

Terrorism Monitor

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ATTACKS DEMONSTRATE IS-CAP EVOLUTION IN MOZAMBIQUE

Brian M. Perkins

Northern Mozambique has witnessed a significant escalation of operations by Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) in recent weeks, with the group claiming two substantial attacks over a span of just three days. The attacks, which took place in Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga between March 23-25, demonstrated a notable, concerning tactical evolution as well as improved capabilities at a moment of particular vulnerability ([Club of Mozambique](#), March 26).

The majority of attacks claimed by IS-CAP since its establishment in Mozambique, as well as those previously attributed to Ansar al-Sunna, have primarily consisted of hit-and-run style attacks conducted by small cells, often with rudimentary weapons. Past attacks have also either explicitly targeted civilians or demonstrated little regard for collateral damage with an increasing trend toward attacks on security forces.

The attacks in Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga, however, were more sustained operations targeting entire cities. IS-CAP fighters overran security forces and seized

control of Mocimboa da Praia, the capital of Cabo Delgado province, before attacking Quissanga, which is more than a hundred miles south. Unlike previous attacks, the fighters seemingly attempted to limit civilian casualties while attacking state institutions, looting banks and stores, and reportedly redistributing provisions to civilians ([Daily Maverick](#), March 26). Rather than small cells armed with old rifles or machetes, the attacks were conducted by upwards of 40 fighters dressed in camo and equipped with automatic weapons and RPGs, a notable departure from most attacks over the past several years.

IS-CAP released a series of photographs as well as a rare video message claiming responsibility for the attacks, with the speaker brandishing an Islamic State (IS) flag and calling on fighters to come join them to establish Sharia rule in Mozambique ([Club of Mozambique](#), March 26). Previously rare, claims of responsibility have grown more common and IS has increased coverage of activities in Mozambique ([Twitter.com/emorier](#), March 26).

While the exact level of IS involvement in the overall violence that has plagued northern Mozambique is still unclear, these recent attacks are evidence that the dedicated IS-CAP core has grown, both in size and capabili-

ty. IS-CAP has evolved from its nascent phase of questionable claims of responsibility to overt displays of its involvement. At the same time, its fighters have seemingly improved their coordination as well as their access to more sophisticated weaponry than what had been used in the earlier days of the conflict. Similarly, the group has seemingly moved on to a growth phase in which it is leveraging its improved capabilities to launch more sustained operations that allow it to target and loot state institutions, while beginning a hearts and minds campaign in an attempt to gain further local traction. The video claim of responsibility also demonstrates the group's efforts to draw in regional and global jihadists. Looking forward, these attacks demonstrate the weakness of the state and set a precedent that it is no longer the remote roadways and townships that are in danger, but also key cities where those who have been displaced by violence in rural areas have relocated. The group may yet prove to be strong enough to hold territory for prolonged periods of time, but its ability to enter a key location such as Mocimboa da Praia by sea and land and control it for hours before successfully withdrawing is a worrying trend of the group's operational growth.

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YEMEN'S LATEST CEASEFIRE CALLS UNLIKELY TO STOP HOUTHI OFFENSIVES

Brian M. Perkins

Saudi Arabia announced that it invited the Houthis to Riyadh for direct talks following days of tit-for-tat attacks that broke the March 25 UN-brokered ceasefire as COVID-19 threatens to wreak havoc on war-torn Yemen. While Yemen has yet to officially confirm a COVID-19 case, it is likely only a matter of time and the virus's spread will have dire human consequences and notable implications for the situation on the ground as it creates both opportunities and dangerous pitfalls.

Saudi Arabia and the Houthis had been engaging in informal talks prior to the latest ceasefire. The recent escalation of violence that broke that ceasefire involved Houthi drone and ballistic missile attacks on Riyadh and Jeddah, followed by Saudi Arabia conducting airstrikes on Sanaa. Though the previous talks had not yielded any concrete results, there was a reduction in cross-border attacks that were a demonstration of Saudi Arabia's efforts to draw back from Yemen, even at a time when the Houthis were still making significant gains. The likely impending COVID-19 outbreak spurred renewed efforts to jumpstart a ceasefire but has also created fodder for the Houthi propaganda machine and an opportunity for them to seek maximum concessions if they were to eventually pursue a ceasefire.

Just one day after the nominal ceasefire agreement, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi gave a televised speech on the group's al-Masirah television channel to once again urge Riyadh to release Hamas prisoners detained in Saudi Arabia in exchange for the release of Saudi prisoners in Houthi custody ([YouTube](#), March 26). In doing so, the Houthis were leveraging heightened media attention as a means to expose Saudi Arabia and turn regional public opinion against the Kingdom. On April 1, Mohammed al-Houthi, a prominent Houthi leader, reiterated calls for a COVID-19-related ceasefire while noting the importance of the three references—the Gulf Initiative, outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, and applicable UN Resolutions—and calling for a 12-country arbitration process, which further muddies the water for timely results ([Middle East Monitor](#), April 2).

Despite the group's public calls to pursue a ceasefire in the face of a potential COVID-19 outbreak, the Houthis

are well aware that they are negotiating from a position of power as they continue to push deeper into al-Jawf and the oil-rich governorate of Marib. Over the past week, both the Houthis and Saudi Arabia have continued military operations, including a reported Houthi attack on an oil pumping station in Marib and the shelling of a prison in Taiz. While the Houthis are likely to pursue this desperately needed, piecemeal ceasefire and dialogue with Saudi Arabia, the group will almost certainly continue its offensive in Marib while trying to leverage the looming health crisis to its advantage. Starting a ceasefire while on the verge of taking Marib would be to the Houthis' detriment, as doing so could allow forces aligned to the internationally-recognized Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to consolidate their positions. Given the Houthis' past strategies and its current trajectory, an outbreak or international pressure would likely need to meet a critical mass before the group abandons its attempts to seize the key governorate of Marib and genuinely pursues a fulsome ceasefire.

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Coronavirus and Continued Conflict Push Syria Into Greater Chaos

Kyle Orton

The first quarter of 2020 saw a serious escalation of combat in Syria, albeit without much alteration in the political trends, and the arrival of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has exacerbated a fraught situation.

Under the Astana process, which began in late 2016, Turkey, Russia, and Iran were supposed to act as guarantors to freeze hostilities in Syria. Instead, Bashar al-Assad's regime, backed by Russia and Iran, picked off each of the de-escalation zones *seriatim*. In September 2018, a renewed ceasefire commitment was worked out in Sochi, based on the new realities on-the-ground, to halt the pro-Assad coalition's attack on the final insurgent-held pocket, Idlib, in northwest Syria ([The National](#), September 19, 2018).

In mid-December 2019, the pro-Assad coalition attacked Idlib again. Within two months, 900,000 people had been displaced ([United Nations](#), February 18). Despite the "observation posts" that Turkey has throughout Idlib, it seemed Ankara had no will to defend the province, even as 21 soldiers were killed by the pro-Assad coalition ([The New Arab](#), February 10). [1] Then, on February 27, 33 Turkish soldiers were killed in an airstrike ([Rudaw](#), February 29). This could not be ignored. Within hours, Turkey used drones to clear the skies over Idlib and attacked Assad's troops and the Shi'a militias controlled by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), including Lebanese Hezbollah. Turkey escalated the aerial campaign even further after midnight on February 29/March 1, when the deadline Ankara set for a regime withdrawal south to the "Sochi Line" expired.

Dubbed Spring Shield (*Bahar Kalkani*), Turkey's operation inflicted an average of 50 *confirmable* fatalities on the Assad/Iranian forces per day until a new Turkey-Russia ceasefire was worked out on March 5 ([Twitter.com/GregoryPWaters](#), March 7). The terms of the ceasefire did not reflect the leverage Turkey had built by demonstrating the essential hollowness of the pro-Assad coalition ([Daily Sabah](#), March 13).

Turkey essentially allowed the pro-Assad coalition to keep the gains from its December-February offensive, covering the south of the “Greater Idlib” pocket up to the M4 Highway that runs east-west from Aleppo city to the coast, including the crucial town of Saraqeb, where the M4 crosses with the M5 (running north-south from Aleppo to Damascus), which the Assad/Iran system also got to keep. The pro-Assad coalition is thus within easy striking distance of Idlib city when this ceasefire inevitably breaks down, and if the provincial capital is lost it might well unravel Turkey’s position in northern Syria altogether.

The options for Idlib, under nominal Turkish protection, but dominated by the al-Qaeda derivative, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), are few and ugly. HTS could evolve into a Hamas-like entity that the international community *de facto* deals with ([Ahval](#), December 8, 2018). Turkey’s continued build-up suggests it will exert ever-increasing control in the remaining areas of northern Idlib, but it probably cannot displace HTS entirely ([Twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik](#), March 27).

Spring Shield has ended the pro-Assad coalition’s hopes of retaking all of Idlib at this moment, but it will try again. Perhaps the precedent of this operation means Turkey will hold its ground, but even if Turkey is in northern Syria for the long-term this is likely to co-exist with the consolidation of the Assad regime in the rest of Syria, including the east, since U.S. President Donald Trump remains determined to leave.

For now, it is HTS controlling the response to the coronavirus in Idlib, banning large gatherings—not that it had previously allowed them—and closing schools, though stopping short of preventing Friday prayers ([Twitter.com/Elizrael](#), March 30). As in Afrin and northern Aleppo, the adjacent zones actually controlled by Turkey, in Idlib there are civil society groups like the “White Helmets” that try to deliver services, but there is a serious lack of medical resources and a vast population of internally displaced people (IDPs) packed into a small, often insanitary, territory. Idlib is additionally debilitated because of Assad’s and Russia’s deliberate destruction of a majority of the hospitals and killing hundreds of medical professionals ([TRT](#), March 23).

Security in the northeast “Rojava” zone that the United States oversees has been deteriorating, largely for political reasons. The United States is embedded with the “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF), the politico-legal cover used by the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Work-

ers’ Party (PKK) (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), June 14, 2019). The pressure exerted by the United States on the PKK to create a more inclusive, sustainable governance structure in the Arab-majority areas of Syria it had captured from Islamic State (IS) was not going well ([AlJazeera](#), October 12, 2019). After Trump ordered the pull-out in December 2018, even this minimal pressure on the PKK evaporated.

Omar Abu Layla, the executive director of *Deir Ezzor 24*, a local reporting outlet, described the situation in eastern Syria as a “time bomb”, and that was before the coronavirus. The virus is “a horrific danger, especially with the presence of the Iranians in the western Euphrates regions”, who are believed to have introduced it into the area, “and the indifference of the Assad regime”. “Indifference” might be to understate the issue: the Assad regime sees political advantages in the spread of the virus into Rojava. [2]

Mazen Hassoun, a journalist from Raqqa, describes a similar situation in his home area, emphasizing that apart from the malevolent games played by the regime and the PKK’s missteps— while the PKK has initiated a public information campaign and taken economic steps, its overnight curfew is not effective as a social distancing measure since people do not go out at that time anyway—there is a simple lack of resources, from testing kits to ventilators. There are no testing kits, and maybe three-dozen ventilators in Rojava. Hassoun says that to the best of his knowledge, the United States has not sent additional equipment. [3] This is partly an unintended consequence of the PKK playing down the scale of the crisis to avoid affecting the situation with coalition troops, fearing that they would begin isolating themselves or that Trump would pull them out altogether and leave the PKK vulnerable ([Twitter.com/Mzahem_Alsaloum](#), April 1).

IS has capitalized on the coronavirus crisis, staging two prison riots in late March in Rojava that led to a number of escapes ([Rudaw](#), March 31). Prison breaks were one of the key factors in IS’ previous revival.

The IRGC, which plays a decisive command role in the Assad system, was likely the vector in bringing the coronavirus to the west of Syria too, and passing it on to both the regime forces and the Russians ([Kavkaz Centre](#), March 5). [4] The regime’s obfuscation makes reliable information difficult to obtain, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has proven to be as compromised in Syria as it has in China.

In early March, WHO dismissed news of coronavirus spread in Syria as “misinformation,” relying on Assad’s notoriously mendacious health ministry. WHO has insisted on sending all aid to Damascus, essentially ensuring that Idlib and Rojava do not receive the help they need ([WHO](#), March 5; [Al-Jumhuriya](#), March 26). Damascus finally admitted its first COVID-19 case on March 22 ([Anadolu](#), March 22). There are now ten confirmed infections and one death, which the United Nations says is the “tip of the iceberg” ([Anadolu](#), March 30).

The Assad regime has instituted a travel ban—between cities and across borders—and a 6PM to 6AM curfew, which has the same limitations as the one in Rojava ([SANA](#), March 24; [Al-Modon](#), March 23). Also, like in Rojava, resources are a problem for the regime. There are 325 intensive care unit (ICU) beds with ventilators in Syria, able to cope with about 6,500 COVID-19 cases ([LSE](#), March 19).

With the economy in free fall long before the virus hit and now essentially paused, the mass-demobilization of reservists announced on March 29 raises serious questions about the capacity of the Assad regime, always short of manpower, to maintain order ([The New Arab](#), January 11; [Youm7](#), March 29). Perhaps the increasingly-overt restoration of Assad’s relations with the United Arab Emirates will fill some of the gaps in the Assad system ([Twitter.com/Presidency_Sy](#), March 27). But, depending on how far the virus has spread during the period of denialism, it might be a moot point.

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Notes

[1] The pro-Assad coalition killed eight Turkish soldiers on 2 February; five on the 10th; two on the 20th; one on the 22nd; two on the 25th; and three in the morning of 27 February before the mass-casualty attack in the evening.

[2] Author interview, March 30, 2020

[3] Author interview, March 30, 2020

[4] Sam Dagher, *Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family’s Lust for Power Destroyed Syria* (2019), pp. 323-324.

The Leadership and Future of Kata’ib Hezbollah

Rafid Jaboori

On February 26, the U.S. State Department designated Ahmed al-Hamidawi, the new secretary general of the Iraqi Shia militia, Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), as a specially designated global terrorist ([State.gov](#), February 26). The designation came amid ongoing tension between the United States and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias. Among the numerous militias supported by Tehran, KH is particularly unique. The militia is one of the most well-armed and organized of these groups, with an active media arm, but an intentionally opaque leadership and chain of command. The United States’ recent strategy has focused more heavily on targeting KH than any other Shia militia.

Recent Tensions

On December 28, a rocket attack on the K1 military base near Kirkuk in northern Iraq killed a U.S. contractor and wounded several U.S. soldiers. The United States quickly launched retaliatory strikes that targeted KH bases and killed dozens of its members ([Arabi21](#), December 29).

Hundreds of KH and other militias members attacked the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in protest. Although most, if not all, of the attackers were Iraqis, the United States administration blamed Iran directly for the attack based on the degree of influence the country has on KH and other Shia militias ([Aljazeera](#), December 31, 2019).

The highest point in the confrontation between the United States and Iran came just days later when the U.S. military killed Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani and Jamal Ja’afar al-Ibrahim (a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), the founder of KH, outside Baghdad International Airport on January 3 ([Al-Quds al-Araby](#), January 3).

The Insurgency Years

KH first became widely known in 2007 as an active Shia insurgent group that targeted U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq. The group has not officially stated when exactly it was founded. Iranian strategy in post-invasion Iraq

aimed to empower its Iraqi allies, namely the Shia parties, and help them dominate the government while at the same time maximizing the losses and cost of the U.S. and coalition military occupation. In 2007, that strategy faced two particular problems. First, Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, which dominated the Shia insurgency after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, declared a series of ceasefires and al-Sadr sponsored a political wing that joined the parliament and government. Second, the Sunni insurgency witnessed the dramatic emergence of the Sahwa (Awakening) groups that shifted sides and fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) alongside U.S. forces. Under those circumstances, KH emerged as an insurgent group almost at the same time another Iranian-supported Shia militia group, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (The league of the Righteous-AAH). In 2009, KH and its founder al-Muhandis were issued terrorist designations (Treasury.gov, July 2, 2009).

The two groups enjoyed significantly more support from Iran than the Mahdi Army received and were referred to as 'Special Groups' in U.S. military literature. AAH was clearly a splinter group of the Mahdi Army and its leaders were former aides of al-Sadr's. KH also attracted members of the Mahdi Army, but its leadership included members with stronger ties to Tehran. Some lived in Iran and were members of the Iran-based armed opposition to the Saddam Hussein government before the 2003 invasion. [1]

Leadership

In response to the collapse of large units of the Iraqi army and police in the face of the swift advance of the Sunni jihadist Islamic State (IS), Shia militias mobilized and deployed its fighters to the frontlines.

While most of the Shia militias publicized their activities and promoted their leaders as war heroes, KH continued to keep its structure and leadership secret. While the group's founder al-Muhandis came into prominence from operating an underground organization, KH never officially announced that al-Muhandis was its leader. He was known to have always aspired to a larger role in Iraq. He was revered by all of the Shia militias as an influential commander and became the deputy leader of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)—the official umbrella group that gave the Shia militias a government mandate to operate.

On March 11, two U.S. and one British soldier were killed in another rocket attack on Camp Taji, north of Baghdad (Rudaw, March 1) Although the United States blamed KH, the group did not claim responsibility for the attack. Instead, they declared that they supported it and called for those who launched it to be proud and claim responsibility. Shortly after, a new unknown group called Usbat al-Thaereen (The League of the Revolutionaries) claimed responsibility for the attack (Al-Akhbar, March 16).

Although KH declared that it opposes the United States and the coalition military presence in Iraq, it never claimed responsibility for the recent attacks. The formation of a new group that is not part of the government or PMU became a necessity for the Shia militias movement. The Shia militias do not want to further embarrass the Iraqi Shia-led government, which is under immense U.S. pressure to reign in the armed groups. Most of the leaders of the Shia militias and the locations of their camps and branches have become known in recent years. A shadowy new group, however, will not be under the same scrutiny or threat from U.S. reprisals.

Future of KH

Reports have surfaced that the United States is considering plans to completely destroy KH in the wake of the Taji attack (Al Arabiya, March 28). KH, however, is just one of several Iranian-backed Shia militias that have acquired significant political and military power in Iraq, especially after the defeat of IS. Many of those militias promote the same anti-American sentiment as KH and have declared policies that aim to expel the United States from Iraq through both violent and nonviolent means. As such, confronting this threat requires a more comprehensive U.S. strategy.

KH was one of the Shia groups that played a key role in repressing the anti-corruption protests that have engulfed Iraq since October. The group, however, pursued a misleading discourse. Like all Iranian-backed militias, KH was against the protests and accused the protesters of being sponsored by the United States, Israel, and anti-Iran Gulf countries. The group never accepted responsibility for killing protesters (almaalomah, October 29).

There have been accusations against many of KH's leaders of orchestrating the crackdown that killed hundreds

of protesters. Yet, the group alleged that it also supports the protesters' cause and their calls for reform. Protesters have condemned KH and the United States has sanctioned the group's leaders. The whole protest movement, however, seems to have lost momentum and failed to bring any genuine reform to the political system. KH appears to have emerged stronger from that crisis and U.S. sanctions are unlikely to weaken its leaders who operate secretly between Iraq and Iran.

The question of leadership is problematic for KH. After all, it failed to live up to its inspiration/name and form an Iraqi Shia group as successful as the Lebanese Hezbollah. KH could neither publicly present a charismatic leader like Hassan Nasrallah, nor unify the other Iraqi Shia militias into one group that dominates the military and political field like Hezbollah did in Lebanon. KH will not be easily eliminated, even in a potential large-scale U.S. military campaign. It would most likely survive, albeit in a different form, and use any losses to consolidate its position as a major component of the PMU. The militia's position and status, however, will always depend on Iranian support for the group and its secretive leadership.

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Notes

[1] Author's April 3 interview with an Iraqi source who preferred to remain anonymous.

Geopolitics and the Greater Maghreb Security Complex in a Time of Financial Distress

Dario Cristiani

Introduction

The first months of 2020 witnessed significant diplomatic activity between the Gulf and the Maghreb. However, the emerging global economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will likely affect some of these diplomatic dynamics. In January 2020, the Berlin conference on Libya offered an occasion for many countries to target Maghrebi partners. Germany largely ignored local actors: Morocco, Mauritania, and the Arab Maghreb Union were not invited. Taieb Baccouche, the Secretary-General of the Arab Maghreb Union openly criticized this European attitude, voicing the regional disappointment for this approach ([Affari Internazionali](#), March 5). Tunisia was invited only the day before the conference, and the new President Kais Saied made an explicit reference to this late invitation when rejecting the offer ([Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), January 18).

Among Gulf countries, the UAE was the sole country invited to the conference. This should not come as a surprise. The UAE is likely the most influential external actor in Libya these days and the only country with the ability to impose choices on Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, the warlord dominating eastern Libya (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), February 7).

In the immediate aftermath of the conference, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, flew to Morocco, where he owns a house, and met with the Moroccan King Mohammed VI ([Twitter.com/for-san_uae](#), January 20). The picture of the meeting was widely shared online, but this did not change the complex nature of Emirati-Moroccan relations, which remain tense due to Rabat's commitment to neutrality over the Qatar blockade. In March, Morocco recalled its ambassador and two consuls from the UAE. Notably, this decision came after Fouad Ali El Himma, one of the most influential Moroccan politicians and a close senior advisor to King Mohammed VI, toured the Gulf in late February, excluding the UAE from his visit ([Le1 Maroc](#), March 11).

Emirati regional diplomatic activism continued in the following weeks. In essence, the UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan met his Algerian counterpart, Sabri Boukadoum, Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad, and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune in Algiers in late January, with Libya being at the forefront of the talks ([Algeria Press Service](#), January 27, [Ashar Al-Awsat](#), January 28). A few days later, the Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani also went to the UAE for an official state visit.

The UAE's recent diplomatic activity was matched by a renewed activism from Qatar as well. At the end of February, the emir of Qatar went to Tunisia, the regional country in which Doha likely has the most significant leverage ([AnsaMedInfo](#), February 25). The UAE has been trying to deepen its role in Tunisia for years, but these ambitions have often been frustrated. The Qatari emir also went to Algeria and despite some ongoing problems—the most notable being the Ooredoo issue—on more strategic and regional issues the countries seemed to be on the same page ([The Arab Weekly](#), February 23, [The Peninsula \(Qatar\)](#), February 25)

This activism on both sides remains part of the broader confrontation, despite some feeble attempts to start settling issues regarding the 2017 blockade. This confrontation goes beyond the mere diplomatic sphere, as it embraces a much more comprehensive set of questions: it is a confrontation between models of governance, ideological approaches to the relationship between power and religion, and how to develop their global presence in the coming years

Mauritania as the UAE's Key to the Region?

The diversified problems that the UAE face vis-à-vis Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are likely the main reasons explaining why, over the past few months, Abu Dhabi has become even keener in deepening relations with Mauritania. Relations between the two countries were already good. Under previous President Mohammad Ould Abdul Aziz, Mauritania took several positions that were in line with Abu Dhabi's feelings—a harsh stance towards the Muslim Brotherhood; and severing diplomatic ties with Qatar in the wake of the spat that led to the blockade in 2017 ([GulfNews](#), September 24, 2018, [Khaleej Times](#), June 7, [Al-Araby](#), September 27, 2014). The situation did not change after the Mauritanian power transition.

The UAE's greater engagement with Mauritania is becoming increasingly multidimensional and not only limited to political and security issues. The Emiratis announced the allocation of \$2 billion towards investment and development projects. National media highlighted how this effort is particularly significant, as Mauritania's GDP is worth \$5 billion. As such, the UAE plan would represent no less than 40 percent of its entire economy ([The National {Abu Dhabi}](#), February 9). Cooperation is also ongoing in areas like environmental and social issues ([Mauritanian News Agency](#), February 19). In March, the UAE-led "Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies" organized the first consultative forum for scholars from Sahel countries in Nouakchott under the patronage of the Mauritanian presidency ([Emirates News Agency](#), March 12). The two countries signed a memorandum regarding a mutual visa exemption ([SaharaMedias](#), February 2). The UAE even helped Mauritania evacuate its citizens stuck in China as the coronavirus outbreak erupted. The two countries also coordinated a response to deal with this crisis ([Al-Mashhad Al-Araby](#), March 4; [Emirates News Agency](#), March 30).

Over the past years, Mauritania's regional importance has indeed increased, partially as a result of growing economic investments, especially in the oil sector ([Africa News](#), December 25, 2016). In the geostrategic context of the Maghreb-Sahel region, Mauritania can hardly be considered a crucial player, given its limited demographic and economic size. However, its position as a country in between the Maghreb and the Sahel—areas whose connections have been more and more important over the past few years—makes it an ideal target for diplomatic action by Abu Dhabi. A more substantial presence there can be used as a tool of influence in both regional blocs, but also vis-à-vis the other countries of the Maghreb in which, for one reason or another, Abu Dhabi struggles to exert influence.

The current Mauritanian president was the primary political architect behind the significant strengthening of relations between Mauritania and Western actors, namely France and NATO ([The New Arab Weekly](#), November 4, 2018, [NATO](#), May 29, 2018). As the UAE is increasingly close with France, as observable in the Libyan quagmire, deepening its ties with Mauritania can also serve as a means to become more involved in the Sahel. France could seek greater support from the UAE as it tries to step up its efforts in the region to make up for American disengagement from Africa and the increasing profile of globally connected local jihadist organizations in the

region, both al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS). Mauritania has also built up a reputation of being effective in coping with the jihadist threat. As it takes the leadership of the G5 Sahel, Nouakchott will become a major asset to UAE eyes.

Conclusions: Diplomatic Depth in a Time of Profound Financial Distress

This diplomatic activism will inevitably be affected by the looming economic crisis set to burden the world over the next several years. The impact of the ongoing global coronavirus crisis is set to be quite significant since the foreign policies of both the UAE and Qatar are directly in service to their economic well-being. In addition, for Gulf countries, the financial crisis will be even more significant given the ongoing price wars that are bringing the global demand for energy, already in freefall because of the coronavirus impact, to a total standstill. The economic crisis is also likely to shake the social fabric and economic foundations of Maghrebi countries, whose health systems are weak and socio-economic stability are already undermined by years of financial crisis. In Tunisia, a country whose democratic transition moved ahead despite years of economic troubles, people in historically marginalized areas of the capital, such as Mnihla, have already taken to the streets, and Algeria and Morocco are bracing to cope with the economic sequences of the pandemic ([Tuniscope](#), March 30; [Courrier International](#), March 27; [Yabioladi](#), April 3; [Tuniscope](#), March 30).

At the same time, these issues create problems and potential for more engagement. Maghrebi countries will need money to support their economies. Gulf countries might need to reduce their external commitment, however, depending on the extent of the impact, and the length, of the ongoing crisis. So far, in the theater in which the UAE is more active, Libya, economic hardship has not turned into lesser engagement, at least yet. Mauritania will remain at the forefront of UAE efforts to become more relevant in both the Maghreb and the Sahel. That said, the impact on the external projection of the Emirates might be significant. Paradoxically, the fact that Qatar had to adapt to the blockade since 2017 made it more resilient to sudden economic and logistic shocks. This aspect might also play a role in determining the efficiency of its external engagement in the coming months, as it needs less time to adapt to its foreign projection to a more challenging domestic economic environment.

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