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EASTERN SUDAN’S FREE LIONS MOVEMENT CLAIMS U.S.-FRENCH AIRSTRIKES ON SUDANESE-EGYPTIAN BORDER

The Free Lions Movement of Eastern Sudan is reporting airstrikes on arms smugglers along the Egyptian-Sudanese border by French and American warplanes (*Al-Mustaqillah*, March 23). According to Dr. Mabruk Mubarak Salim, head of the Free Lions Movement and former Secretary-General of the rebel Eastern Front (a coalition of the Beja Congress, the Free Lions and Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement), the aircraft were acting on intelligence indicating arms smugglers in the area were shipping arms to Gaza. Both the smugglers and several fishing boats are alleged to have been hit in the airstrikes. To date, there has been no confirmation of the report from the remote and sparsely populated region. French and American aircraft operate from a nearby airbase in the former French colony of Djibouti.

The Free Lions Movement is based on the Arab Rashaida tribe, a nomadic group that moved into the region from the Arabian Peninsula in search of open pastures in the late 19th century. Though traditionally aloof from Sudanese politics, in recent years the Rashaida joined the indigenous Beja tribes of eastern Sudan in rebellion against the central government in Khartoum. The movement operated from bases in Eritrea, which has also become home to members of the Rashaida. An Eritrean-mediated agreement ended the rebellion in 2006. The Rashaida have a reputation for smuggling activities in the remote areas of the Red Sea coast.



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A recent report co-written by Yoram Cohen, the former deputy head of Israel's Shin Bet intelligence agency, and American Matthew Levitt, described an unlikely movement of Iranian arms to Gaza, allegedly supplied by Iran's Revolutionary Guards: "The arms travel overland to Egypt through a variety of routes that cross Yemen, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and South Africa and eventually meet in Sudan, where they are moved to Egypt's Sinai desert. After the material enters the Sinai, it is transferred into Gaza via tunnels underneath the Philadelphi Corridor" (*Jerusalem Post*, March 3). The report was issued only days before the alleged airstrikes.

The Egyptian-Sudanese border occasionally makes the news when a long-standing dispute over control of the Hala'ib region flares up. To prevent the region's Arab tribes from being divided by an artificial border, the 1899 Sudan Condominium agreement allowed for Sudanese administration of Hala'ib, a largely barren and roughly triangular area of 25,000 square kilometers lying north of the border. Sovereignty would remain with Egypt. Since both Egypt and the British-Egyptian Sudan Condominium were both under the effective control of London, the decision provoked little controversy. This would change in 1956, when British-Egyptian rule in Sudan came to an end and a newly independent Sudan began treating Hala'ib as its own territory. Oil was discovered in the region in non-commercial quantities in 1978. Sudan continued to encourage exploration of the region until Egypt occupied the area in 1992 (*Middle East Quarterly*, March 1994). Among the Eastern Front's demands was the restoration of Hala'ib to Sudanese control. Control of the region tends to become a flashpoint during periods of strained relations between the two nations, but there seems to be a mutual recognition that Hala'ib is not worth fighting over.

CONFLICTING REPORTS ON HEAVY FIGHTING IN ETHIOPIA'S OIL-PRODUCING OGADEN REGION

For several weeks now, there have been reports of heavy fighting between government forces and rebels in Ethiopia's Ogaden region, home to a majority population of ethnic Somalis. Government officials have denied most such reports as fabrications, while asserting in other cases that government troops were not involved in the clashes.

The fighting would be the latest episode of political violence since Abyssinian troops occupied the region in the late 19th century. Ogaden residents complain of a

lack of development initiatives in the region and oppose the rule of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the leading element in Ethiopia's coalition government (known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front - EPRDF). A number of Chinese, Malaysian and Indian corporations have concluded deals with Addis Ababa to exploit the region's oil and mineral reserves without the input of local communities.

On March 19, Ethiopia claimed that both the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and the allied Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) had been completely destroyed as they attempted to regroup in the southeast of the country. Security forces claimed to have killed Dr. Muhammad Serri, who led a devastating ONLF attack on a Chinese oil installation at Obala in the northern Ogaden region in April 2007 (*Sudan Tribune*, March 16). 65 Ethiopian soldiers and nine Chinese oil workers were killed in the Obala attack (see *Terrorism Focus*, June 5, 2007).

Government spokesmen also claimed to have captured a major OLF military leader in the offensive. Despite these assertions of government success, other sources claim government conscript militias drawn from non-Tigrean communities have mutinied after suffering heavy losses. The mutineers claim they were misled about ONLF capabilities. Reports say 486 mutineers have been arrested and detained in Qabri Dahar (Ogaden Online News, March 11; March 23). Rebel sources also claim to have killed Colonel Manos and "Wadna Qabad," both prominent government militia leaders, in a battle six kilometers outside the garrison town of Wardheer (Ogaden Online News, March 20). Many of the government troops involved in the fighting were recently redeployed to the Ogaden region after withdrawing in January from a two-year deployment in Somalia.

Earlier this month, the ONLF claimed to have captured the town of Mustahil (near the Somali border) in a battle involving heavy weapons, though a government spokesman said the claim was "absolutely false" and rebel forces were on the run (Shabelle Media Networks, March 8; Garowe Online, March 8; BBC, March 9). ONLF sources said their fighters were well trained and equipped with modern arms, enabling them to kill at least 100 government soldiers and capture another 50 in the fighting for Mustahil (Somaliweyn, March 10). Commercial and private vehicles were reported stuck at

the border as Ethiopian troops closed roads while they conducted counter-insurgency operations in the area (Garowe Online, March 9).

In a military communiqué, the ONLF reported its “Dufaan” commando unit was involved in heavy fighting around Degah Bur in northern Ogaden and had captured a quantity of arms and ammunition from the government garrison (Mareeg Online, March 7). The Dufaan unit is best known for leading the 2007 attack on the Chinese oil facilities at Obala. The Ethiopian government denied its forces were involved in the fighting around Degah Bur, insisting the clashes were between locally-raised pro-government militias and “local terrorists” (AFP, March 7). A government official later said the rebel statements were issued because the ONLF was “embarrassed with the fact that the ongoing peace, development and democratization efforts in the state are becoming effective” (Walta Information Center [Addis Ababa], March 16).

Ethiopia refers to both the ONLF and OLF as “terrorists,” though neither group appears on the U.S. or EU list of designated terrorist groups. The rebel movements claim Ethiopia is a colonial regime that has done little to develop outlying regions such as Ogaden.

Palestinians Skeptical of Osama bin Laden’s Plans for Gaza

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

Osama bin Laden’s March 14, 2009 audio message on the war in Gaza was anticipated and covered by Arab and Islamic news agencies, as well as all kinds of Islamist and jihadist forums and websites. Interestingly, the forums directly or indirectly related to al-Qaeda had very little to say about Bin Laden’s audio message, entitled, “Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine.” Extensive analysis and comments on the audiotape were made mostly by Palestinian websites and forums (paldf.net March 19; alaqsa-online.com March 19).

One forum member, nicknamed Haris al-Mahdi, praised bin Laden and sarcastically slandered Arab and Islamic leaders who spend their time in night-clubs; “Salah al-din is no longer with us. Who are you calling to jihad? Patience Osama. We are lions in peacetime and mice

in war.” Other forum members who normally disagree with al-Qaeda’s Salafi-Jihadi approach said they agreed with some of Bin Laden’s main points:

- Muslims shouldn’t hold leaders and religious scholars responsible for what happened in Gaza while absolving themselves of responsibility. It is every Muslim’s responsibility to wage jihad personally or donate money for jihad.
- It is useless to file complaints against Israel in the Security Council of the UN.
- Palestine will only be liberated through jihad.

Others highlighted Bin Laden’s threat to perpetrate terror attacks in the West in anticipation of the fall and defeat of the United States (nahadah.ws, March 17). Many jihadi forum members were expecting Bin Laden’s audio on the eve of the war in Gaza because Bin Laden doesn’t pass by such events without addressing Muslims and instigating them to wage jihad. According to these forum participants, Salafi-Jihadis and moderate Muslims alike interact and hope for help from al-Qaeda when it comes to fighting Israel or in other cases of aggression against Arab countries. Salafi-Jihadi adherents were also quick to point to the presence of the Salafist principle of *al-wala’ wa’l-bara’* (loyalty [towards the believers] and disavowal [of the disbelievers]) in Bin Laden’s audio, in which he accuses some Muslims of collaborating with the infidels, labeling them the “civilian army of the infidels in the Muslim countries” that must be eradicated. Many forum members agreed that Bin Laden conveyed two major themes in his audio:

- The need to wage a war of attrition against the United States until it collapses, which will consequently also lead to the collapse of Israel.
- The need to urge Muslims to revolt against their treacherous leaders (bramjnet.net March 15). According to Bin Laden; “It has become clear that some of the Arab rulers have colluded with the Crusader/Zionist coalition against our people: they are the ones whom America calls ‘rulers of moderate states.’ The fact is, all states of the Islamic world from Indonesia to Mauritania without exception fall into one of two categories; crooked states and even more crooked states...” (NEFA Foundation, March 14, 2009).

A more organized analysis of Bin Laden's audio was posted by a forum member nicknamed al-Asqalani (al-shouraa.com, March 14). Al-Asqalani dissected Bin Laden's audio speech as follows:

- It reaffirmed the role of current Arab leaders (such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak) in protecting Israel.
- The speech cautioned against the very dangerous role of the so-called Islamic scholars who opposed al-Qaeda and labeled them "evil scholars."
- It highlighted the doubtful role of the Shi'ite Hezbollah, claiming the organization is protecting Israel under the pretext of protecting Lebanon. Bin Laden criticized Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for accepting UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Lebanon following the 2006 summer war between Israel and Hezbollah. Bin Laden described these peacekeepers as "Crusader forces to protect the Jews."
- The tape called for support of the mujahideen in Iraq. Jihad's success in Iraq will pave the way for the mujahideen to enter Jordan, whose long border will provide an entry point to the West Bank and the eventual liberation of all Palestine.

On the other hand, not all forum members hailed Bin Laden's audiotape. Some believe Bin Laden failed to present anything new with his speech and rendered his plan of action utterly unsuitable; "What good does Bin Laden's speech do for us? All his talk is very well known among al-Qaeda, therefore, this speech is merely to prove he exists. He ought to have threatened to commit specific attacks in America or Israel to avenge Gaza. That would have frightened the infidels," said one member. Further negative comments came from Palestinian forum members (paldf.net March 19, 2009). One forum participant, nicknamed al-Rian, said pro-al-Qaeda jihadis should refrain from finding excuses for Bin Laden's twisted ideology; "First of all, Bin Laden ought to disavow the killing of innocent people around the world and stop verbal attacks on Hamas. It's time to revise al-Qaeda's ideology."

Bin Laden's audiotape on Gaza did not present any new strategy, plan of action or even threats to perpetrate new attacks. It was disappointing to jihadis to hear the same

old well-known rhetoric when they were eager to hear Bin Laden announcing specific operations to avenge the Israeli war in Gaza. The fact that Bin Laden didn't mention or call upon al-Qaeda to wage jihad against Israelis is a further indication that al-Qaeda has no presence in Israel, a notion corroborated by Palestinian Islamist forum members.

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Al-Qaeda Ideologue Describes Alleged Spread of Al-Qaeda in the Levant

By Murad Batal al-Shishani

A leading jihadi ideologue known as "the Spearhead of the Mujahedeen" claims that al-Qaeda already exists in Palestine and soon there will be "huge good news" to prove its existence. In an internet question and answer session, "Assad al-Jihad 2" concentrated on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the shadow of last December's Gaza conflict. Assad al-Jihad 2 is a regular contributor of articles written on behalf of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups, which are usually posted on jihadi web-forums and are highly regarded by their users. The question and answer session was published by al-Qaeda's Global Islamic Media Front and posted on several jihadi websites (al-faloja.info, February 7).

Assad al-Jihad 2 focused on the so-called "al-Qaeda in the Levant," claiming that this organization is "well-established and firm in the region, like the Levant's mountains. [The organization] has studied every inch of the Levant, sent their reports to the leaders of al-Qaeda, and discussed them with the geniuses of the organization. [Al-Qaeda] has penetrated the Levant states and infiltrated them. I think the reason for the delay in announcing the presence of the organization is due to waiting for the completion of preparations."

The ideologist stated that the goal of al-Qaeda in the region is to fight against Israel, alleging that the organization was already behind missile strikes on "the north of so-called Israel" on June 17, 2007, and again in January 2008; "one day before [ex-President] Bush's visit to the region." Assad al-Jihad 2 also claimed that the

weapons the Lebanese army announced they discovered stored in the south of the country on December 25, 2008 belonged to al-Qaeda in the Levant. He claimed that these Russian pattern Grad rockets were stored for use in attacks on Akka (Acre) and the northern Israeli cities of Nahariya and Shlomi. Nahariya was targeted by hundreds of Hezbollah rockets in 2006; Shlomi was struck by Hezbollah rockets in 2005 and 2006.

Assad al-Jihad 2 asserted that al-Qaeda started to attack Israel from Lebanon in December 2005, when the late leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, claimed responsibility for launching missile attacks on northern Israel (*Daily Star* [Beirut], December 20, 2005; *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2005). Assad al-Jihad 2 also claimed Osama Bin Laden has sent some al-Qaeda leaders to create bases in Lebanon. One of these leaders was Salih al-Qablawi (Abu Ja'afar al-Maqdesi) from Ain al-Hilwa, who was the mastermind behind an attack against Israel in 2002. Al-Qablwai later became friends with al-Zarqawi and appeared with him in a video in 2006 before being killed in Iraq the same year.

The status of Lebanon's Salafi-Jihadi Fatah al-Islam movement and the fate of its missing leader, Shaker Yusuf al-Absi, were discussed at length in the question and answer session. Assad al-Jihad 2 strongly criticized Syria, threatening to wage war against the Damascus regime and challenging it to respond to the "detailed" information he provided about Fatah al-Islam and the whereabouts of its founder. Lebanese security forces initially claimed al-Absi was killed in September 2007 while trying to escape a bloody three-month siege of the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp. DNA tests proved this assertion false, and by October 2008 there were reports al-Absi had relocated to Syria. In January 2008, Fatah al-Islam released a new audiotape recorded by al-Absi recorded at an undisclosed location (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 15, 2008). In December 2008, reports emerged that al-Absi and two other members of al-Fatah were ambushed by Syrian security forces in the town of Jaramanah, near Damascus. Al-Absi was either killed or placed in detention (BBC, December 10, 2008).

Demonstrating "the strength of the mujahideen's intelligence," Assad al-Jihad 2 reconstructed al-Absi's disappearance by saying al-Absi had left the Nahr al-Barid camp in September 2007 and moved to the Ain al-Hilwa refugee camp near Sidon. At this point Syria activated its agents in Lebanon, such as Shaykh Hisham Minqara (the leader of the Tawhid Movement, a pro-Hezbollah Sunni movement). A Syrian "spy" persuaded

al-Absi to go to Damascus with a promise to help al-Absi get to Iraq. After several months of surveillance, Syrian security forces moved in to arrest al-Absi, resulting in an armed clash that took place in al-Muleha (not Jaramanah, as reported).

Furthermore, Assad al-Jihad 2 stated that al-Absi was then tortured and threatened with the rape of his daughter Wafa'a, who was arrested a few weeks after her father was detained. Assad al-Jihad 2 believes that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is using al-Absi ("the most important prisoner in Syria") to blackmail the United States and France, infiltrate the Qaeda-associated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and to prove the existence of organizational ties between Fatah al-Islam and al-Qaeda. Assad al-Jihad 2 concluded; "Shaykh Shaker has no organizational link with al-Qaeda or with the Islamic State of Iraq, even though it is an honor for the mujahedeen in every front [to have a person] such as Shaykh Shaker to be among them. I am saying if he says that he is connected to al-Qaeda, this will be because of torture."

A few days later, a statement was released by Fatah al-Islam entitled "The Response of the Fatah al-Islam organization on the suspicions that brother Assad al-Jihad 2 raised about them" (Fatehalislam.blogspot.com, February 17; alfaloja.com, February 16). The statement claimed al-Absi retreated to al-Baddawi refugee camp after the Nahr al-Barid siege, not to Ain al-Hilwa. From there he made his way to Syria to rebuild his organization by reopening channels that had closed because of the Nahr al-Barid clashes. According to the group's statement, the ISI was among these channels.

While the statement claimed that al-Absi went to Syria on his own and had not been won over by any "spy," it also emphasized that Shaykh Hashim Minqara was not connected to al-Absi at that time. The statement also said that the armed clashes with Syrian security forces took place in Jaramanah, not in al-Muleha, and advised that the communications of Shaykh al-Absi with al-Qaeda existed through "brothers" in the ISI, using Shaykh Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the ISI "Minister of War") as the contact point.

At the conclusion of the question and answer session, Assad al-Jihad 2 pointed to the increasing importance of Salafi-Jihadis in the Levant region, as indicated by the recent trials in Jordan, Lebanon or Syria of members belonging to al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, as well as the increasing focus on the region found in the speeches of

various jihadi leaders and ideologues (see, for instance, Osama bin Laden's March 14 audiotape, entitled "Practical Steps to Liberate Palestine").

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Militant or Peace Broker? A Profile of the Swat Valley's Maulana Sufi Muhammad

By Imtiaz Ali

The peace deal between the Islamabad government and local Taliban militants in Pakistan's northwestern Swat valley has, once again, drawn international attention towards Maulana Sufi Muhammad, a pro-Taliban religious leader who has long fought for the implementation of shari'a (Islamic law) in the region and who has also fought alongside the Taliban against U.S. troops in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

A Leader in Regional Radicalization

Maulana Sufi Muhammad actively participated in the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union. After returning from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, he established his own religious organization in 1992, called Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), an extremist group practicing a strict version of Islam (*The News*, March 11, 2002). Maulana Sufi first shot to prominence when he issued a fatwa ordering a jihad against U.S. forces after the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan. He openly recruited people from the Malakand region and nearby districts before illegally crossing the border into Afghanistan with around 10,000 volunteers to fight U.S. troops. The fighters, mostly young and inexperienced, were crushed by U.S. and Northern Alliance forces and many failed to return home after being killed or captured. Maulana Sufi was arrested by the government of Pakistan on his return in early 2002 for defying government orders. He was convicted on April 24,

2002 and sentenced to seven years of imprisonment for inciting people to illegally cross into Afghanistan. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf also issued a ban on the TNSM and several other militant organizations (see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 30, 2006).

During his long stay in prison, Maulana Sufi never appealed for his release in any court of law. He argued that these courts were un-Islamic and that he would never appear in such secular courts. After spending five years in prison for his role in the disastrous cross-border excursion, Maulana Sufi was released in April 2008 under a peace deal designed to restore normalcy to the Swat valley—a picturesque region in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) taken over by local militants following a nearly two-year campaign. This move by the Awami National Party (ANP) - the secular and nationalist party that forms the government of the troubled Frontier Province - aimed to bring Sufi back to help broker a deal between the government and Taliban militants in the Swat region under the leadership of his son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah (BBC, January 12, 2009). The deal followed assurances from the cleric that he and his supporters would remain peaceful (*Daily Times* [Lahore], April 23, 2008).

Maulana Sufi has now returned to the headlines because of his role as mediator and peace-broker between the government and the Taliban militants in the Swat valley. This once strong opponent of the government is now being used by the government (especially the secular alliance of the ANP and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in their negotiations with the Taliban militia in the Swat valley and Bajaur tribal agency, the latest hot spots where the Pakistan army has been battling hard against Taliban insurgents. Maulana Sufi has successfully mediated a deal between the government and Maulana Fazlullah, the top Taliban commander in the Swat valley. The deal followed 16 months of fighting which left more than 1,200 civilians dead and hundreds of thousands displaced from their homes and villages (*Dawn* [Islamabad] January 30, 2009).

A Long History of Religious Extremism

The 78-year-old Maulana Sufi Muhammad was born in the village of Maidan, in the Lal Qila region of the NWFP's Dir district. He is Tajik by origin, and has 13 sons and six daughters. Maulana Sufi completed his religious education in 1959 at the religious seminary of Darul Uloom Haqqania, located in Saidu Sharif, headquarters of the Swat valley. Soon after receiving his

degree, he returned to his native village, where he started preaching an extremist version of Islam in mosques and madrassas (*Daily Mashriq* [Peshawar], February 21). Although he studied in a Deobandi madrassa, his long association with Arabs and Afghans has brought him closer to the strict Wahhabi school of thought.

Maulana Sufi was not a traditional religious scholar occupied with teaching Islamic duties to a local community. Instead, he was more inclined towards the establishment of a shari'a-based society where everything from daily life to governance and social services could be administered through the implementation of a strict version of Islam. He wanted to play a leading role in this regard, which led him to join Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), a hard-line Islamist party with great influence in the districts of Malakand, Swat and Dir. Maulana Sufi was part of the JI for years and finally quit in 1981 over sharp differences with JI's central leadership on the issue of electoral politics. Sufi believes that there is no place for democracy in Islam and that any party participating in the election process should be regarded as un-Islamic. He is not shy of revealing his hate for democracy; soon after signing the peace deal with the government last month, he once again declared that democracy is a system of kufr (unbelief); "The concept of democracy is against the teachings of the holy Qur'an and Sunnah" (*The News* [Islamabad], February 18; *Daily Times*, March 1).

It was in Peshawar (the NWFP capital) that Maulana Sufi publicly declared in 1998 that anyone in the country that speaks against shari'a is destined to be killed. According to some local journalists who have interacted with him, a change of stance has been noticed in Maulana Sufi's approach when it comes to the implementation of shari'a. They note that, while he still wants an Islamic system, he now shuns violent methods and argues for peaceful ways and means to introduce shari'a (*Daily Mashriq*, April 24, 2008).

TNSM - The Rise of the Black-Turbaned Brigade

As the TNSM founder, Maulana Sufi chose the black turban and black flag as the emblems of this hard-line group, leading to their nickname, "The Black-Turbaned Brigade" (*Daily Mashriq*, February 21). TNSM's goal has been clear since its creation in 1992- the implementation of a strict version of shari'a in the whole Malakand region, which includes the districts of Swat, Buner, and Upper and Lower Dir. As the group grew in numbers and influence, it warned the government that

if it did not implement shari'a in the region, the group would block all the leading roads of Malakand region as a mark of protest. They carried out their threat in 1994, as Maulana Sufi led an armed revolt of thousands of people which blocked all the main roads linking Malakand region with rest of the country, bringing life in the area to a standstill. TNSM militants occupied several government buildings, including a local airport. They also kidnapped a number of government officials. The secular government of then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto accepted their demands and promulgated the Shari'a Ordinance to set up Qazi courts for the delivery of speedy justice in the region (*Daily Times*, March 18; *Monthly Newslite* [Karachi] February 2009). Interestingly, it was exactly during this time that the Taliban movement in Afghanistan was also extending its writ by leaps and bounds. Over the years, Maulana Sufi has established strong ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

There are many who doubt Maulana Sufi's new role as a peace-broker because of his long history of extremism and jihad activities. The Pakistani government is apparently counting on their long-time antagonist to bring peace and normality to the war-ravaged Swat region, a course which could prove counter-productive. Despite the apparent success of Maulana Sufi Muhammad in brokering the Swat peace deal between the government and the Maulana Fazlullah-led militants, there are serious doubts and apprehensions surrounding the agreement. All such peace deals in the past failed bitterly in bringing peace and stability. Instead, militants have gained more power and strength as a result of such concessions. This could happen in Swat too. Already, there are reports that militants have started shifting their activities from Swat to the adjoining Upper and Lower Dir districts. Fazlullah's Taliban militants haven't fully stopped their activities in the restive Swat district either, despite declaring a ceasefire (*The News*, March 20). Interestingly, the guarantor of the Swat peace deal, Maulana Sufi Muhammad and his TNSM organization, fail to criticize the militants for violating the ceasefire by kidnapping government officials, attacking security forces, carrying out targeted killings, and undertaking armed patrols in parts of the valley. Instead, Maulana Sufi and his TNSM have been blaming the government for continuing tensions, clearly indicating his loyalties and his future course of action in the likely event the peace deal fails.

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PJAK, Iran and the United States: Kurdish Militants Designated Terrorists by the United States

By Nihat Ali Ozcan and Saban Kardas

The United States Treasury Department added the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (Parti bo Jiyani Azadi la Kurdistan - PJAK) to its list of designated terrorist groups on February 4. [1] Operating on the Iranian-Iraqi border under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Parti Karkerani Kurdistan - PKK), PJAK has sought to create an autonomous Kurdish region within Iran since its formation in 2004, though the relationship between Iran and the PKK dates back to the creation of the Islamic State of Iran in 1979. This development also highlights unique dynamics of the relationship between a terrorist organization (the PKK) and a state sponsor (Iran).

The decision to designate PJAK as a terrorist group brought to the forefront the trajectory of Iran-PKK ties, which traditionally have oscillated between sponsorship and enmity. In this article, we will look at the ebb and flow of sponsorship-enmity dynamics between Iran and the PKK, and put this relationship into the context of regional developments.

The PKK established contacts with Iranian Kurds who rebelled against Tehran following the Iranian revolution of 1979. Since then, the PKK's relationship with the Islamic Republic has gone through several phases that can be analytically divided into five distinct periods. The first period (1980-1982) covers the immediate aftermath of the Islamic revolution. The establishment of the Iran-Syria alliance and Iran's war with Iraq marked the second era (1982-1988), during which a sponsorship relationship gradually took root. During the third period (1988-1997), Iran and the PKK redefined the sponsorship relationship to

adjust it to the new geopolitics brought about by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fourth period (1997-2003) can best be described as controlled cooperation, during which the parties struggled to maintain a fragile partnership under the pressure of the rapidly shifting regional balances of power. During the fifth era (2003-2009), starting with the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a rather adversarial relationship emerged between the parties, which occasionally turned into open confrontation.

First period

Initial encounters between the PKK and the Islamic Republic date back to the first years of the revolution. The Iranian Kurds, seeking to take advantage of the post-revolutionary turmoil and the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, initiated a rebellion against Tehran. Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the PKK, tasked some of his militants with establishing contacts with the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, which was leading the rebellion against Tehran at the time. Ocalan was reportedly urged by Jalal al-Talabani, the leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to engage Iranian Kurds. [2]

The initial years of the PKK-Iran relationship were characterized by enmity, developing as they did under the shadow of the new Iranian regime's Islamic credentials and the PKK's Marxist agenda. Moreover, the possibility that the PKK might ignite a desire for independence among Iranian Kurds further exacerbated Iran's suspicions of the PKK. However, subsequent developments replaced this short-lived period of ideological antagonism with a spirit of pragmatism dictated by changes in regional diplomacy that provided a fertile ground for the emergence of a sponsorship-alliance relationship between the Islamic Republic and the Marxist PKK.

Second period

The emergence of the Iran-Syria strategic alliance in 1982 had direct repercussions for Iranian-PKK ties as well. In response to the geopolitical shifts brought about by the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, including the deterioration of U.S.-Iranian relations, Tehran and Damascus were increasingly drawn towards each other. A shared interest of this new alliance was the undermining of two pro-Western countries in the region through subversive activities, namely Turkey and Israel. To do this, the Tehran-Damascus axis decided to support the PKK and Hezbollah. [3] Following this agreement, Iran dispatched its Revolutionary Guards to

Lebanon through Syria to train Hezbollah fighters. The PKK froze its ties to al-Talabani and signed a partnership agreement with Barzani. [4] This agreement allowed the PKK to relocate its militants in Syria to northern Iraq through Iranian facilitation.

From Iran's perspective, it had many incentives to engage in such a relationship:

- Tehran and Ankara were involved in an enduring rivalry.
- The Islamic revolution increasingly pitted Tehran against the secular regime in Ankara, adding an ideological fervor to the competition.
- The close ties between Ankara and Washington exacerbated Tehran's fears of Ankara. As part of American plans to contain the Islamic regime, some airfields in Turkish territory close to the Iranian border were expanded (*Cumhuriyet*, November 16, 1982). Moreover, the United States relocated some of the listening stations it had to withdraw from Iran to eastern Turkey, raising Iranian concerns about Turkey.
- Following the revolution, many supporters of the Shah's regime, seeking to reach Western countries, first flew to Turkey. Revolutionary leaders were worried that these refugees, whose numbers were in the millions, could organize themselves in Turkey to undermine the new regime.
- The Kirkuk-Yumurtalik pipeline carrying Iraqi oil to world markets through Turkish territory brought extra revenue to Baghdad, helping it to finance its war against Iran.

These pragmatic reasons led Iran to support the Marxist PKK in its efforts to undermine Turkey. Nonetheless, Iran always denied its support for the PKK, which was partly a reflection of the fact that Iran needed to maintain relations with Turkey (*Cumhuriyet*, May 3, 1987). For instance, it had to use Turkish territory to ensure a flow of logistical supplies to maintain its war against Iraq.

Despite Tehran's official denial of any support to the PKK, its sponsorship gradually increased towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war. As the senior partner, Iran exerted some limitations on the PKK. [5] The PKK

could not attack Turkish targets within fifty kilometers of the Turkish-Iranian border and would refrain from operating among Iranian Kurds. It also agreed to share the intelligence it gathered about Turkey and American bases there with Tehran. In return, Iran provided the PKK with weapons, medical assistance and logistical facilities. Through entering this relationship, the PKK gained access to a wider area of operability and eventually expanded its influence into the Turkish interior.

Third period

Concerned about the growing influence of the PKK among Iranian Kurds after the Iran-Iraq war, Iran changed its attitude towards the PKK and arrested some of its militants. [6] Nonetheless, this situation soon changed. Although Iran's Kurdish population posed a challenge, it was not a vital threat to Iran's territorial integrity. Since the Sunni Kurds were a numerically small minority dwelling in the periphery of the Iranian political system, Iran regarded the problem as manageable. A more serious threat was presented by Azeri nationalism, especially after Azerbaijan emerged as an independent country. Turkey's increasing profile in the Caucasus and Central Asia (backed by the United States) and the growth of Azeri nationalism within Iran became major issues of concern for Tehran, which found itself forced to restore its ties with the PKK. Indeed, a growing number of PKK activities during the 1990s took place mostly around Turkey's northeastern and Caucasus borders. [7] In this way, Iran sought to hinder Turkey's ties to the Caucasus and Central Asia and limit its influence in the region. One direct effect of this policy was that the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline had to be postponed for another nine to ten years. The intensification of PKK terrorist activities consumed much of Turkey's energy, turning its attention inward.

Fourth period

In this stage, Iran gradually reduced its support to the PKK parallel to a declining threat perception. The Turkish-Iranian competition lost its intensity as Azerbaijan and Azeri nationalism were no longer perceived as major challenges. Similarly, Syria's diminishing support of the PKK following the capture of Abdullah Ocalan resulted in Tehran reconsidering its ties to the PKK. Iran adopted a wait-and-see approach given that the regional balance of power was full of uncertainties. Last but not least, the 9/11 terror attacks and the Global War on Terrorism made Tehran more cautious as it sought to avoid being labeled as a sponsor of terrorism.

Fifth period

The Iran-PKK relationship, which started to deteriorate following the capture of Ocalan, turned into one of open confrontation in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The extensions of the PKK operating among the Iranian Kurds declared the founding of PJAK in 2004 (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 15, 2006). Drawing on its past networks, the PKK consolidated its power among Iranian Kurds within a short period. It capitalized on the legacy of Kurdish nationalism and resistance to Tehran introduced to the region before the local Kurdish movement was crushed by Iran, while building its own economic and political networks. To give PJAK a local character, some Iranian Kurds were recruited to its leadership cadres. Despite PJAK's claim to the contrary, it operated under the PKK umbrella and sought refuge in the Kandil Mountain region. As an indication of these organic ties, militants recruited from Turkey were sometimes deployed in Iran, while militants of Iranian origin sometimes took part in PKK operations inside Turkey. [8]

The PKK's growing visibility in Iran and an acquiescent American attitude towards the PKK presence in northern Iraq (which came to be perceived as a de facto rapprochement between Washington and the PKK) pitted Iran and the PKK against each other. PJAK has increasingly engaged Iranian military personnel since 2003 in a bid to gain media attention. In response, Iran has occasionally shelled PJAK positions in the Kandil Mountain region. There were also unconfirmed reports from Kurdish sources of cross-border operations by Iranian security forces in September, 2007 (*Today's Zaman*, August 24, 2007; McClatchy, August 23, 2007). Like Turkey, Iran preferred to present PJAK as an extension of the PKK and lent support to Turkey's fight against the PKK. In this way it sought to boost its own popularity among the Turkish public and to undercut Turkish-American ties.

Although the Bush administration added the PKK to the list of designated terrorist organizations, it was more tolerant toward PJAK, which led to allegations that America and Israel supported PJAK as a way to destabilize Iran. [9] Shortly after coming to power, the Obama administration designated PJAK as a terrorist organization controlled by the PKK. By this decision, Washington signaled that it would adopt a more principled approach in the fight against terrorism. This development also signifies a change in the American attitude towards the intricate relationships

between Turkey, Iran and the PKK. Turkey welcomed the decision and saw it as the fruit of its new policy of building international coalitions to eradicate PKK terror, particularly through closer collaboration with the United States and northern Iraqi Kurdish authorities. A statement from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs underlined Ankara's satisfaction with the U.S. acknowledgment of PKK-PJAK ties (*Anadolu Ajansi*, February 6).

The PKK, in contrast, increasingly feels that it is being encircled as a result of recent developments. PJAK officials condemned the U.S. designation and claimed that for over a year the United States already had a de facto policy of pleasing Turkey and Iran by intensifying pressure on PKK and PJAK. The organization noted that northern Iraqi authorities were also supportive of this new policy (Gundem Online, February 12; February 17). PJAK challenged the Obama administration, arguing that the terrorist designation would not deter their struggle.

Conclusion

Iran is carefully observing developments in Iraq and the evolution of Turkish-American relations. The next stage in the sponsorship-enmity cycle between Iran and the PKK will depend on Iran's assessment of the changes in the regional balance of power and threats to its national security. To escape the pressures exerted by close coordination between Turkey, the United States and the Kurdistan Regional Government of northern Iraq, the PKK will have an incentive to redefine its relationship with Iran. Despite Iranian-PJAK border clashes, PKK leaders are already sending warm messages to Tehran (Gundem Online, February 24). Whereas playing the "Iran card" might increase the PKK's bargaining power, Iran also has reasons to maintain the continued availability of the "PKK card." Considering the ongoing uncertainty over the future of the region (especially northern Iraq) in the wake of a partial U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and discussions over the Iranian nuclear program, Iran might not want to see the PKK disappear from the game completely.

Notes:

1. www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/tg14.htm.
2. Cemil Bayik, *Parti Tarihi*, Damascus, 1996, p.58.
3. For the background of this relationship, see: Huccetulislam Hasimi Muhtesemi's (former Iranian ambassador to Damascus) memoirs. Turkish translation: *Dunya ve Islam*, 1990, pp.53-64.

4. Bayik, *op.cit.* pp.75,77.
5. Abdullah Ocalan, *Parti Tarihimiz Boyunca Disaridan Dayatilan Tasfiyecilik Uzerine* (Damascus, 1991), p.17
6. Bayik, *op.cit.* p.92.
7. Reports submitted to PKK's Fifth Congress, Damascus, 1995, p.283.
8. For the personal records of PKK militants killed see: www.hpg-online.com/sehit/sehit_kunyelere/2008_a.html .
9. Seymour Hersh, "The Next Act," *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2006. The U.S. Ambassador to Ankara, Ross Wilson, denied those allegations; See www.cnnturk.com, June 30, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/12/AR2007091201133.html>

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