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About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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The Islamic State Raises Its Black Flag Over The Caucasus

By Derek Henry Flood



People inspect the damage after a December 4, 2014 attack by insurgents in Grozny, Chechnya. ELENA FITKULINA / GETTY IMAGES

IN THE EARLY hours of December 4, 2014, a group of militants staged a brazen attack in the heart of Grozny, the Chechen capital. They stormed a government media building and a significant part of the edifice was engulfed in flames. Clashes lasted for some 12 hours before the authorities regained complete control of the area.¹ The December incident belied the hard-won image that Chechnya had largely been pacified. The Grozny attack made headlines in part because Chechnya had largely dropped out of the news because the number of attacks within the republic had declined even as the violence seeped into other areas to the east and west.

The timing and location of the attack was significant for several reasons. Targeting a government building in

the region's capital and the death of state security forces demonstrated conclusively that this long-running conflict has not been resolved, despite the message implied in the policies of Ramzan Kadyrov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's hand-picked leader in Chechnya. He has gone to great lengths to suppress religious and political violence and has greatly reduced terrorism and insurgent activity in the area under his direct control. His tactics though have also led to the diffusion of radicalism into the neighboring republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria in particular which have made of up the core of the Caucasus Emirate, known locally as Imarat Kavkaz.

The December attack took place the same day Putin was to give his State of the Nation address to Russian parliament and also occurred a week before the December 11 anniversary of the start of the first Russo-Chechen war that began

¹ Musa Sadulayev and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Islamic militants attack Chechen capital; 20 dead," Associated Press, December 4, 2014.

in 1994.² The attack did little though to force a reassessment of the insurgency in the Caucasus. A more glamorous battle in the Levant continues to attract fighters away from Russia and at the same time is weakening the indigenous fight for autonomy, which is slowly adopting additional radical Islamist characteristics.

With the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, there has been an ongoing tug-of-war among the jihadi fighters in the North Caucasus about whether to remain autonomous, affiliate themselves with al-Qa'ida's core leadership, or follow the Islamic State. By June 21, 2015, it appears that the Islamic State had won the day. An audio recording was posted to YouTube stating that the mujahideen of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria have sided with Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.³ Baghdadi's spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani subsequently released an audio recording on June 23 proclaiming the Islamic State's acceptance of *bay'ah* of North Caucasian militant leaders.⁴ The Caucasus Emirate has now been subsumed into the Islamic State's sphere as a province that would be known as Vilayat Kavkaz or Wilayat Qawqaz in Arabic. The Islamic State's chosen leader in the North Caucasus is Rustam Aselderov (aka Abu Mukhammad Kadarsky),⁵ the former emir of the Caucasus Emirate's Vilayat Dagestan sector and notably also a non-Chechen. He could be in conflict with Magomed Suleymanov, the yet-to-be confirmed leader of the rump Caucasus Emirate, leaving the future of the Caucasus Emirate in question.

Leadership Decapitation as Strategy

Putin ascended to power largely based on his resolve to end the war in Chechnya by any means at the disposal of the Russian state. The management of the Chechen conflict under his predecessor,

former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, can be considered the nadir of post-Soviet Russian power,⁶ particularly the Khasavyurt Accord. General Alexander Lebed and then Chechen rebel President Aslan Maskhadov signed that deal in August 1996 to end the first Russo-Chechen war, but it also resulted in Chechnya becoming de facto independent and referring to itself as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.⁷ Much of Putin's, and by extension Kadyrov's, policy is based on rectifying the military and diplomatic blunders of the early post-Soviet period.

There is one consistent thread throughout the Russian Federation's fight for control of the North Caucasus that began in late 1994, and that is the successive elimination of rebel leaders. The killing of Emir Aliskhab Kebekov in Buinaksk district, Dagestan on April 19, 2015⁸ is the latest in a series of assassinations that accompanied the conflict's steady evolution from a Chechen-centric ethno-nationalist insurgency to the present radical jihadi war that affects a cluster of forlorn countries stretching from the Caspian to Black Sea. In 2014, Kebekov, a *qadi* (sharia judge), had reluctantly succeeded the late Doku Umarov as emir of the Caucasian Emirate. While Moscow may trumpet his death as yet another decisive step in the now decades-long counterinsurgency, there is no indication that yet another leadership decapitation will bring the anti-Russian resistance to its knees.

Despite a long-running series of targeted killings, Russian authorities and their proxies in southern Muslim-majority republics have remained unable to extinguish the smoldering discontent. Russians or their agents have killed Dzokhar Dudaev in 1996, Zelimkhan Yaderbiyev in 1997, Aslan Maskhadov in Tolstoy-Yurt in 2005, Abdul-Halim Sadulayev in Argun in 2006, and

Doku Umarov in 2013. Each blow to the rebel leadership has demonstrably led to increased radicalization among the militants. Early nationalist leaders such as Dudaev and Maskhadov were willing to negotiate. Negotiations with today's underground insurgent leaders would be unthinkable. It is arguable that Russia's attempts to retain one tiny secessionist republic, with all the mass casualties that have ensued, have instead accelerated the radicalization of Islamists throughout the region. The further fighters were pushed into the mountains as the security cordon tightened in the North Caucasus, the more ideologically oriented they became as their isolation deepened. Now the Federal Security Service (FSB) and military must contend with a declared Islamic State *wilayah* on their soil.

The Radicalization of Grievances

The Caucasus was at the edge of historical Islamic expansion. Two schools of Sunni Islam, Shafi'i and Hanafi, were common in the region.⁹ Comparatively moderate by today's standards, two principle Sufi orders, the Naqshabandiyya and the Qadiriyya,¹⁰ took hold during a period overlapping the Tsarist colonization and Caucasian wars of the mid-19th century. Though salafism in the North Caucasus, and Dagestan in particular, predates the Soviet collapse,¹¹ it is now visibly resurgent, aided by broader trends in global Islam and the increased technological connectivity of what was once a remote backwater of the *umma* (Islamic community).

There are other problems emerging with Russian policy. Putin chose to strengthen the state security apparatus and elevate mid-level strongmen, most notably Ramzan Kadyrov. This is potentially problematic for Moscow. Kadyrov, in particular, has become so emboldened that he views his local administration as being beyond Russian

2 Thomas de Waal, "20 Years On, Chechnya Still Traumatized by War," *The Moscow Times*, December 10, 2014.

3 Maria Antonova, "Russia's Caucasus Islamists 'pledge allegiance' to IS," *Agence France Presse*, June 24, 2015.

4 "Russia's Caucasus Islamists 'Pledge Allegiance' To IS," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 24, 2015.

5 "Islamic State moves in on al-Qaeda turf," *BBC Monitoring*, June 25, 2015.

6 Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 142-144.

7 Dmitri Trenin, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, (Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), pp. 61, 171.

8 "Russia says Islamist rebel leader Kebekov 'neutralised,'" *Agence France Presse*, April 20, 2015.

9 Walter Richmond, *The Northwest Caucasus: Past, Present, Future*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 161.

10 Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 229.

11 Roland Dannreuther and Luke March, *Russia and Islam: State, Society and Radicalism*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), p.138.

federal constrictions.¹² Much of Putin's strategy to contain separatism in the North Caucasus depended on power being delegated to Kadyrov. Arguably, those efforts have failed.

As it spread through the region, the insurgency has become more radical and more a part of the militant transnational Islamist movement. The push for Chechen independence had originally been more anti-authoritarian in nature and was fed by the anger stirred up by the Stalinist-like deportations of 1994. Now, the young fighters in the Caucasus are more likely to pursue global jihad to its current locus in Syria and Iraq. Part of this trend is simply logistical and part is ideological. Once in Turkey, which is a fairly straightforward process for Georgians and Azerbaijanis, the porous Syrian border presents relatively few obstacles. In Syria or Iraq, jihadis are presented with the opportunity to contest the so-called near enemy, that is, the forces of the Assad regime, Kurdish militias, Iraqi federal forces, Iranian-sponsored Shia militias, and anyone else who stands in the way of controlling the Umayyad caliphate capital of Damascus or the Abbassid caliphate capital of Baghdad.

One near-term positive for the Russian authorities is that the battle for control against the near enemy in the Russian Federation's southwestern tier has far less appeal with the decline of Sufi-inflected nationalism. But the insurgency has not simply evaporated.

The Post-Chechen Caucasus Emirate

Aliskhab Kebekov's ascent to the top leadership role in the evolving insurgency waged by the Caucasus Emirate was notable because he was not a battle-hardened Chechen, but an ethnic Avar from Dagestan. The selection of another Avar, Magomed Suleymanov (aka Abu Usman Gimry), to replace Kebekov (according to Heydar Jemal, the chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia¹³) would be even more notable. If confirmed by insurgent

sources, Suleymanov's appointment would seem to indicate that the North Caucasus insurgency has shifted shape again. Avar control of insurgency is not unheard of. In the 30-year struggle to subdue Muslims in the same region during the 19th century, the rebellion's two legendary leaders, Qazi Muhammed and Imam Shamil, were both Avars.

Control of the insurgency by non-Chechen Avars also highlights the move in its center of gravity to Dagestan, where radical Islamist thought is on the rise and violence is rife. Once the nationalist independence movement was irrevocably re-framed in Islamist tenets by Doku Umarov in October 2007, the course of the insurgency has continued to metastasize far beyond the Chechen republic. Goals have also changed. Rather than mere secession from the Russian Federation as early Chechen nationalists had envisioned, the primary aim has become the implementation of sharia.

As the situation in the Caucasus devolved from all-out war to a low-intensity conflict, global attention ebbed. Fatigue set in among ordinary Chechens themselves, even as the newly proclaimed emirate was divided into the six principle *vilayats* (provinces) of Dagestan, Nokhchiyocho (Chechnya), Ghalghaycho (Ingushetia)¹⁴ United Vilayat of Kabardia, Balkaria, and Karachai, Nogai Steppe, and Cherkessia.

Kebekov's tenure as emir was marked by growing fissures in the Caucasus Emirate. Though on the surface such internal schisms may appear to be the result of the "strong horse-weak horse" dynamic among radical jihadis, they are also symptomatic of inept leadership, ego-driven disputes among leaders at the *jamaa*¹⁵ level, and financial struggles, even as the jihad is not uniformly popular.

The cracks began to show in November 2014, when the leader of Aukhov jamaat, Suleiman Zaylanabidov, broke with the

emirate to pledge *bay'a* to the Islamic State's al-Baghdadi.¹⁶ Zaylanabidov was subsequently killed as he tried to pass through a police checkpoint on June 6, 2015.¹⁷ In the wake of Zaylanabidov's death and the Caucasus Emirate's expressed allegiance, Islamic State leaders likely perceive that they are in direct conflict with Russia. Russia has territory to secure while Islamic State has an expansionist caliphate to feed.

Fundamental Divisions

The Caucasus Emirate remained under increasing strain since Umarov's death. The Islamic State's jihad in Syria and Iraq has secured jihadi ideological preeminence in those countries and has pulled in recruits and resources that might otherwise have gone to the fight in the North Caucasus.

The Caucasus Emirate de facto involved itself in Syria by letting the most well known foreign fighter faction, Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar, anoint itself as the emirate's official representative in the Syrian conflict. Until recently, Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar was led by Salakhuddin Shishani, a Georgian national like Umar al-Shishani. The two rival "Chechen" leaders in Syria are actually Kists—a distinct cultural group descended from 19th Century Chechen and Ingush migrants—from the Pankisi Gorge in northeastern Georgia's Kakheti region. Salakhuddin Shishani was born Faisula Margoshvili in Duisi, Pankisi's principle town, less than five kilometers from the village of Birkiani where his bitter rival Umar Shishani was raised. Salakhuddin Shishani is a veteran of the 2nd Russo-Chechen war,¹⁸ which may be why he has kept his movement in Syria aligned with the Caucasus Emirate's leadership.

The vast international media attention focused on the Levant has made it difficult for jihadi leaders in the North Caucasus to recruit and retain the fighters needed to sustain their ongoing

¹² "Russian Interior Ministry Slams Kadyrov's 'Shoot-To-Kill' Remark," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 23, 2015.

¹³ "Jamal: New Leader 'Caucasus Emirate' is Magomed Suleimanov," Caucasian Knot, May 28, 2015.

¹⁴ The Ghalghaycho (Ingushetia) appears to include the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania which is a majority Orthodox Christian enclave in the otherwise Muslim-majority North Caucasus.

¹⁵ *Jamaats* are a subdivision of Vilayats.

¹⁶ "In Dagestan, one of the emirs of the Aukhov militants sworn to the leader of the 'Islamic State,'" Caucasian Knot, November 27, 2014.

¹⁷ "Russia says militant adhering to ISIS killed in Dagestan," Associated Press, June 6, 2015.

¹⁸ Author emails with former Middle East analyst at Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs, June 7, 2015.

insurgency. Islamic State ideologues have taken advantage of the Caucasus Emirate's weakened status to stress that their movement is ideologically superior to that of local insurgent leaders in the Caucasus.

As the security situation in Chechnya continued to harden under Kadyrov and in late 2012 and into 2013 the conflict in northern Syria became increasingly fragmented, the Caucasus Emirate struggled to stay relevant. One of Umarov's key challenges in the latter period of his leadership was to keep his insurgency's agenda focused on local issues in the face of the popularity of Syria as the preeminent destination for foreign fighters. Umarov vacillated on endorsing North Caucasians joining the jihad in Syria until it became unavoidable. The Caucasus Emirate is in essence now kept alive mostly on social networks and its fighters only clash occasionally with security forces, while the Islamic State controls territory and is intensifying its appeal as it attempts to form a new state.

The Islamic State, however, sought to expand during 2014 and disputes between the two movements escalated into diametric opposition. The Caucasus Emirate was forced to acknowledge it could not avoid some level of involvement in the Syrian conflict, particularly in light of the new generation of younger commanders that had quickly risen to prominence in the Levant, such as Salakhuddin Shishani, the now deposed emir of the Jabhat al-Nusra-aligned Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar, who pledged *bay'at* to the Caucasus Emirate. Salakhuddin Shishani has since been deposed for alleged transgressions that would stoke *fitna* (intra-Muslim discord) by an internal sharia court according to a Facebook account purportedly run by Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar but the movement still claims to fight on in Aleppo Governorate despite such intense discord.¹⁹

Since the caliphate was declared in June 2014,²⁰ Caucasians already assimilated

into the Islamic State have seen their belief that they were participating in the sole, legitimate jihad justified while those fighting at home were seen as guilty of a form of ethno-linguistic nationalism, even though that fight was the Caucasus Emirate's *raison d'être*. Even so, the continued allegiance of the Jaish al-Mujahireen wal-Ansar to the Caucasus Emirate²¹ dilutes the Islamic State's triumphal absolutism, which seeks total submission rather than a web of alliances.

The head of the Chechen-led Vilayat Nokhchicho, Aslan Byutukayev (aka Emir Khamzat) pledged fealty to Baghdadi in mid-June.²² Byutukayev is a pivotal militant figure in Chechnya and was singled out by Kadyrov as the prime suspect in the December 2014 raid in Grozny.²³ His defection was a severe blow to the group that may have sparked its current situation, especially as he was once widely mentioned as a natural successor to Umarov as the leader of the Caucasus Emirate.

For many years the Kremlin vociferously claimed to be fighting "Wahabis" in the Caucasus, and seemed unable to distinguish between Chechen nationalists and genuine Islamists. Now with the faded Chechen nationalist movement kinetically irrelevant on the ground, the Islamized intra-militant struggle for the North Caucasus is intricately interlinked to the war in Syria and Iraq. Until now, the Islamic State paid scant attention to ideological and theological schisms within the wider Caucasus, there can be no denying Baghdadi has found significant utility in the skilled Chechen, Kist, and other Caucasian fighters active in Syria and Iraq. The Caucasus Emirate, meanwhile, is barely hanging on in its home base. It is pressed hard by local

and federal state actors in the Russian Federation while the Islamic State has been busy winning hearts and minds in the Dagestan vilayat and making inroads into other vulnerable regions. The latest transformation in the Caucasus Emirate's plight, highlighted by its inability to confirm a new emir indicates that a purely anti-Russian resistance may be a thing of the past.

The future of the insurgency in the North Caucasus remains highly uncertain. The rump Caucasus Emirate can now only lay claim to its Nogai Steppe and Cherkessia vilayats, which were never key nodes in the insurgency. The current struggle for power and influence is being disproportionately influenced externally by actors on the Syrian battlefield, several of whom in fact originate from the South Caucasus. The movement of Caucasian jihadis to Syria and Iraq suits Moscow's purposes in several distinct ways. It bolsters Russia's policy of arming the embattled regime of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.²⁴ The far more glamorized war there encourages local-regional fighters to wage jihad outside the Russian Federation or its so-called 'near abroad,'²⁵ and the Putin government can claim that that it has been fighting international terrorism²⁶ as it has professed for many years in its southern republics, rather than an indigenous insurgency motivated by local grievances. Now that the jihad in the North Caucasus has unequivocally been subsumed into the larger transnational jihad helmed by the Islamic State, Moscow will likely be forced to reappraise its current security calculus for the Russian Federation's most violent region.

claims Islamic "caliphate," Reuters, June 30, 2014.

²¹ Liz Fuller, "North Caucasus Fighters in Syria Pledge Allegiance to Umarov's Successor," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 31, 2014.

²² Chechnya: Oath to Emir Khamzat (Vilayat Nokhchicho) to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, June 13, 2015, infochechen.com. The source audio recording purported to be Byutukayev has since been removed by YouTube administrators.

²³ "Chechnya homes targeted after Grozny militant attack," BBC News, December 10, 2014.

²⁴ Jonathan Saul, "Russia steps up military lifeline to Syria's Assad - sources," Reuters, January 17, 2014.

²⁵ Murad Batal al-Shishani, "Chechens drawn south to fight against Syria's Assad," BBC Arabic, November 20, 2013.

²⁶ Fiona Hill, "Putin and Bush in Common Cause? Russia's View of the Terrorist Threat After September 11," Brookings Institution, Summer 2002.

¹⁹ See Russian-language Facebook posts from the account "Jma Sham" dated June 8, June 10, and June 24, 2015.

²⁰ Sylvia Westfall, "After Iraq gains, Qaeda offshoot

A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Michael Steinbach, Assistant Director, FBI

By Brian Dodwell

Assistant Director Michael B. Steinbach has led the FBI Counterterrorism Division since July 2014. He began his career in the FBI in 1995 after seven years as an aviator in the U.S. Navy. Over the course of his 20-year career he has served as manager of FBI operations at Guantanamo Bay, deputy on-scene commander for FBI operations in Afghanistan, legal attaché in Israel, assistant section chief for the International Terrorism Operations Section, Counterterrorism Division, and deputy director for Law Enforcement Services at the CIA's Counterterrorism Center. Before taking his current post, Mr. Steinbach served as special agent in charge of the FBI's Miami Division.

CTC: YOU HAVE had some very interesting counterterrorism assignments in the FBI over the past dozen years that include serving in Afghanistan alongside the military (and others) and being assigned to the CIA's Counterterrorism Center. How have the role and capabilities of the FBI in this interagency fight evolved during this time period?

Steinbach: The evolution over the last couple decades for the FBI has certainly been in the interagency arena, with an especially strong working relationship being developed with the military. If you go back before 9/11 and you look at the relationship we had with DoD [U.S. Department of Defense] and you compare that to today, it would look vastly different. It's a much more thorough relationship, it's a much more agile relationship, and it's an even more functional relationship.

CTC: From a capabilities perspectives how do you feel that the FBI has evolved? The mission given to the FBI after 9/11 was "never again." How do you feel the FBI's capability to achieve what is obviously an almost impossibly high standard has developed?

Steinbach: You are absolutely right. When you look at our mission set to

detect and disrupt, we are really being asked to prevent the crime before it happens. And we have learned throughout our history that, whether we are talking about terrorism, drugs, or some other violations, you really have to take the fight overseas. You cannot sit in Miami, for example, and wait for the drugs and the dealers to come to Miami. You have to be forward leaning and go to the point of origin. In the case of the drug example, that was primarily Central and South America. It is the same model for counterterrorism. We can't sit in the homeland and wait for the actors to plot and then come to the US. We have to be overseas. So, our overseas position and role has greatly expanded.

"When you look at our mission set to detect and disrupt, we are really being asked to prevent the crime before it happens."

The military has played a significant role in our ability to do this. Since 9/11 there have been several different conflict zones which are breeding grounds for terrorists and plots, so the FBI needs DoD in order to work in those environments. Clearly as a law enforcement agency we don't have the tools, necessarily, to work independently in conflict zones, and so lashing up with DoD in such locations is a benefit for both of us.

It is important to remember that the world is quite small these days. Maybe 30-50 years ago what happened in a small corner of the globe didn't really have any impact on the U.S. homeland. However, in today's world, with technology and other factors, what is found in the far corners of the world may have a direct impact on and direct connection to the United States, and that is really why and how our relationship with DoD became one of

the most fundamental evolutions for the FBI over the last decade plus.

CTC: As our global military footprint is scaled back, however, what impacts does this have on your organization in terms of what it will be asked to take on in this evolving environment? Does the FBI pull back as well, or will it be asked to expand to fill that void, albeit in a different capacity?

Steinbach: We are definitely not being asked to pull back. If anything, it is a greater presence overseas. So, in some cases, as DoD leaves a space, we may be asked to step in and provide assistance to indigenous forces, whether it is intelligence or law enforcement, to help them build and develop their capacity. But just because we leave conflict zones does not mean there aren't lots of places in the world where DoD operates in some form, and where the FBI can take advantage of the military's ability to reach into those locations from afar, and where the FBI will look to the military as the action arm.

CTC: Have we come far enough in this evolution and development of our counterterrorism architecture? In what areas are further enhancements to our CT capabilities, policies, or authorities needed in order to get us where we need to be?

Steinbach: I can look at the question in two ways. First, when you look at our capabilities and the technology-driven world we live in, it requires us to continue to invest in technology to stay abreast of the changing landscape, so that we can continue to leverage our resources and do our job. Second, we have done a good job over the last 20 years of developing a joint interagency working environment with our Joint Terrorism Task Force model. But as I said before, the world is small, and we need to take that same model and apply it internationally. We have great relationships with our Western allies, but the way that we do business is through diplomatic channels, and diplomacy takes time. Terrorists don't follow that road map or timeline. We have to develop a more agile and quick way to deal with our international partners, in much the same way we

now deal with our state and local law enforcement partners.

CTC: You have publicly discussed your concerns about the growing gap between adversary use of technology and our own technology and laws—the “going dark” phenomenon¹ as you have called it. Is this a technological problem that we have to solve, or a policy problem? Or both?

Steinbach: It is actually a three pronged problem. First, it is a legislative problem. We need the laws to catch up to technology. There are laws on the books, so we are not asking for new or enhanced authorities. We are asking for existing authorities to be updated and made relevant. There is a law called CALEA [Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act]. It applies to telecommunications providers and it requires them to provide technological assistance when law enforcement has a court order permitting collection. Much of today’s communications, however, are not through traditional telecommunications providers. They are through Internet Service Providers and social media and other companies that aren’t bound by CALEA. So, we need our legislature to take a look and update the laws and make them relevant to today’s environment. Second, it is a public relations problem. We have to get past the [Edward] Snowden concern and inform the public again that we are not asking for new, invasive authorities. We are looking to act on a court order or legal authorities to collect what we should collect so we can prevent a crime or a terrorist incident. Third is the technology challenge. Many of the companies don’t have the technological capability to achieve these goals, so we need to work with those companies to develop technological solutions. So, it is really a three-part problem.

CTC: One of the things the CT community has struggled with is measuring effectiveness in this fight. How can we develop measurable and useful metrics to assess the effectiveness of our CT

efforts? What metrics are most useful to you in determining whether the FBI’s CT actions are having the desired impact on the adversary and on our security more broadly?

Steinbach: I’ll keep it very simple. Fortunately or unfortunately, the only metric that counts is terrorist incidents, and the baseline is zero. So if there are no terrorist attacks in the United States, we succeed; if a terrorist succeeds in conducting an attack in the U.S. or against U.S. interests abroad, we fail. And that’s really the bottom-line metric.

CTC: How would you evaluate and prioritize the various terrorist threats we face? Obviously much of the public

“The only metric that counts is terrorist incidents, and the baseline is zero. So if there are no terrorist attacks in the United States, we succeed; if a terrorist succeeds...we fail.”

focus is on the Islamic State. Is this focus justified, or does it distract from other threats?

Steinbach: I think we need to separate what the American public and the media focuses on versus what we focus on. In many cases they aren’t the same thing. The way we prioritize our threats is through an intelligence-based process. We examine threats from a national perspective and then a city-specific perspective. We take a look at what the intelligence is telling us, and identify what don’t we know and what we do know about a particular threat. So we prioritize the threats we face based on what our collection and our investigations tell us across the landscape of the homeland and also worldwide. Having said all that, ISIL [the Islamic State in Iraq and the

Levant] is certainly one of the most important areas of focus for the FBI in the terrorism arena.

CTC: How does the Islamic State threat differ from that posed by al-Qa`ida over the past decade or so?

Steinbach: How al-Qa`ida and ISIL have approached things is different. Al-Qa`ida was a more organized structural model, and plotting [against the United States.] was more centralized as compared to ISIL, which seems to have a more diffuse model. They have certainly used technology and modern communications (in the form of social media) much more effectively than al-Qa`ida ever did. So there are a number of differences between al-Qa`ida 15 years ago and ISIL today, but I think you could argue it’s perhaps an evolution of the same type of threat.

CTC: How has the nature of the domestic jihadist threat evolved in the past few years? Many of these American jihadists have shifted their support over from al-Qa`ida to the Islamic State. How has this changed the nature of the threat, or your approach to combating it?

Steinbach: I think it starts with ISIL’s propaganda. They are very effective at marketing their brand, and one of their propaganda streams is a Western-focused message that has influenced many of these former al-Qa`ida-following jihadists and brought them to their brand. The last couple years has seen a fundamental shift in how the message is pushed out. We previously had recognized the emergence of the internet as a paradigm shift because the internet allowed for anonymity, it allowed for someone in the United States to no longer have to travel to a foreign location to train, to radicalize; you could now do all of that from the comfort of your own home.

I would argue in the past two or three years another paradigm shift has taken place and that is social media. Social media is fundamentally different than the “traditional” internet, because even though the previous sites could be anonymous, you still had to go to them, find the sites (some of them password-protected), and reach out, whereas jihadi users of social media, with its

¹ Michael B. Steinbach, Assistant Director, Counterterrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Statement Before the House Homeland Security Committee, June 3, 2015.

horizontal distribution model, actually reach into the United States. And on smartphones with push notifications it's right there with someone 24/7, and that is a fundamental difference.

Social media is used by younger individuals, and the fighters overseas have smartphones in hand, so the individual foreign fighters, young individuals who are already over there, are communicating directly with young

“The foreign fighter problem and the homegrown violent extremist problem, though very closely related, are two distinct problems. The homegrown violent extremist is of greater concern.”

individuals in Western countries, including the United States. So instead of that older ideologue trying to sell something to the younger generation, you've got someone of similar age, of similar background—a 20-year-old talking to a 20-year-old—so they can communicate in the language of a 20-year-old. This communication model being used by terrorist groups, and ISIL in particular, is probably the most significant change we have seen in the last couple years. And that provides both opportunities and challenges.

CTC: So as you work to combat that, how do you make determinations in terms of your interjection into that process? Given the number of people who are consuming this material, how do you allocate your finite resources to engage or intervene in those types of conversations?

Steinbach: You just hit on the fundamental challenge the FBI is faced with. With social media, this material is out there in large volumes, so how do you distinguish between people just

passively consuming the propaganda, which is their right, versus those individuals consuming it and then taking it a step further and acting on it or taking overt steps in support of terrorism. That is the fundamental challenge faced by the FBI—going through all that noise out there and identifying the discrete signals.

CTC: The foreign fighter problem appears to pose a particularly interesting challenge to the law enforcement community given the scale of the problem and the lack of certainty regarding the intentions and level of threat these individuals pose. How would you evaluate this problem and assess the relative threat posed by Americans who travel overseas (and who may or may not return) versus those who stay home (either by choice or due to difficulties traveling) and consider pursuing a violent path here?

Steinbach: I don't want to diminish the threat of foreign fighters, but sometimes the media confuses the two categories. The foreign fighter problem and the homegrown violent extremist problem, though very closely related, are two distinct problems. Compared to Europe, the United States does not have the same foreign fighter problem. Our numbers are much smaller for a variety of reasons. And those numbers are also relatively small compared to the universe of FBI subjects in the homeland that are supportive of ISIL.

The foreign fighter problem does, however, still pose several distinct challenges. Once that person travels overseas he or she develops skills and techniques, and if that person comes back to the United States they have an enhanced skill set with which to conduct an attack. They could also go over there and be recruited by leadership who recognize the foreign-born passport and the ability to have access to the United States or Western European countries. Third, the foreign fighters over there can be enlisted as recruiters for their former peers in the West.

But when you compare those two buckets, the homegrown violent extremist is absolutely of greater concern for the FBI on a strategic scale.

You will find those types of cases in every state in the country.

CTC: What does success look like in the CT fight? Is there such thing as victory, or is this just a long-running challenge that we're going to have to manage and mitigate?

Steinbach: I think it's a long-running challenge, and I think that you should plan to expect there to be groups and

“We have to be prepared for the long-haul. We can diminish and reduce the threat, but to think the threat will go away completely is probably not very realistic.”

entities that use the terrorist model to attempt to achieve their objectives. For that reason we have to be prepared for the long-haul. We can diminish and reduce the threat, but to think the threat will go away completely is probably not very realistic.

The Smoldering Thai Insurgency

By Zachary Abuza

THAILAND'S SOUTHERN INSURGENCY continues to smolder in the three mostly Muslim provinces along the border with Malaysia. However, mid-way through the 12th year of this struggle, recent incidents suggest growing restlessness on the part of the Muslim Malay rebels after a historically unprecedented lull in the violence since August 2014. On June 3, four soldiers died in two separate attacks, including an ambush. Some two weeks earlier, insurgents set off a wave of nearly 20 bombs that injured 22. A month earlier, in mid-May, a car bomb exploded in an underground parking lot of an upscale mall on the resort island of Samui, in the first out-of-area operation by insurgents since December 2013; luckily only seven were wounded.

The violence may pale in comparison to the major sectarian conflicts dominating the global stage at the moment, but Thailand's insurgency does not appear to be burning out and there is little hope of any resolution in the near term. Neither is it without human tragedy, with the body count now estimated to have hit 6,400. Peace talks have been abandoned since the Royal Thai Army (RTA) threw out the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in the May 22, 2014 coup, despite lip service from junta leader Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha about the future of such efforts.

Fears that the insurgency may be swept up in the wave of extremism sweeping through the Islamic world remain overblown, however. The roots of the violence in Southern Thailand are ethno-political in nature rather than primarily sectarian. Despite the arrests of over 100 Malaysians for supporting the Islamic State, and the estimated 600 Southeast Asians who have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the fight, there is no evidence of any support or recruitment in southern Thailand.

This article examines the roots of the conflict, before explaining the recent flare up of violence. It concludes by arguing that Thailand's insurgency will remain a localized conflict over political

grievances, and not a transnational threat.

Background

The insurgency in southern Thailand has been intractable since violence erupted in 2004. Four elected governments and two military-installed regimes have come no closer to resolving the conflict and it remains the single most lethal conflict in Southeast Asia, with nearly 6,400 dead and 11,000 wounded. Violence peaked in mid-2007, when nearly three people a day were being killed. The insurgents overplayed their hand, however, and the RTA was goaded into action. Today, more than 60,000 security forces are deployed in the south, an area roughly the size of Connecticut. Violence declined in 2008, but stabilized between 2009 and 2014, averaging 86 casualties per month.¹ Violence dipped again following the May 2014 coup, though not by the 60 percent the junta claims.² Without a doubt, the operating environment for insurgents is more difficult thanks to a very robust system of check points, closed circuit television (CCTV), and better armed and equipped troops. Between June 2014 and May 2015, the average number of casualties fell to 51 per month. The average number of people killed has fallen from 31 per month in 2009 to 17 since the coup.

The reduction in violence has been a source of pride and accomplishment for the junta that has been grasping at any accomplishment to legitimize its rule. Insurgents interviewed by the author in October 2014 and February 2015 acknowledged the changing environment. They cited as causes both fierce flooding in December 2014 and January 2015, but also that arrests were taking a toll on the movement. They also reported a palpable fear of the security forces, which even under democratic leadership had operated with near total impunity in the south under the 2005 Emergency Decree. Government

promises to end the insurgency by 2016 also have created a sense that the junta was willing to give the security forces more scope to control the insurgency.³

The junta was so buoyed by the decline in violence that it announced that starting in April it would withdraw five of its ten army battalions from the Deep South, replacing them with paramilitary rangers, Ministry of Interior troops, and village defense volunteers.⁴ That decision may have been premature. Poorly trained rangers and Ministry of Interior troops are ill equipped to take on kinetic operations.

Rebels Return

Casualties, which hit a low of 24 in December 2014, have stormed back. March, April, and May showed consecutive increases in violence with casualties jumping from just 27 in February to 80 in May, well above the average since 2009. January and February saw 12 shootings combined; the three months following averaged 20. IED attacks also moved higher than long-term averages. In May, 33 IEDs exploded while another 17 were defused before they detonated, for a total of 50 bombs; the average since January 2009 is 13.5.

The May attacks may also mark a shift in tactics. Thirty-four of the 50 total IEDs were in Yala City, the southern administrative capital. The remaining 16 bombs were placed along rural roads, which until this round of attacks had represented the insurgents' tactic of choice. This is both because the security forces, who were at greatest risk in such attacks, are widely seen as legitimate targets, and because the urban areas in the south are so heavily defended with checkpoints and monitored with near ubiquitous CCTVs⁵ that launching attacks in cities is much riskier. The additional difficulties posed by staging attacks in built-up areas, as well as the potential for collateral damage among

¹ This and other data comes from an open source database of attacks in Thailand's Deep South that the author has maintained since 2004. The numbers are conservative; not every incident is reported in the press and there is little follow up; many wounded later die.

² "Violent incidents and casualties drop in Deep South," Thai PBS, April 23, 2014.

³ Amy Sawitta Lefavre, "Thailand promises peace 'within a year' in insurgency-hit south," Reuters, November 3, 2014, and personal interviews with insurgents, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, February 2015.

⁴ "South soldier swaps to start next month," *Bangkok Post*, March 16, 2015.

⁵ Author's travels in southern Thailand during 2015.

the Muslim community, indicates that the insurgents may have additional goals beyond discrediting the government.

When insurgents do stage major bombings in cities, it has usually also been intended to communicate messages about the campaign and to win further support. For example, on February 20, 2015, insurgents detonated a car bomb in Narathiwat. The target and timing were very specific: a dozen bars and karaoke parlors in a Buddhist neighborhood.

“When insurgents do stage major bombings in cities, it has usually also been intended to communicate messages about the campaign and to win further support.”

The bomb exploded in the middle of the day when bar traffic was minimal, rather than at night when the casualties would have been far higher. While 17 people were wounded and more than 40 buildings were damaged, the insurgents clearly intended to minimize the loss of life and signal their military capabilities.

A Focused Strategy

The attack on Narathiwat, though, was atypical and for the most part, the militants instead concentrate on retaliatory attacks with a far more focused use of violence than in the past. One insurgent interviewed for this article said, “The higher ups suggested that we preserve our energy; save it for retaliation for Thai violations of ground rules....But when we hit, we hit hard.”⁶ For example, on February 13, 2014, a Buddhist monk and three civilians (including a 12 year old boy) were shot dead and a policeman and five other civilians wounded in a drive-by shooting in Mae Lan district of Pattani province. It was thought to be a revenge

attack for a February 3 extra-judicial killing of a suspected insurgent who had recently been acquitted.⁷ On October 12, insurgents set alight six schools in retaliation for the torture of three of their members who had recently been arrested.⁸ Additionally, on November 1, 2014, gunmen opened fire on a group of Buddhists drinking in Songkhla’s Thepa district, killing three civilians and wounding seven others, including a girl. Insurgents left leaflets saying that it was a “mistake.” The language appeared to consciously echo that used by the RTA after an October 23 incident in which Marines in Narathiwat’s Bacho district shot a car carrying a Muslim family of four, killing a 10-year-old girl.⁹

These types of retaliatory strikes are unlikely to force the current government back to the table, and that has created significant frustration among the rebels. Starting in February 2013, the insurgents had entered into peace talks with the democratically-elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra. The rebels appeared to be negotiating in good faith, though at times they seemed amateurish, for example, by making post-facto demands.¹⁰ Three rounds of talks were held before they broke down. The prevailing narrative is that the talks were postponed because of the political crisis that unfolded in Bangkok during the fall of 2013, and which culminated in the May 2014 coup d’etat. In reality, the talks had stalled long before because of Thai army opposition to any concessions that the government might make and increased targeting of the insurgents by security forces.¹¹

Stalemate

The situation appears to be stalemated. In the year since the coup, the junta has seemed insincere about its desire to

negotiate with several calls for talks to resume failing to result in any advances. For example, the team that approached Malaysia for assistance in bringing the insurgents to the table is headed by Gen. Aksara Kerdphol, a confidante of Gen. Prayut and anathema to at least one of the rebel groups.¹² More seriously, the junta’s draft constitution further centralizes power in the Thai political structure, making any concession on autonomy or even devolution of powers impossible,¹³ let alone the release

“These types of retaliatory strikes are unlikely to force the current government back to the table, and that has created significant frustration among the rebels.”

of insurgent suspects and political prisoners. Few concessions are being considered by the Thai government.

The insurgents meanwhile are trying to show that they can still attack at will. Recent targeting suggests that the insurgents are trying to force the military government back to the table. In March and April, security forces made up 26 and 27 percent of the total casualties respectively, but that jumped to 54 percent in May. At the same time, the rebels are increasing their attacks in the heavily defended cities. The targeting of security forces continued in early June, with four soldiers gunned down in an ambush, and eight wounded by a car bomb as their truck passed by.¹⁴ The insurgents have also stepped up actions that get Bangkok’s attention. For example, on March 14,

¹² “Aksara to be new chief of South talks,” *Bangkok Post*, October 25, 2015.

¹³ Saksith Saiyasombut, “Thailand’s next post-coup constitution: The dictatorship of the ‘good people’?” constitutionnet.org, May 29, 2015.

¹⁴ “Savage Yala attack kills 4 soldiers,” *Bangkok Post*, June 3, 2015.

⁶ Personal interview, Yala City, February 9, 2015.

⁷ “Monk, 3 civilians slain in Pattani,” *Bangkok Post*, February 13, 2014.

⁸ “Six schools torched in Pattani,” *Bangkok Post*, October 12, 2014.

⁹ “Three men killed in apparent revenge shooting,” *Bangkok Post*, November 2, 2014.

¹⁰ “NSC rebuts BRN demands,” *The Nation*, April 29, 2013.

¹¹ “Prayuth calls BRN terms unacceptable,” *Bangkok Post*, August 20, 2013, and “Paradorn downplays truce violence,” *Bangkok Post*, July 26, 2013.

a bomb exploded as a squad of Border Patrol Police escorted Buddhist monks to collect alms in Pattani's Saiburi district, wounding four police and two civilians.¹⁵ While no monks were killed or wounded, it was the first such attack since February 2014, and portends the fear of greater sectarian conflict as Buddhists start to return to the south with the gradual decline in violence.

Militants have also moved to immolate the bodies of their victims, something that causes particular distaste among the Buddhist community and which even the Islamic clergy have deemed "un-Islamic." On May 6, insurgents set fire to a middle-aged Buddhist

“Militants have also moved to immolate the bodies of their victims, something that causes particular distaste among the Buddhist community.”

couple gunned down in Yala's Bannang Sata district.¹⁶ On April 12, insurgents torched the bodies of a couple they had killed in Sukhirin district of Narathiwat.¹⁷ Such desecrations have happened 54 times since January 2009, but rarely since the end of that year. In 2013, there were none, and six in 2014. Another gruesome tactic, beheading, has not been used by the rebels since March 2014.

Thai leaders seem convinced that with the decline of violence following the coup, they could enter into peace talks from a position of strength, perhaps with only nominal concessions. The insurgents have undermined the RTA's claim that they have been defeated however. It is evident that they were taking a tactical

pause, and are now seeking to again show the government that the only path to ending the insurgency is through a negotiated political solution. While Malaysia appears to have brokered the establishment of an umbrella grouping of the various insurgent groups and factions in the historically fractious Majlis Amanah Rakyat Patani (MARA Patani), they [Malaysia] have shown little will to negotiate with Thailand's military government.¹⁸

Ethnicity, Not Religion, is the Key

The revival of violence in Thailand's predominantly Muslim Deep South has spurred fears that radical extremists will make their presence felt there as they have in other conflict zones such as Syria. That fear remains overblown. Other than a handful of training manuals downloaded from the Internet, there have been few proven links to any international movement, including Jemaah Islmaiyah or the Islamic State. The roots of this fight are cultural and sociological, and are very much rooted in religion and language.¹⁹ The majority ethnic Malay Muslims who comprise roughly 85 percent of the 1.2 million inhabitants of Thailand's southern provinces Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla, see little space for them in the Thai nation state. The conflict remains dominated by conservative Sha'afi clerics, who see themselves as the guardians of traditional Malay culture, and a bulwark against Thai colonialism and cultural influence. Thai officials are frustrated that the 100-year project to assimilate the Malays has failed, unlike every other minority group. Many Thai officials refuse to even refer to them as Malay, calling them instead "Thai Muslims."

Despite concerns that the insurgents could reach out to transnational groups, such as the Islamic State, to date they have remained inwardly focused. Thai authorities have expressed concern about the influence of the Islamic State, including after recent

arrests in Malaysia, but the concerns are driven more by ignorance than reality. Although the Salafi presence in southern Thailand is growing, they are at odds with the Malay nationalists, and in many ways share many of the same prejudices toward them as demonstrated by the institutions of the Thai state. But the rise of Salafism is having its own impact, making the traditional Sha'afis more conservative.

A great concern to Thai security forces is that young university students are starting to be drawn to Islamic State propaganda. This seems to be primarily driven by frustration that the Malay insurgents have nothing

“Although the Salafi presence in southern Thailand is growing, they are at odds with the Malay nationalists.”

akin to the Islamic State's slick social media campaign, rather than any true ideological affinity, but as the conflict drags on, many in the community believe that the militants have to increase the level and scope of violence to force the government to peace talks.

Some insurgents seem to share this perspective. The Koh Samui bombing is thought to be the work of Ubaidillah Rommuhli. Rommuhli was responsible for the March 2012 bombing of the Lee Gardens Hotel in the commercial center of Hat Yai that wounded more than 500. The operation was not sanctioned by the insurgent leadership. Indeed, one insurgent told me that most of the leadership had determined that such attacks would only be authorized as a last resort, as they would be too counter-productive. But more hard-line commanders may be insisting that similar types of operations are necessary to take the insurgency to the next level or force the Thai side to talks. Yet it is doubtful that hard-line militants such as Rommuhli will be able to win support because the risks are so much greater, and such tactics

¹⁵ "Pattani Bomb Targets Buddhist Monks, Injures 6," Khaosod English, March 14, 2015.

¹⁶ "Motorists Shot Dead, Burned By Suspected Insurgents in Yala," Khaosod English, May 6, 2015.

¹⁷ "Eight Die in Two-Day Spate of Violence in Thailand's Deep South," Benar News, April 13, 2015.

¹⁸ "Six separatist groups formed organization to hold peace dialogue," Isra News, May 25, 2015.

¹⁹ Lindsay Murdoch, "The War in Southern Thailand is Long-Running and Threatens to Spread," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 6, 2015.

would run counter to what to date has been a very conservative and cautious insurgency. Also, the insurgency has limited resources and areas to operate from, and it is fighting a large and well-funded state security apparatus.

Conclusion

With violence largely contained to the three southernmost provinces, and only one Westerner killed since 2004, the insurgency remains a low priority for both the military government in Bangkok and the international community, despite the violence ongoing in the heart of Southeast Asia. Yet the Thai government has neither the capabilities to defeat the insurgency nor the political will to end it. The insurgents have limited resources and are operating in a very hostile environment. As such, the violence will likely remain subdued. To many in the insurgency, this is an adequate and appropriate level needed to force concessions. Of course, frustrations are building among some insurgents given there is little expectation the government will give any ground despite new murmurs about peace talks and there are signs that some rebels may change tactics, and start targeting tourists on a more regular basis. There are few internal checks on cells pursuing more aggressive tactics and despite the inherent risks in such a strategy, some insurgents may believe they are worth it given that the smoldering low intensity struggle of the past decade has raised awareness of Malay demands, but has not achieved them.

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The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Opens a Door to the Islamic State

By Damon A. Mehl

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AMONG Central Asian jihadi groups demonstrate a likely shift in support away from the Taliban toward the Islamic State. In mid-September 2014, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's (IMU) emir, Usman Ghazi, issued a statement announcing that the IMU was now siding with the Islamic State.

The narrative of shifting support does have its wrinkles, however. Ghazi did not outright declare allegiance, or *bay`a*, as many other jihadi groups in the Maghreb, the Middle East, and Africa have done. Ghazi's statement of support was clearly diplomatic and is a pragmatic reflection of the IMU's political and tactical environment.

More recently however, in early April 2015, a branch of the IMU did declare its unconditional allegiance to the Islamic State. There is little evidence to indicate whether this statement represents a struggle for control of the IMU or just poor communication. Nonetheless, it does underline the shifting alliances among jihadi groups in Central Asia and highlights the need for continued observation given the operational implications for the Islamic State of increased support in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Ghazi's September 12, 2014 statement declared that, "on behalf of members of our Islamic Movement, I herewith announce to the world that we are siding with the Islamic Caliphate [ed: The Islamic State]."¹ Ghazi did not use terms such as *bay`a*² or pledge of allegiance, but the statement was intended to show its support for the Islamic State while not alienating its patrons in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Usman Ghazi's announcement was

pragmatic. The IMU logically justified its support for the Islamic State,³ while not turning away from the Taliban, who have a longstanding relationship with the IMU.

Nonetheless, the statement is a significant marker. No other Central Asian jihadi groups had previously pledged allegiance to the Islamic State,⁴ though there had been some earlier pledges from smaller groups in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. In March 2014, a group of nine al-Qa`ida members from the region disassociated themselves from al-Qa`ida and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.⁵ That was followed in late January 2015 with the official creation of the Islamic State in Khorasan⁶ (ISK).⁷ The ISK included some mid-rank leaders from the Afghan Taliban and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and Logar and Kunar provinces, Afghanistan.⁸ The role that

3 In his September 2014 statement, Usman Ghazi justified the IMU's statement of support for the Islamic State with multiple scriptures from the Koran.

4 Among the Central Asian jihadist groups fighting in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, only the IMU has pledged support for the Islamic State. The predominantly Uzbek Islamic Jihad Union and the Tajik group Jamaat Ansarullah have remained silent on the issue. There are three prominent Central Asian jihadist groups fighting in Syria: the Imam Bukhari Battalion, Jannat Oshiqdari AKA the Tavid and Jihad Battalion, and the Central Asian/Dagestani Sabiri Jamaat. The first two groups fight with Jabhat al-Nusra and the latter is loyal to the Islamic State. The IMU also indicated they had also fought in Syria in a June 2, 2014 statement available at <http://justpaste.it/messagefromIMU>.

5 Don Rassler, "Situating the Emergence of the Islamic State of Khorasan," *CTC Sentinel*, 3:8, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

6 Khorasan is a historical geographical region dating to pre-Islamic Sasanian dynasty during the 3rd Century of the Christian Era that covered northeastern Iran, southern Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan. The Islamic State's apparent definition is somewhat broader, stretching into Pakistan as well.

7 "Die in Your Rage" by Islamic State spokesman Abu Muhammad al-'Adani as-Shami was translated by Pieter Van Ostaeyen and can be found on his website at <https://pietervanostaeyen.files.abu-muhammad-al-adani-as-shamiwordpress.com/2015/01/al-adani-say-die-in-your-rage.pdf>

8 The Long War Journal provided an excellent graphic on ISK's leadership available at <http://www.longwar->

1 IMU statement dated September 12, 2014, "From the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to the Islamic State: Word of Support and Advice," posted to the IMU's primary website www.jundurrahmon.com.

2 *Bay`a* is an Islamic oath of allegiance.

Central Asian jihadist groups like the IMU will play in the ISK is uncertain. It is still unclear if the IMU is an ISK member group and Islamic State leaders in Iraq and Syria have not yet openly responded to Ghazi's support.

The IMU Hedges Its Bets

The IMU's decision to publicly support the Islamic State, while respecting the Taliban and Mullah Omar's title of *ameerul mumineen*,⁹ is pragmatic. The decision opens the door to the IMU's potential inclusion into the Islamic State, and could help reap a windfall of additional recruits, financing, and resources, but it also attempts to minimize any volatility with the Afghan Taliban by holding back from outright allegiance to the Islamic State. The IMU has operated in Afghanistan as guests of the Taliban since 1997.¹⁰ The two groups have had a mutually beneficial working relationship since then, which was formalized by the IMU pledge of *bay`a* to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban. The early relationship between the Taliban and the IMU is documented in letters captured in Afghanistan, which detail the Taliban accepting and protecting IMU members crossing from Central Asia,¹¹ and providing shelter to

the group.¹² In exchange for the IMU's *bay`a*, the Afghan Taliban provided the IMU with an area in which to train, operate, and survive.¹³

The Taliban has more recently benefited from the relationship by having the IMU fill leadership gaps among Uzbek enclaves in northern Afghanistan.

“Ghazi must have carefully calculated the risks inherent in such a statement and likely believed the IMU could withstand any subsequent pressure or criticism from the Taliban.”

This has allowed the Taliban to expand its operating area into non-Pashtun areas.¹⁴ Despite the support expressed for the Islamic State, Ghazi did not turn his back on the Taliban, and later in the same statement he expressed his

hope that the Taliban and TTP would eventually support the Islamic State.¹⁵

It also seems clear that Ghazi must have carefully calculated the risks inherent in such a statement and likely believed the IMU could withstand any subsequent pressure or criticism from the Taliban. The IMU has not been reliant on the Afghan Taliban's provision of sanctuary or support recently, at least in the areas strongly controlled or influenced by the Taliban's Quetta Shura.^{16 17} The IMU found shelter in South Waziristan with support from the TTP's Mehsud faction from at least 2009¹⁸ until June 2014.¹⁹ IMU leaders likely assessed they would be able to maintain their operating areas in northern Afghanistan²⁰ following

15 Ibid. IMU statement dated September 12, 2014, "From the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to the Islamic State: Word of Support and Advice," posted to the IMU's primary website www.jundurrahmon.com: "We hope that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and the Pakistan Taliban Movement will establish a brotherly relationship with the Islamic State in the near future and cooperate in the sacred jihad against the kufr forces of the world, *insb'Allah*."

16 Press reports and some IMU statements since June 2014 suggest the group fled South Waziristan, due to Pakistan military operations. The IMU may have taken refuge in remote areas of Zabul and Faryab provinces of Afghanistan. This will be discussed further in this article.

17 "Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000015-HT." Although Zabul may fall within the traditional area of control and influence for the Quetta Shura, the province has long been a refuge for foreign fighters including from the IMU and al-Qa`ida. The IMU fled to Zabul following their 2007 ouster from South Waziristan by militants loyal to Wana-based Commander Nazir, according to a report by Pakistani's *Dawn* on 5 April 2007. Al-Qa`ida has also used Zabul as a refuge according to a declassified letter seized during the May 2011 Osama Bin Laden raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

18 The first identifiable joint statement or media release by the IMU and TTP was a November 2009 video produced by the IMU's Jundallah Media Production Studio titled "Al-Ansar and Al-Mujahirun." The video was distributed by the IMU through their www.furqon.com website.

19 In June 2014, Pakistan's military commenced Operation Zarb-e-Azb in Waziristan, which was the IMU's primary sanctuary. Multiple press reports and a few statements from IMU elements indicate the IMU has recently operated in Zabul, Faryab, and Kunduz provinces, Afghanistan.

20 In Afghanistan, the IMU has found refuge in the northern Afghanistan provinces of Faryab, Badghis,

journal.org/archives/2015/01/islamic_state_appoin.php.

9 *Ameerul Mumineen* is an Islamic title meaning "Commander of the Faithful" or "Leader of the Faithful." This title has historically been reserved for the Caliph, the leader of the Islamic Caliphate. Usman Ghazi's association of the title with Mullah Omar in a statement of support for the Islamic State is problematic. The position of "Commander of the Faithful" would technically be given to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the leader of the Islamic State and self-declared leader of the "Caliphate."

10 The IMU's relationship with the Afghan Taliban is longstanding and documented multiple times in IMU documents captured in Afghanistan by ISAF and in IMU media and statements. In this instance, Usman Ghazi specified the IMU pledged *bay`ah* to Mullah Omar in 1997 in his September 2014 statement of support for the Islamic State.

11 "Harmony Document AFGP-2002-60112523," Combating Terrorism Center, West Point. This document is a compilation of four personal accounts of IMU members' migration to Afghanistan from Central Asia. One specific account details a group of IMU members who crossed via the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border under fire from Turkmenistan border guards. The Taliban provided the IMU members protection and refused the border guard's demands to return the IMU members to their custody.

12 "Harmony Document AFGP-2002-000489," Combating Terrorism Center, West Point. This document is an internal IMU letter signed by Tohir Yuldashev detailing the establishment of the IMU's Bukhari Camp in Afghanistan due to the growth of the IMU in Afghanistan because of the influx of members arriving from Central Asia. Yuldashev indicated the IMU needed an independent camp because the Taliban provided shelter to the group when their numbers were small. As the IMU grew, the group rented houses from Taliban, and now required their own camp.

13 Footnotes 11 and 12 provide historical context to the Taliban and IMU relationship. More recent examples of the Taliban's use of IMU commanders to fill Taliban leadership positions in Uzbek enclaves of northern Afghanistan are seen in ISAF press releases from 2008-2012 detailing ISAF operations targeting Taliban and IMU commanders.

14 Evidence of IMU leaders acting in leadership positions on behalf of the Taliban is noted in multiple ISAF press releases from 2008-2012. See also Abubakar Siddique, "In Afghanistan, IMU-Taliban Alliance Chips Away At The Stone," June 9, 2011, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

their statement of support to the Islamic State and despite any potential backlash from the Afghan Taliban.

The IMU's Views on the Caliphate

The IMU's statement of support for the Islamic State is less surprising when viewed in historical context. In 1999, the IMU founder and former leader Tohir Yuldashev described his thinking regarding the establishment of an Islamic state to the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran.²¹ Yuldashev stated the IMU's highest goal was to "see the Holy Koran as the Constitution of Uzbekistan," adding that Uzbekistan was "absolutely ready" to establish an Islamic state. Yuldashev also discussed his perception that NATO²² had focused efforts against Islam following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a narrative that is similar to the language used by Usman Ghazi in the IMU's pledge of support to the Islamic State.²³

In August 2010, Yuldashev's replacement and the new emir of the IMU, Usmon Odil, maintained the group's long-term goal of establishing an Islamic state.²⁴ Odil said the IMU would continue to build a single caliphate, broadening the IMU's mission. In the IMU's most recent statement to the Islamic State, Odil's replacement Usman Ghazi cited the IMU's happiness with the reestablishment of the caliphate in

Kunduz, Baghlan, and Takhar, according to ISAF press releases from 2008-2012 and IMU attack claims from 2007-2014. The author collected multiple IMU statements and claims of attack from 1999-2015 from IMU statements available on their websites, social media, and other jihadist forums.

21 "Uzbek Opposition Head on Establishing Islamic State," Mashhad Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Persian, May 18, 1999.

22 It is interesting that Yuldashev declared NATO as a threat to Islam prior to NATO's establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 attacks. This view likely strengthened the IMU's resolve to fight in Afghanistan.

23 Ibid, "Uzbek Opposition Head on Establishing Islamic State."

24 In mid-August 2010, the IMU's website carried Usmon Odil's statement in Uzbek on the group's website furqon.com. In this statement, Usman Odil breaks the IMU's one-year long silence to officially announce the August 2009 death of Tohir Yuldashev and his new position as the group's emir.

his September statement of support to the Islamic State.

"Our *shaheed ameer*, Muhammad Tohir Foruq,²⁵ gave us good news in many of his *khutbas*²⁶ that the wind of the caliphate was blowing and that we should not miss the caravan. Upon realization of that dream all members of our *jamaab*²⁷ unanimously became joyous."

The IMU's public support for the Islamic State's caliphate is clear, but how and in what manner the IMU could or would support the Islamic State

"The IMU can also provide the Islamic State or their regional affiliate with increased operating areas in northern Afghanistan, or an added offensive capability against strategic targets."

and its regional affiliate ISK remains difficult to identify.²⁸ The IMU has only issued a few statements and provided no further insight into the group's actions to justify or even solidify their statement of support for the Islamic State. The IMU's media profile has

25 Bill Roggio, "Tahir Yuldashev Confirmed Killed In US Strike In South Waziristan," October 4, 2009, The Long War Journal. Shaheed translates into English as martyr. Muhammad Tohir Foruq is the IMU's founder Tohir Yuldashev.

26 A *khutba* is an Islamic preaching or sermon.

27 *Jamaab* or *jamaat* translates into English as group.

28 The IMU's website and social media accounts were the primary outlet to distribute their statements and have nearly fallen silent since June 2014, likely a consequence of Pakistan's military operations in Waziristan and the IMU's departure from the area. The IMU's primary website, jundurrahman.com, went offline sometime in early 2015, and their primary Twitter feed @KhorasanArmy tweeted details of their June 2014 attack on the Karachi airport and has been silent since with the exception of a December 10, 2014 tweet which stated, "We are back *insha Allah!*"

declined²⁹ since Pakistan's military implemented Operation Zarb-e-Azb in North and South Waziristan agencies, which was the IMU's primary sanctuary until June 2014.

What the IMU Can Offer the Islamic State

While the IMU might hope to secure increased recruiting from its pledge of support to the Islamic State, the benefits flow both ways. The IMU can also provide the Islamic State or their regional affiliate ISK with increased operating areas in northern Afghanistan, or provide an added offensive capability against strategic targets in South or Central Asia. The IMU has been responsible for and significantly contributed to several successful high-profile attacks in Pakistan's settled areas in support of the TTP. These attacks have targeted hardened strategic locations in sensitive areas. One hallmark of these attacks has been the high casualty rate, with a majority of attackers dying during the operation. The IMU targeted the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi in June 2014,³⁰ the Bacha Khan International Airport in Peshawar in December 2012,³¹ and Pakistan's naval base at Shahrah-e-Faisal in Karachi in May 2011.³²

The June 9, 2014 attack on Karachi's Jinnah International Airport is an example of the IMU's operational capability to strike strategic targets for media gain. The Islamic State should be able to leverage the same capabilities.

29 Ibid., IMU website

30 IMU statement signed by Usman Ghazi titled "Statement Regarding the Martyrdom Operation in Karachi" posted to the Jamia Hafsa Urdu Forum (jhuf.net) in English on June 10, 2014. The attack killed 37 people and ten jihadis.

31 The IMU is believed to have supported the TTP's December 15, 2012 attack on the Bacha Khan International Airport in Peshawar, Pakistan. See, "TTP Using Uzbeks to Conduct Terrorist Attacks" *The News*, December 18, 2012. Ten militants allegedly first fired rockets at the airport followed by deployment of a Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Device.

32 "Who are the Uzbeks Launching Terror Strikes in Pakistan," *The News Online in English (Islamabad)*, May 22, 2011. According to the report, four Uzbeki members of the IMU attacked the PNS Mehran at Shahrah-e-Faisal resulting in the destruction of two P3C Orion surveillance aircraft and damage to a third.

The attack, which was supported by the TTP³³ and carried out by ten IMU attackers, was initiated at 11:15pm with the attackers equipped with small arms and grenades divided into two groups.³⁴ The 15-hour assault resulted in 37 killed, including the attackers, and damage to several important aerial assets.³⁵ At the time, Usman Ghazi indicated the attack was revenge for the death of women and children in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, after bombardment by Pakistan's military on May 21, 2014.³⁶ If that was in fact the trigger, it displays significant operational capability given there was only 19 days separating the two incidents.

The IMU could also provide the Islamic State with a platform to launch attacks in Central Asia³⁷ and potentially establish another regional affiliate, which could be called the Islamic State of Mawarannahr,³⁸ though these are less likely options. The two biggest challenges are the IMU's patchy presence in Central Asia and the lack of a radicalized population from which

to draw support.³⁹ Nonetheless, the IMU could use the Islamic State's prophesized return of the caliphate as a justification to ramp up their capabilities in northern Afghanistan, where the IMU has a proven operational ability, and the potential to conduct targeted strikes in Central Asia.⁴⁰

“Recent developments, however, indicate that there may be an ongoing power struggle within the IMU.”

Evidence of an IMU Fracture?

Recent developments, however, indicate that there may be an ongoing power struggle within the IMU, though there are alternate explanations. In January 2015, the author interviewed a France-based jihadist sympathizer who closely tracks Central Asian jihadist groups.⁴¹ The individual indicated that the IMU had fractured following the April 29, 2012 death of then IMU emir Usman Odil.⁴² The split was rooted in disagreement over Usman Ghazi's emphasis on operations in Pakistan instead of Central Asia or Afghanistan. The sympathizer stated the IMU had split into two elements: Usman Ghazi's faction, which supported the TTP and which had issued the September 2014 statement offering support to the Islamic State; and an Afghanistan-focused group headquartered in Faryab, Afghanistan.

The evidence of a split is thin, given the limited statements from the IMU since

June 2014. However, someone or some group claiming to be an IMU affiliate openly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a video that circulated on Dari language Facebook accounts in early February 2015.⁴³ The video was likely produced and uploaded by the Faryab-based faction that the jihadist sympathizer indicated had split with Usman Ghazi.

In the video, a Faryab-based IMU member, Sadullah Urgenchi,⁴⁴ named the Islamic State's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as their new leader instead of the Taliban's Mullah Omar.⁴⁵ Urgenchi stated that according to Sharia, IMU militants believed Mullah Omar could no longer be their leader because he had not been seen publicly for 13 years.⁴⁶ Urgenchi's proclamation of allegiance to the Islamic State in the video is overshadowed by the brutal beheading of an Afghan National Army soldier who was kidnapped with approximately 30 other Hazara men in Zabul province, Afghanistan in late February 2015.⁴⁷ In the video, Urgenchi claims that the kidnapping was in retaliation for the Afghan government's arrest of female IMU supporters and threatened additional beheadings if the females were not released. The video is emblazoned with the seal for the IMU's media wing, Jundallah, which is found on all official IMU videos.

Urgenchi is likely a member of the IMU, though his name, or a version of it (Asadullah Urganchiy), appears only once in more than 20 years of media

33 The TTP first claimed credit for the attack, a claim that was quickly overshadowed by the IMU's own statement. Following the attack, Pakistan implicated and issued arrest warrants for TTP Emir Maulawi Fazlullah and other TTP leaders. See “#KarachiAirportAttack: Arrest warrant of TTP chief Fazlullah, others issued,” December 21, 2014, gtms Pakistan.

34 “Karachi airport attack: How it happened,” June 10, 2014, Dawn.com

35 Mid-June 2014, according to photos the IMU circulated and retweeted from other Twitter users on their @Khorasanarmy account. Pakistani media was largely quiet over the damage caused by the attack.

36 Abu Ibrahim, “Pakistan Wars Just Began.” This IMU publication details Pakistan military operations in Mir Ali and the IMU's claim that their homes and families had been targeted. The statement included links to pictures on their websites.

37 Despite its name, the IMU does not maintain a foothold in Central Asia. Instead the group primarily operates in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, supporting the TTP in their jihad against the Government of Pakistan and in northern Afghanistan.

38 Also known as Transoxiana, or in Arabic as Bilad ma-Wara' al-Nahar (land beyond the [Oxus] river). This is the ancient name used for the portion of Central Asia corresponding approximately with modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, southern Kyrgyzstan, and southwest Kazakhstan. The predominantly Uzbek Imam Bukhari Battalion in Syria also calls themselves Mawarannahr Mujohidlari.

39 Reid Standish “Shadow Boxing with the Islamic State in Central Asia,” *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2015.

40 The IMU has not maintained a continuous presence in Central Asia over the past decade, despite multiple claims of arrests by Central Asian countries. The IMU has primarily documented their presence in their statements and media in Pakistan's tribal areas and in Afghanistan.

41 Author interview, January 2015.

42 Bill Roggio, “IMU announces death of emir, names new leader,” *Long War Journal*, August 4, 2012.

43 IMU Leader Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State in Beheading Video of Afghan Soldier. The video can be viewed via the author's YouTube account at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMteerbfySU> [Caution: The video contains graphic footage of a beheading]

44 Urgenchi is a city in Uzbekistan, which is the capital of Khorezm province, located on the banks of the River Amu, and situated approximately 450 kilometers northwest of Bukhara and near the Turkmenistan border.

45 Speaking in native-level Dari fluency.

46 Ibid, “IMU Leader Pledges Allegiance to Islamic State in Beheading Video of Afghan Soldier.”

47 Mirwais Adeel, “Uzbek Militants in Afghanistan Pledge Allegiance to ISIS in Beheading Video,” March 31, 2015, Khaama Press. The English-language Hazara.net website also carried a report about the kidnapping on February 25, 2015.

releases and statements from the IMU.⁴⁸ Urganchiy is listed as the author of a book published in 2013 called “What’s Happening in the Tribal Areas” via the Pakistan-based jihadist media outlet Jamia Hafsa Urdu Forum.⁴⁹

The absence of a notable or identifiable IMU leader in the video is interesting. The claim of allegiance is a bold statement and in more normal circumstances would likely have been reserved for Usman Ghazi. There is one reference to a similar message coming from Usman Ghazi as IMU leader. An Uzbekistani law enforcement official reported in October 2014 that Usman Ghazi indeed pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, amplifying his September statement of support.^{50 51}

The video supports evidence from the jihadist sympathizer regarding a split within the IMU, but there are alternate explanations. Usman Ghazi’s silence on the IMU’s support or allegiance to the Islamic State since his September statement may simply be due to Pakistani military operations and subsequent relocation of the IMU’s network to more hospitable areas of Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it is clear though that both Usman Ghazi and the Faryab-based Sadullah Urganchi have expressed support for the Islamic State.

Conclusion

The IMU’s support for the Islamic State is an important development, notwithstanding the possibility of a split within the group. It has a proven track record of conducting high-profile attacks against strategic targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the

possibility exists that it could expand its operations into Central Asia. The IMU could also provide the Islamic State with a significant force multiplier in the region, similar to the way the IMU has been able to support the TTP’s attacks in Pakistan. The recent reestablishment of IMU sanctuaries in northern Afghanistan, particularly in the Uzbek enclaves of Faryab⁵² and Kunduz,⁵³ could also lead to the establishment of a sanctuary that would rival or replace Pakistan’s tribal areas. If the IMU is able to do so, it could use the area to launch operations into Central Asia that would further their own strategic interests or those of the Islamic State.

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The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Evolving Approaches in Algerian Security Cooperation

By Kal Ben Khalid

FOR THE BETTER part of a quarter century, Algeria had generally focused its security policy inward in an attempt to secure domestic stability. While the National Liberation Front (FLN)-led government took a relatively high international profile in the 1960s and 1970s, the state became more inwardly focused as the economic problems of the 1980s took hold. This domestic focus intensified during Algeria’s bitter civil war during the 1990s. As Algerian leaders sought to consolidate their rule after crushing the decade-long Islamist insurgency, counterterrorism became a key piece of Algeria’s efforts at reengaging with the outside world. This was especially the case after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, as Algeria presented itself as an authority on fighting Islamist terrorism.

Algeria’s leaders moved to assert themselves as responsible global partners and took an active role in regional security cooperation, hosting and coordinating a number of regional counterterrorism cooperation frameworks at the diplomatic and military levels. Many of these arrangements failed, however, when tested by the upheavals of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the 2012 jihadist takeover of northern Mali, in part because of ongoing distrust between regional governments and a lack of capacity.

Following the In Amenas attack in January 2013 (which resulted in the deaths of more than 35 hostages and 29 jihadists), Algeria’s strategic discourse and posture shifted more dramatically. The gas plant crisis was a strategic surprise that shocked and embarrassed the leaders of Algeria’s security institutions. The response was marked by a new willingness to engage with external partners, but this article will argue that the underlying motivation has remained the current crop of leaders’ understanding of how to secure the country’s long-standing national

48 The author has compiled a comprehensive database of media statements produced by the IMU and Central Asian jihadists dating back to the mid-1990s.

49 Asadullah Urganchiy, “What’s Happening in the Tribal Areas” IMU. 2012. This book is translated into English by Jamia Hafsa’s translation department and details the life of the IMU and its members in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

50 Thomas Ruttig, “ANSF Wrong-Footed: The Taliban offensive in Kunduz,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, May 3, 2015.

51 Jane’s Country Risk Daily Reports, “IMU hopes alignment with Islamic State will improve its finances, increasing risks to government targets in Uzbekistan,” October 7, 2014.

52 An increase in Uzbek, Tajik, Pakistani, and Caucasian fighters has been reported in multiple press reports. See, Fazul Rahim, and Alexander Smith, “ISIS-Linked Fighters Tighten Grip in Afghanistan, Outmatch Taliban Brutality” NBC News, May 1, 2015.

53 Ibid, Thomas Ruttig, “ANSF Wrong-Footed: The Taliban offensive in Kunduz.”

interest regarding external threats, maintain Algeria's regional dominance, and secure domestic stability.

The Roots of Change

Changes in Algeria's security posture were prompted by a number of important strategic surprises since 2011. Cross-border attacks by jihadist groups operating in Mali during 2012, such as the Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) splinter faction Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), were among the most notable incidents highlighting the vulnerability of Algeria borders. Attacks included suicide bombings targeting barracks

“The 2013 In Amenas gas plant hostage crisis was a turning point and quickly led to shifts in emphasis in Algerian security policy.”

and security installations in southern Algeria, at Tamanrasset, but also as far north as Ouargla.¹

Algerian-led multilateral security frameworks such as the Tamanrasset-based Comité d'Etat-major Opérationnel Conjoint (CEMOC) were meant to coordinate counterterrorism operations between Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, and Niger as concerns about jihadist activities in the region escalated in the late 2000s. But they proved ineffective and were sidelined during the French intervention in northern Mali. Algeria's approach also suffered setbacks from political instability in Libya, which left Algerian and Tunisian institutions without viable security counterparts in Tripoli as they tried to coordinate border security efforts among the three countries. The 2013 In Amenas gas plant hostage crisis was a turning point and quickly led to shifts in emphasis in Algerian security policy. Algerian leaders focused on buttressing the

country's internal security regimen and cultivating bilateral security arrangements with countries such as Tunisia to stem the growth of cross border activity by extremist groups.

Reorganizations and Rethinking

At a policy level, the Algerian intelligence services were reorganized in late 2013 and early 2014.² Various organs of the powerful Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), the Algerian military intelligence service, were moved to other sections of the military, and their leaders were dismissed, retired, or appointed as advisors to the Presidency. Certain sub-organizations were abolished or divided.³ Like many Arab intelligence services, Algeria's intelligence community is highly compartmentalized and politicized, and public narratives around these reorganizations attributed them to efforts to improve intelligence coordination and assert the control of the Chief of Staff and Presidency over the DRS, which is widely seen as a fiefdom.⁴ Widespread speculation also described these moves as part of a long power struggle between allies of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and those of General Mohamed “Tewfik” Mediene, the DRS chief since its creation in 1990.⁵

According to some reports, the result has been that the military's Chiefs of Staff have gained greater influence over the direction and focus of counterterrorism and counter-trafficking policy.⁶

Policy Journals Track Shift

The Algerian defense policy apparatus has several intellectual and ideological

outlets. These include official journals such as the Chiefs of Staff's *EI Djeich*.⁷ They also include government-backed think tanks and research institutes, such as the Institut Militaire de Documentation, d'Evaluation et de Prospective (IMDEP) and Institut National d'Études de Stratégie Globale (INESG). These organizations have hosted conferences and symposia that explore the evolving Algerian perspectives on crisis diplomacy, military cooperation and assistance, humanitarian operations, strategic communications, command and control doctrine, counterterrorism, border security, electronic warfare, and surveillance technology.⁸

“According to some reports, the result has been that the military's Chiefs of Staff have gained greater influence.”

Starting in 2014 at the direction of the Chiefs of Staff, IMDEP began publishing a biannual strategic studies journal called *Strategia*, which is published in Arabic, French, and English. From the start, the subjects highlighted a more outward focus for Algerian security policy. Articles in the inaugural issue of spring 2014 included topics such as the adaptation of the national state in the face of globalization and recent international crises, the role of social

⁷ *EI Djeich* is the official journal of the Algerian military's Chief of Staff, and has been a mouthpiece for military policy since the 1970s. It has alternated between having been publicly available and having more limited circulation since the 1980s.

⁸ See for example: B. Djaouida, “Prospective sur l'évolution des événements dans le monde arabe,” *EI Djeich*, January 2014, p. 50; H.G. Sihem, “La stratégie des acteurs européens et des USA en Méditerranée et dans la région du Sahel : concurrence ou complémentarité?” *EI Djeich*, June 2013, p. 51; H.G. Sihem, “INESG. Crise, choix du modèle économique et integration régionale en Méditerranée : quels enjeux?” *EI Djeich*, May 2011, p. 60; F. C. Amel, “Colloque national organisé par l'IMDEP: Le Maghreb et les mutations régionales: Quelle synergie face aux nouveaux défis?” *EI Djeich*, February 2015, p. 50.

¹ AFP, “Mali-based Islamist group claims Algerian attack,” *Alarabiya*, June 30, 2012, and “Al-Qaeda offshoot claims Algeria attack,” *AlJazeera*, March 3, 2012.

² Steve Massa, “Is a Possible Power Struggle Looming in Algeria?” November 26, 2013, *The Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, and Lamine Chikhi, “Algeria's Bouteflika consolidates curbs on state intelligence agency,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2014.

³ Riyadi Hamadi, “Vers une profonde restructuration du DRS,” *Tout Sur Algerie*, September 29 2013.

⁴ Lamine Chikhi, “Analysis: Algeria's Bouteflika flexes muscles before 2014 vote,” *Reuters*, October 1, 2013.

⁵ Isabelle Mandraud, “Power struggle takes centre stage ahead of Algerian presidential election,” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014.

⁶ Florence Gaub, “Algeria's Army on Jihadist Alert,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Brief 6, March 2015.

media in public safety, and evaluation of the Algerian approach to security in the Sahel.⁹ Important areas of investigation in Algerian strategic studies and military journals in recent years have included innovations in Command and Control, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (C2ISR), especially as related to the country's southern frontiers, drone technology and remote sensing, and formulating Algerian responses to the emergence of humanitarian interventionism.¹⁰

The shift was also seen in the subject material at National Gendarmerie (NG) conferences. The NG is responsible for border policing, customs, and rural law and order, and material at symposia highlighted new strategies for the coordination of customs operations with bordering countries, especially Tunisia.¹¹ This speaks to two trends: a reevaluation of elements of Algeria's defense policy at a high level and an effort to promote and socialize these analyses and policies among key audiences internally and internationally.

The Algerians see a region fraught with risk and crisis. Algeria's leaders regard Morocco as passively hostile, and Mauritania and Niger as reliable if fragile. Tunisia is regarded as a serious concern, however. That country's security apparatus has suffered a number of setbacks in the last four years and has struggled to adapt to the challenges posed by an underground jihadist militancy. Algeria fears that a jihadist safe haven could develop along its mountainous frontier with the Tunisian provinces of Kasserine, El Kef, and Jendouba. Mali and Libya

9 "Nouvelle revue spécialisée dans les études de défense et de prospective," *El Djeich*, April 2014, p. 52.

10 Samia Djenaoui Goubi, "Les Technologies de l'Information et de la Communication: La clé du succès opérationnelle," *El Djeich*, October 2013, p. 44-47; "ESG. Conférence sur le système C4ISR," *El Djeich*, June 2011, p. 60; "ESG. 'Assurer la sécurité de l'Etat sur le plan militaire en temps de crise,' thème du Wargame," *El Djeich*, June 2011, p. 60; "Séminaire sur le développement des TIC à l'EST: Plus de sécurité et de haut débit," *El Djeich*, June 2013, p. 46.

11 B. Djaouida, "Conférences à l'Ecole supérieure de Guerre: Contribution des Douanes à la sécurité nationale," *El Djeich*, January 2014, p. 49.

meanwhile lack credible border security, institutions or capabilities, and are in the throes of ethno-sectarian, institutional, and ideological conflicts.

Climbing the Learning Curve

The perception of risk and Algeria's own history of internal fragmentation have made the country's leaders reluctant to engage in deep or expeditionary military operations.¹² There are echoes too of the state's approach to the bitter civil war of the 1990s. As in its internal war, Algeria has struggled to cope with crises since 2012. According to critics,

“Algerian security assistance appears intended to both boost efforts to engage with its neighbors and attract the sponsorship of Western and other countries anxious over instability.”

it projected power timidly. Algeria learned lessons from its decade-long struggle with an Islamist insurgency in the 1990s. This led to changes in how it dealt with internal dissent, protests, special operations, communications, and other matters. Its policy shifts in recent years indicate that military security doctrine continues to evolve in a changing threat environment. In 2013, Algeria started to close its borders or place them under military control and ramped up efforts against smuggling and other illicit activities, in an effort to address mounting instability resulting from the disruption of Tunisian border security and intelligence operations.¹³

12 Alexis Arief, "Algeria and the Crisis in Mali," Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), July 2012 and Laurence Aida Ammour, "Regional Security Cooperation in the Maghreb and Sahel: Algeria's Pivotal Ambivalence," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Brief 8, February 2012.

13 George Bajalla, et al, "Algeria at a Crossroads: Borders and Security in North Africa," Muftah, September

This also involved a new focus on direct military-to-military collaboration with officials in Tunis. The internal organization of certain military regions also has been revised to concentrate on counterterrorism or smuggling.¹⁴

Tunisia: A Case Study

A focal point of this evolution has been Algeria's increasing security cooperation with Tunisia on counterterrorism, border security, and customs since 2013. For Algiers, Tunisia represents a buffer from instability in Libya. Tunisia's proximity to Algeria's demographic center of gravity—the northern coast and mountains—and its proximity to Libya make the emergence of AQIM-linked militants there more serious. The mountains and plains linking northwest Libya to Tunisia and eastern Algeria present a complex geography that poses problems for military activity. The threat from Libya, symbolized by the spectacular and humiliating attack at In Amenas, make the eastern frontier a new frontline for Algerian efforts to resist regional instability. In 2013, the Algerians deployed 12,000 troops to its border with Tunisia.¹⁵ They also sent similar numbers of soldiers and paramilitary forces to the Libyan, Nigerien, and Malian borders with the objective of interdicting and deterring cross-border attacks by jihadist militants.¹⁶

Algiers Helps Itself by Helping the Region

Algerian security assistance appears intended to both boost efforts to engage with its neighbors and attract the sponsorship of Western and other

24, 2014 and Lamine Chikhi, "Wary of disorder in Libya and Mali, Algerian army targets southern smuggling," Reuters, May 11, 2015.

14 There is also talk of adding an additional military region, increasing the number from six to seven. According to press reports, the government would split in two the 4th Military Region, which covers much of the Algeria's borders with Libya and Niger and which is headquartered at Ouargla. Gaidi Mohamed Faouzi, "Feu vert pour une 7e Région militaire à Illizi," *El Watan*, December 7, 2014.

15 "L'Algérie déploie 4.000 soldats à ses frontières avec la Libye et le Niger pour traquer des trafiquants d'armes," Xinhua, September 3, 2014.

16 "L'Algérie déploie 4.000 soldats à ses frontières avec la Libye et le Niger pour traquer des trafiquants d'armes," Xinhua, December 22, 2014.

countries anxious over instability in Libya and elsewhere. The Tunisians have also received support from Western militaries, with the United States for example tripling its security assistance to Tunisia in 2015 and planning to give the country major non-Nato ally status.^{17 18} Yet true to form, Algeria continues to closely guard its role in the region and remains wary of too much Western involvement. Algeria's leaders likely also see close collaboration with Tunisia as a way to avoid potential Western intervention in either Tunisia or Libya, after widespread criticism of the light touch they used in the Mali

“Yet true to form, Algeria continues to closely guard its role in the region and remains wary of too much Western involvement.”

crisis, which ended with French military intervention. The Algerian military continues to stress in its messaging that the Algerian state remains committed to “the peaceful resolution of conflicts” without foreign, especially Western, intervention.¹⁹

A Security Vacuum Encourages Cooperation

This regional security cooperation extends to other issues such as organized crime and smuggling. The Algerians

and Tunisians both regard low-level smuggling as something that must be tolerated to some degree in order to short circuit popular discontent, but which can aid their enemies. As a result, the military attempts to limit the growth and operations of organized criminal groups, but will not root it out entirely. After the 2011 revolution, Tunisia's demoralized internal security services melted away from the frontier and its intelligence networks along the border collapsed, contributing to an explosion in illicit trade. The boom allowed new *trabendistes* (smugglers) to emerge, in both Tunisia and Algeria.²⁰

Unsurprisingly, some of AQIM's surrogates took advantage of the security vacuum and boom in smuggling to move into western Tunisia from eastern Algeria. Applying a strategy honed in Algeria, AQIM surrogates have so far targeted only military and security targets, especially those that originate outside of their main area of operations. Groups such as the *Uqba Ibn Nafa'a Brigade*, which reportedly has links to both AQIM and *Ansar al-Sharia* in Tunisia, are controlled by AQIM's commanders in Algeria and draw Tunisian recruits and support.²¹ This process heightened Algerian concerns over the development of a new safe haven in western Tunisia that could enable militant operations inside Algeria.

At the same time, the return of Tunisian jihadists from Syria and Libya has boosted the country's threat profile. In the summer of 2014, the Tunisian Army suffered its largest number of casualties ever, when AQIM militants ambushed and killed 15 soldiers and wounded 20 more in a raid on checkpoints near *Jebel Chaambi*.²² Militants continue to target Tunisian National Guards, police, and soldiers in *Kasserine*, *El Kef*, *Jendouba*,

and other Tunisian provinces bordering Algeria.²³

The Changing Threat Environment

A common regional perception of threat emerged during 2013 and 2014. Crises in Mali, Syria, and Libya have also changed Tunisian perspectives (even among moderate Islamists), particularly as youth from Tunisia flocked to participate in jihadist movements in Syria, Mali, and Libya with some returning with deadlier skills and deeper ties to regional terror groups. Political assassinations, suicide bombings, and killings of soldiers

“AQIM's surrogates took advantage of the security vacuum...to move into western Tunisia from eastern Algeria.”

and police in western and northern Tunisia by AQIM-linked militants have increased support for wider counterterrorism cooperation and a more assertive security service.²⁴

The Tunisian government's crackdown on supposedly non-violent jihadist groups like *Ansar al-Sharia* in Tunisia since 2013 has driven the country's youth-driven militant subculture further underground or into Libya and spurred an increasingly violent low-level insurgency in the area along the country's western border.²⁵ Hard-line jihadists have divided themselves among camps loyal to AQIM and those that back the Islamic State.²⁶ Some

17 “U.S. pledges \$60 million to aid Tunisian Army's war on terror,” *World Tribune*, September 2 2014. and Suzanne Malveaux, “President Obama pledges aid to Tunisia,” *CNN*, May 22, 2015.

18 Danica Simans, “NPS Helps Northern Africa Improve Border Security through Series of Workshops,” *Naval Post Graduate School*, March 13, 2014.

19 H. G. Sihem, “L'Algerie et le règlement pacifique des conflits: Constante immuable,” *El Djetch*, April 2015, pp. 23-25. This article presents the principles of Algerian foreign policy and includes text of part of a speech by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika commemorating Algeria's Victory Day in its war for independence from France, which highlights comments reiterating “the support and solidarity of Algeria with the brotherly and neighborly people of Tunisia,” apparently a reference to Algerian mediation in Tunisia's political crisis last year and ongoing security cooperation.

20 “Tunisia's Borders: Jihadism and Contraband,” *International Crisis Group*, N°148, November 28, 2013.

21 Aaron Zelin, Andrew Lebovich, and Daveed Gartens-tein-Ross, “Al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy,” *CTC Sentinel*, 6:6, 2013.

22 “Tunisian soldiers killed in attack near Algerian border,” *BBC.com* July 17, 2014.

23 Bouazza Ben Bouazza, “Militants kill 4 Tunisian national guard troops,” *Associated Press*, February 18, 2015.

24 Stephano Torelli, “Tunisia's Elusive Jihadist Network,” *Terrorism Monitor*, 11:12, June 2013.

25 “Tunisia's Borders (II): Terrorism and Regional Polarisation,” *International Crisis Group*, N°41, October 21, 2014.

26 Aaron Zelin, “Between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Tunisia,” *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ISCRAR)*, *Insight*, May 11, 2015.

AQIM units operating in Algeria and Tunisia have reportedly shifted their allegiance to the Islamic State following that group's initial claims for incidents such as the kidnapping of a French mountaineer east of Algiers in 2014 and its expansion in Libya.²⁷ However, the extent to which such units have benefited in terms of capacity and recruitment remains unclear.

“Algerian cooperation with Tunisia has focused on targeting AQIM-linked militants in Jebel Chaambi and cracking down on smuggling networks.”

Regional Efforts

Political crises and the deteriorating security environment in Tunisia prompted Algeria's leaders to intervene and boost security cooperation as much as they could. They helped mediate between the Ennahdah government and its opponents in 2013. At the end of 2012, the two countries signed a border security agreement, facilitating joint patrols and operations. And in January 2013, Algerian, Tunisian, and Libyan representatives met at Ghadames in northwestern Libya to coordinate border security, though Libya's contributions were hampered by political crises and Tripoli's weak control of militias operating on its frontiers.²⁸

Algerian cooperation with Tunisia has focused on targeting AQIM-linked militants in Jebel Chaambi and cracking down on smuggling networks.²⁹ Much

27 Melanie Matarese, “Le ralliement d’Al Mourabitoune à l’EI pose des questions sur le sort de Belmokhtar,” *El Watan*, May 15, 2015. M. Aziz, “Daech recrute dans les prisons algériennes,” *El Watan*, May 29, 2015

28 Ali Shuaib, “Libya, Algeria and Tunisia to step up border security,” Reuters, January 12, 2013.

29 Mokrane Ait Ouarabi, “Attentats terroristes en Tunisie: l’engagement de l’armée algérienne,” *El Watan*, August 4, 2014.

of Algiers's engagement with Tunis has focused on drawing attention to militant activity on their common frontier, which Tunisian security forces have tended to see as a secondary threat compared to the southeastern border with Libya.³⁰

“There are reports of the Algerians providing training to Tunisia's elite troops, with Tunisian leaders seeking out Algeria's expertise in dealing with jihadist groups. Both sides have exchanged multiple high-level defense delegations in the last two years.³¹ In 2013, the two governments established a joint intelligence unit and in 2014 they reached an agreement on border security coordination. Meanwhile, Algerian press reports hint that operational coordination may have led to Algerian military participation in joint operations inside Tunisia, despite official denials.³² This cooperation is best symbolized by the Algerian-Tunisian Joint Commission, whose military component has been especially active in recent years.³³

Many in the Tunisian military and security services see assistance

30 Tunisian security and political leaders have tended to view security threats as emanating toward the coast either from abroad or from the country's desert south. This has been due in part to expanding instability in Libya and threats related to small arms proliferation and illicit migration. At the same time, many security elites view threats to the country as threats to the country's more developed coastal region, home to most of Tunisia's economically vital tourism industry. This has led to some neglect of security threats in parts of the interior west and in coastal urban areas seen as less likely to produce or be targeted by terrorist threats. Recent incidents and attacks in Tunis, such as the Bardo National Museum attack in March and escalating insurgent activities in Kasserine, El Kef, Sidi Bouzid, and Jendouba governorates has contributed to shifts in this perspective.

31 “Tunisia, Algeria agree to step up co-operation in tourism, trade and security,” Agence Tunis Afrique Presse, May 17, 2015. “Tunisian people grateful to Algeria for its solidarity,” *Algérie Presse Service*, May 9, 2014.

32 Mokrane Ait Ouarabi, “Attentats terroristes en Tunisie: l’engagement de l’armée algérienne,” August 4, 2014, *El Watan* and “Une cellule de renseignement tuniso-algérienne pour arrêter les terroristes de Châambi,” *Mosaïque FM*, August 3, 2013.

33 Kaci Racelma, “Tunisia, Algeria Join Efforts to Com-

and training from the Algerians as essential.³⁴ Tunisia's security services are overextended, demoralized (especially law enforcement), and ill-prepared for the low-intensity violence brought on by jihadist youth movements and AQIM elements that have emerged since 2011. The Tunisians must adapt tactically and structurally to address the threats posed by the jihadist groups operating in their country. As part of

“Many in the Tunisian military and security services see assistance and training from the Algerians as essential. Tunisia's security services are overextended, demoralized (especially law enforcement), and ill-prepared.”

that process, Tunisian Army, Air Force, and intelligence delegations have made repeated visits to Algiers recently.³⁵ Tunisian National Guard and special operations leaders have, for example, studied the training and tactics of the Algerian Gendarmerie's elite Rapid Intervention Detachments, as well as

bat Growing Terror Threat,” *Al-Monitor*, May 2, 2013 and “Algeria-Tunisia Joint Commission: Security and development high on agenda,” *Algérie Presse Service*, February 8, 2014.

34 Youssef Cherif, “Tunisia's Foreign Policy: A Delicate Balance,” *Atlantic Council*, March 23, 2015

35 See for example: “Le président Bouteflika reçoit le chef du gouvernement tunisien,” *El Djeich*, December 2012, p. 6; “Audiences du chef d'état-major de l'ANP: Le chef d'état-major des armées tunisiennes,” *El Djeich*, December 2012, p. 7; “Délégations militaires étrangères en Algérie: Tunisie,” *El Djeich*, August 2013, p. 9; “Délégations militaires étrangères en Algérie: Tunisie,” *El Djeich*, January 2015, p. 18.

Algerian criminology and forensics labs.³⁶

There are problems, however, despite the push to cooperate. Algiers has reportedly been the driving force for the intensified relations, reportedly causing some anxiety in Tunis. There is also significant distrust. While long-term relationships between Algerian and the Tunisian intelligence services remained relatively intact after 2011, some military collaboration suffered in the wake of the revolution, given that the Tunisian Army had to compensate for the weakness of the Interior Ministry during those events.³⁷ At the same time, communication between the Algerian and Tunisian security forces has generally been hierarchical and slow, despite efforts to formalize lower-level border security and customs collaboration.

Algerian institutions and leaders also distrusted Tunisia's transitional government, led by the moderate Islamist party Ennahdah. Ennahdah's leadership was just as suspicious of their Algerian counterparts.³⁸ These concerns were usually attributed to Ennahdah cadres' view of Algeria as a meat grinder for Islamists, based on the treatment of Islamists by the Algerian military during the 1990s, experiences which were communicated to Ennahdah leaders in Europe at the time through a well developed Islamist grapevine.³⁹

At the same time, some Algerian elites feared that Tunisia's democratic transition might inspire Algerian groups to emulate their overthrow of a long-standing regime. Many press reports and rumors since 2011 depicted Tunisia as a kind of overflowing cauldron of fanaticism, bearded, stone-throwing youth, and general crisis.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some in Tunisia fear that Algeria

might come to dominate Tunisia, due to its significantly larger size and reports that Algerian leaders have requested Tunisian authorities notify them ahead of any defense-related agreements with other countries.⁴¹

Press reports have mentioned concerns among unnamed high level officers in Tunisia⁴² that Algeria may exert influence over armed groups operating in Tunisia using the penetration and manipulation tactics for which the DRS is well known. Whatever the case, Tunisia-Algeria military-to-military and intelligence cooperation appears to be a fact of life as a result of escalating tension within Tunisia itself, the

“Some Algerian elites feared that Tunisia’s democratic transition might inspire Algerian groups to emulate their overthrow of a long-standing regime.”

fragmentation of Libya's political and security institutions, and the largely unbridled expansion of the jihadist presence in Libya.

Conclusion

These shifts in Algerian policy reflect responses to strategic surprises and setbacks for Algerian and international security policy over the last four years. The key response from the Algerian state has been an attempt to cope with an unraveling security environment by beefing up its internal and border defense posture and bilateral security arrangements with key neighboring countries, such as Tunisia. The ruling elite in Algiers hopes that enhanced border security measures and deeper military-to-military cooperation with

neighboring countries will narrow gaps that lead to the kind of strategic surprises that emerged from the upheavals of 2011 through 2013. It also appears to believe that closer ties with countries like Tunisia will help compensate for the lack of a coherent security sector in Libya. As the region becomes increasingly unstable, Algeria's leaders appear more prepared to pursue their security targets and promote regime sustainability through collaboration with regional militaries that share their goals.

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36 “Délégations militaires étrangères en Algérie: Tunisie,” *El Djeich*, May 2015, p. 15.

37 “Tunisia’s Borders: Jihadism and Contraband,” International Crisis Group, N°148, November 28, 2013.

38 Youssef Cherif, “Tunisia’s Foreign Policy: A Delicate Balance,” Atlantic Council, March 23, 2015.

39 Ibid. “Tunisia’s Foreign Policy: A Delicate Balance.”

40 Z. Aniss, “Des groupes extrémistes cèdent à la tentation de la violence: La menace djihadiste plane sur le pays,” *El Watan*, February 6, 2013.

41 Youssef Cherif, “Tunisia’s Foreign Policy: A Delicate Balance,” Atlantic Council, March 23, 2015.

42 Tam Hussein, “Tunisia’s Militant Struggle,” *The Majalla*, August 1, 2013.

Haunted by their Past: Kurds and the Islamic State

Hoshang Waziri and Lydia Wilson

AFTER SWEEPING VICTORIES in Syria and Iraq in June and July 2014 that brought them ever closer to Baghdad, the Islamic State suddenly changed course in August, turning east toward Iraq's Kurdish region. The Kurds were taken by surprise. In the resulting scramble, the peshmergas retreated ahead of the snowballing, rapid advance of the jihadists, leaving tens of thousands of Yazidis around Sinjar and Christians in the Nineveh plains to flee or be captured.¹ Islamic State forces eventually swept through the Makhmour and Gwer regions, reaching within 20 kilometers of the Kurdish capital, Erbil.²

Two things were clear at that point: the Kurds were not prepared to face such a serious military offensive, nor had they seen it coming. Apart from some involvement in the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, Iraqi Kurds had not used arms collectively and intensively since the brutal civil war of the 1990s known in Kurdish memory as the *brakujie* (Brother Killings). What was less obvious was that the divisions that had driven the violence 20 years ago have also been reawakened. The jihadists' assault has revived the rivalry between the two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP, led by the Kurdish President Masoud Barzani) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, led by Jalal Talabani), and their respective military wings. The renewed enmity is deepening internal Kurdish

divisions and swelling the territorial ambitions of each side.

This article explores the apparent failure to overcome these historical divisions, despite a common and formidable enemy, and shows how tensions are growing rather than receding. The analysis underlines the sheer complexity facing policymakers. Any move to help the Kurds in their fight against the Islamic State must be weighed against the danger of stoking tensions through counterproductive

“The Islamic State’s military success had also reawakened those same divisions. The jihadists’ assault has revived the rivalry between the two main Kurdish political parties.”

decisions. Additionally, the analysis highlights the limitations of not considering the complexity of the Kurdish political environment. Using the term “the Kurds” in strategic discussions on this issue is not helpful given the divisions there and the possibility of worsening an already precarious situation.

Background

The tensions in Iraqi Kurdistan can be dated back to just after World War II. In August 1946, one year after Kurdish leader Qazi Muhammad established the KDP in Iranian Kurdistan, the Iraqi branch of the KDP was founded in Baghdad by a group of intellectuals and officers.³ Mullah Mustafa Barzani (the father of current Kurdish president Masoud Barzani), one of the top generals involved in establishing the

first Kurdish independent Republic,⁴ was made the honorary president of the party while Hamza Abdullah, one of the original party's founders, was elected as the secretary general.

In 1951, a young intellectual from the city of Sulaimayiah, Ibrahim Ahmad, succeeded in recruiting most of the Iraqi Kurdish leftists and nationalists into the KDP. In March 1951, the second party congress was held, and Barzani's wing lost to Ibrahim Ahmad who was elected Secretary General. In 1958, Barzani returned from exile in the Soviet Union. Soon after, he began to interfere in party affairs which led to repeated conflicts with other members of the politburo, especially with Ibrahim Ahmad.⁵ Eventually, in April 1964, the political bureau stripped Barzani of his authority. In response Barzani successfully expelled Ibrahim Ahmad, and other key members from the party.⁶ The rivalry between these two men, with Barzani representing rural, tribal society, and Ahmad coming from an urban background,⁷ is still present in the current political landscape.

The next important step came on June 1, 1975, when Jalal Talabani (current leader of the PUK, and Ibrahim Ahmed's son-in-law) announced with others—including Iraq's current President D. Fouad Masoum, and current Change Movement leader Nawsherwan Mustafa—the formation of the PUK. The launch of the PUK was the beginning of a split in Iraqi Kurdistan that led to outright violence from the late 1970s through the 1980s, and again in the 1990s.

The *brakujie* of the 1990s started after the first Gulf War when the international community enforced a no-fly zone over the Kurdish region of Iraq. De facto independence led quickly in 1992 to the first elections in this

1 Euronews, “Iraq: Fleeing Yazidis and Christians Face Desperate Plight,” August 10, 2014. Isabel Coles and Saif Sameer, “Islamic State Advances on Yazidis on Iraq's Sinjar Mountain,” Reuters, “Video shows scale of Yazidi Suffering on Iraq's Mount Sinjar,” *Daily Telegraph*, June 11, 2014.

2 See, for example, an interview with Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein, “Senior Kurdistan Official: IS Was at Erbil's Gates; Turkey Did Not Help,” *Rudaw*, September 16, 2014.

3 For more on modern Kurdish history, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: IB Taurus, 2004), and Michael Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004).

4 The Muhabad Republic

5 For more detail see Martin van Bruinessen, “Major Kurdish Organisations of Iraq,” in *Middle East Report*, 16:141 (July/August, 1986), the Middle East Research and Information Project. FORMAT

6 Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 72.

7 Ibid, McDowall.

newly hopeful region. But the results were too close to call for either party, leading to a catastrophically sharp division not only in the political and administrative system but also within the social fabric of Kurdish society itself, producing a highly fragmented society and leading inexorably towards a bloody civil war that continued for more than four years.⁸ One sign of the renewed tensions has been the revival of the term “50/50,” which originally appeared after the 1992 election and was later used to describe the rigid and

“There is still no unified army in Iraqi Kurdistan, despite the existence of a Ministry of Peshmergas in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).”

scrupulously even power-sharing deal that helped resolve the *brakujie*.⁹ Kurds, as the current disputes show very clearly, have still not recovered from that divisive election.

The War with the Islamic State

One clear sign of the ongoing divisions is the state of the Kurdish military. There is still no unified army in Iraqi Kurdistan, despite the existence of a Ministry of Peshmergas in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) led by Mustafa Sayid Qadir, who is a member of the Change Party, a party with no military wing. In conversation,¹⁰ he reported that the over 1,050-kilometer-long front between the Kurds and the Islamic State is divided into eight operations. The west side is mostly controlled by KDP peshmergas, while the east side is controlled by PUK peshmergas.

At the frontline region of Makhmour, 45 kilometers southwest of Erbil, we spoke to an official from the security (Asaysh)

⁸ Ibid, Stansfield.

⁹ Ibid, Stansfield.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Minister of Peshmergas Mustafa Sayid Qadir, November 2014.

forces, who described the division. “The war front from Sinjar, on the Iraqi Syrian border, to Mala Abdullah, a village in Kirkuk, is under the command of the KDP; from Mala Abdullah to Jalawla and Khanaqeen on the Iranian borders is under the command of the PUK,” he said.¹¹ This territorial division based on political allegiances cuts the front into almost two equal parts, and replicates the “50/50” mechanism used to divide Kurdistan between the two main political parties after the civil war.

The lack of a single, unified central command was illustrated along the front lines in the early stages of the campaign against the Islamic State by the sight of troops, offices, and outposts displaying party flags instead of national Kurdish flags (no Iraqi flags are seen in this region). Unilateral claims of victory are common and have led to increasing tensions, and even outright military reversals. One example illustrates the chronic lack of unity. A Kurdish fighter, a member of the presidential guard, reported that in August, a squabble over claims of victory resulted in the PUK commander ordering all his forces to leave Jalawla soon after helping to liberate the city. A day later, with the remaining KDP forces in disarray, Islamic State fighters retook Jalawla, taking the opportunity to thoroughly booby trap the city. When the peshmergas recaptured the town in November, there were many needless deaths from explosive devices.¹²

Article 140 and Claims for Independence

The divisions do not stop with the frontline. Even more ominous for Iraqi Kurds are the lack of consensus and the power struggles over major issues such as independence, relations with the central Iraqi government in Baghdad, and regional and international alliances. Article 140 in the Iraqi constitution of 2005¹³ is a key example of the tension. It promised a referendum on the issue

of Kirkuk, leaving it up to the residents there whether they would remain under the central Baghdad government or secede to the KRG. The referendum was set for November 2007, but it has been postponed several times, the victim of political convenience for both Erbil and Baghdad.

In late June 2014, President Masoud Barzani congratulated the people of Kirkuk, announcing from the city that Article 140 was dead and that Kirkuk’s status was defacto resolved without

“Even more ominous for Iraqi Kurds are the lack of consensus and the power struggles over major issues such as independence, relations with the central Iraqi government, and regional and international alliances.”

a referendum.¹⁴ In response, Kirkuk Governor Najmaddin Karim publicly disagreed in a July 8 interview with the PUK newspaper *Kurdistani Nwe*, saying he still supported a referendum.¹⁵

The disputed territories are part of the much larger issue of independence for Iraqi Kurdistan. Masoud Barzani has been vocal on this issue, most recently in his May visit to Washington DC. (The U.S. administration remains firmly opposed to that outcome, responding to Barzani’s requests for support by renewing its commitment to “a united, federal, and democratic Iraq.”¹⁶) Some

¹¹ Personal interview, anonymous Asaysh official, November 2014.

¹² Personal interview with Minister of Peshmergas Mustafa Sayid Qadir, November 2014, in which he described booby-trapped refrigerator doors, soft drink cans, and even Qur’ans.

¹³ Iraq Constitution available at www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf.

¹⁴ “President Barzani: We’ll Make Kirkuk an Example of Religious and Ethnic Coexistence,” *Rudaw*, June 27, 2014.

¹⁵ “Najmadeen Kareem: This new situation is a golden opportunity but not free of risks,” *Kurdistani Nwe*, August 7, 2014.

¹⁶ Guy Taylor, “Kurdish leader says his people will one day declare independence,” *Washington Times*, May 6,

KDP members, however, claim that some PUK figures would oppose an independent Kurdish state if it were to be declared by a member of the Barzani family.¹⁷

Regional Implications

One of the main concerns regarding an independent Kurdistan relates to future regional involvement, specifically how the rivalry between Iran and Turkey would play out. Both countries have significant Kurdish populations that are also struggling for more rights. Both nations have sought political and economic influence in Iraqi Kurdistan dating back to the *brakujie*, with Turkey

“One of the main concerns regarding an independent Kurdistan relates to future regional involvement, specifically how the rivalry between Iran and Turkey would play out.”

continuing to support the KDP, while Iran retains its links to the PUK.

The strong ties between the KDP and Turkey have raised concerns among some PUK officials that Turkey would dominate a future independent Kurdistan. For example, KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani in *Time* magazine in 2012, described Turkey as “a door of hope.”¹⁸ On the other hand, Iran appears to have been gaining

2015.

¹⁷ See, for example, “Hemn Hawrami: PUK should not allow some people to remove their Party from the Kurdish consensus,” *Avene*, July 5, 2014. The Barzani family currently occupy the positions of president (Masoud), prime minister (Nechirvan, Masoud’s nephew), head of security (Masrur, Masoud’s son), and various other military and political posts, and also owns large portions of the infrastructure such as mobile phone networks (Sirwan, Masoud’s nephew).

¹⁸ Jay Newton-Small, “An Interview with Nechirvan Barzani: Will There Be an Independent Kurdistan?,” *Time*, December 21, 2012.

influence within the PUK, thanks in part to its good relations with the Shi’a-dominated government in Baghdad and the infighting resulting from the increasing absence of ailing PUK leader, Jalal Talabani. In late 2013, for example, Adel Mourad, one of the PUK’s founding members, publicly favored Iran’s involvements over that of Turkey or Saudi Arabia in the affairs of Kurdistan and Iraq.¹⁹

The PKK: An Added Complication

The final complication that must be factored into the KRG’s uneasy web of tensions that has been exposed by the Islamic State’s military successes is Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The PKK has been on the international terrorism list since the 1980s, yet it has been one of the most effective forces countering the Islamic State. It was, for example, responsible for the Islamic State’s defeat at Makhmour, and the opening of a humanitarian escape corridor from Mount Sinjar after the KRG’s forces had withdrawn.²⁰ President Barzani himself visited PKK officials in Makhmour and thanked them, a move that risked the KDP’s relationship with Turkey.²¹ The PKK has also clashed with another group of armed Kurds, the KDP of Iran, over control of territory, most recently on May 24, 2015.

Future Tensions

There are clear and recent signs that that these multiple tensions are causing problems. On April 5, 2015, for example, security forces in Dohuk, which is dominated by the KDP, arrested the Yazidi leader Hayder Shasho, who is a member of the PUK central council and the commander of the “Shangal [Sinjar] Protection Forces.” He was released a week later with no charges, but the episode angered PUK members

¹⁹ “PUK official supports Iran’s role in Kurdistan and attacks US and Turkey,” *E Kurd Daily*, October 30, 2013.

²⁰ Dominique Soguel, “Terrorist or ally? A Kurdish militia joins the fight against the Islamic State,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 22, 2014. Christoph Reuter, “The Drama of Sinjar: Escaping the Islamic State in Iraq,” *Der Spiegel*, August 18, 2014.

²¹ “Masoud Barzani visits PKK Forces in Makhmour,” *Kurd Press*, August 14, 2014.

and widened the gulf between the two parties at a critical juncture.

There are also increasingly strident debates over the constitution ahead of the August election. President Masoud Barzani has been in power since July 2005, and his original eight-year term had already been extended by two years in 2013 via a parliamentary motion. This extra time expires on August 19, but there is still no clear indication of how a power transition will occur. The KRG could not face this at a worse time given the fighting with the Islamic State and the apparent divisions among Kurdish groups.

“The final complication that must be factored into the KRG’s uneasy web of tensions that has been exposed by the Islamic State’s military successes is Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers’ Party.”

Chief of Staff Fuad Hussein recently announced that the presidential election has been set for August 20,²² although the legal and constitutional setting for these elections are by no means clear, and continue to be debated by the parties. Barzani may have already exceeded his term as KRG president, yet his KDP party claims that the current situation requires he stay in power.²³ Members of Parliament (MPs) from other parties submitted a bill to change the system of governance from a presidential to a parliamentary system, but all 38 KDP members boycotted the session at which the bill was discussed, provoking more tensions.²⁴ KDP MPs

²² “Kurdistan Region sets Aug 20 date for Presidential Election,” *Rudaw*, June 13, 2015.

²³ “KDP says Iraqi Kurdistan requires Massoud Barzani to stay in office,” *E Kurd Daily*, June 10, 2015.

²⁴ “KDP boycotts Iraqi Kurdistan parliament session over presidency law,” *E Kurd Daily*, June 23, 2015.

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have warned of chaos if the session is held.²⁵

The depth of feeling apparent in many personal interviews with peshmerga, police, and others indicates that tensions could spill over into violence, despite protestations from the subjects that they would not fight other Kurds.²⁶ The protestations fall flat though given the loyalty to political parties and leaders apparent in the interviews. Most Kurdish fighters seem likely to do anything their party leaders asked them. "I might not agree, but I would obey," was a common refrain from Kurds of all parties when talking of their leaders.²⁷

Their leaders, however, appear more willing to consider further deterioration of the situation. President Barzani went so far as to predict unrest. Abandoning all pretence of a unified front, on April 16, 2015, he warned of renewed Kurdish conflict, saying "a new method of antagonizing the Kurdish nation has appeared, which is through media statements and articles aiming at initiating a civil war in our region, creating chaos and getting us back to the era of two governments."

Conclusion

The Kurds face significant risks and challenges even after the current threat from the Islamic State is dealt with. Despite the efforts of the Minister of Peshmergas to build mixed brigades, unification of the army has not happened. This is not only affecting the fight against the Islamic State, but has ramifications for regional security in the future. The precarious situation also affects Western governments, which must consider how best to position themselves to pursue their interests after the Islamic State is defeated, and who have many options to pursue in countering its impact. Without a nuanced understanding of the existing conditions, good intentions could actually fuel another round of the

factionalism that drove the brakujie and, at worst, draw regional powers into another proxy war.

Hoshang Waziri's work has appeared in al-Hayat, Assafir, and other Arabic publications, and openDemocracy in English.

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²⁵ "Hemn Hawrami and Jaffer Emniki threatened the Parliament with Blood," *Loyn Magazine*, June 25, 2015.

²⁶ Personal interviews with peshmerga along the frontline in Makhmour, Erbil, Suleimania, and Koya, November 2014.

²⁷ Personal interviews with peshmerga along the frontline in Makhmour, Erbil, Suleimania, and Koya, November 2014.