

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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YEMEN: LONG-SIMMERING TENSIONS BETWEEN SOUTHERN FORCES AND PRO-HADI FORCES EUPRT IN ADEN

Brian M. Perkins

Aside from the remote portions of Yemen's eastern governorates, Southern Yemen has experienced the least amount of direct fighting against the Houthis since UAE-backed forces pushed the group out of the port city of Aden in July 2015. However, another conflict has been boiling beneath the surface—one that has pitted UAE-backed forces, many with secessionist leanings, against forces loyal to President Hadi and the Islah party.

Aden, the temporary base of Hadi's government, is at the center of this conflict. For the past several years intermittent clashes have broken out between Hadi's Presidential Guard and the UAE-backed Security Belt, which is also closely aligned with the pro-secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which aims to govern Southern Yemen ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 1).

While violent clashes between the Security Belt and pro-Hadi forces were common, the Security Belt's close ties with Emirati advisors and forces in Southern Yemen and the UAE's coalition with Saudi Arabia had managed to

keep the conflict from boiling over into a secondary civil war within the broader civil war. The UAE would calm the Security Belt while Saudi Arabia would press its allied groups—the pro-Hadi forces and Islah—to ease tensions.

A larger conflict was always inevitable due to the rise of pro-secessionist militias across the Southern governorates and growing popular support for the Southern Transitional Council, which stands in direct opposition to Hadi's rule. What was less predictable, however, was what would trigger a larger conflict and when it would occur, with many expecting it to break out if/when a political settlement with the Houthis came about.

The conditions that had held the conflict in Southern Yemen at bay, however, changed drastically when the UAE unexpectedly began withdrawing from Yemen in early July. The withdrawal further exposed the fissures that had already been visible between UAE-backed Southern forces and Hadi as well as those between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, which had been pursuing divergent interests and supporting diametrically opposed parties since the war first began.

Tensions had already been high as the Emirati withdrawal left the Security Belt and Southern Transitional Council in de facto control of Aden, no longer as closely tethered by the UAE's relationship with Saudi Arabia. More intense fighting broke out in Aden on August 7 during a funeral for prominent Security Belt commander, Munir al-Yafei (a.k.a. Abu al-Yamama), who was killed when a Houthis-launched missile struck a military parade at al-Jalaa camp in the Buraïqa district of Aden ([Aden al-Ghad](#), August 2). The Houthis claimed responsibility, but STC leaders and members suggested collusion involving Islah, with STC Vice President Hani bin Brik calling on supporters to topple the group ([South Arabia News](#), August 6; [Aden al-Ghad](#), August 7; [Twitter.com/Hanib-inbrek](#), August 8). Security Belt members and STC activists began anti-government chants as the situation escalated to gunfire being exchanged between the Security Belt and the Presidential Guard. Fighting is ongoing with dozens of casualties being reported. Violence has been most pronounced in Crater and Khormaksar, the latter being of particular strategic importance.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have urged restraint but their control over the situation is considerably lower than in the past. A continued escalation in violence, or worse, a concerted attempt to topple the Hadi regime, will likely see the quick deterioration of security throughout Aden as other parties, particularly the Houthis and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, attempt to exploit the chaos in what has been one of the more stable regions of Yemen. Further, the outbreak of a sustained conflict between pro-Hadi forces and Southern forces could have catastrophic effects on the fight against the Houthis as it is likely to draw Southern fighters away from active fronts against the Houthis.

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G5-SAHEL LEADERSHIP CHANGES AS TERRORISM EXPANDS

Brian M. Perkins

Leadership changes are underway again for the G5-Sahel, the joint counter-terrorism force comprised of troops from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania. The reshuffling of leadership from Mauritanian General Hanena Ould Sidi to Nigerien General Oumarou Niamata is the second leadership change since July 2018 and comes amid continued growth and operations by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) ([Malijet](#), July 19, 2018; [North Africa Post](#), July 23). Similar to the last leadership change, the reshuffling came just weeks after JNIM claimed responsibility for a deadly suicide attack on the G5-Sahel headquarters in Sevare, Central Mali and days after the group conducted a suicide bombing on a French base at an airport in Gao, Mali.

Leadership changes within the G5-Sahel force have largely been a face-saving tactic rather than an organized effort to shift tactical operations. The joint force will undoubtedly continue to be plagued by the same issues it has experienced under previous leadership—poor coordination, lack of equipment, and poor training. There is some optimism that the G5's capabilities will be boosted by the \$155 million pledged by the European Union in early July ([Bamada](#), July 11). The benefits from this support, however, will not be realized for quite some time and will do little to improve coordination across the various forces that comprise the G5.

The ineffectiveness of both the G5-Sahel and French forces in the region coupled with freedom of movement across borders and strong recruitment efforts has allowed jihadist groups, such as JNIM and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), to increase their span of control and operational footprint across the region. JNIM and ISGS have even reportedly opened upwards of 600 schools along the border between Mali and Burkina Faso—the area most plagued by violence—which is a testament to their control of and embeddedness within the territory. The groups have also rapidly expanded their footprints to include West African nations of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin.

The proliferation of terrorist activity in the region has drawn in countless international participants, including France, the United States, and Turkey, among others. The G5, however, is still struggling to draw in support from regional neighbors—such as those in coastal West

Africa—that are threatened by the expanding jihadist footprint. The participation of these nations is only likely to come once the threat is existential. Meanwhile, foreign involvement has had a tendency to further entrench jihadist sentiments across Africa. If the international component of the counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel outpaces the regional African component while not addressing any of the systemic causes, the conflict is almost certain to worsen.

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Unveiling the Role of Women in Jihadist Groups

Sudha Ramachandran

On July 21, two back-to-back terror attacks rocked Dera Ismail Khan in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The first was carried out by two unidentified gunmen, who opened fire at a checkpoint at Kotla Saidan, killing two policemen. Soon after, a suicide bomber struck a hospital to which the victims of the Kotla Saidan attack were rushed. According to local officials, the suicide bomber was a 28-year-old burqa-clad woman. She was reportedly strapped with 7-8 kilograms of explosives packed with nails and ball-bearings, which she detonated near a crowd of people who were bringing in the injured and dead to an ambulance. The suicide bombing resulted in the death of four policemen and three civilians visiting relatives at the hospital. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is opposed to the Pakistani state and is based largely in areas along the Afghan-Pakistani border, claimed responsibility for the attack, describing it as revenge for the killing of two TTP commanders by police a month earlier. However, it denied that the suicide bomber was a woman ([The Nation](#), July 22).

Women have played a significant role in South Asia's many militant organizations. In addition to political work, women—who comprised a third of the fighting forces of Maoist groups in India and Nepal—engaged in combat. A few were in senior positions in these organizations. This was the case with the Tamil nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, as well. Indeed, the LTTE had a distinct women's wing called the Suthanthira Paravaigal (Freedom Birds). Female fighters of the LTTE not only participated in pitched battles with the Sri Lankan armed forces, but also carried out several major suicide attacks. [1]

In contrast to these organizations, Islamist and jihadist groups in the region are widely perceived to have avoided recruiting women, especially as combatants. This is a misperception, which stems from the fact that Islamist groups are deeply patriarchal, misogynist and opposed to women entering the public space. Indeed, Islamist militants expect women to confine themselves to the domestic space and traditional domestic roles. The Afghan Taliban, for instance, enforced a rigorous

code of conduct on women that included restrictions on their mobility, education, and attire. Such restrictions are enforced violently. The TTP is no different. In late July, a TTP pamphlet warned women in the North Waziristan district of Pakistan that they would “face worst consequences” if they “went out of their homes alone as it is harmful” for society ([Dawn](#), August 1).

Nothing New

Yet, as the recent suicide attack at Dera Ismail Khan reveals, the TTP is not averse to deploying women as suicide bombers or fighters. Neither is it the first time that Pakistani women militants have engaged in combat. Hundreds of burqa-clad women from the Jamia Hafsa seminary played a significant role in the events leading to and during the siege of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad in 2007 ([Dawn](#), July 13, 2017). Indeed, the military crackdown on the seminaries contributed to the emergence of the TTP. Hence the TTP’s recruiting of women goes back many years.

It was in 2004-2005 that the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network began carrying out suicide attacks in areas along the Afghan-Pakistan border. In some instances, the media reported that women suicide bombers were involved. However, subsequent investigations revealed that the bombers were, in fact, men. Most such attacks were carried out by the Haqqani Network. [2]

It was on June 20, 2010, that for the first confirmed time, a woman suicide bomber carried out an attack in Afghanistan’s Kunar province. Six other suicide attacks by women followed in the Af-Pak region, some of them taking a heavy toll in human lives. An attack in December 2010, for instance, targeted a food distribution camp in Bajaur in Pakistan, killing 47 people and injuring at least 100 others ([Express Tribune](#), December 26, 2010). There was a lull in suicide attacks by women between August 11, 2011 and the recent suicide bombing at Dera Ismail Khan.

Why Women?

Contrary to their overt position of fierce opposition to women’s participation in any activity outside the domestic sphere or departing from their traditional roles as mothers and wives, groups such as Islamic State (IS), al-Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban, and the TTP have recruited women for political activities and military operations.

Among the main reasons for women being recruited for terrorist activities is that they are often not suspected of being terrorists. Neither are they searched due to local customs and traditions. Hence, women on terror missions are able to get past checkpoints or enter tightly guarded installations more easily than men. The all-enveloping burqa they wear facilitates the carrying of weapons by women and even conceals explosives that are strapped to the body of female suicide bombers. This makes them valuable as suicide bombers and couriers of weapons. Also, under pressure from military operations, groups like the TTP are seeing their fighting cadres dwindling in number. This has prompted them to step up recruitment of women fighters in recent years.

Far from Equal

Among the jihadist groups operating in the Af-Pak region, it is IS that is most vocal and highly successful in recruiting women. In comparison, groups like the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani Network, and the TTP have kept their recruitment of women hidden. This could be attributed to the fact that it could set off public revulsion and impact their support base among ordinary people. The TTP’s denial that a woman was involved in the suicide attack must be seen in this context. It is likely that the group is measuring the public reaction of suicide bombing by women in order to test the waters for similar attacks in the future.

Weakened by infighting and military offensives, the TTP’s cadre strength is falling. It is desperate for fighters. Impressed with IS’ successful recruitment of women, it is targeting disaffected and educated Muslim women—the very section that IS-Khorasan successfully attracted—through its own women’s magazine, which is called *Sunnat-e-Khaura* or The Way Of Khaura, a reference to a woman follower of the Prophet Muhammad. The magazine includes advice to potential female fighters, calling on them to “organize secret gatherings at home and invite like-minded jihadi sisters,” and “to operate simple weapons and learn the use of grenades” ([NDTV](#), August 1, 2017).

Although women are participating in all roles in jihadist groups, they are far from equal to the male fighters. There are no women in senior or even mid-level positions of the TTP. Interestingly, none of these groups challenge gender stereotypes. In fact, they reinforce gender roles. Propaganda appeals to women to have more children and be good mothers by raising their children to become jihadists.

Vital Role

Women's participation in Islamist and jihadist struggles is not restricted to cooking and cleaning for the male fighters. Increasingly, women are participating in combat, including suicide attacks as the recent attack in Dera Ismail Khan indicates. Importantly, they play a vital role in the survival of the jihadist group. After all, it is they who give birth to and indoctrinate future generations of jihadists.

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Notes

[1] For a more in-depth analysis of South Asia's female militants especially those of the LTTE, see Sudha Ramachandran, "Dying to be Equal: Women Militants and Organisational Decision Making," in *Women, Security, South Asia: A Clearing in the Thicket*, eds., Farah Faizal and Swarna Rajagopalan (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

[2] Author's interview with an Afghan government official on August 2.

Iraqi Prime Minister's Decree will not Undermine Power of Iran-backed Militias

Rafid Jaboori

On July 1, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi issued a decree stating that the Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias that operate under the umbrella group of the Popular Mobilization forces (PMU) should be fully integrated into the Iraqi armed forces under his direct command (alhadath.net, July 1)

To some, the decree appeared to be a bold move to rein in the militias, whose powers have significantly increased during and after military operations against Islamic State (IS), but a thorough analysis indicates that the prime minister's order is unlikely to make a real difference. Shia militias in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East are important Iranian assets and key militias in Iraq have direct links with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Prominent leaders of the PMU have welcomed the decree, which invited interpretation that its real objective could be to protect certain PMU groups from U.S., and possibly Israeli, attacks as the tension grows between the United States and Iran (Al-Aalem, July 3; Baghdad Today, July 1).

Another purpose of the decree is to contain any damage that might result from small fringe groups attempting to launch unauthorized operations against U.S. or Western targets at such a sensitive time.

The Iranian Context

The decree came against a backdrop of escalating tensions surrounding the role of the PMU in implementing Iranian interests in Iraq and the Middle East. On May 7, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arrived in Baghdad in an unannounced visit. He reportedly shared intelligence with Abdul-Mahdi about the allegedly increasing threat the PMU poses to the interests of the United States and its allies (Asharq al-Awsat, May 7).

Before and after Pompeo's visit, there were a series of attacks on targets in Iraq where U.S. personnel were based that were minor but noticeable (arabi21, July 19). The attacks did not cause any casualties, but they were part of a broader picture of a growing regional and in-

ternational crisis. More serious concerns, however, drew greater attention. A drone attack on pipelines in Saudi Arabia in May allegedly originated from Iraq, not Yemen as it was initially reported (eremnews.com, June 28).

Deployment of Iranian ballistic missiles to Iraqi PMU bases also emerged as a major concern for both the United States and Israel (almodon.com, May 16).

Additionally, there were two ambiguous attacks on PMU camps, the first occurred on July 19 on Camp al-Shuhadaa near the town of Amerli in Salahddin province. The second on July 22 on Camp Ashraf in Diyala province. The attacks raised many questions about the identity of the attackers and the exact target (altahree-eremnews.com, July 29).

Early reports suggested that the attacks were launched by U.S. drones or even IS. Further reports alleged that Iranian officers were killed in the attacks (al-Quds al-Araby, July 19). PMU statements regarding the attacks were unclear and Abdul-Mahdi ordered the formation of a committee to investigate the first attack while the PMU remained silent after the second attack (Rudaw, July 19).

Meanwhile, Israeli media reports suggested that it was actually Israel that launched the two attacks with F-35 jets (Haaretz, August 4).

If those reports are true, this would be the first known Israeli attacks on Iranian and Iranian-linked targets in Iraq. The PMU, however, would usually announce any US, let alone Israeli, operation against its forces in order to boost their credentials as an anti-U.S. Islamist resistance force. Remaining quiet about the recent attacks might suggest that they have been in serious negotiations with the prime minister to deal with the current situation in the Middle East in light of the crisis with Iran.

Shia Relations

It is important to understand that the PMU's endorsement was key for Abdul-Mahdi's appointment as prime minister. After the May 2018 parliamentary elections, the Fatah alliance—the political arm of the PMU—emerged as the second largest block in the parliament, second only to Moqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon. Abdul-Mahdi became prime minister as a result of the two Shia blocks agreement with the blessing of the office of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's most senior Shia cleric. Abdul-Mahdi, a veteran Shia politician and former vice president, did not stand in the elections and he does not have a block

of his own in the parliament. That makes him very dependent on the three dominant Shia powers—Sistani, Sadr, and the PMU.

Moqtada al-Sadr has welcomed the decree and promptly declared the dissolution of his militia, the Peace Brigades (Al Arabiya, July 2). Al-Sadr's position comes on the bases of his rivalry with the other Shia militias. In the past few years, al-Sadr has tried to show more independence from Iran. He famously visited Saudi Arabia, Iran's main Sunni rival, and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. [1] Many of the leaders of the PMU militias were lieutenants under al-Sadr in the past and the recruiting pool of those militias comes from the poorer Shia towns and neighborhoods that make up the strongholds of al-Sadr. Al-Sadr's power and influence would not be weakened by suspending his militias while an end to the other militias would strike major blows to its leaders who have not yet been able to build the same popular movement as al-Sadr. [2]

Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi, like most of the Iraqi Shia Islamist leaders, have strong historical ties with Iran. Therefore, he is not expected to lead any major policy that could affect Iran's strategic interests, such as weakening the PMU. A similar decree was issued by previous Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who was perceived to be more pro-American, but was never implemented. In fact, the essence of the law that legalized the PMU states that they should integrate within the Iraqi armed forces, but the past few years demonstrate how real life implementation reveals a different interpretation of the law and the decrees.

In his decree, the Iraqi PM also ordered the PMU to abandon all its economic departments, which would strip the militias of lucrative sources of income. Having dodgy business interests has always been one of the main features of corruption in Iraq. But those departments are also an important tool for the dominant parties to generate income and run patronage networks. Since IS was driven out of the Sunni majority part of Iraq, the PMU rose to a very powerful position and has profited in various ways using their control over the cities and highways.

Conclusion

By the end of July, the PMU reported progress on the implementation of the decree, but asked for two more months to achieve full compliance with the orders. The whole process looks more like restructuring than over-

hauling. In the past, even when militias claimed to have dissolved themselves, they remained able to reassemble quickly. After the 2003 invasion, Badr corps dissolved itself and announced that it became a civilian organization, but ten years later it emerged as one of the biggest Shia militias within the PMU. Moqtada al-Sadr also dissolved his Mahdi Army only to regroup it quickly and effectively later as al-Yawm al-Mawood (the Promised Day) and finally Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigade).

The PMU might not have the status that it aimed for within the Shia community as the honest protector of the community, but it still enjoyed significant political and military power. Also, the Fatwa that led to the formation of the PMU in 2014 is still active. Many would like to emphasize the idea that Sistani has a different view than Iran and would like to support a degree of independence for Iraq and its military forces from Iran. However, the Fatwa has never been revoked and is not likely to be, as this would cause undesired internal conflict within the Shia community. The PMU was formed during a very critical moment for Iraqi Shia. The sudden and swift advances of the extremist Sunni group IS in June 2014 was alarming. Dominating the government and the armed forces was not enough to protect the Shia community. Any attempt to rein in the PMU would take more than Abdul-Mahdi's decree. It will take absolute and clear support and consensus from Sistani, a prime minister who is willing to overhaul the armed forces, and a lack of opposition from Iran, which currently appears quite unlikely.

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Notes

[1] This does not mean that Sadr has become an enemy of Iran. He still visits Iran frequently and is unlikely to join any US or Saudi effort to hurt Iran. His last reported visit to Iran was in June. (Al-Alam June 27. [https://www.alamtv.net/news/4293911/-لماذا-يزور-مقتدى-الصدر-\(إيران؟](https://www.alamtv.net/news/4293911/-لماذا-يزور-مقتدى-الصدر-(إيران؟))

A knowledgeable source told the author that Sadr has paid another secret visit to the Islamic Republic in August (the time of the writing).

[2] Al-Sadr's militia, the Peace Brigades is in theory part of the PMU however it has a very high degree of independence. Because of Sadr's perceived moderate approach in recent years his group is more accepted in the Sunni community. Unlike other Shia militias deployed in Sunni areas, The Peace Brigades are less tainted by accusation of human rights abuses and corruption.

Remain, Expand, Attract: The Paradigmatic Experience of the Islamic State in Libya

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

On April 4, the Libyan National Army (LNA), which supports the House of Representative government in Tobruk, started its western Libya military offensive to "cleanse" the area and eliminate "terrorists and mercenaries," entering the city of Gharyan ([Jeune Afrique](#), April 4). Field Marshal General Khalifa Haftar was betting on a rapid victory, but his plans were quickly frustrated. The conflict in west Libya is now entering its fifth month and pushed groups that have been fighting each other for years to join forces to repel Haftar's initiative ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 5). The war in western Libya represented an opportunity for Islamic State (IS) in Libya to regain further operational momentum, in line with the crescendo that had characterized its activities since late 2017 ([MLM](#), September 2017; [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 3, 2018).

IS not only attacked LNA positions in southern Libya, but also returned to strike coastal areas in the east, notably in Derna. On May 4, IS attacked an LNA training camp in Sebha, killing nine people ([Al-Jazeera](#), May 4). A few days later, the group carried out another attack in Ghudwah, killing three people ([The Libyan Address](#), May 9). In the following weeks, IS cells continued their hit-and-run operations—a typical feature of their post-Sirte evolution in Libya—by attacking an LNA checkpoint not far from Zillah killing two LNA fighters and kidnapping four others ([The Libya Observer](#), May 18). These attacks are very much consistent with the strategic trends that had characterized Libya over the previous two years. IS was operating mostly in the desert and the south, with sporadic but deadly attacks in Tripoli. The new and very remarkable development, however, is the return of IS to eastern Libya, from which it was operationally absent since 2016 when its Derna branch was defeated. On June 2, two IED attacks targeting LNA forces left 18 people injured. The LNA first accused the Derna Protection Force (DPF) of being behind the attacks, but IS claimed responsibility for the operation the following day ([The National](#) [Abu Dhabi], June 4).

Who's Who in IS Libya Now?

According to a recent UN report, the current leadership of IS in Libya is comprised mostly of Libyan nationals, with the only exception being the Iraqi national Abdel Qader al Najdi (a.k.a. Abu Moaz al-Tikriti), who has been one of the leaders of the organization since its inception in Libya ([UN S/2019/570](#), July 15).

If true, this evolution would be remarkable as, at the time of its emergence in Libya, foreign fighters dominated the group. For instance, Abu Amir al-Jazrawi, the Saudi fighter who led the killing operation of Egyptian Copts in Libya in 2015. Another prominent foreign fighter was the Iraqi, Wisam al-Zubaidi (a.k.a. Abu Nabil al-Anbari), who was the emir of IS Libya province before his death in 2015, being replaced by al-Najdi ([Egypt Today](#), October 7, 2017; [Al-Quds](#), February 19, 2015). Libyan fighters, such as Fawzi al-Ayat, the leader of Ansar al-Sharia in Sirte, who fought in Syria and Iraq, and others played a more marginal role at that time.

However, the reality is likely a bit more nuanced. The information on IS' Libyan leadership remains very fragmented. The rise to internal prominence of Libyan fighters was indeed a trend observable over the past years, but it is unlikely that the command is solely Libyan. Following the defeat in Sirte, IS re-grouped in the desert creating the so-called "desert army" (*Saraya al-Sahraa*), small units responsible for the hit-and-run attacks in Libya over the past years. The leader handling this re-organization was al-Mahdi Salem Dangou (a.k.a. Abu Barakat) ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), September 29, 2017).

In the July video in which IS fighters pledged their loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the speaker was Mahmoud al-Baraasi, (a.k.a. Abu Musab al-Libi, and previously Abu Musab al-Farouq). Al-Baraasi was the founder of the IS affiliate in the eastern city of Benghazi ([Libya Observer](#), July 7; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), July 8; [Akhbar Libya 24](#), July 9). However, it is unlikely that its Libyan component totally dominates IS in Libya. Changes have occurred in the modalities of recruitment of foreign elements, and IS' foreign recruits in Libya are probably declining compared to the past, changing the proportions between local and international fighters. Yet, this influx is not over, and militants continue to join the ranks of the organization from Syria and Iraq ([Al-Marsad](#), July 30).

It is interesting to note that the UN report made no mention of the Franco-Tunisian Mohamed Ben Salem al-Ayouni (a.k.a. Jalaluddin al-Tunisi), who was considered

the leader of IS in Libya in 2017. When speculation was widespread on the fate of al-Baghdadi, al-Ayouni was considered a potential successor as "caliph" ([MLM](#), July 2017). Al-Ayouni's public appearances have shrunk over the past two years. There are several explanations for this absence. He might have died, or he might have fallen out of favor and been sidelined. However, in the first case, for someone of that importance within the organization, IS likely would have released some form of communique. In the second case, al-Ayouni would have probably created a splinter group or tried to flee, reappearing somewhere else. Instead, it is more likely that there are two sides of IS in Libya—one that is more visible and public, and one that instead operates covertly. This would be consistent with the features of global IS, in which prominent figures who move away from the spotlight hold significant power and influence. Al-Ayouni has been in the spotlight for a while—he was one of the fighters appearing in the video launching the IS operation "Breaking the Walls" campaign in 2012/2013 ([Il Foglio \[Rome\]](#), July 7, 2017). However, he might belong now to the second group and be one of the behind-the-scenes minds defining IS strategy in Libya. On top of this, there is also the still significant presence of groups of sub-Saharan fighters within IS in Libya. In July, the LNA killed the Sudanese fighter Mohammed bin Ahmed al-Fallata (a.k.a. Abu Asim al-Muhajir/Abu Asim al-Sudani), who was allegedly in charge of its information office ([The Libyan Address](#), July 12). Notably, IS released a very long eulogy for al-Fallata in issue No. 190 of al-Naba, even though he could hardly be considered a top-name in the organization's hierarchy.

Remaining and Expanding in Libya (and Elsewhere): a Paradigmatic IS History.

The consistent operational revival that has characterized the group, the broadening of its area of action following the beginning of the western Libyan conflict, and its shifting strategic and organizational features suggest a very significant capacity for adaptation and robust resilience. The evolution of the organization in Libya is an essential reminder of IS' strategic priorities, modus operandi, and management of its human resources.

First, its Libyan experience is a classic application of the *Baqiya wa Tatamadad* (remaining and expanding) principle. Following the collapse of the post-Qadhafi transition and the beginning of the polarization between the eastern forces of Haftar and a group of very diversified actors in west Libya in 2014, IS fighters from Syria and

Iraq moved to Libya. The goal was to take advantage of an evolving strategic and political cleavage by establishing an operational foothold. In Libya, there were no sectarian tensions to exploit, unlike in Syria and Iraq. Yet, there were other types of divisions—regional and political. Several groups and territorial realities were thus looking for allies to pursue their interests—jihadist fighters in Derna, but also small groups of former Qadhafists in Sirte. After the rise and consolidation of its territorial power in Sirte, the group was later defeated militarily amid the cooperation between local actors, Misratans in particular, and foreign powers, such as the United States, providing air support.

However, although under attack, the group managed not only to remain active in Libya but also to reinvent itself to a certain extent. Currently, IS is made of fighters coming from very different experiences: Libyans linked to the history of jihad within the country and in its historic stronghold, Derna; some of the Arab foreign fighters linked to the first 2014-2016 wave of IS expansion in Libya; regional jihadists of different national and ethnic background—Tebu, Sudanese, Sahelian groups.

This last element is particularly important and points to IS trying to survive in Libya not only to remain and expand there but to expand into the rest of Africa. The eulogy for al-Fallata, from this point of view, can suggest several trends. In the early days of IS' expansion in Libya, the group was very active in recruiting fighters from Tebu and other tribes in southern Libya, showing that it was open and not limited to Arabs. This is also very consistent with the current phase of continental development of the organization in Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as well as in Mozambique ([Terrorism Monitor](#), May 17; [Terrorism Monitor](#), May 31). While jihadist organizations usually focus on the unity of its members at a rhetorical level, on the ground they have had several problems between ethnic and national sub-groups. The al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) experience is a case in point. In the past, ethno-racial tensions and the lack of what could be defined as the 'ethno-national' pluralization of the chain of command in AQIM led to a split within the organization. The birth of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA) was a result and initiated a process of fragmentation within AQIM that was only restored years later ([Terrorism Monitor](#), April 6, 2012). Aware of how national and ethnic rivalries have undermined jihadist groups in the past, IS expansion across Africa shows that the organization is meticulous in han-

dling these ethnic cleavages, and it wants to exploit them rather than be its victim. Besides, this eulogy is also a signal that, for the group, Libya is also perceived as a regional platform to expand into Sudan. In his first video appearance in years, released in April, al-Baghdadi urged the people of Sudan to launch jihad ([Jeune Afrique](#), April 30). Celebrating the life, and martyrdom, of a Sudanese fighter who died in battle in Libya is thus a PR stunt meant to strengthen its outreach to Sudanese groups. From this point of view, the dynamics of the conflict in Sudan resemble the instability in which IS has flourished in the past. The reinforcement of its presence in Libya will thus be functional to its next phase of development in Sudan.

Conclusion

The conflict in western Libya represented a clear opportunity for IS to further strengthen and broaden its operational presence. This development is coherent with a trend observable since late 2017. The Libyan component of IS, in its leadership, is now more significant than it was in the early phase of its emergence, and these leaders have reorganized the group through these small armies in the desert, which carry out hit-and-run attacks. However, the group is still a multi-national jihadist enterprise with fighters coming from several parts of the world. Its Sahelian and Sub-Saharan component is also increasingly relevant, as shown by the eulogy released for al-Fallata. From this perspective, IS perceives its survival in Libya as not only functional to its strategy of remaining and expanding in the country, but also in the broader continent. Developments in the DRC, as well as in Mozambique, suggest that this is its new strategic goal. Against this backdrop, Libya is seen as the platform from which IS can expand in other parts of Africa as well. Sudan, given its role in the history of jihadist movements and its current, troubled phase, is very much the next target for the organization. The group's expansion and stabilization in Libya will thus be functional for a rising operational profile in Sudan, and likely in other parts of Africa as well.

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