

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## IRAN: JAISH AL-ADL ATTACK COULD SEE INCREASED IRAN-INDIA COOPERATION

*Brian M. Perkins*

Iran has seen a recent surge in terrorism incidents within the country over the past year, particularly in the provinces of Khuzestan and Sistan-e-Baluchistan. Among the most notable incidents have been attacks on the Ahvaz military parade and in the port city of Chabahar. Most recently, a suicide vehicle borne explosive device (SV-BIED) attack targeting an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) bus killed at least 27 on a road between Kash and Zahedan in Sistan-e-Baluchistan. Jaish al-Adl later claimed responsibility for the attack against the “oppressive” Iranian regime ([ILNA](#), February 14). Jaish al-Adl is known to operate out of Pakistan, launching attacks in Iran before retreating back across the border. Pakistan has a sordid history of militancy in its bordering provinces, with the former Federally Administered Tribal Area, now a part of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, being a longstanding haven for Taliban fighters that primarily targeted the Afghan government. However, as the Taliban increased its control over the provinces of Afghanistan, the border regions with Iran have begun to

garner more headlines as the groups operating there are hostile to both countries.

Pakistan has seen a similar escalation of attacks against government and economic interests in Baluchistan and Sindh by local Baluch nationalist and separatist groups, particularly the Baluchistan Liberation Army (See [Terrorism Monitor](#), January 25). These groups share similar grievances against the Pakistani government as their counterparts have with Iran and have selected similar targets.

Given the overlapping similarities in the shared grievances, lineage, and operational areas, it is not a stretch to consider that these groups have or could coordinate with one another, whether through logistics networks or through training.

Pakistan has a clear economic interest in stemming the rise of the various militant groups in the region to ensure work on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor continues and that it remains a viable project. Meanwhile, Iran has expressed its frustration with the lack of effort from Pakistan to ensure that its border regions are not safe havens for groups seeking to attack the Iranian govern-

ment. The IRGC has also launched cross border raids on militant groups hiding in Pakistan on multiple occasions. The two countries worked jointly to put down the Baloch insurgency between 1974 and 1977 and it would be mutually beneficial for the two to conduct similar joint military operations to clear the region of militants that threaten the security of both nations. However, it is unclear if Pakistan's move closer to Saudi Arabia will prevent such cooperation moving forward. Meanwhile, India has ramped up its efforts to combat terrorist organizations on Pakistani soil and the Iranian and Indian governments have agreed to cooperate more closely on combating terrorism in the region. Such an agreement could see an escalation of surreptitious military operations within Pakistan by its neighbors. [1]

## Notes

[1] See Tweet from Sayed Abbas Araghchi on February 16 <https://twitter.com/araghchi/status/1096802730881048578>

## FUTURE OF UIGHUR FIGHTERS IN SYRIA PULLS CHINA DEEPER INTO THE MIDDLE EAST

*Brian M. Perkins*

The United States' impending withdrawal from Syria has sparked considerable concern from the various groups fighting against Islamic State (IS), as well as concerns regarding the return of foreign fighters. China is keen to capitalize on what the country sees as a fortuitous, strategic opportunity that the U.S. withdrawal creates in order to become a primary player in the Middle East. The withdrawal will fundamentally change the balance of power for those involved, increasing the influence from China, whose partnership with Russia has increased while its relations with Turkey have grown increasingly strained.

China has slowly become more involved with the war in Syria over the past several years through humanitarian aid, arms sales, intelligence support, and helping Russia block various UN Security Council resolutions. China has, for the most part, steered clear of direct military involvement, though there have been past reports that China would deploy special forces to the country ([New Arab](#), November 29, 2017). China has significant economic interests in the country, as evidenced by the showing at the Damascus International Fair in September and billions of dollars pledged in investment and reconstruction ([Xinhua](#), September 11, 2018).

Aside from the geopolitical and economic benefits of increased involvement, China is facing a real threat from the return of Uighur foreign fighters and is thus invested in ending the war. While the number of Uighur's fighting in Syria is unclear, estimates have ranged to as many as 5,000 in 2017. ([MEMO](#), May 9, 2017). The largest and most influential Uighur militant group in Syria is the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which is allied with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). On February 19, TIP released a video, as it has in the past, encouraging jihad and lone wolf style attacks in China's Xinjiang region. In addition to TIP, there are several other predominantly Uighur groups that operate throughout Syria and have outwardly expressed a desire to use their training to fight the Chinese government. Another predominantly Uighur group, the Katibat al-Ghuraba al-Turkistan (KGT), has recently featured in a video released on February 15, with the HTS-linked Malhama Tactical group, the training of Uighur fighters. During the video, Malhama Tactical's

leader, Abu Salman Belarus, stated that the training was to prepare the men to fight the Chinese government ([SITE](#), February 15).

China is clearly interested in the war drawing to a close in order to secure its economic interests in Syria and preserve its internal security. However, the end of the war poses an equally, if not more, complex security threat to China, as there are several possible scenarios regarding Uighur fighters. The end of the conflict in Syria is unlikely to see the eradication of Uighur fighters there. While a significant number will return to China, these trained fighters are likely to become more geographically dispersed. Once dispersed, they will likely continue attempts to wage war against the Chinese government by targeting various economic interests. Another potential scenario is that as the war draws to a close these fighters establish cells in Syria and move underground—as many of the groups will likely do—only to rear their heads again when reconstruction, and Chinese investment, begins.

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## **Saudi Arabia and the UAE in al-Mahra: Securing Interests, Disrupting Local Order, and Shaping a Southern Military**

*Brian M. Perkins*

The ongoing war in Yemen has wreaked havoc on much of the country, crumbling centuries old buildings, destroying critical infrastructure and leaving countless civilians dead. Fighting has extended to many corners of the country. Some areas, however, have managed to avoid the brunt of the war, mostly by virtue of their isolation and sparse population rather than a lack of strategic importance. One such place is Yemen's easternmost governorate, al-Mahra. Al-Mahra is second only to the governorate of Hadramawt in terms of size and runs the entire length of the border with Oman, from the Arabian Sea to Saudi Arabia's southern border. Its size and geographic position along the border of both Saudi Arabia and Oman make the governorate a sought-after zone of control not only during the war but also whenever hostilities do subside. As such, al-Mahra is quickly becoming the site of a power struggle over the provision of security in the region, raising further questions as to the longer-term implications surrounding Saudi and Emirati interests and the proliferation of UAE-trained security forces.

Saudi and Emirati Involvement and Interests in al-Mahra Al-Mahra has the fortune of being far from the Houthi's heartland, allowing it to escape Houthi occupation and subsequent bombardment by Saudi Arabia. The governorate has largely been spared violence at the hands of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State (IS). Although both groups do have operatives in the region, radicalism has not historically been a problem in al-Mahra, and violent incidents have generally been rare. However, the divergent interests of local tribes, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have created a combustible environment that threatens to upset the local balance.

Between 2015 and late 2017, Mahra was primarily controlled by the Yemeni military's 123rd and 137th Mechanized Brigades, which are comprised largely of northern soldiers and supporters of Islah, a Muslim Brotherhood-

affiliated Islamist party. Saudi Arabia began increasing its presence in mid-November 2017, taking control of the governorate's facilities, Nishtun port, the Sarfit, and Shehen border crossings, and al-Gaydah Airport while establishing military outposts around key infrastructure and coastal areas (Arabi21, February 23). Shortly after, President Hadi sacked military and government leaders in favor of those aligned with Saudi Arabia. Most notably, Hadi appointed Rajeh Said Bakrit as Mahra's governor on November 27, 2017, to replace Mohammed Abdullah Kuddah after he spoke out against Saudi Arabia's presence.

Riyadh deployed its forces under the guise of reconstruction and counter smuggling operations, but there are underlying commercial and geopolitical reasons at play. Saudi Arabia claims that the governorate has served as a major transit point for arms, cash, and other materials smuggled through Oman and into Yemen for the Houthis either by vehicle through land crossings or by dhows across the sea and onto the shores of al-Mahra (MEMO, November 17, 2017). Smuggling is undoubtedly a major industry in al-Mahra and is closely tied to old patronage networks and tribal sheikhs. In addition to the Houthis, AQAP and IS have benefited from smuggling across the border, and multiple recent UN reports have noted that prominent IS figures routinely travel to Ghaydah to receive payments and coordinate smuggling activities while locals have reported al-Qaeda operatives coordinating similar schemes. [1] [2]

Saudi Arabia implemented exorbitant tariffs and restricted certain goods crossing the border from Oman and implemented restrictions on local fisherman—the latter have since been eased—to stymie smuggling at the Sarfit and Shehen crossing and via dhows similar to those used by local fishermen. Meanwhile, they have attempted to win over locals by promising reconstruction projects such as wells, a water plant, schools, and hospitals, all to be implemented by the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Authority. While many of these projects have been welcomed and have improved the overall quality of life for many Mahris, a large percentage of the population is still concerned about the Saudi coalition's long-term goals.

The Saudi build-up sparked popular protests throughout 2018 by residents frustrated with what they described as a Saudi occupation of a historically peaceful region of the country. Frustrations only grew in August after a

leaked document revealed Saudi Arabia's intention to build an oil pipeline that would carry oil from Saudi Arabia to the coast of al-Mahra, providing direct access to the ocean (Arabi21, August 20, 2018). Aside from commercial interests, Saudi Arabia is undoubtedly seeking to check Oman's influence in the region, as Mahris share many commonalities with Omani's in Dhofar and have historically had great relations with the country.

The recent influx of Salafists and planned projects such as a Saudi-sponsored religious center in Qashan—similar to the one in Dammaj—have raised alarms over the potential rise of Salafism and radical thinking within the local population (Al Mandeb, February 27). While many tribal leaders initially supported the protests, several have since withdrawn support, creating a new division among tribes that have historically worked collectively to maintain order in the governorate. Local tribes and the Mahra General Council, however, have mostly agreed on bringing security back into the hands of local Maharis, but the development of that force has been both slow and contentious, highlighting underlying issues with the UAE's role in militarizing local communities.

### **Shaping Southern Military Forces**

The UAE and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia have demonstrated a proclivity for securing strategic locations and militarizing local communities across the governorates that once comprised the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), including the strategic island of Socotra. Saudi and Emirati interests in Aden and Mukalla—both vital seaports and the capitals of their respective governorates—have been well publicized, but their involvement in al-Mahra has mostly fallen under the radar.

The UAE's security strategy in southern Yemen is based upon coopting, training, and equipping local military leaders, activists, tribes, and anyone with agreeable causes. The strategy began with Emiratis identifying the Southern Resistance and organizing many of its affiliated militias into the "Security Belt," which initially focused on combating AQAP and IS. The same essential model has since been replicated in Hadramawt and Shabwa with the establishment of the Hadrami Elite Forces and the Shabwa Elite Forces. These forces are drawn from a core group of tribes in each region, many with ties connecting them to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which seeks to govern southern Yemen and establish a

new independent state there. It is important to note that the STC itself does not command these forces, but its ties to members and close relationship with the UAE create a convergence of common interests.

While the UAE-backed forces did significantly contribute to the removal of AQAP and IS from Aden and Mukalla (AQAP also tactically retreated from Mukalla), it is clear that operational priorities are heavily skewed by the UAE's strategic interests, notably oil fields in Shabwa, the country's only gas liquification plant in Balhaf, the al-Shihr oil terminal, and most notably, seaports in southern Yemen. These forces have been tied to an escalation of targeted assassinations, arbitrary detentions, forced disappearances, torture and a host of other alleged human rights abuses. Additionally, these security forces as well as the UAE vehemently oppose Islah and have regularly engaged in clashes with its members and have allegedly conducted targeted assassinations against members of the group. Further, they have riled local communities and clashed with tribes and groups that do not align with their goals, particularly Salafist militias, pro-Hadi groups, and supporters of Islah.

The STC has gained significant support, particularly in Aden, since its establishment in April 2017. The organization has opened offices and established local councils in each southern governorate, including al-Mahrah, and numerous international cities, all while maintaining exceptionally close ties with the UAE. [3] The STC and its local representatives have actively been recruiting members in al-Mahra, and although some local elites do support the STC, they have found this process more difficult than in other governorates as Mahris have not historically shared the same sentiment regarding an independent southern Yemeni state comprised of the same governorates as the former PDRY. In fact, many Mahris would prefer their own independent state, though there has not been the same level of effort to create one.

Reports of the UAE establishing a similar elite force in al-Mahra began to surface in November 2018, leading many tribal elites to make public statements against the plan. Among the chief reasons for opposition to such a force is to preserve al-Mahra's political stances and avoid influence from the STC and UAE. Despite calls against a Mahri Elite Force, the STC and UAE are reportedly actively recruiting and training Mahris and those from outside the governorate ([Mahra Post](#), February 11). There have been recent media reports and

posters depicting the deployment of a Mahri Elite Force, but many of the pictures claiming to be in Mahra were in fact from a recent STC Assembly meeting in Hadramawt. Furthermore, locals have denied that a UAE-trained force has been established and deployed to the region, but the UAE will undoubtedly continue to pursue the issue.

## Conclusion

As Saudi Arabia and the UAE look to secure long term strategic and geopolitical interests in southern Yemen, their militarization of the southern governorates will serve to entrench the North-South divide as well as accentuate local divisions, potentially creating an opening for militancy and making it increasingly unlikely that these forces will demilitarize or be willing to integrate with a broader military in a still united Yemen when the war draws to a close. As the likelihood of a return to a North and South Yemen seems to be increasing, even if slightly, Mahra will be a key area targeted by both pro-unity/pro-government groups as well as pro-secession groups such as the STC.

Members of the Mahri General Council are likely to continue their genuine efforts to establish a force comprised of Mahris, but in doing so they will be faced with the challenge of balancing differing opinions among its members, including those with leanings toward the STC or UAE. Meanwhile, the STC and UAE will continue attempts to sway locals, likely through political concessions and outright payments.

Saudi Arabia's ties with Hadi and Islah, as well as the influx of Salafists and plans to build a religious center stand in opposition to the UAE, STC, and likely a large portion of the would-be Mahri Elite Force's members. Most Mahris are skeptical of all of these outside parties, and the convergence of their interests could spark issues similar to those already seen in Aden and Hadramawt. Mahra has already witnessed its first targeted assassination—a rather unprecedented event in the region—since the arrival of Saudi coalition forces, and the presence of a politicized military unit with differing aims from the local community would likely see such incidents increase.

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## Notes

[1] For instance, see United Nations Security Council report pg. 9. [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950\\_EN.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1846950_EN.pdf)

[2] Author interview with Mahra resident December 5, 2018.

[3] See Southern Transitional Council's news releases. <http://stcaden.com/news/8014>

# Internal Threats to Tunisian Security—From the Borders to the Cities

*Stefano M. Torelli*

## Background

Tunisia is currently going through a very delicate phase in its development. Political tensions are intensifying with the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of 2019. The two parties that formed the coalition government, Ennahda and Nida Tounes, are campaigning in open competition against each other. The socio-economic indicators are alarming, with the Tunisian dinar losing 40 percent of its value over the euro in the last two years; the cost of living increasing by a third; and unemployment levels still among the highest in the world. The social discontent was made evident by the hundreds of protests and strikes that paralyzed the country last January. In this context, the security situation is also a cause for concern. The risk that Tunisia could be destabilized in this vulnerable phase is substantial. Although there have been no attacks on the scale of the multiple 2015 attacks against the Bardo Museum in Tunis, a resort in Sousse, and a bus carrying military personnel in Tunis, there continues to be a latent threat.

There are several signs that point to the threat level remaining high. On July 8, 2018, six members of the National Guards were killed in an ambush at Ghardimaou, in the governorate of Jendouba (*Kapitalis*, July 8 2018). On October 3, two explosions in Abd el-Adim, in the Jebel Chaambi area, killed two soldiers (*Kapitalis*, October 4, 2018). On October 29, a female suicide attacker named Mena Gebal blew herself up in Tunis in the central Avenue Habib Bourguiba, injuring at least 15 police officers (*Mosaïque FM*, October 29, 2018). On January 3, during a counter-terrorism operation in Jilma, in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, five terrorists barricaded themselves in a house and detonated their explosive belts (*Tunisie Numérique*, January 3). In recent months, Tunisian security forces have arrested dozens of people suspected of planning terrorist attacks in the country, seizing weapons, ammunition, and explosive material throughout Tunisia. In the last three years alone, 1,270

people have been held on charges of terrorism, according to official data provided by the Ministry of Justice.

### **The Evolution of the Threat**

Compared to the first manifestations of terrorism between 2012 and 2013 and the large-scale attacks of 2015, the current terrorist threat seems to be less coordinated. Nonetheless, it is not less dangerous. Unlike in other regions—such as Egypt or the Sahel countries—in Tunisia, there is not a structured organization framing the militants and providing training and equipment. Rather, there are several cells operating all around the country, without a high level of interconnection. However, they have contacts with local and transnational criminal networks, allowing them to procure weapons and explosives. The threat is highest in urban centers and along the border areas with Algeria and Libya.

In the Kasserine and Jebel Chaambi areas on the Algerian border in northwestern Tunisia, small cells possibly linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continue to operate, falling under the name of the Uqba ibn Nafi' Brigade. Although between 2012 and 2013 this group was primarily responsible for attacks in Kasserine and Jebel Chaambi—which caused the death of more than 70 soldiers—hostilities have decreased since 2015 due to the response capacity of the Tunisian security forces. However, improvised explosive device (IED) explosions continue to occur, indicating that there are still resilient elements jeopardizing the security of local rural communities. In recent months, fighters resorted to raiding stores and private homes trying to find resources for their activities, being debilitated after losing at least 100 fighters in the last four years. Last December, terrorists assaulted a bank in Sbiba, in the governorate of Kasserine, robbing 320,000 Tunisian dinars, more than \$100,000 ([Webdo.tn](http://Webdo.tn), December 15, 2018). Unlike in 2012, when militants in this area were mostly Algerians, now they are largely Tunisians.

This conflict currently resembles more of an internal insurgency than a terrorist campaign. The fighters operate across the mountains in Kasserine, Kef, and Jendouba and operate in small groups of no more than a dozen people, using the tactics of rural guerrillas. It is likely that these areas will continue to serve as a refuge for these cells, but the security forces have dealt several blows to them.

The Tunisian border with Libya holds different dynamics than those on the Algerian border. This border is used more as a corridor for arms trafficking and the passage of militants than as an operational base. In fact, there is a greater level of coordination between traffickers and jihadists, making the Libyan border particularly sensitive. Here, in March 2016, a group of at least 70 armed militants tried to take the town of Ben Guerdane, which later contributed to the strengthening of security measures there. A fence has been built along the border, with monitoring systems provided by the United States and training by the British security forces. Thanks to these countermeasures, traffic in the area is more controlled, but the situation in Libya continues to pose a potential threat to the internal security of Tunisia. Moreover, according to many sources, dozens of Tunisian jihadists and former members of Ansar al-Sharia are still present in Libya and could return to their country of origin.

These potential terrorists add to the more than 800 foreign fighters who have already returned to Tunisia and the hundreds of radicalized citizens still present across the country. The latter category causes the greatest concern for security. The risk of a tactical shift from guerrilla warfare to large-scale attacks and the threat from “lone wolf” terrorism is high. The social tensions of recent months contribute to a climate of general violence, which can easily be exploited by recruiters and radicalized Tunisians.

### **Counter-Terrorism Answers and Possible Scenarios**

Compared to six years ago, the Tunisian security forces have certainly made significant progress in the sector of counter-terrorism. Cooperation with Algeria at a regional level and with major international actors (including the United States, France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Italy, and Russia) has enabled the Tunisian security apparatus to be better equipped and more effective in the fight against terrorism, especially in the border areas. Special Meharist units (*dromedaries*, or camel, cavalry) are hired to patrol the desert areas in the south of the country. With traditional means and without adequate knowledge of the territory, it is almost impossible to patrol these areas.

The Tunisian authorities are also making some progress in overcoming the historical internal divisions between police, the army, and the National Guard forces that risk undermining the effectiveness of counter-terrorism ac-

tions, especially in border areas. Interior Minister Hichem Fourati announced last January the imminent creation of a unified command composed of police forces and the National Guard, having the sole task of fighting terrorism (*Marsad*, January 8). This command will be established first in Kasserine, and should later be enacted in Jendouba and Kef. The Tunisian government has conducted military operations in these mountainous border areas near Algeria since 2014. The army has exceptional power to combat terrorism here.

On February 4, the President of the Republic Beji Caid Essebsi extended by 30 days the state of emergency that has been in force in the country for more than three years (*Tunisie Numerique*, February 4). This measure is intended to give the security forces extraordinary powers to fight terrorism. On the other hand, however, this kind of measure could increase social tensions, and impact the protests related to the declining socio-economic state of the country. The risk is that clashes between police and protesters may occur and radicalize more Tunisians, constituting new threats to state security. The draft law on the state of emergency currently under discussion by the parliament could give further powers to the security forces without the need for a legal mandate (*Tuniscope*, February 20).

The threat to security is directly linked to the discontent that continues to spread among a large part of the population. Together with the fight on the border with Libya and Algeria, it is necessary for the Tunisian authorities to guarantee security in the urban centers, where it is possible that terrorist activities such as the suicide bombing of October 29 will be repeated.

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## A Revolution Not Like the Others: Directions in Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in a Post-Bashir Sudan

*Andrew McGregor*

Ten weeks into massive street protests in Sudan, anger at the three-decade-old regime of President Omar al-Bashir has begun to spread well beyond Khartoum. Unsure of support from the army (supposedly his power-base), Bashir has unleashed counter-terrorist paramilitaries against the demonstrators. Though the 75-year-old Bashir continues to resist calls for his resignation, he is unlikely to continue his iron-hand rule of Sudan for much longer. With religious extremists active in Sudan and continuing insurgencies throughout the country, there is a strong possibility the nation might experience a rapid deterioration in security following a regime collapse, one which would quickly have regional consequences.

While al-Bashir might survive the latest protests through brute repression, he has experienced ill-health in recent years and is facing opposition even amongst his base against running for re-election in 2020. The circumstances raise the question of whether terrorism and counter-terrorism will develop in new or novel ways in a post-Bashir Sudan.

Foreign debt, economic mismanagement, inflation, and shortages of foreign currency have plagued Sudan since the separation of South Sudan in 2011 and the consequent loss of the enormous oil revenues supplied by wells in the south. Protesters have connected this economic deterioration with the authoritarianism of the regime in their calls for immediate change. The growing death toll on the streets of several Sudanese cities reflects how serious the regime takes these protests—popular uprisings supported by elements of the army succeeded in deposing Sudanese regimes in 1964 and 1985.

### **The Governing Military-Islamist Alliance**

Sudan's rather unique military-Islamist regime is the result of Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood (the *Ikhwan*) seeking



firepower and muscle to enable them to overthrow the elected but ineffectual government of Sadiq al-Mahdi and establish an Islamic regime in 1989. Finding little support for this project amongst the military's senior staff, Brotherhood leader Dr. Hassan al-Turabi (1932-2016) turned to more junior officers, especially Omar al-Bashir, who would leap from Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) major to Sudanese president overnight as the figurehead of the coup.

One of the major grievances of Sudan's highly diverse population is the nation's political domination since independence by members of three Nile-dwelling Arab tribes from North Sudan—the Danagla, the Sha'iqiya and the Ja'alini (al-Bashir is a Ja'ali).

The Islamist movement that propelled al-Bashir to power split in 1999, with its leading member, al-Turabi, leaving to form the opposition Popular Congress Party (PCP). Other Islamists remained with the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), which has seemed more dedicated to preserving the regime than promoting an Islamic social transformation in Sudan. The NCP is currently preoccupied with internal rifts.

The NCP is supported by the Sudan Islamic Movement (SIM), which is intended to provide ideological guidance. In the midst of the economic crisis, SIM leader al-Zubayr Muhammad al-Hassan praised the regime for creating a "much better economic situation" and drastically lowering poverty rates. In reality, the country has been propped up in recent years with heavy financial assistance from the Gulf States. Few Sudanese could agree with al-Zubayr's perception, but many would agree with his observation that opportunities had been created for "a number of Islamists" (*Radio Dabanga*, August 28, 2018).

Mosques have become gathering points for protesters, particularly after Friday sermons denouncing the "tyranny and corruption" of the regime. As a result, various mosques have been stormed by security forces firing tear gas, including the Hijra mosque in Wad Nubawi (Omdurman), home of the powerful Ansar Sufi movement led by two-time Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi (*Radio Dabanga*, February 17).

### **A Partner in Counter-Terrorism?**

Khartoum has enjoyed quiet U.S. support as a counter-terrorism partner despite the regime's Islamist base. To reward Sudan for cooperation on the counter-terrorism file and progress on several other issues, U.S. President Barack Obama lifted a long-standing American trade embargo in one of the last acts of his presidency. [1] Sudan, however, has remained a designated state sponsor of terrorism since 1993 and is still subject to certain sanctions as a result.

Sudanese Foreign Minister al-Dardiri Muhammad Ahmad visited Washington in November 2018, where he claimed to have convinced Trump administration officials that Sudan has made major progress on human rights and counter-terrorism issues. However, some of al-Dardiri's remarks were somewhat disconcerting, such as when he insisted Osama bin Laden had "nothing to do with terrorism" during his presence in Sudan. Al-Dardiri claimed Bin Laden was only occupied with developing an airport with his construction team (*VOA*, November 1, 2018). Al-Dardiri also pointed out that Khartoum understood the world is no longer unipolar. China, Russia and Turkey were all ready to step up with aid and debt write-offs without regard to Sudan's status as a state sponsor of terrorism (*Foreign Policy*, November 8, 2018).

### **Islamic Extremism in Modern Sudan**

The Bashir regime has had an ambiguous relationship with extremist groups inside Sudan, partly as a result of the ebb and flow of Islamist influence within the government. In 1991, Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan al-Turabi persuaded the regime to host Osama bin Laden and his followers until they were expelled in 1996 when they came to be identified as an internal threat. The sporadic emergence of other Sudanese extremist groups in some cases came to be recognized as little more than paper claims for the deeds of others.

A group called "al-Qaeda in Sudan and Africa" claimed responsibility for the July 2006 kidnapping and beheading of Muhammad Taha Muhammad Ahmad, the Islamist editor of Khartoum's *al-Wifaq* newspaper, for "dishonoring the Prophet." Authorities instead hanged nine members of the Fur ethnic group for the offense, despite claims by the suspects that they had been tortured into confessions. Their motive was alleged to be revenge for Muhammad Taha's articles claiming that well-documented reports of mass rape by government secu-

rity forces in Darfur were nothing more than consensual sex ([Sudan Tribune](#), April 14, 2009; [Sudan Tribune](#), April 16, 2009).

In 2008, gunmen belonging to the small Ansar al-Tawhid (Supporters of Monotheism) group murdered USAID employee John Granville and his Sudanese driver in the streets of Khartoum. The attack on Granville came only one day after then U.S. President George Bush signed the Sudan Accountability and Divestment Act, a bill drafted in response to Khartoum's alleged genocide in Darfur. Suspicions of official sanction for the attack were reinforced when four members of the group made a video-taped escape from North Khartoum's Kober Prison in 2010 while awaiting execution. It was the first escape from the colonial-era prison. Suspicions were revived when two men convicted of orchestrating the escape from outside were given early presidential pardons ([Sudan Tribune](#), August 15, 2015; [Radio Dabanga](#), April 7, 2016). The attack was also claimed by an apparently imaginary group called "al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Niles," but ultimately none of the suspects were charged with membership in a terrorist group ([Al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), October 12, 2008).

One of the escapees in the Granville case was 'Abd al-Ra'uf Abu Zayid Muhammad, the son of the leader of Ansar al-Sunna al-Muhammadiya, the largest Salafist group in Sudan. Sudanese Salafism is primarily of the quietest type with minimal political involvement, consistent with Salafist beliefs in the legitimacy of political leadership in Muslim nations, which can only be challenged in extreme circumstances such as the repudiation of Islam. However, there exists a strong rivalry with Sufism, the deeply rooted and dominant form of Islamic worship in Sudan, as well as between different Salafist groups. Ansar al-Sunna became engaged in a doctrinal dispute with the Salafist Takfir wa'l-Hijra (Renunciation and Exile) movement in the 1990s, leading to a series of three attacks on Ansar al-Sunna mosques that left a total of 54 people dead (see [Terrorism Focus](#), February 6, 2009).

In December 2012, Sudanese security forces fought an eight-hour gun battle with Salafi-Jihadists at their training camp in Dinder National Park in Sinnar Province (east Sudan). The group was composed largely of university students from Khartoum but was not associated with al-Qaeda, according to authorities ([Akhir Lahza \[Khartoum\]](#), December 4, 2012).

In 2015, it was learned that medical students, primarily dual-citizens from the UK, Canada and the United States, were being recruited from Khartoum's University of Medical Science and Technology to serve in Islamic State medical facilities in Syria ([Guardian](#), March 4, 2017). At the time, a prominent Khartoum imam, Muhammad 'Ali al-Jazouli, was advocating for the Islamic State and encouraging Muslims to kill "infidel" women and children. The imam was jailed for eight months and then quickly re-arrested after it became apparent his beliefs had not changed ([Radio Dabanga](#), July 1, 2015).

The following year, Sudan's Interior Minister admitted there were as many as 140 Sudanese Islamic State members (mostly operating abroad in Syria, Iraq and Libya), adding that they did not present a threat to Sudan ([Assayha.net](#), July 14, 2016). The actual number could be significantly higher.

### **Is Intervention by the Sudan Armed Forces Possible?**

Opposition calls for the army to step in and depose al-Bashir have had little apparent resonance so far. After repeated purges, the officer corps of the SAF is largely Islamist and has little interest in enabling regime change for any other party. With the exception of a few members of al-Bashir's inner circle, the SAF appears to be taking a wait-and-see approach to the street demonstrations, offering little in the way of open support or opposition to al-Bashir. The most likely scenario for an early exit by the president could involve transferring power to the army in preparation for new elections. Al-Bashir has hinted he would have no objection to handing over power to "a person wearing Khaki" (a military man) but has otherwise held to a defiant course, maintaining that the protesters were only hired mercenaries and heretics ([Sudan Tribune](#), January 9; [Arab News](#), January 21).

Soon after reports emerged of military officers joining protests in three Sudanese cities, SAF command released a statement confirming that it "stood behind the nation's leadership" ([Anadolu Agency](#), December 24, 2018). National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS—*Jiha'az al-Amn al-Watani wa'l-Mukhabarat*) chief Saleh Gosh and the SAF's chief of general staff, Kamal 'Abd al-Maruf, publicly proclaimed the army's full support for al-Bashir, with the latter dismissively insisting the army would never hand over the country to "homeless" pro-

testers ([Sudan Tribune](#), January 30; [Sudan Tribune](#), February 10).

The regular army has had little direct involvement in repressing the street protests, which are dealt with largely by elements of the pro-Bashir police, the NISS and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF—*Quwat al-Da'm al-Seri*), the latter a poorly disciplined paramilitary composed mostly of Darfur Arabs. Some are veterans of the notorious Janjaweed. The president's security institutions have used all the tools of a repressive state to control and suppress Islamist extremists (or even manipulate them when desired), but unleashing the "counter-terrorist" RSF against unarmed civilians will not be viewed favorably by most Sudanese.

The NISS is a pervasive and pernicious presence in Sudanese society, enjoying broad immunity from prosecution while deploying their extensive powers of arrest, censorship, property seizure, and even indefinite detention and abuse in so-called "ghost houses" that exist outside the judicial system. Of late, the NISS has been receiving training from Russian mercenaries (see [EDM](#), February 6).

The director of the NISS is Saleh Gosh, a Sha'iqiya Arab and top intelligence figure who was retrieved from the political wilderness to provide unflinching support to the regime. Gosh, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was the regime's point man with Bin Laden during his time in Sudan, later became close to the CIA during his first tenure as NISS chief, supplying important information about al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups. As Gosh revealed in 2005 during the regime's brutal suppression of the revolt in Darfur: "We have a strong partnership with the CIA. The information we have provided has been very useful to the United States" ([al-Arabiya](#), February 12, 2018).

Gosh had a major role in purging the regime of al-Turabi's supporters in 1999 but lost his job a decade later when his rivalry with presidential advisor Nafi al-Nafi began to weaken the regime. In November 2012, NISS agents arrested Gosh and several senior Islamist officers of the SAF—including the popular General Muhammad Wad Ibrahim 'Abd al-Jalil, former commander of the presidential guard—on suspicion of preparing a *coup d'état*. [2] Gosh was released several months later due to a lack of evidence but remained uncritical of the regime. He was rewarded in February 2018 when al-

Bashir re-appointed him as NISS director ([Fanack.com](#), March 28, 2018). Gosh has since cleansed the NISS of those not completely loyal to al-Bashir, even though Gosh himself remains a potential presidential successor.

Another possible Islamist successor is 'Ali Osman Muhammad Taha (Sha'iqiya), a civilian who was once Hassan al-Turabi's chief lieutenant in the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. Taha re-aligned himself behind al-Bashir and the NCP after the 1999 Islamist split. Sudan's Foreign Minister in the turbulent 1990s, Taha was appointed first vice-president in 1998, a post that he held twice until his final dismissal by al-Bashir in 2013. Since then, there has been a trend away from civilian Islamists in the nation's top posts toward the appointment of Islamist-inclined senior army officers. Taha remains highly influential in Sudan's Islamist movement, though his international reputation was damaged by his central involvement in the regime's ethnic cleansing of Darfur ([Fanack.com](#), November 30, 2016). Opposition members have accused Taha's Islamist supporters (the "unregulated brigades" he warned protesters about) of assault on demonstrators and the use of live-fire ([al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), January 21).

## Unresolved Rebellions

Most of Sudan's budget is dedicated to its endless internal conflicts, with over 70 percent of spending allocated to defense and security matters ([Radio Dabanga](#), August 28, 2018). In effect, the regime devotes nearly all its resources to defending itself from internal opposition. The SAF is engaged in the expensive repression of long-standing rebellions on three fronts: Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile State. The four leading rebel movements, grouped as the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), renewed their unilateral ceasefire for a further three months on February 9 ([Sudan Tribune](#), February 10). [3] Though somewhat exhausted from years of campaigning, these groups are still capable of confronting government security forces and may be using Khartoum's focus on the protests to replenish and rebuild. Despite the viciousness with which these conflicts are fought, Sudan's rebel movements continue to eschew urban terrorism in favor of more "conventional" guerrilla tactics.

On December 28, 2018, the Sudanese government claimed to have captured armed members of Darfur's Sudan Liberation Movement of Abdel-Wahid al-Nur

(SLM/A-AW rebel) group in the North Khartoum suburb of al-Droushab, over 500 miles from the group's normal operational zone in the Jabal Marra region of Darfur. Security forces broadcast footage of young detainees confessing their intention to kill protesters, destroy property, and attack public institutions. The SLM/A-AW refuted the charges, calling them "blatantly fabricated allegations" while insisting the movement's operations were confined to Jabal Marra (Sudan Tribune, December 30, 2018).

## Security Prognosis

Sudanese insularity and widely based self-perception as leaders rather than followers in the development of political Islam (dating back to the anti-imperialist Mahdist movement of the late 19th century) has helped to inhibit the local growth of foreign-based extremist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Nonetheless, Sudan's economic crisis will not suddenly cease if al-Bashir steps down, leaving a moderate possibility that foreign terrorist groups may try to exploit political instability to establish a presence in Sudan.

Islamists may find it hard to find space within a new post-Bashir regime, much as was the case when the Islamist-influenced President and former general Ja'afar Nimeiri was overthrown in 1985. Closely tied to al-Bashir, there is a good chance the NCP could collapse soon after a change in the presidency, leaving room for new actors and the traditional parties to explore after years of exclusion from power. Convinced of their religious duty, Islamists have turned to violence elsewhere after being ejected from power. Certain Islamist factions will thus remain a danger to the emergence of a more secular government, but a descent into urban terrorism remains unlikely, due in large part to the broader population's revulsion for the targeting of innocents. The carefully-planned coup, the lightning raid, and the protracted defense of rough terrain are all more acceptable methods of armed struggle in Sudan, though the growth of terrorism in neighboring countries means new strategies of violence are never far away.

Shortly before his death, former Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan al-Turabi made a terrible prediction for the future of Sudan: "The revolution, if there is any, will not be like [the earlier uprisings]. The whole Sudan now is armed, though any violence will quickly spread across the whole country, and the situation will be worse than

Somalia, Iraq, because we are from different tribes, and types" (Sudan Tribune, July 7, 2015). So far, the uprising has had more of a unifying effect, but the potential remains for a general security breakdown with daunting prospects for regional security.

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## Notes

[1] See: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/13/executive-order-recognizing-positive-actions-government-sudan-and>, January 13, 2017.

[2] See: Andrew McGregor, "Sudanese Regime Begins to Unravel After Coup Reports and Rumors of Military Ties to Iran," AIS Special Report, January 7, 2013, <https://www.aberfoylesecurity.com/?p=141>

[3] SRF members include Minni Minawi's Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A-MM), al-Hadi Idris Yahya's Sudan Liberation Movement – Transitional Council (SLM-TC), Malik Agar's Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army – North (SPLM/A-N) and the Justice and Equality Movement led by Jibril Ibrahim.