



Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME VII, ISSUE 16 ♦ JUNE 12, 2009

IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS.....1

AL-QAEDA IN YEMEN SUPPORTS SOUTHERN SECESSION
By Abdul Hameed Bakier.....3

SUNNI TERRORISTS STRIKE SHI'A MOSQUE IN IRAN'S SISTAN-BALUCHISTAN PROVINCE
By Bernd Kausler.....4

HEZBOLLAH IN EGYPT: THE POLITICS OF CONSPIRACY AND RESISTANCE
By Chris Zambelis.....6

ARE THE AFGHAN TALIBAN USING TAJIKISTAN'S ISLAMIST MILITANTS TO PRESSURE DUSHANBE ON NATO SUPPLY ROUTES?
By Andrew McGregor.....9



Jondollah's Abdolmalek Rigi

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PRESIDENT OBAMA'S OUTREACH TO THE MUSLIM WORLD (I) – AFGHAN TALIBAN ATTACK BARACK OBAMA'S "ARROGANT" CAIRO SPEECH

U.S. President Barack Obama's June 4 speech in Cairo was seen by many observers as an outreach to the Islamic world. Within that world, some welcomed his words, some wait to see if deeds of substance accompany those words, while others, such as the Afghan Taliban, described the President's words as nothing more than "misleading slogans" that "failed to deliver a clear and true message to the Muslim world." The speech failed to contain any "sign of practical change in the hostile policy of America towards Muslims" (Afghan Islamic Press, June 5).

In a point-by-point deconstruction of the speech, the Afghan Taliban analyzed and condemned most of the material within the President's address, which sought to lay a groundwork for repairing relations with the Islamic world.

- The Taliban described the president's claims of tolerance and good-will as inconsistent with American actions, particularly those of its "occupation forces," which are committing "mass murder" and imprisoning Muslims in Afghanistan and Iraq in "the most hateful prisons of the world." As a result of these "illegal" activities, "Obama's baseless speech has no importance."



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- The statement objected to the President’s justification of the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq as part of a “legitimate struggle to secure U.S. interests... According to national and international laws, the occupation of independent countries and hostile war against their free nations cannot be called a legitimate war.”

- The Taliban accused the President of wanting to separate Muslims from “their real protectors,” the mujahideen. The speech is described as an effort to divide the Muslim community. “Today, all vigilant Muslims are engaged in jihad in one way or the other. Therefore, the U.S. war against the mujahideen is considered a war against all Muslim nations and Islam.”

- Obama’s claim that America was not seeking a permanent military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan is contradicted by the ongoing construction of military bases and airports in both countries, as well as the President’s stated intention of sending additional military forces to Afghanistan. “This large number of airports and countless number of military bases are established at a time when they do not need even half of them, given the number of their forces and daily military flights. This shows that Americans are intending to permanently remain in and occupy the region.”

- The President’s contention that U.S. forces will leave Afghanistan if peace is achieved “is quite funny... The presence of Americans is the main cause of violence and the current problems in the region. Jihad and resistance against American forces will continue as long as they are present in Afghanistan.”

- The Taliban also objected to the President’s use of the Jewish Holocaust to demand that Muslims avoid the “deeply wrong” practices of “threatening Israel with destruction – or repeating vile stereotypes about Jews.” The Taliban statement claims President Obama “described Israel as the most innocent and worthy nation of the world” while summarizing the 70-years of Palestinian suffering in “a few misleading words.” While the President did contend that “the continuing humanitarian crisis in Gaza does not serve Israel’s security,” the Taliban

condemned Obama for failing to speak about the blockade of Gaza and Israeli efforts to deny the passage of medicines and basic food items to Gazan residents. The President also ignored the fact that “mass murders are committed [in Palestine] at every moment.”

In its summary of the President’s address, the Taliban statement remarked that President Obama did not come with conciliatory intentions, but with an “arrogant notion” to give orders to the Muslim world.

PRESIDENT OBAMA’S OUTREACH TO THE MUSLIM WORLD (II) – JIHADI ANALYST DISSECTS U.S. PRESIDENT’S PRAISE OF TURKISH SECULARISM

U.S. President Barack Obama’s continuing outreach to the global Islamic community has brought a harsh response from Jihadi-Salafist ideologues. Typical of this reaction is an article entitled “ObamaTurk: The Secular Phenomenon” by a jihadi analyst using the name “al-Janubi.” The article, based on President Obama’s visit to Turkey and his April 6 address to the Turkish parliament, appeared in issue two of the magazine *Jihad Recollections*, published in May by al-Fursan Media Productions.

Al-Janubi claims Obama’s speech “championed a version of Islam that advocated secularism, nationalism and democracy in place of the Islam revealed 1400 years ago.” Particularly offensive was his praise of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, “who single-handedly dismantled the greatest nation Allah ever let exist on the face of the earth” (i.e. the Ottoman Empire). Ataturk’s creation of a secular nationalist democracy in place of the Istanbul-centered Caliphate (dismantled by Ataturk in 1924) may be his legacy, but this does not make it a good legacy; “Obama forgot that Islam has no room for secularism.”

Al-Janubi cites a Quranic verse, Surah Baqarah, verse 120: “Never will the Jews or the Christians be satisfied with you unless you follow their way.” Secularism, says al-Janubi, is the way of the Jews and Christians, though if the Muslims were to follow them in this way they would be respected even less than they are now. Addressing Obama’s statement of U.S. support for Turkish accession to the European Union (EU), al-Janubi points to the futility of Turkey’s attempts to join the EU as proof of the truth of this Surah.

While Obama praised Turkey's choice of a new path (the creation of a secular democracy) rather than allowing partition by the Great Powers or attempting to restore the Ottoman Empire, al-Janubi maintains Turkish nationalism was nothing less than another form of "European hegemony," as proved by Ataturk's preference for the Latin, European alphabet and European dress rather than "neutral, non-European" modes. President Obama "lied when he said that the Turkish republic commanded the respect of the United States and the world. By imitating those who will not accept them except as alternative to the 'radical Muslims,' they are *begging* for the respect of the U.S. and the world, not demanding it."

The author calls Obama a hypocrite for stating "There is no excuse for terror against any nation," after having already pledged his support for Israel during the electoral campaign. "He has already promised to aid one nation, Israel, which has no right to exist, in its terrorizing of a neighboring nation of which Israel should be a jizyah-paying dependency [jizyah is a tax on non-Muslims]. He means one thing and says another, and according to a Muslim or a non-Muslim, that is the definition of a hypocrite!"

Finally, al-Janubi responds to President Obama's assertion that "The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam." According to al-Janubi, "To not be at war with Islam, he would have to withdraw troops from all Muslim lands, allow the Shari'a to be implemented by whom everyone else calls the 'radicals' and the 'extremists,' stop supporting any anti-Shari'a movements in the Muslim lands, and then withdraw all support from Israel so they may be easily overrun and absorbed by the Islamic caliphate to pay jizyah or be driven into the ocean." Had Obama been sincere in his stated intention to deal fairly with the Islamic community, according to al-Janubi, he would have withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan and admitted that America had started the current conflict with the support of the one nuclear power in the Middle East, "the real terrorist, Israel." He would also have cut off aid and support for dictators in Muslim lands, such as Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and King 'Abdullah of Jordan. Al-Janubi concludes by asking whether Muslims will withdraw their support of Obama or support an enemy of Islam "and thereby become our own enemies in the process."

Al-Qaeda in Yemen Supports Southern Secession

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

Exploiting ongoing unrest in Southern Yemen, Al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen released an audio statement on May 13 entitled "To Our People in the South," in support of southern Yemeni efforts to secede from Yemen. The audiotape was released through the jihadi media outlet al-Malahim (shmo5alislam.net, May 14). Various jihadi forums debated al-Qaeda's call for a week afterwards (hanein.info, May 14).

As the Soviet bloc began to crumble in 1990, North and South Yemen (a socialist state supported by the Soviet Union) were hastily united despite a history of bitter enmity between the political structures in both parts of the country. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Sana'a regime led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh waged a war in 1994 to eliminate South Yemen's socialists. Since that time, Yemen has witnessed waves of public unrest due to poor social and economic conditions in the south. The latest upheaval in the region was in March, when Yemen's president Ali Abdullah Saleh ordered his defense minister to quell the unrest in Chanffar city in the Abyan governorate (al-Arabiya TV, May 24). Most of the protests against the Yemeni regime have been led by the Southern Mobility Movement (SMM), a popular opposition movement that incorporates "civil society organizations, political parties, societies, shaykhs, dignitaries, academics, politicians, independents and others," according to SMM leader Nasser al-Khabjji (*Yemen Post*, March 12).

In light of this latest unrest in the south, al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen, Nasir Abdul Kareem al-Wuhayshi (a.k.a. Abu Basir), said in an audio statement that what the Yemeni government was doing in the southern districts of Lahij, al-Dhale, Abyan and Hadramawt was unacceptable and the people of the south have every right to defy the Yemen government's oppression, a right guaranteed by Islam. Al-Wuhayshi added, "We in al-Qaeda organization support what you are doing to reject oppression and support you against the government." Al-Wuhayshi reminded the southerners of South Yemen's defunct communist order and how it failed in the past, saying that only Islamic Shari'a renders justice and freedom. "A return to God's law is the only way out of this dilemma we're in... I warn you not to be manipulated again."

Al-Wuhayshi also appealed to the people of South Yemen to reject all forms of political parties, an implicit call not to join the Supreme Council for the Liberation of Southern Yemen, which has been stirring up protests in the south under the leadership of the exiled former president of South Yemen, Ali Salem al-Beed. Al-Wuhayshi warns his fellow Salafists of the implications of allowing the regime of President Ali Abdallah Saleh, “an infidel apostate agent who has thrust aside the command of the Shari’a,” to continue in its support of U.S. anti-terrorism efforts. “Even the rest of our brothers in Iraq and Palestine were not safe from this regime either, as it has provisioned the U.S. battleships to kill their children and women.”

Al-Qaeda’s incitement of Yemeni separatists was discussed extensively in jihadi forums by moderate Muslims, Arab nationalists and pro-al-Qaeda Salafi-Jihadis. The latter supported al-Qaeda’s drive in southern Yemen on the pretext that the Yemeni government is arresting Salafis and preventing them from practicing their beliefs in mosques because Salafism is unacceptable to the United States.

Al-Qaeda claims Salafis are not supporting dissension, but are instead trying to help the oppressed southerners and prevent them from becoming communists again. According to al-Wuhayshi, “You have experienced the socialist regime, which imposed on you a lot of suffering - only God knows its amount. Yet here you are still drinking from the same glass at the hands of the gang of the [socialist] regime, which rules you today. It is about time that Islam rules so that you enjoy its justice and tolerance. Be cautious not to be deceived once again [by socialism], or the efforts you have exerted in fighting oppression and aggression will be credited to the immoral custodians of [political] parties. Such parties gave our umma [Islamic community] nothing but disunity, subordination and submission to the enemies.”

Another al-Qaeda leader, Ghalib al-Zayidi, told a pan-Arab daily that the “mujahideen” of Yemen would not repeat the mistake they made in 1994, when they joined the regime’s campaign to destroy “the Socialist Party in defense of Yemeni unity after the government had promised them it would implement Islamic Shari’a” once the socialists had been eliminated. The regime broke its promise and “suddenly turned against the mujahideen and put them in jail. Some of them were killed and foreign mujahideen were expelled” (*al-Hayat*, May 23).

Observers believe al-Qaeda’s religious argument is an excuse to destabilize southern Yemen because it does not recognize international borders between Islamic States. Stable countries are not suitable for al-Qaeda’s sabotage activities. To strike at Yemen’s strong points, al-Qaeda is constantly planning terror attacks on four major targets - oil facilities, foreign embassies, foreigners and security officials. Al-Qaeda can only grow and expand in countries burdened with sectarian and tribal conflicts similar to the situation in Somalia, just a short distance from Yemen. Setting up safe havens for military training and recruiting new cadres is only possible after weakening the Yemeni government. If all goes as al-Qaeda has planned, it would control the Bab al-Mandab strait from both sides through a presence in Yemen and Somalia, enabling it to hold maritime shipping hostage. Al-Wuhayshi’s audio, ostensibly in support of the South Yemen opposition movement, is actually an attempt to exploit the situation and control the southern region because al-Qaeda would never ally itself with those who do not adhere to Salafi-Jihadism, let alone infidel communists. So far, it appears al-Qaeda efforts in Yemen are bearing fruit in the sense that it has made successful penetrations of the Yemeni security apparatus (*al-Faloja.info*, March 29).

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Sunni Terrorists Strike Shi’a Mosque in Iran’s Sistan-Baluchistan Province

By Bernd Kaussler

Iranian authorities in the southeastern region of Sistan and Baluchistan hung three men in public on May 30 for their role in a mosque bombing that killed 25 and injured over 100 worshippers in the city of Zahedan two days earlier. The men were convicted of providing explosives used in the attack and had allegedly confessed to complicity, according to a local judiciary official (IRNA, May 30). The Sunni terrorist group, Jondollah (“Soldiers of God”) claimed responsibility for the bombings.

Two days later, Zahedan witnessed major street riots and clashes between security forces and an angry mob protesting the decision by Mowlavi Abdolhamid, the

Sunni Friday prayer leader, to attend a memorial service for the victims of the bomb attack. While security was restored by local police, five people died in the riots as one bank was torched, and three people were injured when gunmen opened fire at the campaign headquarters of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Press TV, June 1; Fars News Agency, May 29). On the same day, security personnel defused a homemade bomb found on a domestic “Kish Air” flight carrying 131 people.

The Zahedan bombing was the third such attack by Jondollah in the last twelve months. The central government’s control over the underdeveloped province of Sistan and Baluchistan has never been strong and economic development and public infrastructure is still inferior compared to the rest of Iran. The latest bombing and other violent incidents coincide with the ongoing campaign in Iran leading to the June 12 presidential election. Iran’s political establishment was quick to blame foreign governments for the attacks. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, urged unity to “confront enemy plots,” while Speaker of the House Ali Larijani accused the United States of instigating the attack through Jondollah (IRNA, May 30; Press TV, May 31).

Jondollah’s *raison d’être* has less to do with secessionist ambitions than with the objective of drawing attention to the plight of the people of Sistan and Baluchistan. The group’s leader is Abdolmalek Rigi, who looks back on more of a criminal career than a political one. Lacking any religious credentials, his ideology has virtually no jihadist rhetoric but instead focuses on the “protection of national and religious rights of the Baluch tribe and Sunnis in Sistan and Baluchistan” (Fararu, December 17, 2008). In an interview with Roozonline.com in May 2006, Rigi stated, “Since the Revolution until today, the Sunnis have remained the most impoverished group in the country... we realized that there is no other way than to take up arms and begin an armed struggle.” It is unclear how much authority Rigi enjoys over his group and to what extent he can legitimately claim to be heading the Baluch nationalist movement. Since hostage-taking, drug-trafficking and smuggling fund the group’s terrorist activities, Rigi has to contend with criminal networks and mercenaries in the region.

Jondollah denies any links to the Taliban but has strong ties to Baluch tribes and militias in neighboring Pakistan. Iranian security and judiciary officials continue to claim their intelligence indicates that the group is being

funded and provided with information by Britain and the United States (Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, December 13, 2008). Jondollah, however, makes frequent use of international media outlets, including monarchist TV stations based in Europe and the U.S.. Voice of Baluch is based in Sweden and seems to enjoy very good relations with Dubai-based Al-Arabiya TV, which has, on several occasions, aired footage showing Jondollah members with Iranian military hostages (Tabnak News, June 20, 2008).

Jondollah’s tactics include assassinations, bombings and kidnappings. In 2006, the group launched a series of attacks targeting Iranian security personnel and local authorities. In March 2006, members of the group disguised as policemen shut down part of the Kerman-Bam highway and stopped a convoy carrying civilian officials and members of the local security force. Jondollah executed all 22 officials and took several civilians hostage (Mardom-Salari, 15 May 2006). Two months later, on the same road, the group killed another 12 travelers and took several others hostage (BBC, May 21, 2006). Gaining more operational strength, the group moved on to target military bases and convoys in 2007, killing 22 Revolutionary Guards and Basiji in the city of Tasuki (Sistan-Baluchestan Provincial TV, March 15, 2007). Abdolmalek Rigi’s boldest move came in June 2008, when his group kidnapped 16 policemen at the Iran-Pakistan border and demanded the release of 200 imprisoned Baluchi militiamen. Despite setting up a joint security committee between Islamabad and Tehran, neither counterterrorism strategies nor negotiations proved effective, with the group eventually killing all the police hostages in December 2008 (Mehr News Agency, December 4, 2008).

The killing of the policemen was met with stepped up security and concerted efforts to destroy the group. Since then, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the regular army have increased their presence in the region, staged large-scale maneuvers, stepped up intelligence cooperation with Pakistan and provided border checkpoints with modern surveillance cameras. Iran’s police chief, Brigadier General Esma’il Ahmadi-Moqaddam stated in March that over \$150 million has been allocated to strengthen border security (Press TV, March 26). Since January 2008, concerted aerial and ground-based counterterrorism efforts by the IRGC have led to numerous violent clashes at border checkpoints and isolated security posts and the confiscation of significant amounts of opiates. According to border

police commander, Ebrahim Karimi, the fighting has so far claimed the lives of 120 rebels and 19 servicemen (Press TV, January 21).

By and large, the most recent attack at the Shi'a mosque in Zahedan and the subsequent sectarian violence indicates that Jondollah's operational and tactical strength is far from broken and that an alienated Sunni-Baluchi minority is now openly challenging the central government's authority. Since presidential elections are scheduled for June 12, and incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seems to be losing ground to his reformist rival, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the government is trying to use the situation as an opportunity to call for a united stand behind Ahmadinejad in order to "foil foreign plots." While stepped up security in the region may lead to electoral interference by security forces, such government rhetoric is unlikely to impress Iran's largely young electorate. Even though Jondollah has few friends outside Sistan-Baluchistan, the current volatile situation may well be interpreted as yet another manifestation of poor governance and the government's appalling human rights record.

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Hezbollah in Egypt: The Politics of Conspiracy and Resistance

By Chris Zambelis

The timing of Egypt's April 8 announcement of its arrest of 24 men—allegedly linked to Hezbollah—on Egyptian soil in November and December 2008 upped the ante in the already tense relationship between Cairo and the Lebanese Islamist resistance movement and, by extension, Hezbollah's supporter, Iran (al-Jazeera [Doha], April 11; al-Arabiya [Dubai], April 11). Cairo's allegations regarding the suspects and their motives, however, have been fraught with inconsistencies that say more about the factors shaping the trajectory of contemporary geopolitics in the Middle East than any alleged conspiracy.

A Web of Conspiracy

The nature and targets of Cairo's allegations of a Hezbollah-led plot in Egypt shed light on the underlying issues at play. Egyptian authorities initially accused the suspects, which included Egyptians, Lebanese, and Arab citizens of Israel, of funneling funds to Hamas in the Gaza Strip from Egyptian territory (al-Jazeera, April 10). Cairo then shifted its account and claimed that the 24 suspects were part of a 49-member Hezbollah cell that was preparing to execute attacks against Egyptian targets and Israeli tourists in Egypt. The suspects were also accused of engineering a coup at the behest of Iran to overthrow the government of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and spreading Hezbollah's brand of Shia Islam in Egypt (*al-Hayat* [London], April 17; al-Arabiya, April 16).

The suspects are also reported to have attempted to recruit Egyptians and others in the country to monitor shipping traffic traversing the Suez Canal and in other locations near the Sinai Peninsula (al-Jazeera, April 10). The alleged cell was also said to have mapped out the terrain and demographics of a number of Egyptian towns and villages in Sinai, situated adjacent to Israel and Gaza. Egyptian sources stated that Hezbollah aimed to gauge the utility of these towns and villages for infiltrating Gaza and Israel proper to support the Palestinian resistance, groups such as Hamas in Gaza and possibly members of Israel's Arab minority (al-Jazeera, April 9). Members of the alleged cell are also accused of planning to smuggle arms and ammunition by ship from Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan into Sinai, presumably to sustain their operations in Egypt and also to bolster the Palestinian resistance (al-Jazeera, April 13). Subsequent reports citing official sources in Cairo later claimed that the suspects intended to mount suicide attacks against unspecified targets in Tel Aviv (Press TV [Tehran], April 16). Egyptian security officials also reported that they uncovered explosive materials, including suicide belts, during the arrests of the suspects (al-Jazeera, April 13). The remaining 25 members of the alleged cell, which according to Egyptian officials include an unspecified number of Sudanese, remain at large (*Daily Star* [Cairo], April 13).

In addition to implicating Hezbollah and Iran in a web of conspiracy, official Egyptian media sources named Syria, Hamas, Qatar and its al-Jazeera satellite network, and Egypt's banned Ikhwan al-Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood), as being party to a plot against Egypt (al-Jazeera, April 18). Egypt's citing of Damascus stems

from Syria's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. Similarly, Cairo sees Hamas as a threat due to the example it sets for Egypt's embattled Islamist opposition, as well as its alliances with Syria and Iran. Cairo is also threatened by Qatar's rise as a diplomatic heavyweight in the Gulf, where it has emerged as a new voice for Arab causes (in spite of its close strategic relationship with Washington) and an alternative to the pro-U.S. Egyptian- and Saudi-led consensus in the region, a role bolstered by its natural gas and oil riches and ownership of al-Jazeera. Qatar and Syria were first to call for an emergency meeting of Arab League members and a ceasefire during Israel's invasion of Gaza from December 2008-January 2009. Qatar also welcomed exiled leaders of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups to Doha to meet with Arab League members and urged all Arab countries to immediately cut ties and negotiations with Israel in a show of solidarity with the Palestinians. In contrast, Egypt and Saudi Arabia boycotted the event. Qatar's assertiveness during the crisis humiliated Egypt (and Saudi Arabia). Furthermore, Egypt and other autocratic regimes in the Middle East consider al-Jazeera a threat because it provides opposition forces a venue to voice their opinions. The network's allotment of airtime to critics of Egypt's stance during the Gaza conflict also did not sit well in Cairo.

Egypt's claim that the Ikhwan, the moderate, democratic reform-minded Islamist movement that represents the main opposition to Mubarak's rule, was active in the alleged scheme suggests an effort on the part of Cairo to tarnish the group's reputation domestically and internationally (al-Jazeera, April 18). The Ikhwan denied any involvement with or knowledge of the alleged cell, although they did support any attempts to help the besieged Palestinians in Gaza (al-Jazeera, April 11). At the same time, the Ikhwan highlighted the importance of defending Egyptian national security and criticized attempts by foreigners to violate the country's sovereignty on any grounds (*al-Ahram Weekly* [Cairo], April 23-29).

Hezbollah's Threat to Egypt

Cairo's official portrayal of Hezbollah's threat to Egypt obscures the true nature of the Hezbollah threat. Egypt accuses Hezbollah of, among other things, religious fanaticism, terrorism and, most importantly, serving as a spearhead of Iranian expansionism. The true threat Hezbollah poses to Egypt and, for that matter, other U.S.-backed autocracies in the Middle East, however,

is its ability to inspire popular dissent and resistance. Hezbollah's impressive performance against Israel in combat during the years of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon and the Summer 2006 war are cases in point. Popular displays of solidarity with Hezbollah across Arab cities such as Cairo and Amman with predominantly Sunni populations during the July 2006 war, for instance, are also indicative of Hezbollah's popularity. Significantly, Sunni Islamist opposition movements such as the Ikhwan in Egypt were among Hezbollah's most vocal supporters during the July 2006 war (see *Terrorism Focus*, August 8, 2006). Hezbollah's Shi'a Islamist pedigree is irrelevant in this context. In fact, Hezbollah secretary general Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah is widely regarded as a hero in the Arab and greater Muslim world. Many Arabs see Iran in a favorable light due to Tehran's vocal opposition to the United States and Israel, not to mention the pro-U.S. regimes in the Middle East. In spite of repeated warnings out of Cairo and other U.S.-friendly Arab capitals of the rise of an aggressive Iran that is bent on regional domination, the Arab public continues to identify the United States and Israel as posing the greatest threats by large margins. [1] As a result, Egypt, along with U.S.-backed autocracies such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia that comprise the core of the so-called "moderate regimes," has been vocal in playing up the specter of what it sees as an Iranian-led conspiracy to dominate Egypt and the Middle East. It is against this background that Hezbollah plays an integral role in the threat of a "Shi'a Crescent" first defined by Jordan's King Abdullah II in December 2004 to describe Iran's growing influence from Iraq to the Levant.

Hostilities between Egypt and Hezbollah have reached a fever pitch since Hezbollah accused Egypt of colluding with Israel's invasion of Gaza (*al-Manar* [Beirut], April 10). During Israel's invasion of Lebanon in July 2006, Hezbollah also accused Egypt, along with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, of tacitly supporting Israel (see *Terrorism Focus*, August 8, 2006). While largely ignored in the U.S. and Western press, the regional fallout from Israel's invasion of Gaza and the escalating human cost on the Palestinians continues to weigh heavily on Egypt and the wider Middle East. For its part, Cairo remains on the defensive domestically and in the wider Arab arena for the role it played in the latest war in Gaza and for its support of the Israeli blockade against the Palestinians that was instituted after Hamas emerged victorious in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections (al-Jazeera, April 13).

Hezbollah's Response

Hezbollah's political, information, and social service wings operate relatively transparently in the mainstream of Lebanese politics and society. In contrast, the group's military and intelligence wings are shrouded behind a cloak of secrecy that rivals—if not exceeds—the behavior of state actors. This shroud of secrecy extends to all matters related to Hezbollah's membership. But in a move atypical of the ultra secretive organization, Nasrallah acknowledged in a lengthy response to Cairo that one of the men in Egyptian custody, Sami Chehab, was in fact a member of Hezbollah operating in Egypt. Nasrallah admitted that Chehab was providing logistical assistance to the Palestinians along the Egyptian-Gaza border: "Our brother Sami, is a member of Hezbollah, we do not deny this..." (*al-Manar*, April 10). Egyptian authorities detained Chehab, a Lebanese citizen, in Egypt on November 19, 2008 (Press TV, May 1).

Nasrallah, however, vehemently denied Cairo's allegations that Hezbollah intended to mount attacks against Egypt or foreign targets on Egyptian soil. He also rejected the charges that Hezbollah was planning to orchestrate a coup at the behest of Iran against the Mubarak regime or to cause any problems for the Egyptian people. Regarding Cairo's allegations, he stated, "The aim here is to agitate the Egyptian people and to defame Hezbollah's pure and bright image. This aims to only please the Americans and Israelis, for the Egyptian regime has failed by all means" (*al-Manar*, April 10). Nasrallah also admitted that Hezbollah was actively supporting the Palestinians in Gaza and that Hezbollah's sole concern was countering Israeli threats to Lebanon (*al-Manar*, April 9; April 10).

In a reflection of Nasrallah's confidence in light of the serious allegations Egypt leveled against his organization, he also mentioned: "If aiding the Palestinians is a crime, then I am proud of it" and that "the Egyptian regime should be charged and condemned for besieging Gaza" (*al-Manar*, April 10). Nasrallah's bold response was intended for ordinary Egyptians, as well as a wider Arab and Muslim public—Sunni and Shi'a alike—the vast majority of whom deeply resent Egypt's stance on Gaza and the larger Palestinian question. Moreover, Nasrallah makes it apparent that Cairo's attempt to accuse Hezbollah of plotting terrorist attacks against Egypt represents a sign of desperation on the part of Egypt to divert attention away from its unpopular stance regarding Gaza and the Palestinians.

The Irony of the Iranian Threat

In an ironic twist, adherents of the most extreme strains of radical Sunni Islam (namely violent Salafi militants who subscribe to al-Qaeda's brand of radicalism) along with U.S.-backed autocracies like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as the United States and Israel all identify Iran as a serious threat. Naturally, each of these unlikely bedfellows defines the perceived threat from Iran differently. For reasons discussed earlier, pro-U.S. authoritarian regimes, themselves the original targets of radical Islamist ire long before radical Islamists turned their sites on the United States, also identify Iran as a threat in political, ideological, and military terms. The United States and Israel also harbor deep concerns about Iran stemming from Tehran's nuclear aspirations to the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Radical Salafi extremists despise the revolutionary brand of Shi'a Islam propagated by Tehran, and see Shi'a believers overall as heretics and apostates. Given its Shi'a Islamist credentials and ties to Iran, Salafi extremists view Hezbollah's presence and influence in Lebanon and the wider region in an adversarial, sectarian context. The spread of Iranian influence and the marked rise of Shi'a political power in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad also helped feed Salafi conspiracy theories that the United States, Iran and Hezbollah are secretly colluding to undermine Sunni Islam across the globe. Yet al-Qaeda's brand of radicalism has never been able to gain a widespread following; not even close, in fact, to the popular following and respect enjoyed by Iranian-sponsored groups such as Hezbollah across the region. To undermine their enemies, Iran and Hezbollah will continue to reach out to Arab and Muslim publics through a non-sectarian resistance narrative that resonates deeply with those concerned with the plight of the Palestinians, domestic political opposition in the Middle East, social justice, and related themes.

Conclusion

In spite of the media hype, the apparent defeat of the Hezbollah-led March 8 Alliance in Lebanon's June 7 parliamentary elections will do little to stymie Hezbollah's influence in Lebanese politics and beyond. Nevertheless, Hezbollah's defeat at the polls will inevitably be described in Cairo—as well as in Riyadh, Amman, Washington, and Tel Aviv—as a major setback for Iran. On the contrary, Hezbollah's loss at the polls represents a blessing in disguise for the organization;

Hezbollah is able to preserve its role as a symbol of resistance, a role strengthened by its position as a powerful opposition force in Lebanese politics, without assuming the myriad of burdens that come with being the dominant political power in Beirut.

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Notes:

[1] See University of Maryland (w/ Zogby International), "2009 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey," May 2009, http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/~//media/Files/events/2009/0519_arab_opinion/2009_arab_public_opinion_poll.pdf.

Are the Afghan Taliban Using Tajikistan's Islamist Militants to Pressure Dushanbe on NATO Supply Routes?

By Andrew McGregor

As Pakistan's military continues to consolidate its control over the Malakand region of the North-West Frontier Province and talks of continuing on into South Waziristan, there is some apprehension in neighboring states that foreign fighters based in northwest Pakistan may begin leaving their now-endangered bases for home. Various reports claim foreign militants are on the move towards the Central Asian states in the aftermath of the Pakistan Army's offensive against Islamist extremists in the Swat Valley (*Jang* [Rawalpindi], June 3; *Millat* [Dushanbe], May 21; *Ozodagon* [Dushanbe], May 21). A new military operation in eastern Tajikistan suggests the Central Asian nation is responding to the return of such extremists under the command of veteran Tajik jihadi leader Mullo Abdullo Rakhimov, though the Dushanbe-based government says it is only conducting routine anti-narcotics operations.

During Tajikistan's 1992-1997 civil war, Mullo Abdullo was an important Islamist commander, operating as part of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), an awkward coalition of liberal democrats and Islamists. If Abdullo has returned, it would mark his first known presence in Tajikistan since September 2000, when a government offensive in the Darband region destroyed most of his group, with over 40 fighters captured. Mullo Abdullo himself was reported captured in this encounter. He is supposed to have been sent on to Dushanbe, but was apparently amnestied and released, taking advantage of his unexpected freedom to leave for Afghanistan whereby according to some accounts, Ahmad Shah Masoud made him a commander in the Northern Alliance. Other reports say he joined the Taliban and was captured by government forces in Kandahar province in 2002, after which little was heard of him (*Asia Plus*, May 23; RFE/RL, May 21). Tajikistan authorities were unable to confirm reports of Abdullo's detention in Afghanistan (Interfax, May 22).

The Legacy of Tajikistan's Civil War

Government troops are currently at work in the Rasht Valley, in the western part of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). The Garm district of the Rasht Valley has a long history as a center for Islamist militancy, dating back to its days as an important center for the anti-Soviet Bashmachi rebellion of the 1920's. During the civil war the Garmis sided with the Islamists and suffered severe retribution for their efforts. The Rasht Valley was also the main operational base for Mullah Abdullo's forces during the war.

The GBAO, located in the Pamir Mountains, occupies 45% of the territory of Tajikistan but has only 3% of the total population. GBAO was created by the Soviets in 1925 and joined the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic in 1929. During the civil war, the GBAO was a stronghold of Islamists affiliated with the UTO. Eastern Tajikistan is also the home of the Pamiri, an Isma'ili Shi'a people who were targeted for massacres after trying to separate from Tajikistan in 1991. The Pamiris were mostly supporters of the UTO.

Roughly 100,000 people were killed and over a million displaced in the 1992-1997 civil war, which pitted democratic reformers and Islamists against the Soviet elites of the northern Leninabad and central Kulyab regions who sought to continue their dominance of the Tajikistan government in the post-Soviet era. By 1993 the Garmi and Pamiri opposition forces were

suffering from serious reverses on the battlefield and a violent campaign by government forces determined to drive Garmi and Pamiri civilians from Tajikistan. Both civilians and Islamist fighters took refuge across the border in Afghanistan, where the Islamist fighters received arms and assistance from ethnic Tajik Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance military forces. The fighters also received religious training in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A Russian intervention in the civil war brought Afghan nationals north to fight the Russians around Dushanbe in 1996. When a negotiated settlement brought an end to the war in 1997, Mullo Abdullo was one of a number of Islamist commanders who refused to lay down arms, using bases in Afghanistan to mount cross-border attacks on Tajikistani security forces in the Rasht Valley. There are claims that Abdullo participated in raids on Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s as a field commander in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). [1]

Operation Kuknor

According to government sources, Operation Kuknor (Operation Poppy) began in the Rasht Valley on May 15 and is expected to continue until November, an unusually long period when compared to previous anti-narcotics operations. Spokesmen say the operation is designed to interdict narcotics trafficking and eliminate poppy cultivation, but this explanation has raised eyebrows in the isolated valley, which has never been part of any known smuggling routes. Its climate is also generally considered unfavorable for the cultivation of poppies. The Tajikistan Interior Ministry expanded on the reasons behind the operation:

Due to favorable weather conditions large fields of opium poppy plants and other drugs of the opium group were observed in the Afghan (northeastern) province of Badakhshan... A wide-scale operation is being carried out in Tajikistan, including in the Rasht valley, as part of the Poppy 2009 operation in order to prevent drug smuggling cases from the neighboring country and to uncover cases of cultivation of drug plants. The Interior Ministry does not have information about armed people who allegedly entered Tajikistan's territory (*Asia Plus* [Dushanbe], May 23).

The operation includes units of the Interior Ministry, the Drug Control Agency, the State Committee on National

Security and Customs units. The inclusion of members of the Interior Ministry's Special Forces is considered unusual for an anti-narcotics operation (RFE/RL, May 21). Tajik Border Guards and Drug Control Agency officers were reported to have seized more than 80 kg of drugs in eastern Darvoz District (along the north-west border of the GBAO) in the opening days of the operation, but a Dushanbe daily reported rumors of fighting between government forces and militants in the same district, noting the government could not give "a clear explanation of the situation" in eastern Darvoz (*Nigoh* [Dushanbe], May 28; *Tojikiston* [Dushanbe], May 28).

The Return of Mullo Abdullo

Reports from Russia claimed that Abdullo crossed into eastern Tajikistan several weeks ago and has been canvassing elders in the Rasht Valley for support. The original group of 100 fighters has allegedly grown to 300 (*Kommersant*, May 25).

A source in the Interior Ministry stated, "It is not known who is spreading such rumors, but we will get to the bottom of this. It is quiet and calm [in the Rasht Valley], no operations are being conducted there except for Kuknor-2009" (Interfax, May 22). At the same time it was denying cross-border incursions by militants, the Interior Ministry reported the discovery of a cache of weapons in a Dushanbe home, including a grenade launcher with 27 rounds, five assault rifles, two grenades and a large quantity of ammunition (Interfax, May 23, 2009).

Whether by design or coincidence, there have recently been a number of arrests of high-profile former associates of Mullo Abdullo on charges that appear to have been ignored for years. On May 17 the Tajik Interior Ministry announced the arrest of Muzzafar Nuriddinov and several other former Islamist UTO leaders. Nuriddinov was a well-known associate of Mullo Abdullo in the period 1994-1999 and the timing of his arrest led to increased speculation in Dushanbe over the real intent of the government's operations in the GBAO (*Asia Plus* [Dushanbe], May 21). Among other "past crimes" dating back to the 1990s, Nuriddinov is wanted for murdering two policemen with a Kalashnikov rifle. Prior to his involvement with Mullo Abdullo, Nuriddinov was a member of a militant group under field commander Fathullo Tojiddinov, who

later became a leader of the Interior Ministry's rapid deployment unit before being charged with possession of six kilograms of raw opium in June 2007 (*Asia Plus*, March 18, 2008). Another former member of Abdullo's command, Djumaboi Sanginov, was arrested on May 31 in Dushanbe for crimes allegedly committed as a member of the UTO in 1996 (Ferghan.ru, June 1). Another Target for Operation Kuknor?

Other reports claim the operation in the Rasht Valley is directed at arresting former opposition warlord Mirzokhuja Ahmadov for his involvement in unspecified "past crimes." An attempt last year to arrest Ahmadov resulted in the shooting death of Colonel Oleg Zakharchenko, chief of Tajikistan's OMON police unit, by one of Ahmadov's followers. Ahmadov was serving as head of the anti-organized crime unit in the Rasht Valley at the time, a post he received as part of integration efforts following the civil war. During the war, Ahmadov was a well-known UTO field commander. Ahmadov claims Zakharchenko's death was the result of his men thinking their headquarters was under attack by gunmen. He further claims to have received a verbal pardon from Tajikistan president Emomali Rahmon (Eurasianet.org, February 5, 2008; RFE/RL April 14, May 20).

Conclusion

The Taliban recently warned Tajikistan against providing a new supply route for U.S. and NATO military supplies on their way to Afghanistan (Dayzhest Press, May 28). Nevertheless, Tajikistan agreed to a deal to allow non-military supplies to pass through Tajikistan as part of a vast new northern supply route meant to provide an alternative to the turbulent Khyber Pass of northwest Pakistan (BBC, April 21). If Mullo Abdullo has passed from Pakistan through Afghanistan into eastern Tajikistan, it may be part of an effort by the Taliban to convince Dushanbe to rethink its cooperation with the Coalition.

Speaking at a meeting with EU ministers working on greater cooperation with Central Asian states, Tajikistan's Foreign Minister, Hamrokhon Zarifi, confirmed the nation's readiness to support international anti-terrorism operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. "Threats by Taliban insurgents do not frighten us and Tajikistan signed an agreement on giving a corridor for the land transit of U.S. non-military goods to Afghanistan" (ITAR-TASS, May 29). Nevertheless, with a recent and sudden outbreak of suicide bombings

and other violence in neighboring Uzbekistan raising fears of a return of Islamist fighters to that region, Dushanbe may be making efforts to preempt the penetration of Islamist fighters from Pakistan in force. An anti-narcotics operation would provide useful cover for extensive ground sweeps and the systematic collection of intelligence necessary to prevent Islamist militants from establishing new bases inside Tajikistan's Rasht Valley.

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[1] Muzaffar Olimov and Saodat Olimova, "Region early warning report: Political Islam in Tajikistan," Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), July 31, 2001.