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U.S. strike kills Islamic State militant linked to Benghazi attacks

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Refugees from Syria's Tal Abyad face uncertain future

Some residents have started returning home after Kurdish forces and their allies reclaimed the town from ISIL.

[Lucy Kafanov](#) | 19 Jun 2015 10:11 GMT | [Politics](#), [Turkey-Syria border](#), [Refugees](#), [Middle East](#), [Syria](#)

Akcakale, Turkey - War-weary and with uncertain futures, refugees from Syria's Tal Abyad began returning home this week after Syrian Kurdish forces, backed by allied rebel groups and US-led air strikes, wrestled control of the border town back from fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group.

Some carried sacks containing their meagre possessions, while others arrived with nothing but their children. Many at the Turkish-Syrian border crossing expressed anxiety about the days to come.

"I don't know what the situation will be like under the Kurds. Maybe they will stay and maybe ISIL will come back, but there is nothing for us here," said Mustafa, a 43-year-old farmer waiting to cross back to Syria with his wife, their five children and his elderly mother. "I pray to God there will be no more air strikes and that our family can spend Ramadan in peace."

Fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and their Syrian rebel allies [declared full control](#) over Tal Abyad on Tuesday, following an advance that lasted less than a week and sparked an exodus of more than [23,000 refugees](#) into Turkey.

[RELATED: The ticking time bomb of Syrian refugees](#)

"It's a significant blow for ISIL because it cuts off one of its main transit routes used to smuggle supplies, weapons and fighters," said Andrew Tabler, an expert on Syria at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "For the Kurds, it's significant because it means they can consolidate their territory by connecting Kurdish enclaves in Kobane to the west and Hasakah to the east."

Before war ravaged these parts of Syria, some 50,000 Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Christians [lived in the town](#) of Tal Abyad and the surrounding villages. The area was under the control of the Syrian government until 2012, when it was taken over by the [Free Syrian Army](#) (FSA).

Just over a year ago, ISIL fighters swept into Tal Abyad, driving out the FSA and hoisting their black flag. But the Kurds, who consider Tal Abyad to be [part of Rojava](#), the western part of their long-coveted ethnic homeland, are now in control.

Years of instability and political uncertainty have taken their toll on Tal Abyad's residents. Several of the refugees crossing back home refused to answer reporters' questions, citing security concerns.

"Whoever controls the town is in charge," said a man who was heading back to Tal Abyad with his wife and two daughters. "I have learned long ago that political opinions are best kept private."

About 400 Syrian refugees crossed back into Tal Abyad on Wednesday, according to witnesses and a Turkish border official who was not authorised to speak to journalists. But the majority remained in the dusty border town of Akcakale, where they were spread out in refugee camps or crowded into nearby apartment buildings.

"I wish to return to my house, but I spoke to some of our neighbours who returned and they told me that the YPG did not allow them to enter their homes," said Hamadi Ahmad, a 50-year-old food vendor who fled to Akcakale four days ago with his wife, four daughters and five sons.

They were staying in an unfinished empty concrete building along with six other families from Tal Abyad. "The Kurds want this land for themselves and don't care about our rights."

[RELATED: Hundreds cross into Turkey from Syria](#)

More than a dozen Syrian rebel factions accused the YPG of a "sectarian and ethnic cleansing" campaign against Sunni Arab and Turkmen residents, in a joint statement issued on Monday. The claim was echoed by Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc, who on Monday [said](#) there were signs "pointing towards a kind of ethnic cleansing" by both Kurdish and rebel groups - a charge strongly denied by the Kurds.

Several refugees interviewed on Wednesday said the YPG forced them out of their homes.

"We left because of the air strikes - this was the main danger - but we were also told to leave by the Kurds," said Ayman Suleiman, 30, who arrived in Turkey on Sunday. "Some homes were taken by the YPG."

YPG spokesperson Redur Xelil [dismissed allegations](#) of forced displacements of non-Kurdish civilians, promising safe passage for any families wishing to return.

"We assure them that we will insure security and their humanity needs. They can return to their villages and property when security comes back to the region," Xelil said on his [Facebook page](#).

"There is no ethnic cleansing - that information is completely wrong," Xelil told Al Jazeera, reached by telephone in Tal Abyad. "We are helping people who have returned from the Turkish border back to Tal Abyad to re-enter their homes."

The YPG is the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been fighting for Kurdish self-rule in Turkey for more than three decades. Ankara fears the YPG advance in Syria could exacerbate separatist sentiment among its own Kurdish minority.

"I don't think that Turkey is primarily concerned with the alleged or real atrocities by Kurdish fighters against Arabs; all sides have inflicted atrocities on civilian populations all along the border there," Aron Lund, the editor of the Carnegie Endowment's Syria in Crisis blog, told Al Jazeera. "What they're worried about is having PKK as the dominant force on their southern border."

[RELATED: ISIL seizes territory from Syria rebels in Aleppo](#)

Refugees said that most of Tal Abyad's Kurdish residents fled the city following the ISIL takeover. Many have gone to Kobane, which also saw ISIL defeated by YPG fighters backed by Syrian rebel allies and US-led air strikes.

"The ethnic tensions are real," [said Kani Xulam](#), director of the American Kurdish Information Network. "Kurds have suffered at the hands of Arab governments, and during Kobane, Arab populations felt they were taken advantage of by the Kurds. There is a lot of mistrust on both sides right now that will be difficult to overcome."

Until the security situation in Tal Abyad stabilises, many Syrian refugees said they will wait out the instability in Turkey.

"To me, there is no difference between the [Syrian] regime, ISIL or the Kurds," said Abdul Nasser, a 30-year-old Tal Abyad resident who watched the returning stream of refugees from the Turkish side of the border. "We are tired of being ruled by others. We are tired of war."

EU-wide police unit formed to take on Islamic State propaganda

23 GIUGNO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



A special Europe-wide police unit is to be set up to monitor and close down Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil) social media accounts.

The unit, run by Europol, will start work on July 1, and aims to track the Isil propaganda arms that attract young jihadists to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight with the group.

Thousands of young European men, including an estimated 700 Britons, have travelled to Syria to join the group. The Europol database contains 6,000 names of foreign fighters in the two countries.

It will also target messages aimed at inspiring "lone wolf" attacks in the West, such as the attacks on the offices of 'Charlie Hebdo', the French satirical magazine, and a kosher supermarket in Paris in January.

There has been concern since the rise of Isil that counter-terror measures have been left to individual countries while the scale of the problem is clearly international.

The new unit is to be modelled on the Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, (CTIRU), a joint unit of Scotland Yard and the UK Home Office. It trawls the internet for offending posts and asks media companies like Facebook and Twitter to take them down.

In the last few years, it has had 75,000 items removed from the internet, according to the 'Financial Times'.

Analysts say that there are between 40,000 and 50,000 jihadi Twitter accounts, posting several times a day on average, creating a huge volume of material.

The unit will aim to identify the “ringleaders” behind the operation, ‘The Guardian’ reported.

In Britain, the lure of Syria has attracted a wide range of people, from professional young women and teenage girls to disaffected young men, such as Mohammed Emwazi (inset), the man identified as Isis’s executioner, “Jihadi John”.

Erdogan sees threat from Kurdish gains in Syria

Author: Week in Review Posted June 21, 2015

Obama expects “deeper cooperation” with Turkey

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is reportedly angered by the victory June 15 of Syrian Kurdish and rebel fighters over Islamic State (IS) forces in Tell Abyad, a Syrian town close to the Turkish border.

The influx of more than 23,000 Syrian refugees to Turkey as a result of the latest fighting brings the total number to nearly 1.8 million, the most Syrians hosted in any country, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Fehim Tastekin wrote June 14, “Erdogan’s anger with the operation to oust IS from the region became evident when he said on June 11, ‘The West, which is hitting Arabs and Turkmens of Tell Abyad from the air, is sadly settling the PYD [Democratic Union Party] and PKK [Kurdistan Workers Party] terror organizations in their places.’”

While it may be baffling to most observers to understand how anyone could consider the defeat of IS by non-government, non-Islamist Syrian forces a bad thing, the Turkish president’s responses are actually more consistent than not, as readers of this column know well. Erdogan had similar reactions during IS’ siege of Kobani last year. His Syria and Kurdish policies have contributed to the declining fortunes of his Justice and Development Party (AKP), which lost more than 50 seats in the parliamentary elections June 7, as analyzed here last week.

Tastekin continued, “Erdogan claimed Kurds are being settled in areas abandoned by Arabs and Turkmens during the aerial bombing by the Western coalition. In September and October 2014, when IS was besieging Kobani, Erdogan’s declaration — sounding like he was delivering good news — that ‘Kobani is about to fall’ infuriated Kurds. This may help explain his total loss of Kurdish regions in the June 7 elections. Now the question being asked is why Erdogan seems to be so concerned about the possible IS loss of Tell Abyad?”

Tastekin also points out that US President Barack Obama said June 8 that Turkey could be doing more to crack down on foreign fighters entering Syria. Obama said, “The other area where we’ve got to make a lot more progress is on stemming the flow of foreign fighters. Now, you’ll recall that I hosted a U.N. General Security Council meeting specifically on this issue, and we’ve made some progress, but not enough. We are still seeing thousands of foreign fighters flowing into, first, Syria, and then, oftentimes, ultimately into Iraq.

“And not all of that is preventable, but a lot of it is preventable — if we’ve got better cooperation, better coordination, better intelligence, if we are monitoring what’s happening at the Turkish-Syria border more effectively. This is an area where we’ve been seeking deeper cooperation with Turkish authorities who recognize it’s a problem but haven’t fully ramped up the capacity they need. And this is something that I think we got to spend a lot of time on.

“If we can cut off some of that foreign fighter flow then we’re able to isolate and wear out [IS] forces that are already there. Because we’re taking a lot of them off the battlefield, but if they’re being replenished, then it doesn’t solve the problem over the long term.”

In an exclusive video obtained by Al-Monitor, an IS fighter captured by Syrian forces detailed, through his personal recruitment story, the often porous border between Turkey and Syria.

Amberin Zaman reports that prisoner and Turkish citizen Huseyin Mustafa Peri stated that the way into Syria “was an easy affair: ‘Ibrahim Osama had given me a number. ... I was told to go to [the southern border province of] Gaziantep.’ Once in Gaziantep, Peri was taken in turn by taxi and minibus to the Syrian border. ‘I was with three or four Indonesians and three Uighurs,’ he recalls. ‘The smuggler told us to run fast. ... I saw no soldiers. ... I just ran for 50 meters [164 feet] and encountered no problem.’”

The toll of Erdogan’s divisive policies, on both Turkey’s international standing and the AKP’s declining support within the country, has not escaped the attention of one of the founding members of the AKP, Turkey’s former President Abdullah Gul.

A recent book by Ahmet Sever, the former spokesman for Gul, has revealed the former president’s disagreements with Erdogan and may foreshadow Gul’s return to politics.

Cengiz Candar reports that one story from the book that “made a ‘bombshell blast’ within AKP ranks is Gul’s disclosure of his intent to re-engage in active politics in order to correct what he sees as fatal mistakes. About a year ago, he expressed an extreme discomfort about the way the AKP government was handling Turkey’s mounting problems.”

Semih Idiz writes that Gul’s potential return to politics could help address several of Turkey’s issues: “Many Turks who do not support the AKP would be more at ease with an AKP-led coalition headed by Gul, given his position on democracy, which contrasts sharply with Erdogan’s. Gul is also keen on Turkey’s bid for membership in the European Union. His supporters argue that he would return Turkey to its traditional foreign policy and abandon those that have left the country isolated and with little say over regional issues.”

IS sets fires in Kobani

IS may have lost control of Kobani to Syrian Kurdish forces, but it continues to terrorize the town’s citizens.

Massoud Hamed reports from Kobani, “Massive fires broke out in early June in the agricultural areas of this Kurdish-majority city, affecting wheat and barley crops and fruit trees. [IS] used heavy weaponry to target these areas following its late January defeat in Kobani at the hands of Kurdish forces and the international coalition.”

Hamed continues, “The city of Kobani, which comprises an area of about 2,700 square kilometers (1,042 square miles), continues to face the problem of crop fires, which frightens the city’s residents and prevents them from returning. It has even led to a reverse migration from the city, especially since the residents depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, particularly wheat, barley and cotton. About 4,000 acres have been burned since the beginning of 2015, which causes severe hardship to the area’s residents who depend on agriculture for survival.”

Israel’s Druze lobby

Israel’s Druze community is lobbying the Israeli government to support its Syrian co-religionists threatened by jihadist groups in Syria.

The approximately 130,000 Israeli Druze are considered trusted citizens who serve in the military. Syrian-origin Druze communities in the occupied Golan Heights, however, have historically maintained their loyalty and sympathies to Syria and the Syrian government.

Like other minorities in Syria, the Druze, which number approximately 650,000 or roughly 3% of Syria’s population of 22 million, consider the Syrian government as their only and best defense against radical jihadists. The al-Qaeda-linked Jabhat al-Nusra group recently killed at least 20 Druze

near Idlib, in northwest Syria, and further deadly attacks are likely. This column has repeatedly warned of an alarming campaign to mainstream Jabhat al-Nusra as part of some preposterous rationale to weaken the Syrian government.

Ben Caspit writes that the concerns of its Druze population further complicate Israel's Syria policy: "Israel is keeping close tabs on what is going on in Syria and in the last two years, Israeli intelligence has intensified its intel-gathering efforts among the various rebel groups. This is done in preparation for what is now viewed in Israel as the inevitable termination of the Assad era, and the end of Syria as one recognized sovereign unit. Yet the supreme Israeli interest was, and remains, keeping its distance from the Syrian turmoil as much as possible, so as not to give any of the groups involved an excuse to drag Israel into the war."

Caspit continues, "Israel hopes that the Druze worries will remain only on paper, and will not turn into a humanitarian nightmare. No one has forgotten the sights and sounds connected to the fate of Yazidi villages in Iraq not long ago. Should such sights repeat themselves in the Druze villages in Syria, it will be very hard if not impossible for IDF [Israel Defense Forces] authorities and Israeli political echelons to turn their backs on the demand of Israeli Druze to extend aid to their brethren being slaughtered. Israel has a recognized historic record of assistance to any and every Jew who gets into trouble anywhere in the world. The Druze will rightfully demand equal rights in this realm too. They are Israeli citizens, they are joined by "a covenant of blood" with the state, and the state ought to behave the same way with the Druze as it would with Jews who are in danger. In the event that such a scenario should emerge, the Israeli dilemma will intensify. At the moment, the only thing under discussion is a humanitarian corridor that will allow potential Druze refugees to receive refuge and medical treatment in the Golan Heights. And by the way, even rebel combatants are already being treated and hospitalized in a military hospital that was erected in the Golan Heights, and in civilian hospitals in the country's north. Hence, if Israel would not be able to preserve its neutrality, consequences might be dire."

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/erdogan-kurdish-threat-syria-isis-tel-abayd.html>



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The Islamic State's scorched earth policy in Kobani

Author: Massoud Hamed Posted June 12, 2015

KOBANI, Syria — Massive fires broke out in early June in the agricultural areas of this Kurdish-majority city, affecting wheat and barley crops and fruit trees. The Islamic State (IS) used heavy weaponry to target these areas following its late January defeat in Kobani at the hands of Kurdish forces and the international coalition.

Setting these fertile lands ablaze is one of the attempts by IS to intimidate the citizens who returned to Kobani after the group's departure from the city.

"IS emptied the Kobani countryside and Tell Abyad of its original Kurdish residents through a systematic policy that has been applied since the beginning of the attack on these Kurdish cities in 2013," Zara Misto, editor-in-chief of Welati Net and its office director in Kobani, told Al-Monitor. "This was done either through military tactics that converted the countryside into a military zone or through burning crops. Six thousand Kurdish families have been displaced from these areas. After the defeat of IS in Kobani and until now, the group's bomb attacks and fires in many villages have hindered the return of residents to their towns. IS is even rigging children's toys with explosives, resulting in only a very small number of residents returning — about 10% [of those who left]. This is because the return of residents and life to Kobani is akin to a monumental defeat to this terrorist organization."

The residents of Kobani are living in a volatile environment; sometimes they are faced with the threat of death and destruction of the city, and other times they see their crops being set on fire.

The leadership of the Kobani Canton, formed on Jan. 27, believes that IS is targeting agricultural fields to intimidate civilians.

"On April 20, we communicated with the owners of agricultural lands, in particular farmers in the western and southern region who were confronted by IS, to find urgent solutions to [the destruction of] crops," Anwar Mosallem, head of the Kobani Canton executive body, said in a statement to Al-Monitor. "Necessary procedures were taken to distribute fuel to landowners at low and subsidized prices so that they could farm the land, which amounts to millions of acres. On the other hand, measures were taken by the Kobani municipality. While the latter lacks a sufficient number of fire trucks, it is putting out fires within its present capacities. We call on international organizations to provide support to the region, to find a solution to the issue of the fires. Currently, there is a proposal by the Agricultural Body (affiliated with the municipality) to support farmers who had their land burned, by distributing oil and bags for wheat and barley.

"The circumstances of this year in particular are different. We are facing a terrorist organization that is despised globally, thus IS is resorting to all terrorist methods and means to fight the Kurdish people. It usually follows a scorched earth policy against us. As a result of its repeated defeats and suffering one blow after another from our forces, it is now resorting to targeting [agricultural] fields behind our lines of fighters using weapons to set the crops alight. [IS] is trying to preoccupy [our] fighters with the fires instead of the confrontation [with IS]. Each fire caused by IS came from behind our line of fighters. If we take into account the direction of the wind — which blows from west to east — we realize that these fires place our fighters, who are on the front line, between IS in front of them and the fires the group has set behind them."

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria reported May 28 on its website that Kurdish forces and forces allied with them were responsible for the fires. The report claimed that these operations were systematically applied by the People's Protection Units and their allies, stemming from a policy aimed

at avenging the citizens and expelling anyone who does not support their ideas.

In light of these accusations, the Shams al-Shamal Brigade, a military force affiliated with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and allied with the Kurdish People's Protection Units, issued on May 25 a statement on social media categorically denying these charges.

Since Kobani was attacked in September 2014, it has been abandoned by the majority of its inhabitants, leaving mostly militants in the city.

The city of Kobani, which comprises an area of about 2,700 square kilometers (1,042.5 square miles), continues to face the problem of crop fires, which frightens the city's residents and prevents them from returning. It has even led to a reverse migration from the city, especially since the residents depend on agriculture for their livelihoods, particularly wheat, barley and cotton.

About 4,000 acres have been burned since the beginning of 2015, which causes severe hardship to the area's residents who depend on agriculture for survival.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/islamic-state-burn-agriculture-lands-kobani-syria.html>



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Why Assad may be helping Islamic State's offensive

Author: Mohammed al-Khatieb Posted June 21, 2015

ALEPPO, Syria — Airstrikes by President Bashar al-Assad's regime on rebels in the northern countryside of Aleppo raise the question of why regime forces seem to be supporting the latest offensive of the Islamic State (IS). This support came through regime air raids on towns under the control of rebels close to the front lines with IS, where violent clashes have been ongoing since May 31.

Al-Monitor recorded regime airstrikes against 17 rebel-held villages and towns in Aleppo's northern countryside from May 31 to June 11. In contrast, IS-controlled towns in Aleppo's northern countryside were spared any regime air raids.

Among the towns bombed by regime aircraft, four were part of a direct front line between the rebels and IS, among them Marea, Tlalin and Tell Qara, while 13 others formed part of a network of supply routes and staging areas for rebels on their way to fight IS, such as Tell Rifaat, Herbel and Ihras.

The intensity of the bombing that Aleppo's northern countryside was subjected to, in conjunction with IS' attack, seemed to further confirm that these were not regular regime strikes against areas outside of its control. What's even more important was the fact that villages that had not been targeted for a considerable period of time were now bombed by the regime in conjunction with IS' attack on rebel forces in Tlalin, for example, which had not been bombed since July 2014, and Herbel, which had been spared since August 2014.

Despite the fact that IS must be benefiting from these strikes, it cannot be said that Assad and IS are allies. The regime has fought IS before, incurring heavy losses in materiel and troops in August and September of 2014, when IS attacked the Tabaqa military airport and the Shaer oil field. What then drives Assad to help IS on the battlefield?

There are two main reasons. The first is the region's importance to the rebel forces. Aleppo's northern countryside is considered to be one of the largest rebel strongholds with access to Turkey, as well as the rebels' only gateway to the city of Aleppo.

On Feb. 17, the regime tried hard to isolate the northern countryside from the rest of the areas that are under rebel control to blockade the city of Aleppo by attacking the towns of Hardatneen, Retyan and al-Mallah. But, regime forces were met with stiff resistance by the rebels, who considered the battle to be a matter of life and death. As a result, 300 regime troops were killed, according to statements made to Al-Monitor by the former military commander of al-Jabha al-Shamiya (Shamiya Front), Lt. Col. Abu Bakr.

IS' advance in Aleppo's northern countryside is sure to weaken the rebels there; as a result, the regime will achieve, with minimal losses, its goal of besieging the rebels in Aleppo city, as the only supply route to it is the Castello road.

The second reason for the recent strikes against rebel areas is that the Assad regime faces two main foes in Syria: IS, against which the United States is leading an international coalition, and rebels backed by a variety of regional powers, most notably Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In that context, it is only logical that the regime would prefer eliminating an enemy that receives backing, weapons and funds from regional sources, and leave the task of weakening its primary enemy, IS, to the international coalition. Consequently, the regime's presumed elimination of Syrian rebels would force the international community and the factions that back those rebels into allying themselves with Assad to finish off IS.

In that regard, the Syrian-Turkish border is the main avenue for the delivery of arms from backers to the rebels. Reaching the Turkish border seems impossible for regime forces at the moment as it would require them to completely eliminate rebel presence in Aleppo's northern countryside. In contrast, IS is only 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) away from the Bab al-Salam crossing, and its advance from the town of Ghazal (north of the town of Souran) toward Bab al-Salam in the west would lead to the isolation of rebels in Aleppo from the Turkish border, which is the regime's ultimate goal.

The regime has been enduring difficult times, since Jaish al-Fatah — a joint force comprised of a number of opposition forces such as Ahrar al-Sham, al-Sham Legion and Jabhat al-Nusra — spread its control over wide swaths of land in Idlib province March 18, from the city of Aleppo to Ariha, Jisr al-Shughur and the Mastouma military base. Jaish al-Fatah's fast advance and the arrival of the rebels to the Syrian coast, which is the regime's main stronghold and primary human resources' reservoir, puts the regime at risk.

Aleppo has witnessed the same experience as Jaish al-Fatah in Idlib. On May 3, most opposition forces — with the exception of Jabhat al-Nusra — formed a joint "Battle of Aleppo" command center, with the aim of completely controlling Aleppo city, half of which remained under regime control. No sooner had the joint command center organized and expanded to include 31 opposition factions than IS launched its attack on Aleppo's northern countryside.

As a result, instead of fighting the regime in Aleppo, the first task undertaken by that command center was to retake the village of al-Bal on June 12, which was overrun by IS on June 1. In that context, the joint command issued a statement May 31 that read: "We intend to repel [IS'] attack and recover the towns that the latter took over. ... Doing so shall not interfere with our preparations for the battle of Aleppo."

As such, the rebels' attack on the regime in Aleppo has been postponed. And, even if they did launch said attack, it would be a weak one as long as their back remains exposed in Aleppo's northern countryside. Furthermore, on June 2, the Ahrar al-Sham movement — which formed the main body of Jaish al-Fatah in Idlib — withdrew some of its troops and repositioned them north of Aleppo to counter IS' attacks. All of these developments were beneficial to the regime, which aims to postpone any attacks against its forces and divide the rebels along two fronts: those fighting Assad and those fighting IS.

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Army Reprimands Top General Who Helped Run War Against ISIS

By LUIS MARTINEZ

—

The Army has reprimanded a former top general in the fight against [ISIS](#) for misconduct reportedly involving the alleged steering of a contract award to former West Point classmates when he was in command of [Fort Bliss](#), Texas.

Secretary of the Army John McHugh will decide whether Maj. Gen. Dana Pittard should retire at his current two star rank or at a lesser rank as a result of the career-ending reprimand.

Until April, Pittard was the deputy commanding general of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. military headquarters directing the war on ISIS [in Iraq](#) and [Syria](#). An Army official said his departure from the post was because of a normal rotation and not related to the reprimand.

An official for that headquarters, CJTF-OIR, referred questions about Pittard's status to the Army's Office of Public Affairs.

Following an investigation by the Army Inspector General Agency, Maj. Gen. Pittard received an official reprimand for his misconduct, which called into question his suitability for continued service and resulted in his request for retirement, effectively ending his career in the Army, said Cynthia O. Smith, an Army spokeswoman.

Secretary McHugh has referred Maj. Gen. Pittard's file to an Army Grade Determination Review Board, which will make a recommendation on Maj. Gen. Pittard's retired grade, said Smith.

Citing documents obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request, [The Washington Post reported](#) that Pittard was reprimanded in February for actions in 2011 when he commanded the sprawling Army base at Fort Bliss, Texas.

Army investigations were triggered by allegations that Pittard had steered a \$492,000 renewable energy no-bid contract to a company owned by two former West Point classmates. One of those classmates, Thomas Gregory Harris, was convicted of wire fraud in September in a federal case triggered by the Army's investigation.

The documents obtained by The Washington Post said Pittard was reprimanded for his excessive involvement in awarding the contract.

Through a spokesman Pittard declined to comment to ABC News' request, but he provided a written statement to *The Washington Post*.

"I invited a measure of risk with the contracting process," he wrote. "Throughout my 34 years of service as an Army leader, I have always operated with an understanding that some risk is acceptable in taking action that will benefit our force."

"If my example deters other senior Army leaders from taking bold risk in the future, that is unfortunate," he added.

Smith stressed that Pittard was not removed from his position because of the misconduct. She noted that Pittard had served as deputy commanding general, Army Central, from July 2013 to April 2015 and his departure was as part of a normal rotation.

Pittard is currently serving as the special assistant to the commanding general, United States Army Training and Doctrine Command.

He will remain in this position until the secretary of the Army approves his retirement request and the associated retired grade, said Smith.

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'Jihadi John fled to Libya after press revealed identity' – US intelligence

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Islamic State executioner Mohammed Emwazi, dubbed 'Jihadi John' by Western media, has fled from Syria to Libya after his identity was revealed by the press, a US intelligence source says.

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An American spy claims to have intercepted communications suggesting the Londoner has been in Libya for several days.

British-born Emwazi, 26, has not appeared in any Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) videos since January when he was shown beheading Japanese journalist Kenji Goto.

Prior to that he was shown executing American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, and British aid workers David Haines and Alan Henning in grisly videos which shocked the world.

"We think it is a tactical move by ISIS to keep Emwazi out of the limelight," an anonymous US intelligence official told the Sunday Express.

"His unmasking by the press took away the mystery surrounding his bogeyman persona and though we have targeted him with conventional missiles we have had no confirmation of a successful strike," he added.

The unnamed US official went on to claim Emwazi has links to an underground terrorist cell in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, the hometown of Talha Asmal, Britain's youngest known suicide bomber.

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Jihadi John's extremist 'mentor' cannot be deported because of his human rights

Asmal, 17, reportedly died in an IS attack in Iraq earlier this month. The teenager traveled to Syria in March with Hassan Munshi, brother of convicted terrorist Hammad Munshi.

"Emwazi and his British colleagues in IS played a leading role in turning this terror cell, we call it a control cell now as its members appear to play the role of spiritual guides and logistical helpers rather than actively being involved in plotting themselves," the source said.

"We have known since last year that Emwazi has been in contact with a leading member of this cell based in Dewsbury."

"There are clear operational and strategic reasons we are monitoring these individuals linked to Emwazi and not arresting them straight away, including the fact that some of its periphery members are prepared to co-operate with us."

News of Asmal's death in a car bombing north of Baghdad, which killed 11 people, shocked the Yorkshire town, where the local imam compared the IS militants who recruited Asmal to "*pedophiles*."

Emwazi's true identity was revealed by Washington Post journalists Souad Mekhennet and Adam Goldman in February after months of speculation.

Before then the world only knew him by the moniker 'Jihadi John', a nickname given by hostages because he worked within a group of four British

militants they dubbed 'The Beatles.'

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[Jihadi John wanted to join Al-Shabaab in Somalia to wage holy war – reports](#)

A 29-year-old Syrian man known only as Ayman recently claimed Emwazi originally wanted to join Al-Shabaab in Somalia, years before becoming a member of IS.

He told the Independent last month that Emwazi gave up on his plan to join Al-Shabaab, which controls swaths of war-torn Somalia, after some of his London friends in the region were betrayed and killed by US forces amid allegations they were set up by rival groups.

The two friends referred to are likely to be Bilal al-Berjawi and Mohamed Sakr, members of the 'London Boys.'

They were stopped and deported from Kenya on their way to Somalia, but managed to reach the East African state in a second attempt that year. Both were later killed in US drone strikes.

Benghazi was a sideshow. Republicans are looking at Clinton's role in launching Libya war.

Updated by Jonathan Allen on June 22, 2015, 5:40 p.m. ETjon@vox.com



House Select Committee on Benghazi Chairman Trey Gowdy (R-SC) arrives for a closed door meeting in the House Visitors Center at the US Capitol June 16, 2015, in Washington, DC. Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The House Select Committee on Benghazi is moving quickly away from **Benghazi** and toward a more potent 2016 campaign issue: **Hillary Clinton's** judgment in pushing for war in Libya in 2011.

Republicans would like to undermine Clinton's foreign policy record, which is perceived as a strength because Clinton **served as secretary of state**. Their release Monday of a new batch of her emails with longtime confidant **Sidney Blumenthal** suggests that the wisdom of the Libya mission is increasingly an

area of focus.

That's unlikely to cause Clinton any legal problems, but it could become a real battleground in the presidential campaign, as Libya has descended into chaos.

What is the controversy?

Ostensibly, there are two main issues: One is whether Clinton really turned over all of her work-related email to the State Department, as she has said she did. The second is whether Blumenthal, who worked for the Clinton Foundation and Clinton-backing outside groups, influenced her decision-making as secretary of state.

Republicans hope the latest batch of emails, obtained from a request to Blumenthal and not handed over by State, will show Clinton withheld essential documents and that Blumenthal was much more influential than she has let on.

"Questions about what influence, if any, Mr. Blumenthal had on our US policy toward Libya can only be answered by Secretary Clinton and her State Department senior staff," Rep. Trey Gowdy said in a statement accompanying the emails. "It is clear from these e-mails Secretary Clinton encouraged Mr. Blumenthal to send them in some instances calling

into question her previous characterization of them as 'unsolicited.'"

But Gowdy's making a broader play that is evident in Monday's release: He'd like to extend the scope of his investigation beyond the Benghazi attack and the State Department's security decisions before it. In large part, that's because Clinton isn't responsible for the terrorist attack that killed four Americans in September 2012, which makes it poor political fodder. If Gowdy can make the investigation more about the controversial decision to bombard Libya and invest in its future, he may have a political winner.

What is the evidence?

Clinton's longtime friend Blumenthal gave Gowdy new emails that show he urged Clinton to meet with a Libyan rebel leader. And eight days later, **Clinton and her aides did**. The emails also include a slew of information about the status on the ground in Libya, the danger Muammar Qaddafi posed to his own people, and profiles of major players. Clinton would go on to be a powerful voice inside the administration for intervention in Libya.

In one email dated March 6, 2011, Blumenthal sent a report to Clinton about **Mahmoud Jibril**, a leader in the Transitional National Council, which sought an international intervention to oust Qaddafi and secure

recognition as the transitional governing authority in the event of his removal.

On March 14, 2011, on the sidelines of a meeting held in Paris to determine whether the West would confront Qaddafi, Clinton met privately with Jibril. By that time, according to a State Department official who spoke to me and my co-author for our book, *HRC*, she was looking for evidence that would persuade President Barack Obama to join in a coalition to take out Qaddafi.

Jibril told Clinton that Qaddafi would decimate his own people if no one came to their rescue, and Clinton, without promising to take any specific action, was moved toward planning actively for the use of military force, according to the official.

"I remember her being impressed afterward that this was a group of opposition leaders who were beginning to pull themselves together," the official said. "And then she used that not only in Washington but with other coalition partners to try and generate support from them, that the [opposition leaders] were pointed in the right direction, even though they needed a lot of support."

Over the next few days, Clinton played a lead role in creating the coalition that began bombarding Qaddafi's forces on March 19, 2011. Qaddafi's

government was overthrown, and he was later killed by Libyan rebels. Since then, the country has descended into factional fighting, and an arm of the Islamic State has **taken root there**.

What are the doubts?

It doesn't necessarily follow that Clinton met with Jibril because Blumenthal urged her to do so, and she made an independent assessment of Jibril's abilities by talking with him face to face. There's also no evidence to date that she took any action based on emails Blumenthal sent her — other than to forward or reply to them.

Clinton spokesman Nick Merrill did not respond to a request for comment on whether Blumenthal was influential in her decision-making regarding the Libya campaign.

In several of the emails contained in the 179-page cache, Clinton encourages Blumenthal to continue sending her intelligence reports from a third party who asserts knowledge of the debates going on inside Qaddafi's inner circle, of the thinking at high levels of various governments, and of the status of fighting in Libya.

But what does this have to do with Benghazi?

The emails released Monday were obtained by the

committee through a request to Blumenthal, and were not included in a set of Clinton emails turned over by the State Department, Gowdy said. Clinton had kept her government email on a private server when she was secretary and only turned over some of her correspondence after she left — holding back what she deemed to be personal communications.

Gowdy wants to know whether State ever got the Blumenthal emails from Clinton or whether she withheld some of them.

"These emails should have been part of the public record when Secretary Clinton left office and at a bare minimum included when the State Department released Clinton's self-selected records on Libya," he said. "For that reason, the committee has made the decision to release the latest set of Clinton's public records unearthed by the committee."

The Democrats on the Benghazi committee say that the emails are taken out of context and that Gowdy should give the public the full transcript of Blumenthal's deposition last week. And, they say, he's on a partisan witch hunt.

"By the chairman's own admission, these emails have absolutely nothing to do with the attacks in Benghazi, and their selective release demonstrates the Select Committee's singular focus on attacking Hillary

Clinton in her bid for president," Maryland Rep. Elijah Cummings, the top Democrat on the panel, said in a statement.

National Security

U.S. strike kills Islamic State militant linked to Benghazi attacks

By Missy Ryan and Karen DeYoung June 22 at 8:19 PM

A U.S. airstrike in Iraq has killed an Islamic State militant suspected of involvement in the 2012 attacks in Benghazi, Libya, that killed U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, the Pentagon said Monday.

Col. Steve Warren, a military spokesman, said that Ali Awni al-Harzi, who U.S. officials believe acted as an intermediary for militant groups across the Middle East and North Africa, was killed in a strike in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul on June 15.

“His death degrades ISIL’s ability to integrate North African jihadists into the Syrian and Iraqi fight, and removes a jihadist with long ties to international terrorism,” Warren said, using another name for the militant group that controls a vast swathe of Iraq and Syria.

Warren described Harzi, a Tunisian, as a “person of interest” in connection with the attacks in Benghazi, where militants overran a U.S. diplomatic facility on Sept. 11, 2012.

A U.S. defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the operation, said Harzi, whom he described as part of the group’s “middle management,” was in a vehicle when he was killed in a drone strike. The United States and allied nations have been conducting airstrikes against Islamic State militants in Iraq since last summer.

Harzi, 29, was designated a “global terrorist” in April by the State Department, which described him as a “Syrian-based Tunisian national who joined Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AAS-T) in 2011” and “a high-profile member known for recruiting volunteers, facilitating the travel of AAS-T fighters to Syria, and for smuggling weapons and explosives into Tunisia.”

Harzi and his brother Tariq, 33, were added to the United Nations terrorism list of al-Qaeda associates days before the State Department’s April designation. According to a U.N. Security Council statement, both brothers were said to be in Syria, with Iraq added as a “possible alternative location” as of March 2015.

The U.N. statement said that in 2005 Ali Harzi was “detained and sentenced to 30 months imprisonment for planning terrorist attacks . . . in Tunisia.” It said that he “planned and perpetrated the attack” against the U.S. mission in Benghazi.

After the Benghazi attack, Harzi is believed to have fled to Turkey, where he was arrested at an airport in late October 2012 and held for several days before being extradited to Tunisia. The FBI, which sought Harzi after a social-media post indicated involvement in the attack, reportedly questioned him in Tunisia in December 2012.

To the dismay of authorities in Washington, the Tunisian government released him the following month, citing lack of evidence.

A U.S. intelligence official said Harzi was suspected of playing a role in the attacks, but it's unclear what exactly U.S. officials suspect he did.

U.S. officials have struggled to track down and prosecute suspects in the Benghazi incident, the first time a senior American diplomat had been targeted and killed in more than 30 years, in part because of ongoing instability in Libya. In 2014, U.S. special forces captured Ahmed Abu Khattala, a suspected ringleader in the attacks, in Libya. He has pleaded not guilty in a U.S. federal court to charges including murder and conspiracy.

Last March, immediately before the U.N. and State Department designations, the Tunisian National Guard issued an arrest warrant for Ali Harzi.

The U.N. listing for his brother, Tariq, called him “a dangerous and active member of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2004, also active in facilitating and hosting members of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia in Syria.” The Obama administration has described al-Qaeda in Iraq as the precursor organization to the Islamic State, whose forces have swept across northern Iraq a year ago, drawing the United States back into military operations there.

Tariq Harzi was sentenced in absentia by a Tunisian court in 2007 to 24 years in prison for terrorist activities.

In January 2014, the State Department designated what it said were three separate Ansar al-Sharia organizations, two in Libya and one in Tunisia, as foreign terrorist organizations.

The Tunisian group, it said, was founded in early 2011 and was “involved” in the September 2012 attack against the U.S. Embassy and American school in Tunis, days after the Benghazi attack in neighboring Libya. It described the Tunisian group as “ideologically aligned with al-Qaeda and tied to its affiliates,” including its North Africa branch, called al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

Adam Goldman contributed to this report.

Missy Ryan writes about the Pentagon, military issues, and national security for The Washington Post.

EUROPE

NATO Returns Its Attention to an Old Foe, Russia

By **ERIC SCHMITT** and **STEVEN LEE MYERS** JUNE 23, 2015

CAMP ADAZI, Latvia — After years of facing threats far beyond its borders, NATO is now reinvigorating plans to confront a much larger and more aggressive threat from its past: Moscow.

This seismic shift has been apparent in military training exercises in this former Soviet republic, which is now a NATO member and on the alliance's eastern flank, bordering Russia.

On a recent day, Latvian soldiers conducted a simulated attack on dug-in enemy positions in a pine forest here as two United States A-10 attack planes roared overhead and opened fire with 30-millimeter cannons.

Two days before, a B-52 dropped nine dummy bombs radioed in by the Latvians on the ground — all just 180 miles from the Russian border.

The symbolism of the B-52s, stalwarts of the Cold War arsenal, was lost on no one. The bombers' main mission was once was to deliver a nuclear knockout punch to Soviet forces, but they were put to use for the first time over this former Soviet republic to show resolve on the new front between NATO and Russia, the heir of the Soviet war machine.

“If the Russians sense a window of opportunity, they will use it to their advantage,” said Estonia's chief of defense, Lt. Gen. Riho Terras, who recently mobilized 13,000 soldiers across his tiny country in a separate exercise. “We must make sure there's no room for miscalculation.”

The military drills that unfolded here, part of a series of exercises planned over coming months to demonstrate the alliance's readiness and

resolve, emphasize the seismic shift that has strained an alliance that for a quarter of a century turned its attention to threats much farther afield.

This week, Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter travels through several NATO capitals before sitting down on Wednesday and Thursday with other defense ministers in Brussels to debate how to counter a resurgent Russia.

Russia's annexation of Crimea — and its role in the war in eastern Ukraine — has already resulted in what NATO's secretary general, Jens Stoltenberg, recently called “the biggest reinforcement of NATO forces since the end of the Cold War.”

It has involved a marked increase in training rotations on territory of the newer NATO allies in the east, and stepped up patrols of the air and seas from the Baltic to the Black Sea intended to counter an increase of patrols by Russian forces around NATO's periphery.

Most of those are temporary deployments. But in February, NATO announced that it would set up six new command units within the Eastern allies and create a 5,000-strong rapid reaction “spearhead” force.

And the Pentagon now plans to preposition heavy American tanks and other weaponry in Eastern Europe for the first time, prompting unease in some quarters ahead of the NATO defense ministers' meetings, and strong protests from Moscow that coincided with an announcement by President Vladimir V. Putin that he was bolstering Russia's arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons.

With the leaders of NATO's 28 members scheduled to gather in Warsaw for an important summit meeting next year, the alliance is now considering what other measures are needed to adjust its forces, to increase spending that had plummeted as part of a “peace dividend,” and to revisit NATO's military strategy and planning.

“During the Cold War we had everything there in the neighborhood we needed to respond,” said Julianne Smith, a former defense and White House official who is now a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington. “It's all atrophied. We haven't gone through the muscle movements of a conventional attack in Europe for decades.”

NATO's steps, and its deliberations over future ones, have exposed internal tensions within the alliance over the extent of the threat Putin's

Russia poses. That in turn has colored the debate over how vigorously the allies should prepare.

Some view the threat as imminent, while others view Russia as less a threat than the instability, the flood of migrants and the rise of extremism emanating from North Africa. A recent poll suggested that residents in some member nations were far from committed to the notion of going to war to protect the other NATO allies — let alone Ukraine.

NATO's response to the events in Ukraine has required a shift in strategic thinking as profound as the one that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the alliance's main adversary suddenly no longer existed. For years, the Russia that emerged from the Soviet ruins seemed destined to be a partner if not an ally, something Mr. Putin himself did not rule out when he first came to office in 2000.

"I don't think we're in the Cold War again — yet," said James G. Stavridis, the retired admiral and NATO military commander, now dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, who served on a destroyer as a "thorough seagoing cold warrior" when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

He added, however: "I can kind of see it from here."

While some do not rule out a conventional confrontation — something Mr. Putin himself rejected as "insane" — others point to the potential threats shrouded in subterfuge and subversion, much like Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its continuing support for ethnic-Russians in the war in eastern Ukraine, which has claimed more than 6,000 lives.

Britain's defense secretary, Michael Fallon, warned in February that there was a "real and present danger" of Russia moving to destabilize the Baltic States: Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia.

A confidential assessment of that risk is expected to be presented at the coming NATO meetings in Brussels. But the potential for such an attack has implicitly been the focus of much of the training and planning going on in places like this.

In private and in public, some officials and commanders argue that much more is needed to reverse two decades of policy, particularly to shore

up an eastern flank that to many, especially here in the Baltics, feels gravely exposed to a Russian attack.

Poland's defense minister, Tomasz Siemoniak, said that NATO had to undertake a "strategic adaptation" that accounted for the fact that Russia's hostility toward the alliance was "a change in climate and not a summer storm." It is time, he said, to consider significant deployments of heavy weapons in Eastern Europe, brushing aside the worry that such a move would provoke Russia.

"I think the caution expressed by some of our European allies is excessive," Mr. Siemoniak said during a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington in May.

Some believe that stoking divisions among the allies is simply another of the tactics that Mr. Putin has employed.

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commander of United States Army forces in Europe, said in an interview, "I am sure they want to create doubts in the minds of some members of the alliance that the other 27 members won't be there for them."

The rising tensions between NATO and Russia come at a time of sharp decline in the United States military presence in Europe, to 64,000 troops now, including just 27,000 soldiers, from more than 400,000 at the height of the Cold War. Other nations' militaries have shrunk, too. Britain now has a smaller army than during the Crimean War in the mid-19th century.

The notion of a more robust NATO has encountered inertia that has built over the last two decades. The "peace dividend" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union could prove hard to reverse, said David Ochmanek, a former senior Pentagon official who is a senior analyst at the RAND Corporation.

NATO's militaries drew down so precipitously that it has become a regular challenge for members to maintain military spending at 2 percent of gross domestic product, a level considered minimal for effective defense. "The assumption was that this was pretty much cost free because there was no plausible threat to the security of members," Mr. Ochmanek said. "Putin has changed that."

At the same time, few of the NATO allies are looking to increase

military spending significantly. “Nobody in any military establishment is looking for more bills to pay right now,” Mr. Ochmanek said.

Even before the annexation of Crimea, NATO had watched Russia warily.

“NATO has reduced defense spending over a long period of time, especially European NATO allies,” Mr. Stoltenberg said in an interview in Washington in May. “Russia has increased substantially. So they have modernized their forces. They have increased their capacity. And they are exercising more. And they are also now starting to use nuclear rhetoric, nuclear exercises and nuclear operations as part of their nuclear posture. This is destabilizing.”

While American officials say that exercises like the one at this former Soviet tank base are mainly to allow NATO and Baltic States to hone their training together, they are also intended to send a strong message of resolve to Moscow.

More than 6,000 troops from 14 allied nations — three times the number of soldiers that joined the same exercise two years ago, before Russia’s invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine — conducted the annual **Saber Strike** training exercise in the Baltics and Poland that ended Friday.

On a brilliant, sunny day this month, 150 Latvian infantry members fought across a sandy pine barren to seize locations defended by Atropians, a fictional foe played by Gurkha soldiers of the British Army. Both sides traded simulated artillery and rocket fire, before the Latvians dashed from the woods and used smoke screens as cover to seize their targets. The A-10 attack planes roared overhead. But what really snapped back the necks of Baltic and other European observers was the B-52 bomber, on call for any additional strikes.

Latvia’s defense chief, Lt. Gen. Raimonds Graube, looked up admiringly at the warplanes, and dismissed any suggestion that a NATO exercise with B-52s might provoke the Russians, as some European officials have complained. “Our soldiers must be ready to train on an international level,” he said.

For a United States military that has spent nearly two decades fighting insurgencies in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, the tensions with Russia

have young soldiers — many born after the Soviet Union collapsed — learning old skills and brushing up on old adversaries.

“It’s not lost on me or my soldiers where we’re operating,” said Lt. Col. Chad Chalfont, an Army battalion commander training at a former Soviet base in Rukla, Lithuania.

Colonel Chalfont, whose father served as an Air Force officer in an underground nuclear missile silo during the Cold War, said American and Lithuanian troops drilled together on mundane but critical tasks like talking on the same radio frequency. Lithuanian infantry troops also learn more complex skills, like operating together with American battle tanks for the first time in dense pine forests.

The threat to the Baltic nations, at least in theory, is acute. For the Pentagon, Mr. Ochmanek of RAND has run war games trying to anticipate how to defend the Baltics in particular, the most immediate concern for the alliance. “It’s not realistic to think they could defend themselves against a determined Russian attack,” he said.

There is a hope that deterrence will suffice to prevent Russia from moving, but many fear that Mr. Putin’s government could seek to undermine the allies by subterfuge, as Russia did in Crimea and is doing in Ukraine.

More likely than any ground attack from Russian troops, NATO officials say, would be some kind of cyberstrike or information warfare assault, two of the critical components of a hybrid warfare style that is central to a new Russian military strategy unveiled in 2013 by Russia’s chief of the general staff, Gen. Valery V. Gerasimov.

The doctrine explicitly acknowledged the use of “military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces.”

For those on NATO’s front lines, the doctrine appears all too real. This month, unknown hackers targeted the website of the Lithuanian Army leadership, posting false information about NATO exercises in the Baltics and Poland, a Lithuanian Defense Ministry spokesman said.

Lithuanian officials said the false messages included a report that the NATO exercise was a pretext for a possible annexation of the Russian region

of Kaliningrad, which lies between Lithuania and Poland.

“They use information like artillery and rockets, in barrages,” said General Hodges, the Army commander in Europe.

All of this is on NATO’s mind as it takes interim measures to deal with the threat.

Asked what steps his military would take if Russian “little green men” tried to sneak across his border, General Terras, Estonia’s chief of defense, said bluntly, “We will shoot them.”

Bravado aside, Baltic commanders and civilian leaders said they were scrambling to improve and enlarge their militaries and other security forces.

These countries are overcoming years when Russia was not considered an enemy, but was still eyed warily. When Baltic nations joined NATO more than a decade ago, they were encouraged to develop niche specialties rather than territorial defense, which was no longer thought necessary. Latvia, for instance, developed capabilities like explosive demolition experts and ground spotters to call in strikes — all skills that filled needs in NATO missions outside Europe, such as Afghanistan.

Now with standing forces of about 5,000 to 10,000 troops, the Baltics feel vulnerable despite being members of NATO. They have no tanks, no air forces to speak of and only patrol craft and minesweepers to ply coastal waters. Each country is now rushing to correct this shortfall.

The Estonians have a “defense league” that is made up of about 30,000 civilians and includes farmers, carpenters, lawyers and other professions. They engage in basic infantry training once a month, receive arms from the government, and in the event of an invasion would be called to active duty to be commanded by professional soldiers.

Juozas Olekas, Lithuania’s defense minister, said in an interview that the government was developing a more comprehensive self-defense plan coordinating across several government agencies. The army will soon add some 3,000 new conscripts. In January, Lithuania’s Defense Ministry published a pamphlet intended to instruct Lithuanians how to survive a foreign occupation and organize nonviolent resistance.

In Latvia, Defense Minister Raimonds Vejonis said that with the

Baltics' bitter history under Soviet occupation, the public and the government were only too aware of Mr. Putin's attempts to use propaganda and military might in Ukraine to intimidate NATO's smallest members. "We will stay united because if we don't, NATO will die," said Mr. Vejonis, who becomes Lithuania's president in July.

Col. Martins Liberts, a Latvian brigade commander who joined his country's new military when it formed upon Latvia's independence in 1991, said: "We are all monitoring closely what's happening in Ukraine. And we're learning lessons. We're different from Ukraine."

Not all of the NATO allies are as ardent. While there has been striking unanimity against Russia's actions in Ukraine — and separately, the European Union extended its sanctions against Russia this week — divisions remain.

"There's a hope this is all a bump in the road and with a little bit of tweaking we can get back to the status quo," the former American ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, said in a telephone interview. "In my view, that's naïve. Putin's not going to change his position, and he's not going away. You've got to be in this for the long haul."

Eric Schmitt reported from Camp Adazi, Latvia, and Gaižiūnai Training Area, Lithuania; Steven Lee Myers reported from Washington.



What Borders Mean to Europe

Geopolitical Weekly | JUNE 23, 2015 | 08:00 GMT | [Print](#) | [Text Size](#)



By [George Friedman](#)

Europe today is a continent of borders. The second-smallest continent in the world has more than 50 distinct, sovereign nation-states. Many of these are part of the European Union. At the core of the EU project is an effort to reduce the power and significance of these borders without actually abolishing them — in theory, an achievable goal. But history is not kind to theoretical solutions.

Today, Europe faces three converging crises that are ultimately about national borders, what they mean and who controls them. These crises appear distinct: Immigration from the Islamic world, the Greek economic predicament, and the conflict in Ukraine would seem to have little to do with each other. But in fact they all derive, in different ways, from the question of what borders mean.

Europe's borders have been the foundation of both its political morality and its historical catastrophes. The European Enlightenment argued against multinational monarchies and for sovereign nation-states, which were understood to be the territories in which nations existed. Nations came to

be defined as groupings of humans who shared a common history, language, set of values and religion — in short, a common culture into which they were born. These groups had the right of national self-determination, the authority to determine their style of government and the people who governed. Above all, these nations lived in a place, and that place had clear boundaries.

The right of national self-determination has created many distinct nations in Europe. And, as nations do, they sometimes distrust and fear one other, which occasionally leads to wars. They also have memories of betrayals and victimizations that stretch back for centuries before the nations became states. Some viewed the borders as unjust, because they placed their compatriots under foreign rule, or as insufficient to national need. The right of self-determination led inevitably to borders, and the question of borders inevitably led to disputes among states. Between 1914 and 1945, Europeans waged a series of wars about national boundaries and about who has the right to live where. This led to one of the greatest slaughters of human history.

The memory of that carnage led to the creation of the European Union. Its founding principle was that this kind of massacre should never happen again. But the union lacked the power to abolish the nation-state — it was too fundamental to the Europeans' sense of identity. And if the nation-state survived, so did the idea of place and borders.

If the nation-state could not be abolished, however, then at least the borders could lose their significance. Thus two principles emerged after World War II: The first, predating the European Union, was that the existing borders of Europe could not be changed. The hope was that by freezing Europe's borders, Europe could abolish war. The second principle, which came with the mature European Union, was that the bloc's internal borders both existed and did not exist. Borders were to define the boundaries of nation-states and preserved the doctrine of national self-determination, but they were not to exist insofar as the movement of goods, of labor and of capital were concerned. This was not absolute — some states were limited in some of these areas — but it was a general principle and goal. This principle is now under attack in three different ways.

The Movement of Muslims in Europe

The chaos in the Middle East has generated a flow of refugees toward Europe. This is adding to the problem that European nations have had with prior Muslim migrations that were encouraged by Europeans. As Europe recovered from World War II, it needed additional labor at low cost. Like other advanced industrial countries have done, a number of European states sought migrants, many from the Islamic world, to fill that need. At first, the Europeans thought of the migrants as temporary residents. Over time, the Europeans conceded citizenship but created a doctrine of multiculturalism, which appeared to be a gesture of tolerance and was implicitly by mutual consent, given that some Muslims resisted assimilation. But this doctrine essentially served to exclude Muslims from full participation in the host culture even as they gained legal citizenship. But as I have said, the European idea of the nation was challenged by the notion of [integrating different cultures into European societies](#).

Partly because of a failure to fully integrate migrants and partly because of terrorist attacks, a growing portion of European society began perceiving the

https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/what-borders-mean-europe?utm_source=feedlist-f&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Gweekly&utm_campaign=20150623&ut... 1/4

Muslims already in Europe as threatening. Some countries had already discussed resurrecting internal European borders to prevent the movement not only of Muslims, but also of other Europeans seeking jobs in difficult economic times. The recent wave of refugees has raised the matter to a new level.

The refugee crisis has forced the Europeans to face a core issue. The humanitarian principles of the European Union demand that refugees be given sanctuary. And yet, another wave of refugees into Europe has threatened to exacerbate existing social and cultural imbalances in some countries; some anticipate the arrival of more Muslims with dread. Moreover, once migrants are allowed to enter Europe by any one country, the rest of the nations are incapable of preventing the refugees' movement.

Who controls Europe's external borders? Does Spain decide who enters Spain, or does the European Union decide? Whoever decides, does the idea of the free movement of labor include the principle of the free movement of refugees? If so, then EU countries have lost the ability to determine who may enter their societies and who may be excluded. For Europe, given its definition of the nation, this question is not an odd, legal one. It goes to the very heart of what a nation is, and whether the nation-state, under the principle of the right of national self-determination, is empowered [to both make that decision and enforce it](#).

This question does not merely concern Muslims. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Ostjuden — the Jews coming into Western Europe as they fled czarist edicts — raised the same challenge, even though they sought more vigorously to assimilate. But at that point, the notion of borders was unambiguous even if the specific decision on how to integrate the Jews was unclear. In many countries, the status of minorities from neighboring nations was a nagging question, but there were tools for handling it. The Muslim issue is unique in Europe [only to the extent that the European Union has made it unique](#). The bloc has tried to preserve borders while sapping them of significance, and now there is an upsurge of opposition not only to Muslim immigration, but also to the European Union's understanding of borders and free movement.

The Greek Crisis

The question of borders is also at the [heart of the Greek crisis](#). We see two issues: one small, the other vast. The small one involves capital controls. The European Union is committed to a single European financial market within which capital flows freely. Greeks, fearing the outcome of the current crisis, have been moving large amounts of money out of Greece into foreign banks. They remember what happened during the Cyprus crisis, when the government, capitulating to German demands in particular, froze and seized money deposited in Cypriot banks. Under EU rules, the transfer of deposits in one country of the bloc, or even outside the bloc, is generally considered legitimate. However, in the case of Cyprus, the free movement of capital across borders was halted. The same could conceivably happen in Greece.

In any event, which is the prior principle: the free movement of capital or the European Union's overarching authority to control that flow? Are Greek citizens personally liable for their government's debt — not merely through austerity policies, but also through controls imposed by the Greek government under European pressure to inhibit the movement of their money? If the answer is the latter, then borders on capital can be created temporarily.

The larger issue is the movement of goods. A significant dimension of this crisis involves free trade. Germany exports more than 50 percent of its gross domestic product. Its prosperity depends on these exports. I have argued that the inability to control the flow of German goods into Southern Europe drove the region into economic decline. Germany's ability to control the flow of American goods into the country in the 1950s helped drive its economic recovery. The European Union permits limits on the movement of some products, particularly agricultural ones, through subsidies and quotas. In theory, free trade is beneficial to all. In practice, one country's short-term gain can vastly outweigh others' long-term gains. The ability to control the flow of goods is a tool that might slow growth but decrease pain.

The essential principle of the European Union is that of free trade, in the sense that the border cannot become a checkpoint to determine what goods may or may not enter a country and under what tariff rule. The theory is superb, save for its failure to address the synchronization of benefits. And it means that the right to self-determination no longer includes the right to control borders.

Ukraine and the 'Inviolability' of Borders

Finally, there is the Ukraine issue — which is not really about Ukraine, but about a prior principle of Europe: Borders cannot be allowed to change. The core of this rule is that altering borders leads to instability. This rule governed between 1945 and 1992. Then, the fall of the Soviet Union transformed the internal borders of Europe dramatically, moving the Russian border eastward and northward. The Soviet collapse also created eight newly free nations that were Soviet satellites in Central and Eastern Europe and 15 new independent states — including Russia — from the constituent parts of the Soviet Union. It could be argued that the fall of the Soviet Union did not change the rule on borders, but that claim would be far-fetched. Everything changed. Then came the "velvet divorce" of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and now there are potential divorces in the United Kingdom, Spain and Belgium.

Perhaps most importantly, the rule broke down in Yugoslavia, where a single entity split into numerous independent nations, and, among other consequences, a war over borders ensued. The conflict concluded with the separation of Kosovo from Serbia and its elevation to the status of an independent nation. Russia has used this last border change to justify redrawing the borders of Georgia and as a precedent supporting its current demand for the autonomy and control of eastern Ukraine. Similarly, the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia shifted dramatically as the result of war. (On a related note, Cyprus, divided between a Turkish-run north and a Greek-run south, was allowed into the European Union in 2004 with its deep border dispute still unsettled.)

Since the end of the Cold War, the principle of the inviolability of borders has been violated repeatedly — through the creation of new borders, through the creation of newly freed nation-states, through peaceful divisions and through violent war. The principle of stable borders held for the most part until 1991 before undergoing a series of radical shifts that sometimes settled the issue and sometimes left it unresolved. The Europeans welcomed most of these border adjustments, and in one case — Kosovo — Europeans themselves engineered the change.

It is in this context that the Ukrainian war must be considered. Europe's contention, supported by America, is that Russia is attempting to [change inviolable borders](#). There are many good arguments to be made against the Russians in Ukraine, which I have laid out in the past. However, the idea that the Russians are doing something unprecedented in trying to redraw Ukraine's borders is difficult to support. Europe's borders have been in flux for

some time. That is indeed a matter of concern; historically, unsettled borders in Europe are precursors to war, as we have seen in Yugoslavia, the Caucasus and now Ukraine. But it is difficult to argue that this particular action by Russia is in itself a dramatically unprecedented event in Europe. The principle of national self-determination depends on a clear understanding of a nation and the unchallenged agreement on its boundaries. The Europeans themselves have in multiple ways established the precedent that borders are not unchallengeable.

There are two principles competing. The first is the European Union's desire that borders be utterly permeable without the nation-state losing its right to self-determination. It is difficult to see how a lack of control over borders is compatible with national self-determination. The other principle is that existing borders not be challenged. On the one hand, the union wants to diminish the importance of borders. On the other hand, it wants to [make them incontestable](#).

Neither principle is succeeding. Within Europe, more forces are emerging that want to return control over borders to nation-states. In different ways, the Muslim immigrant crisis and the Greek crisis intersect at the question of who controls the borders. Meanwhile, the inviolability of borders has been a dead letter since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The idea of borders being archaic is meaningful only if the nation-state is archaic. There is no evidence that this is true in Europe. On the contrary, all of the pressures we see culturally and economically point to not only the persistence of the idea of nationality, but also to its dramatic increase in Europe. At the same time, there is no evidence that the challenge to borders is abating. In fact, during the past quarter of a century, the number of shifts and changes, freely or under pressure, has only increased. And each challenge of a national border, such as the one occurring in Ukraine, is a challenge to a nation's reality and sense of self.

The European Union has promised [peace and prosperity](#). The prosperity is beyond tattered now. And peace has been intermittently disrupted — not in the European Union, but around it — since the Maastricht Treaty was signed in 1992 to create a common economic and monetary union. All of this is linked to the question of what a border represents and how seriously we take it. A border means that this is [my country and not yours](#). This idea has been a source of anguish in Europe and elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is a reality embedded in the human condition. Borders matter, and they matter in many different ways. The European crisis, taken as a whole, is rooted in borders. Attempting to abolish them is attractive in theory. But theory faces reality across its own border.

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