

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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## IRAQ'S POLITICAL CRISIS FURTHER HINDERS ANTI-IS SECURITY COLLABORATION

*Brian M. Perkins*

Iraq's political crisis continues to worsen as Abdul Mahdi's intended successor, Mohammed Allawi, withdrew his candidacy ([Al Jazeera](#), March 2). Allawi cited opposition from the public and other political leaders as the reason for his withdrawal. It is now as unclear as ever who will help to steer Iraq out of the crisis while Iran-aligned political leaders and the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) they command jockey for supremacy within the political landscape. While focus is directed toward the political power vacuum, the resilience of Islamic State (IS) still lingers in the background. A prolonged political crisis will, of course, serve to benefit IS, but so too could the composition of whatever government formation comes next.

Among the key challenges with eradicating IS and preventing a future resurgence in Iraq has been the matter of coordination between Iraqi troops, including PMUs, and Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the subsequent security vacuums that exist between Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan,

particularly from Daquq and the Khanoka Mountains north to Nineveh's border with Syria. The security vacuums in these areas are often dozens of miles deep and provide the ideal, rugged terrain from which IS has started to reconstitute itself and use as a base to launch attacks. IS has launched numerous operations against civilians, including kidnappings, as well as attacks against Iraqi and Kurdish forces along these lines. Kurdish officials have been calling for a long-term, comprehensive joint security plan to address these shortcomings with little success ([Kurdistan24](#), February 29).

In particular, IS has managed to regroup in Nineveh beyond just the disputed areas due to the province's vast size. However, it is the insecure line between Kurdistan and Iraq that could potentially provide the group an easier route to push further south into more urban areas if it continues to regroup.

Baghdad has not prioritized a deeper partnership with Kurdish officials to address these areas and a prolonged political crisis will undoubtedly delay any such plans. Even if the political void in Baghdad were filled quickly, the composition of the new government will have significant implications for cooperation between the two rival governments. The Kurdish government as well as its

Peshmerga forces' relationship with their Iraqi counterparts, particularly the PMUs, remains significantly strained. Kurdish officials have been vocal in warning against the rise of Iranian-backed militias. Countless bloody battles have been ongoing between Peshmerga forces and Iranian-backed PMUs, most notably when the Iraqi government sought to retake control of Kirkuk province in 2017 ([Kurdistan24](#), October 20, 2017). Meanwhile, efforts to push U.S. forces out of Iraq are in direct opposition to Kurdish sentiment and the government's commitment to eradicating IS and stabilizing the country and its relations with Baghdad. A major victory for Iranian-backed politicians and the PMU will further slow security partnerships and an improvement in relations between the Iraqi and Kurdish government, the latter of which will push to continue the United States' presence.

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## **IRAN: CORONAVIRUS ADDS TO REGIME'S WOES**

*Brian M. Perkins*

The rapid and global spread of coronavirus has significantly impacted the global economy and is particularly devastating to the oil exporting Gulf states, many of which rely heavily on exports to China. The domestic impact for Iran, however, extends well beyond the economy and is less related to oil exports than in nearby countries—due to sanctions—and more about the already boiling public resentment toward the regime. While the virus has mostly kept the outrage off the streets, the ongoing handling of the situation and its impact will almost certainly come to bare when the dust settles.

The rapid spread of coronavirus across most major population centers in Iran has led to at least 290 deaths—the third most deaths behind China and Italy—since the first reported case on February 19. The outbreak comes on the heels of popular protests in late 2019, the controversial downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet, and during parliamentary election polling on February 21 that was boycotted in numerous locales for purportedly being a sham ([Middle East Eye](#), March 10). The Iranian regime has faced significant criticism, both externally and internally, for its failure to quarantine the city of Qom and enact broader restrictions, the virus' spread among political leaders, and the lack of transparency surrounding the outbreak and reporting on the official number of cases. Some isolated clashes have already been reported over the handling of the outbreak in the city of Talesh in Gilan Province and further isolated, small-scale incidents could crop up elsewhere.

The parliamentary election, which saw the disqualification of countless reformist candidates, proceeded despite the outbreak and saw a turnout that was, understandably, even lower than what was already expected. Hardline conservative politicians won in a landslide victory and the rapid spread of the virus is almost certain to have muted public frustration. Adding further intrigue to the likely delayed public response is the matter of the number of Iranian officials who have been infected with coronavirus, including two newly appointed conservative lawmakers ([Radio Farda](#), March 7; [Al Arabiya](#), March 1).

The Iranian regime's handling and duration of the coronavirus outbreak is almost certain to provide more fodder to a public that has grown increasingly frustrated

with its narrative controlling cycles of lies, repression, corruption, and overseas misadventures at the detriment of the public. If the outbreak continues to spread at its ongoing pace and the death toll continues to rise, the Iranian regime will face new questions and outrage beyond the already tumultuous past six months. Further, it is unclear how the second order effects will play out in regard to the number of Iranian lawmakers effected and the implications a prolonged outbreak will have on runoff parliamentary elections that were slated to be held on April 17, but could be delayed ([Tasnim News](#), March 10).

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## Where Next for Sudan's Soldiers of Fortune? Army Withdrawal from Yemen Signals Wider Reform

*Cameron Evers*

Sudan's April 2019 popular revolution—aided by the military—ended three decades of rule by dictator Omar al-Bashir. The removal of Bashir was celebrated, and the country was hopeful for a new era. Despite Bashir's ouster, the next steps would prove difficult as the new transitional government inherited one of the world's worst economic and foreign policy portfolios. One of the outstanding failed policies during the fading years of the Bashir regime was the deployment of Sudanese armed forces into the quagmire of Yemen's civil war.

### **The Gulf Origins of Sudan's Army-for-Hire and its Inherent Political Limit**

At the outset of the Yemeni civil war in 2015, Saudi Arabia aimed to build up its ground forces with the armies of both allies and potential allies. Then-dictator Bashir offered his experienced soldiers to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in exchange for funds that Sudan desperately needed ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 27, 2017). For roughly five years, tens of thousands of Sudanese troops (including youths in their early teens) cycled in and out of deployments, often engaging in the heaviest of the fighting. Many Sudanese sought out the mission in Yemen for its high rate of pay, which posed an alluring sum in Sudan's dire economy ([Al-Jazeera](#), December 29, 2018).

While Sudan's regular military mostly deployed to the border areas between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, it was the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) from Darfur, led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, (a.k.a "Hemedti"), who were deployed directly inside Yemen ([Middle East Eye](#), December 22, 2019).

The mission was unpopular, and while exact casualty numbers are unknown, Houthi rebels claim 4,000 Sudanese troops have been killed and other accounts indicate that upwards of 3,700 have been wounded ([Press TV](#), November 2, 2019; [Middle East Eye](#), November 10, 2019). Sentiment against the country's presence in the war has persisted within Sudan's government and the

wider population, including members of the political movement that would eventually help topple the Bashir regime in April 2019 ([Radio Dabanga](#), April 30, 2019).

### **Normalization: Sudanese-style**

Just four months after the revolution, despite aspirations of reform, reports surfaced of possible additional Sudanese deployments to a separate conflict altogether, in Libya ([Africa News](#), July 17, 2019). For the time being, it appeared the old regime's patterns had remained in place. Some Yemen experts believed Sudan's post-revolution government was still too military-dominated for the country to buck the trend and withdraw its troops from overseas ([Al Araby](#), September 13, 2019).

Nonetheless, a July 2019 deal for a new, post-revolution government arrangement established the position of prime minister, which was taken up by Abdullah Hamdok on August 21 ([Gulf News](#), August 22, 2019). Hamdok began his tenure by quickly moving to establish himself as a normalizing figure, paying a visit to Washington in December 2019—the first time a Sudanese prime minister had visited in over 30 years. On this trip, Hamdok repeatedly stated that Sudan would reduce its role as a destabilizing factor in its region and draw down its involvement in foreign wars ([Middle East Eye](#), December 15, 2019; [YouTube](#), December 5, 2019). Just days later, he followed these statements with an announcement that 10,000 troops had returned home to Sudan from Yemen ([YouTube](#), December 9, 2019). In February 2020, a military spokesperson stated that Sudan's force in Yemen had been reduced further to just 657 soldiers ([Press TV](#), February 10; [Al-Monitor](#), February 3). A new foreign policy had paralleled the transitional government's formative stage and set the tone for Hamdok's strategy.

Meanwhile, in Libya, Sudan plays a much murkier role than in Yemen. The total number of Sudanese fighters in Libya who are former Darfuri rebels versus how many are RSF, and which Libyan faction holds the majority in their rosters, remains unclear. While Sudanese officials and UN panels deny the country's official involvement in Libya, some Sudanese media and separate UN panels contradict them and affirm the RSF is inside Libya, alleging 1,000 RSF militiamen were sent to aid Khalifa Haftar's siege of Tripoli beginning in July 2019 ([Radio Dabanga](#), January 15; [Middle East Eye](#), November 9, 2019). Later accounts emerged of thousands of Sudanese serving as rearguard forces for Haftar's eastern oil fields, bordering Sudan ([Middle East Eye](#), January

28). A UAE-based company allegedly hired numerous Sudanese for security jobs in the country, but then after training, only presented them with positions fighting in either the Yemeni or Libyan conflict zones. The practice has generated anti-UAE protests in Khartoum ([TRT World](#), January 28; [Sudan Tribune](#), January 27).

Hamdok has had less to say about Libya, possibly because of Sudan's official position that it is not involved. Given his mission to bolster Sudan's image abroad and his past role in backing Sudan's exit from Yemen, however, a similar pattern of reform could envelop Hemedti's schemes in Libya.

### **Potential Tampering of Other War Policies**

One does not have to look far back into history—or lingering current issues—to see less preferable directions for Sudan's future. Sudan's wars are unpopular, and its principal benefactors (the RSF) are linked to some of the worst human rights abuses of the 21st century.

In this context, Hamdok will likely attempt to further limit the inherited Bashir-era arrangements that could damage Sudan's recovering reputation. In some ways, he has already begun a type of damage control for the past dictatorship. In February, Hamdok announced a deal with the United States on compensating the families of the victims of the USS Cole terrorist bombing in 2000 that was linked to Sudan (though officially denied) ([Al Jazeera](#), February 13; [The East African](#), February 13).

Looking ahead, any future attempts to reduce the flow of weapons, militiamen, and terrorists into other African and Middle Eastern countries will likely influence the global community's perception of the reforms made possible by Hamdok. However, these are the illicit industries closest to the hearts of his military competitors in the government. If Hamdok can reform the underworld of the Sudanese security sector, then it is likely that the outside world will perceive him as being able to reform the less contentiously violent sectors. But on the contrary, a lack of a coherent Yemen/Libya policy or a sudden RSF rebound abroad may leave the door open for further RSF meddling in any of Sudan's neighbors. Such a scenario would highlight that the ghosts of Bashir-economics persist, and slow the rest of the reform agenda.

Finally, the potential legitimacy gained from taking on popular public grievances—indeed the cause of the April revolution—against the regime's self-serving war-

making, could also ultimately help to shield Hamdok from military factions, who remain Hamdok's greatest threat, as demonstrated by a March 9 assassination attempt ([Sudan Tribune](#), March 9; [Middle East Eye](#), March 9).

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## Potential for al-Qaeda-Islamic State Cooperation in Afghanistan

*Farhan Zahid*

Frequent There has frequently been speculation has recently posited that Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda affiliates could eventually coalesce again, or at the least, begin cooperating at a more notable level than was seen at the height of the conflict in Syria. The death of IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi provided fresh evidence of likely cooperation between the two, despite their strategic differences and turf wars all over the world. Outside of Syria, most notably in Afghanistan, circumstances on the ground could further necessitate such cooperation. in certain instances.

### The Case of Barisha, Idlib

U.S. sSpecial fForces conducted Operation Kayla Mueller on the October 26- and 27 in the village of Barisha in Syria's rebel- controlled Idlib province . The well-executed operation resulted in the death of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi along with his children and guards; and, seriously damaging the organizational structure of IS. Scores of children were rescued and several IS militants were taken into custody. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had reportedly supplied critical intelligence about Baghdadi's the presence of Baghdadi in the hideout in Barisha, just five kilometers away from the Turkish border. The most notable aspect of where Baghdadi was killed was that it was located in an area controlled by Jamaat Huras ad Din (HaD) an al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria led by Khalid al-Aruri, an al-Qaeda veteran of ethnic Palestinian origin.

The existence of Baghdadi's safe house in a locality controlled by an al-Qaeda affiliate is a matter of great concern and needs to be taken seriously. Another revelation that came to light after the raid was that Baghdadi and his cohorts were paying HaD a large amount to secure safe havens in areas under HaD the group's control. Receipts of payments collected by the U.S. sSpecial fForces indicate a sum of \$67,000 was paid by Baghdadi to HaD leadership for staying in Barisha ([Middle East Eye](#), November 9, 2019). It was also revealedNew information also revealed that it was not the al-Qaeda affiliate that supplied the critical intelligence to SDF, but



some of Baghdadi's own trusted and close confidants. This again indicates that Baghdadi and HaD had developed enough of a working relationship or low-end cooperation for HaD to keep his location concealed.

### The Case of Afghanistan

IS first emerged in Afghanistan after the proclamation of the Islamic Caliphate in July 2014. IS maintained an anti-Taliban stance in Afghanistan from the beginning of the organization's founding ([Terrorism Monitor](#), August 10, 2018). The Taliban are an old al-Qaeda ally and have long worked hand in hand. The late al-Qaeda emir Osama bin Laden famously pledged allegiance to the Taliban's then supreme leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar. Later, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the new Emir of al-Qaeda, renewed his pledge of allegiance to subsequent Taliban supreme leaders. IS's local chapter, Wilayat-e-Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), routinely fought against the Taliban during the early phase of its presence in Afghanistan. The violence significantly declined with following reported peace deals that were brokered by al-Qaeda to settle disputes between the Taliban and IS-K. [1] The Taliban, under the leadership of their new Emir Mullah Haibatullah, appeared more content to target Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and U.S. forces rather than fighting directly with IS-K. While direct violence between the two declined, the Taliban's peace negotiations with the United States is likely what has led the Taliban to reportedly aid the Afghan National Security Forces ANSF in operations against IS-K.

As part of the peace negotiations, the Taliban is supposed to help assist in rooting out al-Qaeda and IS-K, potentially placing both groups in a challenging position, much like similar to the situation al-Qaeda affiliates and IS faced in Syria as their territories collapsed. If the Taliban is no longer helping to support and shelter al-Qaeda, or it loses trust that the group will conceal its whereabouts, al-Qaeda could seek out a strategic agreement with IS-K, at the least secure a safe haven ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 12, 2019).

### Future Prospects

Considering the situation both al-Qaeda and IS-K could face if ANSF efforts against the Taliban slow, there could become a greater necessity for some level of cooperation could grow, as has been seen in Syria. IS-K has lost numerous leaders, and al-Qaeda is still attempting to regroup in Afghanistan and could lose some of the vital support it receives from provided by the Taliban, at least

to an extent. The Both organizations are both facing an acute shortage of seasoned and experienced commanders and strategic planners. Naturally, pooling resources could help to solve much of their problems. Al-Qaeda appears to be short of finances, whereas IS-K likely has greater access funds from the larger IS network, which and the funds accumulated substantial resources during its five year rule over territories in Iraq and Syria.

### Conclusion

Alliances among terrorist organizations are not a new phenomenon. Alliances occur on the basis of mutual interests and conditions on the ground. Such collaboration could initially work as either high-end or low-end cooperation. Working relationships could start to develop on the basis of tactical challenges and threats emanating from the common enemies. IS splintered out of al-Qaeda's Iraq chapter and ideologically the two adhere to similar Salafist schools of thought with slightly different ambitions. Similarly, IS-K splintered from al-Qaeda's long time Taliban partners and some members are likely more inclined to connect if necessary. As such, it is entirely possible that the changing environment could force IS-K and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan to reconnect on the basis of shared concerns and potentially serve as a future model for affiliates of the two groups facing similar situations elsewhere to further their cooperation.

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### Notes

[1] For further details on this issue please see Antonio Giustozzi, *Islamic State in Khorasan*, Hurst (September 1, 2018), London

# The Emerging Triad of Islamic State Central Africa Province

Brian M. Perkins

The ongoing conflict in northern Mozambique has gathered pace over the past several months and shows little sign of abating, despite the Mozambican military and Russian private military contractor (PMC) Wagner's security operations in the region. Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) has claimed responsibility for attacks at an increasing rate over the past six months, but the dynamics between various militant cells in the region remain opaque. While the dynamic between local cells in Mozambique is still unclear, there have been mounting indications as to what IS-CAP's overall structure will look like and the logic behind its geographic layout.

IS-CAP's arrival in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in April 2019 came as somewhat of a surprise, despite evidence that ADF members had adopted an inclination toward IS ([East African](#), April 19, 2019). The announcement of IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique was, to a degree, less unexpected given the strong jihadist teachings underpinning the core of the local insurgent group Ansar al-Sunna, which had been ramping up attacks at the time of the announcement. What was peculiar about IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique, however, was the geographic divide between the branch's two components—DRC and Mozambique—and the fact that, on the surface, the armed groups in the two countries have seemingly little to do with one another. Meanwhile, there was already an IS affiliate in Somalia established by al-Shabaab defectors in 2015, which is coincidentally the same year ADF leader Jamil Mukulu was arrested, an event many believe helped further fragment the group more toward jihadist sentiment. Unlike IS-CAP, the IS group in Somalia made its allegiances more publicly known, but had not been recognized as a formal IS *wilayat* (province).

## Building the IS Triad

IS' strength has long been its ability to capitalize on deep-rooted religious and ethnic divides, and its branches that span multiple countries have something specific in common—they are often located in multi-border areas with significant overlap in tribal, ethnic, linguistic or religious groups. For instance, in the Sahel, ethnic Fulani and Dogon people straddle the Mali, Burk-

ina Faso, Niger border area and the local IS branch has leveraged fissures between these communities (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), December 19, 2018). Having an expansive area of operations in border territories has significantly benefitted IS in numerous territories, allowing the group to more easily conduct hit and run style attacks, avoid head-to-head military operations, and draw from a larger recruiting pool.

IS-CAP does follow IS' common strategy of coopting or rebranding already established militant groups. The group's geographic structure, however, represents a notable departure from IS' typical strategy in which its formal provinces largely represent a more contiguous territory or area of operations, aside from its province in Southeast Asia, which spans multiple island nations due primarily to geographic necessity. A particularly strong logic, however, exists behind IS' strategy for establishing IS-CAP in this manner, and there have been indicators as to the branch's likely intended form—a triad formed by contingents in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia.

The first IS-CAP contingent to be recognized was in DRC, and likely represents, at the least, a faction of the ADF. Little is known about how exactly IS courted fighters in DRC, but there is evidence of collusion and links between Somali-based fighters and networks and members of the ADF, including smuggling and recruitment networks and alleged training camps (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), November 18, 2019). Additionally, a Kenyan-based IS financier—Waleed Ahmed Zein—known for working within East Africa reportedly made financial transfers to the ADF ([Treasury.gov](#), September 7, 2018; see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), September 30, 2019). It is, therefore, conceivable that IS' initial outreach and current communications were facilitated through similar channels.

IS-CAP's presence in Mozambique since June 2019 is of a similarly mysterious origin with no clear evidence as to the source of the relationship. There is also little available evidence indicating what percentage of the cells responsible for the overall violence are actually linked to IS-CAP. IS-CAP has claimed approximately 28 attacks since June, a fraction of the total throughout that time period. Regardless, there are several common denominators that link fighters in the three countries and likely form the logical basis of incorporating Mozambican fighters into the larger IS-CAP, including ties between militants and smugglers and links back to radical networks—including through Kenya and Tanzanian-based

radical preachers—that have long fed the conflict in Somalia and DRC.

The phased announcement of IS-CAP in DRC and Mozambique, without prior formal pledges of allegiance, or acceptances, and the fact that the older and more vocal IS branch in Somalia had not been formally deemed a *wilayat* suggested the potential for its absorption into IS-CAP. IS in Somalia has also faced significant challenges and has struggled to expand its base, making its absorption into IS-CAP a logical step for self-preservation and to project greater strength. Significant overlap exists in terms of the various nationalities that comprise the various militant groups in the region. In fact, a failed upstart, Jabha East Africa, which was announced in April 2016 and sought to gather fighters from Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda hinted at the desire to build a broader regional IS group ([ISS](#), November 21, 2016). Jabha East Africa, however, was seemingly an ambitious project without buy-in from pre-existing groups and subsequently fizzled out.

IS-CAP's media output steadily increased in the latter half of 2019 and began to incorporate images not only of DRC and Mozambique, but also Somalia, giving the most concrete indications of the Somali branch's eventual incorporation. According to the January 20 UN Security Council report, the IS branch in Somalia has been designated as the command center for IS-CAP to consolidate efforts and loose networks of sympathizers in the region ([UN](#), January 20).

### Looking Ahead

A formal consolidation of the already established groups in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia—even if only nominally—would serve to strengthen the greater collective and build upon Jabha East Africa's ambitions in a more tangible way. The merging of these three would allow IS-CAP to collectively strengthen their image while creating the potential for a more streamlined media strategy and opening up potential avenues for greater resource sharing and collaboration. While reports have indicated that the branch in Somalia will serve as the command center, the various contingents' operations are almost certain to remain rooted in unique local grievances and conflict drivers. Little information suggests that these groups, even if consolidated in name, will coordinate their operations or that a significant increase in military capabilities is likely in the coming months. What is more likely, however, is that the Somali branch will serve as the coordinator in terms of propa-

ganda and will likely leverage the IS financiers already known to have worked within Somalia. Additionally, forming a broader group will help draw in lingering pockets of radicalized individuals from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, providing broader regional appeal and options in terms of which contingent to join in support of the broader group.

The increasingly global aspect of the conflicts in DRC, Mozambique, and Somalia cannot be discounted, but should not overshadow the fact that they are still, at their core, extremely local phenomena that must be addressed as such. The global aspect, however, will only serve to further entrench these armed groups and spread the IS brand. This is particularly concerning given the fact that it is likely that a significant number of those responsible for the violence in northern Mozambique and DRC are still not fully within the IS fold. The attachment to the global IS brand also raises the specter that the region could draw in veteran fighters or advisors, as well as increased financing, from IS branches elsewhere.

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