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Sher Mohammad Qasab

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U.S. TRAINED “COLONEL IMAM” DISCUSSES BIN LADEN, STINGER MISSILES AND THE TALIBAN

Karachi’s Geo News conducted an interview on September 13 with Colonel Imam, a former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officer who is best known as “the Father of the Taliban” for his crucial role in helping establish the movement in Afghanistan. Colonel Imam’s real name is Amir Sultan Tarar, though he notes “My actual name has been forgotten by the people; I am mostly known as Colonel Imam now... The Afghan people gave me this name because I lead the prayers.”

Colonel Imam spoke of his cultural integration into Afghan Pashtun society during his days as an ISI officer, but noted the continued survival of pre-Islamic Pashtun customs; the Pashtuns “have camouflaged the Pashtun culture [with Islam], except the Taliban, who have always practiced Islam in its true spirit. I have observed the Taliban closely; they are very simple, sincere, truthful and strong believers.”

Colonel Imam also recalled his training from U.S. Special Forces at North Carolina’s Fort Bragg in the 1970s. “A visit to the United States was as an incentive given by the Pakistan Army. We would get to study a more refined curriculum with the help of advanced technology. My subject was ‘explosive sabotage’... When I would perform prayers, they would look at me with amazement.”

The former ISI agent described the beginning of his association with Afghanistan in the 1970s, when he was asked by then-Brigadier Nasirullah Babar (later Major General and Interior Minister in the government of Benazir Bhutto) to organize and train Islamic students fleeing from a crackdown by the communist regime in Kabul. Among those trained by Colonel Imam were current Taliban leader Mullah Omar, the late ethnic-Tajik guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Masud and Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The Colonel complains that by 1988, the ISI's authority over the Afghan mujahideen had been "hijacked" by the United States.

On the controversial issue of the distribution of U.S. supplied Stinger missiles, Colonel Imam denied accusations that he sold some of the stock of 2,000 American Stingers, saying this was done instead by Benazir Bhutto's government after it had decided to reduce the size of the military mission in Afghanistan. "I was supposed to get the missiles back. We knew those Stinger missiles were being sold in the market. Six missiles were smuggled to Iran and three to North Korea, while the remaining stock was kept by the mujahideen themselves."

The former ISI operative distanced himself from Osama Bin Laden, particularly during the period surrounding the 9/11 attacks. "He was not in contact with me at that time. It was the Jalalabad operation in 1990 when I last met Bin Laden... He was just an ordinary citizen who would get frightened by the sight of bombing."

In December 2008, it was reported that Amir Sultan (Colonel Imam) was one of four names of former ISI officials sent by the United States to the UN Security Council for inclusion in the Security Council's list of designated international terrorists (Islam Online, December 4, 2008). Colonel Imam responded, "By blaming the retired people, it is a conspiracy to tighten the noose around Pakistan's ISI" (AKI, December 9, 2008).

The former ISI official is open about his support for the Taliban but denies that he and retired General Hamid Gul continue to fund the Taliban, saying, "As far as support is concerned, I said in front of Americans at a seminar that I do support the Taliban. I pray for their success but neither I nor General Hamid Gul has the money to give to the Taliban. We are retired people living hand to mouth. This is an electronic age—any transaction can be traced any time. If they have any proof, bring it forward" (AKI, December 9, 2008).

SOMALI MILITANTS REACT TO U.S. AIRSTRIKE WITH THREATS AND ROUNDUP OF "U.S. SPIES"

Fallout from the September 14 U.S. Special Forces raid on an al-Shabaab convoy in southern Somalia continues, with various Islamist factions vowing revenge strikes while pro-government militias approved of the killing of al-Qaeda operative Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan and a number of senior al-Shabaab members.

Convinced that an inside source directed American helicopter gunships to the convoy, al-Shabaab organized an emergency meeting of its leadership in Mogadishu, where they decided to launch an investigation of anyone suspected of having links to Western countries. This could develop into a divisive obsession, as many of al-Shabaab's fighters and leaders have not only lived in the West, but have also obtained citizenship in these countries.

Shaykh Hassan Abdullah Hirsi al-Turki announced to media sources in the Islamist stronghold of Kismayo that 15 Islamist fighters had been arrested for spying on behalf of the United States and other Western countries. Mu'askar Ras Kamboni, an Islamist insurgent group closely tied to al-Shabaab, claimed to have discovered a substantial Western intelligence network that had penetrated the Islamist insurgent groups. Digital cameras and other items were seized from a number of fighters (Radio Gaalkacyo, September 16).

On September 16, al-Shabaab spokesman Shaykh Ali Mahmud Raage (a.k.a. Shaykh Ali Dheere) declared that the group would strike U.S. government targets in retaliation for the raid, saying the strike would only provide the movement's fighters with increased motivation. Two days later, two vehicles bearing UN markings drove unchallenged into the heart of AMISOM's main base in Mogadishu. When the suicide bombers detonated their payloads, 9 AU peacekeepers and TFG soldiers were killed, with the toll later rising to 21 as the seriously injured succumbed to their wounds. Among those who lost their lives were 12 Ugandans, five Burundians and four Somalis (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], September 18; *Daily Monitor* [Kampala], September 22). Gun battles broke out in several places in Mogadishu after the blast. Shaykh Ali Mahmud Raage claimed responsibility on behalf of al-Shabaab. "We have got our revenge for our brother Nabhan. Two suicide car bombs targeting the AU base, praise Allah" (al-Jazeera, September 18).

The leader of Hizb al-Islam, Shaykh Hassan Dahir al-Aweys, said of the raid, “The enemy of Allah is targeting Muslims all over the world, it is not only Nabhan that they killed recently but they are targeting many others. Such attacks will only increase hate and violence” (AFP, September 20). Al-Aweys, whose militia is fighting side by side with al-Shabaab in Mogadishu, also called for an increase in suicide attacks.

Not all Somalis were sorry to hear of the airstrike. A spokesman for the Sufi-based Ahlu Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a militia (a bitter enemy of al-Shabaab) announced that the group's leadership was very pleased with the death of Nabhan and several senior members of al-Shabaab, adding that God had punished them. A Somali army spokesman also applauded the airstrike and called for further targeted killings of insurgent leaders (Radio Gaalkacyo, September 16).

Djibouti Facing Local Insurgency and Threats from Somali Islamists

By Andrew McGregor

Few nations in the world are as strategically important but as little known as Djibouti, a small desert nation of half a million people in the heart of the Horn of Africa. A lingering insurgency by the ethnic-Afar Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et de la Démocratie (Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy - FRUD) that many believed was over in 2001 has reemerged as one of a number of security problems challenging Djibouti's continued stability.

FRUD is based in northern Djibouti, the traditional home of the nomadic Afar people. The Afar ethnic group represents roughly a third of the population in Djibouti, where the dominant ethnic Somali group is divided between the majority Issa clan and smaller groups from the Issaq clan and the Gadabursi, a Dir sub-clan. Most of the nomadic Afars live in the Danakil Desert of Ethiopia, giving them their alternate name of “Danakil.” The lack of Afar representation in the central government sparked the Djiboutian Civil War in 1991. France became involved in both mediation efforts and support missions for government troops, but the conflict continued until 2001, when the remaining radical faction signed a peace agreement with the government and joined the president's governing

coalition. Since then, however, it appears that a number of Afar militants have retaken the field, dissatisfied with the implementation of the peace treaty. Most of the movement made peace with the government in 1994, with a group of hardliners under the late FRUD founder Ahmad Dini Ahmad holding out until 2001 before cutting their own deal with the government. Though certain roles at the highest level of the government have been reserved for Afars, the rest of the administration is still largely dominated by the ethnic-Somali Issa clan.

Hassan Mokbel, the FRUD spokesman, announced in early September that the movement had fought off an attack by the Djibouti military on one of their bases in the northern Mablās region. Though the attack was supported by two helicopter gunships that bombarded FRUD positions, Mokbel claims the rebels killed four soldiers and wounded 20 others in repulsing the government attack (FRUD communiqué, carried by dabio.net, September 1; Middle East Online, September 1). The troops were units of the Armée Nationale Djiboutienne (AND) based at Gal Ela in Mablās, together with reinforcements from the barracks at Tadjourah and Obock. If the FRUD reports are accurate, the action would appear to be the Djibouti army's biggest offensive against the Afar guerrillas since May, 2006, when Colonel Abdo Abdi Dembil of the Presidential Guard led 2000 men through the Tadjourah and Obock districts (FRUD communiqué, May 17, 2006, carried by harowo.com, May 22, 2006).

The FRUD militants term the present Djibouti regime a 32-year-old dictatorship characterized by a refusal to conduct free and transparent elections, a refusal to honor peace agreements, the repression of social movements (including trade unions) and the killing of innocent civilians, citing the killing of five people during the November 2005 clearance of the slum district Arhiba in Djibouti City (FRUD communiqué, June 26, carried by the *Sudan Tribune*, July 3; FRUD communiqué, May 17, 2006, carried by harowo.com, May 22, 2006).

According to spokesman Hassan Mokbel, “FRUD, which has a politico-military approach, does not exclude any option. For FRUD, armed struggle was never the only solution. These options come in a wide range, combining social actions and mass actions and diplomatic policies... FRUD has until today ensured its military presence on the ground and is able to respond to any aggression on the part of the AND. In addition, FRUD has considerably strengthened its positions in the Djibouti diaspora in Europe, North America and

Oceania [including New Zealand and Australia]” (Les Nouvelles.org, January 24, 2006).

Mokbel complains that “international forces” are placing advanced technology such as satellite surveillance at the disposal of President Guelleh, who uses it to thwart the development of “true democracy” in Djibouti. Guelleh is also accused of playing the French army against the U.S. military to extract the greatest concessions from each (Les Nouvelles.org, January 24, 2006). The FRUD spokesman maintains that the movement has never been equated with terrorism because it has never targeted civilians – “I would even add that the activities of FRUD are the antithesis of religious proselytism (Les Nouvelles.org, January 24, 2006). In June, FRUD appealed to the people of Djibouti to “end the lifetime presidency of Ismael Omar Guelleh” and join FRUD’s struggle for “justice, for a real national state and for authentic democracy” (FRUD communiqué, June 26, carried by the *Sudan Tribune*, July 3).

France first arrived in the region in 1862, when it acquired the port of Obock from the local Sultans. By 1888, the Djibouti region had become the colony of French Somaliland, giving France a strategic presence in the Horn of Africa that was largely unaffected by independence in 1977 (French Somaliland was known as “The French Territory of the Afars and the Issas” from 1967 to 1977). France continues to guarantee Djibouti’s territorial integrity from foreign aggression, but now finds itself competing for the attention of Djibouti’s leaders with the powerful new American military presence based at Camp Lemonier since 2002. Camp Lemonier, once a French Foreign Legion base, now hosts the American Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), which focuses on coordinating U.S. military activity in the region, including anti-terrorism operations. In recent years China has emerged as a new suitor, seeking to establish diplomatic and economic ties with Djibouti.

Though Djibouti’s ethnic-Somalis have so far escaped being dragged into the interminable conflict raging between their ethnic-Somali cousins in Somalia, Djibouti’s role as a host of French and American training of Transitional Federal Government (TFG) troops and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces and its own offer of peacekeeping troops for Somalia have incensed Somalia’s al-Shabaab Islamist militants. Al-Shabaab, which has carried out a number of deadly suicide bomb attacks against AMISOM targets,

has promised to prepare a similar welcome for the Djiboutians (Garowe Online, September 18).

Djibouti’s rapidly deteriorating economy and massive unemployment in an increasingly urban population is another threat to its future stability. Djibouti also has a simmering border conflict with Eritrea in the Ras Doumeira region on the Red Sea coast. Nine members of the AND were killed when fighting broke out with Eritrean forces in June, 2008.

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Taliban Commander Known as “the Butcher” Dies After Arrest in Swat Valley

By Mukhtar A. Khan

The Pakistani military’s powerful offensive in Swat has destroyed much of the terror network of the Taliban. The fiery “FM Mullahs” who once announced death threats to opponents on their radio networks are now silenced. Their readily available spokesmen claiming responsibility for the daily deadly attacks on security forces are now in government custody. The men who flogged those considered to be in violation of Islamic law have either been killed or captured. Above all, in a recent development, the notorious head of the Taliban’s throat-cutter squads, Sher Mohammad Qasab, was arrested and subsequently died while in government custody (Dawn [Karachi], September 20).

Qasab was a symbol of terror, having slaughtered police and military officials and all other opponents, including “spies” and members of anti-Taliban tribal militias. He did this publicly and sometimes on videotape to terrorize the rest of the people. He used to make piles of heads in the notorious Green Chowk (later known as Khooni Chowk, or Bloody Square) in the Swat capital of Mingora, once famous for tourism and scenic spots. The mutilated and decapitated bodies were often left hanging on poles with threatening notes.

The arrest and death of Sher Mohammad Qasab is considered to be a major blow to the Taliban network in Swat. His capture marked the fourth high profile elimination of a Taliban commander in Swat this month after the capture of Taliban commander Mehmood Khan, the capture of Taliban spokesman and organizer of suicide bombings Muslim Khan, and the killing of fiery “Radio Mullah” Shah Dauran, who used to announce every evening the names of those waiting in the death queue (*Daily Times* [Lahore], September 4; September 12).

Sher Mohammad Qasab was nabbed in an injured condition along with his son Adalat Khan only after a long and heavy gunfight with security forces in the Gat Kandao area of Charbagh, the headquarters of his “slaughtering squad.” Qasab lost his other three sons, Shah Wazir, Zahid and Perwanat in the gunfight. The majority of his other family members had already surrendered to security forces (*The News*, September 16).

The man who had once terrorized the region, Sher Mohammad Qasab, was paraded miserably before the public in Charbagh bazaar after his arrest. Qasab had a bounty of ten million rupees (\$120,000) on his head and was one of Pakistan’s 15 most wanted terrorists. The list of most-wanted Taliban militants is still headed by Maulana Fazlullah, with a bounty of 50 million rupees (over \$600,000) for his elimination. Fazlullah is believed to have been seriously injured in the April military offensive and security forces claim that he has now been encircled and will be arrested soon. Sher Mohammad Qasab was a close aide to Maulana Fazlullah. There is speculation that Maulana Fazlullah may surrender soon after the loss of many of his top aides (*The News*, September 18).

As indicated by his Urdu last name, Qasab was a butcher by profession. Before joining the militant Swat Taliban, he was an active member of the outlawed Tehrik-e-Nifazi Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) under Sufi Mohammad, who is now imprisoned in Peshawar. He is alleged to have run an organized slaughter chamber in Charbagh where he executed several innocent security officials and other opponents of the Taliban. He was also wanted by the government in connection to the torching of several girls’ schools and attacks on other government installations (BBC Urdu, September 16).

Soon after the arrest of Qasab, more than 50 Taliban militants in Swat surrendered to the Pakistani

government. The arrests of Qasab and Muslim Khan have been a severe blow to the Taliban movement in Malakand division. Pakistani officials expect to arrest more prominent Taliban leaders on information obtained from the arrested militants (BBC Urdu, September 19). The recent arrest of Abu Faraj (a.k.a. Nasim) from the same town of Charbagh is a case in point. Abu Faraj was a senior commander under Mullah Fazlullah and was notorious for training children to be suicide bombers (Pakistan Times, September 23). His father, Darvesh, also a militant commander, surrendered under pressure to the security forces only a few days earlier (*The News*, September 21).

The traumatized people of Swat are breathing a sigh of relief with the end of a man known for butchering people like animals with his special knife. The Khooni Chowk (bloody square) is returning to normalcy and life is returning to the scenic Swat Valley. But the cost to the region of this brief period of Taliban rule and the resulting military campaign was extremely high. Several hundred innocent lives were lost. Property was damaged. Crops were destroyed. Schools were burnt down. More than two million people were displaced as tourism was replaced with terrorism. The area is not yet fully cleared and sporadic attacks continue. The government claims to have killed 1,800 militants since April, with several hundred more arrested. For the first time, the government has shown a resolve to fight against Islamist militancy and the public has given its full support to the venture.

Mukhtar A. Khan is a Pashtun journalist based in Washington, D.C., covering the issues of Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan-Afghanistan border regions.

PKK General Says Kurdish Militants are Ready for War or Peace: An Exclusive Interview with Murat Karayilan

By Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Murat Karayilan is the acting commander of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK) and chairman

of the executive council of the Kurdish Democratic Confederation (Koma Civaken Kurdistan - KCK). Karayilan, whose surname means “black snake,” joined the PKK in 1979, just a year before the 1980 Turkish military coup. The PKK is listed as a terrorist organization by the European Union, the United States and Turkey. In an August 11 interview with Karayilan in a PKK camp located in the mountains of northern Iraq, Karayilan said that he would like to return to his home country. “But I am not dreaming about this, I am a realist.”

Karayilan controls around 8000 PKK insurgents, spread almost equally through northern Iraq and Turkey. The PKK commander claims that the movement can easily increase the number of insurgents, but at the moment they are following a self-defense strategy: “The biggest part of this strategy is a political struggle. Most military actions are only for reasons of defense.”

The PKK is still waiting for the release of the “roadmap” of conditions necessary for the PKK to lay down arms in its decades-old struggle against the Turkish state. The roadmap is the work of imprisoned PKK-leader Abdullah Ocalan, but rather than being released by authorities after its completion in August, the document has ended up in the hands of the public prosecutor’s office (*Today’s Zaman*, September 5; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, August 6; *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, September 10). Karayilan says that the PKK is prepared for peace, but also for a continuation of “the resistance.” “The [KCK] has taken the decision, despite the approach of Ocalan to find a peaceful solution for the Kurdish question, that if the Turkish state insists on old style approaches, we have to resist these as well.”

JT: How do you see the situation of Kurds today in Turkey?

Karayilan: The struggle and resistance of the PKK since August 15, 1983 has brought the Kurdish question to the point of solution. From the denial of the Kurds to the point that [Turkey] recognizes the Kurdish reality. For the last 16 years, we have been trying to solve the Kurdish question through peaceful ways and announced six unilateral ceasefires, but Turkey did not use this [opportunity] to solve the Kurdish question.

When our leader announced a ceasefire in September 1998, Turkey conspired against him with American support and captured him on February 15, 1999. For the last 11 years all European countries were against us

and applied great pressure on us to destroy us. It was a very heavy period.

But currently America is pulling back from Iraq and wants to redesign the region. They think that Turkey’s importance for energy is growing as Turkey and Kurdistan become an energy corridor. An example is the Nabucco pipeline project [the planned Nabucco pipeline will send gas from the Caspian region and possibly Iraq to Europe through Turkey]. For this reason, it is more important to solve the Kurdish issue both internationally and regionally, because there is a need for stability. Stability can only be reached by the West through destroying the Kurdish freedom movement and oppressing Kurds or by solving the Kurdish question.

The Turkish state began this period under the name “the Kurdish Opening.” But what the Turkish state is doing now is not enough to solve the Kurdish question. All around the world there [are] always two parties to talk with, and they have always talked with other parties [Britain with the IRA, Spain with the ETA, etc]. What they are doing at the moment is not considering the other party [the PKK] at all. They want to solve the question by themselves.

JT: What kind of negotiations do you mean?

Karayilan: For example, the Interior Minister Besir Atalay says the Kurdish issue will be solved in a new Turkish way, there is no other [relevant] example in the world. We are very surprised and waiting to see what kind of solution they mean. They have not shown how they are going to solve the Kurdish question. Atalay gives his red lines: Ocalan will not be freed, there will not be autonomy for Kurds and no education in the mother language. If these are the red lines, how is he going to solve the Kurdish question? Why don’t Kurds have their education in their own language? This approach cannot solve the Kurdish question at all. They might [have the intent] to mislead the international community.

JT: What will be in the roadmap?

Karayilan: For the last three months our leader Abdullah Ocalan has been getting different views from intellectuals, journalists and other people through his lawyers. The roadmap will take the constitution of the first Turkish republic into consideration. This constitution does not say that everyone [in Turkey] is Turkish, but only a citizen of the Turkish republic. At that time [1921] there were no assimilation policies. Kurds could speak their

mother tongue and wear Kurdish clothes in parliament. We see the solution within the framework of the constitution of 1921. If the 1921 constitution is taken as a reference, the Kurdish question can be solved. But after July 1923, the Lausanne agreement was signed by the Western powers, which was based on the denial of Kurds and gave the new Turkish authorities the power to change the constitution in 1924. For the last 85 years, Kurds have been living through genocides and tragedies because of this approach of denying the Kurds, while this land is their own land.

Next to this there are many examples where conflicts were solved, like Ireland and Catalonia... The idea is to find examples for similar problems, we are clear about this, but the Turkish state, while having a “Kurdish Opening,” is [also] having hidden meetings to prepare military attacks against the Kurdish freedom movement.

JT: You mean with the Iraqi government and America?

Karayilan: Yes, with Iran as well. We want sincerity. If they use the old methods [of repression], we have the military, political and social power to oppose this. Everybody should know this. Between the 24th and the 27th of July this year, the second congress of the KCK decided to support the roadmap of our leader, but also took the decision to prepare for resistance against the Turkish state.

JT: Joost Lagendijk, former Chairman of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee, says if the PKK stops fighting, Turkey will not have any excuse to avoid giving rights to Kurds. What do you think about this?

Karayilan: When there is no guerrilla force, Turkey will say there is no Kurdish question at all. I do not think Mr. Lagendijk understands the mentality of the Turkish state. For instance, the Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in Moscow in 2004, that “If you do not think there is a Kurdish question, there is no Kurdish question,” and that is only five years ago.

JT: What about the Village Guard program and the amnesty?

We are not discussing amnesty. Who is going to forgive who? Are they going to forgive me? Almost 70.000 civilians were killed by unknown assassins. Who is going to forgive them? Both sides should forgive each other and the Turkish state has to apologize to the Kurdish people.

JT: What do you think about the Ergenekon case? [1] And the prosecution of Colonel Cemal Temizoz who is accused of killing Kurdish civilians in the 1990s? [2]

Karayilan: They have to start court cases against [former prime ministers Tansu] Ciller and [Suleyman] Demirel as well. The Kurdish question cannot be solved through cases such as Ergenekon. It is better to set up a project to reach reconciliation within the society. For example, in South Africa there was a reconciliation commission. A fact finding commission should be established to investigate the murders and killings of both sides.

JT: What about the “peace mothers” of killed Turkish soldiers and PKK guerrillas who organized a peace march from Diyarbakir to Ankara this month [August]. What do you think about this initiative?

Karayilan: It is very nice and positive. In reality, both Kurds and Turks want to solve the Kurdish issue in a peaceful way. But the mentality of the denial of Kurds stops the solution of the Kurdish issue. For the solution a brave will is needed, but nobody can show this at the moment. Some like the CHP [Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi] and the MHP [Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, both Turkish opposition parties] are also against solving the Kurdish question.

JT: You said America supports a destruction plan, but on the other hand the United States allows the DTP [Demokratik Toplum Partisi – the PKK’s political wing] to open an office in Washington. There were also meetings between President Obama and the DTP. Is this not a sign that America wants a solution?

Karayilan: America has been supporting Turkish policies against the Kurds for years. They asked Turkey to [take] steps to solve the Kurdish question, but they did not do this and at the same time tried to annihilate us. From this perspective, you might say the United States wants the Kurdish problem to be solved. I think America wants a solution whether Turkey wants it or not. I do not think America will accept Turkey trying to finish off the PKK. There is an approach by the United States and Britain to solve the Kurdish issue to bring stability to the region.

But the approach of France and Germany is different - they do not want Turkey in the EU and do not want the Kurdish question to be solved. If there is war, they can refuse Turkey’s EU membership. There were 26 Kurdish politicians arrested in France without any proof. They could not even find a knife yet they were accused of

collecting money for the PKK. France is giving Turkey a message: “Don’t be scared, I’m attacking the PKK in my own country and you can have your war against the PKK. We will be at your back and supporting you.” This might upset the Kurdish people. France should change their policies towards the Kurds.

It is important that both European countries and America support a peaceful solution of the Kurdish question and support the roadmap of Abdullah Ocalan. We will see what is going to happen.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg writes freelance articles on the Middle East and is an editor at the Kurdish newspaper Rudaw, based in Erbil, northern Iraq.

Notes:

1. See *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 6, 2009.
2. Gendarmerie Brigade Commander Colonel Cemal Temizoz and six others are currently on trial for their suspected involvement in 20 unsolved murders in ethnic-Kurdish southeast Turkey. The indictment claims Colonel Temizoz formed a death squad in the region in the 1990s that was involved in the murder of hundreds of Kurds under the cover of “anti-terrorism” efforts. See *Today’s Zaman*, September 11; September 14; *Milliyet*, September 18.

Death from the Skies: An Overview of the CIA’s Drone Campaign in Pakistan - Part One

By Brian Glyn Williams

In the spring of 2004 the CIA began its most extensive targeted assassination campaign since the Vietnam War by launching dozens of unmanned aerial drones into the inaccessible tribal regions of Pakistan to hunt and kill Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. Since then, more than six hundred people have died in these unpredictable aerial strikes that have killed both high value terrorist targets and innocent civilians. Al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban leadership have been reeling from the deaths of their operatives even as the Pakistani public has commenced an outcry against this

violation of their sovereignty and the deaths of civilian bystanders. This report will provide an outline of this murky drone war with the aim of shedding light on its tactical successes, collateral damage fallout, overall historical trajectories, and the secret deals between the Pakistani leadership and the White House that made the campaign possible.

Background to the Aerial Offensive

The primary weapon used in the aerial campaign, the MQ-1 Predator Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV), had its debut as an unmanned spy plane in 1995 and was used in the campaigns against the Serbs in Bosnia and Kosovo. While the original version of the Predator had the ability to loiter over the enemy, sending live video links back to its pilots operating from trailers at Creech Airbase, Nevada or CIA headquarters in Langley Virginia, it had no weapons systems at the time. As the CIA’s Counter Terrorism Center picked up increasing “chatter” from al-Qaeda in early 2001, however, it began to explore the possibility of arming the Predator to hunt Bin Laden. In February 2001 the Air Force succeeded in mounting a laser designator to the Predator’s nose and adapting its wings to fire AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. The Predator’s deadly laser-guided missiles were reconfigured to penetrate mud walled compounds and SUVs and destroy them.

The armed version of the Predator saw considerable action during 2001-2002’s Operation Enduring Freedom. For example, it was used to fire on Taliban who were surrounding a Northern Alliance commander named Abdul Haq, used again to kill al-Qaeda’s number three, Muhammad Atef, and to assist U.S. troops in Operation Anaconda. It was also used in an unsuccessful attempt to kill the pro-Taliban Hezb-i Islami warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

As the Taliban subsequently retreated and regrouped in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), U.S. commanders in Afghanistan became increasingly frustrated by the enemy’s ability to launch cross-border raids from these untamed tribal regions. It also became obvious that al-Qaeda had found sanctuary in FATA with such Pakistani-based Taliban commanders as Maulana Nazir, Jalaludin Haqqani and the especially bold militant leader, Nek Muhammad. In FATA, al-Qaeda operatives plotted further terrorist attacks such as the 2006 plot to blow up planes flying from Heathrow Airport (AFP, September 8).

By 2002 the CIA was using Predator drones to monitor more than 150 al-Qaeda training facilities and Taliban bases in Pakistan's FATA. At the time the press reported that the spy drones operating in Afghanistan were flying from a Pakistani base in Jacobabad in western Pakistan (New York Times, November 6, 2002; *News International* [Islamabad], October 27, 2008).

Then Nek Muhammad, who just two months before had vowed to continue his support of al-Qaeda and jihad against the United States, was killed on June 18, 2004 in a mysterious explosion. At the time Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper reported that witnesses had seen a spy drone flying overhead minutes before the missile attack. But in the same article a Pakistani general rejected the claim and insisted that Pakistani forces had carried out the attack (*Dawn* [Karachi], June 19, 2004). Clearly the Pakistanis did not want the negative public relations fallout that would come from a public acknowledgement of the fact that a foreign power was acting in its own interests to kill Pakistani citizens on Pakistani soil.

There were no further strikes in 2004, but in May 2005 the CIA launched two aerial drone strikes, this time against Al-Qaeda targets. The first killed a high ranking Yemeni explosives expert named Haitham al Yemeni; the second killed Al-Qaeda's number three leader, Abu Hamza Rabia (Arab News, May 15, 2005; *Indian Express*, December 5, 2005; Rediff.com, December 5, 2005). Both were killed in the tribal agency of North Waziristan. The Pakistani government once again denied that the attacks were carried out by the Americans, but local villagers found pieces of Hellfire missiles at the sites of the attacks.

Thus far the drone strikes were relatively "clean" in regards to unintentional civilian deaths, but the next strike was not. On January 13, 2006 several drones firing up to ten missiles destroyed three homes thought to be housing Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri (al-Qaeda's number two) in the village of Damadola in the tribal agency of Bajaur. Eighteen people, including numerous women and children, were killed in the strike, but al-Zawahiri was not there. This bungled attack caused thousands to protest across Pakistan and led to official condemnation of the attack by furious Pakistani officials. Perhaps as a result of the disastrous public relations fallout, it was not until October 30, 2006 that a Predator again launched a strike. This time it was on a madrassa just north of Damadola in the village of Chenagai. This massive strike killed Mullah Liaquat, a Tanzim Nifaz Shariat-i-Mohammadi (TNSM) commander who had given

sanctuary to Dr. al-Zawahiri, together with as many as 80 of his followers (*The News* [Islamabad], October 31, 2006). Thousands of local tribesmen protested the strike and the Taliban responded by targeting a Pakistani military training facility in Punjab with a suicide bomb that killed forty-five soldiers.

The CIA followed up this attack by launching five strikes on Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in 2007, predominantly in North Waziristan. At the time leaflets began to appear in the tribal agencies warning local tribesmen in Pashto that they would be bombed if they harbored al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

In 2008 the aerial campaign stepped up considerably, and between 33 and 36 attacks were recorded. The pace of the attacks picked up notably in August 2008 after the Bush administration made a unilateral decision to carry out attacks without seeking Pakistani permission first. [1] This diminished the risk of the Taliban or al-Qaeda being tipped off by sympathizers in the Pakistani military, as had happened on several occasions. The number of UAV strikes in Pakistan this year has already exceeded last year's total.

The vast majority of UAV strikes have been directed at North and South Waziristan, but there have also been a few strikes in the agencies of Bajaur, Kurram and Orakzai, as well as three strikes in Bannu. The strikes in Bannu are important in that this province is located in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), not FATA, and thus represents an escalation of the drone campaign. In the spring of 2009 there was talk of President Obama extending the campaign to Taliban hideouts in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, but this has not happened so far (ANI, March 20; *Times* [London], May 19).

The CIA's ability to hit targets in Pakistan increased in 2007 with the introduction of a much improved drone known as the MQ-9 Reaper. The Reaper has a much larger engine, allowing it to travel three times the speed of the Predator and carry fifteen times as much armament. This ordnance includes GBU-12 Paveway II laser guided bombs and Sidewinder missiles. There are currently 195 Predators and 28 Reapers in the Air Force's UAV fleet.

In late May it was reported that the Predators and Reapers were being aided by secret electronic transmitter chips placed near targets by tribesmen working for bounties (*Guardian*, May 31). South Waziristan Taliban

leader Mullah Nazir, a frequent target of drone strikes, claimed that the “SIM-card transmitters” were actually planted by agents of the ISI (Al-Sahab, March 2009). This might account for the drones’ success in taking out dozens of high value al-Qaeda and Taliban targets. It is the undoubted tactical success of the drones that have made them America’s greatest asset in killing those who are deemed terrorists.

Drone Successes in Killing Taliban and al-Qaeda Targets

It is clear from the success rate in killing high value targets that the CIA has excellent intelligence resources in the tribal areas. These locals have tracked the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership, often for money or out of distaste for the extremists who have beheaded many moderate maliks (Pashtun tribal heads). In addition to killing over a dozen mid-level Taliban leaders, the strikes have taken out ten of al-Qaeda’s top twenty leaders.

The list of high value al-Qaeda targets assassinated in Pakistan is impressive and includes:

- Sa’ad Bin Laden, Osama Bin Laden’s third son who was involved in al-Qaeda attacks in North Africa.
- Abu Laith al-Libi, the al-Qaeda number three who was responsible for a suicide bombing at Bagram Airbase that targeted Vice President Dick Cheney.
- Osama al-Kini, a Kenyan national and al-Qaeda’s external operations chief, who was wanted for the 1998 bombings against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar as-Salaam.
- Khalid Habib, the commander of the Lashkar al-Zil or the Shadow Army, al-Qaeda’s fighting force.
- Abu Khabab al-Masri, the chief of al-Qaeda’s weapons of mass destruction program.
- Rashid Rauf, the suspected mastermind of the 2006 Heathrow airliner plot who had escaped from a Pakistani jail the previous year.
- The drones’ greatest success was the August 2009 killing of Baitullah Mahsud, the former head of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Pakistan’s most wanted man. Baitullah was responsible for numerous suicide bombing

outrages and was accused in the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

This list represents one of America’s greatest successes in the war on terror. The unpredictable attacks on convoys, hujras (guest houses), compounds, training camps and madrassas have wreaked havoc in the Taliban and al-Qaeda ranks. As a result, al-Qaeda members have been forced to dismantle their training camps in favor of hidden classrooms; they no longer communicate using cell phones for fear of being tracked; they have been forced to replace trusted veterans who have been killed with less experienced operatives; and they have launched what has been described as a “witch-hunt”, killing real or perceived spies and traitors. According to Mullah Nazir:

All the spies that we have caught turned out to be employees of Pakistan. The location-tracking SIMs that they use had been provided by Pakistan... The spyware and intelligence is fully associated with the Army. A couple of days ago, an American CIA officer confessed that Pakistan’s airbases are being used for these attacks and that Pakistan itself is involved in them... We are taking measures to catch spies. We do not spare those who are proven guilty... but only after acquiring genuine evidence. This sedition has been pioneered by the government of Pakistan. They have put men into deceit by making them do their dirty work for them, and they do it for the return of a few rupees (Al-Sahab, March, 2009).

U.S. officials are of course thrilled by the success. According to a senior U.S. counterterrorism official, “These attacks have produced the broadest, deepest and most rapid reduction in al-Qaeda senior leadership that we’ve seen in several years” (NPR, February 3).

Such success has come at a high political price in the form of hundreds of civilian bystanders who have been killed in the strikes. The strikes may have turned many Pakistanis into enemies and might thus represent a strategic defeat in the greatest battle in this front-line country, the battle for the hearts and minds of the Pakistani people.

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Notes:

1. Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, “Drone War,” *New Republic*, June 3, 2009, pp. 22-25.