

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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MALAWI AND ZIMBABWE'S IMPROBABLE INTERVENTIONS AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE

Jacob Zenn

Amid Islamic State (IS) fighters' continued insurgency in northern Mozambique, which has extended into southern Tanzania since October, questions remain about who will support the country in impeding the insurgency ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 3). The major Western powers, including the United States and France, are busy elsewhere in Africa, while Russia's employment of the Wagner Group in Mozambique was short-lived due to bureaucratic delays and the mercenaries' insufficient knowledge of the local terrain and "bush warfare" techniques ([The Moscow Times](#), November 19, 2019). China may also have interests in Mozambique, but its strategic culture in Africa does not involve counter-terrorism interventions. Moreover, with Ethiopia recently experiencing civil war in Tigray, global geopolitical attention is presently not focused on Mozambique.

For the foreseeable future, Mozambique, therefore, will likely be forced to go it alone against IS fighters, who, along with the group's fighters in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are called Islamic State in Central Africa Province (ISCAP). Rumors circulated in early November, however, that Malawi might send soldiers to support Mozambique. According to the local *Nyasa Times*, for example, Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera promised at a Southern African Development Community (SADC) meeting in Botswana that the Malawi Defense Forces (MDF) would be dispatched to Mozambique by December 15 ([Nyasa Times](#), December 3).

Four days later, however, Malawi's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called that report "fabricated" while acknowledging that the SADC meeting focused on "peace and security affairs" in DRC and Mozambique ([Twitter/Malawi-Govt](#), December 7). SADC, whose membership includes 16 southern African countries and is based in Gaborone, Botswana, had been diplomatically involved in DRC earlier in 2020 ([sadc.int](#), July 27; [southerntimesafrica.com](#), December 7). However, SADC was not focused on the areas near Beni where ISCAP operates and instead dealt

with a Zambia-DRC border dispute (southerntime-africa.com, August 7). In sum, there are no imminent signs Malawi or SADC more broadly will take a more assertive approach towards ISCAP in either DRC or Mozambique at the moment.

In contrast to Malawi, Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa stated in November that, "Zimbabwe is ready to assist in any way we can" in Mozambique (chronicle.co.zw, November 11). On the strategic level, Mnangagwa noted Mozambique was Zimbabwe's outlet to the sea because the country is landlocked. Given SADC's inaction on Mozambique, Mnangagwa also stated Mozambique was approaching countries like the United States and France for support. At the same time, Mnangagwa reportedly sought for the United States to end sanctions against Zimbabwe in exchange for assistance in combating ISCAP in Mozambique (business.co.za, November 11). Zimbabwe's Defence Ministry further asserted on December 15, after a day-long SADC meeting in Maputo to discuss the conflict, that Zimbabwe would contribute troops to a "subregional response against Islamist insurgency" once SADC leaders sanctioned such an intervention (The East African, December 1). However, it remains unclear if or when that deployment will ever occur.

Until U.S. Ambassador-at-Large Nathan Sales stated on December 8 that the United States "wants to be Mozambique's security partner of choice in strengthening its capacity to counter terrorist activity," there were few indications that the country would become involved (translations.state.gov, December 8). However, with President Trump's reported order to move all U.S. troops out of Somalia and into other countries in the region, such as Kenya, the United States might become better situated to deal with threats on the southern part of the Swahili coast, including Mozambique (stripes.com, December 4). Either way, Mozambique seems unable to combat ISCAP on its own, while any broader subregional or international intervention could even become a recruitment generator for ISCAP and lead to it carrying out external attacks. A clear or ideal solution is not present, but at least diplomacy to address the conflict is gaining momentum.

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

ISLAMIC STATE BEHEADINGS REVIVE JIHADISM IN POSO, INDONESIA

Jacob Zenn

Jihadism had found inroads into Indonesia before 9/11. It began with Indonesians' immersion in the 1980s Afghan jihad, localized Muslim-Christian tensions on the island of Sulawesi in the late 1990s, and short-term instability caused by the government's shift from authoritarianism to democracy from 1999 to 2002. Although the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiya's major attacks occurred in Bali in 2002 and 2005 and in Jakarta multiple times throughout the 2000s, one of the main areas where Afghan jihadist veterans imported al-Qaeda's ideology was Poso (liputan6.com, December 17, 2001). Poso is the largest town in the Central Sulawesi province and was the site of the beheadings of three young female Christian students in 2005 by a cell led by militants who had trained with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines. They considered the beheadings an "act of charity" before Ramadan (The Australian, November 9, 2006).

Poso later became the base of Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (MIT), which was led by the singularly named Santoso, who trained under Jemaah Islamiya founder Abubakr Baasyir and eventually pledged loyalty to Islamic State (IS) "Caliph" Abubakar al-Baghdadi in 2015 (Terrorism Monitor, May 30, 2013; Jakarta Post, December 1, 2015). However, Santoso was killed in 2016 and his following became weakened in Poso in the ensuing years (Jakarta Post, July 19, 2016). It was not until the beheading of one Christian and throat-slitting of three other Christians on November 27 near Poso that the specter of jihadism again became front and center in Sulawesi (smh.com.au, November 30). Prior to this incident, Indonesia's counter-terrorism unit, Densus 88, had succeeded in breaking up jihadist cells throughout the country, including arresting Upik Lawanga, who had operated in the Philippines and masterminded the bombing of the JW Marriott hotel in Jakarta in 2009 (Antara news, May 13; Militant Leadership Monitor, September 29, 2011).

The four Christian victims on November 27 belonged to the Salvation Army and were a husband and wife and

their daughter and son-in-law. IS claimed the beheadings on November 30 and noted that they were revenge for the Muslim-Christian clashes in Poso in 2000. Police have yet to catch the suspects (smh.com.au, November 29). However, IS' recalling of the jihadist violence in Poso from two decades ago and the attack's occurrence near Poso indicates the suspects are likely among the one dozen or so remnants of Santoso's fighters in Sulawesi. The attack does not necessarily indicate the expansion of jihadism in Poso or the reviving of Santoso's network, but does indicate that those remnants still retain a line of communication to IS, which explains the IS claim. Moreover, the attack claim as well as mention of the attack in IS' *al-Naba* newsletter indicates IS still desires to convey its presence in Indonesia. If Densus 88 continues its momentum, however, it can be expected that Densus 88 will track down the attackers and any repeat beheadings or similar incidents will be unlikely to recur near Poso.

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How War in Ethiopia Impacts Red Sea and Horn of Africa Power Politics: The Battle in Tigray and Beyond

Michael Horton

Ethiopia is a key prize in the scramble for influence and power in the Horn of Africa and broader Red Sea region. With its natural resources, population of 110 million, and well-equipped military, Ethiopia has become an African power. The nation's capital, Addis Ababa, moreover, hosts the African Union headquarters, and the country is one of the few African nations never to be colonized. [1] Ethiopia has accordingly long played an outsized role in African and sub-regional politics.

For much of the last decade, successive Ethiopian governments have navigated treacherous regional and global politics by maintaining relations with diverse geopolitical actors. On the global level, Ethiopia has been—and remains—an important U.S. ally, while China accounts for the largest volume of foreign direct investment into Ethiopia. [2] At the regional level, Ethiopia has avoided becoming entangled in the Gulf's acrimonious power politics between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their two main adversaries, Qatar and Turkey. All four of those countries nevertheless provide Ethiopia with financial aid and private investment across multiple areas, especially its important agricultural sector. Turkey and the UAE, despite being regional rivals, also both maintain high-level military-to-military relations with Ethiopia.

The ongoing war in Ethiopia's northernmost Tigray region will test Ethiopia's strategy of balancing the interests of outside powers with its own need for domestic investment. At the same time, the war, which began on November 4, will present these same outside powers with new opportunities to enhance their relationship with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali ([East African](#), November 7). However, those and other outside powers will also have ample opportunity to create instability in Ethiopia if they so choose.

Ethiopian Foreign Policy from Balancing to Entanglement

The war in Tigray pits the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Ethiopian government. The TPLF, which dominated Ethiopian politics for much of the last three decades, is a formidable political and military power in its own right. While the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) has made quick progress in capturing major cities in the Tigray region, this was likely due to strategic withdrawals by the TPLF ([Nazret](#), November 19). Such a strategy aligns with the TPLF's long history of guerrilla warfare.

Barring some negotiated settlement between the TPLF and the Ethiopian government, the war in Tigray will likely evolve into an insurgency that will spill beyond the borders of Tigray. At the same time, the war in Tigray, even if it is contained to TPLF redoubts in the mountains, will attract the interest of outside powers. This is already the case with Eritrea, which has deployed troops within Ethiopia's borders to help the ENDF bottle up the TPLF. In addition to its three decade-long battle for independence from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Ethiopia fought over disputed border towns from 1998-2000. Eritrea, which was once allied with the TPLF, is now supporting Abiy Ahmed, who signed a peace agreement with Eritrean president Isaias Afewerki in 2018 that ended the two countries' longstanding border conflict ([Addis Fortune](#), September 22, 2018).

The involvement of Eritrean forces in Ethiopia's war in Tigray could be a harbinger of things to come. The UAE, which maintains military bases in Eritrea, may also be aiding Abiy Ahmed's government. Conflicting and unconfirmed reports, for example, indicate the possible deployment of UAE-operated drones from the UAE base in Assab, Eritrea to Tigray. [3] The UAE, which is locked in a cold war with Qatar and Turkey, could try to enhance its relationship with Ethiopia by supporting its fight against the TPLF at the cost of Ethiopia's relationship with Qatar and Turkey.

Turkey, however, like the UAE, enjoys excellent military-to-military relations with Ethiopia. Due to Ethiopia's involvement in Somalia, with which it shares a long and largely unguarded border, Turkey works closely with the Ethiopian military and intelligence services. Turkey also

regards Somalia, where it maintains its largest overseas military base, as the lynchpin in its strategy to preserve and grow its influence in the Horn of Africa and Red Sea region ([Terrorism Monitor](#), November 20). In mid-November, Ethiopia withdrew large numbers of troops it had deployed in its ethnically Somali Ogaden region and Somalia itself to redeploy them to Tigray ([Somali Affairs](#), November 3). Somalia-based al-Shabaab, therefore, will benefit from gaps left by the Ethiopian forces, and the relationship between Ethiopia and Turkey may deepen as Ankara seizes on opportunities to help Addis Ababa bolster security along its border with Somalia. Turkey also has greater ability than either the UAE or Saudi Arabia to offer the Ethiopian military what it lacks and most desires: drone technology and the expertise to use it ([Terrorism Monitor](#), October 13).

Further afield, China, which has invested billions of dollars in almost every economic sector in Ethiopia, will act to protect those investments. China will make every effort to support stability in Ethiopia. Given China's pragmatic foreign policy in Africa and in Ethiopia in particular, this support will be cost-effective and possibly covert. There is little doubt that China will aid Abiy Ahmed's efforts to contain and defeat the TPLF. However, such aid will, as is customary with Chinese foreign policy, come with strings attached. [4]

Water Wars and Instability

On the other side of the equation, Ethiopia's regional rivals will view limited instability in Ethiopia as a benefit. Ethiopia has completed its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and, as of July 2020, began filling the dam's immense reservoir ([Nazret](#), July 16). Egypt views the dam, which impedes the flow of water into the Nile's primary tributary, the Blue Nile, as an existential threat. [5] Thus far, the two governments have failed to reach an agreement over how they will share the Nile's water resources.

Over this summer, Egypt reportedly proposed to build a base in the unrecognized Republic of Somaliland ([The East African](#), July 28). It is unlikely the government of Somaliland will accept the proposal. However, it reflects Egypt's interest in enhancing its relations with other nations in the Horn of Africa and expanding its military's

regional reach as a way of checking what it sees as growing Ethiopian power.

For its part, Sudan, which will benefit from cheap electricity and flood control provided by the GERD, has been more willing to negotiate with Ethiopia on the dam. However, Egypt wields considerable influence in Sudan. The war in Tigray, especially if it is prolonged, may undermine the Ethiopian government's ability to press forward with what Egypt views as an uncompromising agreement on GERD and hinder Sudan's possible accommodation with Ethiopia on the dam.

Ethiopia's Outlook

Ethiopia's successful foreign policy, which is based on balancing the interests of rival countries in its natural resources and strategic position in exchange for access and investment, could be compromised by sustained war in Tigray. The TPLF is a sophisticated political and military organization that possesses the knowledge and institutional memory that will allow it to engage rival internal and outside powers. Abiy Ahmed's government will find it requires more and new types of aid to deal with the challenges posed by the TPLF. Receipt of this aid, be it military or financial, will constrain Ethiopia's nimble and independent foreign policy.

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Notes

[1] Ethiopia was occupied by the Italians from 1936-1941. See Jeff Pearce, *Prevail: The Inspiring Story of Ethiopia's Victory over Mussolini's Invasion* (Skyhorse Publishing, 2014).

[2] In 2019, China accounted for the largest volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ethiopia, followed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

[3] There are conflicting and unconfirmed reports in Western media on the possible deployment of UAE-operated drones from the UAE's base in Assab, Eritrea to Tigray. See, for example: <https://www.voanews.com/africa/expert-no-evidence-uae-drones-are-being-used-ethiopia-tigray-conflict>; [https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2020/11/19/are-emirati-armed-drones-supporting-ethiopia-from-an-eritrean-air-base/)

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-conflict-idUSKBN27V05M>. While deployment of UAE-operated and Chinese-manufactured Wing Loong II drones would be consistent with the UAE's deployment of drones over Yemen and Libya, it is unlikely at this stage. What is more likely is that the UAE is using surveillance drones within Eritrean territory to monitor incursions into Eritrean territory by TPLF forces.

[4] This is not to say that other countries providing aid, like the United States, do not also expect some kind benefit in return. However, China is particularly adept at incorporating countries into its financial and political web at relatively minimal expense to the Chinese treasury. See Tom Burgis, *The Looting Machine: Warlords, Oligarch, Corporations, Smuggler, and the Theft of Africa's Wealth* (Public Affairs, 2016).

[5] For an overview of the complexity surrounding GERD and downstream riparian environments, see: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-020-19089-x>

Jihadism in Francophone Western Indian Ocean Islands: Cases from Comoros, Réunion, and Mauritius

Christian Jokinen

The tropical islands in the Western Indian Ocean are overlooked by terrorism analysts because they have been spared from major attacks. However, several factors make them vulnerable targets for radicalization. The three main islands assessed in this article are Comoros, Réunion, and Mauritius.

The Comoros archipelago is 300 kilometers across the Mozambique Channel and is politically divided between the Union of Comoros and Mayotte, the latter an overseas department of France. Mayotte became an official French colony in 1843, while the three other islands in the Comoros archipelago became French protectorates forty years later, colonies in 1912, and independent in 1974. Only in Mayotte did the population vote to remain part of France due to a longer history of interaction and stronger cultural ties with the country.

Meanwhile, to the east of Madagascar, Réunion and Mauritius changed hands several times from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries between the Dutch, Portuguese, French and British. Today Réunion, like Mayotte, is a French overseas department, while Mauritius gained independence from Britain in 1968 and became a republic in 1992. Since Mauritius was ruled by France from 1715 until 1814, French became the lingua franca on Mauritius and French culture remains to this day an integral part of the islanders' heritage and identity. Mauritius is, for example, part of the 88 countries of *Le Francophonie*, which share French as a common language.

Comoros, Réunion, and Mauritius are different from one another, including by size, culture, socio-economic context, and political status. However, they share certain common traits that distinguish themselves from nearby states on the African continent, including their island geography, insularity, and historical ties with France and *Le Francophonie*. Only recently, however, has the threat from jihadism become something that these islands now face in common with their continental counterparts.

Comoros: A Potential Hideout and Infiltration Route?

In the past, the Comoros archipelago, though predominantly Muslim, has been considered an unlikely breeding ground for jihadism because Comoran Islam is generally tolerant. However, there have been several known jihadists to have emerged from Comoros. One of them was late al-Qaeda commander in East Africa and Osama bin Laden's "confidential secretary," Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, who was killed in Somalia in 2006.

Individual counter-terrorism investigations have taken place involving Comoran nationals in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda between 2014 and 2017, which points to Comorans' links to East African jihadist networks ([Comores-Infos.net](http://comores-infos.net), May 20, 2014; comores-infos.net, April 23, 2015; tanzanialatestnews.blogspot.com, October 14, 2017). At the same time, the Comoran archipelago has been shaken by more than 20 coups or attempted coups since gaining independence. Before the most recent March 2019 presidential elections, for example, Comoran President Azali Assoumani allegedly survived an attempt on his life.

The assassination attempt was intended to target Assoumani's convoy on his election campaign trail. However, the opposition insisted the incident, which was on Anjouan island, was "not credible" and implied it was staged, and also accused Assoumani of winning the 2019 elections through fraud. Comoran authorities, meanwhile, claimed to have prevented a second assassination attempt in April 2020, when assassins plotted to smuggle a bomb into Assoumani's airplane ([Agence France-Presse](http://agence-france-presse.com), May 22; [Radio France Internationale](http://radio-france-internationale.com), May 23).

These attempts on the life of the president demonstrate the volatile political culture of Comoros. France fears jihadists could use that instability to hide or to infiltrate Mayotte, which is only 70 kilometers from the coast of Anjouan island. This proximity has also been conducive to human trafficking and illegal migration, which has been difficult to control. In 2016 and again in 2018, for example, Mayotte islanders protested against insecurity caused by spiraling crime and an influx of migrants from neighboring African islands ([Radio France Internationale](http://radio-france-internationale.com), October 22, 2010).

In 2017, General Bertrand Soublet, former commander of the French Gendarmerie forces in France's overseas territories, stated Mayotte was ill-prepared to tackle terrorism and that its borders were poorly protected ([Francetvinfo.fr](http://francetvinfo.fr), December 13, 2017). One year later,

France prevented a Comoran female, Sakina Said Omar, who was suspected of having jihadist ties, from entering French territory (FranceInfoTVinfo.fr, June 1, 2018). And in 2019 Comoran security authorities handed over to France two French female nationals, who were allegedly on France's terrorism watchlist and had moved to the Comoran islands (FranceInfoTVinfo.fr, June 9).

Furthermore, Mayotte was not spared from Islamic State (IS)'s outreach—at least nine people from Mayotte joined IS. Several of them died in subsequent years in Syria and Iraq, including a former military mechanic called "Sharif," who deserted from the French army in 2012 and died in December 2014. Another unnamed female left Mayotte as early as 2005 and her relatives were informed in 2017 of her death in Syria (Linfo.re, July 17, 2015; Francetvinfo.fr, November 7, 2017).

Réunion: Radicalization, Travels, and Shootouts

With the ascent of IS in Syria and Iraq, Réunion also witnessed an increase in radicalization and overseas terrorism. In 2015, for example, French authorities counted over 60 radicalized individuals in Réunion. This was above the national average of 40 per department (Imaz Press Réunion, July 1, 2015).

In the years 2014-2015, several individuals from Réunion and its diaspora joined IS. They included the veteran jihadist, Fabien Clain, and his brother Jean-Michel. Fabien arrived in Syria in March 2015 and became known as the "voice of Daesh" (the Arabic acronym for Islamic State) after he announced in a recording immediately after the November 2015 Paris attacks that IS was responsible. Fabien and Jean-Michel, however, died in 2019 fighting for Islamic State.

Among the half dozen jihadist travelers who departed from Réunion was also Sandia Gaia. Born in 1990, she left Réunion in December 2014 for Syria. After the fall of IS' caliphate, Gaia wound up in the Kurdish-run Ayn Issa camp for IS family members. In May 2020, it was reported, however, that Gaia escaped from the camp (francetvinfo.fr, May 31).

Attempts to stem jihadism in Réunion led to several counter-terrorism operations. In June 2015, five individuals were arrested for terrorism offences, including a 21-year-old preacher, Naïl Varatchia, who was known as "the Egyptian." Varatchia was radicalized while studying in Egypt and after returning home, he became a central

figure in Salafist circles in Réunion. He was accused of inspiring and aiding five men's travel to join IS and was sentenced to an eight-year prison sentence in 2018 (francetvinfo.fr, June 28, 2017; Zinfos, October 5, 2018).

The most severe terrorism case to date on Réunion took place in April 2017, when authorities arrested Jérôme Lebeau at his home. Lebeau had been radicalized through the internet and was an active member on jihadist websites. When police arrived at his apartment, Lebeau shot and wounded two police officers. He was quickly overpowered and a search of his apartment revealed several weapons and supplies to make Molotov cocktails. His mother was also arrested. Both were sentenced for terrorism offences by a Paris court in March 2020: Jérôme for 28 years and his mother for five years (Imaz Press, March 6, 2020).

Mauritius: Persistent Communal Tensions

This combination of radicalization and jihadism was also witnessed in Mauritius. In late 2014, Mauritian intelligence services discovered a handful of Muslims from the island had traveled to Syria and Iraq to join IS. Mauritius was further shocked in December 2015 when IS released a propaganda video of a young Mauritian, "al-Shuaib al-Afriqi," speaking in both French and Mauritian Creole and urging his compatriots to travel to the Middle East and join IS. Al-Afriqi was soon identified as 35-year-old Yogen Sundrun, who had converted to Islam from Hinduism, the Mauritius' largest religion, and moved to England a decade earlier (Defimedia.info, December 10, 2015).

While Sundrun's radicalization most likely took place outside Mauritius, three other travelers joined IS from Mauritius itself. Possibly the first was Reaz Lauthan, a radical preacher who died fighting for IS in 2013. Before his first departure to Syria in 2011, Lauthan had been an Islamist activist, who founded several Islamist organizations in Mauritius that sought to "purify" Islamic traditions of "Hindu influence." Lauthan returned to Mauritius in 2012 and opened a bookshop in Plaine-Verte. One year later, he sparked controversy when he organized a demonstration to condemn "the sins of Mauritians" that had "invited God's punishment" after the capital Port Louis was hit by deadly flooding. Later in

the same year Lauthan returned to Syria and died soon afterwards (lexpress.mu, December 12, 2015).

In March 2014, another Mauritian, Zafirr Golamaully, travelled from Mauritius to Syria. He then became a relatively high-profile fighter for IS and published accounts online about travelling to and living in Syria. Golamaully was joined in March 2015 by his sister, Lubnaa, who had also travelled without her parents' knowledge to Syria. The siblings received moral encouragement and financial assistance from their uncle and aunt in Britain, who were later sentenced by a British court in 2016 to several years in prison (BBC, November 22, 2016).

By March 2015, Turkish authorities had expelled 13 Mauritians who were suspected of trying to cross the Turkish-Syrian border to join IS (Defimedia.info, June 5, 2016). One of those Mauritians was the brother-in-law of Raez Lauthan, the Mauritian radical preacher Javed Meetoo. Meetoo studied in Pakistan before becoming a teacher in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Back in Mauritius, Meetoo founded several Islamist organizations, including "Abu Faaris" and "Islam4Mauritius" in 2015, and courted controversy ever since then. In 2015, Meetoo was arrested together with his family on the Turkey-Syria border, purportedly on their way to Mecca. He was, however, expelled to Mauritius.

Faced with this problem of jihadist travelers, Mauritius tightened its counter-terrorism legislation and criminalized participation in terrorist activities overseas (Defimedia.info, October 9, 2016). Mauritian authorities were, however, unable to convict Meetoo on terrorism charges. Since his return to Mauritius, Meetoo, therefore, was able to continue stirring up trouble, including firing gunshots at the French embassy and a hotel in Port Louis in 2016. While causing no damage, pro-Islamic State graffiti was found sprayed on the wall of the embassy and in a private courtyard with the inscription "You will no longer live here in peace" (AfricaNews, May 30, 2016).

In June 2018, Meetoo led further protests against a planned LGBT-march. On the day of the march, scores of anti-LGBT protesters gathered for an unauthorized counter-march led by Meetoo, who was wearing an Islamic State-style bandana. Mauritian police were unable to guarantee the safety of the Gay Pride marchers and

the event was cancelled (lexpress.mu, June 5, 2018). In June 2019, Meetoo was again arrested for organizing an unauthorized gathering, but released three weeks later. Meetoo accused Mauritian authorities of arresting him only to safeguard another Gay Pride march that occurred while he was detained (InsideNews, June 24, 2019).

Although Mauritius has not experienced any terrorist attacks thus far, ethnic tensions do also exist. The island has witnessed several attacks against Hindu temples in recent years, including in April 2020 when a Hindu temple in Port Louis Valley Pitot was attacked with a Molotov cocktail. While small-scale in damage, such attacks provoke ethnic and communal tensions on the island (CurrenTrigger, April 30, 2020).

Conclusions

The overall trends show Western Indian Ocean islands have challenges with Islamist extremism. These risks have been driven by local networks and a desire to link up with IS physically and ideologically. Although IS' "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq has been dismantled, in August 2020, IS' fighters in Cabo Delgado captured the Mozambican port city of Mocimboa da Praia on the Indian Ocean coast. This may affect the security of Western Indian Ocean islands if Cabo Delgado becomes the next overseas destination for jihadist travelers from the islands.

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The Iraqi and Kurdish Regional Government's Sinjar Agreement: Consequences for U.S., Turkish, and Iranian Influence and Rebel Rivalries

Rami Jameel

On October 9, the Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) signed the "Sinjar Agreement" to normalize the situation in the war-torn district of Sinjar in northern Iraq. The agreement stated that only Iraqi federal forces should operate in Sinjar and all other armed groups must leave the town. It also gave the KRG a say on establishing a new local government, including appointing a new mayor, and planning and running reconstruction efforts in Sinjar, including related budgetary matters ([Rudaw](#), October 10).

Both the Iraqi government and KRG were struggling to extend their authority into Sinjar town and the larger district of the same name. Since 2017, Sinjar district has been under the control of groups affiliated with the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Both the PMU and PKK obviously did not welcome the recent Sinjar Agreement between the Iraqi government and KRG, and some PMU and PKK leaders condemned it ([Alforat News](#), October 11; [pleasebaghdadtoday.news](#), October 10).

Nevertheless, on December 1, Iraqi forces entered Sinjar and started taking over positions previously occupied by the PMU and PKK-affiliated groups ([Nina News](#), December 2). The takeover occurred after a series of side negotiations between the Iraqi government, PMU, and PKK that spared Sinjar of renewed military confrontations once Iraqi government forces deployed to Sinjar. However, the situation remains volatile. Some reports suggest that the PMU and PKK were not committed to either a full withdrawal from Sinjar or compliance with Iraqi government's authority in Sinjar ([Al Araby](#), November 29).

Sinjar's Strategic Location

Sinjar is a strategic location for various armed groups and regional powers. For Iran and its Iraqi proxy militias in the PMU, Sinjar is a main crossing between Iraq and Syria. The US, therefore, welcomed the Sinjar Agreement in the hope that restoring Iraqi government and KRG authority in Sinjar would curtail Iranian influence.

Although Iran's Iraqi proxy militias in the PMU objected to the agreement, Tehran was not quick to condemn it either. Iran has other means of influence in Iraq and might wait to see how events in Sinjar unfold. Similarly, for the PKK, Sinjar has represented the eastern flank of territories controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The main SDF component is the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is a PKK affiliate.

Turkey welcomed the Sinjar Agreement because it reduced YPG/PKK influence, but Turkey will closely track its implementation. Turkey considers the PKK as an existential threat to its national security and previously threatened it would invade Sinjar to drive out the PKK if Iraq was not willing to do so ([turkeyalaan.net](#), October 11). It should be noted that the Sinjar Agreement was preceded by a significant improvement in Turkish relations with Iran and a higher degree of coordination of their activities not only in Iraq, but also in Syria ([the-newkhalij.com](#), June 19).

The Sinjar Massacre's Legacy

Sinjar was the epicenter of Islamic State (IS)'s campaign against the Yazidi community in the summer of 2014. Thousands of Yazidis suffered during mass killings and enslavement by IS, which considered Yazidis to be infidels. Yazidi women and girls especially suffered because IS captured thousands of them as sex slaves (*sabaya*). [1] Sinjar had fallen to IS after the KRG's Kurdish forces (*peshmerga*) fled IS advances, much like the Iraqi army had done in Mosul and other cities. Yazidi civilians who managed to flee Sinjar found their only refuge in the nearby Sinjar Mountain, where PKK fighters were the only force that seemed willing and able to resist IS' major advances ([noonpost.com](#), August 26).

The following months after IS' invasion of Sinjar saw increased fighting between IS and the PKK and its affiliates in Syria and Sinjar. In 2015, the PKK then played a key role in the campaign to retake Sinjar from IS along-

side the KRG's *peshmerga*, Iraqi forces, and PMU. In October 2017, relations between the Iraqi government then headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the KRG deteriorated after the latter insisted on holding a referendum on independence. The referendum was also condemned by Turkey and Iran, which both have their own Kurdish minorities. In retaliation against the KRG for their referendum, the al-Abadi government ordered Iraqi forces, who were alongside the PMU, to expel the *peshmerga* from Sinjar, as well as other larger disputed areas in Iraq, including Kirkuk ([Al Arab](#), October 18, 2017).

After the KRG's *peshmerga* was expelled from Sinjar, the power of PKK-affiliated groups in Sinjar increased, as they now shared control of Sinjar with the PMU. The PKK had already worked to build affiliated militias comprised of Yazidi locals. The largest among those is the Sinjar Resistance Units (YPS), which is estimated to have at least 7,000 fighters and was the first militia formed by the PKK in Sinjar in 2014 to combat IS. The other large PKK-affiliated militia is the Ezidkhan Protection Force (EPF), whose leader is Haider Shasho. It is believed to have more than 5,000 members. Besides the YPS and EPF, other smaller Yazidi groups exist, including the National Yazidi Front, which is based in the town of Kojo to the south of Sinjar, and the Lalish Battalion ([Al Jazeera](#), April 23, 2019).

PMU and PKK's Regional Rivals

In the face of their common regional foes, including the KRG and Turkey, relations between the PMU and PKK were bolstered. A deal between the PMU and PKK was, therefore, designed by PMU leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, in 2019 before al-Muhandis was killed in January alongside Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in a U.S. airstrike outside Baghdad international airport. This deal paved the way for YPS and other Sinjar-based PKK-affiliated groups to join the payroll of PMU, which is funded by the federal government in Baghdad ([Al Jazeera](#), April 23, 2019). [2]

Yet, other more recent developments since 2019 led to the Sinjar Agreement. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi assumed office in May 2020 and seemed willing to try to check the PMU's power. [3] Additionally, relations between the Iraqi government and the KRG have signifi-

cantly improved since the 2017 referendum crisis. After the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the Kurds reclaimed the role they played in Iraqi politics since 2003 and enhanced their position in the federal government. Unlike al-Abadi, the current Iraqi prime minister, al-Kadhimi, has been friendlier with the KRG.

In his previous position as head of the Iraqi Intelligence Service (*Jihaz al-Mukhabarat*), al-Kadhimi reportedly even built a good working relationship with his Turkish counterpart, Hakan Fidan, who reportedly made a secret visit to Baghdad in June and met senior Iraqi officials ([alarab.co.uk](#), June 13). Turkey is the main backer of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by the Barzani family, which is the largest party in the KRG. In Sinjar, the goal of the KRG was to regain at least part of its influence. Although the Sinjar Agreement does not allow the *peshmerga* to come back to Sinjar, it does give the KRG, and especially the KDP, an avenue to regain some of their influence in Sinjar. Thus, Turkey also gains more influence in Sinjar via the KDP as a result of the Sinjar Agreement, but it was still more important for Turkey to remove the PKK from Sinjar due to its geographic proximity to Turkey.

Intra-Kurdish Conflict

The Kurds are often mistakenly viewed in the international media as a monolithic group. In reality, however, rival Kurdish groups have differences in their positions and alliances. The situation in Sinjar is a microcosm of these dynamics. After the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Sinjar came under the control of the KDP, which also restored some of its power in the area after IS was driven out in 2015. Mahma Khalil, a local Yazidi politician and member of the KDP, for example, became Sinjar's mayor. By that time, the PKK and PMU had significant power and influence in Sinjar as well. The 2017 rift between the Iraqi government and KRG subsequently led to the removal of not only the *peshmerga* from Sinjar, but also the KDP-led local administration and Mahma Khalil, who went into exile in areas controlled by the KDP. The PKK, for its part, moved in to support the appointment of Fahad Hamed Omar as Sinjar's mayor. This gave the PKK greater influence on Sinjar's administration.

Sinjar has become the flashpoint of a larger and long-term conflict between the PKK and the KDP. In early November, for example, the PKK launched attacks on the KDP *peshmerga*, which is under the KRG, in northern Iraq that killed one and injured eight Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters ([Aawsat](#), November 6). KDP leader Massoud Barzani condemned the PKK attacks and threatened that he might reconsider his position of opposing intra-Kurdish infighting ([Nas News](#), November 2).

However, clashes between the Kurds has been far from taboo. The Turkish-supported KDP, for example, joined forces with Turkey in several campaigns against the PKK in Iraq in the 1990s and early 2000s. [4] However, since 2003, the KDP and PKK have avoided direct military confrontations. [5]

The PKK, meanwhile, also fought Iraqi federal forces in March ([Al Arabiya](#), March 18, 2019). This was because confronting the PKK, especially in Sinjar, became a priority for both Iraqi federal government forces and the KRG by that time as a result of Turkish pressure that has always loomed in the background. Turkey has offered Iraq its support to expel the PKK from Sinjar, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened in 2018 that his forces would invade Sinjar to drive out the PKK if Iraq took no action ([Al Araby](#), March 19, 2018). Thus, Iraq was compelled to take action in Sinjar, and the PKK responded.

PKK, PMU and Sunni Arabs' Perspectives Under the Specter of IS

The PKK might prefer not to challenge the initial implementation of the Sinjar Agreement militarily, but only on the local administrative level. Many in the Yazidi community resent the KRG and remember how its forces retreated from Sinjar without protection when IS invaded in the summer of 2014. On the contrary, Yazidis embraced the PKK because it provided them with the only refuge at the darkest hour in their history. [6]

The PMU was also not pleased with the Sinjar Agreement. The leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous—AAH), Qais al-Khazali, leads an almost entirely Shia group. However, he has based his argument against the Sinjar Agreement on the grounds that it is against the interest of the Yazidis ([alquds.co.uk](#), October 11).

That the Sinjar Agreement was opposed by Sunni Arabs in Ninawa was also notable. They allege the Sinjar Agreement ignores their demands and the current situation ([iqiraq.news](#), October 11). This is because when the Yazidis returned to Sinjar in 2015—armed and supported by the PKK and PMU—almost all Sunni Arabs from the area became displaced. The Yazidis, meanwhile, accuse those Sunni tribes of having embraced IS. Acts of revenge took place against Sunnis, who obviously deny the accusation of having supported IS. That dimension of the conflict indicates how complex the situation is in and around Sinjar.

The UN, meanwhile, welcomed the Sinjar Agreement as a means to normalize the situation on the ground in order to pave the way for the return of displaced people. However, that goal will take much more than a single agreement. Increased disenfranchisement and suffering for the Sunni displaced people always keeps the door open for IS to exploit the situation in Sinjar and beyond.

The Turkey-Iran Tango

The mutual PKK and PMU influences and interests in Sinjar makes it one of the most dynamic areas in Iraq today. Both the PKK and PMU have built relations with the local Yazidi community in a way that would make it difficult for the Iraqi government and KRG to restore full control of the area. However, much will depend on Iran's strategic decisions. The Sinjar Agreement was facilitated by recent coordination between Turkey and Iran. The latter shows some understanding for Turkey's concerns about the PKK. And as Turkey launched a campaign against PKK positions inside Iraq in the summer of 2020, Iran also attacked its own Kurdish PKK-linked rebels inside of Iraq called The Kurdistan Free Life Party, or PJAK ([Aawsat](#), June 18).

While Turkey has historically supported the KDP in the KRG, Iran has supported its rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which is led by the Talibani family. The usual friendly position of Iran and the PUK towards the PKK seems to have changed recently in favor of greater coordination with Turkey. Sinjar will, therefore, be the place to test that trend.

The Iranian-backed PMU and PUK position in Sinjar will depend on how much Iran is willing to concede to Tur-

key. Iran is unlikely to easily abandon Sinjar as it remains one of its crossings between Iraq and Syria. But Iran has clearly chosen to cooperate with Turkey as part of a larger strategy that involves the two countries' agreements in Syria, which is another country where they have conflicting interests and have supported opposing parties.

For now, all parties are seemingly consolidating their positions in Sinjar, while closely monitoring developments in Syria, and also awaiting the possible changes in strategy that the incoming U.S. administration may introduce in 2021.

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Notes

[1] Under IS's strict interpretation of Islamic *sharia* law, the Yazidi faith is not recognized as a monotheistic faith. Unlike Jews and Christians, who could live as second-class citizens under Islamic rule after paying a protection tax called *jizya*, Yazidis were considered infidels, or *kafir*. The IS ruling on the Yazidis when they were captured at war was to kill all adult males and enslave all women and children.

[2] The PMU is dominated by Iranian-backed Shia militias, but it is also an official part of the Iraqi armed forces.

[3] Al-Kadhimi assumed office in May after bloody street protests in Baghdad and the Shia south of Iraq against Iranian-backed political parties. Iran did not oppose the secular Shia politician, al-Khadimi. Although al-Khadimi has not delivered on his promises to fully take responsibility for Iraqi security and control Iranian-backed militias, he has shown that he is willing at least to try to fulfill that difficult and complicated mission.

[4] Barzani's party and its main rival in Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK, which is led by the family of late former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, engaged in years of civil war between 1993 and 1998. This occurred after the Kurdistan region fell outside the authority of Baghdad and under the U.S. and Western protection of a no-fly zone. Thou-

sands were killed in the conflict that only ended when Barzani and Talabani signed a U.S.-mediated peace agreement on September 17, 1998 at the State Department in Washington, D.C. alongside then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

[5] Since 2003, the KDP and PKK have avoided direct major military confrontations. However, fighting between the two groups has become more frequent recently, including as this article went to press. Both groups blame each other for the violence.

[6] Author's interview with a Yazidi journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous on December 2, 2020.