

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

Jacob Zenn

BRIEFS

p.3

Sunguta West

U.S. Withdrawal or Disengagement from Somalia? Assessing Somalia's and Kenya's Concerns

p.4

Fatemah Aman

Iran's Fuel Smuggling Paranoia in the Baluchistan Border Region

p.6

Can Kasapoglu

The Syrian National Army and The Future of Turkey's Frontier Land Force

SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES CONTEND WITH LINGERING INFLUENCE OF ISLAMIC STATE

Jacob Zenn

In recent weeks, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have experienced incidents involving Islamic State (IS) members and supporters operating on their territories. On March 8, for example, Sweden prosecuted a 31-year-old woman who had traveled to IS-controlled areas of Syria with her son and then returned to Sweden by air in November 2020. The woman was a convert to Islam and had apparently wanted to experience what living in a caliphate is like. However, she claimed to have been quickly forced to marry an IS fighter in Syria. Working against her at her trial were photos that she posted on Facebook, showing herself with a weapon in Syria. She also sold gold she owned to finance her trip, indicating deliberate intent to stay in Syria. Her ex-husband in Sweden and her son's father had reported her to the Swedish authorities in 2014 once he learned that she traveled to Syria. Ultimately, the Swedish courts sentenced her to three years in prison ([aftonbladet.se](https://www.aftonbladet.se), March 8)

Meanwhile, in Norway, a 34-year-old woman is on trial for having lived with IS in Syria for six years ([thelocal.no](https://www.thelocal.no), March 4). She married Chilean-Norwegian Bastian Vasquez there, who became notorious in Syria. Vasquez was executed by IS for the crime of killing the two-year-old son of a former rival, whose wife he later married. Vasquez also appeared in some of IS's most severe propaganda videos in which he blew up a building where captives were inside ([thelocal.no](https://www.thelocal.no), October 21, 2016). After Vasquez's death, the 34-year-old woman subsequently married an Egyptian IS fighter and gave birth to a child with him, but he died in battle, which meant she had to marry again. It remains to be seen what the result of her trial will be, but prosecutors argue she tried to recruit other women. There will also be extra spotlight on this case because she is the first women returnee to Syria to be tried for crimes committed there ([thelocal.no](https://www.thelocal.no), March 4).

Further, in February, Denmark broke up a cell of a dozen IS supporters who were plotting operations in Germany and Denmark ([thenationalnews.com](https://www.thenationalnews.com), February 12). These trials and this Danish case indicate that several years after the fall of IS' 'territorial caliphate' in Syria, the

group's after-effects linger in European countries. In some cases, there will be trials for repatriated members, especially women, whose roles were often more ambiguous than their combatant male counterparts. However, other cases will involve more serious IS-influenced or IS-masterminded attack plots in Europe.

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THE PHILIPPINES' STRUGGLES AGAINST NEW PEOPLE'S ARMY, SUCCEEDS AGAINST ABU SAYYAF

Jacob Zenn

On March 4, the President of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, issued a stark order for the country's military: "kill them all" ([inquirer.net](https://www.inquirer.net), March 4). Duterte was referring to the Communist New People's Army (NPA), whose full defeat Duterte calls for by the end of his presidential tenure in 2022. Duterte went so far as to claim that the military and police should not "mind human rights" and that Duterte himself would go to prison for any offences they commit.

The NPA, for its part, is leveraging Duterte's excesses for its own recruitment campaign. After police killed nine activists from various groups, including union workers, in raids near Manila, the NPA stated that it would "mobilize its units to help secure the people being persecuted and hunted down by the fascist regime" ([benarnews.org](https://www.benarnews.org), March 7). The NPA further announced its willingness to "absorb" anyone who has been victimized by "Duterte's state terrorism."

The intensification of the rhetoric between Duterte and the NPA comes after several years of prospective peace talks that have since broken down completely ([Terrorism Monitor](https://www.terrorismmonitor.com), January 15). In contrast, while the conflict with the NPA appears likely to escalate, the Philippines has reported several recent successes against Abu Sayyaf. For example, on March 3 and March 8, two sets of seven and 14 Abu Sayyaf surrendered ([pna.gov.ph](https://www.pna.gov.ph), March 4; [sunstar.com.ph](https://www.sunstar.com.ph), March 10).

Operationally, the army also reported in February that it arrested nine women, including three daughters of an Abu Sayyaf leader, who were preparing to become suicide bombers for the group ([aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com), February 21). As a result of Abu Sayyaf's struggles, it has reportedly resorted to increased piracy in the waters between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia ([splash247.com](https://www.splash247.com), March 5). Unlike the NPA, however, it does not appear to be exploiting the country's political situation to ratchet up a recruitment drive.

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U.S. Withdrawal or Disengagement from Somalia? Assessing Somalia's and Kenya's Concerns

Sunguta West

The Somali and Kenyan governments fear a resurgence by al-Shabaab as a result of the U.S. withdrawing its forces from Somalia. The exit was completed on January 15 in line with the deadline ordered by former President Donald Trump and involved about 600-800 U.S. soldiers under U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). They had been supporting African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops and training the Somali National Army (SNA) to battle al-Shabaab ([East Africa](#), October 19, 2020).

AFRICOM's mission in Somalia had more soldiers than any other UN mission in Africa. Its deployment occurred soon after Trump took office and comprised part of the 7,000 U.S. soldiers in Africa. They are deployed in more than ten other African countries ranging from Botswana to Niger, but especially in countries experiencing Islamist militancy ([Garowe Online](#), October, 2020).

In Somalia, U.S. troops' military actions, including drone strikes, had aided in disrupting the activities of al-Shabaab and a growing Islamic State (IS) faction in Galgala Mountains in Bari region in the northern Somali state of Puntland. In December, for example, the U.S. military said it carried out two airstrikes in an al-Shabaab compound of Qunyo Barrow killing three militants. Six buildings were also destroyed in the strike ([africom.mil](#), January 2). In addition, in Southern Somalia, al-Shabaab has lost some of its key leaders and fighters in the air strikes. One of the latest leaders to be killed in such an airstrike was Abdulkadir Osman Yarow a.k.a Abdulkadir Commandos, who was killed in near Saakow in the Middle Juba region of southern Somalia ([Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 6, 2020). In 2020 alone, AFRICOM carried out over 50 airstrikes against al-Shabaab in Somalia ([Nation](#), September 10, 2020).

Somalia's Concerns About the U.S. Withdrawal

Al-Shabaab remains a lethal militant force, despite the disruptions by AMISOM and U.S. air strikes. Its ability to carry out deadly attacks was demonstrated on January 31, when the group killed at least five people, including

a former Somali army commander and two civilians, in an attack on a hotel in Mogadishu. The hotel, which is located near the main airport in Mogadishu, is frequented by Somali government officials, members of the security forces, and community leaders. The militants exploded a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) at the front entrance of the hotel before armed fighters stormed in. It became the deadliest attack in the weeks since the United States removed its forces from Somalia ([Africanews](#), February 1).

The U.S. withdrawal may also embolden al-Shabaab, which has remained resilient since launching its insurgency in 2006. The Somali government fears that without the U.S. troops' aerial surveillance and drone bombardments, AMISOM will be less effective. With Somalia and its neighbors remaining at high risk of attack by the militant group, government officials in both Somalia and Kenya appealed to the U.S to reconsider the decision to remove the troops while Somalia remains unstable ([The East Africa](#), October 19, 2020)

Stressing the U.S. as Somalia's key ally in the fight against al-Shabaab, President Mohammed Abdullahi Mohammed (a.k.a. Farmajo), for example, highlighted that U.S. troops had been instrumental in securing the Horn of Africa after they aided in the removal of al-Shabaab from several strategic locations in country. Al-Shabaab was forced out of the capital Mogadishu in 2011 and strategic port city of Kismayo in 2012, for example. Farmajo indicated that Somalia still needs continued U.S. military and capacity-building support for Somali troops ([Garowe Online](#), October, 2020; [FTLSomalia](#), October 17, 2020).

Kenya's Concerns about the U.S. Withdrawal

Kenya is also concerned about the U.S. withdrawal. Kenyan Foreign Affairs Principal Secretary Macharia Kamau warned the U.S. troop withdrawal would create a space that would aid the resurgence of al-Shabaab and cautioned that the withdrawal would be a costly mistake. His concern was that the gains made against the militant group over the past several years could be lost, especially with al-Shabaab gaining ground in regions where it had been retreating ([Garowe Online](#), October, 2020).

Meanwhile, the U.S. troops are now likely to be stationed in other countries in Africa, such as Kenya itself and Djibouti, where the United States maintains a permanent military base. A Pentagon statement explaining the changes in Somalia indicated that the U.S. was not

disengaging from Somalia. Instead, it would retain the capability to conduct targeted counter-terrorism operations and collect early warning indicators on threats to the United States from bases outside Somalia ([Africa-News](#), December 5, 2020).

The U.S. military in Kenya trains security forces and helps in the fight against al-Shabaab. Camp Simba and Manda Bay airfield, which are located in the coastal county of Lamu, Kenya, are used for such activities and host both U.S. troops and the Kenya Defense Forces. On January 5, 2020, al-Shabaab raided the camp, killing three Americans, including a U.S. service member and two Department of Defense pilot contractors, when al-Shabaab's fighters struck a U.S. surveillance plane with rocket propelled grenades. They also destroyed a fuel storage area, making a nearby airstrip unusable ([KTNnews](#), January 15, 2020; [The East African](#), January 22, 2020).

Conclusion

Although U.S. troops have withdrawn from Somalia, the United States has not disengaged from Somalia. That fact provides sufficient confidence to Somalia and Kenya. The much-needed support to the African troops and Somali army through surveillance and airstrikes against al-Shabaab will likely continue under the Biden administration.

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Iran's Fuel Smuggling Paranoia in the Baluchistan Border Region

Fatemah Aman

On February 22, Iranian military forces opened fire on a group of Baluch fuel carriers who were protesting against the government for blocking their ability to take fuel loads into Pakistan. For decades, the livelihoods of thousands of Baluch families have depended on transporting cheap fuel to neighboring countries. It is unclear why these soldiers, who were from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), first detained and then opened fire on the carriers.

However, there are two likely possibilities: first, the IRGC's desire to be the sole beneficiary of fuel smuggling; and, second, the Islamic Republic's growing fear and paranoia about gatherings and protests, especially in border areas. Whatever the reason, the incident has alienated the Iranian Baluch community more than ever before.

Clashes, for example, erupted in Saravan, a city in Sistan and Baluchistan province in eastern Iran, shortly after the shooting, with protesters storming the provincial governor's office. Accounts of the number of deaths from the incident conflict, with the government claiming that one person was killed and right groups claiming "two dozen" were killed ([Center for Human Rights in Iran](#), March 1). As with previous incidents of unrest, Iranian authorities shut down the internet, causing fear to grow that there may be plans to intensify the crackdown.

Molavi Abdolhamid Ismaeelzahi, a well-respected Sunni religious leader and the Friday prayer imam in Zahedan, a city in Sistan and Baluchistan province, called on all sides to "avoid destruction of public properties" and demanded a thorough investigation into the circumstances that led to the unrest and violence. He recommended to the authorities that they "keep in mind the economic hardship of the local population. A large portion of [local] people win bread by carrying fuel. Until there are other options available, don't cut their bread,"

he said ([Aftab News](#), February 25). According to Ismaeelzahi, the authorities were aware of the fuel carriers sending and selling fuel in Pakistan “as a means to evade economic sanctions on Iran” ([YouTube](#), February 26).

Understanding Fuel Smuggling on the Iranian-Pakistani Border

For decades, smuggling fuel has been part of a dangerous illicit trade on both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border. The trade can be accompanied by gunfire, bribes, and even death. Economic sanctions on Iran and the declining value of the Iranian rial have sparked the creation of organized fuel smuggling networks ([Gandhara](#), February 11). In a region so economically deprived on both sides of the border, the opportunities for earning a living are often limited to either trafficking drugs or smuggling fuel. Fuel carriers lack any other income besides carrying gasoline and diesel fuel from Iran to Pakistan, with the big money going to the organizers. In contrast, drivers and truckers receive only a small share of the profit even though they are the ones who take the most risks.

Sources conflict on the amount of fuel that is annually smuggled. Estimates vary from between 10 to 40 million liters daily. According to the Iranian Minister of Petroleum Bijan Namdar Zangeneh, “smuggling has increased [in recent years]. This is not just limited to smugglers, everybody does it.” This indicated that officials at high levels of power may be involved in running the lucrative business ([Eghtesad Online](#), September 12, 2018).

In 2014, several multi-million-dollar security projects along Iran’s eastern border were assigned to the IRGC, including the construction of new towers and barriers along the border with Pakistan ([YouTube](#), January 24, 2018; [Donya-e-Eqtesad](#), March 29, 2014). Later, in 2018, the IRGC presented its Razzagh (“provider”) Plan, allegedly to “decrease poverty and reduce social suffering, such as smuggling,” and the IRGC took control of border security ([Mehr News](#), February 28). In reality, however, according to the Razzagh Plan, a database will be created that defines who is “poor enough” to carry fuel, as well as the origin and amount of the fuel to be distributed. The IRGC then

built fuel stations in order to take full control of the distribution among carriers. However, Iranian officials have criticized one another behind the scenes for this system’s failures. An unnamed official from the Headquarters for Combatting Smuggling of Goods and Foreign Exchange blamed the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC), for example, for “lack of cooperation and delays” ([Mehr News](#), February 28).

Sistan and Baluchistan is also, perhaps, Iran’s poorest region. The dire situation and depth of poverty in the province was exemplified in an anecdote relayed by a parliamentary representative of Zahedan. According to Mo’ineddin Saeed, “a few years ago, an honorable widow was forced to sell her body out of desperation to provide her children with drinking water” ([Aftab News](#), October 21, 2020). The woman then committed suicide, he added. Another example was expressed in 2014 by Shahindokht Molaverdi, a former vice president in Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s government. In a remote, poor village in Sistan and Baluchistan province, “There are no men; all have been hanged by the government for drug and other offenses” ([Mehr News](#), February 23, 2016).

Protests and unrest in the border regions have always been rife with conspiracy theories. Therefore, it was unsurprising to see the Islamic Republic News Agency characterizing the February 22 incident and its aftermath as the product of “foreign countries’ involvement in inserting insurgency and unrest into Iran.” According to Mohammad Hadi Marashi, the deputy governor of Sistan and Baluchistan, “provocations” were carried out by the extremist Salafist group Jaish al-Adl (Army of Justice) during the unrest in Saravan ([IRNA](#), February 28).

Conclusion

The Islamic Republic has struggled to deal with its ethnic challenges. Its policy of blaming foreign enemies for unrest and protests has now been compounded by the increasing paranoia of Iranian authorities, as evidenced in the February 22 fuel smuggling incident. Authorities emphasizing a policy of militarization and an excessive use of force instead of winning the hearts and minds of the people in minority regions has created a vicious cycle of violence and dissatisfaction among Iran’s minority

communities. This is, in part, a self-inflicted wound by the Iranian government.

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The Syrian National Army and the Future of Turkey's Frontier Land Force

Can Kasapoglu

From the summer of 2016 to early 2020, the Turkish military launched four expeditionary military campaigns into northern Syria. The first campaign, Operation Euphrates Shield, marked the first time that a NATO nation deployed conventional formations to confront Islamic State (IS). The second and third campaigns, namely Operation Olive Branch and Operation Peace Spring, targeted the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and affiliated groups in Syria. The latter, which took place in northeastern Syria, also led to serious divergences between Turkey and its traditional Western allies. The final campaign, Operation Spring Shield, was a punitive measure targeting the Syrian Arab Army and adjacent paramilitary units following the killing of 36 Turkish troops by a joint Russian–Syrian air campaign ([Hurriyet](#), February 29, 2020).

Turkey's security and foreign policy has traditionally refrained from interfering in intra-Arab affairs. Syria was the turning point, however. Several years after the eruption of the Syrian civil war, Turkey began to pursue the demise of the Bashar al-Assad regime. This ambition had to be altered with more sober national defense priorities that, first and foremost, involved eliminating terrorist threats from Turkey's doorstep, including IS, and denying a PKK-led statelet along the Turkish-Syrian frontier.

Through these Syrian expeditions, the Turkish military has not operated alone. Turkey has closely supported the armed opposition, centered on the Free Syrian Army (FSA). With the FSA graduating into the larger Syrian National Army (SNA) in October 2019, Ankara is now investing in the SNA as an institutionalized military entity to ally with the Turkish military in northern Syria ([Anadolu Agency](#), May 20, 2017; [Anadolu Agency](#), October 9, 2019).

The Road to the SNA's Formation

Following Operation Euphrates Shield, the Turkish military boosted its train-and-equip program to improve the FSA's combat capabilities until it became the SNA. The SNA can best be described as a confederation of armed opposition groups with some 40 factions that all took part in the October 2019 merger. At present, the SNA is estimated to be capable of mobilizing 70,000 fighters ([SETA](#), October 11, 2019).

The SNA is also an Arab-dominated entity with broad geographic representation from all corners of Syria ([SETA](#), October 11, 2019). However, the Turkmen factor in the organization is important. Before the October 2019 merger, Syrian Turkmen, who are of Turkish origin, had some 10,000 to 15,000 fighters in the armed opposition ranks ([SETA](#), December 31, 2018).

These battle-hardened groups punch above their weight and have high discipline and motivation. Back in 2016, during Operation Euphrates Shield's final assault in al-Bab, Syria, for example, the Sultan Murat Division, which is a well-known Turkmen combat formation, captured the areas around the silos in the south of the city. From a military standpoint, the division courageously placed itself in a multi-front engagement zone between IS militants, who were in the north holding the town center, and the Syrian Arab Army, which was approaching from Tadif in the southeast. The division's maneuver enabled the Turkish campaign in al-Bab to result in the capture of the most critical high-ground in the area of operations, Aqil Mountain.

What's Next for the SNA: Implications for 'Post-War' Syria

The SNA's trajectory, especially in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War, was the most critical issue that Turkish decision-makers needed to address. Several groups among the former FSA, now in the SNA, fought alongside the Turkish military in its Syrian expeditionary campaigns. Turkey trained them, armed them, and strategically invested in them. In other words, they are hard to leave behind. Yet, some problems have arisen with the Turkey's indigenous ally in Syria.

Open-source intelligence suggests that Turkey has begun implementing its own security sector reform within

the ranks of the armed opposition. In late 2020, Hamza Division, a former component of the U.S. train-and-equip program in Syria and part of the pro-Turkey coalition, for example, opened its first special forces military academy in the northern Syrian town of Azaz ([Anadolu Agency](#), December 4, 2020). The Sultan Murad Division, likewise, has operated a military training center in the town of Afrin that was captured from the PKK and its offshoots in Operation Olive Branch in 2018 ([Sultan Murad Division Twitter Account](#), January 4).

Despite its roadmap toward institutionalizing the SNA, Turkey faces various wildcards and challenges. First, there are intra-SNA rivalries that make, or should make, cohesion a major concern for Turkey. Some SNA factions have developed violent enmities and vendettas that plague unity. Ahrar al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sharqiya, for example, have clashed with each other multiple times ([SETA](#), October 11, 2019).

Second, the diverse ideologies within the SNA raises concerns of their acceptability among Western countries. Not every actor within the SNA shares the same worldview. Their struggle against the Syrian Arab Army and the al-Assad regime unites them in the interim. However, their objectives in a political settlement in post-war circumstances are different.

Most importantly, Turkey's traditional Western allies do not have positive views regarding certain SNA parties. Ahrar al-Sham, for example, remains among the largest of the factions within the SNA, but is considered to be the 'Syrian Taliban' by some experts due to the group's Salafist ideology combined with geopolitical ambitions limited to the Syrian battleground ([SWP](#), May 2016). In addition, some experts have also depicted the SNA party, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, as an "extremist group" ([WINEP](#), October 18, 2019). Regardless of whether these assessments are accurate or not, these views represent the mainstream strategic viewpoint in the West that deeply influences the policy communities when it comes to any post-war scenario. Further, these perceptions are likely to remain and limit Turkish international diplomacy and strategic communications capabilities amid its growing strains with the Western capitals.

Finally, there are the limits regarding turning the SNA into a part of the anticipated security sector reform in

Syria in the aftermath of the civil war. Compared to the West, Russia and Iran, which are the two patrons of the Syrian al-Assad regime, have even more negative stances regarding Sunni armed opposition groups in Syria. Add to that the sectarian stance of the predominantly Alawite elite of the Syrian Arab Army, integrating any SNA components into the future Syrian Arab Army would be extremely daunting, if not completely impossible. Furthermore, Ahrar al-Sham still considers overthrowing the Baathist al-Assad regime to be its principal ideological objective. Thus, it remains to be seen whether the entire SNA would be willing to sign a broader social contract for a functioning post-war *status quo*.

If the bulk of the SNA were not to directly take part in the security sector reform in a post-war scenario, then Turkey would have to deal with an immense DDR (Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration) burden. This could be even more daunting than integrating the SNA into a broader Syrian security sector. Disarming thousands of paramilitaries who have been fighting for more than a decade is, simply, a near-impossible task. What is worse, Syria has already become the largest black and gray arms depot of the world. Thus, these groups can make the battleground even more violent if they choose to do so.

Disarming the SNA factions, which would be the first condition of any DDR process, is simply beyond the realm of Turkey's realistic options. Furthermore, there is the war economy plaguing the entire conflict-torn country. Armed groups across Syria ranging from pro-Baath regime militias to the armed opposition factions, enjoy certain economic benefits from the fighting that they have been doing for years. Convincing them to adapt to a normalized, peace-time economy is, therefore, difficult. Even beyond this, all of the SNA factions' loyalties cannot be taken for granted should Turkey ask them to lay down their arms.

The SNA: Challenges Ahead for Turkey's Least Worst Option

The SNA remains Turkey's most ambitious project in northern Syria. Its warfighting capabilities have evolved through the years, and have reached a substantial level

at present. Turkey has even transferred some of these paramilitaries to the Libyan front.

The SNA's available manpower can be compared to that of the Syrian Arab Army, although the SNA lacks the organic strategic enablers that al-Assad's troops enjoy, including, first and foremost, an air force, missile forces, chemical warfare capabilities, and heavy armor. Since Hafez al-Assad's time, the Baath regime in Syria has offered little room for the Sunni majority in the elite units of the Syrian Arab Army. Thus, as the civil war erupted and quickly gained a sectarian character, the armed opposition had to digest thousands of fighters with little warfighting skills. Many extremist networks have exploited this vacuum, the most prominent of which was IS.

At present, Turkey's efforts to unify, discipline, and train an armed opposition may bear fruit if the post-war security sector reform process is wisely managed. However, if DDR efforts fail the day may come for forcibly disarming the SNA constituents. At that point, the Turkish administration would have to deal with an uphill battle.

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