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GOVERNMENT FORCES CLASH WITH ROGUE ISLAMIST COMMANDER IN MINDANAO

Filipino government forces engaged in a major battle last week with rebel forces under the command of a renegade commander of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The clashes, described as the fiercest this year, occurred on the island of Mindanao, ten kilometers from the provincial capital of Maguindanao, where Philippines president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was visiting at the time. The clashes began on March 26 near the town of Mamasapano in Maguindanao province, one of six provinces forming the Muslim autonomous region.

An MILF spokesman maintained the clashes were initiated by government forces, which allegedly attacked a village where many of the families of Umbrakato's fighters lived. According to an army spokesman, units of the army's 601st Brigade were checking on reports of a rebel presence in the area (Xinhua, March 28). The troops were attacked by an estimated 60 to 80 rebel fighters under the command of Ameril Umbra Kato, an MILF commander with a 3 million peso reward (U.S. \$310,000) on his head. Kato styles himself commander of the 105th Base Command of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (the armed wing of the MILF).

The 601st Brigade engaged the rebels with artillery, mortars and heavy-machine-gun fire from armored personnel vehicles (APVs). The rebels targeted the military with mortar and small-arms fire for eight hours before splitting into small groups and melting into a marshy area where pursuit was difficult (AFP, March 28).

Government forces claimed at least 20 rebels were killed while admitting the loss of eight soldiers. An MILF spokesman insisted the rebels had suffered the loss of only one fighter while killing 20 government troops (MindaNews [Mindanao], March 28). The rebels also claimed to have destroyed two APVs and to have seized a weapons cache that included an M-60 machine-gun (*Mindanao Examiner*, March 27). Eid Kabalu, the MILF's civil-military affairs chief, declared government troops "encountered our regular forces, not those under Kato" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* [Mindanao], March 28).

An agreement between the government and the MILF last year on "ancestral domain" (effectively creating a Muslim homeland) in the historically Muslim southern islands of the Philippines fell through when it was overturned by the Supreme Court. Despite a continuing (but lightly observed) ceasefire, a number of MILF commanders responded by attacking Christian communities in Mindanao last August, killing dozens of people and driving 160,000 others from their homes. Kato became one of the most wanted men in the Philippines when his fighters rampaged through Christian communities in the North Cotabato, Lanao del Norte, and Sarangani provinces of Mindanao. The rebel commander faces scores of criminal charges, including a charge of terrorism under the Human Security Act (*Philippine Star* [Manila], September 4, 2008). Two other MILF commanders, Abdullah Macapaar (a.k.a. Commander Bravo) and Sulayman Pangalian, are also wanted for their attacks on Christian communities, apparently without the approval of the MILF command. MILF chairman Al-Haj Murad Ebrahim announced that Kato and Macapaar would be charged under the Shari'a in a military court martial for their role in the attacks, but the commanders have yet to be reined in (*Sun Star* [Davao, Mindanao], August 25, 2008).

In a YouTube video recorded last fall, Kato denied allegations his force was "a lost command," while accusing the government of terrorism. He described the bounty on his head as a "pre-modern tactic" used by enemies of the Prophet Muhammad and insisted that the President sought to "sow chaos" in Mindanao by ordering military attacks on the MILF (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dU-Se7g1k7U>).

Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro Jr. once said of Kato; "We know the way he thinks and the way he thinks is quite dangerous" (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, October 2, 2008). Kato's progress through remote areas

of Mindanao is partially tracked through text messages sent to security forces by civilians (GMANews [Manila], October 2, 2008).

Manila is demanding the surrender of Kato, Macapaar and Pangalian before peace talks can resume with the MILF (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 1). The government has tried to exploit a divide between the three commanders and the mainstream MILF command, characterizing the three as "renegades" who don't "honor and respect" MILF members of the ceasefire committee. According to Interior Minister Ronaldo Puno; "The minute the MILF surrenders the three commanders, the Philippine National Police will stop its operation and development will begin in Mindanao. It seems it's the tail wagging the dog, the criminal elements controlling the central committee" (*Philippine Star*, September 10, 2008). The struggle for a Muslim homeland in Mindanao is now in its fourth decade and is believed to have claimed the lives of 120,000 people.

AL-SHABAAB MAGAZINE DENOUNCES SOMALIA'S ISLAMIST PRESIDENT

The split between Somalia's al-Shabaab militant group and the Islamists who have joined the new Somali government continues to deepen, as demonstrated by the fifth issue of al-Shabaab's *Millat Ibrahim* magazine, which appeared on various jihadi websites on March 4. The issue contains a number of articles critical of former Islamic Courts Union Chairman Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad, the new President of Somalia.

An article by Abu Talha al-Somali makes its view of the "apostate" nature of the new president clear in its title; "Apostate Sharif Is President of the Apostate Government in Replacement of the Apostate [Abdullahi] Yusuf." Unflattering comparisons are made in "Those Similar to Sharif Throughout Islamic History."

The deepest analysis of the direction of the new government was provided in an article entitled "Message" by Abu al-Hashir al-Salafi al-Sudani, which examined the implications of the appointment of Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad as president. The author described the challenges al-Shabaab would face from the following aims of this "puppet president:"

- Undermining al-Shabaab through the implementation of Shari'a as the legal code of Somalia, which will also decrease the possibility Shaykh Sharif will be considered a tyrant or apostate.

- The appointment of Shaykh Sharif as leader and the withdrawal of the Ethiopian invaders will remove the *raison d'être* of al-Shabaab.
- The elimination of piracy on the Somali coasts, which al-Sudani notes will remove a threat which has caused “excessive losses” to the Crusaders and their apostate supporters.
- The forthcoming popular elections will entrench the new government. Al-Sudani argues that they will instead return the rule of tyrants; “Islamic Shari’a is not established by innovative elections that recognize the false multi-party system with all its forms and colors. The religion is only established by a victorious sword and a guiding book.”

Shaykh Sharif also comes under severe criticism for fleeing Somalia when the Ethiopians invaded in December 2006 and is accused of negotiating with the “enemies” and receiving their financial support during his absence from the battlefield.

A number of other topics are examined in *Millat Ibrahim*. A “Message to Gaza” calls on Palestinians to use Somalia as a base for the liberation of Jerusalem. Other articles describe the gentle behavior of a mujahid and provide an analysis of the reasons behind the withdrawal of the Ethiopian military from Somalia. There is also a transcript of a February speech on Somalia by al-Qaeda strategist Abu Yahya al-Libi (the organization’s point-man on Somali issues) and a selection of quotations on jihad by the “martyr Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” the late leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The Amir of the Islamic State in Iraq Lambastes President Obama’s Plan for Iraq

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

In his second speech of the year, the Amir of the al-Qaeda-allied Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, has criticized President Obama’s Iraq plan as deceitful and announced a new military campaign entitled “The Good Harvest” (al-hanein. info, March 17). The campaign is designed to combat an American-Iranian alliance al-Baghdadi calls “the

Crusader-Magian Coalition” (Magian refers to the main pre-Islamic religion of Iran, Zoroastrianism, thus implying the Shi’a Islam practiced in Iran is a form of paganism). Baghdadi’s March 17 speech is the ISI’s official response to President Obama’s February 27 speech entitled; “Responsibly Ending the Iraq War.”

Al-Baghdadi sets out to achieve two objectives with his speech. First, he denigrates President Obama’s plan for Iraq as the continuation of President Bush’s policies with the intent to erode local and regional support for the American plan and to present the ISI as the last line of defense against U.S. plans in Iraq and the region. If locals grow disappointed with President Obama’s policies in Iraq, then al-Baghdadi hopes to capitalize on that disenchantment. Second, al-Baghdadi offers an apology for the ISI’s past mistakes to entice all Sunnis to take part in the ISI’s “Good Harvest” campaign.

Al-Baghdadi conveys his disdain for the newly elected U.S. president by referring to him as a “house slave,” a phrase first coined last November by al-Qaeda’s number two, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. The implication is that the new president will not change U.S. policies in the Middle East because, like “domestic slaves” who can only serve their masters, President Obama will remain beholden to past policies. To drive his point home, al-Baghdadi argues that the President has already recanted on his electoral promise; while candidate Obama promised to withdraw from Iraq within sixteen months, President Obama now proposes staying for three more years.

Throughout his speech, al-Baghdadi labors hard to tie President Obama’s policy to that of George Bush, hoping to erode the new president’s good standing in the Middle East and put the ISI in a position to capitalize on the eventual disenchantment if Obama’s policies fail. Al-Baghdadi thus calls the phased withdrawal a “deception” and argues that only “the silly and naive will accept that our land be under occupation and our dignity be insulted for three coming years under the pretext of a gradual withdrawal.” He argues that the proposed withdrawal timetable is not a significant change, as it “will ensure the long duration [of the occupation] with less casualties and a diminution in costs materially, militarily and morally...” He accuses the new President of looking at Iraq with the same rosy glasses that President Bush did. Obama “continued the series of lies launched by his criminal predecessor, claiming that his army achieved an extreme success...”

Al-Baghdadi also contends that Obama's description of Iraq as a sovereign state is conspicuously wrong. He argues that Iraq's political landscape is still dominated by the "State of the Cross and ally of the Jews" (i.e. the United States) and portrays the Shiite and Kurd parties that dominate the national polity as posing an existential threat to Iraqi Sunnis. By portraying the Sunnis as the victims of a Shiite-dominated Iraqi government that has failed to make concessions to the religious minority, al-Baghdadi stokes the fears of Iraqi Sunnis who have lost a great deal of political clout in the new Iraq and have not seen their political grievances seriously addressed by the Government of Iraq. Sunni insurgents who successfully turned against al-Qaeda in Iraq and helped greatly in reducing the level of violence in the last two years still remain by and large a low-paid auxiliary security force, with little hope of becoming integrated into the Iraqi security forces. Constitutional reforms sought by Sunnis remain unaddressed. By reminding Sunnis that their government has not seriously addressed their grievances and by inferring that sectarian forces seeking the political marginalization of Sunnis still dominate national politics, al-Baghdadi hopes to encourage Iraqi Sunnis to identify the ISI as their only defender.

After the diagnosis, Baghdadi offers a remedy in the form of the "Good Harvest" military campaign, which is scheduled to succeed the "Plan of Dignity" campaign, launched in January 2007 in response to the U.S.-led surge in Baghdad. The Plan of Dignity, says al-Baghdadi, has succeeded since the U.S. government has now agreed to withdraw its forces from Iraq. This new campaign, according to al-Baghdadi, has been carefully crafted to respond appropriately to the current strategic dynamic. Al-Baghdadi urges all Muslims to see the complexity of the plots waged against Islam in Iraq, implying that unity in the ranks of the insurgents is necessary to fight against U.S. plans. He also offers a rare acknowledgement that the ISI made mistakes in the past, but argues it is time to "put all problems in the past."

Al-Baghdadi's call for Iraqi Sunnis to participate in this new ISI-led campaign sounds both contrite and conciliatory; "We have only one condition, which is: to be a Muslim seeking for the rule of the Shari'a of Allah and the consolidation of His religion on the method of Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a." [1] This is a drastic change. As soon as it was formed in the fall of 2006, the ISI tried to coerce other factions to come under its leadership. The group also tried to enforce a strict behavioral code according to its rigorous interpretation

of Islam in the areas it dominated. By requiring that people who join in its new campaign be only Muslims "seeking the rule of Shari'a" following the "method of Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a," al-Baghdadi lays out broad general requirements that can be adhered to by many Sunnis beyond the borders of the ISI's traditional audience.

Within a few days, al-Baghdadi's call seemed to resonate with his fellow jihadis. On March 21, the Amir of the Ansar al-Sunnah, a small insurgent group aligned with Islamist-nationalist forces in Iraq, responded publicly and favorably to al-Baghdadi's invitation. In a rare speech entitled; "The Best Harvest," Amir Shaykh Abu Wa'il saluted al-Baghdadi for trying to heal the rift between insurgent factions in Iraq and warned that if disagreements between jihadist factions persist, it will lead to "the empowerment of another enemy," a barely veiled reference to Iran (Media Office of the Ansar al-Sunnah Group Shari'a Commission, March 20).

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Notes:

1. The doctrine of Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a (the people of the Sunnah and the community) refers to those who form the community that follows the "right path" set by the Prophet. The term highlights the importance of the unity of the community. All four schools of Sunni Islam (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali) recognize the doctrine.

Lashkar-e-Taiba Resumes Operations against Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir

By Animesh Roul

After lying low for a few months following the November 2008 Mumbai carnage and the subsequent crackdown on its leadership and camps in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) has once again resumed operations in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

LeT fighters engaged Indian regulars of 1 Para and 6 Btn. Rashtriya Rifles (a counterterrorism paramilitary created in 1990 for use in Kashmir) in a five-day firefight, beginning on March 20 in the Shamasbari forest range of Kupwara District, close to the Kashmir Line of Control (LoC) – a military control line constituting a de facto border between Indian and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. The LeT claimed responsibility for the ambush on an army patrol party and the subsequent encounter in which 17 militants and eight soldiers (including a major) were killed (Kashmir Live, March 25; NDTV, March 24). The Indian Army ascribed its losses to the technical sophistication of the insurgents and their extensive use of GPS systems in the densely forested region. According to Brigadier Gurmit Singh; “The militants killed in the encounter were highly trained, well equipped. We have recovered the latest weapons, communication systems and maps from them” (*Kashmir Observer*, March 27).

Indian security agencies suspect the Pakistani army of involvement in the infiltration of the militants. The army’s suspicion is based on recovered snow gear, maps, GPS systems, a Thuraya satellite phone, rations and medicines (*Kashmir Observer*, March 27; RTT News, March 26). However, Pakistan has dismissed the idea that the Kupwara encounters were supported by government forces across the border.

In mid-March, almost a week before the Kupwara battle, at least three LeT terrorists successfully crossed the LoC and were later killed during a siege of the mosque in which they took refuge in the Kishtwar district of Jammu region (News Agency of Kashmir, March 14). One of the militants was identified as an LeT commander, Yusuf Gujjar (Indo-Asian News Service, March 14; *Times of India*, March 15).

The recovery of two Pakistan-made liquefied petroleum gas cylinders and four AK-47 assault rifles in the Mendhar area of Poonch District indicated militants successfully crossed the LoC late last month (*Daily Excelsior* [Jammu], March 22).

A day after the Army completed the operation in Kupwara, the LeT terrorists again made an unsuccessful attempt to enter the Kashmir Valley from the Gurez sector in Bandipora District and from the Hachamarg area of Handwara District (*Times of India*, March 28). Indian troops deployed at the LoC have confirmed large-scale attempts by Pakistan-based militants, mostly LeT and Hizb ul-Mujahidin (HuM) cadres, to infiltrate into the state through the forests of the Kupwara and Gurez sectors.

After recently overhauling its infrastructure in J&K, the LeT has reportedly vowed to continue lethal strikes against the security forces and vital installations in the state. Claiming responsibility for the Kupwara encounters, the LeT’s elusive spokesman, Abdullah (Gaznavi) Muntazir, told local media; “The encounter which ensued turned out to be a long-drawn-out battle... [it] should serve as an eye-opener for New Delhi... India should understand that the freedom struggle in Kashmir is not over... it is active with full force” (*Rising Kashmir* [Srinagar], March 25).

There is increasing concern in the Indian security establishment over the flourishing terror infrastructure across the border. Contrary to Pakistan’s claim to have shut down terror camps in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, unconfirmed reports in early March suggested the LeT has opened up more camps in Muzaffarabad, Mirpur and Kotli for the fresh recruitment and training of new cadres. According to Indian intelligence agencies, the LeT has positioned around 800 cadres under newly designated leaders in charge of J&K operations. The new leaders were identified by Indian intelligence sources as Shahji (a.k.a. Abu Anas), Hyder Bhayee (a.k.a. Bilal, a.k.a. Salahuddin), Huzefa (a.k.a. Abdul Gaffar) and Walid, the LeT’s “top man for ammunition supply and finances” (*Indian Express*, March 7). The four senior LeT commanders reportedly replaced Mumbai attack masterminds Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, Zarar Shah and Yousuf Muzammil, all currently in Pakistani custody.

However, the Kupwara encounter took the Army and paramilitary by surprise and forced them to increase their level of preparedness to meet future infiltration attempts by Pakistan-based terrorists. Likewise, security has been beefed up along the LoC and around vital installations in J&K following intelligence inputs about impending attempts to infiltrate militants into Kashmir in the spring to sabotage the Parliamentary poll in the state. 183 paramilitary companies will be deployed to provide security for the elections (*Hindu*, March 31).

The infiltration attempt and subsequent encounter in Kupwara coincided with the first major violation of the bilateral ceasefire in the Uri sector of north Kashmir, in which Pakistani and Indian troops exchanged fire for several hours on March 20 (Rediff.com, March 21; *Daily Times* [Lahore], March 22).

The question remains as to how the LeT has been able to bounce back, even after Pakistan’s so-called crackdown

following the Mumbai episode. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addressed this puzzle recently by saying the LeT has made a resurgence “because the government of Pakistan is either not able to control them or they are not willing to control them” (*Indian Express*, April 1).

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Strange Days on the Red Sea Coast: A New Theater for the Israel - Iran Conflict?

By Andrew McGregor

Over the last few months, the strategically important African Red Sea coast has suddenly become the focal point of rumors involving troop-carrying submarines, ballistic missile installations, desert-dwelling arms smugglers, mysterious airstrikes and unlikely alliances. None of the parties alleged to be involved (including Iran, Israel, Eritrea, Egypt, Sudan, France, Djibouti, Gaza and the United States) have been forthcoming with many details, leaving observers to ponder a tangled web of reality and fantasy. What does appear certain, however, is that the regional power struggle between Israel and Iran has the potential to spread to Africa, unleashing a new wave of political violence in an area already consumed with its own deadly conflicts.

Airstrike in the Desert

Though an airstrike on a column of 23 vehicles was carried out on January 27 near Mt. Alcanon, in the desert northwest of Port Sudan, news of the attack first emerged in a little-noticed interview carried on March 23 in the Arabic-language *Al-Mustaqillah* newspaper (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 26). In the interview, Sudanese Transportation Minister Dr. Mabruk Mubarak Salim, the former leader of the Free Lions resistance movement in eastern Sudan, said that aircraft he believed to be French and American had attacked a column of vehicles in Sudan eastern desert after receiving intelligence indicating a group of arms smugglers was transporting arms to Gaza. Dr. Salim’s Free Lions Movement was based on the Rasha’ida Arabs of east Sudan, a nomadic group believed to control smuggling activities along the eastern Egypt-Sudan border.

On March 26, Dr. Salim told al-Jazeera there had been at least two airstrikes, carried out by U.S. warplanes launched from American warships operating in the Red Sea. There was no further mention of the French, who maintain an airbase in nearby Djibouti. After the news broke in the media, Sudanese foreign ministry spokesman Ali al-Sadig issued some clarifications:

The first thought was that it was the Americans that did it. We contacted the Americans and they categorically denied they were involved... We are still trying to verify it. Most probably it involved Israel... We didn’t know about the first attack until after the second one. They were in an area close to the border with Egypt, a remote area, desert, with no towns, no people (Al-Jazeera, March 27).

With the Americans out of the way, suspicion fell on Israel as the source of the attack.

Sudanese authorities later claimed the convoy was carrying not arms, but a large number of migrants from a number of African countries, particularly Eritrea (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 27; *Sudan Tribune*, March 28). According to Foreign Minister Ali al-Sadig; “it is clear that [the attackers] were acting on bad information that the vehicles were carrying arms” (*Haaretz*, March 27). Dr. Salim claimed the death toll was 800 people, contradicting his earlier claim that the convoy consisted of small trucks carrying arms and that most of those killed were Sudanese, Ethiopians and Eritreans (al-Jazeera, March 26). There was also some confusion about the number of attacks, with initial claims of a further strike on February 11 and a third undated strike on an Iranian freighter in the Red Sea. The latter rumor may have had its source in Dr. Salim’s suggestion that several Rasha’ida fishing boats had been attacked by U.S. and French warplanes. Otherwise, no evidence has been provided to substantiate these claims.

A Hamas leader, Salah al-Bardawil, denied the movement had any knowledge of such arms shipments, pointing to the lack of a common border with Sudan as proof “these are false claims” (Al-Jazeera, March 27).

A Smuggling Route to Sinai?

The alleged smuggling route, beginning at Port Sudan, would take the smugglers through 150 miles of rough and notoriously waterless terrain to the Egyptian border and the disputed territory of Hala’ib, currently under

Egyptian occupation. From there the route would pass roughly 600 miles through Egypt's Eastern Desert, a rocky and frequently mountainous wasteland. Crisscrossing the terrain to find a suitable way through could add considerably to the total distance. North of the Egyptian border the Sudanese smugglers would be crossing hundreds of miles of unfamiliar and roadless territory. The alternatives would involve offloading the arms near the border to an Egyptian convoy or making a change of drivers. Anonymous "defense sources" cited by the *Times* claimed local Egyptian smugglers were engaged to take over the convoy at the Egyptian border "for a fat fee" (*The Times*, March 29).

Use of the well-patrolled coastal road would obviously be impossible without official Egyptian approval. The other option for the smugglers would be to cut west to the Nile road which passes through hundreds of settled areas and a large number of security checkpoints. The convoy would need to continually avoid security patrols along the border and numerous restricted military zones along the coast. Either Egyptian guides or covert assistance from Egyptian security services would be needed for a 23 vehicle convoy to reach Sinai from the Egyptian border without interference. Once in the Sinai there is little alternative to taking the coastal route to Gaza, passing through one of Egypt's most militarily sensitive areas, to reach the smuggling tunnels near the border with Gaza.

Water, gasoline, spare parts and other supplies would take up considerable space in the trucks. Provisions would have to be made for securing and transporting the loads of disabled trucks that proved irreparable, particularly if their loads included parts for the Fajr-3 rockets the convoy was alleged to be carrying, without which the other loads might prove unusable. Freeing the trucks from sand (a problem worsened by carrying a heavy load of arms) and making repairs could add days to the trip. The alleged inclusion of Iranian members of the Revolutionary Guard in the convoy would be highly risky – if detained by Egyptian security forces, every member of the arms convoy would be detained and interrogated (Israeli sources claimed several Iranians were killed in the raid). It would not take long to separate the Iranians from the Arabs, with all the consequences that would follow from the exposure of an Iranian intelligence operation on Egyptian soil.

Of course most of these problems would disappear if Egypt was giving its approval to the arms shipments. But if this was the case, why not send the arms through

Syria and by ship to a port near the Gaza border? Ships are the normal vehicle for arms deliveries as massive quantities of arms are usually required to change the military balance in any situation.

Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper reported that the arms were "apparently transferred from Iran through the Persian Gulf to Yemen, from there to Sudan and then to Egypt through Sinai and the tunnels under the Egypt Gaza border" and included "various types of missiles, rockets, guns and high-quality explosives" (*Haaretz*, March 29). The Yemen stage is unexplained; Iranian ships can easily reach Port Sudan without a needless overland transfer of their cargos in Yemen before being reloaded onto ships going to Port Sudan. Looking at this route (the simplest of several proposed by Israeli sources), one can only assume Hamas was in no rush to obtain its weapons.

Reserves Major General Giyora Eiland, a former head of Israel's National Security Council, alleged the involvement of a number of parties in the Sinai to Gaza arms trade, including "Bedouin and Egyptian army officers who are benefiting from the smuggling." He then turned to the possibility of arms being shipped through Sudan to Gaza; "Almost all of the weapons are smuggled into Gaza through the Sinai, and some probably by sea. Little comes along this long [Sudan to Gaza] route" (*Voice of Israel Network*, March 27).

Video footage of the burned-out convoy was supplied to al-Jazeera by Sudanese intelligence sources. The footage shows only small pick-up trucks, largely unsuitable for transporting arms. If Fajr-3 missiles broken down into parts were included in the shipment, there would be little room for other arms (each Fajr-3 missile weighs at least 550 kilograms). Sudanese authorities described finding a quantity of ammunition, several C-4 and AK-47 rifles and a number of mobile phones used for communications by the smugglers. There was no mention of missile parts (*El-Shorouk* [Cairo], March 24). No evidence has been produced by any party to confirm the origin of the arms allegedly carried by the smugglers' convoy.

Assessing Responsibility

Citing anonymous "defense sources," the *Times* claimed the convoys had been tracked by Mossad, enabling an aerial force of satellite-controlled UAVs to kill "at least 50 smugglers and their Iranian escorts" (*The Times* [London], March 29). American officials also reported

that at least one operative from Iran's Revolutionary Guards had gone to Sudan to organize the weapons convoy (*Haaretz/Reuters*, March 27). According to the Times' sources, the convoy attacks were carried out by Hermes 450 and Eitan model UAVs in what would have been an aviation first – a long distance attack against a moving target carried out solely by a squadron of remote control drones.

U.S.-based *Time Magazine* entered the fray on March 30 with a report based on information provided by “two highly-placed Israeli security sources.” According to these sources, the United States was informed of the operation in advance but was otherwise uninvolved. Dozens of aircraft were involved in the 1,750 mile mission, refuelling in midair over the Red Sea. Once the target was reached, F15I fighters provided air cover against other aircraft while F16I fighters carried out two runs on the convoy. Drones with high-resolution cameras were used to assess damage to the vehicles.

The American-made F16I “Sufa” aircraft were first obtained by the IAF in 2004. They carry Israeli-made conformal fuel tanks to increase the range of the aircraft and use synthetic aperture radar that enables the aircraft to track ground targets day or night. The older F15I “Ra'am” is an older but versatile model, modified to Israeli specifications.

The entire operation, according to the Israeli sources used by *Time*, was planned in less than a week to act on Mossad information that Iran was planning to deliver 120 tons of arms and explosives to Gaza, “including anti-tank rockets and Fajr rockets with a 25 mile range” in a 23 truck convoy (though this shipment seems impossibly large for 23 pick-up trucks). The Israeli sources added that this was the first time the smuggling route through Sudan had been used.

Israeli officials claimed anonymously that the convoy was carrying Fajr-3 rockets capable of reaching Tel Aviv (*Sunday Times*, March 29; *Jerusalem Post*, March 29). The Fajr-3 MLRS is basically an updated Katyusha rocket that loses accuracy as it approaches the limit of its 45km range and carries only a small warhead of conventional explosives. It has been suggested that the missiles carried by the convoy “could have changed the game in the conflict between Israel and Palestinian militants,” thus making the attack an imperative for Israel (BBC, March 26). Yet the Fajr-3 was already used against Israel by Hezbollah in 2006 (see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 11, 2006). It has also been claimed that

the Fajr-3 rockets could be used against Israel's nuclear installation at Dimona, but Israeli officials reported at the start of the year that Hamas already possessed dozens of Fajr-3 rockets (*Sunday Times*, January 2). Some media accounts have confused the Fajr-3 Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), which would seem to be the weapon in question, with the much larger Fajr-3 medium-range ballistic missile.

Reports of the complete destruction of the entire convoy and all its personnel raise further questions. Desert convoys tend to be long, strung out affairs, not least because it is nearly impossible to drive in the dust of the vehicle ahead. Could an airstrike really kill every single person involved in a strung out convoy without a ground force going in to mop up? UAV's with heat sensors and night vision equipment might have remained in the area to eliminate all survivors, but this seems unnecessary if the arms had already been destroyed. The political risk of leaving Israeli aircraft in the area after the conclusion of a successful attack would not equal the benefit of killing a few drivers and mechanics.

What role did Khartoum play in these events? A pan-Arab daily reported that the United States warned the Sudanese government before the Israeli airstrike that a “third party” was monitoring the arms-smuggling route to Gaza and that such shipments needed to stop immediately. (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 30). Despite state-level disagreements, U.S. and Sudanese intelligence agencies continue to enjoy a close relationship.

With Sudan under international pressure as a result of the Darfur conflict, Khartoum has sought to renew its relations with Iran. Less than two weeks before the airstrike, Sudanese Defense Minister Abdalrahim Hussein concluded a visit to Tehran to discuss arms sales and training for Sudanese security forces. An Iranian source reported missiles, UAVs, RPGs and other equipment were sought by Sudan (*Sudan Tribune*, January 20).

An Iranian Base on the Red Sea?

As tensions rise in the region, wild allegations have emerged surrounding the creation of a major Iranian military and naval base in the Eritrean town of Assab on the Red Sea coast. Assab is a small port city of 100,000 people. A small Soviet-built oil refinery at Assab was shut down in 1997. Last November an Eritrean opposition group, the Eritrean Democratic Party, published a report on their website claiming Iran had agreed to revamp

the small refinery, adding (without any substantiation) that Iran and Eritrea's President Isayas Afewerki were planning to control the strategic Bab al-Mandab Straits at the southern entrance to the Red Sea (self-democracy.com, November 25, 2008).

A short time later, another Eritrean opposition website elaborated on the original report of a refinery renovation, adding lurid details of Iranian ships and submarines deploying troops and long-range ballistic missiles at a new Iranian military base at Assab. Security was provided by Iranian UAVs that patrolled the area (EritreaDaily.net, December 10, 2008).

The Israeli MEMRI website then reported that "Eritrea has granted Iran total control of the Red Sea port of Assab," adding that Iranian submarines had "deployed troops, weapons and long-range missiles... under the pretext of defending the local oil refinery" (MEMRI, December 1, 2008).

The story was further elaborated on by Ethiopian sources (Ethiopia and Eritrea are intense rivals and political enemies). According to one Ethiopian report, Iranian frigates were using Assab as a naval base (Gedab News, January 28). An Ethiopian-based journalist contributed an article to *Sudan Tribune* in which he again claimed Iranian submarines were delivering troops and long-range missiles to Assab, basing his account on the original report on self-democracy.com, which made no such claims (*Sudan Tribune*, March 30). Israel's *Haaretz* noted that Addis Ababa is "a key Mossad base for operations against extremist Islamic groups" in the region, adding that some of the weapons destroyed in the convoy had "reportedly passed through Ethiopia and Eritrea first" (*Haaretz*, March 27).

Only days ago, a mainstream Tel Aviv newspaper reported that Iran has already finished building a naval base at Assab and had "transferred to this base – by means of ships and submarines – troops, military equipment and long range-ballistic missiles... that can strike Israel." The newspaper claimed its information was based on reports from Eritrean opposition members, diplomats and aid organizations, without giving any specifics (*Ma'ariv* [Tel Aviv], March 29). On March 19, Israel's ambassador to Ethiopia accused Eritrea of trying to sabotage the peace process in the region by serving as a safe haven for terrorist groups (Walta Information Center [Addis Abbab], March 19). In only four months, a minor refinery renovation was transformed into a strategic threat to the entire Middle East.

Conclusion

Questions remain as to how the moving convoy was found by its attackers. Did Mossad have inside intelligence? Did the Israelis use satellite imagery from U.S. surveillance satellites as part of the agreement they signed earlier in January on the prevention of arms smuggling to Gaza, or did they use their own Ofeq-series surveillance satellites? Was an Israeli UAV already in place when the convoy left Port Sudan? A retired Israeli Air Force general, Yitzhak Ben-Israel, recognized the difficulty involved in finding and striking the convoy by noting; "The main innovation in the attack on Sudan... was the ability to hit a moving target at such a distance. The fact that Israel has the technical ability to do such a thing proves even more what we are capable of in Iran" (*Haaretz*, March 27).

The two-month silence on the attacks from other parties is also notable – it is unlikely U.S. and French radar facilities in Djibouti would have missed squadrons of Israeli jets and UAVs attacking a target in nearby East Sudan. If the Israelis took the shortest route through the Gulf of Aqaba and down the Red Sea they would likely be detected by Egyptian and Saudi radar on their way out and on their way back. According to former IAF commander Eitan Ben-Eliyahu, the attack would require precise intelligence and a two and a half hour flight along the Red Sea coast, keeping low to evade Egyptian and Saudi radar. The aircraft would also require aerial refuelling (*Haaretz*, March 27).

Even if the aircraft evaded radar, their low flight paths would have exposed them to visual observation in the narrow shipping lanes of the Red Sea. Israeli aircraft would almost certainly have been tracked by the Combined Task Force-150, an allied fleet patrolling the Red Sea. All other routes would have taken the aircraft through unfriendly airspace. By March 27, an Egyptian official admitted that Egypt had indeed known of the airstrike at the time, but added the Israelis had not crossed into Egyptian airspace (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 27).

If Tehran was involved in this remarkably complicated smuggling operation, it will now be taking its entire local intelligence infrastructure apart to find the source of the leak. Egypt is reported to have deployed additional security personnel along the border with Sudan, effectively closing the alleged smuggling route (*Haaretz*, March 29). As Sudan revives its defense relationship

with Iran it is very likely rumors and allegations will continue to proliferate regarding an Iranian presence on the Red Sea.

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Assyrian Nationalists Cooperate with Kurdish PKK Insurgents

By Wladimir van Wilgenburg

For many people in the West, mention of the “Assyrians” brings to mind the relentless empire-builders of northern Iraq who conquered most of the Middle East, including Egypt and large parts of Anatolia, in the period stretching between the 20th to 7th centuries B.C. Few are aware of the existence of the modern “Assyrians,” an Aramaic-speaking Christian community still centered on the region surrounding the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh (Arabic – Ninawa). Though they are undoubtedly an indigenous group predating the Arab invasion of the 7th century, there is still intense debate within the community over the reality of a direct link to the Assyrians of old. Three developments have spurred the growth of modern Assyrian nationalism:

- The introduction of the concept of ethnic nationalism from Europe and America in the late 19th century.

- The repression of the Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

- The violence suffered by elements of the community during Ba’athist rule and again in the post-2003 period, which has hastened the flight of the community to new homes in the West.

Today, some Assyrian nationalists have tied their fortunes to the militant element of another nation-less ethnic group in the same area, the Kurds. The radical Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has proved willing to accommodate the nationalist aspirations of this Christian community, though not all members of the community agree that an alliance with the militant Kurds is in their best interest.

The Assyrian actors

According to Assyrian nationalists there are around three million “Assyrians” living in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Iran, Europe, Canada, Australia and the United States. But not all these Middle-Eastern Christians see themselves as “Assyrians.” Some self-identify as Aramaean, others as Chaldean, and others as Syriac. [1] There are also a number of confessions practiced by this ancient Christian community, including Orthodox Christianity, Chaldean-Catholicism and even Presbyterianism. Assyrian nationalist organizations commonly aim to “revive” Assyrian culture and to “re-establish” Assyria in its Middle Eastern homeland, which is roughly identical to the region occupied today by the Kurds – south-eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, north-eastern Syria and north-western Iran. This region is also home to large numbers of Arabs, Turks, Persians, Yazidis and Turkmen. Some Assyrian nationalist groups with more moderate ambitions seek only cultural recognition in a region where ethnic, cultural and linguistic identities are often the focus of violent disputes.

Many Aramaeans, however, are firmly opposed to the use of the term “Assyrian,” condemning it as either an intrusive concept introduced by 19th century Protestant missionaries working in the area or an historically inaccurate attempt to link the Aramaean people with the long vanished Assyrian Empire. One of the first communities to have accepted Christianity, the modern Aramaic speakers refer to their homeland as Beth-Nahrin, “The Land of the Two Rivers.”

Assyrians have formed a number of ethnic-based opposition movements that advocate certain goals for the Assyrians in the diaspora and try to play a political

role in Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The main Assyrian actors used to be the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO - Mtakasta Demokrateta Atureta) formed in Syria, the Beth-Nahrin Democratic Party (BNDP) and the Mesopotamia Freedom Party (Gabo d'Hirutho d'Beth-Nahrin - GBH), which seeks an autonomous state for Assyrians in Iraq and is related to the Assyrian National Congress (ANC) in America. The Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM - Zowaa Demokrataya Aturaya), with a secular and democratic program, is one of the most successful Assyrian political parties in Iraq. Under the leadership of Yunadam Kanna, the ADM was involved in armed opposition to the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein.

But according to Fikri Aygur of the European Syriac Union (ESU), there have been changes on the political front. [2] Among the new players is the Assyria Council, with a small group of people who follow the ideas of the ADM and lobby for Assyrian rights. They work against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. The ADM recently lost all of their seats in the regional parliament to the KRG-supported Chaldean Syriac Assyrian People's Council as a consequence of working with Iraqi Shiites after the fall of Saddam.

Assyrian lobby organizations have managed to create ties with Christian political parties in Europe and various governmental organizations. Due to successful lobbying from influential Assyrian-Americans and Congressman Henry Hyde (Republican-Illinois), the ADM obtained recognition as an Iraqi opposition movement from the Bush government in 2002. [3] The Syriac Universal Alliance (an ethnic Syriac umbrella group founded in New Jersey in 1983) was given special consultative status by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations in 1997 (sua-online.org).

Common Interests of the PKK and the Assyrians

The PKK newspaper *Yeni Ozgur Politika* dedicated several articles to the relations between Assyrian organizations and Kurdish political parties in November, 2006. According to this pro-PKK medium there are ties between Kurdish parties and diaspora Assyrians in Sweden, France, Holland and Germany. There are also Assyrian members in the Kurdistan Parliament in Exile (KPE), which was established in 1993. The name of this PKK front organization was later changed to the Kurdistan National Congress (Kongra Netewiya Kurdistan - KNK).

The PKK share a common enemy with the Assyrian nationalists - Turkey. An Assyrian lobbyist noted this in an interview with a Christian newspaper; "There are Assyrians who fought with the Kurds, against the common enemy Turkey." (*Trouw*, December 21, 2000). Turkey has no intention of recognizing Assyrian claims that the Ottoman Empire committed genocide (an incident the Assyrians call Seyfo) against them or to recognize their cultural rights. The PKK uses the Assyrians to promote their human rights and cultural organizations while the Assyrians use the media organs of the PKK and their lobby organizations to confront Turkey. A few Assyrians have even joined the armed wing of the PKK.

Because the Syriac Orthodox are a very small minority in Turkey, they lack the ability to force Ankara to listen to their demands; "We are a small nation and our population numbers aren't sufficient enough in the Middle East to form an independent power bloc," observed Petrus Karatay, leader of the Association des Assyro-Chaldéens de France (AACF) and a member of the KNK (*Magazine Kurdistan*, January/February 1997). The danger has always been that radical members of the community would become associated with a terrorist organization. Some Assyrian nationalists believe they can use their collaboration with the PKK to put pressure on Turkey.

Currently, the PKK still supports recognition of the "Greek, Armenian and Assyrian genocide." In November, 2008 a PKK front organization, "The Association of Reconstruction of Dersim," organized a "Dersim Genocide" conference in which it was claimed Turkey committed genocide against the Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Jews, Alevis and Assyrians (kurdishinstitute.be, 4 November, 2008).

The Beginning of the Assyrian Revolution

On April 24, 1993, members of the ADO, including Numan Ogur, visited PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Syria. There they signed an agreement calling for the PKK media to promote Assyrian identity and interests. In addition, the Assyrians would share in the victory if the PKK succeeded in their struggle against the Turkish military (*Berxwedan*, April 24, 1993). However, not all members of ADO agreed to work with the PKK. The PKK had good ties with the Ba'ath regime in Syria and therefore ADO members who were receptive to an alliance with the PKK separated from the ADO and established the Bethnahrin Revolutionary Party

(*Zaman*, 19 October, 2006). 200 Assyrians were reportedly sent for training in the PKK camps (Haber7.com, August 19, 2006). “We as Christians should be the first that should start resistance against oppression,” argued Petrus Karatay (*Magazine Kurdistan*, January/February, 1997). The Bethnahrin Patriotic Revolution Organization and the Bethnahrin Freedom Party were both put on the terrorist list by Turkey in 2001 (*Zaman*, December 30, 2001).

Assyrian nationalists were allowed to broadcast on the PKK TV-stations. For instance, Assyrian activist Attiya Tunc made programs for Med TV (*Trouw*, 21 December, 2000). “We have our own Assyrian programs, produced by Assyrians and spoken in our own Assyrian language,” KNK member George Aryo explained in an interview (*Zenda magazine*, December 7, 1998). [4] The ESU has used their experience with PKK media operations to set up their own independent channel, Suroyo TV. The ESU supports the formation of an autonomous Christian region in Iraq. Assyrian activist Matay Arsan (a.k.a. Metin Tunc) says the ESU cooperates with Turkey and the Syriac Orthodox Church in Turkey, which doesn't support Assyrian secular nationalism. Arsan claims Suroyo TV is financed by Turkey and that the ESU members have meetings with the Turkish intelligence services. [5]

Some Assyrian nationalists, including members of the GHB, are highly critical of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Massoud Barzani. According to George Aryo, Barzani cooperated with Turkey to “kill Assyrians and to attack the PKK” (*Zenda Magazine*, December 7, 1998). In 1999 the GHB killed more than 39 KDP members in a revenge attack for the alleged murder of an Assyrian woman (RFE/RL, August 6, 1999).

Turkish intelligence services kept a close watch on the activities of the GHB (*Yenicag*, March 6, 2000). The GHB organized hunger strikes in 2000 “to condemn the Turks who barbarously killed 500,000 Syrianis/ Assyrians and Chaldeans!” More than 100 members of the GHB also occupied a government building in Lausanne, Switzerland to protest against Turkey. In January, 2001 the GHB participated in a demonstration with PKK organizations in Cologne to support hunger strikes in Turkish prisons.

A report prepared in 2000 for the Turkish National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu - MGK) warned; “Attention is also drawn to the increase of

(Syriac) activities to achieve their objectives and the close co-operation of the Assyrian/Syriani/ Chaldean community with the Armenian and Greek organizations and the terrorist organization PKK” (*Turkiye*, March 6, 2000).

Downfall of the Assyrian revolutionaries

The GHB was weakened by the capture of PKK-leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1999 and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, but continued their plans to fight for an independent Assyrian state (*Zaman*, October 19, 2006). Eventually there were internal fights and the party become divided. In 2002 GHB fighter Michael Judi (a.k.a. C. Kulan), a former Amsterdam policeman who joined the PKK military forces, allegedly froze to death in the mountains, though many claimed he was murdered when he decided to part ways with the PKK. In 2003 the founder of the GHB, Numan Ogur, was kidnapped when he attempted to leave the organization (*Pirmasenser Zeitung*, January 20, 2003). According to Fikri Aygur, the GHB was dissolved in 2005 and transformed into the Mesopotamia National Council. [6]

There are some Assyrian nationalists who still cooperate with the PKK or maintain ties with PKK organizations. Kurdish Roj TV broadcasts an Assyrian program and the Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Association continues to work with the PKK. AACF leader Petrus Karatay also cooperates with Roj TV. On 25 December 2005 Ali Ertem, president of the Association against Genocides, joined him in a debate to discuss “the genocide against the Chaldo-Assyrians and the Armenians.”

Assyrian Opposition to the Kurdistan Regional Government

Assyrian activist Attiya Tunc helped to establish the Assyria Council of Europe to lobby for the Assyrians in the European Union capital of Brussels (Huyodo.com). On June 11, 2008 the Assyria Council organized a conference in cooperation with the European People's Party-European Democrats (EPP-ED), the biggest bloc in the EU parliament. According to the conference, the rights of Turkmen and Chaldo-Assyrians are severely neglected in their homelands.

Tunc is currently a member of parliament of the Dutch Labour Party, part of the government coalition. In 2008 she used her position in the party to advance the Assyrian cause and tried to bring Dutch politicians with her to

northern Iraq. Tunc follows the position of the ADM in opposing the KRG and their efforts to incorporate the Assyrians into their autonomous region. Tunc recently succeeded in convincing the Dutch government to launch an investigation into the situation of Christians in Iraq. She also works closely with the Iraqi Turkmen lobby in Europe.

On November 4, 2008 the Assyria Council of Europe, the Iraqi Turkmen Front, the Yezidi Movement for Reform and Progress and the Mandaean Human Rights Group issued a protest against the lack of political representation for minorities in Iraq (assyriacouncil.eu). These groups also campaign against the KRG in northern Iraq. They argue that the Kurdish government takes over their regions and supports terrorist attacks against them. Some Kurdish nationalists claim these organizations are supported by Turkey against the KRG government. The Turkmen front especially is accused of receiving support from Turkey, but denies these claims.

During the 2009 regional Iraqi elections, the KDP-supported Assyrian Ishtar Patriotic List won the reserved Assyrian seats in Mosul province and the reserved Christian seat in Bagdad. This resulted in a fierce counter-campaign by Assyrian nationalist media after the nationalist slate performed poorly in the vote (aina.org).

Assyrians: a Continuing Challenge for Turkey and the KRG

It seems that some minor Assyrian organizations will continue to work with the PKK and other organizations to confront Turkey with the “Assyrian genocide.” The Assyrian lobby organizations want the recognition of cultural rights and possibly the establishment of an Assyrian safe haven in Iraq. Turkey has successfully incorporated some former violent elements of the GHB and seems to be more tolerant of Assyrian activities than in the past. It is possible Turkey played a role in the fragmentation of the radical Assyrian militant party. Currently Assyrian and Syriac Orthodox organizations are using the legal dispute over land claimed by Mor Gabriel Syriac Orthodox monastery in Turkey as a rallying point. The Belgian-based PKK TV station, Roj TV, has used the dispute to villainize Turkey.

The Assyrians who have worked with, or are still working with the PKK, are also lobbying against the KRG of northern Iraq. The armed Assyrian branch of the PKK was dissolved, but the Assyrians continue

to use the broadcast media and lobbying networks of the PKK. The interests of the PKK, the Turkmen front and the Assyrian nationalist organizations intersect in their opposition towards the Kurdish government. The Turkmen front, however, only cooperates with Assyrian nationalist organizations to combat the “democratic image” of the KRG and to obtain more rights. It’s unlikely that Turkish security services would accept the development of strong ties between the Turkmen front and PKK-related Assyrians.

Currently, both the KRG and the Turkish government have an interest in combating the activities of Assyrian nationalists who are opposed to both administrations, but are unlikely to overcome their mutual differences to cooperate against what remains a lingering but minor security threat, due to the small number of Assyrians in the region.

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Notes:

[1] Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaean language, an ancient and once widely-spoken Semitic language that has been largely replaced in the Middle East by another Semitic language, Arabic. Those who identify themselves as Syriac are often criticized by other Assyrians/Aramaean for misuse of the word. Syriac has no relationship to the Syrian state.

[2] Fikri Aygur (Aho), Vice chairman of European Syriac Union (ESU), correspondence with the author, March 18, 2009.

[3] Jonathan Eric Lewis, “Iraqi Assyrians: Barometer of Pluralism,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2003.

[4] Footage of the broadcasts can be seen on YouTube: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKJ26gahK18>).

[5] Matay Arsan, Assyrian activist, correspondence with author, March 15, 2009.

[6] Jonathan Eric Lewis, “Iraqi Assyrians: Barometer of Pluralism,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2003.