

# Terrorism Monitor

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## Al-Qaeda's Malian Affiliate Targets Russia's Wagner Group

*Jacob Zenn*

On April 25, the al-Qaeda affiliate in Mali, Group for Supporters of Islam and Muslims (JNIM), claimed that it kidnapped Russian Wagner Group "soldiers" in Segou ([Twitter/@Lesoirdebamako](https://twitter.com/Lesoirdebamako), April 26). This occurred despite the fact that the Malian government has denied even the existence of the Wagner Group in its territory. Rather, the Malian military rulers, who came to power through a coup in 2021, only acknowledge "Russian trainers" being in the country ([lemonde.fr](http://lemonde.fr), April 25).

Although JNIM's claim appears credible, the group's lack of any publicized video showing Wagner Group soldiers in the group's custody lowers the authenticity of the claim. Such a JNIM video would not only embarrass Mali government by showing their claims about the Wagner Group to be false, but would also exacerbate Mali's relations with France, which, among other European countries, has withdrawn its counter-terrorism forces from Mali and oppose the deployment of Wagner Group in the country. The Malian government accuses France of "subversion" for criticizing the lack of democratic transition in Mali, which, in turn, has led Mali to court closer ties with Russia ([Senenews.com](http://Senenews.com), April 27).

The Wagner Group has also been accused of partaking in massacres of Malian, and specifically Fulani, civilians suspected of collaborating with JNIM. Whether or not the Malian government's denials of those accusations are credible, JNIM retaliated for these deaths of civilians by killing six Malian soldiers with suicide car bombs on April 6 in Segou ([dakaractu.com](http://dakaractu.com), April 25). At the same time these attacks took place, elsewhere in northern Benin JNIM launched attacks and extended its reach further westward in the Sahel ([Senenews.com](http://Senenews.com), April 27).

North of Segou, JNIM attempts to enter Severe in the Mopti region have been thwarted. The fact that JNIM fighters have been seen walking in villages on the outskirts of Severe and have been killed while conducting raids into the city itself indicates that the city could be captured in the future ([Twitter/@511ZGS](https://twitter.com/511ZGS), April 27). JNIM is not currently able to control territory in Mali and neighboring Sahelian countries like its predecessors did in 2012-2013. However, the continued political turmoil in the country, combined with the questionable support from Russia and decreasing counter-terrorism support from the West, does bode well for JNIM's future prospects.

JNIM's ideology, meanwhile, remains consistent with broader al-Qaeda ideology. Its deputy leader, Abu Yahya, appeared in a video on April 26 calling on the "mujahideen" to continue waging jihad and promised that Allah would grant them victory ([Twitter/@ocisse691](https://twitter.com/ocisse691), April 26). Any such victory for JNIM no longer has France standing in the way, at least in Mali, but rather the Malian army and, despite its refutations, also Russia's Wagner Group.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor*

## **Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) Expands Into Central Nigeria, as Boko Haram Revives Around Lake Chad**

*Jacob Zenn*

On May 12, Islamic State in West Africa (ISWAP) claimed an attack in Kabba, Kogi State in which it detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) at a bar ([Twitter/@IsraelAwolowo](https://twitter.com/IsraelAwolowo), May 12). Three bar patrons were killed and others were injured. The Kogi Commissioner of Police asserted that the explosion was not a bomb blast, but was caused by a gas leak ([globalupfront.com](http://globalupfront.com), May 12). Given the ISWAP claim and Nigerian officials' longtime record of incorrectly denying that ISWAP or the rival Shekau faction attacks occurred, it is quite likely that ISWAP did, in fact, conduct the attack in Kabba.

The attack, moreover, comes after a series of ISWAP attacks that for the first time occurred outside of its main area of operations in northeastern Nigeria. Coinciding with the Islamic State's global campaign to seek "revenge" for the deaths of its previous two caliphs, ISWAP has claimed attacks in Taraba and "central Nigeria," as well as others in Kogi ([Terrorism Monitor](http://Terrorism Monitor), May 6). These attacks in the historically volatile Middle Belt region of Nigeria, which comprises a roughly equal number of Muslims and Christians, risk escalating religious tensions in the country. This would not be the first time such an attack triggered religious sectarianism, as the Shekau faction conducted bombings in

the region in 2012 ([nigerianeye.com](http://nigerianeye.com), January 11, 2012).

The psychological effect of ISWAP's attacks is also starting to take control. Northern Nigeria's largest city, Kano, which has almost completely been spared from attacks by ISWAP and the Shekau faction since 2015, has suddenly reported attacks. On May 17, there was a reported "gas cylinder explosion" in Kano at a popular market, making it the second marketplace targeted by ISWAP in recent months ([aljazeera.com](http://aljazeera.com), May 18). Although ISWAP did not claim the explosion in Kano that killed nine people, suspicions about ISWAP's possible role in the explosion are elevated, given trends elsewhere in the country.

While ISWAP expands its influence in central Nigeria, the Shekau faction is reviving around Lake Chad, despite the death of the faction's longtime leader, the ruthless Abubakar Shekau. He was killed in an ISWAP military offensive against the faction in May 2021 ([vanguardngr.com](http://vanguardngr.com), June 18, 2021). In a video on May 2, the Shekau faction reiterated that its formal name was still Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna Lidda'Awati Wal-Jihad (Sunni Muslim Group for Preaching and Jihad) and that the group's new leader was Abu Umaimata ([Telegram](http://Telegram), May 2). The group's continued operations in Niger Republic, Lake Chad, and the Mandara Mountains along the Nigerian border with Cameroon indicate that the ISWAP raids caused the group to lose most of its fighters in and around Shekau's former base of Sambisa – through defections to ISWAP no less. However, the former Lake Chad-based Shekau faction, led by top commander Bakura "Doron" ([crisisgroup.org](http://crisisgroup.org), April 6, 2020), still remain in and around Lake Chad.

Another Shekau faction video surfaced on May 12 and confirmed that the faction would continue to reject ISWAP for its failure to declare *takfir* (excommunication) on Muslims who do not fight jihad. Further, the video affirmed that Abu Umaimata was the faction's leader ([Telegram](http://Telegram), May 12). Any expectations for Nigeria that Shekau's death would lead to the elimination of his faction can now be rejected, while similar hopes that ISWAP could remain "only" a northeastern Nigerian problem can also be withdrawn.

*Jacob Zenn is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.*

## **The Female Suicide Bombing at Karachi's Chinese Confucius Institute and the Paradigm Shift in Baluch Rebels' Strategy in Pakistan**

*Kiyya Baloch and Akbar Notezai*

### **Introduction**

Since 2018, the Baluch insurgency in Pakistan has become more lethal, especially for Chinese nationals, and the pattern behind such attacks is clear. In the past, Baluch separatist violence focused on a guerrilla style of warfare and was largely confined to southwestern Pakistan's Baluchistan province, but now the violence has expanded to Karachi. Although casualties and the number of attacks remain relatively low, the separatist insurgents are receiving more attention now than they have in the 20 years since the fifth rebellion broke out in early 2000. This is because they have started conducting suicide bombings, including now a female suicide bomber. This shift in tactics has helped the group stay in the public eye domestically and internationally.

Since 2018, the Baluch separatist militants have carried out only six *fidayee* [suicide “martyrdom”] attacks, among which all but one were directed at Chinese targets. Three of these suicide attacks occurred in Karachi, outside of Baluchistan ([Twitter/Kiyya Baloch](#), April 27). The dramatic shift in the operations of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA)’s suicide wing, known as the Majeed Brigade, surprised many when it dispatched its first-ever female suicide bomber at the Chinese Confucius Institute on April 26, which killed three Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver ([Dawn](#), April 26).

The Baluch separatist and ethnic-nationalist militants have more broadly been apprehensive about their future in Baluchistan in the wake of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). They fear these projects may cause changes that result in their becoming a minority in Baluchistan province, which is now home to around 6.8 million ethnic Baluch ([China Brief](#), January 28). However, extreme operations, such as a suicide bombing by an educated woman at Karachi’s Chinese Confucius Institute, show a dramatic shift from the previous strategies of Baluch militants and indicate new trends emerging in the conflict ([al-Jazeera](#), April 28).

### **Baluchistan’s Evolving Rebellion**

Since Pakistan’s independence in 1947, Baluchistan province has witnessed five rebellions. However, the current insurgency that broke out in early 2000 is the longest phase. Baluch tribal chiefs had previously dominated various militant groups. However, all this changed in 2006 after a practicing physician, Dr. Allah Nazar, was arrested by Pakistani law enforcement agencies in Karachi. Nazar had also founded the Baluch Students Organization (BSO-Azad) in 2002, which was dominated by middle-class students who advocated for Baluchistan’s separation from Pakistan. After Nazar’s release from prison in 2008, Nazar became part of the

Baluch armed struggle and led his own Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF). Middle-class, non-tribal, and educated youth, including doctors, engineers, and teachers, have since joined BLF ([Express Tribune, September 9, 2015](#); [Dawn](#), February 2, 2012).

Since August 2018, the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) has been behind the most lethal attacks against Chinese installations inside and outside Baluchistan ([PIPS](#), March 22). Chinese engineers and workers have come under attack, however, only since the beginning of the fifth Baluch insurgency. For instance, in Gwadar port town, Nazar’s BLF killed three Chinese engineers in an IED blast on May 3, 2004. Since then, there have been sporadic attacks on Chinese workers, which increased significantly in 2018 in Baluchistan and Karachi ([Dawn](#), July 20, 2007).

BLA’s Majeed Brigade claimed its first attack in 2018 on a Chinese target, which was carried out by founder Aslam Achu’s son, Rehan Baluch, in Dalbandin, southwest of the provincial capital Quetta. The attack targeted Chinese engineers working at the Saindak mineral reserves, and wounded three Chinese nationals ([Dawn](#), August 12, 2018). Three months later, in November 2018, the Majeed Brigade attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi, but no Chinese nationals were hurt ([scmp.com](#), November 23, 2018). The Majeed Brigade breached security again in Gwadar, the epicenter of CPEC, with an attack which targeted the Pearl Continental hotel in May 2019. According to officials, five individuals, including four hotel employees (three security guards and a navy officer) lost their lives while the three BLA attackers were also killed. The hotel was very popular among Chinese tourists and business people ([Al Jazeera](#), May 12, 2019). More recently, besides the Karachi Stock Exchange attack in 2020, where China has shares, BLA perpetrated two major suicide attacks in February 2022 on paramilitary frontier corps in southwestern Pakistan ([Dawn](#), February 2).

## BLA's Female Suicide Bombing

The most dramatic shift in the insurgency was seen on April 26 when a female suicide bomber named Shari Baluch blew herself up outside the Confucius Institute in Karachi. BLA's Majeed brigade immediately claimed responsibility for the attack in an e-mail to journalists, which stated that "the mission was carried out by first female *fidayee* of the Brigade." Identifying the suicide bomber as the 31-year old Shari Baluch was a surprise because Baluch insurgents had refrained from recruiting women in their ranks, let alone using them as suicide bombers ([al-Jazeera, April 28](#)).

According to Shari Baluch's family and friends, she was a teacher, held a Master's degree, and a cheerful lady. Her uncle claimed she was obsessed with books and literature related to philosophy, and her colleagues in the local school where she taught described her as a "curious lady" ([BBC Urdu, April 28](#)). BLA's operational tactics suggest that the primary motive behind the shift is due to the fact that a female suicide bomber attracts less attention from law enforcement agencies and can more easily accomplish the mission. Indeed, out of five suicide attacks against Chinese nationals since August 2018, only the current attack was successful. In contrast, the other attackers failed to kill any Chinese nationals in their attacks.

Beijing reacted strongly to the attack and urged the Pakistani government to bring the perpetrators to justice. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson stated, "The Chinese blood cannot be shed in vain, and those behind this incident will surely pay the price ([NDTV, April 27](#))." Hours after the attack, Pakistan's newly elected Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif also arrived at the Chinese embassy in Islamabad to show his sympathy to the Chinese ambassador and also sent a message to President Xi Jinping. He promised that the attack "would be investigated expeditiously, and the country would make an example out of the culprits

behind this horrific attack ([Twitter/@PakPMO, April 26](#))."

Following the deadly attack on the Chinese Confucius Institute in Karachi, the recently formed Pakistani government is under immense pressure to secure Chinese interests in the country. With Pakistan's greater economic dependence on China as its economy is on a ventilator, a stronger military crackdown against Baluch insurgents, pro-separatist activists, and their facilitators inside and outside Baluchistan could be the first move Islamabad takes to protect its all-weather friendship with Beijing.

## Conclusion

Despite the increase in attacks on Chinese targets by Baluch insurgents, Beijing continues to pursue its projects under CPEC. Nevertheless, Baluch experts suspect China may continue to work on projects it has already invested in but might not invest in new projects in Baluchistan. [1] BLA's Majeed Brigade, meanwhile, still continues to pose a threat to both Chinese and Pakistani interests in the country. The use of women suicide bombers may lead to divided opinions within the insurgent group on the appropriateness of the tactic. Whether it proves to be a sign of BLA desperation or strength and whether the Majeed Brigade will keep employing new tactics combined with old ones to cause maximum fatalities remains to be seen.

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## Notes

[1] The authors' interview Adnan Aamir, editor of Baluchistan Voices, who closely follows the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, April 2022.

## **Nigerian al-Qaeda Affiliate Resumes Propaganda Campaign**

*Daniele Garofalo*

Jama'at al-Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan (Ansaru) is a Nigerian jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda that operates in northwestern Nigeria. The group was formed between November 2011 and January 2012 by Boko Haram defectors and with the approval of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). After about a year of activity, Ansaru ceased activities entirely around January 2013 and became a clandestine and dormant group. In January 2020, Ansaru resumed its armed operations and then continued military activities, including most prominently attacks in Kaduna and Yobe states in February and in Kaduna State in August ([Vanguard Nigeria](#), August 8, 2020; [DailyPost Nigeria](#), February 5, 2020).

As for propaganda activities, between May 2019 and August 2020, Ansaru created its official media wing, al-Yaqout Media, and established channels on Telegram and Rocket Chat – claiming several operations through pro-al-Qaeda media channels. [2] Since then, however, the group's media mostly became inactive until the end of 2021. In 2022, Ansaru has continued recruiting, resumed military operations -- in particular against bandits, and approached communities in the areas where it operates while also confirming its ties with al-Qaeda.

### **Ansaru's Propaganda Revival**

After a hiatus of more than a year, on November 29, 2021, a 22-minute al-Yaqout Media video appeared on local media channels, although it was probably released in error because it referred to a message for the Eid al-Fitr six months into the future in May 2022 ([Telegram](#),

November 29, 2021). In the video, the speaker mentioned several prominent al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Ibrahim al-Qosi, Abdelmalek Droukdel, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and showed images of ideologues, such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Abdullah al-Azzam, and Mohammad al-Maqdisi. These citations and the message transmitted indicated that the group is strongly tied to al-Qaeda, while strong condemnations against Boko Haram revealed the group's distance from its parent group.

On December 18, 2021, Ansaru, through al-Yaqout Media, returned to publishing with a four minute video in which the group congratulated the Taliban on their victory in Afghanistan ([Telegram](#), December 18, 2021). In addition, images of training and military operations were shown. Subsequently, on December 31, 2021, al-Yaqout Media Center released an official statement in which it recounted its origins and announced that it swore allegiance to AQIM in 2020. The statement noted that Ansaru's fighters were previously part of Boko Haram but abandoned the group due to the extremism and deviance of its leader, Abubakar Shekau. Finally, Ansaru stated that the group is committed to "defence and jihad by fighting the hateful disbelievers and renegade apostates."

On January 14, Ansaru's media activity continued with an announcement that al-Yaqout Media will become part of al-Qaeda's global media network and will be managed by the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) ([Twitter/Daniele Garofalo](#), January 14). The announcement not only placed Ansaru's propaganda within al-Qaeda's global propaganda machine, but also raised its quality and expanded its circulation insofar as it would be published thereafter in both Arabic and English, and later also translated into French. Two days later, on January 16, al-Yaqout Media through GIMF

released a claim and photo set for the first time, showing Ansaru announcing a military operation in Kaduna State against local bandits, who they killed ([Twitter/Daniele Garofalo](#), January 16). Then, on January 21, Ansaru, again via GIMF, released a new statement with a photo set of a military operation conducted a few days earlier, again in Kaduna State, in which the group announced that it had killed 15 burglars belonging to a group of local bandits and seized their motorbikes and weapons ([Twitter/Daniele Garofalo](#), January 21).

Another new publication was released on March 30, when al-Yaqout Media via GIMF issued a long statement announcing the start of a periodic bulletin ([Twitter/Daniele Garofalo](#), March 30). The first issue, released exclusively in Arabic, was titled “Why to Join Jama’at Ansar al-Muslimeen fi Bilad al-Sudan” and was intended to be continued in May. Ansaru stated that people should join Ansaru because it learned from the mistakes of the 1990s-era Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria and Shekau in Nigeria and was now following a more correct path. The publication mentioned the importance of al-Qaeda’s decentralization, which provides affiliates with general objectives to follow. Ansaru, therefore, proudly showed itself as an al-Qaeda group in Nigeria and was trying to recruit accordingly.

On April 9, Ansaru returned to publishing claims in Arabic and English and disseminating photo sets. On April 7, two large operations against bandits in the Birnin Gwari and Tun Sado areas of Kaduna and Zamfara states, northern Nigeria, were respectively published. It then showed photos of several bandits the group killed and announced that it had also killed the bandits’ leader and seized the bandits’ weapons, ammunition, and motorbikes ([Twitter/Daniele Garofalo](#), April 9, 2022).

On May 4, Ansaru published the first issue of its periodic bulletin “Sawt al-Qara’a al-Samra’a” (“The Voice of the Dark Continent [Africa]),” which was translated into English and consisted of 10 pages, including two editorials. The first was titled “Why join Ansaru?” and the second was about the importance and advantages of decentralizing al-Qaeda (these editorials were already seen in the late March publication, but now translated into English). The first editorial critiqued Shekau’s theology and Boko Haram, which was useful for recruiting that group’s defectors who do not want to join Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). The second editorial on “The Decentralization of al-Qaeda,” which was a translation from the English publication of March 30, underscored that affiliates follow the line dictated by al-Qaeda Central, but have operational autonomy. In this way, any errors committed by affiliates are not attributable to the mother organization or the responsibility of the al-Qaeda’s own leaders.

## **Conclusion**

Ansaru claims to be “the vanguard for the protection of Muslims in black Africa” and promises to restore the “dignity of Muslims” in that area, which broadly refers to the pre-colonial Sokoto Caliphate in present-day Nigeria. The group also criticizes the indiscriminate killing of civilians committed by Boko Haram and maintains a very strong link with al-Qaeda, and has conducted a low-profile media strategy primarily focused on the several operations it has conducted. Although in the past Ansaru has been described as possibly coexisting with militants in northern Nigeria, Ansaru’s operations have proved otherwise because it has attacked militants. Moreover, although Ansaru has actually been accused of conducting attacks, robberies, and kidnappings for extortion, it is possible these operations

were not committed by Ansaru, but by the various militant groups present in northwestern Nigeria and wrongly attributed to Ansaru ([Premium Times Nigeria](#), April 7; [Daily Nigerian](#), April 6).

Ansaru's connection to al-Qaeda Central and the entry of Ansaru's media into the global al-Qaeda publication ecosystem will shape Ansaru's future operations. A continued increase in publications and claims, with photos of the group's operations in states where it is active against bandits and criminal groups is likely in the coming months. It is also probable that in the medium term, should Ansaru succeed in recruiting new members and finding local support, Ansaru itself will expand its operations and follow the guidelines provided by al-Qaeda Central and AQIM.

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#### **Notes**

[1] To view all claims from the period cited see *Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF) – Ansaru Photos (and subsequent claims) - October 27, 2019, onward:* <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/12/15/global-islamic-media-front-gimf-ansaru-photos-october-27-2019/>

## **The United Arab Emirates' Long-Term Goals in Syria: Managing Militant Proxies and Geopolitical Adversaries**

*Andrew Devereux*

On March 18, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad landed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for a whistle-stop tour involving meetings with numerous high-ranking Emirati government officials ([Arab News](#), March 18). Among others, al-Assad met with UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum before being received by de-facto UAE leader and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, now President, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan. The day-long trip was al-Assad's first visit to an Arab country since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. The Syrian president's only other foreign trips were to long-standing allies Russia and Iran, which have provided the necessary military support to keep al-Assad in power.

The trip was largely symbolic and centered on demonstrating that UAE leaders are committed to strengthening cooperation with Damascus. According to statements from the press, bin Zayed stressed that "Syria is a fundamental pillar of Arab security" ([The Arab Weekly](#), March 19). The visit was criticized by the U.S., with a State Department official noting that Washington was "disappointed and troubled" by the trip and the apparent attempts by the UAE to normalize relations with Syria ([Alaraby](#), March 19).

### **A Gradual Shift**

During the onset of the Syrian civil war, the UAE, alongside the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, cut ties with Damascus as a result of its violent



crackdown on protesters. In 2012, the UAE closed its embassy in Damascus and cut all diplomatic ties ([Middle East Online](#), December 27, 2018). In the ensuing years, the UAE position shifted from supporting rebel groups trying to depose al-Assad to backing the beleaguered Syrian president.

Foreign involvement and the rise of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) posed a problem for the UAE because it meant there was a greater potential for Islamist groups to seize power and expand political Islam, which is antithetical to the UAE's regional agenda. When increased Russian military support in 2015 swung the conflict in al-Assad's favour, the UAE consolidated its position by committing to regional stability, which no longer included the demand for al-Assad's removal. With al-Assad clearly set to be central to Damascus's future and the geopolitical situation in Syria increasingly offering opportunities for friendly external parties, the UAE made conciliatory moves ([Alaraby](#) November 13, 2018).

The UAE began taking small steps toward reconciliation with al-Assad in 2018 when they reopened their embassy in Damascus that year. Since then, other peace-making tactics have included offering COVID-19 support to Syria, conducting bilateral negotiations with high-ranking Syrian officials regarding trade, commerce and humanitarian support, and opening backchannel talks with other amenable regional partners, such as Egypt and Jordan, regarding Syria's potential readmission to the Arab League ([Alaraby](#), March 10). The visit of Assad to the UAE, however, is the most brazenly public show of normalization between the two states, and the timing of the trip is not accidental.

## **Drifting Western Focus**

Attempts to reintegrate Syria into the Arab world are part of the UAE's wider strategy of diversifying global relationships. The U.S and UAE remain close global partners, particularly in the areas of bilateral counter-terrorism and security. Despite the admonishment from the State Department, the Biden administration has been reticent to criticize the UAE's public overtures to Damascus. Under the auspices of the 2019 Caesar Act, which aims to isolate Assad through sanctions, the UAE is vulnerable to sanctions for re-engaging Assad, but there has been no suggestion that the U.S is contemplating such a move ([Alaraby](#), March 9, 2021).

U.S. focus on the Middle East had already begun to drift since President Biden took office in January 2021, and the conflict in Ukraine has ensured its focus remains away from Syria. The conflict has, however, provided the UAE with unexpected geopolitical leverage due to global furor over Western purchases of Russian oil, which offers the UAE additional commercial interests. The West is unlikely to start sanctioning a state like the UAE which can provide alternate energy markets from Russia. A refusal by the UAE to support the Western position in Ukraine has, therefore, passed largely unnoticed. The UAE has even continued its policy of attempting to secure closer relationships with Russia as well as China through adopting a policy of increased neutrality in global conflicts ([Middle East Eye](#), February 27). Maintaining working relations with multiple major powers and hedging bets that the U.S. will remain distracted appears to be working for the UAE.

## **Curbing Regional Adversaries**

Greater influence in Syria will allow the UAE to curb the inclinations of regional adversaries, such as Iran and Turkey. Despite relations thawing in the past 12-18 months, Turkey and the UAE had previously been at odds with one another, largely due to the former's support of Qatar and ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Syrian civil war was the theatre where these tensions manifested. The UAE was also critical of Turkey's conflation of Kurdish nationalism with terrorism and has repeatedly attempted to suppress Turkish influence in Syria ([al-Monitor](#), February 25, 2019).

Damascus was able to partner with the UAE's security establishment to force the withdrawal of hundreds of Turkish troops from Syria, who were set to be redeployed in Iraq ([Middle East Eye](#), March 24). If Turkish interests and its presence in northern Syria are diminished, economic assistance to Syria will likely allow the UAE to establish significant influence in the region, while simultaneously offsetting Turkish regional ambitions. Relations with Turkey remain complex, but closer ties with Damascus have certainly allowed the UAE to flex its muscle in Syria, with demonstrable success. In sum, an emboldened al-Assad regime is detrimental to Turkey's national security interests.

## **UAE Strategy Vis-a-Vis Iran**

Increased influence in Syria is beneficial to Abu Dhabi's wider strategy of re-engaging Tehran while also trying to limit Iran's growing regional influence ([Terrorism Monitor](#), March 11). Both Russia and Iran have had military, economic, and societal influence in Syria in recent years and the UAE's push for normalization with Syria is

likely tied to future plans rather than trying to pressure al-Assad into immediately decoupling from Tehran. Iran is a major player in the Syrian melting pot, providing billions of dollars of assistance and material support, but the UAE is able to offer advantages that Tehran cannot. Al-Assad visited Tehran on May 8, demonstrating that the Syrian president remains within the Iranian sphere of influence and that Damascus is looking to strengthen ties with Tehran owing to the instability associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine ([PressTV](#), May 8).

The UAE is the flag bearer for potential Syrian re-engagement with other GCC states and a gradual re-introduction of Damascus into the Arab diplomatic fold. The increased economic and political opportunities this would bring al-Assad compared to the comparatively isolated Iran would be myriad. Key international players, including Saudi Arabia, also want to weaken Syrian dependence on Iran, and although Riyadh has yet to make any overtures to Damascus, this common goal could persuade the Saudis to consider allowing Syria back into the Arab League. If the Arab states can offer Syria an avenue back into the international fold, its reliance on Tehran could wane.

## **The Houthi Question**

Despite UAE and Iranian desires to increase diplomatic relations, the issue is complicated by the ongoing activity of the Houthis, the Iranian-backed militia movement in Yemen. On January 17, Houthi militants conducted a drone attack targeting Abu Dhabi. This triggered a fuel tank explosion which killed three people and caused structural damage to an under-construction section of Abu Dhabi International Airport ([Daily Sabah](#), January

17). The attacks were reportedly in retaliation for a UAE-backed offensive by the Giants Brigade, which forced the Houthis out of key strategic positions in Shabawh Governorate.

The Houthi attacks were the first instance of the UAE experiencing domestic 'blowback' from the Yemen crisis, and Abu Dhabi has urged the Biden administration to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation ([Alarabiya](#), 1 February 2022). The attacks further caused concern in Abu Dhabi that its reputation as a safe harbour in the Middle East could also be impacted. The UAE had long been reluctant to get embroiled in the Saudi-Yemeni conflict, and it is unlikely that the attacks were ordered by Tehran. Although weaponry and training is provided by Iran, the Houthi rebels operate with a degree of independence. Damascus, which is sympathetic to the Houthis and remained silent when other international partners condemned the attacks on Abu Dhabi, may come to see that their relationship with the Houthis is an impediment to closer ties with the UAE ([NPASyria](#), October 18, 2021).

### **Limitations to Syrian Stability**

Resurrecting relations with the UAE is a major boon for al-Assad, but in reality, it is not going to contribute to Syrian stability in the medium term. The UAE has no troops on the ground in Syria, and promises of humanitarian aid have not solved the myriad of social, economic, and medical issues plaguing the country. While the civil war in Syria has been raging, no countries without a military presence have been able to exert significant influence. The UAE is pursuing a long-term strategy of forcing its way into the already clustered Syrian theatre of influence, and is hoping

significant economic assistance is enough to get a seat at al-Assad's table.

The promise of investment in a solar-powered energy plant close to Damascus is an example of the UAE strategy of investments aimed at extending UAE political influence ([al-Arabiya](#), November 11, 2021). Normalization efforts have not resulted in any discernible improvement in the quality of life for Syrian citizens, while the country remains rife with human rights abuses, extreme corruption and militias wielding outsized influence. The normalization talks have largely been symbolic, and UAE investment will have little to no impact on the current insurgencies or Islamic State remnants, which are operating in Syria, given the piecemeal promises of material support or reconstruction thus far.

### **Conclusion**

The UAE's overtures to Damascus are driven by a complex network of motivations, but at the heart they are all focused on the UAE's desire to expand outreach across the region and portray itself as the region's bastion of stability. These goals are clearly being viewed through a long lens, with al-Assad being hardly likely to decouple from an Iran that has played an essential part in keeping him in power. However, the UAE is hoping it can lure al-Assad into its orbit by offering investment and a potential route back into the Arab League.

It is also unclear for just how long the West will accept the UAE's increasingly brazen normalization efforts with Assad. Nevertheless, the West's prioritization of the Ukrainian conflict means the U.S. could demand the UAE back down from its favorable posture toward Russia and its

allies in Syria at any time. The UAE is playing a long and potentially perilous game, but it has clearly decided the long-term gains outweigh the short-term geopolitical risks.

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