, the majority were Filipinos living in Malaysia and that they were involved in kidnapping-for-ransom and recruiting children to use as human shields in Basilan. An unnamed 35-year-old Filipino man

that was arrested was also reportedly involved in the beheading hostages being held by Abu Sayyaf Group. Also among those arrested was another unnamed individual who is reportedly an Abu Sayyaf sub-commander with close ties to notorious senior group leader Furuji Indama ([The Sun Daily](#), November 16).

Concerns over an increase in Abu Sayyaf activity in Malaysia grew further after intelligence reports indicated that Hatib Hajan Sawadjan, an Abu Sayyaf sub-commander known for involvement in kidnapping, escaped a battle with the Philippine Army in Jolo on November 16 ([Straits Times](#), November 22).

While Malaysian authorities have reportedly thwarted at least 10 other kidnapping attempts and made several high-profile arrests, there are thousands of illegal Filipino immigrants in Sabah. Many of them have relatives in Abu Sayyaf or those that are vulnerable to coercion. The arrest of an Abu Sayyaf sub-commander that had long been operating in Sabah coupled with the escape of Hatib Hajan Sawadjin suggests Abu Sayyaf activity in Sabah and its waters is likely to increase as the group seeks refuge from the Philippine Army as well as new members and revenue to support operations in Jolo.

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Terror Threat Turns Inward on Central Asia

Ashley Scarfo

Central Asian countries' reputation as exporters of radicalized extremists appears to be giving way to one marked by a growing threat of terrorism domestically. A number of incidents in Tajikistan over the last year highlight the problem of increasing militant activity that targets both foreign and national interests. Several factors—the Islamic State's shift in focus toward Afghanistan following losses in Iraq and Syria; growing Chinese influence in Central Asia; and ongoing repression by authoritarian governments—point toward a more widespread threat, however, that is likely to affect the region as a whole.

On November 13, Tajikistan's authorities confirmed that they had apprehended 12 suspects with alleged ties to IS who were planning an attack against a Russian military base and school near Dushanbe. Officials claim that the would-be perpetrators, arrested on November 4, had been "recruited" by IS online and had taken an online oath of allegiance to the group. The incident follows two others in recent months with apparent links to IS. Most recently, a large prison riot reportedly instigated by IS adherents in the city of Khujand, in northern Tajikistan, on November 8, killed more than 50 people ([Asia Plus](#), November 14). The second incident was the widely publicized killing of four foreign tourists cycling outside of Dushanbe in July. IS retroactively claimed responsibility for both incidents via its Amaq News Agency ([SITE](#), November 8).

The thwarted attack against the Russian 201st military base in Tajikistan prompted Russian officials to increase security at the facility, suggesting that they believe there to be an ongoing, credible threat of attacks against the site—if not the region more broadly. Russia has been concerned with increasing militant activity in Central Asia since at least early 2017. Officials stated in June 2017 that they were reinforcing security at bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, citing the "deteriorating" security situation in Afghanistan ([Asia Plus](#), June 8, 2017). As early as 2014, when U.S. forces began to withdraw from Afghanistan—but particularly since the military "defeat" of the IS Caliphate in early 2018—foreign observers have expressed similar concerns over a worsening mili-

tant threat in Afghanistan, which shares a 1,357-kilometer border with Tajikistan, a 744-kilometer border with Turkmenistan, and a 144-kilometer frontier with Uzbekistan. Spillover violence from Afghanistan into Central Asia is likely. At least some of the estimated 2,500-4,400 Central Asian fighters who traveled to Iraq and Syria have almost certainly shifted their focus to the Afghan battlefield, or are seeking to return to their native countries to carry out attacks (CAP, October 25).

Violence in nearby Afghanistan exacerbates the long-standing threat from radicalization driven by the repressive policies of Central Asia's authoritarian regimes, with Kazakh policies being among the most draconian. The country's 2011 Religion Law outlawed all unregistered religious groups. Amendments passed in 2016 have further narrowed the window of acceptable religious activity and implemented strict punishments including fines and lengthy prison sentences for individuals who violate the law. In June, the Senate of Kazakhstan began considering additional, similar amendments (Forum 18, June 5). Data showing that law enforcement personnel represent about 85 percent of all terrorism-related fatalities in Central Asia in the last ten years suggest that individuals who enforce such repressive policies are the preferred targets of terror attacks in the region (CAP, October 25). However, such reports of attacks and other terrorist activity must continue to be taken with a grain of salt. Governments in the region tightly control the press and have a broad definition of terrorism that also encompasses political opposition, criminality, and other activity.

Moving forward, militants and extremist sympathizers may also diversify their activities to increasingly target foreign interests in Central Asia. The July attack on foreign tourists in Tajikistan, for instance, could encourage IS adherents to carry out similar opportunistic attacks in the future. The growing Chinese presence in Central Asia—exemplified by Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative—also has the potential to draw extremist ire. Central Asians are likely to be highly sympathetic to Kazakh, Kyrgz, and Uighur Muslim minority groups reportedly being detained en masse in "reeducation" camps in Xinjiang (New York Times, November 6). As with repressive policies in Central Asia, alleged ethnic cleansing in China could inspire terrorist attacks against the country's foreign interests. Whether any such plots will be successful almost certainly depends on the effectiveness of local security forces.

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Islamic State's Continued Presence and Footprint in Syria

Nidal Betare & Bassam Barabandi

The current Islamic State (IS) strategy in Syria is based on two connected pillars—centralization, and networks of locals and middlemen. It is clear from the IS publication, "Rome" or "Rumiyah," that the group realized it would not be able to maintain a sustainable "Islamic State." With this realization, IS prepared its members for the phase when they lose their terrain and call the "hidden soldiers of Allah" to join the fight across the world. [1] Through their publications, IS began giving instruction and guidance to their hidden soldiers around the world on how to do things such as conduct "car bomb" attacks. The group even chose a picture of a U-Haul truck as an example of what to use, and an image from a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade as an example of what to target. [2]

The Centralized Sleeper Cell Structure and its Resources

In March, IS dissolved the "al-Rikaz" depot responsible for the economic management of IS, and transformed it into a new entity called "the war affairs committee." Activists believe that this committee centralized and structured their sleeper cell hierarchy. It reportedly appointed a leader for each cell; armed and funded the cells; and instructed them to stay dormant until further notice. This is unless of course there was a need to defend themselves or another necessary task. [3] With this transformation, the structure of IS went back to where it was before the "Caliphate declaration," but with more organization and significantly more resources.

IS collected billions of dollars over the years through oil trade, which allowed them to finance and build a coherent governance system. A full social services structure existed where tax revenue played an important role in maintaining the system.

That meant that the system funded itself and losing oil revenue would not result in the system's collapse.

The group was able to grow its networks through the locals of areas it controlled inside Syria. They did this through brainwashing programs in schools and institutions and through their organizations focused on children, like the Cubs of Caliphate, or "Ashbal al-Khilafa"(SWI, March 8). These strategies still exist and are some of its most important tools. The majority of these brainwashed children have not been exposed to any counter-IS narratives and there are more than 80,000 children out of school today in Der Ezzor, where the education sector is facing serious challenges due to the lack of resources and insecurity (deirezzor24, October 4). [4]

Over the years, IS managed to develop strategic relationships with middlemen who would make lucrative deals for them—making IS wealthier than when it began in 2014, with an organized system for revenue. [5] IS stored gold, money, and weapons in Raqqa. Prior to the U.S.-led coalition operations to liberate Raqqa, IS packed all the gold and money in small carton boxes, loaded it into trucks and relocated. Weapons—including heavy weaponry such as missiles—were moved and hidden in the desert. [6]

Throughout the crisis in Syria, IS was able to strike evacuation agreements with the Syrian regime, unlike other armed actors on the ground. IS was allowed to leave different areas in Syria to the east and southeast with their weapons, including those gained from fighting with other armed groups and those taken from the Iraqi army.

Given its structural changes, continued revenue, and resources, it is fair to conclude that despite losing its territories, IS might have gained in capacity and strength and is as dangerous as a group of sleeper cells.

Infiltrating SDF

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—in coordination with the civil councils of both al-Raqqa and Der Ezzor—has developed a strategy to reconcile with the tribes—especially those who pledged allegiance to IS—by creating a local mediation process. According to this process, the tribal members who were once IS fighters, members, or Emirs, can be granted amnesty and return to their normal life. This process has even taken a further step, as 22 former IS leaders—funders, merchants, and those who brokered oil deals between IS and the Syrian regime—are now working with the SDF. [7]

As a result of this SDF policy, local communities have grown increasingly distrustful of both the SDF and its backer, the U.S. military. [8] Locals and activists believe that many of these former IS leaders and the estimated 200 former IS fighters who joined SDF are still ideologically loyal to IS and will switch sides if and when needed. Omar Abu Laila, the executive director of Der Ezzor24, explains that as a result of this policy, people in Der Ezzor have stopped using social media or being publicly pro-SDF or U.S. as they worry about the resurgence of IS and retaliation. [9] This is important because it demonstrates that locals in the area are afraid of IS returning and that locals are disappointed and now distrustful of both SDF and U.S. forces.

This distrust and fear was evident on November 3, when Bashir al-Hwaidi, a well-known tribal leader from al-Affadlah tribe in al-Raqqa, was assassinated (al-Ghad al-Soury, November 3). A few hours after his assassination, tribes released statements condemning the assassination and indirectly accused SDF of being behind the operation (Horrya, November 4). They called on the "Kurds" to leave the city and give control back to its "Arab residents." These tribes rejected American participation in the funeral of al-Hwaidi and asked the SDF leaders who came to the funeral to leave (Geiroon, November 10). One statement read, "tribes in the 20th century liberated Syria from French colonialism, these tribes can always fight and liberate their areas again."

This assassination proved that IS has a strong network of informers and sleeper cells. It showed their ability to operate successfully in different situations and the level of sophistication they have developed through the experiences they gained running a state. Most importantly, it demonstrated the insecurity and vulnerability of the local community.

IS Working to Further Fracture Vulnerable Areas

Any former Emir can announce anytime he wants to come back to IS. [10] While the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate, IS is watching closely and is likely happy to see the tension between locals and SDF spreading. In November, IS released a video featuring hostages from the SDF it captured earlier this month fighting in Hajin. The video shows the beheading of one of the captured (Enab Baladi, October 28). The brutality of this video was directed at the Arab fighters in the SDF. An IS leader made this clear clear by saying "these are the hostages, the fighters of SDF, none of them are American, none of them are Kurdish, all of them are the children of you Arabs. The U.S. and SDF are using you and sending you to this fate."

Locals have already started comparing their current living conditions with those under IS. [11] Aside from its brutality, IS formed institutions that ruled the region between Iraq and Syria with similar standards and developed an economic system that generated a viable labor cycle, employment, a reduction in poverty, and an end to homelessness and begging. [12] IS built a "central office for investigating grievances" where people could go to file claims and find solutions for issues in dispute. [13] Through different mechanisms and tactics, IS established a society with "citizens" for the "al-Ra'ya" and provided those it co-opted with physical and economic security. [14]

While coercion and cooptation were the main tools IS used to gain control and legitimacy, the security they provided residents was something residents did not enjoy before IS and do not enjoy now. [15] Those that lived under the group are now the same people living under the Self Administration Author-

ity (SAA) and policed by local SDF forces, where the SDF's checkpoints disappear at night and looting, raping and murder take place, with no courts or effective judiciary system with which to file their complaints. [16]

Conclusion

IS transformed from a so-called "state" to smaller cells. It is true that IS lost most of its territory, but the institutions they built for the state were not completely demolished. Instead, these institutions were transformed into other entities that allow the group to manage its operations. The group still has the ability to regenerate itself, as the security and social situations and conditions on the ground are working to its favor. To stop its capability to regenerate, there should be a solid policy that can address the above factors that facilitate its persistence. However, the danger is not limited to Syria or Iraq—the group is still a global threat. IS is potentially as dangerous as before, as it has gained more experience and resources to remain resilient.

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Notes

[1] IS publication, Rumiyah, page3, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/rome-magazine-3.pdf,

[2] Ibid, page 11

[3] Author's interview with a former a media activist from Der Ezzor.

[4] Author's interview with a civil council member

[5] Author's interview with the executive director of Der Ezzor24

[6] Author's interview with a former a media activist from Der Ezzor

[7] The list of former fighters was confirmed by four activists and three local residents

[8] Ibid

[9] Author's interview with a former a media activist from Der Ezzor.

[10] Author's interview with three residents from Der Ezzor

[11] Author's interview with a former a media activist from Der Ezzor

[12] Ibid

[13] Author's interview with three residents from Der Ezzor

[14] al-Ra'ya is the Islamic term that defines the citizens in an Islamic state

[15] Khalaf, Rana, Beyond Arms and Beards: Local Governance of IS in Syria, https://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/07/beyond-arms-and-beards-local-governance-of-isis-in-syria/

[16] Author's interview with three residents from Der Ezzor

The Islamic State in Libya: Operational Revival, Geographic Dispersal, and Changing Paradigms

Dario Cristiani

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of Mission of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Ghassan Salamé, addressed the UN Security Council in September concerning the outbreak of clashes in Tripoli in August (see MLM, October). During the address, he linked the persisting instability engulfing Libya to the potential broad-scale return of terrorist organizations. He stated that, "ISIL (Islamic State—IS) presence and operations in Libya are only spreading." Salamé further stated that Libya may turn into "a shelter for terrorist groups of all persuasions" (UNISMIL, September 5). These concerns echoed the words that other external and internal actors have voiced over the past months (TASS, December 27, 2017; al-Sharq al-Awsat, January 3).

The Operational Revival

During this period, IS has managed to strike targets across Libya, in line with its operational crescendo already recorded in 2017 (see MLM, September 2017). In November, the group carried out an attack against a police station in Tazirbu (Kufra district)—killing at least eight civilians—with several more wounded and kidnapped (Middle East Eye, November 24). One month earlier, IS claimed responsibility for an attack in al-Fuqaha (Jufra district), burning security offices and governmental buildings, leaving four dead and several injured (Libya Observer, October 29). While these attacks show the IS capacity of operating in the south and in the desert, the group has also managed to strike targets in major urban centers across the country. On September 10, IS gunmen attacked the National Oil Corporation (NOC) headquarters, located in the area of Dahra (Libya Observer, Sept 10; al-Awsat Libya, Sept 10). The attack was carried out by four gunmen, who targeted the High National Election Commission (HNEC) building in the Ghul al-Shul area of the Libyan capital. The group claimed responsibility for the attack on May 2 (Libya Observer, May 2). IS also claimed responsibility for two

attacks this past May in Ajdabiya—the same region where IS killed two police officers. The group destroyed a military armored vehicle and an ambulance, and seized equipment at a checkpoint in Aqilah (Libyan Express, May 22; ANSA Med, May 26; Al-Sharq Awsat, July 25).

The Geography of IS Dispersal

These operational trends indicate that—after fleeing Sirte at the end of 2016—IS reorganized itself into small groups and dispersed throughout Libya. This dispersal allows the group to strike in different areas of the country. This development was facilitated by the weakness of the forces that worked to defeat IS in Sirte. In the words of Colonel Ali Faida—commander of the Misratan forces that secured Sirte—his troops "were too poorly equipped to undertake desert operations" (Middle East Eye, August 2). IS cells are now present in the areas around Sabha, Ubari, Kufra, and al-Awaynat. They are especially in those territories located in mountainous regions and characterized by the presence of remote valleys. From this point of view, IS replicated what AQIM groups did following the French attack in Northern Mali. The group used southern Libya to reorganize its ranks and move towards the Sahel—the actual operational focus of the organization (see TM, May 5, 2017).

At the time of its rise, IS failed to gain control of some of the major checkpoints and trading routes required to enter Libya from the Sahara. The group, however, now enjoys some freedom of operation in the area, being supported by local Arab tribes. This area also provides IS with a significant market for recruitment. Foreign fighters have always played a significant role in the group, as the Libyan component was numerically limited. Over time, the importance of foreign fighters within IS ranks has even increased. Of the about 700 members of IS in Libya, almost 80 percent are of foreign origin according to AFRICOM sources, with fighters joining not only from Maghrebi and Sahelian countries, but also from countries like Eritrea and Ghana (Jeune Afrique, October 19; The Citizen, November 21). The southern Libya is also increasingly important for IS in terms of recruitment. The organization can offer money and support to migrants that arrive in Libya on their journey to Europe (Middle East Eye, August 2). From this point of view, IS also participates in the market of foreign mercenaries that has increasingly characterized Libya over the past few years (Libya Herald, June 11, 2017; Libya Express, March 1; Libya Observer, March 13,; TM, April 6).

The group's presence, however, is not limited to the deepest parts of southern Libya. The organization also still exists in the southern desert of Sirte—particularly in Bani Walid and Wadi Zamzam. These were the areas where IS forces retreated following its defeat in Sirte (al-Wasat, Jan 8, 2017). Bani Walid was one of the historical strongholds of Qadhafi's regime; one of the biggest losses of the 2011 revolution; and home to the most prominent Libyan tribe, the Warfalla. In this area, U.S. forces carried out a number of air strikes—killing several leaders of the organization. In June, AFRICOM announced the death of four IS members, among them Abdel-Ati El-Kiwi, known as Abu Muslim al-Libi (Alayam Libya, June 6; Al Marsad, June 6). This was followed by another airstrike two months later that killed IS leader Walid al-Warfalli (El Khabar, August 28; Al-Chourouk, August 28).

Lastly, IS maintains a presence east of Sirte and in the areas around Sabratha, where the organization had a training camp operated by Tunisian fighters that were hit by a U.S. airstrike in 2016. IS presence has been reported around the areas of Wadi al-Hunaywah and Nawfaliyah and there were rumors concerning a potential convergence between local al-Qaeda fighters present in the area and IS (Libya Herald, June 11, 2017; Africa-NewsGate, August 31, 2017; al-Wasat, November 20). These allegations are not new, as the IS leadership in Libya is reportedly more prone to collaborate with al-Qaeda, and there were reports of logistical cooperation in the south as well.

Conclusion

The operational revival and geographic dispersal of IS suggests that the group remains up and running in the country—although driven by different strategic and tactical paradigms compared to those during its first rise to prominence (2014-2016). When IS appeared in the Libyan theater, it aimed to replicate its Syrian-Iraqi model, despite the significant differences existing between the Syrian-Iraqi and Libyan contexts. In the Qadhafist's former stronghold of Sirte, the group tried to replicate what it achieved in Raqaa.

The conditions in which the group emerged, however, were very different compared to Syria. In order to sus-

tain the creation of a proto-state in Libya and using Sirte as a center for the irradiation of its state model in Libya, IS needed resources that it could not access in Libya. For instance, oil wealth and smuggling networks. In addition—unlike in Syria and Iraq—IS did not have the sectarian card to exploit. Libyan cleavages run across different faultlines (economic, local, ethnic, personal) and there were no groups that were clearly under threat from sectarian or structural marginalization—like Sunni groups around Raqaa—that could be used to garner local support. While there were rumors and accusations concerning the eventual role of former regime loyalists in supporting the rise of IS, the group struggled to find any significant support within the country.

It became clear that IS wanted more than to strike deals with Libyan militias or trying to control oil resources. The group wanted to promote a strategy of destruction of these resources to foster chaos perceived as advantageous to its project in Libya. Once dislodged from Sirte by Misratans supported by U.S. airpower, however, the group dispersed across Libya and adopted "hit-and-run" tactics. These tactics are not new in Libya, as Qadhafi's forces resorted to them in the late days of the civil war in 2011.

IS failed substantially in creating a proto-state entity in Libya to be used as a symbolic tool and logistic hub for the consolidation of its presence. However, it now enjoys a renewed tactical mobility that makes its threat even more dangerous in the short-term, as it adds a significant degree of unpredictability to its actions and makes it harder for Libyan groups and external powers to chase and counter its militants.

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