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# CTC SENTINEL

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## Contents

### FEATURE ARTICLE

#### 1 Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali

By Morten Bøås

### REPORTS

#### 6 AQIM's Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel

By Samuel L. Aronson

#### 10 The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria

By Aaron Y. Zelin

#### 14 Mexico's Vigilante Militias Rout the Knights Templar Drug Cartel

By Ioan Grillo

#### 18 Drug Trafficking, Terrorism, and Civilian Self-Defense in Peru

By Steven T. Zech

#### 23 Maritime Piracy on the Rise in West Africa

By Stephen Starr

#### 26 Recent Highlights in Political Violence

#### 28 CTC Sentinel Staff & Contacts

## About the CTC Sentinel

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# Guns, Money and Prayers: AQIM's Blueprint for Securing Control of Northern Mali

By Morten Bøås



An Islamist policeman patrolling the streets of Gao in northern Mali on July 16, 2012. - Issouf Sanogo/AFP/Getty Images

**A**L-QA`IDA IN THE ISLAMIC Maghreb (AQIM) is occasionally described as an operational branch of the global al-Qa`ida structure. Yet AQIM should not be viewed as an external al-Qa`ida force operating in the Sahel and Sahara. For years, AQIM and its offshoots have pursued strategies of integration in the region based on a sophisticated reading of the local context. AQIM and its offshoots leverage money, guns and prayers to establish their presence in poorly governed areas in the Sahel and the Sahara. Their use of religion is of particular importance in an area where the local governing administration, to the degree that it exists, is generally perceived by the domestic population as corrupt, whereas AQIM and affiliated Islamist militants present themselves as honest and pious Muslims. This is especially the case in northern Mali.

As a result, even if the recent French military intervention in Mali has pushed back the Islamist rebels and secured control of the northern cities of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, a number of challenges remain.<sup>1</sup> The Islamists have not been defeated. Apart from the loss of prominent figures such as AQIM senior leader Abou Zeid and the reported death of Oumar Ould Hamaha,<sup>2</sup> the rest of the leadership as well as many of its core fighters are alive and motivated to fight. They do not seek a negotiated settlement, and they still have the capacity to resist and execute attacks inside towns under French control. While capturing the major cities of northern Mali may have

<sup>1</sup> France's military intervention in Mali is known as Operation Serval. The operation, which began in January 2013, is still ongoing.

<sup>2</sup> "Leading Militant Killed in Mali, Military Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 14, 2014.

been a swift, successful French military operation, controlling the vast territory of the Sahel and preventing AQIM's reemergence is a much more daunting challenge.

Based on fieldwork in Mali and close coverage of the field of insurgencies in the Sahel for almost a decade, this article argues that AQIM is best understood as a complex and multi-dimensional group that combines a Salafist ideological orientation with a pragmatic approach to integrate itself into local communities

**“AQIM should not just be viewed as a predatory, external force in northern Mali, but also as an actor that has managed to integrate into local communities over time.”**

and conflicts. The article provides background on the Tuareg, explains how AQIM gained influence in northern Mali, and examines the links between AQIM, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar. It finds that AQIM's strategies of integration in northern Mali are key to its longevity, and these same strategies could be employed by the group in other regions of the Sahel and the Sahara.

**Background on the Tuareg of Northern Mali**

Northern Mali, home to the country's Tuareg minority, comprises the broad part of the Sahel-Sahara that borders Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. Conflict in this area is not new. Throughout history, many Tuaregs viewed external intervention as a threat to their traditional life of nomadic pastoralism and fought several wars to maintain these customs. When the French arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the Tuaregs' religious leaders declared them infidels, and the Tuaregs spearheaded resistance to colonial rule in northern Mali.<sup>3</sup> By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the French had

managed to establish some nominal control over northern Mali and the Tuaregs lost key privileges, including their right to collect taxes and to offer protection services for trans-Saharan caravans.<sup>4</sup> Today, northern Mali may seem isolated and economically marginalized, but historically it served as an important frontier region, well integrated into the global economy. In some ways, northern Mali remains integrated into the global economy even today—through the economic power of trafficking contraband, migrants and drugs.<sup>5</sup> Trans-Saharan smuggling operations are profitable enterprises,

4 Ibid.

5 The increased popularity of these routes across the Sahel-Sahara is a consequence of more stringent border controls in Europe as well as recent technological advances that have made desert travel much easier. Global Positioning System (GPS) navigation devices, satellite and cellular phones, and four-wheel-drive vehicles have become standard equipment for desert travelers, making it possible to travel from Kidal in northern Mali to Tamanrasset in Algeria in about one day without ever traveling on a marked road. Some of these routes run up and down dry riverbeds, whereas others are little more than camel paths. Ordinary commodities are transported on these routes, but also contraband such as cigarettes, drugs and weapons, and these same routes are used for the trafficking of people seeking to reach Europe. The cigarettes, mainly but not exclusively Marlboro, used to come in presealed containers from Zouerat in Mauritania to Kidal, where the cargo was off-loaded and split into smaller lots and taken across the border to Algeria on four-by-four pick-up trucks. Some were sold locally in Algeria, while other shipments made their way across the Mediterranean to the European market, where they were sold at a lower price than non-smuggled cigarettes—even after a number of middlemen took their cut. The trafficking of people across the Sahara has also increased, but it is impossible to estimate the number. Until the town of Gao was captured by French forces in early 2013, however, Gao had been an important informal hub for Congolese, Cameroonians, Liberians, Nigerians and others who sought to leave the African continent. Once in Gao, migrants were picked up for a Sahara crossing through Kidal into Algeria. Other main routes for human trafficking through the Sahara include a route through Mauritania, Western Sahara and Morocco to Spain, and a route through Tunisia to Italy or Malta. Considering how much attention this topic is given by European media, it is quite remarkable how little is actually known about the number of people using these routes and how these operations are organized. See Morten Bøås, “Castles in the Sand: Informal Networks and Power Brokers in the Northern Mali Periphery,” in Mats Utas ed., *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks* (London: Zed Books, 2012), pp. 119-134. This chapter is based on interviews conducted by the author in Mali between 2008-2011.

and it has become an integral part of a minority of Tuaregs' livelihoods.<sup>6</sup> To a certain extent, the current increase in informal or illicit trade also represents a revitalization of the ancient routes of trade, commerce and pilgrimage that used to pass through the area, connecting West Africa to the Mediterranean, and to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

The Tuaregs' position in the northern region was turned upside down by French colonialism (1892-1960) and made permanent by the post-colonial state system. The Tuaregs, who had once seen themselves as the “masters of the desert,” became a minority in several countries.<sup>7</sup> In Mali, this entailed being ruled by a black population against whom they had previously directed their slave raids.<sup>8</sup> The Tuaregs view themselves as distinct from the other groups that constitute the Malian polity—in language, lifestyle and heritage.<sup>9</sup> Traditionally, the Tuaregs' livelihood has been one of semi-nomadic pastoralism, where pastoralist

6 Latin American cartels are increasingly using West Africa as an important transit point in their attempt to penetrate the European market with cocaine and cannabis. The route through northern Mali has not been the most important route for trafficking drugs, but since about 2006 it has been a part of the trans-Sahara trade in contraband and illicit goods. According to information received from local sources in Kidal, a successful trip across the border from Mali into Algeria with a load of cocaine could earn the driver as much as 3,000 euros. This is a considerable amount of money in a place with scarce resources and few employment opportunities. According to information obtained from sources in Kidal prior to the Islamist takeover of the area in 2012, the smugglers were organized in small gangs, numbering 10-15 people, and these gangs were connected to local authority figures (state and nonstate) who were paid to ignore these operations. Some of the Islamist insurgents who roamed this area (such as Mokhtar Belmokhtar) were also at times involved in these operations, either directly or indirectly through informal taxation. It is important to stress, however, that these interactions were fluid and pragmatic and not based on relationships other than business. Also see Bøås, “Castles in the Sand: Informal Networks and Power Brokers in the Northern Mali Periphery.”

7 Not all Tuaregs share this view, but it is a fairly widespread sentiment. See Bruce Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa 1600-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

8 Berge.

9 Jennifer Seely, “A Political Analysis of Decentralization: Co-opting the Tuareg Threat in Mali,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 39:3 (2001): pp. 499-524.

3 Gunvor Berge, *In Defense of Pastoralism: Form and Flux Among the Tuaregs in Northern Mali* (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2002), Ph.D. thesis.

activities were supplemented by trade and farming.<sup>10</sup> They speak their own language, Tamasheg, and their society is constructed as a pyramid, with nobles at the top and various levels of dependents and servile groups below, stratified into the *imusbar* (warriors), *ineslemen* (Muslim scholars), *inhaden* (artisans) and *iklan/bella* (slaves).<sup>11</sup> This hierarchy was established over time based on discourse and interpretations of race as well as descent, with noble families typically from fair-skinned lineages of Berber origin, whereas the *Bella* were black-skinned people of slave origin.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of how solid this social pyramid may have been (and to a degree still is), the Tuaregs have never constituted a coherent polity. Historically, they have been divided between a number of sultanates, ruled by different royal families, sometimes in cooperation with each other, but also experiencing violent conflict among themselves.<sup>13</sup> It is important to recognize this aspect of the Tuareg social structure, as it continues to inform their society and influence processes of social change.

The first Malian Tuareg rebellion took place in the early 1960s, and the second in 1990.<sup>14</sup> The 1990 uprising ended with the National Pact of 1992, although that agreement failed to placate all of the Tuareg factions and a new rebellion emerged in 2006.<sup>15</sup> The 2006 rebellion was initially a relatively small affair in Kidal organized around the now deceased Ibrahim ag Bahanga and concerned with local discontent. Yet that dynamic changed when Tuaregs began to return from post-Qadhafi Libya with new supplies of arms.<sup>16</sup>

10 Hall.

11 *Iklan* is the Tuareg name for this group, whereas *bella* is the Songhay term. The latter is much more commonly known in Mali. *Bella* is therefore not a separate ethnic category, but a collective term for people of slave descent. See Jon Pedersen and Tor Arve Benjaminsen, "One Leg or Two? Pastoralism and Food Security in the Northern Sahel," *Human Ecology* 36:1 (2008): pp. 43-57.

12 Ibid.

13 Baz Lecocq, "Unemployed Intellectuals in the Sahara: The Teshumara Nationalist Movement and the Revolutions in Tuareg Society," *International Review of Social History* 49:S12 (2004): pp. 87-109.

14 Berge.

15 Bøås, "Castles in the Sand: Informal Networks and Power Brokers in the Northern Mali Periphery."

16 Ibid.

This gave fresh momentum to the idea of a larger rebellion, and a new Tuareg movement was formed in 2011: the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Whereas Tuareg independence and nationalism had been more rhetoric than a concrete goal in previous rebellions, the MNLA declared full independence of Azawad<sup>17</sup> from Mali in April 2012.<sup>18</sup>

What little that may have existed of Tuareg unity, however, quickly disappeared. As MNLA fighters looted and plundered the north,<sup>19</sup> and the Malian army fled and committed the March 21, 2012, coup in Bamako, other forces stepped in and effectively sidelined the MNLA. These forces were the Tuareg Islamist organization Ansar al-Din,<sup>20</sup> led by Iyad ag Ghaly, a veteran Tuareg fighter from the 1990s, and two other regional movements: AQIM and MUJAO.<sup>21</sup> The latter two groups are not Tuareg movements *per se*, but their senior members have been present in the area since at least 1998.<sup>22</sup> Thus, perceiving these Islamist fighters as part of a new and foreign invasion force is not accurate.

17 The term "Azawad" originates from a large dry river bed in the Timbuktu area, but it is also used as a common denominator for the supposedly historical homeland of the Tuareg. In the Malian context, this territory would include most of the area of the country north of the Niger River.

18 Lydia Polgreen and Alan Cowell, "Mali Rebels Proclaim Independent State in North," *New York Times*, April 6, 2012.

19 "Human Rights in Occupied North Mali," International Society for Human Rights, April 9, 2012.

20 Ansar al-Din has been alternatively translated as Ansar Eddine, Ansar ed-Dine, and Ansar al-Dine.

21 When the MNLA rebellion began, elements from AQIM and MUJAO supported the MNLA, and Ansar al-Din also had a tactical alliance with the MNLA. When the MNLA rebellion devolved into looting and sexual violence, however, the Islamist factions used the opportunity to chase the more secular MNLA out of most of northern Mali.

22 Although AQIM was not formed until 2006/2007, the militants who now fight with AQIM used to fight with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). These same militants have been active in northern Mali since 1998. See Morten Bøås and Liv Elin Torheim, "The Trouble in Mali - Corruption, Collusion, Resistance," *Third World Quarterly* 34:7 (2013): pp. 1279-1292.

**How AQIM Gained Influence in Northern Mali**  
AQIM originated from Algeria's civil war, which erupted after the military leadership annulled the election results in 1992 after it became clear that an Islamist party would achieve victory. This resulted in a devastating civil war between the military and the armed Islamic opposition known as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). Officially, the civil war in Algeria ended with the amnesty of 1999,<sup>23</sup> but some fighters were unwilling to lay down their arms. Those who continued fighting currently form the core of AQIM.

The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), AQIM's predecessor organization, was formed by Hassan Hattab in 1998 as a breakaway faction of the GIA, mainly as a reaction to the immense and senseless violence of the GIA in the latter years of the Algerian civil war. Rooted in the Salafist tradition, most GSPC commanders and rank-and-file were committed to a Qutbist form of Salafism that justifies violence.<sup>24</sup> Officially, the GSPC moved into northern Mali in 2003-2004, but they already had rear bases in the area since 1998.<sup>25</sup> The relationship between the GSPC and al-Qa`ida is opaque, as there is a history of statements of mutual collaboration but also of conflict. When the GSPC was established in 1998, the organization expressed support for al-Qa`ida, only to claim that it had broken away from al-Qa`ida in 2001.<sup>26</sup> The GSPC reaffirmed its loyalty again in 2003, was blessed by al-Qa`ida in 2006, and then finally adopted the al-Qa`ida banner in 2007 when the GSPC changed its name to AQIM.<sup>27</sup>

23 A referendum was held after the 1999 elections that approved the Civil Concord Initiative. The initiative pardoned many political prisoners and granted thousands of members of armed groups exemption from prosecution under a limited amnesty in force until January 13, 2000. This was followed by the 2004 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation approved in a referendum in September 2005. This charter offered amnesty to most guerrillas and members of government security forces for acts conducted during the civil war.

24 There are different variants of Salafism. Some Salafists are non-violent, while others pursue violence to achieve their goals. See "Understanding Islamism," International Crisis Group, 2005.

25 Bøås and Torheim.

26 "Islamist Terrorism in the Sahel: Fact or Fiction," International Crisis Group, 2005.

27 See John Rollins, *Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical*

The GSPC may have adopted al-Qa`ida's name for ideological reasons, but more pragmatic brand concerns also likely played a role. The GSPC's members had lost the war in Algeria and some members were on the run in the deserts of northern Mali. Neither the Algerian government nor the international community wanted to negotiate with them, thus no settlement, not even an honorary surrender, was possible. The organization felt they had little to lose and something to gain by officially joining al-Qa`ida: local communities would perceive them as more "global" and powerful than the reality at the time.

When AQIM began to materialize in northern Mali in 2007, it had more than just al-Qa`ida's brand name. AQIM also had money. The group's source of wealth originated from kidnap-for-ransom, particularly the kidnapping of 32 European tourists in 2003.<sup>28</sup> These tourists were captured when traveling through the Sahara and were held hostage for several months before they were released.<sup>29</sup>

Money matters in the context of northern Mali, as the traditional role of the *chef du village* (traditional chief) has diminished rapidly, yet new systems of governance have not replaced traditional rule.<sup>30</sup> The history of AQIM's mission creep in the region of Timbuktu is therefore instructive as it reveals that its ability to embed locally not only derives from its use of force, but also on its ability

to create order based on a religious-ideological framework. Already in 1998, GSPC members started to arrive in the Timbuktu area<sup>31</sup> and they portrayed themselves to the local population as honest and pious traders. In one example, when they wanted to buy a goat from the locals, they paid the owner double his asking price.<sup>32</sup> They bought themselves goodwill, friendship and networks by distributing money, offering medicine, treating the sick and providing cellular phone access.<sup>33</sup> They also married locally—not into powerful families generally,<sup>34</sup> but poor local lineages, deliberately taking the side of the impoverished.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in some ways, the GSPC/AQIM acted as an Islamic charity, with the exception that they carried arms and did not hesitate to use them if needed.

AQIM's penetration of the Timbuktu area has, therefore, been underway for more than a decade, but its tactics also gradually changed from distributing money and small benefits to aggressively promoting its interpretation of Islam. This became particularly evident after they gained territorial control in northern Mali in 2012. To facilitate this, AQIM also established alliances with some local *marabouts* (religious teachers) and encouraged them to preach AQIM's version of Islam.<sup>36</sup> AQIM thus utilized a pre-existing traditional structure of cultural importance for its own purpose. Yet while the *marabouts* historically did not have much power, AQIM empowered them by supplying "their *marabouts*" with vehicles, money, weapons and bodyguards.<sup>37</sup> After the MNLA offensive, AQIM also offered locals protection. In Timbuktu, for

example, AQIM communicated a "green" cell phone number that people could call if they were harassed by MNLA members or ordinary bandits.<sup>38</sup>

AQIM's strategy was a careful and gradual one of integration and penetration into local communities based on a combination of military, political, religious, economic and humanitarian means. The latter component was clearly facilitated by the money that AQIM leaders had at their disposal due to their involvement in smuggling and kidnap-for-ransom. Therefore, AQIM should not just be viewed as a predatory, external force in northern Mali, but also as an actor that has managed to integrate into local communities over time.

This is also partially true for MUJAO. There was undoubtedly some local support for the group in and around Gao, but its style of governance was also more violent than AQIM's. As a much younger organization—essentially a splinter movement of AQIM, formed in late 2011, comprised of non-Algerian elements from Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel—it consists of various factions that need to demonstrate their Salafijihadi credentials. It is, therefore, no coincidence that whereas AQIM only carried out one amputation as part of its implementation of Shari`a (Islamic law) in Timbuktu, MUJAO carried out 15 in Gao.<sup>39</sup> Even if MUJAO is more of a youthful firebrand insurgency, its ability to carry out attacks in Gao after French forces took control of the town indicates a certain level of civilian support (particularly in Peul communities) because these attacks were reportedly made possible through arms hidden among the civilian population.<sup>40</sup>

*Perspective, Global Presence and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010).

28 "14 Tourists Kidnapped in Algeria Head Home," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 2003.

29 The German government reportedly paid a ransom of five million euros (\$6 million) to secure the release of the 32 mostly German hostages. The German government has denied that it ever paid any ransom money, but according to local sources the Salafists had a lot of money to spend after the tourists had been released. See "Newspaper: Berlin Paid Ransom to Free Hostages," *Deutsche Welle*, August 6, 2004.

30 Due to a combination of external shocks such as increased climatic variability and the penetration of the modern state, the traditional systems of governance are less useful than they used to be. Even if the modern state is more present in people's daily lives, it is most often perceived as a nuisance or a negative factor because it has failed to respond adequately to people's needs.

31 "Understanding Islamism."

32 These details are based on personal interviews conducted in Bamako in February and March 2013 with a number of people who lived in northern Mali when the Islamists controlled the area. Also see Bøås and Torheim.

33 Ibid.

34 One exception is Mokhtar Belmokhtar. At least one of his four wives comes from a prominent family in the Timbuktu area.

35 Bøås and Torheim.

36 Ibid. Some needed encouragement in the form of the incentives that AQIM provided, but this was not the case for everyone, as some also started to embrace the Salafist ethos either due to AQIM's influence or on their own.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 This is based on interviews conducted in Bamako with doctors and hospital staff who lived in Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal in 2012-2013 when these towns were controlled respectively by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar al-Din.

40 This is based on conversations with a Malian colleague who conducted fieldwork in Gao and the surrounding areas between the Malian elections in the autumn of 2013. The reason why MUJAO managed to recruit more extensively in Peul communities is still not entirely clear. It may be that people in this community already had started to swing religiously and ideologically in the same direction as the discourse of MUJAO, but there are also

### The Relationship Between AQIM, MUJAO and Mokhtar Belmokhtar

The relationship between AQIM and MUJAO and the role of Mokhtar Belmokhtar has been the center of much debate and speculation since MUJAO emerged in mid-December 2011.<sup>41</sup> Initially, some observers claimed that the formation of MUJAO was due to the dominant position of an old guard of Algerian nationals and other Arabs in AQIM.<sup>42</sup> These observers pointed to MUJAO's West African rhetoric and reference to historical figures of West African jihadism and anti-colonial struggle, such as Umar ibn Said al-Futi Tall, Usman dan Fodio and Amadou Cheikhou (Seku Amadu).<sup>43</sup> This analysis, however, is challenged by interviews conducted by the Italian scholar Luca Raineri in Gao in November 2013 that corroborate previous interviews made by this author suggesting that a majority of MUJAO's ranks were comprised of Arabs and Moors from Mauritania, Algeria and Western Sahara—not "black" Africans from other parts of West Africa.<sup>44</sup> Thus, another possible hypothesis is that the rift in AQIM that led to MUJAO's formation was based on other disagreements, but that the West African rhetoric and reference to West African jihadism was used to legitimize the formation of a new insurgency with a broader regional platform than that offered by AQIM. Internal disputes between AQIM and MUJAO were not only about the role of religion, military tactics and social strategy, but also about money. In particular, disagreements arose on how to share funds generated

through kidnapping and smuggling.<sup>45</sup> Some ambitious jihadists who did not belong to the hardcore AQIM leadership that originated from the GSPC may have craved more autonomy and decision-making power.<sup>46</sup>

Exactly what role Mokhtar Belmokhtar played in the emergence of MUJAO is still unclear. Yet even prior to the establishment of MUJAO, it was evident that there were internal divisions within AQIM and in particular between Abou Zeid and Belmokhtar. The two senior AQIM figures were divided over issues concerning leadership and strategy, but also over money.<sup>47</sup> These divisions eventually led to the departure of Belmokhtar's *katibat* (battalion) al-Mulathamini (The Veiled Ones) from AQIM.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, even if the circumstances surrounding Belmokhtar's departure from AQIM are not known, it is clear that there was a great deal of rivalry between Belmokhtar and Zeid. This may have been purely about strategy or money, but it may also have been about leadership. Perhaps Belmokhtar never really accepted AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel's decision to appoint Abou Zeid as his main Sahel *amir* over him.<sup>49</sup>

Belmokhtar's decision to merge with MUJAO elements that he already knew in Gao (such as Hamada Ould Muhammad Kheirou) would give him a larger platform than what he could achieve only with his own *katiba*.<sup>50</sup> The subsequent merger between MUJAO and Belmokhtar's *katiba* to form al-Murabitun (Those Who Remain Steadfast) is likely just

another attempt by Belmokhtar to gain dominance in the region.

Belmokhtar's moves may have negative consequences for the future sustainability of AQIM. Nevertheless, AQIM has always had more depth beyond Belmokhtar and his *katiba*. AQIM operatives were also present in Gao, whereas the Timbuktu region was controlled by the *katiba* of Tarik ibn Ziyad loyal to Abou Zeid. There are no signs that these and other AQIM structures have followed Belmokhtar into a merger with MUJAO.

Moreover, the original AQIM leadership and cadre have survived similar infighting in the past.<sup>51</sup> Some of these disputes were resolved over time, while others were not. Yet none of these past disagreements have prevented AQIM from continuing to function as an insurgency with a proven ability to integrate into communities and tap into local conflicts and grievances.

### Conclusion

AQIM and its offshoots are no longer in control of cities and territories in northern Mali. Nevertheless, they have not been defeated. Apart from the death of Abou Zeid and the reported death of MUJAO commander Hamaha, the leadership remains intact, and most of its rank-and-file fighters have survived the French intervention. Some have returned to their homes or moved elsewhere to seek out other opportunities (not necessarily violent ones).<sup>52</sup> Some have left for other areas of the Sahel to continue their struggle, whereas others are hiding in northern Mali in the desert or among local populations.<sup>53</sup> The ability to blend in with the population is possible due to a combination of local support (based on their previous strategies of integration)

other possibilities. One is that this kind of allegiance was used to gain the upper hand in local rights-based conflicts over access to land, pasture and water.

41 In this video, MUJAO declared its existence and claimed responsibility for the October 23, 2011, kidnapping of three European hostages from a refugee camp in Tindouf, southern Algeria, presumably under the control of the Polisario (the insurgency that still fights for the independence of the Western Sahara from Morocco).

42 See, for example, "Mali's Irrevocable Crises," al-Jazeera, April 16, 2012.

43 Ibid.

44 Luca Raineri, *MOJWA: Complex Dynamics Between Armed Groups and Organized Crime in Northern Mali*, 2014, unpublished manuscript. This finding is not based on an accurate headcount of MUJAO's ranks, but on interviews with people present in Gao during MUJAO's rule who were asked about the group's composition.

45 See also Ould Idoumou Raby, "Al-Qaeda Splinter Group Reveals Internal Erosion," *Magharebia*, December 30, 2011.

46 Ibid.

47 Rukmini Callimachi, "Rise of Al-Qaida Sahara Terrorist," *Associated Press*, May 28, 2013.

48 In this regard, it is important to note that AQIM in northern Mali and the Sahel has always consisted of and hosted semi-independent groups under the AQIM banner. These have included, in addition to Belmokhtar's group, Yahya Abu al-Hamam's (also known as Jemal Oukacha) al-Furqan Squadron, al-Ansar (headed by Abdelkrim el-Targui, who is Iyad ag Ghaly's cousin), and the Youssef ben Tachfine brigade (headed by Abu Abdelhamid al-Kidali). See also Raineri.

49 Callimachi.

50 See also Oumar Jemal, "In Aménas Attack Magnifies Belmokhtar, AQIM Rift," *Magharebia*, February 7, 2013.

51 See, for example, Raby Ould Idoumou, "AQIM Under Siege," *Magharebia*, January 13, 2012. Also see the detailed analysis of collaboration and fragmentation among Algerian Islamists in "Islamism, Violence and Reform in Algeria: Turning the Page," *International Crisis Group*, 2004.

52 This conclusion is based on interviews conducted in Mali in February and March 2013, and a number of follow-up conversations with Malian colleagues, diplomats and other scholars who follow the region, and staff members in the United Nations and other international organizations involved in Mali and the Sahara-Sahel.

53 Ibid.

and uncertainty about the future. As long as French forces remain, few local inhabitants believe that AQIM will return to the same level of control it had in 2012 and early 2013; however, many locals also understand that the French presence on the ground is only short-term. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) remains understaffed and few Malians have much hope in the national army's reform process.<sup>54</sup> As a result of these factors, accepting the presence of AQIM figures in the local community is one strategy to hedge against the future.

These illustrations of AQIM's approach to the region indicate that it is an organization with an understanding of the local context. AQIM and its offshoots make use of a combined strategy of force, trade and the distribution of other benefits, while maintaining the image of honesty and piety; this is in contrast to the corrupt local officials of the state whom they replaced. This strategy served AQIM well in northern Mali. Therefore, as AQIM searches for new safe havens in the Sahel and the Sahara, such as the southwestern Fezzan region of Libya,<sup>55</sup> it can be expected to once more employ its strategy of guns, money and prayers to integrate into new local communities.

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Boubacar Ba and Morten Bøås, *The Mali Presidential Elections: Outcomes and Challenges* (Oslo: Norwegian Centre for Peacebuilding, 2013). Also see Bruce Whitehouse's blog, *Bridges from Bamako*, available at [www.bridgesfrombamako.com](http://www.bridgesfrombamako.com).

<sup>55</sup> The Fezzan region of Libya is one area that has caught AQIM's attention in the aftermath of the fall of Qadhafi. This region is another borderland of the Sahel where the state exercises little influence, and local groups compete for control of the region's few resources. For details, see "Fresh Blood and New Safe Haven for Jihadists: Libya," *Today's Zaman*, October 27, 2013.

## AQIM's Threat to Western Interests in the Sahel

By Samuel L. Aronson

ALREADY ONE OF THE most volatile and impoverished regions of the world,<sup>1</sup> Africa's Sahel has been on the forefront of U.S. foreign policy following the coup d'état in Mali in 2012. The subsequent French military intervention, Operation Serval, served to disorganize extremists and stabilize the region, including the neighboring countries of Niger, Algeria, Nigeria, and Mauritania. Yet in a region with vast open land, weak central governments, and porous borders, terrorist groups are able to operate transnationally with few restraints.

Although the Sahel region has been viewed by some policymakers as lacking significant Western political and economic interests, there has been moderate oil and gas drilling over the last decade along with mining operations, including for gold and uranium.<sup>2</sup> As is commonplace in post-colonial Francophone Africa, a sense of hostility still exists toward French nationals, thus contributing to the difficulties of conducting business or residing in the region as a Westerner. Nevertheless, the Sahel has a sizeable presence of Western aid workers, extractive industry employees, faith-based personnel, and, to a lesser extent, diplomats and tourists.<sup>3</sup>

Since the rebranding from a domestic Algerian Salafist group to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in early 2007, a number of offshoots and other terrorist organizations have formed in the region, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar's *katibat* (battalion) al-Murabitun (Those Who Remain Steadfast), the Movement for Unity

and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Boko Haram, and its splinter group, Ansaru.<sup>4</sup> While each of these groups has a unique context and dynamic, it is widely recognized that, in recent years, they have—at the very least—communicated with one another.<sup>5</sup> Less clear, however, is the extent of inter-group collaboration and the subsequent threat increase to Western interests. The possibility of continued or increased collaboration in the near future makes it important to examine two typologies of motivation—criminal kidnap-for-ransom and politically-motivated terrorism—insofar as they highlight an analytical distinction between attacks. Since the start of Operation Serval, several larger terrorist attacks have occurred in the Sahel, underscoring cooperation between groups and indicating a potential shift from the former to the latter.

With an emphasis on the private sector, this article explores four central findings. First, it highlights the linkages between AQIM, Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun brigade, Boko Haram, and Ansaru. Second, it finds a notable (and possibly temporary) shift from criminality to politically-motivated terrorism. Third, it finds that among the most threatened interests in the Sahel are extractive companies operating near border regions. Lastly, it finds that the adaptability of Belmokhtar makes him one of the region's greatest near-term threats to Western interests.

### Linkages

Although collaboration was once questioned, it is now widely indicated that AQIM has linkages to al-Murabitun, MUJAO, and the Nigerian terrorist groups Boko Haram and Ansaru.<sup>6</sup> To understand this relationship, however, it is important to examine the historical context.

<sup>1</sup> "Sahel: Background on the Sahel, West Africa's Poorest Region," Integrated Regional Information Networks, June 2, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> John Campbell and J. Peter Pham, "Does Washington Have a Stake in the Sahel?" Council on Foreign Relations, January 14, 2014; Franklin Charles Graham IV, "Abductions, Kidnappings and Killings in the Sahel and Sahara," *Review of African Political Economy* 38:130 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Carlos Echeverría Jesús, "Kidnappings as a Terrorist Instrument of AQIM and the MUJAO," *Paix et sécurité internationales: revue maroco-espagnole de droit international et relations internationales*, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> These groups have been covered extensively within both academic and policy literature. For more background, see previous issues of the *CTC Sentinel* or The National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) "2014 Counterterrorism Calendar: Terrorist Groups," available at [www.nctc.gov/site/groups/](http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/).

<sup>5</sup> "LRA, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, AQIM and Other Sources of Instability in Africa," testimony by the coordinator for counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, April 25, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

AQIM was formed in January 2007, formally rebranding from its previous name, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC). The official affiliation with al-Qa`ida—beginning several months prior—was largely seen as an effort to maintain relevancy as an extremist group on the global stage, but the group's interest was still strictly regional in nature. The GSPC, formed in 1998, was itself a derivative of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).<sup>7</sup> While much of the overarching ideology—a leading tenet of which is a Salafist Qur'anic interpretation—remains static, smaller philosophical and personal disagreements ultimately led to numerous spinoffs and splinter cells.<sup>8</sup> In the wake of a personality dispute with AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel and other subordinate leaders in northern Mali, Belmokhtar split from the group and formed the *katibat* al-Mulathamini (The Veiled Ones).<sup>9</sup> Belmokhtar's group merged with MUJAO in August 2013 to create al-Murabitun.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding whether any of these groups continue to work with AQIM and its leader Droukdel, it is widely understood that the various units under Belmokhtar's control claim allegiance to al-Qa`ida core, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri.<sup>11</sup>

The study of Sahelian terrorism must also consider the Nigerian violent extremist groups Boko Haram and its 2012 splinter Ansaru. The linkages between these two groups and AQIM are less clear. When Boko Haram first transitioned into a jihadist group after 2009,<sup>12</sup> most scholars and policymakers dismissed its affiliation with AQIM and

al-Qa`ida core as only rhetoric.<sup>13</sup> The idea that an inexperienced domestic insurgency from northeast Nigeria would be embraced by the broader transnational jihadist community was rebuked as aspirational at best. Yet, by the summer of 2009, evidence suggested that Boko Haram members were training with AQIM.<sup>14</sup> In 2010, AQIM leader Droukdel declared that AQIM would provide Boko Haram with weapons, support, and training.<sup>15</sup> This collaboration between Boko Haram and AQIM is supported by public statements from both groups, as well as clear indications that Boko Haram's suicide attack on the United Nations office in Abuja, Nigeria, in 2011 employed tactics that were strikingly similar to bombings by AQIM.<sup>16</sup>

This again revealed that terrorist groups in the Sahel are adaptive. Differences in ideology are not mutually exclusive in group membership, funding, and coordination. On the contrary, splinters of AQIM, such as al-Murabitun and the AQIM ally in northern Mali, Ansar al-Din,<sup>17</sup> collaborate at least marginally. There is even some evidence that Boko Haram and its splinter group Ansaru have both trained and coordinated with AQIM, al-Qa`ida core, and even Somalia's al-Shabab.<sup>18</sup>

Sahelian terrorist organizations appear willing to change their names and sacrifice personal and ideological variances. The merger of al-Mulathamini and MUJAO in August 2013 (themselves splinters of AQIM) created a larger and better coordinated group, al-Murabitun, which is asserting its prominence

in the region.<sup>19</sup> A statement sent to Nouakchott Information Agency in January 2014 reiterated Belmokhtar's desire to continue attacks against "France and her allies" in the Sahel.<sup>20</sup> Keeping in mind the limitations of forecasting, it is clear that al-Murabitun's intent, capability, and access throughout the region are likely a continued threat to Western interests. Against the backdrop of Boko Haram's legacy of domestic insurgency in Nigeria, Ansaru and even some actors

**“There is even some evidence that Boko Haram and its splinter group Ansaru have both trained and coordinated with AQIM, al-Qa`ida core, and even Somalia's al-Shabab.”**

within Boko Haram have demonstrated a capability and desire to continue executing attacks against Western interests. A video statement<sup>21</sup> by Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau in February 2014 reiterated the group's aspirational intent to harm Western interests throughout Nigeria (including the oil-rich delta region<sup>22</sup>) and into neighboring Cameroon and Niger.

**Borderless Kidnapping**

Belmokhtar's legacy of kidnapping spans more than a decade. A seasoned Islamist militant with experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the early 1990s, he returned to Algeria in 1993 and rose through the ranks of the GIA

7 Ibid.

8 Paul Cruickshank, "Algeria Gas Facility Attack Fuels Jihadist Rivalry," CNN, January 30, 2013; Jacob Zenn, "Cooperation or Competition: Boko Haram and Ansaru After the Mali Intervention," *CTC Sentinel* 6:3 (2013).

9 "AQIM Leaders Belmokhtar and Abdelmalek Droukdel Split," *Militant Leadership Monitor* 3:12 (2012).

10 "2014 Counterterrorism Calendar: Terrorist Groups."

11 Eric Ouellet et al., "The Institutionalization of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2014; personal interview, anonymous, U.S. Embassy, Niamey, Niger, January 21, 2014.

12 Boko Haram "...has gained recent notoriety because of its transition from being a local radical Salafist group, which until 2009 had a largely quietest nature, to a Salafi-jihadi group that has demonstrated the capacity to carry out major operations..." See David Cook, "The Rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel* 4:9 (2011).

13 Zenn.

14 "Boko Haram: Growing Threat to the U.S. Homeland," U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, September 13, 2013.

15 Ibid.

16 Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, "Boko Haram: Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria," *West African Politics and Society Series* 2 (2014); personal interview, anonymous, U.S. Embassy, Abuja, Nigeria, January 17, 2014.

17 The alliance between AQIM and Ansar al-Din is detailed in the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Terrorist Organization designation, March 21, 2013, available at [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/206493.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/03/206493.htm).

18 "LRA, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, AQIM and Other Sources of Instability in Africa."

19 Seth G. Jones, "The Extremist Threat to the U.S. Homeland," House Committee on Homeland Security, January 15, 2014; General David M. Rodriguez, "Posture Hearing," Senate Armed Services Committee, March 6, 2014.

20 "Terror Group Threatens France over Mali," Associated Press, January 6, 2014; "Les Mourabitoune de l'Azawad menacent de s'en prendre a la France et ses allies," Agence Nouakchott d'Information, January 4, 2014.

21 "Nigeria's Boko Haram Threatens Oil Refineries, Muslim Clerics," Voice of America, February 20, 2014.

22 The likelihood of a Boko Haram attack in Nigeria's Delta is currently deemed as low, although the implications of an attempted suicide bombing or armed assault would be much greater.

and, later, the GSPC.<sup>23</sup> Belmokhtar's successes at making money through smuggling cigarettes, narcotics, and possibly humans<sup>24</sup> foreshadowed his alleged political motivation with al-Murabitun. Belmokhtar was not simply raising money to fund jihad and insurgencies in Africa. On the contrary, while a portion of the profits surely financed the operational overhead costs of the group, a sizeable minority also benefited him and his associates personally.<sup>25</sup> Belmokhtar is able to ensure his leadership role and prominence in the region by controlling financial opportunities for his associates and followers.

In April 2003, the GSPC—of which Belmokhtar was an active member—took 32 Europeans hostage in northern Mali in his first major kidnapping operation.<sup>26</sup> The group subsequently released all but one hostage (who died in the desert) in return for a ransom payment of more than \$6 million.<sup>27</sup> Dozens of small-scale kidnappings of Western tourists, diplomats, aid workers, and extractive industry personnel since that time have netted Belmokhtar an estimated \$50 million in ransom payments.<sup>28</sup> AQIM as a group is estimated to have made more than \$90 million in total ransom profits from 2003 to 2013.<sup>29</sup>

#### Motivational Shift?

A major shift in Belmokhtar's tactics and procedures occurred at the end of 2012 following his split from AQIM. In the days following France's Operation Serval in northern Mali in January 2013, Belmokhtar instructed several dozen followers to attack a gas facility near In Amenas, Algeria—within 50 miles of the Libyan border—taking nearly 800 hostages. At least 39 foreign workers, including three Americans, were killed in the attack and ensuing Algerian military rescue operation.<sup>30</sup> In his claim of responsibility, Belmokhtar stated that the attack was in response to the Algerian government granting airspace access to France, and he threatened to kill dozens of more captives if France did not put an end to its military operation in northern Mali.<sup>31</sup>

His justification for the attack was questionable for two reasons. First, the scale of the attack took precision and preparation that would likely have taken weeks, if not longer, to coordinate. Procuring an arsenal of weaponry and explosives for several dozen militants in less than a week is not likely. Second, his alleged motivation for the attack is inconsistent with nearly two decades of Belmokhtar's patterns and priorities. To be sure, Belmokhtar is known for his ability to adapt, even managing to escape arrest and capture reportedly seven times.<sup>32</sup> This was not the first time he had justified his actions with political ideology, but it had previously been peripheral to his criminality. The magnitude of the attack at In Amenas, however, indicated a more coherent motivation that resonated with Salafi-jihadis worldwide.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, significant indications point toward the overt justification of political ideology

to shadow what was likely an attempt to obtain a hefty ransom payment.

This suggested shift in motivation was again seen in Niger in May 2013. Two simultaneous attacks were conducted by MUJAO and al-Mulathamain, targeting a French uranium mine not far from the Algerian border and a military camp housing French forces in central Niger.<sup>34</sup> These attacks employed similar tactics and weaponry as the Algerian gas facility siege but included the use of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs).<sup>35</sup> Belmokhtar's spokesman immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, stating they were in response to the government in Niger cooperating with the French.<sup>36</sup>

The work of Belmokhtar and AQIM after 2012 must be examined in the context of both political terrorism and criminal kidnap-for-ransom. When analyzing the attacks through a lens of criminality, it appears that Belmokhtar is a savvy businessman who manipulatively leverages purported jihadist ideology to inspire supporters and solicit ransom payments by governments and private organizations. Whether his political motivation may be insincere is largely peripheral to mitigating the threat of kidnapping in the Sahel. Nevertheless, it underscores that Belmokhtar is a businessman who is willing to adapt as necessary to engage in kidnap-for-ransom.

When examined through a lens of political ideology, Belmokhtar's Salafi-jihadi tendencies are a result of his decades-long affiliation with al-Qa'ida core in Afghanistan and Pakistan<sup>37</sup> and his role as a respected Islamist figure in North and West Africa. As a former leader of AQIM and a supporter of various related factions such as MUJAO, Boko Haram and Ansaru, Belmokhtar is viewed as an *amir* of Salafi-jihadism in a region

23 "Profile: Mokhtar Belmokhtar," BBC, June 4, 2013.

24 Andrew Black, "Mokhtar Belmokhtar: The Algerian Jihad's Southern Amir," *Terrorism Monitor* 7:12 (2009).

25 Belmokhtar was reportedly forced out of AQIM for, in the words of one Malian official, "straying from the right path." Some members of AQIM questioned his devotion to Salafi-jihadism and believed his interests lied in criminality and smuggling. Also see *ibid.*; personal interview, anonymous, U.S. Embassy, Niamey, Niger, January 21, 2014.

26 "Les disparus du Sahara seraient les otages d'un groupe terroriste islamiste," *Le Monde*, April 17, 2003. The exact role of Belmokhtar in this operation is not entirely agreed on by policy experts. The public leader of the GSPC operation, however, was Amari Saifi (also known as El Para).

27 Jesús.

28 "Statement on Reported Killing of Mokhtar Belmokhtar," U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, March 2, 2013.

29 "Millions in Ransoms Fuel Militants' Clout in West Africa," *New York Times*, December 12, 2012.

30 "Timeline of the In Amenas Siege," *Guardian*, January 25, 2013.

31 "New Video Message from Katibat al-Mulathamain's Khalid Abu al 'Abbas (Mokhtar bin Muhammad Belmokhtar): Claiming Responsibility for the In Aménas Operation," *Jihadology*, January 22, 2013.

32 "'This is the Eighth Time' -- Caution Greets Reports of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's Death," *Independent*, March 3, 2013; personal interview, Jeremy Keenan, University of London, February 2014.

33 "Regional Security Lessons from the Attack on Algeria's In Amenas Gas Plant," U.S. Institute of Peace, January 23, 2013.

34 "Suicide Bombings in Niger Kill Dozens in Dual Strikes," *New York Times*, May 23, 2013.

35 SVBIEDs were rarely used by AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar prior to this attack.

36 "Statement in Belmokhtar's Name Claims Role in Niger Attacks," *Financial Times*, May 24, 2013.

37 William Thornberry and Jaclyn Levy, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 1, 2011.



that is predominantly Muslim. The French intervention in Mali may have reinforced his belief that Western governments are attacking Islam to exert political and economic influence in Mali.

Indeed, as both typologies are feasible within the context of Belmokhtar's activity, a third explanation may exist. Insofar as evidence points to Belmokhtar as a businessman and a radical *amir*, it is quite likely that his actions are motivated by both money and ideology. More debatable is the balance between these motivations, which is far from confirmed and remains fluid. As the UN Security Council continues to push governments and private sector organizations to cease paying ransoms,<sup>38</sup> the notion of political terrorism vis-à-vis criminality becomes a more beneficial way to instill fear in Westerners while still producing funds through soliciting ransoms.

The international community recognizes this transitive move by violent extremist organizations in the Sahel. Resolutions 1904 and 2133, passed by the United Nations Security Council in 2009 and 2014, respectively, forbid the payment of ransoms to groups affiliated with al-Qa`ida. While the U.S. and UK governments categorically follow this policy, European states have been slower to follow suit. The lack of any real enforcement mechanism inhibits the motivation for governments, and even private sector organizations, to stop paying ransoms, leading to off-the-record deals with kidnapers and hefty payments to AQIM and its affiliates, averaging \$5.4 million per ransom in 2011—an increase of nearly \$1 million from the year prior.<sup>39</sup> Multinational kidnap-for-ransom insurance, consulting, and negotiating firms charge premiums to lone businessmen and large corporations alike, creating an insurance and consulting market worth roughly \$500

million in 2011.<sup>40</sup> The primary advice given by most kidnap consulting and negotiation firms is to not contact the U.S. or host-country governments, but rather communicate solely with the firm.<sup>41</sup>

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power stated in relation to al-Qa`ida, "We know that hostage takers looking for ransoms distinguish between those governments that pay ransoms and those that do not—and that they make a point of not taking hostages from those countries that refuse to make concessions."<sup>42</sup> There is even a credible belief among policy experts that U.S. and British citizens are less likely to be kidnapped but more likely to be killed as a result of the U.S. and UK governments' categorical refusal to pay ransoms. One such instance was the 2009 kidnapping of a British citizen in Niger, who was subsequently held and killed in Mali.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, French and other European hostages have historically been released in exchange for ransom payments.<sup>44</sup>

#### Greatest Near-Term Threat to the West

The U.S. Department of State continues to warn against the threats posed by violent extremist groups in Africa's Sahel. In response to attacks and kidnappings that specifically targeted private sector organizations in Algeria, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and elsewhere in the region, the U.S. government declared AQIM, Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun (al-Mulathamini), and separately Ansaru and Boko Haram as Foreign Terrorist Organizations.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, the

State Department's Rewards for Justice Program has offered rewards of up to \$5 million and \$7 million on Mokhtar Belmokhtar<sup>46</sup> and Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau,<sup>47</sup> respectively.

Two trends are evident when analyzing the attacks and kidnappings conducted in the Sahel during the last five years. First, Western private sector groups—non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations and even tourists—are the targets of choice for AQIM, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, and Ansaru.<sup>48</sup> Second, patterns of target and location have appeared. At most risk are the extractive industries (mining, oil and energy, and construction) operating near border regions.<sup>49</sup> Evidenced through the work of Ansaru in 2012 and al-Mulathamini/MUJAO in 2013, there have been at least seven separate incidents affecting the extractive sector since 2010, all within 250 miles from a border.<sup>50</sup> While the most fatal was the January 2013 attack near In Amenas, Algeria, numerous smaller incidents occurred in Niger and northern Nigeria. Indeed, companies in the extractive industry are likely to retain kidnap-for-ransom insurance and have a set precedent for paying ransoms, compared with NGOs and private citizens who may lack financial resources. Conducting attacks near borders often allows militants and kidnapers to cross into a neighboring country undetected.

46 "Rewards for Justice Program: Mokhtar Belmokhtar (2014)," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, available at [www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=belmokhtar&language=english](http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=belmokhtar&language=english).

47 "Rewards for Justice Program: Abubakar Shekau (2014)," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security, available at [www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=shekau&language=english](http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=shekau&language=english).

48 This statement is not necessarily true for Boko Haram. It is believed that Boko Haram operates primarily as a domestic insurgency—confined to a region of Nigeria with few Westerners—rather than a transnational jihadist organization, although this article makes clear its relationship with al-Qa`ida and its affiliates.

49 To be sure, the relationship between the target and location is not necessarily causal; there may be additional variables that are not yet evident to this author. Regardless, the history of attacks affecting extractive companies near borders in the Sahel is worth noting.

50 Personal interview, anonymous, U.S. Embassy, Niamey, Niger, January 21, 2014; Jesús.

38 "Ransom Business: Blood Money," *Economist*, November 6, 2013; "U.N. Security Council Urges End to Ransom Payments to Extremists," Reuters, January 27, 2014.

39 "Remarks of Under Secretary David Cohen at Chatham House on 'Kidnapping for Ransom: The Growing Terrorist Financing Challenge,'" U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 5, 2012.

40 "Kidnap and Ransom Insurance. I'm a Client...Get me Out of Here," *Economist*, June 27, 2013.

41 This notion has been reiterated numerous times during interviews between this author and private sector corporate executives, NGOs, and security vendors.

42 "Statement by Ambassador Samantha Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, on the Adoption of UNSCR 2133 on Kidnapping for Ransom," United States Mission to the United Nations, January 27, 2014.

43 "Al-Qaeda Kills British Hostage," al-Jazeera, June 4, 2009.

44 "No More Ransoms Paid for French Hostages, Hollande Tells Families," Radio France Internationale, March 19, 2013.

45 See list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, available at [www.state.gov/j/ct/list](http://www.state.gov/j/ct/list).

## Conclusion

As France's Operation Serval begins to draw down in northern Mali and successful Western and Sahelian counterterrorism operations continue to rid the region of senior terrorists,<sup>51</sup> the Sahel is still a critical area to monitor during the coming years.<sup>52</sup> The combination of weak central governments, porous borders, and vast open land allows terrorist groups such as AQIM and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Murabitun to operate with few restraints.

These terrorist groups have collaborated with Boko Haram and its splinter group Ansaru in Nigeria, highlighting the linkages between various actors—even those with marginally different ideologies and objectives—and the adaptivity of terrorism in the Sahel. While the January 2013 French military incursion in Mali motivated terrorists in the region to justify hostage taking and armed assaults, it is clear that kidnap-for-ransom still plays a largely financial and criminal role in the operations of Belmokhtar and his associates. When taking into account recent terrorism incidents in the Sahel and statements by Mokhtar Belmokhtar and Boko Haram's Abubakar Shekau, a pattern emerges, revealing that extractive companies operating near borders face the most risk. With increasing counterterrorism resources devoted to the Sahel in recent years, it is clear that extremist actors in the region remain a significant threat to Western interests.

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*The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.*

<sup>51</sup> This claim is evidenced by many articles in major media publications during 2013.

<sup>52</sup> See the statement by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield on October 30, 2013.

## The Saudi Foreign Fighter Presence in Syria

By Aaron Y. Zelin

THE FOREIGN FIGHTER trend currently developing in Syria is unprecedented both due to the quantity of fighters as well as the number of foreign nationals involved. For Saudi foreign fighters, this trend is not new. Saudis have been involved in foreign fighting since the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They played one of the most prominent roles in that war, as well as in subsequent conflicts in Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan in the 1990s, Afghanistan post-9/11, and Iraq. Similarly, Saudis are one of the leading foreign national groups in Syria in terms of the total number of individuals fighting, and also among those who have died.

This article offers a brief history of Saudi involvement in past jihadist conflicts, the current statistics on how many Saudis have traveled to Syria, and highlights cases of important Saudis who have joined the war. The article finds that similar to past foreign fighter mobilizations, the Saudis have been one of the largest contingents, with some individuals taking important positions on the ground as clerics or leaders. This development could have far reaching implications. Saudi foreign fighters who join jihadist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or al-Qa`ida's Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) will gain tactical experience and further ideological indoctrination in Syria. Once their "tour" in Syria ends, there is a risk that these fighters could adopt al-Qa`ida's targeting patterns and conduct attacks against the Saudi government or Western interests.

### From Khurasan to al-Sham

Scholars consider the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s as the first contemporary case of the modern foreign fighter phenomenon in the context of Sunni militancy. Due to the fact that this influx was, at the time, a new development, researchers did not track the flow of foreigners as they have for Iraq or Syria in the past decade. It should be noted, however, that the foreign fighter trend in the 1980s was far different than now; many who went

in the 1980s were more "tourists" than actual fighters.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a direct comparison to more recent conflicts may be informative in terms of observing how many left for each warzone, but it does not account for the fact that the situations are from a different time period and context.

Nevertheless, through archival, primary source, and field research, Norwegian academic Thomas Hegghammer believes that "a majority of Arab Afghans were from Saudi Arabia" from 1979-1992.<sup>2</sup> This trend would continue in Chechnya in the 1990s, when the top leaders among the foreign fighters embedded in the insurgency against Russia were from Saudi Arabia—with the most notable being Samir bin Salih bin `Abdullah al-Suwaylim, better known as Umar ibn al-Khattab.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, according to 51 biographies of Arab volunteers to Chechnya that analyst Murad Batal al-Shishani collated, Saudis accounted for 59% of that dataset.<sup>4</sup> In Bosnia, this tendency remained, although not nearly as prevalent. According to Bosnian government intelligence records on the conflict, the Saudis were once again the largest contingent, reportedly making up 25% of the foreign fighters.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the post-9/11 conflicts, Saudis have been the top foreign national group involved in the more significant jihadist wars. In Iraq, for example, Evan

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 47. Tourists can have a number of different meanings in this context. It could either represent those going for thrill and adventure, or could highlight individuals who only go to the front lines to say they have gone, but never actually fight.

<sup>2</sup> "Arab Afghan" is a moniker that has been used to describe the contingent of individuals who traveled to Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. See Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security* 35:3 (2010/11): p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31:5 (2008): p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> Murad Batal al-Shishani, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya* (Washington, D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> These documents were obtained from Bosnian government records by J.M. Berger for research on the documentary *Sarajevo Ricochet* (Febrius Film, 2010). Berger e-mailed this author a picture of a pie chart breakdown on June 3, 2013.

Kohlmann documented the foreigners killed fighting in the insurgency from June 2003 to June 2005. Kohlmann concluded that 55% of those killed were Saudi, with the next highest being Syrians at 12.7%.<sup>6</sup> In October 2007, this would later be affirmed when the U.S. military found a cache of documents in Sinjar from al-Qa`ida in Iraq identifying those who entered Iraq from August 2006 to August 2007. Saudis were the highest percentage, comprising 41% of the individuals where records noted their nationality.<sup>7</sup> This trend has continued in the current conflict in Syria.

#### Current Estimates

In late March 2014, a Saudi official stated that 1,200 Saudis have traveled to fight the Bashar al-Assad regime, placing Saudis at the top of the list of foreign nationals in Syria.<sup>8</sup> More recently, the Saudi Interior Ministry said that 25% of those who had gone have since returned.<sup>9</sup> Based on a database maintained by this author since the fall of 2011 on foreign jihadist "martyrdom" notices, exactly 300 Saudis have died in Syria as of late February 2014, which also is the highest number of fatalities among foreign nationals.<sup>10</sup> This tentatively suggests that there could be close to 600 Saudis in Syria, Iraq (the ISIL uses individuals on both sides of the border) or elsewhere abroad.<sup>11</sup>

While Saudis might currently be the highest foreign national group that has traveled to Syria, this only came to pass around the summer of 2013.<sup>12</sup> In the early days of the conflict, foreign fighters from Syria's neighboring countries (Lebanese, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Jordanians), many of whom previously fought U.S. forces in Iraq, were the first to arrive.<sup>13</sup> A year later, Saudis began increasing in number, although the largest contingents based on percentage were from Libya and Tunisia, two of the countries that successfully deposed their leaders during the original wave of uprisings in 2011. Many went as "tourists" to continue riding the wave of the "Arab Spring," while others went to assist the Syrian rebels militarily.<sup>14</sup> A number of fighters joined more radical forces such as JN and other smaller jihadist factions.<sup>15</sup>

What led to the influx of Saudi foreign fighters? While ease of travel certainly accounts for a portion of the rise in the unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters, it is not the main factor in the Saudi case.<sup>16</sup> First, travel limitations have never been an issue for Saudis, as they have been heavily involved in all prior large-scale jihadist foreign fighter mobilizations. Second, if travel was the main factor, then one would have expected to see a large-scale Saudi mobilization earlier in the conflict.

Instead, the public entrance of Lebanese Hizb Allah into the conflict on the side of the al-Assad regime during the battle of Qusayr in late May 2013 precipitated the sudden increase in Saudi foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>17</sup> Less than a week later, in response, mainstream clerics such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi called upon Sunni Muslims to go fight in Syria: "anyone

**"Exactly 300 Saudis have died in Syria as of late February 2014, which also is the highest number of fatalities among foreign nationals."**

who has the ability, who is trained to fight...has to go; I call on Muslims to go and support their brothers in Syria."<sup>18</sup> This statement was later praised by Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Abdul Aziz al-Shaykh.<sup>19</sup> Two weeks after al-Qaradawi's announcement, Saud al-Shuraym, a Saudi cleric at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, proclaimed that Sunni Muslims had a duty to support the Syrian rebels "by all means."<sup>20</sup> Before Qusayr, Saudi religious scholars supported helping the Syrian rebels through financial means, but were not overt in terms of foreign fighting. Hizb Allah's admission of joining the conflict, the sectarianism that is intertwined in Saudi Arabia's state religion and education,<sup>21</sup> the clerical framing of the conflict as *wajib* (duty), campaigns of support for the rebels, as well as the summer months coinciding with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan all helped catalyze efforts to send Saudi fighters to Syria.

6 Evan Kohlmann, "Foreign Fighters Reported Killed in Iraq: June 2003-June 2005," *Global Terror Alert*, June 2005.

7 Brian Fishman and Joseph Felner, *Al-Qa`ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

8 It is difficult to acquire accurate data from the Tunisian, Jordanian, or Lebanese governments on how many of its citizens have gone to Syria, but based on credible estimates they are just below the numbers from Saudi Arabia. See Peter Bergen, "Why the Saudis Unfriended the U.S.," CNN, March 26, 2014.

9 Fahd al-Dhiyabi, "Saudi Interior Ministry Says 25 Percent of Fighters in Syria Have Returned," *Asharq Alawsat*, March 24, 2014.

10 "Jihadi Martyr Notices," author's personal database, last updated February 25, 2014.

11 Although jihadists have announced 300 martyrdom notices, this number does not include Saudis who died fighting with non-jihadist units in Syria nor does it provide information on unannounced deaths.

12 Based on open source data, the second highest foreign nationals are Jordanians, with an estimated 1,000 Jordanians according to Abu Sayyaf, the top Jordanian Salafist leader in the country. It is possible that higher numbers of Lebanese and Iraqis have gone, but there is not much credible data on either cases due to a lack of government estimates. See "Alf Anasir min al-Tayyar al-Salafi al-Jihadi Bi-l-Urdun yuqatilun fi Suriyya," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, October 19, 2013.

13 Aaron Y. Zelin, "Foreign Fighters Trickle into the Syrian Rebellion," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 11, 2012.

14 Aaron Y. Zelin, Evan F. Kohlmann, and Laith al-Khoury, "Convoy of Martyrs in the Levant: A Joint Study Charting the Evolving Role of Sunni Foreign Fighters in the Armed Uprising Against the Assad Regime in Syria," *Jihadology.net* and *Flashpoint Global Partners*, June 2013.

15 Ibid.

16 Thomas Hegghammer, "Syria's Foreign Fighters," *Foreign Policy*, December 9, 2013.

17 Hassan Nasrallah, "Kalimah fi Eid al-Muqawama wa-l-Tahrir," *al-Manar*, May 25, 2013.

18 Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Khutbah al-Jumu'ah," May 31, 2013.

19 "Mufti al-Sa'udiyya yushid Bi-muwaqf al-Qaradhawi dhid Iran wa-Hizb Allah," *al-Arabiya*, June 6, 2013.

20 "Al-Shuraym yada'u Li-da'im thuar Suriyya wa-mudhaharah Bi-Misr," *al-Jazira*, June 14, 2013.

21 Nona Shea et al., "Saudi Arabia's Curriculum of Intolerance," *Freedom House*, 2006.

### From Where Do the Saudis Hail?

While it is difficult to determine specifics on the origins of all Saudi foreign fighters, the 300 jihadist death notices provide some insights considering that 203 of them detail the individual's origination city in Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup> The 203 deceased came from 12 of Saudi Arabia's 13 *minatiq* (regions). Only Jizan, which is the smallest region in Saudi Arabia, is not represented.<sup>23</sup> While one cannot draw too many conclusions from incomplete data, the strongest recruitment networks appear to be based in the center of the country or on the coasts.<sup>24</sup> This could be because the center of the country is more conservative overall, while all the areas have some of the highest population densities in Saudi Arabia.

Since quantitative analysis regarding the foreign fighter phenomenon only provides one aspect of detail, reviewing some cases of important individuals from Saudi Arabia who have joined the Syrian rebels is informative.

### Cases

#### Dr. `Abd Allah bin Muhammad al-Muhaysini

One of the most influential and well-known figures among Saudi foreign fighters in Syria is Dr. `Abd Allah bin Muhammad bin Sulayman al-Muhaysini. According to al-Muhaysini's autobiography, he was born in Buraydah (Qassim region) in north-central Saudi Arabia. He became a *hafiz* (one who has memorized the entire Qur'an) by the age of 15. For his bachelors studies, he majored in Shari`a at the University of Umm al-Qura in Mecca. He later completed his master's and doctorate in comparative *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) at al-Imam Muhammad ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh, writing his dissertation on legal provisions affecting war refugees in Islamic *fiqh*. He studied under a number of

shaykhs, including the controversial Shaykh Sulayman al-Ulwan who was arrested by Saudi authorities in 2004 for supporting al-Qa`ida. After his studies, al-Muhaysini was an imam and *da`iya* (missionary) at the Qatar mosque in Mecca, Jami` al-Thani.<sup>25</sup>

Since the Syrian uprising became a civil war, al-Muhaysini has been involved with fundraising to help the rebels procure weapons as well as assisting refugees.<sup>26</sup> Unlike many other high-profile clerics from the Gulf, al-Muhaysini—instead of just traveling to the frontlines for photo opportunities—moved to Syria around 2013. Al-Muhaysini claims no affiliation with any particular group, but he has been seen with Umar al-Shishani, who is now a leader in the ISIL, and Abu al-Walid al-Muhajir of JN.<sup>27</sup> Since the infighting between the ISIL and JN began in January 2014, al-Muhaysini has distanced himself from the ISIL.<sup>28</sup>

While al-Muhaysini has been a presence on social media and has become an important personality, he also is an actual player on the ground in Syria.<sup>29</sup> For one, he has fought and been injured in battle.<sup>30</sup> More importantly, he set up the Da`wa al-Jihad Center in December 2013, which has been involved with Islamic lessons, educating children, and aid.<sup>31</sup> He also set up the al-Faruq training camp in March 2014, potentially as a reference to the infamous one in Afghanistan pre-9/11.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, al-Muhaysini

has been vocal in attempting to broker peace between the ISIL and other rebel factions. Most notably, in late January 2014, al-Muhaysini tried to settle the disputes through *Mubadarat al-Umma* (the Initiative of the Umma).<sup>33</sup> Although the initiative failed because the ISIL did not participate, it highlighted al-Muhaysini's stature since all of the other key groups cooperated.<sup>34</sup>

#### `Abd al-Muhsin `Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (Sanafi al-Nasr)

Unlike al-Muhaysini, `Abd al-Muhsin `Abd Allah Ibrahim al-Sharikh (also known by his online moniker Sanafi al-Nasr/@Snafialnasr) was not as well known publicly prior to his "reported" death in Syria on March 21, 2014.<sup>35</sup> On April 18, al-Sharikh said that he had been in a coma since March, and that JN claimed he was dead so that he could recover from injuries sustained while fighting.<sup>36</sup> Al-Sharikh is allegedly an important player within al-Qa`ida and tasked as being the head of its "Victory Committee" in Syria.<sup>37</sup> He is third cousins with Usama bin Ladin, and two of his brothers were detained at Guantanamo Bay, but have since been released.<sup>38</sup> He fought in other jihadist battlefronts from Chechnya to Afghanistan to Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> Before arriving in Syria, he was based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.<sup>40</sup>

In 2009, al-Sharikh was placed on Saudi Arabia's 85 "most wanted" list.<sup>41</sup>

tus/443626270199644160; Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Mu'askr al-Faruq," March 17, 2014, available at [www.justpaste.it/erx4](http://www.justpaste.it/erx4). Al-Muhaysini announced the establishment of the al-Faruq camp on March 17, 2014, and called for people to join for training.

33 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Mubadarah al-Ummah," Mubadarah al-Ummah Facebook page, January 23, 2014, available at [www.facebook.com/mobadratalomaa/posts/694970217214186](http://www.facebook.com/mobadratalomaa/posts/694970217214186).

34 Al-Muhaysini, "Ila hal ballaghat: 'an mubadarah al-ummah."

35 For details, see [www.twitter.com/alMutasim007/status/447103519695200256](http://www.twitter.com/alMutasim007/status/447103519695200256).

36 See his statement posted at [www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/457266856794292225](http://www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/457266856794292225).

37 Thomas Joscelyn, "Head of al Qaeda 'Victory Committee' in Syria," *The Long War Journal*, March 6, 2014.

38 Ibid.

39 For details, see [www.twitter.com/1\\_K\\_Z/status/447105984771919872](http://www.twitter.com/1_K_Z/status/447105984771919872).

40 Eric Schmitt, "Qaeda Militants Seek Syria Base, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times*, March 25, 2014.

41 "Qa'ima al-Matlubin 85," *Wizara al-Dakhiliyya*,

22 "Jihadi Martyr Notices."

23 This could be due to the small sample size of individuals whose origins are known.

24 Since a number of death notices mention only the region an individual is from and not a city, this article identifies only the region. The following is a list of regions in Saudi Arabia along with the corresponding number of dead jihadists in Syria from those regions: Riyadh: 62; Qassim: 40; Makka: 27; Eastern Region: 22; Tabuk: 11; Jawf: 10; Najran: 9; Medina: 7; Northern Borders: 6; Asir: 4; Ha'il: 4; Bahah: 1.

25 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Sirah al-dhatiyya," undated, available at [www.mhesne.com](http://www.mhesne.com).

26 Asher Berman, "Saudi Preacher Relocates to Syria," Syria Survey blog, November 17, 2013.

27 See the following Twitter posts at [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395283462854569984](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395283462854569984) and [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395984154942504960](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/395984154942504960).

28 Dr. `Abd Allah Muhammad al-Muhaysini, "Ila hal ballaghat: 'an mubadarah al-ummah," February 2, 2014, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO8\\_Tm\\_Mbyg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO8_Tm_Mbyg).

29 Miriam Berger, "How One Jihadi in Syria Became a Twitter Sensation," *Buzzfeed*, April 1, 2014.

30 For details, see the YouTube video located at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUUY1ckE4qM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUUY1ckE4qM).

31 See, for example, the following posts: [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/408331097773473792](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/408331097773473792), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swc3i5H5p5k&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Swc3i5H5p5k&feature=youtu.be), and [www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/427549360260648960](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/status/427549360260648960).

32 See, for example, [www.twitter.com/mhesne/sta](http://www.twitter.com/mhesne/sta)

His listing states that he was born in 1985 and is from Shaqraa in central Saudi Arabia. In September 2011, he wrote for al-Qa`ida's *Vanguards of Khurasan* magazine about Saudi female prisoners.<sup>42</sup> He has kept a low profile during the infighting between the ISIL and the rebels, although he is firmly on JN's and Ahrar al-Sham's side.<sup>43</sup> Prior to the death of a key al-Qa`ida leader in Syria, Abu Khalid al-Suri, who was Ayman al-Zawahiri's emissary for resolving the conflict between the ISIL and JN as well as a founding member and senior leader in Ahrar al-Sham, al-Sharikh stated that Abu Khalid confided in him that he believed the ISIL would send five *inghimasi* (fully committed) fighters to kill him.<sup>44</sup> Following the initial announcement of al-Sharikh's "death," there was a huge outpouring of support through the hashtag in Arabic "#Istishahid\_Sanafi\_alNasr" (Martyrdom of Sanafi al-Nasr), highlighting his career involvement in jihad on a number of fronts.<sup>45</sup>

#### Other Saudi Fighters

On October 20, 2012, Abu `Awn al-Shamali died in Aleppo fighting for JN. He conducted a suicide bombing in an explosives-laden vehicle at the French hospital. JN claimed that the attack killed 300 people, while the Syrian government said it only caused damage to the building.<sup>46</sup> The operation was detailed in JN's official video release, *The Beginning of the End #5*.<sup>47</sup>

`Abd al-`Aziz Jughayman (also known as `Abd al-Malik al-Ahsa'i), who was from al-Ahsa, was killed fighting in Idlib on November 24, 2012.

February 3, 2009.

42 Sanafi al-Nasr, "Hal sayafaji'na al-i'alam al-Sa'udi bi-quwa'im al-matlubat," *Tali'a al-Khurasan*, Issue #19, September 11, 2011.

43 Joscelyn.

44 For details, see [www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/437590454604136448](http://www.twitter.com/Snafialnasr/status/437590454604136448).

45 For the entire archive, search on Twitter for [#استشهاد\\_بنافي\\_النصر](https://twitter.com/istishahid_sanafi_al_nasr)

46 "Beginning of the End #5: Battle of the Commander Abu 'Aisha: Blowing Up the Barracks of the French Hospital in a Vehicle Martyrdom Operation," *Jabhat al-Nusra*, January 10, 2013; "Qa'ima al-sharf: shuhada Bilad al-Haramayn fi Suriyya al-habiba," [almdina55.com](http://almdina55.com), January 31, 2013; "Armed Forces Target Terrorists in Aleppo, Foil Terrorists' Infiltration Attempts from Lebanon," *Syria News Agency*, October 21, 2012.

47 Ibid.

Jughayman was a former professor at King Faisal University in al-Ahsa. A veteran of previous jihadist conflicts in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kashmir, he served in at least two jihadist combat tours in Afghanistan, including one immediately after the 9/11 attacks. After fleeing Afghanistan in early 2002, Jughaiman was captured by Syrian authorities and imprisoned for almost three years.<sup>48</sup>

Khalid al-Suwayd (also known as Abu Himam) died fighting against the al-Assad regime in Damascus on March 5, 2013.<sup>49</sup> Previously, he fought U.S. troops in Iraq, presumably with al-Qa`ida in Iraq as part of a mortar team and later an artillery team.<sup>50</sup> He was arrested for two years after going to fight in Iraq, and Saudi Arabia suspended his passport.<sup>51</sup> Unknown parties were able to transport him to Syria.<sup>52</sup> He fought in eastern al-Ghuta before joining the fight in Damascus.<sup>53</sup> During a raid on the Ghasula security barrier, he conducted a suicide-style attack with four other foreign nationals from Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany and Jordan that allegedly killed 50-60 soldiers.<sup>54</sup> Al-Suwayd and the other assailants were all killed in the attack.<sup>55</sup>

Nayif al-Mutayri (also known as Abu Bara' al-Madani), who was from Mecca, died fighting with the ISIL on January 5, 2014. He was also a *munshid* (one who does *anashid*) for the ISIL's official *nashid* media outlet, the Ajnad Foundation for Media Production.<sup>56</sup> Abu Basir al-Murqi died fighting in Azaz for the ISIL also

48 "Sur # Istishahid al-Batal `Abd al-`Aziz," *Ansar al-Mujahidin Forum*, November 24, 2012; "Nazafa lakum Khabar Istishahid al-Batal `Abd al-`Aziz al-Jughayman min al-Ahsa' fi Bilad ash-Sham," *Shamukh al-Islam*, November 24, 2012; "Saudi Man Killed After Three Decades of Jihad," *Saudi Gazette*, November 27, 2012.

49 "Al-Shahid al-Batal (Khalid al-Suwayd) min ardh jazira al-arab - Bilad al-Haramayn - wa-qisa istishahiduhu," *Shamukh al-Islam*, March 21, 2013.

50 Ibid.

51 It is not clear which government arrested him.

52 "Al-Shahid al-Batal (Khalid al-Suwayd) min ardh jazira al-arab - Bilad al-Haramayn - wa-qisa istishahiduhu." 53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 For details, see [www.twitter.com/Bttar\\_mohajr/status/419852683122851841](http://www.twitter.com/Bttar_mohajr/status/419852683122851841), [www.twitter.com/AbuSiqr/status/420725642217660416](http://www.twitter.com/AbuSiqr/status/420725642217660416), and [www.twitter.com/zhoofl/status/421255925413187584/photo/1](http://www.twitter.com/zhoofl/status/421255925413187584/photo/1).

on January 5, 2014. Prior to his death, he was the head of the ISIL's Shari'a institute in Azaz.<sup>57</sup>

On January 18, 2014, `Abd Allah Sulayman al-Dhabah (also known as Abu `Ali al-Qasimi), from Qassim, was killed in al-Bab fighting with the ISIL. He was killed by "sahwat," a reference to the tribal uprising against al-Qa`ida in Iraq last decade, which has been used by the ISIL as a rhetorical tool against any of their enemies within the Syrian rebellion. Prior to joining the ISIL, he was a member of JN. Previously, al-Dhabah fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan with Abu al-Layth al-Libi and the Pakistani Taliban's Baitullah Mehsud. The main locations where he fought were Waziristan, Orakzai, and Ghazni. He was also on Twitter: @mlng4455.<sup>58</sup>

#### Conclusion

In the case of Saudi foreign fighters, past large-scale mobilizations have led to a number of consequences: the rise of Bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida after the original anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, post-9/11 Saudis from the Afghan front returning home and pursuing an insurgency against the Saudi government, and Saudis returning from the Iraqi battlefield to join al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, which led to attacks from Yemen into Saudi Arabia.<sup>59</sup> There are already signs that some fighters have gone to Yemen again to join AQAP after fighting in Syria.<sup>60</sup>

57 For details, see [www.twitter.com/nashraljihad/status/419879228067569664](http://www.twitter.com/nashraljihad/status/419879228067569664).

58 For more details, see [www.shaghor.com/index.php?s=26&cat=10&subcat=7&id=1068#.UtrM861-7B3A.facebook](http://www.shaghor.com/index.php?s=26&cat=10&subcat=7&id=1068#.UtrM861-7B3A.facebook), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564345146593280](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564345146593280), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564543415541761](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424564543415541761), [www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424565071692324864](http://www.twitter.com/silentweep/status/424565071692324864). Also see "Wanted Saudi al Qaeda Militant Killed in Syria: SITE," *Reuters*, January 24, 2014.

59 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Thomas Hegghammer, *The Failure of Jihad in Saudi Arabia* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010); Gregory D. Johnsen, *The Last Refuge: Yemen, al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2013).

60 Rania El Gamal, "Saudis Hardened by Wars in Syria, Iraq Join al Qaeda in Yemen," *Reuters*, March 14, 2014.

While the Saudi government did not expend great effort to deter travel to Syria,<sup>61</sup> they have tried to be proactive in preventing violence once these fighters return home.<sup>62</sup> In early February 2014, the Saudi government issued a royal order declaring that any citizen who fights in conflicts abroad will face three to twenty years of jail.<sup>63</sup> A month later, the Saudis released a royal decree designating JN and al-Qa`ida in Iraq (now known as the ISIL) as terrorist organizations.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, to deter more recruitment, the Saudis used the television program *Humumana* (Our Concerns) to promote the disillusioned Saudi foreign fighter Sulayman Sa`ud Sbi`i after he returned home from Syria. The fighter described the weaponization of *takfir* (declaring a Muslim an infidel, which in this context then implies that one can kill that person) among the different rebel groups. He also noted how the Syrian jihad is not as glamorous as it is portrayed in the media and online.<sup>65</sup>

At this juncture, due to the sheer number of Saudis who have gone abroad to fight in Syria, there will likely be future ramifications. How and when these ramifications occur remains to be seen.

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61 Early in the conflict, the Saudi government did not appear to actively try to stop individuals from traveling abroad to fight in Syria.

62 It is important to note that not all foreign fighters who have gone to Syria are jihadists. Many in the beginning fought with the Free Syrian Army.

63 "182-184 | Royal Order: A Penalty of Imprisonment To All Those Who Participated In Hostilities Outside the Kingdom or Belonging to the Streams or Religious Groups and Radical Ideas," Wa-Kala al-Anba' al-Sa'udiyya, February 3, 2014.

64 "Full Text of Saudi Interior Ministry Statement Designating Terrorist Organizations," *Asharq Alawsat*, March 8, 2014.

65 "Al-Halaqa al-Sadisa: tujarib shabab maghrur bihim," March 5, 2014, available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ8SS1HmT2o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQ8SS1HmT2o).

## Mexico's Vigilante Militias Rout the Knights Templar Drug Cartel

By Ioan Grillo

MEXICAN ARMED CITIZEN militias, known as self-defense squads or *autodefensas*, have mushroomed in early 2014 and led a campaign that has dealt decisive blows against the Knights Templar drug cartel in the state of Michoacán. The vigilantes have changed the dynamic of Mexico's ongoing drug war. They have proved themselves as a significant third force—alongside government security forces and cartel gunmen—and have shown that powerful cartels can be vulnerable.

Self-defense squads have won important support from residents in Michoacán, in the neighboring state of Guerrero and in migrant communities in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Some see them as a sign of hope following years of cartel violence that ravaged many Mexican towns and villages. Others, however, worry about the rise of these vigilantes, as a significant number of vigilante gunmen have criminal records. In recent months, for example, Mexican police have arrested some vigilantes for crimes including murder.<sup>2</sup> Such arrests feed worries that vigilantism will only inflame more violence, and some fear that the self-defense squads could begin to commit atrocities like the massacres perpetrated by paramilitaries in Colombia in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>3</sup> There are also signs of vigilante groups spreading to other parts of Mexico—including close to the U.S. border.

This article examines the roots of the vigilante militias, their cadre, as well as how they arm and organize themselves. It examines the Mexican government's

1 Groups of migrants in California and other states have organized in support of the vigilantes. See Raymundo Pérez Arellano and Luis Díaz, "Autodefensas USA," *Noticieros Televisa*, February 4, 2014.

2 Mark Stevenson, "Another Mexican Vigilante Accused of Murder," *Associated Press*, March 31, 2014.

3 The fear of the vigilantes turning into Colombian-style paramilitaries was voiced most forcefully by Human Rights Watch Americas Director Jose Miguel Vivanco. See "Mexico's Response to Vigilante Groups Insignificant," *Agence France-Presse*, January 21, 2014.

shifting and sometimes contradictory position on the self-defense squads. It also looks at the future of the vigilantes, and whether these groups will grow and become increasingly dangerous or be a passing phenomenon.

### Indigenous Origins

The creation of Mexico's self-defense squads is closely linked to the growth of indigenous community police forces. Mexico's millions of indigenous people, who speak languages such as Mixtec and Nahuatl, have carried out a certain amount of self-policing for centuries.<sup>4</sup> In 1995, amid heightened demands for indigenous rights that followed the Zapatista uprising, indigenous activists in Guerrero state formed a network of community police forces, known as the Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarios (CRAC), armed with hunting rifles and shotguns.<sup>5</sup>

As drug cartels wreaked increasing havoc in Guerrero in recent years, many indigenous residents turned to the community police, and the CRAC has grown to command more than 1,500 volunteer officers in dozens of villages and small towns.<sup>6</sup> The CRAC not only detains people, but also tries them in village or regional assemblies and imprisons them in community jails.<sup>7</sup>

A Guerrero state law recognized the CRAC as a legal force, but there is fierce debate as to the parameters of this parallel indigenous justice system.<sup>8</sup> The Mexican army has detained CRAC activists for carrying guns outside of their villages, while CRAC supporters have had violent clashes with state police.<sup>9</sup>

4 The history of indigenous self-policing is explained in "Justice at the Barrel of a Gun: Vigilante Militias in Mexico," *International Crisis Group*, May 28, 2013. It was also detailed in personal interview, Raul Benitez-Manaut, Center for Research on North America, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico, March 17, 2014.

5 Personal interview, Eliseo Villar, leader of CRAC, Chilpancingo, Mexico, April 2013.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*

8 For details, see the following state law: *Ley Numero 701 De Reconocimiento, Derechos y Cultura de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indigenas del Estado de Guerrero*.

9 Sergio Ocampo, "Se Enfrentan Policias de Guerrero y Comunitarios en el Fortin," *La Jornada*, March 19, 2014.

In neighboring Michoacán state, some indigenous residents inspired by the CRAC also took up guns against criminals. Most notably, a group of the indigenous Purepecha people in the Cheran municipality armed themselves in 2011 to fight illegal logging and violence from the Knights Templar cartel.<sup>10</sup> Again citing their indigenous rights to self-policing, the Cheran residents constructed barricades made of sandbags to guard the entrances to their town.<sup>11</sup> Such barricades provide an effective defensive position to fend off cartel gunmen and have since been built by the vigilantes across large swathes of Michoacán and Guerrero.

In Guerrero, thousands of vigilantes rose up in the Costa Chica area in January 2013 to fight cartel kidnappers and extortionists plaguing the mountains.<sup>12</sup> These vigilantes were led by indigenous Mixtec Bruno Placido, a seasoned community police activist.<sup>13</sup> Yet the vigilantes rapidly spilled over into non-indigenous villages and neighborhoods. The movement thus ceased to be a purely indigenous affair, governed by self-determination laws, and entered the majority Spanish-speaking population.

The Costa Chica vigilantes carried more potent weapons such as AR-15s and Uzis, as well as shotguns and hunting rifles.<sup>14</sup> They also pioneered the tactic of deploying hundreds of vigilantes to sweep into towns, overwhelming cartel gunmen.<sup>15</sup> The following month, self-defense squads rose in the seething Tierra Caliente area of Michoacán using identical tactics.

### Fighting the Knights Templar

The vigilante militias that rose in Michoacán's Tierra Caliente in February 2013 quickly became a larger and better-armed force than their counterparts in Guerrero.<sup>16</sup> This is partially due to the fact that they had access to higher-quality resources.<sup>17</sup> Members were not indigenous *campesinos* (peasant farmers), but included many large farm owners and businessmen.<sup>18</sup> They also had to

## “While Guerrero vigilantes fought peripheral cells of fragmented drug gangs, the Michoacán self-defense squads faced one of the most powerful cartels in Mexico, the Knights Templar.”

become a more potent armed force just to survive.<sup>19</sup> While Guerrero vigilantes fought peripheral cells of fragmented drug gangs, the Michoacán self-defense squads faced one of the most powerful cartels in Mexico, the Knights Templar. If the vigilantes did not fight together and use more effective weapons, they would be defeated.<sup>20</sup>

The Knights Templar cartel has grabbed media headlines for its cult-like practices and pseudo-religious ideology as well as its brutal violence.<sup>21</sup> The *templarios* name themselves after medieval crusaders to appear brave and righteous even as they traffic crystal meth, heroin, marijuana and cocaine. They have a book of codes, conduct rituals in mock medieval armor and idolize their leader Nazario “The Maddest One” Moreno like a saint.<sup>22</sup>

Moreno was killed by Mexican marines in March 2014.<sup>23</sup> The Knights often behead or mutilate their victims and leave their heads in discotheques or town squares.<sup>24</sup>

The Knights also stood out for the way they dominated the local Michoacán economy. They diversified from trafficking drugs into a more substantial portfolio of crimes, including kidnapping, extorting businesses large and small, illegal mining and illegal logging.<sup>25</sup> This diversification into crimes that directly harm civil society is an important factor that led to the formation of the vigilantes.

Other Mexican cartels such as the Zetas have also moved into a range of criminal activities, but the Knights Templar was perhaps the most systematic cartel, extorting almost every business in its territories. Corn growers say they were forced to sell their maize at three pesos a kilo to the Knights Templar, who subsequently sold it to tortilla makers for six pesos; lime and avocado farmers paid a percentage on every ton of fruit they grew; local stores, builders, restaurants, and gas stations all paid monthly quotas.<sup>26</sup> The failure of the government to stop these pervasive extortion schemes is cited by the Michoacán self-defense squads as their main justification for taking up arms.

“We believe that when the government is incapable of taking care of the people, of defending the people, the people have the right to defend themselves,” said Estanislao Beltran, a leader and spokesman of the Michoacán self-defense squads. “The people here, fed up of the injustice caused by the Knights Templar said ‘*basta*,’ and they rose up.”<sup>27</sup>

10 Karla Zabudovsky, “Reclaiming the Forests and the Right to Feel Safe,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2012.

11 Ibid.

12 Personal reporting in Tierra Colorada, Guerrero, April 2013. Also see Adam Thomson, “Mexico Vigilantes Take Law Into Own Hands,” *Financial Times*, April 12, 2013.

13 Ibid.

14 This author witnessed vigilantes carrying these guns during personal reporting in Tierra Colorada, Guerrero, April 2013.

15 Personal reporting in Tierra Colorada, Guerrero, April 2013.

16 Personal reporting in Apatzingan, Paracuaro, Buenavista, Antunez and Nueva Italia, Mexico, January, February and March 2014.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ioan Grillo, “Crusaders of Meth: Mexico’s Deadly Knights Templar,” *Time Magazine*, June 23, 2011.

22 Ibid.; Catherine E. Shoichet, “Notorious Mexican Cartel Leader Nazario Moreno Dead – Again,” CNN, March 11, 2014.

23 Ibid.

24 “Hallan Cuatro Cuerpos Decapitados en un Convulso Estado de Mexico,” *El Dia*, February 5, 2014.

25 Dave Graham, “Chinese Iron Trade Fuels Port Clash With Mexican Drug Cartel,” Reuters, January 1, 2014.

26 Personal interviews, businessmen and residents, Apatzingan, Paracuaro, Buenavista, Antunez and Nueva Italia, Mexico, January, February and March 2014.

27 Personal interview, vigilante leader Estanislao Beltran, Apatzingan, Mexico, February 2014.

### A Grueling Campaign

When the self-defense squads of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente first rose, they were vulnerable to the heavily armed Knights Templar and cornered in a few towns and villages. They defended themselves with layers of defensive barricades, manned day and night by vigilantes armed with assault rifles.<sup>28</sup> They gradually spread to neighboring towns and villages, establishing cells of vigilantes in each territory they entered.<sup>29</sup> The balance of power shifted decisively in 2014, when the vigilantes advanced into the key towns of Paracuaro and Nueva Italia in January and Apatzingan in February.<sup>30</sup>

The self-defense squads form cells of about 10 men, led by a coordinator. These coordinators in turn answer to local or regional commanders.<sup>31</sup> About 30 commanders sit on a governing council, responsible for major decisions and strategies in Michoacán.<sup>32</sup> By April 2014, thousands of vigilantes bore arms in 30 municipalities in the state.<sup>33</sup>

The vigilantes smuggle in guns bought illegally in the United States and capture others from the Knights Templar.<sup>34</sup> Some of the vigilantes already had firearms experience because they were members of rifle clubs. They also trained with members who had served in the Mexican army, learning tactics such as how to advance into gunfire.<sup>35</sup>

Vigilantes often fight defensively against Knights Templar gunmen who ambush them at barricades on the edge of their communities. In other cases, they fight offensively, confronting cartel shooters as they advance into towns. When vigilante groups took Paracuaro in January 2014, a gangster

attempted to fight them off, carrying a rocket launcher.<sup>36</sup> The vigilantes shot him dead before he could return fire.

A vigilante known by the *nom de guerre* Comandante Cinco has led several of the major offensives. He stated that his men will pardon lower level Knights Templar members, but the higher-level gangsters and killers must flee or risk death.<sup>37</sup> "We have to kill them," he said. "If they captured me, do you think they would let me live?"<sup>38</sup> There has been no official count of the casualties from fighting between the Knights Templar and self-defense squads, but one vigilante said that more than 200 had been killed on both sides during a year of fighting.<sup>39</sup> While concerning, this is a fraction of the more than 70,000 estimated to have been killed in cartel related violence in Mexico since late 2006.<sup>40</sup>

### Shifting Government Response

The government of President Enrique Peña Nieto has led a varied and shifting policy on the self-defense squads. After the vigilantes first rose in the Tierra Caliente in 2013, the army arrested 51 members for the possession of illegal weapons.<sup>41</sup> The vigilante movement defied these detentions and continued to grow and gain public support, with leaders appearing on top television news shows and opinion polls showing public sympathy toward them.<sup>42</sup> Security forces were then cautious about arresting more vigilantes as their numbers multiplied.

36 Photojournalists captured images of the dead Knights Templar gunman bearing the rocket launcher.

37 Personal interview, vigilante leader Comandante Cinco, Paracuaro, January 2014.

38 Ibid.

39 Personal interview, vigilante commander, Apatzingan, March 2014.

40 While there is discussion about the number of deaths caused by cartel related violence, most concur that at least 70,000 have been killed since December 2006, using counts provided by the government and those by Mexican media.

41 "Suman 51 Miembros de Grupo de Autodefensa Detenidos en Mexico," *Prensa Libre*, March 12, 2013.

42 Various opinion polls showed positive public perception of the self-defense squads. One in January 2014 found that 52.3% said the vigilantes were good and only 29.7% said they were bad. See "Encuesta: Crece El Apoyo de Ciudadanos a Las Autodefensas," *ADNPolitico*, January 29, 2014.

When the vigilantes led a major offensive into Nueva Italia and Paracuaro, Michoacán, in January 2014, provoking prolonged firefights, more than 12,000 police and soldiers descended on the state to keep order. The government then forged an effective alliance with the self-defense squads, holding a series of

**"The failure of the government to stop these pervasive extortion schemes is cited by the Michoacán self-defense squads as their main justification for taking up arms."**

meetings with their leaders.<sup>43</sup> Some vigilantes became members of the Rural Defense Corps—a volunteer corps linked to the Mexican army<sup>44</sup>—while others continued to operate illegally, but were still tolerated, operating side-by-side with federal police and soldiers.<sup>45</sup> The vigilante leaders say they passed information to the security forces, including names and addresses of Templar leaders.<sup>46</sup>

Peña Nieto, who had condemned vigilante justice, supported this new position. "Some of the so-called self-defense squads have genuinely organized themselves to defend against the incursion of organized crime," he said.<sup>47</sup> This effective alliance was formed when the vigilantes were in a position of strength and had gained the upper hand against the Knights Templar. With the security forces

43 Dudley Althaus, "With Friends Like These, Can Mexico Find Justice?" *Global Post*, March 13, 2014.

44 "Mexico To Integrate Vigilantes Into Security Forces," *BBC*, January 28, 2014.

45 Richard Fausset, "Mexico Vigilantes Backed By Troops March Into Key City In Michoacán," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 2014.

46 Personal interviews, vigilante barricades, Apatzingan, Paracuaro, Buenavista, Antunez and Nueva Italia, Mexico, January, February and March 2014.

47 Georgina Olson, "Peña Nieto: habia policas cooptadas en Michoacan, zonas con debilidad institucional," *Excelsior*, January 24, 2014.

28 Personal interviews, vigilantes and vigilante commanders, Apatzingan, Paracuaro, Buenavista, Antunez and Nueva Italia, Mexico, January, February and March 2014.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid. Also see Mark Stevenson, "Mexico Drug War: 70 Percent of Guns Seized Originate in U.S.," Associated Press, June 13, 2011; Tim Johnson, "253,000 Guns Smuggled to Mexico Annually, Study Finds," *McClatchy Newspapers*, March 18, 2013.

35 Ibid.



and vigilantes moving against the gangsters, the group of criminals who have controlled Michoacán since about 2006 largely collapsed, losing territory and resources. Mexican marines killed Knights Templar leader Moreno and his deputy Enrique Plancarte in March 2014.<sup>48</sup> This toppling of the Knights Templar sent shockwaves across the Mexican crime world, as their gangsters took refuge in surrounding states.<sup>49</sup>

As the Knights Templar were being routed, however, the government turned once again on the vigilantes. In March and early April, police and soldiers arrested dozens of members of self-defense squads for crimes including murder, kidnapping, theft and possession of illegal firearms.<sup>50</sup> Among those arrested was founding member Hipolitio Mora, imprisoned on the accusation he ordered the killing of a fellow vigilante.<sup>51</sup>

Mexico's federal Attorney General Jesus Murillo Karam stated he had evidence that many of the firearms used by the vigilantes had been provided by the rival Jalisco New Generation Cartel, adding to widespread accusations about suspected gangster support for the vigilante groups.<sup>52</sup> While it is clearly not the case that the entire self-defense movement is controlled by the Jalisco Cartel, it is likely that some vigilantes may work for them. A number of vigilantes openly admitted that they had worked for the Knights Templar cartel before "flipping" sides to the self-defense squads.<sup>53</sup> Vigilante commanders defend the recruitment of former *templarios* by saying they were better off having them on their side than working against them.<sup>54</sup>

48 Olga Rodriguez, "Enrique Plancarte, Leader of Brutal Mexican Knights Templar Cartel, Dead," Associated Press, April 1, 2014.

49 Rodrigo Villegas, "El Efecto Cucaracha," *Reporte Indigo*, January 21, 2014.

50 "Suman 54 Autodefensas Detenidos," *Quadratin*, March 31, 2014.

51 Adriana Gomez, "Mexico Charges Vigilante Leader With Murder," Associated Press, March 14, 2014.

52 Richard Fausset and Cecilia Sanchez, "Mexico Official Says Some Vigilante Arms Supplied By Drug Cartel," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 2014.

53 Personal interviews, vigilante barricades, Apatzingan, Paracuaro, Buenavista, Antunez and Nueva Italia, Mexico, January, February and March 2014.

54 Personal interviews, vigilante commanders, Apatzingan and Antunez, February 2014.

Nevertheless, this made the ranks of the vigilantes increasingly filled with people who had served prison time, trafficked drugs or committed even worse crimes.

#### Spreading to Other States

While vigilantes battle cartels in Michoacán and Guerrero, self-defense squads have emerged in several other states. In March 2014, groups of indigenous Yaquis in Sonora, which borders Arizona, announced the formation of "Community Guards" to

### **"A number of vigilantes openly admitted that they had worked for the Knights Templar cartel before 'flipping' sides to the self-defense squads."**

stop drug producers who force them off their land to grow marijuana.<sup>55</sup> Also in March, a group handed out leaflets in Tamaulipas, across the border from Texas, calling itself the "Alberto Carrera Torres Brigade," after a local revolutionary, and promising to target the Zetas cartel.<sup>56</sup> Different forms of vigilante groups have also appeared in Veracruz, Tabasco, Jalisco and Oaxaca.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, whereas there are thousands of vigilantes in Michoacán and Guerrero, there are only dozens in the other states. Alejandro Hope, a security analyst at the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness and a former member of Mexico's intelligence services, warned that there is danger of the self-defense squads spreading if the government does not forge a coherent policy to deal with them.<sup>58</sup> One policy, Hope said, could involve a new federal community police law defining exactly

gan and Antunez, February 2014.

55 Astrid Rivera, "Surgen en Sonora Autodefensas," *El Universal*, March 27, 2014.

56 "Anuncian La Creacion de Una Brigada de Autodefensa en Tamaulipas," *Proceso*, March 5, 2014.

57 "Autodefensas Se Expanden a 10 Estados del Pais Afirmo Estudio," *Sin Embargo*, September 22, 2013.

58 Personal interview, Alejandro Hope, Mexican Institute for Competitiveness, March 2014.

what groups such as the CRAC can do and finding mechanisms to control the authentic vigilantes.<sup>59</sup> "We need to find an exit for these exceptional circumstances, a way to reintegrate vigilantes into society, perhaps an amnesty for crimes they committed in fighting the Knights Templar," he argued.<sup>60</sup>

#### Conclusion

Mexico's vigilante self-defense squads began as an authentic movement to fight cartels, copying and expanding on the tactics developed by indigenous community police. The vigilantes clearly broke laws, but they claimed they were forced to take up arms because the government failed to defend them. They were effective in pushing the cartels out of territory because they could attack their base in the community in a way that the government had failed. When vigilantes and security forces worked together, they routed one of Mexico's most powerful cartels, the Knights Templar.

Despite these successes, it is important to note that some elements of the self-defense squads are accused of receiving resources from rival cartels.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the vigilantes have increasingly filled their ranks with former criminals and gangsters. They have been plagued by infighting among commanders and accusations of crimes in the territories they control. The Mexican government needs to forge a coherent policy to define the role of community police while it reestablishes the rule of law in these areas. If vigilantes continue to be illegal but informally tolerated, they could keep spreading into other states and, though well intentioned, further deteriorate Mexico's rule of law and precipitate another cycle of violence.

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59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Fausset.

## Drug Trafficking, Terrorism, and Civilian Self-Defense in Peru

By Steven T. Zech

PERU IS POISED to become the focal point of global efforts to combat the production and transportation of illegal narcotics in South America. Between 2006 and 2011, U.S. agencies provided \$5.2 billion in counternarcotics support to the Andean region of South America to curb the annual flow of hundreds of metric tons of cocaine.<sup>1</sup> Although Colombia received 76% of this funding, Peru is now the world's largest producer of coca leaves and is rapidly expanding domestic cocaine production.<sup>2</sup> In June 2012, Peruvian President Ollanta Humala gave the inaugural speech at the International Anti-Drug Conference in Lima. He assured members from more than 70 delegations that Peru is committed to a global effort to reduce the production, transport, and consumption of illegal narcotics. At the conference, the European Union pledged 34 million euros to help implement Peru's 2012-2016 Anti-Drug Strategy.<sup>3</sup> Since his election in 2011, President Humala has strengthened Peru's ties with the Barack Obama administration and in the coming year the United States will almost double its support for Peruvian counternarcotics and development efforts with a \$100 million contribution.<sup>4</sup>

Strong ties between drug traffickers and remnants of the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) insurgency from the 1980s and 1990s complicate counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts in Peru.<sup>5</sup> Sendero Luminoso,

led by philosophy professor Abimael Guzmán, waged a violent campaign against any actor positioned to challenge their Maoist revolutionary program.<sup>6</sup> Guzmán and his followers originally targeted symbols of power in an effort to highlight social and economic injustice, as well as the inability of the state to address the people's needs.<sup>7</sup> The campaign later devolved into the indiscriminate and brutal targeting of civilians, security forces, and political actors alike.<sup>8</sup> After Guzmán's arrest in 1992, state security forces halted the revolutionary group's momentum and eventually defeated the armed insurgency.

Today, however, the remnants of the Sendero movement protect the illicit narcotics trade and use the profits to strengthen their organization and acquire advanced weaponry.<sup>9</sup> Drug traffickers and Sendero militants have disrupted local economies, generated increased insecurity, and stunted post-conflict institutional development in many regions that cultivate illegal coca. As policymakers and state security forces in Peru address these challenges, they must now also contend with a growing number of civilian self-defense forces. Civilian actors played a crucial role in the initial defeat of Sendero Luminoso in the 1990s, and many communities have reactivated local self-defense forces in the last few years. In some parts of Peru, armed civilian patrols confront criminal and insurgent organizations, and they will play an increasingly important role in addressing the challenges associated

with state counterterrorism and counternarcotics efforts.

This article offers a summary of Peru's counternarcotics strategy, showing how the Peruvian state has attempted to simultaneously address security issues related to illegal narcotics production and armed Sendero militants. It then identifies the challenges faced by many communities affected by the

### **“The Peruvian case provides a unique opportunity for policymakers to learn from successes and failures when civilians help to combat security threats.”**

illicit drug trade, as communities contend with state security forces, “narcoterrorists,” as well as legal and economic pressures related to coca cultivation. Finally, the article examines the participation of civilian actors in confronting security challenges. It finds that civilian actors played a critical part in Sendero Luminoso's original defeat and will likely play an equally important role in combating the contemporary “narcoterrorist” threat.

#### **Peru's Anti-Drug Strategy**

When President Humala first took office in 2011, La Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo y Vida sin Drogas (DEVIDA), Peru's anti-drug agency, announced that it would scale back forced coca eradication and focus efforts on development projects and programs to promote social inclusion.<sup>10</sup> Peru's Anti-Drug Strategy of 2012-2016 emphasizes a holistic, multifaceted approach to combating drug production.<sup>11</sup> The

1 *Counternarcotics Assistance: U.S. Agencies Have Allotted Billions in Andean Countries, but DOD Should Improve Its Reporting of Results* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012).

2 *Perú Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2012* (New York: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013).

3 “Peru: Uniting Against Drug Trafficking,” *Diálogo*, October, 1, 2012.

4 Simeon Tegel, “As US Ups Aid to Peru's Drug Battle, Farmers Say They Will Fight to Defend Cocaine Source,” NBC News, October 12, 2013.

5 For more on the historical relationship between Sendero Luminoso and drug traffickers, see Gabriela Tarazona-Sevillano and John B. Reuter, *Sendero Luminoso and the Threat of Narcoterrorism* (New York: Praeger, 1990);

Bruce H. Kay, “Violent Opportunities: The Rise and Fall of ‘King Coca’ and Shining Path,” *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 41:3 (1999): pp. 97-127; John T. Fishel, “Coca, Cocaine, Sicarios and Senderistas,” in Graham H. Turbiville ed., *Global Dimensions of High Intensity Crime and Low Intensity Conflict* (Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago, 1995): pp. 184-203; David Scott Palmer and Alberto Bolivar, “Peru's Shining Path: Recent Dynamics and Future Prospects,” Western Hemisphere Security Analysis Center, 2011.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 William Neuman, “Guerrilla Faction Leader is Captured in Peru,” *New York Times*, February 12, 2012; Kelly Hearn, “Shining Path on New Road as Drug Smugglers,” *Washington Times*, April 25, 2012; Kelly Hearn, “Peru Guerrillas Set Aside Rebellion for Drug Money,” *Washington Times*, April 26, 2012.

10 John M. Walsh and Coletta A. Youngers, “International ‘Anti-Drug’ Summit in Peru Attempts to Maintain Drug War Status Quo: Will It Succeed?” Washington Office on Latin America, June 22, 2012.

11 The full document, *Estrategia Nacional de Lucha Contra las Drogas 2012-2016*, is available at [www.peru.gov.pe/docs/PLANES/11793/PLAN\\_11793\\_Estrategia\\_Nacional\\_de\\_Lucha\\_contra\\_las\\_Drogas\\_2012-2016\\_2012.pdf](http://www.peru.gov.pe/docs/PLANES/11793/PLAN_11793_Estrategia_Nacional_de_Lucha_contra_las_Drogas_2012-2016_2012.pdf). The summary and implementation plan for DEVIDA, *Estrategia Nacional de Lucha Contra las Drogas 2012-2016*, is available at [www.devida.gov.pe/images/documentos-](http://www.devida.gov.pe/images/documentos-)

initiatives outlined in the 2012-2016 strategy include alternative development efforts, various forms of interdiction, as well as prevention and treatment programs aimed at drug users. Many of the regions most affected by counternarcotics initiatives, however, have become increasingly militarized as key political leaders and state security forces implement these strategies. Peru has prioritized particular elements of interdiction and eradication as evidenced by Humala's commitment to eradicate 50% more illegal coca plants in 2013 than 2012.<sup>12</sup> Actual eradication surpassed targets with the removal of 23,600 hectares of coca crops in 2013, and DEVIDA has set an ambitious 30,000 hectare target for 2014.<sup>13</sup> Although key policymakers recognize the importance of pairing eradication with development and social inclusion programs, they often prioritize security concerns.<sup>14</sup> The national police (Policía Nacional del Perú, PNP) and the armed forces simultaneously combat the two primary sources of regional insecurity: drug traffickers and the remnants of the Sendero Luminoso insurgency. Until recently, they have prioritized counterterrorism efforts over halting the expansion of

drug cultivation and trafficking. For example, the PNP had only one base dedicated to counternarcotics efforts in the communities surrounding the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro River valleys (the VRAEM) in 2012, while the armed forces combating terrorism had 29 bases.<sup>15</sup> Counterterrorism efforts in communities cultivating illegal coca generate additional challenges, as the military and police attempt to implement state counternarcotics strategies.<sup>16</sup>

Communities in the VRAEM are bracing themselves for the Peruvian state's response to expanding coca plantations and processing sites.<sup>17</sup> Closer ties to the United States and increased dependence on U.S. funding may influence Peru's counternarcotics strategy to mirror past efforts in Colombia that prioritize eradication. A close alliance between drug traffickers and Sendero militants exacerbates the danger of militarizing counternarcotics efforts. Sendero Luminoso militants have taken on a mercenary role, and key political and military decision-makers believe that attacking the insurgent group's financial lifeline will lead to Sendero's defeat.

For example, General Leonardo Longa López, the new head of the VRAEM Special Command, explained recent Sendero attacks and kidnappings after a period of inactivity. Longa suggested that these actions are Sendero's last desperate reaction to the military's efforts to halt drug trafficking in the region. "The production supplies aren't getting through and the terrorist remnants have withdrawn," he said. "There are fewer and fewer [terrorists] because they're abandoning the ranks."<sup>18</sup>

15 Hans Huerto Amado, "¿Qué es el Plan VRAE y por qué no funciona?" *El Comercio*, April 16, 2012. The VRAEM region produces the most illegal coca in Peru and is home to the strongest holdout of Sendero Luminoso insurgents. The VRAEM and the Upper Huallaga Valley are the two regions with the strongest Sendero and drug trafficking presence.

16 Pablo G. Dreyfus, "When All the Evils Come Together: Cocaine, Corruption, and Shining Path in Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley, 1980 to 1995," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 15:4 (1999): pp. 370-396.

17 Although total coca cultivation in Peru actually decreased 3.4% in 2012, cultivation levels rose in many regions, including in the VRAEM. See *Perú Monitoreo de Cultivos de Coca 2012*, p. 26.

18 Raul Mayo Filo and Vanessa Romo Espinoza, "Recruyen los ataques terroristas en la zona del Vraem," *El*

He believes that removing incentives offered by illegal narcotics production will eventually eliminate Sendero militants. Carmen Masías, the head of DEVIDA, also recognized the symbiotic relationship between Sendero and the illegal drug economy. He emphasized the need to focus on eradication: "There are leftover terrorists to attack, but that's not the main problem. This year we've invested three billion [Peruvian] soles in the VRAEM and [coca cultivation] didn't go down a single hectare. When you don't eradicate, it doesn't affect drug-trafficking."<sup>19</sup> For Masías, successful counternarcotics policy must include actively eliminating coca crops. These two key actors in Peruvian counternarcotics strategy think that the key to success includes interdiction (limiting supplies and transport) and eradication (removing crops).

Peruvian security forces have also actively engaged in counterterrorism operations. The arrest of Sendero leader Florindo Eleuterio Flores Hala (known as Comrade Artemio) in the Upper Huallaga Valley in 2012, as well as the deaths of "Alipio" and "Gabriel" in the VRAEM in 2013, removed important obstacles hindering state security forces' ability to enter these regions to combat terrorism and illegal drug production.<sup>20</sup> The December 2013 arrest of Alexander Dimas Huaman (also known as Héctor), Artemio's successor, caused the head of Peru's national drug police to declare that Sendero has disappeared from the Upper Huallaga Valley and that the region has been pacified.<sup>21</sup> Yet despite recent arrests that dealt temporary blows to the Quispe Palomino clan<sup>22</sup> that now controls

*Comercio*, March 2, 2014.

19 Espinoza. The exchange rate between the nuevo sol and the U.S. dollar is about 2.75 to 1.

20 For more on the arrest of "Artemio," see William Neuman, "Guerrilla Faction Leader is Captured in Peru," *New York Times*, February 12, 2012; "Peru Shining Path Leader Comrade Artemio Captured," BBC, February 13, 2012. For more on "Alipio" and "Gabriel," see Oscar Castilla, "Cabecilla de Sendero pidió a terroristas reagruparse tras caída de 'Alipio' y 'Gabriel,'" *El Comercio*, August 17, 2013; Mariella Balbi, "Jaime Antezana: 'El clan Quispe Palomino no volverá a ser igual,'" *El Comercio*, August 19, 2013.

21 "Con captura de 'Héctor,' Sendero Luminoso desaparecería en el Huallaga," *El Comercio*, December 9, 2013.

22 The Quispe Palomino clan is a powerful drug producing and trafficking organization operating in the

disponibles/PPT\_ENLCD\_2012-2016.pdf.

12 In his annual address to the Peruvian public, President Humala noted that in 2012 they eradicated more than 14,000 hectares of illegal coca plants and in 2013 they sought to eradicate 22,000 more. See "Mensaje a la Nación del Señor Presidente Constitucional de la República Ollanta Humala Tasso, con motivo del 192º Aniversario de la Independencia Nacional," Presidencia de la República del Perú, July 28, 2013. More recent figures place DEVIDA eradication goals at 30,000 hectares. See Vanessa Romo Espinoza, "Devida afirma que se entrará al Vraem para erradicar hoja de coca," *El Comercio*, January 3, 2014.

13 Charles Parkinson, "Peru Sets Record Coca Eradication Target for 2014," *InSight Crime*, January 6, 2014. To reach these new goals, Peru will need to expand eradication efforts to areas controlled by criminal organizations and Sendero militants protecting the coca crop.

14 For example, the head of DEVIDA, Carmen Masías, and Peru's new president of the Council of Ministers, César Villanueva, both suggested that eradication must be accompanied by development efforts. See Sebastian Ortiz Martínez, "Devida: Villanueva 'contribuirá a reforzar' lucha antidrogas en el Vraem," *El Comercio*, October 31, 2013. When asked about his new role, however, Villanueva suggested that he will prioritize security. See Gerardo Caballero and José Santillan, "Cambio ministerial: los detalles de la llegada de Villanueva a la PCM," *El Comercio*, October 31, 2013.

much of the VRAEM, civilians in that region remain doubtful about the military's capacity and intentions.<sup>23</sup> The Quispe Palomino clan, headed by brothers Víctor and Jorge (aliases "camarada José" and "camarada Raúl"), recently demonstrated their ability to recover quickly from military blows to their organization by reasserting control over key drug routes shortly after sweeping arrests of suspected narcoterrorist actors. Armed columns of narcoterrorists took several communities by force, despite supposedly being under military protection.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, an indiscriminate military response in some communities left civilians with questions about the military's concern for their well-being. One civilian described the military operation that followed as a barrage of missile fire from a helicopter around the periphery of their village without clear targets.<sup>25</sup>

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VRAEM. The group focuses on drug trafficking, but maintains at least a nominal connection to Sendero Luminoso and their political ideology. The family and their organization had close ties to the revolutionary movement and its leadership dating back to the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s. The current leadership are the children of Martín Quispe, one of the founding members of Sendero Luminoso, in Ayacucho. For more information on the Quispe Palomino clan, see "La historia de la última generación de Sendero: el clan Quispe Palomino," *Panorama*, August 18, 2013; "Clan Quispe Palomino es una poderosa organización de la droga, afirman," *RPP Noticias*, April 22, 2012.

23 Contemporary drug production is organized around clans or *firmas* based on local kinship or friendship ties. These groups maintain close relationships with groups of peasants that cultivate coca leaves and control drug trafficking out of the region. Some clans form alliances with Sendero members while others directly participate in Sendero Luminoso activities. Sendero simultaneously assists peasants involved in coca cultivation and provides protection for drug traffickers. See Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Shooting Up: Counterinsurgency and the War on Drugs* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2010), pp. 66-67.

24 Gustavo Kanashiro Fonken, "El clan Quispe Palomino se ha recompuesto y recupera fuerzas en la selva," *El Comercio*, October 18, 2013.

25 Ibid. Also, one coca farmer an hour outside Llochegua noted an increase in the frequency of helicopter flights overhead with no change in the presence of armed state actors on the ground. See personal interview, coca farmer, Peru, May 14, 2013.

### Sendero Luminoso Threats and the Failure of a Coca Economy

Civilians in Peru feel they are once again caught "between two fires," fearful of violent reprisals from both Sendero and state security forces. One coca farmer in the VRAEM explained the dangers of leaving his modest wooden home during the night and warned, "You should not use a candle or flashlight."<sup>26</sup> He pointed up into the hills to the north. "The military controls that area over there."<sup>27</sup> Then he pointed toward the hills to the west, "And Sendero controls that area over there. Either one of them might take a shot at you if they see a light."<sup>28</sup> Civilians often find themselves in an impossible situation with few options to ensure the safety of their families and improve their lives. Communities must avoid accusations and physical attacks from two fronts: state security forces and Sendero militants.

For example, during a spike in violence in 2008, the military killed numerous villagers in one VRAEM community whom they labeled "subversives."<sup>29</sup> Months later, guerrillas came and abducted the village leader for supposedly collaborating with the military.<sup>30</sup> Today, many communities continue to help Sendero Luminoso out of fear.<sup>31</sup> With punitive violence from both Sendero and state security forces, combined with increased drug eradication efforts that threaten some farmers' livelihoods, many communities in the region want change or to simply be left alone.<sup>32</sup>

Market pressures to grow the most profitable crops with more frequent harvests originally led local farmers to embrace illegal coca production. If local farmers could make a similar living cultivating alternative crops, however,

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26 Personal interview, coca farmer, VRAEM, Peru, May 14, 2013.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Simon Romero, "Cocaine Trade Helps Rebels Reignite War in Peru," *New York Times*, March 17, 2009.

30 Ibid.

31 "En el Vraem hay pobladores que se sienten obligados a ayudar a SL, dice José Cueto," *El Comercio*, August 20, 2013.

32 A teacher in one community stated, "What we want is that neither side interrupts our lives." See Joshua Partlow, "In Peru, a Rebellion Reborn," *Washington Post*, November 12, 2008.

some would voluntarily grow cacao, coffee, and other plants instead of coca. One farmer explained, "Of course! We would eradicate ourselves. We wouldn't need the army or police to do it. It would be magnificent."<sup>33</sup> Coca has not provided a solution to the economic hardships faced by farmers and their families, and few farmers have made substantial profits through illegal coca.<sup>34</sup>

Apart from continued poverty, farmers in the region have also started to recognize the devastating environmental effects of illegal coca cultivation. They have experienced environmental degradation in the

### "Civilian support and participation may prove crucial in defeating remnants of the Sendero Luminoso insurgency and halting the expansion of illegal narcotics production."

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form of a disappearing jungle canopy, the elimination of native wildlife like monkeys and parrots, and widespread soil erosion.<sup>35</sup> More frequent harvests drain vital nutrients from the earth, and pesticides used to protect the vulnerable coca leaves have poisoned the soil. The effects of coca cultivation have disrupted the production of other important agricultural staples such as yucca.<sup>36</sup> Collaborating with Sendero

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33 Tegel.

34 Isaías Rojas, "The Push for Zero Coca: Democratic Transition and Counternarcotics Policy in Peru," *Drug War Monitor* 2:1 (2003). Coca farmers have traditionally made more than those who cultivate other agricultural goods, although these individual financial gains have not led to broader regional economic development or facilitated social mobility. See Felbab-Brown, pp. 37-38.

35 Personal interview, nephew of a coca plantation owner, VRAEM, Peru, May 14, 2013. He recently returned to the region after more than 20 years away and described the numerous environmental changes he observed as a result of transitioning to coca cultivation. Other crops yield harvests around twice a year, while farmers harvest coca leaves four or five times per year.

36 One coca farmer's wife explained that yucca used to be easier to find and much larger. Since they began to use

and drug traffickers has failed to improve the lives of farmers and has disrupted some indigenous groups' cultural traditions.<sup>37</sup> Forced eradication by state security forces, however, will likely harm communities tied to the coca economy. Eradication does not work without supplementary programs that generate broad and equitable development, and finding sufficient resources to implement these programs is challenging.<sup>38</sup>

### Civilian Self-Defense in Peru

The civilian population will play an increasingly important role in Peru's recent push for eradication in the VRAEM. A similar effort in the Upper Huallaga Valley in the mid-2000s disrupted social order and led to widespread violence until the communities were able to organize and provide for their own security.<sup>39</sup> Peru has a long history of civilian self-defense, and armed civilian actors still help to maintain social order in many rural regions of Peru. Communities in the Cajamarca and the Piura regions of Peru originally organized *rondas campesinas*<sup>40</sup> (peasant rounds) in the 1970s to combat rampant cattle thievery.<sup>41</sup> Some credit the presence of these organizations with limiting Sendero Luminoso expansion into these regions when the insurgent group initiated armed struggle in 1980.<sup>42</sup> Another form of civilian self-defense, *comités de autodefensa* (CADs), emerged in the Central Sierras in the early 1980s

so much pesticide for coca leaves, however, she has noticed a difference. See personal interview, coca farmer's wife, VRAEM, Peru, May 14, 2013.

37 For example, some indigenous communities in parts of the VRAEM (e.g., the Ashaninka) subsist largely on yucca and have resisted changes to their traditional way of life.

38 Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Finding an Alternative to Illicit Opium Production in Afghanistan, and Elsewhere," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 68:3 (2001): pp. 373-379.

39 Mirella van Dun, "The Drugs Industry and Peasant Self-Defence in a Peruvian Cocaine Enclave," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 23:6 (2012): pp. 442-448.

40 *Rondas campesinas* translates to "peasant rounds" and describes both the organization and the act of patrolling.

41 Dun.

42 Segundo Vargas Tarrillo, *Crisis, violencia y rondas campesinas, Chota - Cajamarca* (Tacna: Fondo Editorial de la Universidad Privada de Tacna, 1994); Orin Starn, *Nightwatch: The Making of a Movement in the Peruvian Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

to combat Sendero Luminoso.<sup>43</sup> Early CADs developed "organically" through the communities' own volition. As the conflict progressed, the armed forces sometimes stepped in to co-opt these nascent organizations to provide them with logistical and material support, or in some cases to compel communities to organize if they had failed to do so on their own. The academic literature on violence during Peru's internal armed conflict recognizes civilian mobilization as a key component in the defeat of Sendero Luminoso.<sup>44</sup> Policymakers and state security forces see the potential benefits of coordinating with community self-defense forces to complement current counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations, but the state has offered only minimal support in terms of financial resources.<sup>45</sup> Civilian support and participation may prove crucial in defeating remnants of the Sendero Luminoso insurgency and halting the expansion of illegal narcotics production.

Past and present civilian participation in combating insurgent violence in this region is complicated. Although many contemporary civilian self-defense organizations in jungle communities

43 Elsewhere these organizations may also be referred to as *comités de defensa civil*, *defensa civil antisubversiva* (DE-CAS), or *rondas contrasubversivas*.

44 For example see José Coronel, Carlos Iván Degregori, Ponciano del Pino, and Orin Starn, *Las rondas campesinas y la derrota de Sendero Luminoso* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1996); "Informe Final, Tomo II, Capítulo 1.5. Los comités de autodefensa," Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, undated, pp. 437-462; Carlos Iván Degregori, "Reaping the Whirlwind: The Rondas Campesinas and the Defeat of Sendero Luminoso in Ayacucho," in Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt eds., *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (New York: Zed Books, 1999); Oscar Espinosa, *Rondas campesinas y nativas en la Amazonia peruana* (Lima: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica, 1995); Mario Fumerton, *From Victims to Heroes: Peasant Counter-Rebellion and Civil War in Ayacucho, Peru, 1980-2000* (Amsterdam: Rozenberg, 2003); Carlos Tapia, *Autodefensa armada del campesinado* (Lima: Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo y la Participación, 1995).

45 Personal interview, self-defense force leader in Luricocha at the municipal government meeting of the "Commission for Peace in Luricocha," Peru, May 9, 2013. The interview subject suggested that the reasons for the lack of support reflected a combination of limited resources, corruption in the allocation of funds, and prioritizing the funding of state-controlled institutions.

have largely chosen not to become involved in issues related to drug trafficking and terrorism, many of the mountain communities leaving the VRAEM have recently reactivated patrols to respond to these challenges. For example, 24 communities around Luricocha coordinate with each other to train, organize patrols, and confront contemporary security challenges that the state is either unable or unwilling to address.<sup>46</sup>

These cases allow for a glimpse into the actual process of civilian mobilization. Small groups of civilians armed with 12-gauge Winchester shotguns aim to deter drug trafficking and to protect the population from groups of bandits along the highway leading out of the jungle.<sup>47</sup> Civilian patrols set up temporary roadblocks on the dirt highway an hour outside of Luricocha en route to the jungle. They stop and search automobiles and trucks traveling in the middle of the night.<sup>48</sup> These actions generate great risks for the participants, but many of these individuals have previous military experience or belonged to civilian self-defense forces during the civil war.

Many policymakers oppose civilian efforts to militarize. The press, politicians, and academics often debated the matter in the media during the internal armed conflict

46 Ibid.

47 Jungle community self-defense forces often respond to domestic disturbances and other issues, but stay clear of insurgents and drug traffickers out of fear (e.g., in Pichari and Llochegua). The author bases this observation on comments from an interview with self-defense organization leaders on May 13 and May 15, 2013. Near Huanta, the patrols reorganized several years back and have brought increased order to their communities. Some interview subjects suggested that two or three years ago one could not walk the streets at night, but now the streets are safer. This author's research on civilian self-defense forces finds that community narratives play a crucial role in explaining the emergence of these groups and their behavior during the conflict. Community narratives help leaders bring meaning to the changing political landscape and define inter-group relations among the various armed actors.

48 This author accompanied a commander and six other armed men on patrol on May 29, 2013, to observe civilian self-defense forces in action. They set up a roadblock from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. to stop passing cars. They were especially interested in automobiles carrying only groups of young men.

of the 1980s and 1990s. Many were hesitant to arm civilians, fearful that by supplying rural communities with weapons they would arm the same militants they sought to defeat. In some cases, civilian militia leaders have committed human rights abuses or become involved in drug trafficking.<sup>49</sup> For the most part, however, their fears never materialized and armed civilian actors never took on a large political role in their communities during the post-conflict period.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Peru has developed a legal framework regarding civilian self-defense that facilitates state oversight and control of these organizations.<sup>51</sup> Although the groups operate autonomously, they coordinate with the armed forces. For example, one group near Huanta, in the Ayacucho region of Peru, carries out joint patrols with other groups and they meet once a month at a local military base for training and weapons maintenance.<sup>52</sup> Groups from the region also meet annually to commemorate their role in the initial defeat of Sendero Luminoso and reaffirm their support for the armed forces and police in pacification efforts as well as socioeconomic development.<sup>53</sup> Civilian

self-defense initiatives collaborate with state security forces, which can generate better human intelligence. Community members who organize and participate in civilian self-defense know the terrain and the people, and they often share their knowledge with security forces.<sup>54</sup> These individuals also cater security provision to local needs. Civilian self-defense organizations have generated stronger relationships between local intermediaries and the state to help coordinate and implement development efforts.

#### Civilian Resistance in Peru and Beyond

Civilian participation in security provision can lead to drastically different outcomes. While the Peruvian case generally experienced fewer instances of predatory behavior by armed civilian self-defense forces, in other cases these types of groups exacerbated existing armed conflicts. Scholars and policymakers should not make broad generalizations about the benefits of armed civilian mobilization. The conditions in which armed civilian groups emerge often affect their goals and behavior.

For example, in Colombia, paramilitaries emerged to defend against violence tied to revolutionary groups and the drug trade. The Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC) emerged as an umbrella organization coordinating disparate civilian paramilitaries. In Colombia, however, armed civilian defense mostly formed to protect private interests.<sup>55</sup> Paramilitary groups emerged as private protection organizations for landowners, cattle ranchers, or other business elites with interests in regions with conflict.<sup>56</sup> Large landholders in Colombia might pay armed civilians to protect their property and guarantee their safety.

Alternatively, in Peru, collective custodians and small landowners coordinated together to mobilize and protect their own collective interests. The formation of civilian self-defense

forces in Peru must be understood as “the expression of a massive, autonomous decision on the part of the rural population.”<sup>57</sup> Continued coordination with state security forces and legal accountability helped minimize the risk of rogue paramilitary mobilization.

In addition to addressing immediate security concerns in this case, the Peruvian experience may shed light on other contemporary cases where armed civilian actors confront threats to social order. As many Mexican communities organize “self-policing” efforts to combat drug traffickers, and towns in northern Nigeria mobilize civilians to confront the Boko Haram Islamist insurgency, policymakers will benefit from a better understanding of the dynamics behind civilian resistance.<sup>58</sup> Peruvian civilian self-defense forces varied in their origins, behavior, levels of support they received from the military, and their post-conflict trajectory. The Peruvian case provides a unique opportunity for policymakers to learn from successes and failures when civilians help to combat security threats.

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49 For example, several interview subjects suggested that the infamous Comando Huayhuaco, a fearsome civilian militia leader in the late 1980s, had previously organized members of his community to collaborate with the Sendero insurgency. But, later on, he saw the devastation they brought to the region and he switched sides. After organizing and patrolling throughout Ayacucho to help defeat the Sendero insurgency, he later became involved in drug trafficking, leading to a national scandal and stoking fears of an armed peasantry tasked with security provision.

50 This assertion is based on interviews in dozens of communities in Ayacucho and Junín, April through June 2013, and on comments made by participants of a regional congress for victims and displaced people in Junín, April 27-28, 2013.

51 For more on legal issues pertaining to armed civilian actors in Peru, see Alejandro Laos F., Edgardo Rodríguez Gómez, and Pastor Paredes Diez Canseco, *Rondando por nuestra ley: la exitosa experiencia de incidencia política y cabildeo de la Ley de Rondas Campesinas* (Lima: Red Interamericana para la Democracia, 2003).

52 Personal interview, self-defense force leader, Huanta, Ayacucho, May 29, 2013.

53 “Comités de autodefensa del VRAEM celebran XXI aniversario de lucha contra el terrorismo,” Presidencia del Consejo de Ministros, May 22, 2013. Communities have formed self-defense forces in parts of the VRAEM as well, sometimes seeking aid from the state security forces. For example, see María Elena Hidalgo, “Comités

de Autodefensa solo tienen 18 escopetas para combatir al ‘camarada Gabriel,’” *La República*, July 16, 2012.

54 Ibid.

55 Felbab-Brown, p. 94.

56 Ibid.

57 Carlos Basombrio, “Militarization of Public Security in Peru,” in Hugo Frühling, Joseph S. Tulchin, and Heather A. Golding eds., *Crime and Violence in Latin America: Citizen Security, Democracy, and the State* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2003), p. 161.

58 For more on cases of Mexican communities organizing “self-policing” efforts, see Ioan Grillo, “Mexico’s Vigilante Militias Rout the Knights Templar Drug Cartel,” *CTC Sentinel* 7:4 (2014); Karla Zabudovsky, “Mexican Violence Prompts Self-Policing by Civilians,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2013; Linda Pressly, “Mexico’s Vigilante Law Enforcers,” *BBC News Magazine*, April 16, 2013; Katie Orlinsky, “Mexico’s Female Vigilante Squads,” *Daily Beast*, October 5, 2013. For more on the case of civilian self-defense and an emerging “vigilante war” in Nigeria, see “Nigeria’s Vigilantes Take on Boko Haram,” *BBC*, July 23, 2013.

## Maritime Piracy on the Rise in West Africa

By Stephen Starr

INCIDENTS OF MARITIME piracy across the globe have decreased in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Yet a spate of attacks off the West African coast centered around the Gulf of Guinea<sup>2</sup> has drawn renewed attention from governments and shipping companies. According to the industry magazine *Maritime Executive*, pirate attacks in the Gulf of Guinea increased by 33% in 2013.<sup>3</sup> At the current growth rate, the number of attacks will be even higher for 2014.

This article reviews recent incidents of maritime piracy in West Africa, looks at some of the groups involved and their tactics, and finally details efforts to combat this trend. It finds that a key difference between piracy off the coast of Somalia and piracy in West Africa is that Somali pirates target ships as part of kidnap-for-ransom schemes, whereas in West Africa pirates primarily hijack ships<sup>4</sup> to siphon off crude petroleum to sell on the local black market.<sup>5</sup> This presents both problems and solutions to governments and other interested parties. Since pirates and hijackers in West Africa operate in national, rather than international, waters, the security responsibility shifts to national navy and police forces. Yet nine countries<sup>6</sup> share waters along the Gulf of Guinea, corruption in these states is endemic, and pirates often conduct attacks in one state's territorial waters only to flee to another state's jurisdiction. Moreover, maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Guinea are often not properly delineated, hindering cooperation between governments and their navies.<sup>7</sup>

1 Rick Gladstone, "Global Piracy Hits Lowest Level Since 2007, Report Says," *New York Times*, January 15, 2014.

2 "The Rise and Rise of Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea," Think Africa Press, July 18, 2013.

3 "Suspected Pirate Attack on Tanker Off Angola," *Maritime Executive*, January 22, 2014.

4 Offshore rigs in the Gulf are generally not targeted.

5 Keith Johnson, "Oil Pirates and the Mystery Ship," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2014.

6 The Gulf of Guinea is not territorially defined, although it generally includes: Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

7 Daniel J. Dzurek, "Gulf of Guinea Boundary Disputes,"

### A Spate of Recent Attacks

The year 2013 marked a significant drop in international piracy due to the falloff in Somali-related attacks on Africa's east coast,<sup>8</sup> but the slack has been taken up on the other side of the continent. In early January 2014, 55 miles off the coast of Gabon, five pirates boarded a liquefied natural gas (LNG) carrier only to be frightened off when the crew raised the alarm and blew the ship's horn.<sup>9</sup> Also in January, the Greek-owned MT *Kerala* vanished in Angolan waters south of the Gulf of Guinea before reappearing further north in Nigerian waters about 57 miles southwest of a Nigerian oil terminal<sup>10</sup> and missing almost 13,000 tons of its diesel cargo.<sup>11</sup> To facilitate the theft, the pirates allegedly disabled the *Kerala's* identifications system and communications equipment and used paint to conceal its identifying markers.<sup>12</sup>

Experts say pirates near the Gulf of Guinea primarily hijack vessels to siphon off the crude oil on-board; however, serious threats to human life are emerging.<sup>13</sup> On December 17, 2013, a Ukrainian captain and Greek engineer were abducted from their oil-carrying ship off the Nigerian coast.<sup>14</sup> Nigerian pirates released the two men three weeks later after an unknown ransom amount is believed to have been paid.<sup>15</sup> In March 2014, a top UK-based maritime intelligence organization announced a special advisory warning

*IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Spring 1999, pp. 98-104. It is important to note that attacks occurring in national waters are categorized as armed robbery and not piracy. Piracy only occurs in international waters.

8 "Drop in Sea Piracy Helped by Big Somali Improvement, Watchdog Says," BBC, January 15, 2014. The Somali decrease has been attributed to the presence of armed guards on ships, increased international naval presence and action taken by the Somali government.

9 "First Pirate Boarding for 2014," *Maritime Executive*, January 4, 2014.

10 "Navy Intercepts Hijacked Greek Ship MT Kerala, in Nigeria," Vessel Finder, February 4, 2014.

11 "Oil Soaked Pirates in Gulf of Guinea," *Maritime Executive*, March 15, 2014.

12 Ibid.

13 Personal interview, Chris Trelawny, head of maritime security at the International Maritime Organization, March 24, 2014.

14 "Pirates Abduct Greek, Ukrainian from Ship Off Nigeria," Reuters, December 17, 2013.

15 "Master and Chief Engineer of m/t Althea Released, Nigeria," *Maritime Bulletin*, January 7, 2014.

for crew kidnapping in the Gulf of Guinea following 10 attacks since December 2013 alone.<sup>16</sup> In August 2012, Togolese security forces traded gunfire with pirates who had hijacked a Greek oil tanker.<sup>17</sup> More recent activity suggests piracy is expanding further

### "More recent activity suggests piracy is expanding further south to Angola's coast in the southern Atlantic Ocean."

south to Angola's coast in the southern Atlantic Ocean.<sup>18</sup> Angolan waters lie almost 1,000 miles from the regional piracy epicenter in Nigeria, with Angola the second largest oil producer in sub-Saharan Africa behind Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

Eleven of the 40 global incidents of piracy, boarding, hijacking and armed robbery aboard ships recorded by the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) Piracy Reporting Center thus far in 2014 were in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>20</sup> According to the IMB, West African pirate attacks comprised 19% of all piracy in 2013. Although many attacks go unreported and figures accordingly vary, that figure was 10% in 2010, 14% in 2011 and 19% in 2012.<sup>21</sup> As explained by *Maritime Executive*, "International navies are not actively engaged in counter-piracy missions in the region, unlike in the waters off Somalia, the piracy hotspot on the other side of the continent."<sup>22</sup>

16 "Dryad Maritime Warns of Surge in Gulf of Guinea Kidnap Incidents," Dryad Maritime, March 7, 2014.

17 Chandrika Narayan, "Pirates Hijack Greek-Operated Tanker Off Togo Coast," CNN, August 28, 2012.

18 "Oil Soaked Pirates in Gulf of Guinea."

19 "Angola," U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 5, 2014.

20 See, for example, the IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Map 2014 from ICC Commercial Crime Services, available at [www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/live-piracy-map](http://www.icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre/live-piracy-map).

21 "Somali Pirate Clampdown Caused Drop in Global Piracy, IMB Reveals," ICC Commercial Crime Services, January 15, 2014.

22 "Oil Soaked Pirates in Gulf of Guinea."

### Responsibility for Attacks

Nigerian piracy makes up the majority of attacks on vessels in West Africa.<sup>23</sup> The Nigerian navy estimates that up to 200,000 barrels of crude oil—valued at around \$200 billion annually—are lost daily to thieves and pirates.<sup>24</sup> Although piracy involving the theft of oil dominates maritime attacks in the Gulf of Guinea, a rise in maritime-related kidnappings occurred in late 2013 and early 2014. Approximately 12 ships were hijacked and 20 crew members kidnapped in Nigerian waters alone during the first 10 weeks of 2014, with the kidnapping incidents generally occurring between 12 and 50 nautical miles from land.<sup>25</sup>

There is a history of paying ransoms for the release of kidnapped energy company personnel in the Gulf of Guinea and, specifically, in Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> The most notorious group responsible for kidnap-for-ransom operations in Nigeria is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). MEND, which was formed in 2005-2006, draws its roots from the 1990s, when Niger Delta politicians funded and armed university youths to coerce political opponents.<sup>27</sup> All of the militant groups in the Niger Delta claim that they commit acts of theft and violence to seek economic justice, as the region is one of the richest in Africa in terms of resource wealth but remains one of the most underdeveloped and polluted.<sup>28</sup>

MEND is not considered a unified organization; instead, it is recognized as a messy coalition of splinter groups and factions.<sup>29</sup> A 2009 government amnesty

resulted in many Niger Delta militants laying down their arms,<sup>30</sup> yet recently alleged members of MEND have resumed attacks.<sup>31</sup> In January 2014, elements within the group claimed responsibility for an attack on a Nigerian tug boat and the abduction of two Agip Oil Company employees.<sup>32</sup> “At the right time, we will reduce Nigerian oil production to zero by 2015 and drive off our land, all thieving oil companies,” threatened Jomo Gbomo, a MEND spokesman, in January 2014.<sup>33</sup> MEND also claimed the kidnapping of two American sailors off the Nigerian coast in October 2013.<sup>34</sup> The Americans were later released, allegedly in exchange for a ransom.<sup>35</sup>

Nigerian government elements are also thought to be involved in the illicit movement of oil. Nigerian gang members suspected of piracy in the gulf and arrested in late 2012 claimed a network of government workers gave information on the location and content of vessels in the Gulf. In the gang commander’s confession to Nigerian authorities, he stated,

Once we complete the assignment, we would inform the pointsmen who thereafter, contact the cabal that takes charge of the hijacked vessels. We usually meet at a designated point on the high sea, from where they would offload the contents from the hijacked vessels and thereafter, deposit them in various oil facilities for distribution by oil marketers. We are not directly involved in the sale of the product. We only assist to convey the product to the designated point by acting as escorts in case of any confrontation. My gang has about 3,000 various weapons which

are kept in different parts of the country.<sup>36</sup>

The commander claimed that he made 10 million naira (\$62,000) on his last operation.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the line between piracy and conventional criminality is becoming increasingly blurred in Nigeria, resulting in the “cross-pollination” of the country’s naval and police forces’ remit.<sup>38</sup> The Gulf of Guinea is almost as big as the Gulf of Mexico,<sup>39</sup> and policing the waters has proved difficult.

Pirate attacks are spreading out from Nigerian waters. The *Economist* apportioned responsibility for the January 2014 attack on the MT *Kerala* in Angolan waters to Nigerian pirates, as “the pirates forced the vast vessel to sail hundreds of miles up the coast before offloading much of its cargo close to the Niger Delta.”<sup>40</sup> The increase of naval and police patrols in Nigerian waters, albeit patchy and riven with corruption, has led to a knock-on effect in neighboring countries’ territorial waters. In Ghana, the MT *Mustard* was intercepted by a naval vessel in August 2013 after having been used to siphon 3,500 tons of stolen crude oil from the tanker vessel *Cotton* in neighboring Gabonese waters.<sup>41</sup> The pirate vessel siphoned the fuel in Gabonese territory before it “sailed into Ghanaian waters, first docking at the eastern port of Tema before heading for an offshore oil facility off the town of Saltpond,” suggesting Ghanaian elements were involved in the robbery.<sup>42</sup>

23 Mark Doyle, “Nigeria’s Piracy – Another Form of Oil Theft,” BBC, June 18, 2013.

24 “No Crude Oil Theft,” Nigerian Navy, available at [www.cot.navy.mil.ng/crude-oil-theft](http://www.cot.navy.mil.ng/crude-oil-theft).

25 “Kidnapping Resurgent in Gulf of Guinea Piracy,” *KRM Magazine*, March 20, 2014.

26 Josh Margolin, “US Sailors Held Hostage Off Nigeria Freed,” ABC News, November 12, 2013.

27 Caroline Duffield, “Who are Nigeria’s Mend Oil Militants?” BBC, October 4, 2010.

28 The Niger Delta has one of the highest population densities in the world and is one of Nigeria’s most underdeveloped regions. Also see “Oil Industry Has Brought Poverty and Pollution to Niger Delta,” Amnesty International, June 30, 2009.

29 Stephanie Hanson, “MEND: The Niger Delta’s Umbrella Militant Group,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 22, 2007.

30 “Nigeria: Government Amnesty Program for Niger Delta Militants, Particularly with Respect to the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND),” Refworld, August 5, 2011.

31 See, for example, Elisha Bala-Gbogbo, “Nigeria’s MEND Rebels Threaten Future Attack on Oil Industry,” Bloomberg, January 27, 2014.

32 Osa Okhomina, “We’re Responsible for Agip Tug Boat Attack, Kidnapping of Engineer, Captain – MEND,” *Leadership*, January 28, 2014.

33 Bala-Gbogbo.

34 “MEND Claims Responsibility for Kidnap of U.S. Sailors,” *This Day Live*, November 18, 2013.

35 Ibid.

36 Bless Nube’s confessional statement cited in Evelyn Usman, “Top Government Officials, Politicians Contracted Up – Sea Pirates,” *Vanguard*, December 12, 2012.

37 Ibid.

38 Christos Kyrou and Kaade Wallace, “The Gulf of Guinea: Maritime Piracy’s New Global Nerve Center,” *Fair Observer*, March 3, 2014.

39 David Arnold, “Shippers Raise Alarm Over Oil Piracy in Gulf of Guinea,” *Voice of America*, October 14, 2013.

40 “Angola in their Sights,” *Economist*, February 6, 2014. Cyrus Mody, assistant director of the ICC International Maritime Bureau, supported this claim in: David Kashi, “Nigerian Pirates Likely Hijacked Oil Tanker off Angola’s Coast, Expert Says,” *International Business Times*, January 24, 2014.

41 “Ghana’s Navy Intercepts Suspected Pirate Ship and Arrests Crew,” Reuters, August 2, 2013.

42 Ibid.



In Cameroon, a group known as Africa Marine Commando has conducted a number of attacks,<sup>43</sup> while in September 2013 a Cameroonian newspaper claimed a pirate was killed by government forces following a raid there.<sup>44</sup>

Victims of pirate attacks in Benin in 2012 reported assailants speaking English and French, suggesting that they were from the Benin-Nigeria border region.<sup>45</sup> With Nigerian waters under increasing surveillance from the combined naval forces of Benin and Nigeria, local knowledge of Benin's coast next door has become a valuable commodity for Nigerian pirates, suggesting piracy in Benin may grow. "The shared history, culture and language of Yoruba communities on both sides of the border encourage such collaboration," explained a 2012 International Crisis Group report.<sup>46</sup>

#### Strategy, Tactics and Corruption

Pirates operating in the Gulf of Guinea appear to employ similar tactics. According to Noel Choong, the head of the IMB's piracy reports division, pirates typically hijack ships for five or six days, ransack the vessels, steal the cargo, and leave the sailors.<sup>47</sup> Hijacked tankers are often taken back to Nigerian waters, where the oil is siphoned off and the crews are freed.<sup>48</sup>

Nigeria's geography makes for easy flight. Pirates conceal boats and stolen commodities in the thousands of inlets, rivers and mangroves that comprise Nigeria's coast. Crude oil is unloaded to criminal partners and resold on the local

market through government and non-government facilitators. "These vessels are attacked because there is a booming black market for fuel in West Africa," read a report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in 2013. "Without this ready market, there would be little point in attacking these vessels."<sup>49</sup>

Both low- and high-level corruption facilitate and encourage pirate-related activity in the Gulf of Guinea.<sup>50</sup> Nigeria and Cameroon jointly languish at 144 out of 175 countries in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.<sup>51</sup> Cote D'Ivoire sits at 136, while Togo is close behind at 123.<sup>52</sup>

Government officials hold discretionary powers in many of Nigeria's major ports.<sup>53</sup> A Nigerian corruption commission report co-sponsored by the United Nations Development Program recently found that "corruption is reported to be a legitimate and accepted tool to promote business interests. Gifts are accepted as normal and expected even in the port agencies."<sup>54</sup>

In one of the worst cases of corruption, admirals of the Nigerian navy, Francis Agbiti and Samuel Kolawole, were charged with involvement in the illicit bunkering of 11,000 tons of crude oil to an awaiting Russian-crewed vessel in 2003.<sup>55</sup> The two officers were sacked and demoted for their role in the theft.<sup>56</sup>

According to maritime security specialist James Bridger, in the early 2000s "the basic grievance [among militants] was that the federal

government in Abuja [Nigeria] had taken too great a share of Nigeria's petroleum wealth, while distributing little back to the oil-soaked communities of the Niger Delta. A plethora of militant groups emerged to 'redress' the oil issue during this period."<sup>57</sup> This allows criminals to profit under the guise of economic justice—although clearly genuine grievances exist in the delta.

#### Efforts to Combat Piracy

There have been efforts to combat piracy in the region. In 2012, the Togolese army agreed to hire private security companies to guard anchored vessels at the port of Lome,<sup>58</sup> while Nigeria installed anti-piracy surveillance towers along its coast in December 2013.<sup>59</sup> In February 2014, Cote D'Ivoire announced it would expand its navy by 40 vessels to help combat piracy within its waters.<sup>60</sup>

Regionally, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) launched a coordination center in 2009 to pool money financed by maritime taxes to combat piracy in the gulf.<sup>61</sup> In September 2011, neighbors Nigeria and Benin launched "Operation Prosperity" in an attempt to curb piracy, which is ongoing.<sup>62</sup> In an attempt to coordinate a response to attacks, an anti-piracy code was adopted by 22 West African countries in June 2013.<sup>63</sup>

On the international level, the U.S. Navy has donated boats and carried out training in Nigeria,<sup>64</sup> while the U.S. Congress passed a bill on January 7, 2014, "encouraging increased cooperation between the United States and West and Central African countries

43 For more details, see the listing for the Africa Marine Commando in the Global Terrorism Database at the University of Maryland's START.

44 Interestingly, the pirate had possible familial ties to a leader in the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram. There are not thought to be operational links between these pirates and Boko Haram. See Yerima Kini Nsom and Nformi Sonde Kinsai, "Pirates Kill 7 in Bakassi Again," *Cameroon Mirror*, September 5, 2013.

45 "Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, undated.

46 "The Gulf of Guinea: The New Danger Zone," International Crisis Group, December 2012.

47 Quoted in Jon Gambrell, "Pirates Kidnap 24 in Gunfight Off Togo Coast," *Independent*, August 28, 2012; Joe Bavier, "French Tanker Believed Held by Pirates Off Ivory Coast," Reuters, February 6, 2014.

48 Harry Alsop, "Oil Tanker Near Ivory Coast Hijacked by Pirates," *Daily Telegraph*, February 4, 2014.

49 "Maritime Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea."

50 Personal interview, Chris Trelawny, head of maritime security at the International Maritime Organization, March 24, 2014. For a confession of a Nigerian pirate, see "Oil Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea," *Conflict Trends* 4 (2012).

51 "Corruption Perceptions Index 2013," Transparency International, undated.

52 Ibid.

53 "ICPC Study Unravels Cause of Corruption at Nigerian Ports," *Marine and Petroleum Nigeria*, undated.

54 "Corruption Thrives in Ports, Says ICPC," Nigeria Intel, December 10, 2013.

55 "NIGERIA: Conviction of Admirals Confirms Navy Role in Oil Theft," Integrated Regional Information Networks, January 6, 2005.

56 Ibid.

57 James Bridger, "Piracy in West Africa: Preventing a Somalization of the Gulf of Guinea, Pt.1," Center for International Maritime Security, December 12, 2012.

58 "Togo Implements New Anti-Piracy Measures," Gard, July 4, 2012.

59 Edd Gent, "Anti-Piracy Surveillance Towers Installed in Nigeria," *Engineering and Technology Magazine*, December 20, 2013.

60 David Pugliese, "Ivory Coast to Expand Navy by 40 Ships To Fight Piracy," *Ottawa Citizen*, February 9, 2014.

61 "The Gulf of Guinea: The New Danger Zone."

62 Ibid.

63 "New West and Central Africa Piracy and Maritime Law Enforcement Code Adopted," *Maritime Executive*, June 26, 2013.

64 "The Gulf of Guinea: The New Danger Zone."

to fight armed robbery at sea.”<sup>65</sup> These measures follow the U.S. Africa Command’s ongoing efforts to train national naval forces in the region and to “promote relationships between nations to combat these illicit activities.”<sup>66</sup>

The UN Security Council in 2011 passed a resolution condemning threats of piracy and armed robbery in the gulf,<sup>67</sup> and Japan contributed \$1 million to an International Maritime Organization West and Central Africa Maritime Security Trust Fund to curb piracy in the gulf in March 2014.<sup>68</sup>

Onboard armed security details proved important in dissuading pirates from attacking vessels in the international waters off Somalia and East Africa in recent years. In the Gulf of Guinea context, however, only armed guards from or employed by the national forces of the state in whose territorial waters a vessel is in may operate on ships.<sup>69</sup> As the majority of attacks in West Africa take place in territorial waters of countries with standing governments and navies—which is in contrast to the international waters off Somalia patrolled by pirates—coordination can be difficult. This is especially true when some of the countries in West Africa deny that incidents of piracy have even taken place.<sup>70</sup>

### Conclusion

Piracy and armed attacks are not new ventures in West Africa, but growing export volumes out of the region destined for Europe and China, among other states, mean piracy will grow as a critical issue for regional governments and international energy organizations. Nigeria and Angola are Africa’s top

crude oil exporters respectively, with the latter an important supplier of crude oil to China, the United States and the European Union.<sup>71</sup> Of the nine Gulf of Guinea countries, eight export metals and oil to American and European markets.<sup>72</sup> Nigeria became Africa’s biggest economy in April 2014, exporting almost \$100 billion worth of crude petroleum in 2011.<sup>73</sup> In 2011, 24% of all Nigerian exports went to the United States, valued at \$30 billion—although this number has fallen significantly in 2012 and 2013.<sup>74</sup>

With a number of governments holding territorial control of the Gulf of Guinea—some of which suffer from high levels of corruption—pirates and criminal enterprises are able to hijack ships and siphon off oil with little deterrence. Unlike the waters off the Horn of Africa in the east, powerful international navies are not patrolling the Gulf of Guinea. The states in the Gulf of Guinea have their own national navies—which are generally weak—and the waters do not lie along major international shipping lanes.

A chief cause of piracy in West Africa is the vibrant black market for crude oil in Gulf of Guinea states. As such, with these structural impediments a symptom of a much greater illness, piracy in the Gulf is likely to continue despite qualified efforts at the regional level to reduce it.

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<sup>65</sup> The bill is available at [www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/sres288/text](http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/sres288/text).

<sup>66</sup> Captain Dave Rollo quoted in Donna Miles, “Africa Command Helps Partners Promote Maritime Security,” American Forces Press Service, October 28, 2013.

<sup>67</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2018, October 31, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> “Japan Gives One Million Dollar Boost to Gulf of Guinea Fund,” International Maritime Organization, March 17, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Anna Petrig, “The Use of Force and Firearms by Private Maritime Security Companies Against Suspected Pirates,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 62:3 (2013).

<sup>70</sup> “Angola Navy Says Missing Tanker Located, Crew Faked Pirate Attack,” Reuters, January 26, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> “Angola.”

<sup>72</sup> For more details, see the Observatory of Economic Complexity, MIT Media Lab Macro Connections, available at [www.atlas.media.mit.edu](http://www.atlas.media.mit.edu).

<sup>73</sup> “Profile Nigeria,” the Observatory of Economic Complexity, MIT Media Lab Macro Connections, available at [atlas.media.mit.edu/profile/country/nga/](http://atlas.media.mit.edu/profile/country/nga/).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

## Recent Highlights in Political Violence

March 1, 2014 (PAKISTAN): Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan announced a one-month cease-fire aimed at restarting failed peace talks with the Pakistani government. The following day, on March 2, the Pakistani government announced a cessation of air strikes against the Pakistani Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. – *Reuters, March 1*

March 2, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): Afghan officials announced that a number of Taliban insurgents escaped from Sarposha Prison in Kandahar on February 25. According to the officials, someone altered an official document, allowing at least 10 prisoners to leave the prison freely. The *New York Times* stated that “the escapees were believed to be among the most prominent insurgents being held at Sarposha on terrorism charges, followers of a particularly notorious Taliban commander, Mullah Dad Mohammad Munib, who specialized in orchestrating assassinations and suicide bombings.” The Afghan Taliban claimed that 23 inmates escaped. – *New York Times, March 2*

March 3, 2014 (GLOBAL): Rob Wainwright, the head of Europol, warned that “multiple thousands” of young men may have traveled to Syria as foreign fighters for militant groups linked to al-Qa`ida. – *Telegraph, March 3*

March 3, 2014 (PAKISTAN): Militants attacked a court building in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital, killing 11 people, including a judge. The attack began with gunfire, followed by two suicide bombings. It marked the first suicide bombing in Islamabad since June 2011. Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, which announced a one-month cease-fire on March 1, denied any involvement in the attack. Instead, Ahrar-ul-Hind, a group that recently split from the TTP, claimed responsibility. – *AFP, March 3*

March 3, 2014 (YEMEN): Suspected fighters from al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula ambushed a Yemeni military convoy, killing seven soldiers. – *AP, March 3*

March 4, 2014 (GLOBAL): General David Rodriguez, the head of U.S. Africa Command, said that North Africa provides

a “significant source of foreign fighters” involved in the war in Syria. “Terrorists are learning their trade abroad [in Syria], returning to their countries with hard-earned skills that increase their lethality,” Rodriguez said in testimony soon to be presented to the House Armed Services Committee. – *Bloomberg, March 4*

March 4, 2014 (FRANCE): A Paris court found Romain Letellier guilty of “apology for terrorism” for his role in publishing al-Qa`ida propaganda translated into French on the internet. He was sentenced to a year in prison. Letellier, also known as Abou Siyad al-Normandy, is a 27-year-old convert to Islam. He was the first person in France to be charged under a new law directed at promoting and apologizing for terrorism. – *Radio France Internationale, March 5*

March 4, 2014 (SOMALIA): Al-Shabab announced on its Facebook page the recent execution of three men accused of spying for the U.S. or Somali governments. Al-Shabab is an affiliate of al-Qa`ida. – *Voice of America, March 4*

March 5, 2014 (IRAQ): Seven car bombs and two roadside bombs exploded in six primarily Shi`a areas in Baghdad, killing at least 14 people. – *AFP, March 5*

March 5, 2014 (PAKISTAN): A roadside bomb killed at least six Pakistani soldiers in Hangu District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. – *Reuters, March 5*

March 6, 2014 (YEMEN): Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) killed one of their own members and hung his body from a light post in Shahr, Hadramawt Province. AQAP accused the man of spying for the United States. – *AP, March 6*

March 6, 2014 (SYRIA): A car bomb tore through Homs, killing at least 15 people. The bomb exploded in a mostly Christian and Alawite area. – *AFP, March 6*

March 7, 2014 (SAUDI ARABIA): Saudi Arabia declared the Muslim Brotherhood, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant as terrorist organizations. – *Reuters, March 7*

March 9, 2014 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber in an explosives-laden minibus killed at least 45 people in the largely Shi`a city of Hilla. – *Reuters, March 9*

March 10, 2014 (GLOBAL): Al-Qa`ida released an al-Sahab-produced video promising a new English-language magazine, known as *Resurgence*, that will seek to recruit and inspire Western jihadists to conduct attacks in their own countries. Although al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula already produces the English-language *Inspire* magazine, *Resurgence* will supposedly be produced by al-Qa`ida’s core leadership. As stated by the *Telegraph*, the new video “mixes graphics, images of George W. Bush and warplanes launching missiles with a speech by Malcolm X...in which he said: ‘You can’t ever reach a man if you don’t speak his language. If a man speaks the language of brute force, you can’t come to him with peace.’” The video ends with the message: “‘So fight in the way of Allah...’ *Resurgence*. Coming Soon...” – *Telegraph, March 10*

March 10, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): The Taliban threatened to target Afghanistan’s upcoming presidential election on April 5, instructing its fighters to attack voters, polling staff and security forces. “It is the religious obligation of every Afghan to fulfill their duty by foiling the latest plot of the invaders that is guised in the grab of elections,” the Taliban’s statement said. – *AFP, March 10*

March 10, 2014 (SYRIA): Jabhat al-Nusra militants released a group of 13 Greek Orthodox nuns in exchange for dozens of women held in Syrian government prisons. The nuns were captured three months ago after militants overran a Christian village. Qatari and Lebanese officials mediated the prisoner exchange. Jabhat al-Nusra is an al-Qa`ida affiliate. – *AP, March 10*

March 11, 2014 (GLOBAL): Director of the Central Intelligence Agency John Brennan said that Nasir al-Wahayshi, the head of al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), has been appointed as al-Qa`ida’s second-in-command, under Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Wahayshi previously served as Usama bin Ladin’s personal secretary. – *NBC News, March 14*

March 11, 2014 (GLOBAL): According to the Associated Press, “A British man testifying in the terror trial of Osama bin Laden’s son-in-law [Sulaiman Abu Ghaith] said Tuesday that he flew on planes over the Middle East and Europe with explosives in a shoe after the Sept. 11

attacks but didn’t detonate them because he was saving the bomb for an attack over America.” The man, Saajid Badat, eventually backed out of his mission. – *AP, March 11*

March 11, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A Taliban splinter group shot to death Nils Horner, a Swedish-British journalist, on a street in Kabul while he was reporting on Afghanistan’s elections. The splinter group, Feday-e-Mahaz, was reportedly formed by loyalists of the late Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah. – *AP, March 12*

March 14, 2014 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber killed seven people in a suburb of Peshawar. – *CNN, March 14*

March 15, 2014 (SOMALIA): A car bomb exploded near a hotel popular with government officials and businessmen. The blast injured one person. – *AFP, March 16*

March 17, 2014 (UNITED STATES): Federal prosecutors announced the arrest of Nicholas Teausant of Acampo, California, after he allegedly spoke of wanting to bomb the Los Angeles subway system and attempting to travel to Syria to fight with Islamist extremists. The San Joaquin Delta Community College in Stockton student and member of the U.S. National Guard was arrested on a northbound Amtrak bus just short of the Canada border. – *AP, March 17; KCRA, March 17*

March 18, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber on a rickshaw detonated explosives outside a checkpoint at a market in Faryab Province, killing at least 13 civilians. – *Guardian, March 18*

March 18, 2014 (RUSSIA): The well-known Islamist website Kavkaz Center announced that Doku Umarov, the *amir* of the Caucasus Emirate, had been killed in the North Caucasus. Umarov had been fighting against the Russians in Chechnya since 1994. – *Business Insider Australia, March 19*

March 18, 2014 (YEMEN): A suicide bomber in an explosives-laden vehicle killed one person at a military intelligence headquarters near Aden in southern Yemen. – *AFP, March 18*

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

March 19, 2014 (UNITED STATES): Shelton Thomas Bell, of Florida, pleaded guilty to conspiring to travel to Yemen to join the al-Qa`ida-linked Ansar al-Shari`a group. He recruited an unnamed juvenile, but they were unable to reach Yemen. – *Reuters, March 19*

March 20, 2014 (GLOBAL): The new issue of *Inspire* magazine, which is published by al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula, called on individuals to detonate car bombs in cities of symbolic importance, such as Washington, D.C., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and northern Virginia. The issue also encouraged individuals to detonate bombs in the United Kingdom, France and “other crusader countries.” – *Newsweek, March 20*

March 20, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): Four Taliban gunmen opened fire inside the Serena Hotel in Kabul, killing nine people, including a reporter from Agence France-Presse and his wife and two children. The hotel is considered one of the most secure sites for civilians in Kabul. – *Wall Street Journal, March 21*

March 20, 2014 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber killed at least 12 people at a Baghdad café. – *RFE/RL, March 20*

March 22, 2014 (IRAQ): A roadside bomb exploded on a commercial street in Tikrit. When policemen arrived, a car bomb exploded in the same area. The blasts killed at least seven people. – *RTTNews, March 22*

March 23, 2014 (KENYA): Gunmen opened fire on worshippers at a church near Mombasa, killing two people. – *Voice of America, March 23*

March 24, 2014 (YEMEN): Suspected al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula militants attacked a security checkpoint in Hadramawt Province, killing at least 14 Yemeni soldiers. – *AP, March 24*

March 25, 2014 (UNITED STATES): Jose Pimentel was sentenced to 16 years in prison for attempting to conduct an al-Qa`ida-inspired homegrown terrorism campaign in the United States. Pimentel, 29-years-old, admitted trying to build pipe bombs to conduct terrorist attacks. – *AP, March 25*

March 25, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): Two Taliban suicide bombers detonated explosives outside an election office on the outskirts of Kabul. Other militants subsequently stormed the facility. The gunmen, and two police officers, were killed. – *CBS/AP, March 25*

March 25, 2014 (NIGERIA): Two suicide bombers in an explosives-laden vehicle attacked a police patrol in Maiduguri, killing five policemen. – *Reuters, March 26*

March 26, 2014 (UNITED STATES): A jury in New York City convicted Sulaiman Abu Ghaith, Osama bin Ladin's son-in-law, of conspiring to kill Americans. – *National Public Radio, March 26*

March 27, 2014 (IRAQ): Bombs tore through commercial areas of Baghdad, killing 26 people. – *Canadian Press, March 27*

March 28, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): The Taliban attacked the offices of a U.S.-based charity in Kabul in a complex assault involving four gunmen and a suicide bomber in a vehicle. The charity, Roots of Peace, is involved in replacing minefields with vineyards. – *Washington Post, March 28; al-Jazira, March 29*

March 29, 2014 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban militants attacked the headquarters of Afghanistan's independent election commission in Kabul. There were no injuries reported. – *Guardian, March 29*

March 29, 2014 (LEBANON): A suicide bomber in an explosives-laden vehicle killed three Lebanese soldiers at an army checkpoint in the Bekaa Valley. – *CNN, March 29*

March 30, 2014 (IRAQ): Gunmen shot to death seven Iraqi soldiers at a security checkpoint in Mosul, Ninawa Province. – *Voice of America, March 30*

March 31, 2014 (GERMANY): Authorities arrested two people suspected of being current or former members of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. A third person was arrested for allegedly providing financial support to the terrorist group. – *AP, March 31*