

Terrorism Monitor

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p.1

Brian M. Perkins

BRIEFS

p.3

Sunguta West

Islamist Militants in Mozambique Intensify Attacks in Cabo Delgado Province

p.5

Brian M. Perkins

The STC's Carrot and Stick and its Rivalry with Islah

p.6

Animesh Roul

Islamic State-Khorasan Remains Potent Force in Afghan Jihad

THE LIBYAN CONFLICT AND THE MOROCCAN-ALGERIAN ARMS RACE

Brian Perkins

Algeria and Morocco have long been in competition for diplomatic and military supremacy in the Maghreb and have intermittently faced off in the conflict over Western Sahara. Algeria has been the region's preeminent military power for decades, despite its influence being hampered by its military dogma of non-interference. Morocco, meanwhile, has placed a significant emphasis on modernizing and expanding its military while showcasing its current military and counterterrorism strengths through partnerships with European and African countries. As Morocco edges closer to matching Algeria's military capabilities and influence, the conflict in Libya appears to be offering a tempting way for Algiers to once again assert itself on the regional stage.

While Algeria has been struggling with internal political conflicts and societal unrest over the past several years, Morocco has been implementing a five-year plan to industrialize its military and defense industry to reach "regional supremacy." The plan has seen Morocco significantly increase its military expenditure, already devoting

over \$20 billion between 2017 and late 2019 ([Morocco World News](#), November 20, 2019). While Morocco's military expenditure is still eclipsed by that of Algeria, Morocco has gained an advantage through a focus on technological advancements and by investing in strike capabilities and air superiority, particularly through the anticipated acquisition of 25 F-16 fighter jets, 24 Apache helicopters, and numerous missile systems ([North Africa Post](#), January 11). Meanwhile, Algeria has been hindered by its inability to purchase U.S. equipment and Algiers' own attempts to reduce its reliance on Moscow. Further, the country's comparative lack of involvement in the Maghreb, including participation in military operations and exercises or broad security partnerships, has impeded both training opportunities for its armed forces and its regional and global influence.

The arms race between Morocco and Algeria is taking place amid Algiers' efforts to codify external military involvement into its constitution as well as the increasingly international conflict in Libya. Competing parties to that conflict are attempting to draw both countries into the fold.

Morocco has maintained its stance of neutrality and non-interference toward Libya and has been key in pre-

vious efforts to mediate the conflict, including in the Skhirat Agreement in 2015. Rabat has so far managed to avoid international actors' attempts to draw the country into the Libyan war. More recently, reports have suggested that Morocco rejected the UAE's attempts to entice the country to back the Libyan National Army (LNA) in exchange for concessions, including Libyan oil ([Alayam24](#), May 3). The kingdom will likely remain keen to maintain its neutral role going forward, opting for diplomatic prestige rather than an assertion of military influence.

Similarly, Algeria has so far attempted to remain relatively neutral while still nominally supporting Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), even playing host to its leaders and its Turkish backers. Unconfirmed reports have started to surface suggesting that Algiers is preparing to sign a defense pact with the GNA with Turkish support. Algeria, however, is in a precarious position due to the country's historic relationship with Moscow, which, alongside the UAE, backs the rival LNA.

Algeria is eager to reassert itself onto the regional stage and the conflict in Libya offers an attractive way to do so, whether by taking a stronger diplomatic or military stance. At the same time, increased involvement in Libya allows Algeria to check Morocco's rising diplomatic and military power in the Maghreb.

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IRAN: COVID-19 CONTINUES TO EXACERBATE POLITICAL AND PROVINCIAL DISPARITIES

Brian Perkins

The Iranian regime is just seven months removed from some of the fiercest social unrest it has experienced in recent memory. The country's deadly outbreak of COVID-19 signaled the potential for a delayed but fervent return to anti-regime protests, though prolonged public health crisis and the regime's response has seemingly sidelined such opposition for the time being. However, the Iranian interior minister's first acknowledgement of the severe death toll from the violent crackdown against protestors in late 2019 is likely to continue to resonate and cause anti-regime sentiment to fester while the country grapples with COVID-19, which has only worsened the effects of U.S. sanctions.

Just days before Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli's May 30 acknowledgment that around 200 protestors had been killed in 2019—international observers place the number closer to 1,000—protests and clashes broke out in Gheizaniyeh district, outside of Khuzestan province's capital Ahvaz as residents condemned the regime for the region's severe water shortages ([Radio Farda](#), May 31; [Radio Farda](#), May 30). Iranian forces used rubber bullets to disperse the protestors and arrested dozens of individuals. Khuzestan accounts for approximately 80 percent of Iran's onshore oil reserves and was one of the provinces hardest hit by both the initial COVID-19 outbreak and the second wave that occurred after Iran attempted to ease restrictions on April 19. The province suffers from severe underdevelopment and has been a bastion of anti-regime sentiment, being the center of the deadliest protests of 2019 before it spread elsewhere.

The current crisis has revealed deepening fissures across Iran and future challenges to the shift in the balance of power, which will likely have significant implications on the players that participate in the 2021 presidential elections. The disparity between President Hassan Rouhani and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's messaging has widened as the COVID-19 crisis has worsened and the parliament has become more populated with hardliners. This includes the new speaker of parliament and former IRGC commander, Brig. Gen. Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf. He is a longtime confidant to Khamenei and, along with the current majority of parliament, has stood in opposition to Rouhani on most issues. Meanwhile, there are two

other trends worth noting: the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) expansion of power and role in the COVID-19 response and provincial officials' deepening disdain toward the regime for its failed response to the crisis.

The coming months will continue to see the IRGC consolidate further authority while hardline members of parliament stifle Rouhani and gear up for the 2021 presidential election. Meanwhile, the pandemic will likely continue to suppress most larger protests, with more isolated protests, such as the those in Khuzestan, cropping up intermittently. Anti-regime sentiment, however, is likely to continue to build as more suffer from another wave of COVID-19, particularly in more restive provinces such as Khuzestan and Sistan and Baluchestan, and provincial officials feel they have been left to their own devices without meaningful government support. The question moving forward is how Iranian society will respond to the IRGC and hardline political consolidation once the COVID-19 dust settles.

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Islamist Militants in Mozambique Intensify Attacks in Cabo Delgado Province

Sunguta West

Ahlu Sunnah Wal Jammah (ASWJ) was incorporated into Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) in 2019 and includes militants from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. The group has been responsible for attacks that have killed hundreds and displaced thousands from their homes since 2017 ([CTGN Africa](#), January 31, 2019; [The East African](#), August 11, 2018).

IS-CAP made its first claim of an attack in the region in June 2019. The organization issued a statement at that time claiming to be involved in a gunfight with Mozambican military forces in the region. It later boasted that its fighters had captured weapons, ammunition, and rockets in the clash. The group's claims of responsibility have increased significantly over the past several months ([The East African](#), June 5, 2019). Although the group's exact agenda is still unclear, some reports suggest it wants to establish an Islamic caliphate in the natural gas-rich province.

In recent weeks, the militants have carried out some of their most daring assaults, seizing government buildings, blocking roads, and hoisting black and white Islamic State flags in Cabo Delgado's towns and villages. In the attacks, villages have been burnt down and people beheaded. The militants have also killed government soldiers before retreating into the bush. At least 1,000 people have died and nearly 150,000 have been displaced after two years of violence ([Africa Diplomatic](#), April 1; [ClubofMozambique](#), May 19).

The group launched a series of coordinated attacks throughout April and May in an attempt to control movement between the towns of Macimboa da Praia and Montepuez and the route to neighboring Tanzania ([AllAfrica](#), May 14).

On April 8, 52 youth were killed by the militants in the village of Xitaxi in Muidumbe district after they resisted forced conscription into the group. Reports from local

residents described the youth being either shot dead or beheaded ([Arabnews](#), April 21).

Another key attack occurred on May 12, when the militants targeted Koko and Nacate villages in the southern Macomia district of Cabo Delgado. They entered Koko village at 2 PM local time and began to burn down the surrounding buildings. When the attacks ended, 47 houses and several granaries had been razed ([Club of Mozambique](#), May 14).

On the same date, the militants captured Auasse, a town center near the port of Macimboa da Praia. A major electricity power substation serving Macimboa and Palma was destroyed, disrupting electricity and telecommunications in the region. The militants also destroyed a police station and captured an armored vehicle believed to have been donated to Mozambique by China. The attackers later used the vehicle to destroy two small bridges linking key towns in the region.

Miengueleua, a large town in Muidumbe, was attacked twice on May 11 and 12. During this attack, the militants also took time to arm themselves with weapons hidden along the Messalo River. Later, the port of Macimboa da Praia came under attack on May 12 and 13. In attacks along the coast of Macomia, the militants held public meetings with the local people ([Club of Mozambique](#), May 14).

Cabo Delgado covers 82,624 square kilometers and has an estimated population of 2.3 million people. Located 2,600 kilometers from the capital Maputo, the province is extremely poor and largely neglected. While it's rich in mineral resources such as rubies, oil, timber, and gold, the Cabo Delgado is also rife with illegal activities such as drug and ivory smuggling ([Club of Mozambique](#), December 16, 2019).

In 2010, international oil and gas prospecting companies discovered huge deposits of natural gas in the province. The insurgency did not start until years later, with what was then ASWJ carrying out its first attack in October 2017.

With the recent spike in attacks, concerns have been growing that the assaults are threatening natural gas projects valued at \$60 billion, which Exxon Mobil and Total SA are planning to spearhead in the region ([Club of Mozambique](#), May 24).

The fighting in Cabo Delgado has so far involved less sophisticated tactics and weaponry. The militants are known to use mobile phones to communicate and motorcycles to move from one point to the next.

Despite the less sophisticated tactics, Mozambican forces have largely failed to make any notable gains. The Mozambican security forces have had a few recent successes, however. On May 1, these troops repelled militants who had burned down a tourist camp in Metuge district in the province. No casualties came from the attack as most people living in nearby villages had fled after learning of the planned assault.

In early May, the Mozambican police and army backed by South African private military companies (PMCs) halted the militants' aggressive two-month push south in Quissanga district. For a month, they had taken control of the district and were moving south towards the city of Pemba ([AllAfrica](#), May 7). Similar short-lived military offensives have been common, but have failed to yield notable results.

Signaling a shift in strategy, Mozambique is reportedly in talks with South Africa for possible support in fighting the militant group. The country has been using PMCs to augment its forces to counter the group, but this week, President Filipe Nyeusi finally called for regional support to fight the insurgents.

Admitting to the severity of the situation and drawing in regional governments has widely been seen as the missing cog in the battle against the Mozambican insurgents. A united approach in extinguishing the violence is more urgent now than ever as the frequency and scale of attacks continues to increase and \$60 billion in gas projects hang in the balance.

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The STC's Carrot and Stick and its Rivalry with Islah

Brian M. Perkins

Saudi Arabia's military adventurism in Yemen has been nothing short of disastrous. As political and economic woes are beginning to hit home, the kingdom is struggling to maintain its resolve and cajole warring parties in southern Yemen toward some kind of peace deal. Conflict between the internationally recognized Yemeni government under Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi and the rival Southern Transitional Council (STC) escalated once again on April 26, when the STC declared self-rule over southern Yemen. While the focus of the matter has been on the STC and the Hadi government itself, it obscures the importance of the Islah-STC rivalry and the implications these developments have on the current and future role of Islah within the government more broadly.

The April 26 declaration was not the first—and is unlikely to be the last—declaration of self-rule by the STC, which uses the tactic as a means of leverage. The political-military field in Yemen is exceptionally convoluted, but what has grown increasingly clear is that the STC has become a key stakeholder capable of influencing, to a degree, the direction of the conflict and the future of southern Yemen. The STC's claims to be the authority on matters across southern Yemen do not entirely reflect the reality on the ground, as evidenced by residents and officials in Abyan, al-Mahra, Hadramawt, Shabwa, and Socotra rejecting the STC declaration ([Al Jazeera](#), April 26). The STC, however, has still proven that it does have some leverage over Saudi Arabia, particularly due to its ability to impose its will on the critical port city of Aden, Yemen's temporary—if only symbolic—capital.

Much more is at stake than the give and take of political and war-time military concessions between President Hadi and the STC. Islah and, inherently, the mercurial Vice President, General Ali Mohsen, stand to gain or lose significant influence based on both the short- and longer-term success or failure of the STC. Islah has long been an influential party within the Yemeni government and the emergence of other powerful players capable of influencing the future direction of the country inherently takes a piece of the pie away, and further, those pieces will be given to Islah's two biggest enemies—the Houthis and the STC.

The Houthis and Islah are longtime adversaries and the former holds Ali Mohsen accountable as the man who led the Yemeni military against them during the Saada wars between 2004 and 2010 as commander of the northwest military district and 1st Armored Division. Always the opportunist, Ali Mohsen managed to leverage his military clout into the vice presidency, a heartbeat away from being, at the least, the interim president. The ongoing war has only deepened that animosity as it has pitted Islah and the Houthis against one another in some of the war's fiercest battles. It is clear that there will be no solution in Yemen that does not see the Houthis with a seat at the table.

Likewise, both Islah and Ali Mohsen have been vilified by pro-secessionist groups in southern Yemen. This disparity has fallen along the battle lines of the historic rivalry that saw the Zumra faction defeat the Tughma during the southern civil war that took place in 1986. The Zumra faction represented the southern followers of Ali Nasser Mohammed, the president of South Yemen during the 1986 conflict, primarily in Abyan and Shabwa. The Zumra came to include the likes of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, President Hadi, and allies within Islah, notably Ali Mohsen. The Tughma, primarily from al-Dhale and Lahij, were comprised of separatists led by Ali Salim al-Beidh and have come to represent the STC and its followers in Aden, al-Dhale, and Lahij.

The STC's latest declaration of self-rule has seen a return of clashes with pro-Hadi forces, particularly those affiliated with Islah. Alongside these clashes, Islah and the STC have been waging propaganda campaigns against one another, with the STC previously being accused of coordinating with both the Houthis and al-Qaeda ([Al Jazeera](#), August 29, 2019). Like previous outbreaks of violence between the warring parties, the focus has been on securing strategic locations in Shabwa and Abyan, most notably Shoqra and Zinjibar, Abyan, which would serve as the Yemeni military's potential gateway to Aden ([Al-Monitor](#), May 19). The STC views gaining the upper hand in these areas, where it exercises less influence than its primary powerbase, as essential to maximizing its political concessions and Islah views marching on Aden as key to ensuring its long-term primacy. Islah has so far managed to monopolize power within the government and military, but concessions given to the STC through the Riyadh Agreement would necessitate ceding influence to its mortal enemies.

At present, the STC lacks the widespread local and international support to achieve its goal of controlling an independent southern Yemen but will continue to press for maximum concessions from the Hadi government and the Saudi coalition to revisit its demands down the road. The STC and Islah's actions will continue to be motivated by their mutual disdain for one another and the goal of securing influence. The Riyadh Agreement is not entirely dead just yet as STC delegates have held meetings in Riyadh to iron out revisions ([Middle East Monitor](#), May 21). Saudi Arabia cannot afford for the agreement not to be implemented in some form. Its implementation, however, will only be a short-term solution that highlights fundamental fissures within southern Yemen, and the country as a whole, and exposes the importance of beginning to consider a successor to Hadi other than Ali Mohsen.

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Islamic State-Khorasan Remains Potent Force in Afghan Jihad

Animesh Roul

Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) has dominated the jihadist landscape of Afghanistan for the past several years while sharing turf with the powerful Taliban. It has suffered several significant setbacks in recent months, including a leadership crisis and territorial losses in its former provincial strongholds of Nangarhar and Kunar. Both Afghan government forces and the Taliban claimed to have accosted and defeated IS-K in 2019. The perceived downfall coincided with Islamic State's (IS) crumbling caliphate in the Middle East and the death of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. A string of arrests and mass surrenders of IS-K fighters led to the assumption that concerted government offensives have disrupted the group's command and control structures. In November 2019, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani himself said that IS-K was "obliterated" in Afghanistan ([Ariana News](#), November 25, 2019).

While obituaries poured out in later 2019 predicting IS-K's imminent collapse, the group seemed to recover, launching several terrorist attacks on civilians and security forces between March and May. Recently, four significant strikes proved the operational capability and resiliency of the group. On May 12, an IS-K suicide bombing at the funeral ceremony of Shaikh Akram—a police commander in the eastern province of Nangarhar—killed at least 32 people and more than 60 people were injured ([Tolo News](#), May 13). Claiming responsibility for the attack, IS' statement claimed the suicide bomber, Abdallah al-Ansari, killed and wounded '100 non-believers.'

Another purported IS-K suicide assault occurred at a maternity hospital in the Dasht-e-Barchi area of the capital Kabul on May 12. The attack killed at least 24 civilians, including children ([Afghanistan Times](#), May 13). Though there was no official claim from IS-K, suspicion has fallen squarely on the group. The other potential culprit, the Taliban, denied any involvement in the attack. Government security agencies and the United States have blamed IS-K for the recent series of deadly attacks in capital Kabul and in Nangarhar province ([Afghanistan Times](#), May 15). While IS-K media units are

still silent on the violence inflicted on the maternity ward, the group claimed responsibility for multiple low-intensity mine blasts in Kabul on May 11. The bombs targeted vehicles belonging to the National Directorate of Security (NDS) ([Tolo News](#), June 2). The jihadist group's statement, however, erroneously claimed that 15 security force personnel had been killed or wounded in the attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Though IS-K is deeply ingrained into Kunar and Nangarhar province due to its strong physical presence in the eastern Afghan regions bordering Pakistan, its subversive activities intermittently reach Kabul. In March this year, IS-K launched a coordinated attack on a Sikh gurdwara (place of worship) in Kabul's Shor Bazar area, which killed 27 worshippers. Two Indians were identified as part of this suicide operation—Muhammed Muhsin (a.k.a. Khalid al-Hindi) and Sajid Kuthirummal. Both were from India's southernmost state of Kerala. Later, IS claimed the attack was intended to "avenge Muslims in Kashmir" ([Express Tribune](#), March 26). Kabul also witnessed several high profile IS-K strikes in early March this year, including a suicide attack on a ceremony marking the death anniversary of Hezb-e Wahdat party leader Abdul Ali Mazari. The IS-K assault killed 32 people and injured more than 80 others ([Khaama Press](#), March 6). IS-K also claimed the most recent attack on May 30, 2020, targeting a vehicle carrying the Khurshid TV news station employees in Kabul. Its statement mentioned the TV station as "loyal or aligned to the Afghan apostate government." Two people including the driver of the vehicle died while six others were injured in the blast ([Khaama Press](#), May 30).

IS announced its so-called Khorasan province (*Wilayat-e-Khorasan*) under the leadership of disgruntled former Taliban commanders in January 2015. The new branch pledged its allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and primarily focused on the geographical region of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The inherent ideological differences and battle over territorial control remained the major bone of contention with the Taliban throughout IS-K's existence. However, the IS affiliate has spread its influence mostly by co-opting Pakistan-based militant factions, including Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Alami, Jundullah, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, among others. The group has garnered much of its strength and influence through its covert network of extremists in Pakistan who have sworn allegiance to IS.

Recent arrests of several key IS-K leaders revealed the lasting symbiotic nexus between Pakistani militant groups and their backers in the state intelligence agencies, including with organizations such as the Haqqani network and Lashkar-e-Taiba. According to Afghanistan's NDS, recently arrested IS-K leaders such as Munib Mohammad (Abu Bilal) and Sheikh Abu Omar al-Khurasan may have acted as liaisons with Pakistani intelligence agencies and its terrorist proxies ([Kabul Times](#), April 23, [Dawn](#), May 7; [Pajhwok](#), May 11; [Gandhara](#), May 6). The Afghan security forces also detained two senior-ranking members of IS-K identified as Sahib, the head of public relations, and Abul Ali, the group's intelligence chief ([Khaama Press](#)).

Earlier in April, the NDS arrested IS-K's chief Aslam Farooqi (a.k.a. Mullah Abdullah Orakzai) in the southern province of Kandahar. According to NDS, Farooqi had close ties with Pakistani intelligence agencies and their militant proxies ([Tolo News](#), April 4; [Pasbanan](#), April 4; [Tolo News](#) May 11). In April 2019, according to a UN document, the IS-K *Shura* in consultation with the IS representative from Syria had promoted Aslam Farooqi, who was previously in charge of Pakistan's Khyber Agency, to lead the group. He replaced Abu Omar Khorasani, who was demoted for a series of setbacks that took place under his watch in Nangahar ([UN Document](#), July 15, 2019). However, Afghan NDS sources claimed that Aslam Farooqi took the reins of the group following the death of Abu Saeed Bajauri, another Pakistan-based chief of IS-K ([1TV News](#), April 4).

If the local media reports are to be believed, IS-K has increased its influence despite the mass surrenders last year and leadership arrests in 2020. The group still benefits from militant factions from Pakistan and Central Asia. Officials of Afghanistan's Badakhshan province observed in April that IS-K is trying to establish a more robust military presence in the region. Nearly 400 fighters linked with various groups affiliated with Islamic State—such as Tajikistan-based Ansarullah militant group, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the Harkat-i-Islami Uzbekistan—are active in the Khastak valley of Juram district in the province ([Tolo News](#), April 21).

Conclusion

The string of recent arrests, however, underscored Afghan security and intelligence agencies' success in stifling IS-K to some extent. These successes, however, have hardly affected its operational capabilities in its strongholds and Kabul. It is undoubtedly far from de-

stroyed and is still capable of carrying out sporadic attacks against U.S. and Afghan security targets with impunity. IS-K regularly issues statements claiming attacks against the Bagram Airbase located in northern Kabul ([Al Jazeera](#), April 9).

The Afghan government forces continue to carry out concerted security efforts to dismantle IS' remaining networks in eastern Afghanistan and other parts of the country. With the rank and file of the group experiencing significant disruptions and several members of its leadership being placed in detention, IS-K might appear subdued for the time being. However, there should be no complacency in dealing with its ideological traction and operational capabilities as the IS-K attempts to further regroup and regain lost ground in neighboring Pakistan and Central Asia with the help of its existing local networks

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