

Terrorism Monitor

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BAHRAIN REMAINS POWDER KEG FOR IRANIAN PROXY CONFLICT

Brian M. Perkins

Iranian involvement in the most prominent conflicts in the Middle East—particularly in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon—has dominated international headlines over the past several years while overshadowing Tehran's hand in the smoldering, low-intensity conflict in Bahrain. Unlike the more prominent conflicts where Iranian-backed groups are heavily armed, well-organized, or wield significant political power, Shia militants supported by Tehran in Bahrain operate entirely outside of political view and in small cells across the small nation. While Bahrain is a far less permissive environment for Shia militant groups than Iraq, Lebanon, or Yemen, their presence is a constant destabilizing force within the country, which could easily become the next powder keg in the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Bahrain's religious demographics—30 percent Sunni and over 50 percent Shia—coupled with the harsh Sunni autocratic rule of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa creates a combustible environment that Iran has exploited with very little effort or cost. The roots of Iranian involvement

in Bahrain grew out of the Arab Spring uprisings and the government's violent response against Shia protestors. The crackdown caused the uprisings to intensify, and fringe groups mobilized and grew increasingly militant after the uprisings were quelled. As these organizations grew, so did the indications of Iranian involvement, beginning with the increased sophistication of explosive devices used to target the government and security forces. Among the most organized and notorious group is al-Ashtar Brigades, which has been responsible for the deadliest attacks in Bahrain to date and whose members have also reportedly received training with Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and the IRGC in Iran ([al-Arabiya](#), June 9, 2017).

Now, eight years removed from the beginning of the Arab Spring, Bahrain's Shia insurgent groups are still operating in the shadows, and though there has not been a significant attack since 2017, there are indications that the insurgency could be escalating and arrests have shown an increased level of training and sophistication of weapons. In February, al-Ashtar Brigades released a statement threatening further attacks against the Kingdom as well as U.K. and U.S. targets within the country ([Al Arabiya](#), February 14). More recently, in early November, the lesser known Katibat al-Haydariyah

reemerged to threaten attacks after being dormant since claiming a series of attacks in 2015 ([al-Abdal](#), September 10).

Although the death toll throughout the history of the Shia insurgency in Bahrain is only in the dozens, there are signs that the country's various insurgent groups might be growing increasingly active. While Iran's role in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen is being seriously challenged—both by local dynamics and the international community—there is far less focus on Bahrain. It is easy to conceive that Iran could look to increase its support to its proxy groups in Bahrain, which is right on Saudi Arabia's doorstep. While it is unlikely the insurgency will rise to the level seen in other countries, it would be a low-risk, high reward scenario for Iran to ramp up support in the coming months.

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SRI LANKA: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS LIKELY TO FURTHER ETHNIC STRIFE AND RADICALIZATION

Brian M. Perkins

The tragic Easter Sunday 2019 bombings that claimed the lives of at least 250 people in Sri Lanka have paved the way for a contentious presidential election on November 16. The presidential election has seen the return of the highly divisive Rajapaksa clan, with former defense secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, securing victory. Support for Rajapaksa largely comes from Sri Lanka's majority Sinhala Buddhist population, which has grown increasingly suspicious and hostile toward the island nation's minority Muslim community following the bombings. The attacks were claimed by the Islamic State (IS) and perpetrated by the Salafi-jihadist group, National Thowheeth Jamaat (NTJ).

The Rajapaksa clan, particularly Gotabaya's brother and former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, has a storied history of human rights abuses and political violence against minorities during the war against the militant separatist Tamil Tigers. Rajapaksa announced that he would run for president just days after the attacks, promising to stop the spread of Islamic extremism ([Tamil Guardian](#), April 27). Sri Lanka has long experienced violent tensions among the country's various ethnic groups, and the bombings led to a significant increase in violence and abuses toward the Muslim minority community by both civilians and security forces. His appointment will almost certainly galvanize the state as well as militant Buddhist groups against the country's beleaguered Muslim community. The longstanding communal violence and ethnic rift between the majority Buddhist and minority Muslim and Tamil communities has fueled radicalization at mosques and online. In fact, key members of the NTJ had used these channels to call for Muslims to retaliate against Buddhist groups (See [MLM](#), June 4).

Though Rajapaksa was the front runner, his victory was not guaranteed as rival candidate Sajith Premadasa from the ruling United National party (UNP) ran a strong campaign. A victory for Premadasa would have likely not seen the situation for minority ethnic communities deteriorate as significantly, but he ran his campaign on promises to eradicate terrorism, which would have likely disproportionately affect minority Muslim and Tamil communities while allowing militant Buddhist groups to continue operating. At the same time, Premadasa would have been unlikely to spur neither the kind of govern-

mental change that would lead to transparency or accountability for past governments' atrocities, nor would it have built the institutions and pass legislation that would lead to reconciliation and help ease communal tensions.

Now that Rajapaksa has secured a victory, the Muslim minority in Sri Lanka will come under increased scrutiny by security forces and the shift in government sentiment will only serve to demonize Muslims in the eyes of the Buddhist majority. At the same time, there are widespread fears that Rajapaksa will punish the minority community since he won without a significant portion of votes from the Muslim community. There is a clear need to address radicalization and militancy in Sri Lanka but villainizing one community while allowing another to operate will further ethnic tension and violence and fuel radicalization within fringe Buddhist as well as Muslim communities.

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Attacks in Northern Kenya Highlight al-Shabaab's Enduring Ambition

Sunguta West

Deadly al-Shabaab attacks targeting security forces, civilians, and government installations in northeastern Kenya have continued to unfold despite security forces' intensified actions to counter the militant group's activities in the region.

Since 2011, when the Kenyan Defence Forces entered Somalia—the base of the al-Qaeda affiliate in East Africa—hundreds of small-scale terror assaults have been recorded.

In most of the attacks, the militants have used improvised explosive devices (IEDs) planted on roads to strike the military and police convoys on patrol. The consequence has been deadly with dozens of soldiers and police officers losing their lives. Civilians have also borne the brunt of terrorist attacks. The attacks have forced some of the region's professionals, including teachers, nurses, public administrators, and construction workers to flee ([Business Daily Africa](#), October 10, 2018).

The continued attacks are lending credence to suspicions that the militant group has existing cells in the region which it is using to radicalize and recruit Kenyan youths. In June, the group said it had recruited an army of fighters in Kenya. The mass recruitment strategy fits well with the latest attacks inside Kenya, including the DusitD2 office attack in January. Ali Salim Gichuge, the lead attacker on DusitD2, was an ordinary Kenyan youth who was born and raised in non-Muslim regions ([Daily Nation](#), November 15).

Late last month, suspected al-Shabaab militants crossed into Kenya from Somalia to attack the Dadajubula Police Station in Wajir County. The attack left two terrorist suspects who had been detained at the station dead. Three police officers and a civilian were also injured in the attack. The heavily armed fighters had used rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) to target the station located only 13 kilometers from the Somali border ([Standard Digital](#), October 30).

It later emerged that the militants had initially wanted to free the two terror suspects detained at the station. Analysts observed that by killing the two, al-Shabaab was trying to stop them from revealing useful information about the group to Kenyan intelligence. The two suspects had been handed to Kenyan authorities by the Somali government. When they were detained, one was in possession of an AK47 rifle belonging to Kenyan police, while the other carried one belonging to Somali forces ([Standard Digital](#), October 30; [Daily Nation](#), October 30).

On October 12, al-Shabaab was also blamed for an IED attack that killed at least 11 members of an elite paramilitary police force known as the General Service Unit (GSU). The officers were patrolling the borderline when the IED hit their vehicle.

Reports accused Abdullahi Banati, an earlier unknown militant leader for planning the IED attack. Banati, who was recently operating along the Kenya-Somalia border, had allegedly planned the attack with the help of a thriving al-Shabaab cell in the Dadaab Refugee complex. The camp complex has frequently faced allegations that it harbors terrorist cells that radicalize and recruit youth for al-Shabaab ([Nairobi News](#), October 19).

Since its emergence in 2006, al-Shabaab has continued to defy predictions of its defeat. Although it has lost key territories, cities, and towns in the battle against African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops and the Somali National Army, the group remains capable of launching successful and deadly attacks in both Somalia and Kenya.

While many al-Shabaab commanders have died in U.S military air strikes or defected to the Somali government, the group has also shown rare determination to rise again after every setback to threaten regional security.

For every commander who has been killed, a new one has emerged. Banati is a case in point. His rise has come months after the death of Ahmed Iman Ali, a.k.a Zunira. Ali was a deadly and influential Kenyan-born al-Shabaab militant leader who is believed to have died in March in a U.S. airstrike in the town of Bu'aale in the Middle Juba region. Ali, being familiar with the people, terrain, and language found it easy to export al-Shabaab's ideology into Kenya ([Nairobi News](#), March 25).

At the same time, while the group changes its strategies, al-Shabaab has also been evolving new ways to raise revenue. The loss of key cities and seaports such as Mogadishu in 2011 and the port of Kismayo in 2012 meant the loss of funding sources needed to continue the war. Through the port of Kismayo, it exported illegal charcoal to the Gulf region. The returning ships brought in illegal weapons, including small arms and light weapons.

After an initial blow to revenue, the group has outgrown the loss, turning to local taxation, extortion and delivery of basic services to boost its war chest. Massive taxation measures have been easy to roll out for the group due to the absence of government administration, especially in southern Somalia where it controls large swathes of territory. More revenue is sourced through extortion, provision of security, and judicial services in these areas ([Daily Nation](#), November 13).

Increased recruitment and revenue are critical for the group, which needs to maintain funds and fighters for regional expansion. Unless both local and international security agencies tackle the two, al-Shabaab will continue to wreak havoc while benefiting from its operations within Kenya.

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The Cross Pollination of East Africa's Armed Groups

Brian M. Perkins

East Africa and its peripheral countries, particularly the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), are experiencing an evolution of their security landscapes as jihadist ideologies continue to creep into domestic conflicts. On the surface, many of the domestic conflicts and armed groups in individual East African nations are locally concentrated and driven by local issues, with violent spillover mostly concentrated in small portions of bordering countries—al-Shabaab violence spilling from Somalia into Kenya, or the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) operating in DRC and neighboring Uganda. A closer look, however, shows an increasing level of cross pollination in ideology, tactics, and financing stemming from high levels of mobility across the region as a whole, and not just between neighboring countries.

Across East Africa and its periphery, Somalia, Kenya, and Tanzania have historically been the most affected by jihadist violence, with Kenya and Tanzania experiencing deadly attacks by al-Qaeda in the late 1990s and early 2000s and Somalia being host to al-Shabaab, a longtime al-Qaeda affiliate, and more recently an Islamic State (IS) branch. Mozambique, Uganda, and DRC, meanwhile, have historically struggled less with overt jihadist groups and more with anti-government rebel factions such as the ADF or FRELIMO. Over the past year, jihadist ideologies have taken root at a more alarming rate as IS expanded its presence into DRC and Mozambique through one of its newer branches, Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) ([See TM](#), November 6). While the pace and international focus on growing jihadist sentiment in East Africa has increased in the past year, groups that had once primarily been anti-government rebels have increasingly been exposed to the region's jihadist-leaning groups. These groups have particularly made contact through highly lucrative smuggling and money laundering networks, as well as through loosely connected radical mosques that are exporting militants across the region.

There are few if any East African countries that have not suffered significantly from the smuggling of highly lucrative goods ranging from ivory and timber to gold, rubies, and cobalt. Smuggling routes traverse the inland

countries, such as DRC, to those lying along the coast for goods to be transferred onward to the Gulf, Asia, and beyond. It is no secret that smuggling and illegal mining have long funded rebel groups and terrorist organizations in Africa. However, recent developments in countries such as DRC and Mozambique have started to underscore how smuggling and financing networks and the mobility of regional jihadist-minded groups have likely led to a cross pollination of ideologies and tactics, further connecting groups that have historically had little to do with one another.

At a distance, the ADF in DRC has very little to do with al-Shabaab in Somalia. However, al-Shabaab is intimately connected to the ADF through illegal mining and smuggling operations in ADF's strongholds in North Kivu, DRC, where the group exploits security vacuums to loot mineral resources ([The East African](#), March 26, 2016). There is murky evidence to suggest these two groups have collaborated in terms of substantial training or support, but the relationship is likely to be primarily one of mutual benefit through these smuggling exchanges (See [TM](#), January 9, 2015). Little doubt exists, however, that through this type of socialization there is a mixing and exchange of ideologies that has been taking place over the past decade, particularly given that al-Shabaab militants have been credibly reported in DRC and are seemingly involved upstream in the smuggling process. This type of socialization is not at all unique to ADF and al-Shabaab and is increasingly taking place across the region, with further help from a handful of mosques that produce radicalized fighters that end up dispersed elsewhere across the region.

Major transshipment points for smuggled resources include Kampala, Nairobi, Mombasa, Kinshasha, and Dar es Salaam, all of which have also seen numerous mosques become breeding grounds for Islamist groups across the region. For instance, Ugandan militants with ties to the radical Usafi Mosque in Kampala were arrested during security operations against Ansar al-Sunna in Mozambique and radical mosques in Nairobi have long been linked to al-Shabaab, radical networks in Dar es Salaam, and elsewhere in Tanzania. Members of Ansar al-Sunna reportedly received religious training in Tanzania ([All Africa](#), January 30; See [TM](#), June 14, 2018).

Looking at Mozambique, there are additional signs of this cross pollination in the smuggling routes and radical mosques in the region. Ansar al-Sunna now likely comprises the coastal segment of IS-CAP and is the coun-

terpart to its inland segment in DRC (believed to be a faction of the ADF). In early September, United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pointed to “real links” between the ADF and Ansar al-Sunna while noting how insecurity in DRC facilitates insecurity elsewhere in the region ([Club of Mozambique](#), September 5). Ansar al-Sunna is believed to have its origins in the smuggling of lucrative goods to the country’s coastline in the northern province of Cabo Delgado. In fact, a recent study by Basel Institute on Governance noted that Mozambique has the highest risk of money laundering and terrorist financing of 125 countries that were assessed ([Club of Mozambique](#), August 29). Militants have received Islamic training at radical mosques in Uganda and Tanzania, including mosques in Kibiti—which lies along a route that connects Mombasa, Dar es Salaam, and Cabo Delgado ([Club of Mozambique](#), May 23, 2018). Radical mosques in Kibiti are occupied by followers of Aboud Rogo Mohammed, the al-Shabaab-linked Kenyan cleric who was killed in Mombasa in 2012. It is also worth noting that Aboud Rogo Mohammed was previously charged for his involvement in al-Qaeda’s 2003 bombings in Mombasa. The majority of Tanzanian’s who have joined al-Shabaab and a notable percentage of those who have joined Ansar al-Sunna are from Kibiti (See [TM](#), June 14, 2018). [1]

While the armed groups across East Africa and its periphery do not share the same agendas—many are aligned in opposing international terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda and IS)—and are unlikely to forge a larger, more impactful connection, it is clear that smuggling networks and radical mosques across the region have served to collectively strengthen each group. Radical mosques are not just producing local militants but instead are exporting them across the region, leading to a greater spread of jihadist ideology and helping to facilitate the transformation of anti-government rebel groups into more jihadist leaning insurgents. These same connections are likely to also facilitate introductions to new financing networks, tactics, and partners outside of the region. Stemming this spread is going to require a concerted effort by East African nations to shore up borders, crackdown on smuggling and financing networks, and reduce radicalization within each country’s borders.

Notes

[1] *The Islamic State in East Africa*, Hiraal Institute, July 31, 2018. <https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/The-Islamic-State-in-East-Africa.pdf>

Rift Emerges in PKK Command Structure over Ties to U.S. Coalition Forces in Syria

Kyle Orton

Even by the standards of Syria's complicated war, October 2019 was a tumultuous month. The contradictions inherent in the U.S. effort to conduct a counter-terrorism war against the Islamic State (IS) divorced from the realities of the underlying conflict erupted into view. Trump announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria on October 6 and effectively green-lit a Turkish incursion, codenamed Operation *Baris Pinari* (Peace Spring), which began on October 9. Trump then changed course, applying sanctions on Turkey for moving against the United States' Kurdish partner force, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the political and legal cover for the black-listed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) ([See TM](#), June 14).

There was a week of fighting, with Turkish troops and their Arab proxies, the Syrian National Army (SNA), taking over the Tel Abyad-Ras al-Ayn zone, an Arab-majority corridor that had formed the link between Kobani and Qamishli—two core Kurdish-majority parts of "Rojava", as the PKK calls its Syrian statelet.

A U.S.-brokered ceasefire with Turkey on October 17 gave Ankara (on paper) virtually everything it had asked for, ratifying the conquests already made and, crucially, proclaiming a twenty-mile corridor inside Syria free of the PKK, plus lifting the sanctions imposed over the incursion ([Al-Hurra](#), October 17).

Trump subsequently declared that U.S. troops would remain in Syria, albeit in a smaller "oil region" further to the south ([Twitter.com/realDonaldTrump](#), October 24). U.S. officials openly told the media the oil mission was a ruse to get Trump to keep U.S. forces in Syria. There is a bureaucratic argument between those who want the troops to counter IS and those who want them to counter Iran—and the Pentagon, which wants to protect the SDF, and by extension, the PKK.

The logistics of protecting this "oil region"—to be occupied by around 500 troops—would require a continued reliance on the PKK. The PKK, however, has been in discussions about the terms under which it would be re-subordinated to the Assad regime and Russia. It is un-

clear what the PKK gains from standing with the United States, which is clearly on its way out of Syria. Even when still in place, the United States refused to defend the PKK from Turkey.

Assad's political terms will always be Carthaginian—the Rojava project is finished—but at least the PKK would be able to retain itself in some format under a deal, resuming its old role as a proxy Damascus can use against Turkey ([Anadolu](#), August 18, 2017). Assad views the PKK as "treacherous" for its association with the United States and will cut the organization down from their current U.S.-empowered position. The PKK is not going to gain leverage over time to mitigate this, and a pointless further delay for however many months the United States remains in Syria could make matters worse, though the PKK operative who leads the SDF seems unclear on this point.

Referred to in much of the Western press as General Mazlum, the SDF leader was known as Shahin Jilo when he was an open PKK member, and his real name is believed to be Ferhat Abdi Shahin, though Turkish sources have recently stated his name is actually Mustafa Abdi bin Halil ([Karar](#), October 16). On November 6, Shahin tweeted that the SDF/PKK was "resuming its joint program of work with the Coalition" ([Twitter.com/MazloumAbdi](#), November 6). On the same day, Shahin gave an interview where he spoke in surreal terms of Assad's offer on Rojava being "incomplete" and the dictator needing to "take more steps" to meet the PKK's demands for political and military autonomy within his state ([Rudaw](#), November 6). Assad's paranoid, Ba'athist worldview does not permit power-sharing in a serious way, certainly not with forces that were recently U.S. proxies, and the balance of power means doing so is not necessary. It is possible that Shahin is only maintaining this line in public for tactical reasons; if not, he is taking the PKK down a very dangerous path.

Shahin himself might be in some danger. Internal PKK dynamics are difficult to discern, but there are some indications that Shahin has run afoul of the PKK central leadership, who are located in the Qandil Mountains ([Al-Monitor](#), November 7). A defector from the SDF confirmed that Sabri Ok, a Kurd from Turkey on the PKK executive council, is the current commander of the Rojava area, a position that rotates to prevent any one person gaining too much personal authority. It is exactly for this reason—Shahin's growing publicity, even in-

ternational, prominence and popularity—that Ok has expressed displeasure ([Karar](#), November 28).

Shahin has also been criticized by the “Qandilians” such as Ok and Fehman Husayn (Bahoz Erdal), who control the Rojava regime behind the scenes, because of his good relations with the United States ([Karar](#), November 28). The PKK was on the Soviet’s side in the Cold War and was deeply influenced by them, regarding the Turkish state as an instrument of U.S. imperialism that had to be swept away—a sentiment also shared toward Israel. The only criticisms the PKK ever had of the Soviet Union relate to the period after Stalin. [1]

The anti-Americanism of the PKK is not in the past, either. Not long ago, the deputy chairman of the PKK, Mustafa Karasu (Husayn Ali), wrote an article that began by defending Iran’s Islamic Republic, regarding with horror the possibility the country would return to a pro-Western government like that of the Shah, before accusing the Americans of being engaged in a conspiracy to steal the YPG away from the PKK ([Yeni Ozgur Politika](#), November 12, 2018).

The PKK has killed hundreds of its own members, sometimes for dissenting from the leadership, and sometimes, as with the massacres of young recruits at the Bekaa camps, for no reason beyond the paranoia of the leadership ([T24](#), December 15, 2011). [2] Shahin’s personal recognition and ties to the United States could easily be interpreted within the PKK as a crime, though it does not seem that Qandil objects organizationally to the way the SDF is being run, specifically the recent decisions around the Turkish incursion ([ANF](#), November 6).

The political-military map of northeastern Syria has been re-drawn over the last month, albeit in ways that were inevitable. The United States is leaving, and without them—or a peace deal with Turkey—the PKK statelet is not sustainable. That the PKK would turn back to Damascus and Moscow in such circumstances was likewise predictable. The United States keeping troops in Syria has paused the completion of this trendline, but the signs that this interruption will be brief are already present ([White House](#), November 12).

Notes

[1] Balci, A. (2017), *The PKK-Kurdistan Workers’ Party’s Regional Politics: During and After the Cold War*, pp. 92-95, 111-13.

[2] Marcus, A. (2007), *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, p. 136.

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