



# Terrorism Monitor

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Marriott Hotel attack, Pakistan

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## AL-SHABAAB BLAMED FOR ASSASSINATION OF MILITARY COMMANDER IN DISPUTED SOMALI REGION OF SOOL

Violence in the strategically located Somali city of Las Anod continues to threaten a new round of warfare in a region that has largely evaded the interminable fighting consuming Mogadishu and southern Somalia. Las Anod is the administrative capital of Sool region, one of three Somali regions at the center of a territorial dispute between the self-declared independent state of Somaliland and the autonomous Somali region of Puntland.

Colonel Osman Yusuf Nur, commander of Somaliland's 12th infantry division, was killed in a November 1 roadside bombing that appeared to target his vehicle (Shabelle Media Network, November 1). The Colonel was on his way to visit the scene of an earlier explosion in Las Anod when a remote-controlled bomb blew up his vehicle, killing as many as five other members of his entourage. There were reports that troops rushing to the scene opened fire on civilians gathering at the scene of the bombing (Garowe Online, November 2).

The bombing came at a time of high tension in Las Anod as the dispute between Somaliland and Puntland over the regions of Sool, Sanaaq and Cayn (SSC) heats up, with reports of clashes between Somaliland forces and Puntland militants in Sanaaq region at the end of October (Waaheen, October 29). Hundreds of Las Anod residents have also taken to the streets to protest the presence of Somaliland troops, who were reported to have fired on the stone-throwing demonstrators

in response, wounding two (Shabelle Media Network, November 2; Garowe Online, November 2; Mareeg Online, November 2). The town was placed under curfew and over 20 individuals arrested in connection with the bombing.

The day before the assassination, former al-Shabaab spokesman Mukhtar Robow “Abu Mansur” threatened Somaliland and Puntland with invasions by al-Shabaab due to their failure to implement Shari’a (AllPuntland.com, October 31). It was the first statement from Mukhtar Robow since he was replaced as the movement’s spokesman in May (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 4). Only three days before the attack, Somaliland’s president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, called for war against al-Shabaab, which is led by Somaliland native Shaykh Ahmad Abdi Godane “Abu Zubayr.”

To date, there has only been one claim of responsibility for the bombing, coming from one Burale Yusuf, who claimed the act was carried out by a heretofore unknown anti-Somaliland group, the Jabarti National Movement. Burale escaped an early morning raid on his house in Las Anod by Somaliland police forces, though tribal elders quickly organized a press conference to reveal Burale is known as an insane person in the community and was completely incapable of organizing such an attack (Somaliland Press, November 3).

While suspicion has fallen on al-Shabaab, the radical Islamist group is far from the only suspect in the bombing. Besides the radical Islamists, there is also the Northern Somali Unionist Movement (NSUM), which opposes the secession of Somaliland and its control of the SSC region (n-sum.org, May 14).

There is also the Somali Unity Defense Alliance (SUDA) of Colonel Abdi Aziz “Garamgaram” Muhammad, a pro-Puntland militia which has committed several attacks on Somaliland security forces since its formation earlier this year (Garowe Online, November 9). Garamgaram is a former commander in the militia of notorious warlords and accused war criminal General Muhammad Said Hersi Morgan, known as “the Butcher of Hargeisa (the capital of Somaliland)” for his brutal campaign in the region in the late 1980s against opponents of dictator Siad Barre. SUDA has been described as the military wing of NSUM (Maanhadal.com, November 19, 2008). Another armed pro-Puntland group determined to liberate the disputed territories from Somaliland’s rule was formed in Nairobi in October by Puntland politician Saleban Ahmad Isse and Colonel Ali Hassan

Sabarey (Jidbaale.com, October 11; Somaliland Press, November 2). In January 2008, former Puntland president Adde Musa Hersi declared his government’s intention to resume control of Las Anod (Somalinet, January 15, 2008).

Though the SSC region falls within the boundaries of the former British Somaliland, which Hargeisa used in determining the borders of Somaliland, the majority of its citizens belong to the Darod/Dhulbahante clan, which has close ties to Puntland. Hargeisa’s rule over the regions has proven increasingly unpopular since it sent its troops in 2007 to expel Puntland forces that had been present in the area since 2003. The Dhulbahante made a brief effort in 2008 to form an autonomous state from the three regions to be known as the Northland State of Somalia, though some members of the clan support Hargeisa’s rule.

#### UZBEK MILITANTS WITHDRAW AFTER PAKISTANI ARMY SEIZES KANIGURAM

After heated fighting, Pakistani forces in South Waziristan have captured the towns of Sararogha and Kaniguram, the latter a main center for fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant organization that has operated in the region since it was forced from its bases in Afghanistan in late 2001. Pakistani security services claim over 360 militants have been killed since the start of Operation Rah-e-Nijat, to the loss of 37 soldiers (*The Nation* [Islamabad], November 4).

The slow start to the air and ground offensive involving 30,000 troops provided the militants ample time to prepare escape routes, but continuing suicide bomb attacks in Pakistan’s major urban areas by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have provided a new sense of urgency in eliminating the terrorist threat in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northwest Pakistan. Chief of the Army Staff Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has described the elimination of the Uzbek militants as one of the three main goals of Operation Rah-e-Nijat.

Uzbek fighters and TTP militants were reported to be fighting from fortified positions and bunkers at Kaniguram as Pakistani troops struggled to take the town street by street, clearing IEDs as they went. Jet fighters, helicopter gunships and artillery were all used to hammer the militants’ positions (*Daily Times* [Lahore], November 3; *Dawn* [Karachi], November 4). The number of Uzbek fighters based at Kaniguram

was estimated somewhere between 1,000 to 1,500. The town is primarily populated by members of the Pashtun Barki tribe (*Nawa-i-Waqt* [Rawalpindi], November 1).

While many accounts of the operation have described the Uzbeks as being “on the run” after the army’s attack on Kaniguram, Brigadier Muhammad Ihsan allowed that the Uzbeks “might have made a strategic withdrawal” (*Dawn*, November 4). Major General Khalid Rabbani, commander of Pakistan’s 9th Infantry Division, said Uzbek militants “gave us a very good fight” in the army’s earlier effort to take the village of Sherwangi, a known base for foreign fighters. The Uzbeks eventually made a disciplined withdrawal from the village to continue resistance elsewhere (AFP, November 1).

The IMU leader, Tahir Yuldash, is believed to have been killed in a missile strike in August, but it is unclear what changes, if any, have been made to the IMU leadership structure, particularly with IMU spokesmen denying reports of his still unconfirmed death. Locally the options for IMU fugitives are limited, as the Uzbek gunmen have developed serious differences with TTP factions beyond the Mahsud tribe of South Waziristan. There are reports that the Uzbeks may be moving into North Waziristan, but this would bring them into close proximity to TTP factions that have long opposed the Uzbek presence. Crossing the border into east Afghanistan via established Taliban routes may be the best option for the surviving IMU fighters, many of whom are traveling with their families. The military operation in South Waziristan is expected to last another one to two months.

## Interview with Amir of Jihad in Afghanistan’s Balkh Province

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

The recently released 41st issue of the Afghan Jihadi e-magazine al-Somod carried an interview with the Amir of Jihad of Balkh province in northern Afghanistan, Mullah Raz Mohammad bin Sayd al-Haydari. Al-Somod is published by the press center of the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and circulated by major jihadi websites. The Amir discussed the objectives of the Taliban’s deployment in northern Afghanistan, including their intention to cut off vital NATO supply lines crossing through the north (alsomod.org, October 23). The magazine also released

a statement from the Islamic Emirate on the eighth anniversary of the Afghan war.

Mazar-e Sharif is the capital of Balkh province and is regarded by Afghans as the center of the Afghan jihad against the former Soviet occupation. The Amir of Balkh, Mullah al-Haydari, was born in Jowzjan province in 1983 and received an elementary school education there. In 2001, al-Haydari joined the Afghan insurgency against the Coalition and fought in Khost, Zabol, Oruzgan and Helmand. In 2004, al-Haydari was appointed Amir of Jihad in Charikar city, a post he held until 2009, when he was appointed Amir of Balkh province.

In the interview with al-Somod, al-Haydari said the future of jihad in Balkh is very reassuring. In general, the mujahideen are deployed all over Balkh province, along with secret cells in the center of Mazar-e Sharif. More specifically, the Balkh mujahideen are in full control of eight of the province’s 15 districts, says al-Haydari, without naming the eight districts.

According to the Amir, government and Coalition forces are confined to their barracks and remain ineffective in Balkh. The greatest number of mujahideen in Balkh are deployed in the strategic directorate of Chahar Bolak – 300 full-time mujahideen, says al-Haydari, who reveals that mujahideen in less important districts work in regular jobs during intervals of peace and take up arms whenever needed for special hit and run attacks on Coalition forces. Overall, there are at least 100 jihadis in each district of Balkh and more are being trained. Al-Haydari claims the advance of the Coalition forces from Germany, Bulgaria, Sweden and Norway to set up military bases in different cities in Balkh was stopped by mujahideen attacks, except for the military base at Mazar-e Sharif airport. The Balkh mujahideen also prevented the government from holding elections in the province and inflicted heavy losses on Coalition forces that tried to facilitate these elections. The people of Balkh have great confidence in the mujahideen, says al-Haydari, because they are fed up with the government’s corrupt gangs and mercenaries: “The people of Balkh perceive the mujahideen as saviors from the agony they have been suffering for eight years.” Al-Haydari alleges that mujahideen rule is accepted by all ethnicities in Balkh, including the Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen groups.

Al-Haydari believes the jihadi situation in the northern states is improving by the day, as demonstrated by the

frustration suffered by the enemy in the north. The northern mujahideen are constantly seeking to open new jihadi fronts in the region because these significantly distract and confuse coordination between the multinational Coalition forces.

Future plans of the northern mujahideen, revealed al-Haydari, include the deployment of fighters currently being trained in large numbers to new fronts: “By God’s will, the world will witness big changes in the quality and quantity of jihadi operations next spring. We will attempt to cut off enemy supply routes running from Central Asia to northern Afghanistan. We also have preplanned military actions awaiting orders from the supreme command of the Islamic Emirate.”

Finally, al-Haydari calls upon the mujahideen to hold on to their faith and assist the mujahideen cadres by liquidating rogue elements, a strong indication of the Coalition’s successful penetrations of mujahideen ranks. Using terrorism as a pretext, the Taliban’s statement on the eighth anniversary of the Afghan war accused the United States of waging a colonial war in Afghanistan. At the time of 9/11, the statement alleges, the Taliban offered assistance in the investigations, but “U.S. Generals and the Jewish lobby” were behind the decision to instead invade Afghanistan. The United States promised to withdraw from Afghanistan after eradicating terrorism, but eight years have passed and the United States is still increasing its military presence in Afghanistan (a reference to U.S. plans to send more troops to Afghanistan). The Taliban are convinced that the United States is waging war on Afghanistan to secure their interests in Central Asia and the Middle East, calling upon the United States and its allies to set a clear time table for withdrawal. “Afghanis no longer believe your hollow slogans. The world can no longer tolerate the negative consequences of your faulty policies. We announce to the world that our objective is to establish an independent Islamic State in Afghanistan. We do not plan to invade or impose Islamic Shari’a on any other country, especially the European countries,” concludes the Taliban statement. The Taliban threaten to put up a long and fierce resistance if the United States continues its onslaught on the Islamic Emirate, urging the United States to learn lessons from the long history of Afghanistan’s successful struggles against occupation forces.

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## Karzai Claims Mystery Helicopters Ferrying Taliban to North Afghanistan

*By Andrew McGregor*

While the Western press has been occupied recently with accounts of fraudulent elections in Afghanistan and the alleged role of President Hamid Karzai’s brother as a paid CIA agent, a stranger but perhaps more instructive story was playing out in Afghanistan that reveals the rather shallow penetration NATO and Coalition efforts have made in building trust and confidence in that country, as well as giving some indication of what can be expected from a Karzai administration that does not sense full support from its former backers in the West as it begins a second term. In addition the controversy demonstrates the very different perceptions of the counterterrorism struggle in the West and in Afghanistan.

For several weeks now, Afghanistan has been consumed by stories of mysterious “foreign helicopters” ferrying Taliban fighters to a new front in northern Afghanistan. These helicopters are alleged by no less than President Karzai to belong to “foreign powers” such as the United States and its allies. The helicopters are said to land in remote regions, but their activity has supposedly been noted by nomads who travel through the deserts of Baghlan and Kunduz province (*Hasht-e Sobh*, October 13).

Without mentioning guilty parties or offering evidence, President Karzai suggested the reports of helicopters delivering terrorists to north Afghanistan were true, saying, “We have received reliable reports from our intelligence service. We have received reliable reports from our people, and today I received a report that these efforts [to transfer Taliban fighters] are also being made mysteriously in the northwest. The issue of helicopters has also been proved. We do not make any more comments now and investigations are under way to see to whom and to which foreign country these helicopters belong” (Tolo TV, October 11). According to Karzai, the “unknown” helicopters had been taking Taliban fighters to Baghlan, Kunduz and Samangan provinces in northern Afghanistan. The president’s remarks were quickly followed by a call from the Lower House speaker, Muhammad Yunis Qanuni, for a government debate on the issue. “When the president of Afghanistan,

as the first man of the country, is raising a fact and a problem, then it shows that the problem is important and serious.” According to Takhar MP Habiba Danesh, the helicopter airlifts were already underway before the elections (Tolo TV [Kabul], October 13; Ferghana.ru, October 12; *Hasht-e Sobh* [Kabul], October 13).

Kunduz governor Muhammad Omar claimed the fighters being brought to his province at night were members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group that recently lost its longtime leader Tahir Yuldash and is now hard pressed by the Pakistani government in South Waziristan, their home since 2001. The governor pointed to the detention of 15 militants by U.S. Special Forces south of Kunduz, whom he described as supporters of the late Tahir Yuldash (Afghan Islamic Press, October 11; Eurasia.net, October 13). At the same time, the governor noted the security situation in his province was improving (Tolo TV, October 11). The governor of Baghlan province, Muhammad Akbar Barakzai, also claims to have received intelligence that unidentified military helicopters are making midnight landings in remote areas of his province (Tolo TV, October 21).

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai’s former rival for the presidency, accuses the Afghan government of being behind the transfer of Taliban fighters to the northern provinces. “They have sent to the north of the country the most evil people, the most notorious and criminal people who are involved in killing the people of Afghanistan and crime against the people of Afghanistan... I have the names of these people; they sent them to the north by helicopters so that they carry out their mission. Is this a government?” (Tolo TV, October 11).

Iran’s state television network, Press TV, sought to exploit the controversy by adding a large number of details to the helicopter story in an October 17 report, all according to unnamed “diplomats”:

- The British Army was responsible for relocating Taliban fighters with Chinook helicopters to the northern provinces from Helmand province in south Afghanistan (though this might come as a surprise to critics of the UK’s Ministry of Defence, who have suggested the military has not provided enough transport helicopters to meet British needs – BBC, August 30).

- The death of Afghan interpreter Sultan Munadi in a September British Special Forces raid that freed a *New York Times* reporter from Taliban

captivity, has already been a controversial issue in Afghanistan, with repeated calls for an inquiry into the circumstances of his death. Press TV claimed Munadi was killed during the raid by a British sniper because he had documents and photographs verifying the British role in the alleged airlift.

- American forces were supplying the Taliban militants in north Afghanistan with weapons seized during the 2001 invasion. Most date back to the era of Soviet occupation.

- Afghan Interior Minister Mohammad Hanif Atmar, a British educated Pashtun, was working under the direction of the UK. The Interior Ministry has funneled arms to the newly relocated Taliban through Pashtun police officers. The distribution of arms to Taliban fighters by the Afghan police was also reported by Kabul daily *Arman-e Melli* on October 13.

Not all Afghan officials believe in the nocturnal activities of the “mystery helicopters.” Amrullah Saleh, the chief of the National Directorate of Security (NDS – the Tajik-dominated national security agency), dismissed the helicopter reports, as did many other members of Afghanistan’s security services. Amrullah maintains that the reports are designed solely with the intention of reducing trust in Western forces engaged in Afghanistan (*Hasht-e Sobh*, October 13). Even a member of Karzai’s campaign team, MP Nur Akbari, noted diplomatically that the president’s assertions were “unexpected,” saying that security officials had not provided any such information in the past (*Hasht-e Sobh*, October 13). President Karzai’s endorsement of the “mystery helicopter” theory compelled U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Karl Eikenberry to issue a clear denial of “the rumors about the reinforcement of the Afghan government’s armed opposition in the north by the U.S.A. These rumors are baseless” (Tolo TV, October 14).

Nevertheless, one Afghan daily reported widespread belief in the “mystery helicopter” phenomenon. “The people strongly believe that these helicopters belong to the British and U.S. forces. They also believe that these helicopters have transferred some armed residents of the neighboring provinces to northern provinces and the killing of several armed men from these areas in the north seem to confirm this issue” (*Arman-e Melli* [Kabul], October 13).

It was not long before the “mystery helicopters” were seen in Pakistan, where the “foreign allies” of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were alleged to be rescuing Taliban militants from the government offensive in South Waziristan. An Islamabad daily reported the belief of “some experts” that the airlift was part of a deal between the Western nations and the so-called “good Taliban” (*Pakistan Observer* [Islamabad], October 19).

Existing rumors of a Western airlift of Taliban fighters were no doubt adopted and exploited by the Karzai administration to express its displeasure with the West’s refusal to rubber stamp his election victory, but they mask a more serious problem – how has the Taliban managed to expand its operations in the north and what can be done to stop it before the Taliban is in a position to interfere with vital NATO supply lines that cross the region? By endorsing such rumors, President Karzai appears ready to endanger years of Western civil and military efforts in Afghanistan if he feels it necessary to ensure his domestic political survival.

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## Terrorism’s Trojan Horse: Vehicle-Borne Suicide Attacks Give Taliban Upper Hand in Pakistan

By Animesh Roul

Suicide terrorism has taken a lethal turn in Pakistan recently with the widespread use of vehicle bombs, known to security services as Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIED). These suicide VBIED attacks have targeted both civilian and military establishments and the frequency of these attacks fully demonstrates a tactical advance on past terrorist strikes in Pakistan.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, car, truck or even bicycle bombs have been used indiscriminately against civilian and Coalition targets. For the Taliban and their affiliates (e.g. Jaish-e- Muhammad, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Fidayeen-

e-Islam), they have lately proven a very effective weapon in Pakistan. After numerous mass casualty VBIED attacks across the country in October, Taliban terrorists again struck in the garrison city of Rawalpindi in early November (*Daily Times* [Lahore], November 3). In their latest strike, a bike-borne suicide bomber triggered a blast near a bank where people gathered to collect their salaries, located close to Rawalpindi’s four-star Shalimar Hotel, killing 35 people and damaging many buildings and vehicles nearby (Geo TV, November 2; *The Nation* [Islamabad], November 3).

### VBIED - The Taliban’s Tactical Advantage

Suicidal VBIED attacks have become a weapon of choice for Taliban terrorists in Pakistan due to the availability of dedicated and relatively young would-be martyrs and large numbers of easily hijacked vehicles such as SUVs, cars, trucks and bikes. The advantage provided by this tactic is the guided movement of a large amount of explosives by the bomber himself. Typically wearing a loaded suicide vest, the bomber can swiftly reach the intended target. Larger vehicles can carry a large quantity of explosives, which makes VBIEDs an effective terrorist weapon in causing maximum fatalities and structural damage.

The Taliban have tested the effectiveness of these VBIEDs on soft targets such as crowded gatherings, taking inspiration from al-Qaeda’s 1998 attack on the U.S. embassy in Nairobi and numerous attacks in Iraq since 2003. In Pakistan, the Taliban initiated mass-casualty suicide car bombings two years ago when a suicide car bomb hit Benazir Bhutto’s cavalcade in the port city of Karachi in October 2007. This was followed by a series of major VBIED attacks:

- A dump truck filled with explosives and driven by a suicide bomber wreaked havoc on the Marriott Hotel in the capital Islamabad in September 2008, killing 54 people. The Marriott truck bomb carried a deadly cocktail of nearly 600 kg of RDX and TNT and the blast was so huge it left a swimming pool-like crater outside the hotel (Geo TV, September 21, 2008).
- On May 27, a suicide bomber exploded a vehicle loaded with approximately 100 kilograms of explosives near the offices of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Capital City Police office in Lahore (Geo TV, May 27). The blast killed 26 people and injured over three hundred while

completely destroying the adjacent building of the Rescue 15 police service. The explosion left a 15 feet deep and 17 feet wide crater at the site of the blast (*The News* [Islamabad], May 28).

- On June 9, Taliban terrorists struck at the Pearl Continental Hotel in Peshawar with an explosives-laden truck, killing 11 people and injuring more than 60 others. At least 500 kilograms of explosives were used in the attack, according to bomb disposal officials (*Daily Times*, June 10). The hotel, a hub for foreigners and UN officials, was badly damaged and as many as 40 vehicles parked in the compound were destroyed.
- Reports surfaced in early July that at least 25 vehicles fitted with explosives had entered major cities to target sensitive government installations and other important buildings. The Interior Ministry also indicated that suicide bombers and vehicles had entered Peshawar, Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Quetta and Karachi. The explosives-laden vehicles included a Hyundai Shehzore van, an ambulance, a Mitsubishi Pajero and seven Toyota Corollas (*Daily Times*, July 7).

### Bloody October

VBIED attacks following the launch of Pakistani military operations in South Waziristan made October one of the bloodiest months in recent memory, with at least four mass casualty VBIED attacks in Pakistan creating more than 200 fatalities. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has taken the responsibility for this recent string of bloody attacks across the country.

The Taliban's renewed suicide campaign started on October 9 with an attack at the crowded Soekarno Square in Peshawar's Khyber Market, where over 49 people including seven children were killed and a hundred others injured (*The News*, October 10). Many of those killed in the attacks were patients and their visiting relatives at the Lady Reading Hospital, the biggest government run hospital in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Three days later, a similar VBIED attack targeted a military convoy passing through the bustling Alpuri market in Shangla district, a Taliban stronghold near the restive Swat valley. At least 41 persons including six soldiers were killed and over 40 others injured (*Dawn* [Karachi], October 12).

On October 15 another vehicle-borne suicide assault took place in Kohat in the NWFP. A suicide bomber smashed his explosives-laden car into the Saddar Police Station located in the fortified area of Kohat, killing three policemen and eight civilians. Another 22 people sustained injuries in the blast, which destroyed the northern portion of the Police Station building, smashed many vehicles parked in the vicinity and damaged the wall of the Pakistan Air Force's Officers Mess (*The News*, October 15). It was estimated that 100 kilograms of explosives were used in the bombing. Kohat district experienced a similar bloody attack in mid-September when a suicide bomber rammed a Jeep loaded with explosives into a crowded market in Ustarzai (on the Kohat-Hangu road), killing 33 people, mostly from the minority Shi'a community (*Dawn*, September 18). The previously unknown Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al-Almi (perhaps a splinter of the deadly anti-Shi'a Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) took responsibility for the attack.

More than 15 people were killed including three security personnel on October 16, when a suicide bomber rammed his vehicle into the Special Investigations Unit of the Criminal Investigation Agency in Peshawar (*Daily Times*, October 18). Bomb disposal squad chief Shafqat Malik indicated that around 60 to 70 kilograms of explosives had been used in the attack. There was little time to recover before Peshawar was struck again by a VBIED attack on October 28, when the most powerful car bomb explosion yet seen in Pakistan took place at Peshawar's famous Meena Bazaar. The blast killed over 120 people – including many women and children (*Frontier Post* [Peshawar] October 31; *The News*, November 2). The bomb disposal squad estimated that around 150 kilograms of explosives were used in the blast. The explosion brought down many buildings in the vicinity, including a three-story structure and a mosque. The consequent conflagration destroyed almost everything in the area, including houses and garment shops.

Not all attempts at vehicle-borne suicide attacks have been successfully executed by terrorists in Pakistan, partly because of enhanced security measures. Alerted to potential attacks by prior intelligence inputs, threefold security cordons are put in place in sensitive areas that prevent terrorists from getting near the intended targets. Many attempts have been foiled by security forces beforehand; for example, on October 25 two explosives-laden vehicles were destroyed by security forces at Fort Salop in the Khyber Agency before they could be used in attacks.

The Islamabad administration has blamed the Taliban and al-Qaeda elements for the spurt in suicide VBIED attacks and linked the surge to the ongoing military operation in South Waziristan and search and sweep operations in Swat and Malakand. Surprisingly, Taliban and al-Qaeda have denied any responsibility for the October 28 market blast in Peshawar, instead blaming disgruntled refugees and elements who want to “defame jihad” (PakTribune, October 29).

### Conclusion

Pakistani armed forces are readying their guns to eliminate a regrouped Taliban in Waziristan before the coming winter season, perhaps by the end of this year. Buoyed by the death of former TTP leader Baitullah Mahsud in a U.S. missile strike, Islamabad announced on November 2 that it would make rewards worth millions of dollars available for information leading to the apprehension, dead or alive, of current TTP leader Hakimullah Mahsud and 18 of his associates, including members of splinter factions such as Waliur Rehman Mahsud and Qari Hussain Mahsud. The latter is known as “Ustad-e-Fidayeen” (trainer of suicide bombers) and is notorious for brainwashing and training youths and children as suicide bombers.

However, the surge in suicide VBIED attacks as part of Taliban’s violent campaign in Pakistan’s cities might hamper the time-sensitive military planning in the tribal areas. Unlike Iraq, where security officials were able to crack down on the suicide VBIED networks operating in the northern and central regions of the country (such as the Ramadi cell), Pakistani officials have been largely unsuccessful in either unearthing or dismantling the suicide cells behind this countrywide campaign of violence. They are also struggling to intercept incoming VBIEDs due to lack of technical knowledge and equipment like perimeter surveillance instruments and explosives scanners. Even though Home Affairs officials claim to have prior information about the explosives-laden vehicles and their movements into cities, only a few have been intercepted by the security forces to date. Now dubbed the “Trojan Horse” of terrorism, suicide VBIEDs are proving deadly for Pakistan’s internal security and future stability in the context of an enormous Taliban threat and a scared and bruised civil society.

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## Is Iran Supporting the Insurgency in Afghanistan?

*By Chris Zambelis*

Violence and instability in Afghanistan continue to rage in the form of an organic insurgency shaped by local identities, networks, and interests. Operating under the nebulous rubric of the Taliban, the insurgents in Afghanistan have evolved in sophistication, lethality, and geographic scope in recent years. While the presence of transnational radical Islamists led by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan augments the tactical and operational capabilities of the insurgents, myriad factors help fuel the violence that confronts the American-led Coalition. The reach of regional state actors, for instance, impacts the insurgency in Afghanistan. The machinations of Afghanistan’s neighbors, in essence, define its geopolitics. Pakistan’s impact on Afghan politics, society and the insurgency receives the most attention. Another influential actor in Afghanistan that is drawing more attention of late, however, but whose role in Afghan affairs is far less understood, is Iran.

Iran’s interests and reach into Afghan society are well known. Official U.S. and regional sources, however, often paint a confusing picture of the nature of Iran’s activities in Afghanistan. Iran is frequently described as a force for stability in Afghanistan, with interests that largely converge with those of the U.S. mission there, namely their shared opposition to the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Yet reports that Iranian-made munitions are finding their way into the hands of the Taliban coupled with allegations that Iran is actively providing insurgents with operational and material support are increasingly making headlines. These claims are echoed in General Stanley A. McChrystal’s unclassified August 2009 assessment of the situation in Afghanistan (McChrystal is commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan). [1] At the same time, General McChrystal’s report cites Iran as a source of development aid and support for Kabul. These apparently contradictory assessments of Iran’s activities in Afghanistan are underlined by what the report calls Tehran’s “ambiguous role” in Afghanistan. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates has also accused Tehran of playing a “double game” in Afghanistan through its alleged support for armed factions and its friendly relations with Kabul (Agence France-Presse, June 12; *Asia Times* [Hong Kong], July 8). In spite of Kabul’s close ties with Tehran, Afghan security sources have



made similar claims implicating Iran in the insurgency in Afghanistan (RFE/RL, June 22, 2007).

#### An Iranian Footprint on the Battlefield

Proof of Iran's role in aiding the insurgency in Afghanistan, according to U.S. and regional sources, is based on evidence that Iran has provided weapons, explosives, and other forms of material support to elements of the Taliban and other militants since 2007. British forces reportedly intercepted at least two shipments of Iranian-made arms in Helmand province in southern Afghanistan between April and June 2007 (BBC, June 11, 2007). British forces also claimed to have uncovered Russian-made SA-7 "Strella" and SA-14 "Gremlin" man portable, low-altitude surface-to-air missiles that are believed to have originated in Iran (*The Times* [London], March 1). Armor-piercing bullets, mortars, C-4 plastic explosives, and anti-tank mines of Iranian origin are also reported to have appeared on the battlefield (*The Times*, March 1; August 5, 2007). A ten-ton cache of arms and munitions of Iranian, Chinese and Russian manufacture was uncovered in western Afghanistan's Herat province, located beside the border with Iran (RFE/RL, September 14, 2007). More recently, Afghan police reported seizing explosives-packed jerry cans they believed to have originated in Iran during a search of militants traveling on the Bagram-Kabul highway (*Weesa* [Kabul], September 9). The Afghan National Army (ANA) claims to have uncovered 14 Iranian-made missiles of unidentified specification in Herat (Tolo TV [Kabul], October 19). Detonators for explosives and related items reported to have originated in Iran have also been uncovered throughout Afghanistan (*Asharq al-Awsat*, September 12).

Many observers have traced the appearance of advanced armor piercing explosives in Afghanistan, namely Explosively-Formed Penetrators (EFPs - an advanced form of shaped charge), back to Tehran (*Wired*, January 28; al-Jazeera [Doha], February 27, 2007). Significantly, the appearance of EFPs in the arsenal of armed factions in Iraq was also blamed on Iran. Dubbed a "superbomb" for their ability to pierce armored vehicles, including battle tanks, EFPs have been blamed for many U.S. and Coalition casualties in Afghanistan (*Gulf Times* [Doha], July 4, 2007; *Wired*, August 23, 2007).

In addition to allegedly providing weapons and related support to insurgents in Afghanistan, Iran is also accused of operating militant training and logistical camps across the country, particularly in the western

provinces of Herat and Farah, as well as on Iranian soil, specifically the eastern provinces of Kerman and Khorasan along the Iranian-Afghan border (*Weesa*, January 29). Colonel Rahmatullah Safi, police chief for Afghanistan's western provinces of Herat, Baghdis, and Farah, reported that at least twenty armed militants had crossed the border on pickup trucks from Iran into Farah en route to confront Coalition forces (RFE/RL, June 22, 2007).

#### Evaluating the Evidence

In spite of the appearance of Iranian-origin weapons on Afghan soil and reports that Tehran is actively supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan, U.S. and regional officials, including the Kabul government, appear to take great care not to accuse Iran of operating a deliberate policy aimed at undermining the NATO and U.S. mission and overall stability in Afghanistan. A number of reasons may be behind this logic. First, there may be little concrete evidence of official Iranian involvement in the transfer of weapons to insurgents in Afghanistan. Instead, corrupt elements within the Iranian security forces or independent smugglers may be trafficking weapons and explosives across the border for profit or in exchange for opium (*Asia Times*, June 22, 2007). Cross-border smuggling is a part of life on the Iranian-Afghan frontier. Moreover, from a technical perspective, military officials and other observers have suggested that the EFPs and other forms of IEDs that are linked to Iranian support or expertise often contain a uniquely Afghan signature in their design and deployment, even though some of the dual-use components used to manufacture these devices may have originated in Iran due to the high volume of bilateral trade between Iran and Afghanistan. The technology for deploying EFPs and other sophisticated IEDs is also widely available these days due to the Internet and communication between militants with experience in various theaters, making it possible that local insurgents have procured the necessary materials and expertise themselves to effectively deploy EFPs and other advanced weapons systems (*Wired*, August 23, 2007).

Washington understands that Tehran's support to Kabul is crucial to Afghan and regional stability. The presence of Iranian-origin weapons in Afghanistan may not necessarily prove that Iran is formally operating a policy designed to sabotage the U.S.-led Coalition effort. Factions within the Iranian security services, however, namely the elite Quds (Jerusalem) Force, may

be following an agenda parallel to Tehran's normal diplomatic and economic relations with Kabul and stated commitment to support peace and stability in Afghanistan. An elite special operations organization within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that emerged in the 1980s, the Quds Force aims to advance key aspects of Iranian foreign policy. The track record of the Quds Force includes special operations in theaters as varied as Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sudan, and Afghanistan.

The reported presence of Quds Force operatives in Afghanistan likely represents an effort on the part of Tehran to counter growing U.S. diplomatic pressure against its nuclear program and other points of contention. Iran also feels threatened by the robust U.S. military presence on its eastern and western flanks. In other words, Tehran may see an opportunity to hit back at Washington in a limited manner in Afghanistan to increase its bargaining leverage on other matters it deems vital to Iranian security and interests. On the U.S. side, Washington may have long ago accepted Tehran's "ambiguous role" as a constructive and obstructive force in Afghanistan as a necessary cost of U.S. intervention. While highlighting the alleged role of the Quds Force in supporting elements of the insurgency in Afghanistan, General McChrystal's assessment also mentions that Iran's current policies and activities do not threaten the U.S.-led Coalition's short-term mission, but does maintain that Iran is capable of threatening the mission in the long-term. [2]

### Iran's Stake in Afghanistan

Understanding the dynamics of Iranian involvement in Afghanistan is essential to grasping the U.S.-Iranian interface in Afghanistan. On account of its geography and the ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian links its people share with millions of Afghans, Iran's influence and interests in Afghanistan go back millennia. By virtue of its growing regional influence and historic links to Afghanistan, Iran is crucial to Afghanistan's development and prospects for long-term peace and stability. Examples of Iran's influence and reach in Afghanistan abound:

- Iran has emerged, among other things, as the fourth largest source of foreign direct investment in Afghanistan in 2009 (Ferghana.ru, April 12). Iranian investment includes major

developments in sectors as varied as critical infrastructure, energy, agriculture, health care, and communications.

- Iran also provides humanitarian aid on a wide scale. Iran's efforts encompass the development of Afghan educational and cultural institutions and the empowerment of civil society organizations.
- Tehran has also been keen on shoring up its contacts with local political leaders and other notables, including local warlords and tribal leaders in Afghanistan's western provinces (IWPR [Kabul], October 12).

While the locus of the Iranian presence in Afghanistan is found in the country's western provinces such as Herat, Iran's diplomatic, economic, and cultural influence is felt throughout much of the country, a reality not lost on the government in Kabul.

In spite of reports alleging Iranian support for the Taliban, in reality Iran stands to lose a great deal with the resurrection of a Taliban-led order in Afghanistan. The emergence of the Sunni fundamentalist and virulently anti-Shi'a Taliban represented a major threat to Iran at the height of its power prior to 2001. The rise of the Taliban added to the stream of Afghan refugees, especially Shi'a Afghans, who sought refuge in Iran. The influx of refugees seeking sanctuary in Iran added to the already large refugee community residing in Iran since the years of the anti-Soviet struggle. Over 1.5 million Afghan refugees are believed to reside in Iran today, an issue that remains a point of contention between Tehran and Kabul. [3] The assassination of 11 Iranian diplomats in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif in August 1998 after the Taliban overran the city almost sparked an Iranian invasion. Iran at the time, along with Russia and India, was a staunch supporter of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance forces operating in northern Afghanistan. Iranian opposition to the Taliban and its al-Qaeda ally was such that Tehran cooperated closely with Washington in the run-up to Operation Enduring Freedom by providing vital intelligence support for the U.S. war effort. While Tehran may relish seeing the United States stumble in Afghanistan, the prospects of having to contend with a reinvigorated Taliban backed by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan is not likely to sit well in Tehran.

## Afghanistan and the Iranian War on Drugs

Much has been said about the rapid expansion of the opium trade in Afghanistan and the nexus between transnational drug trafficking, insurgency, and international terrorism in South and Central Asia. Few countries, however, have felt the impact of this trend more than Iran, especially on the domestic social level. Iran has one of the highest rates of drug addiction in the world. An October 2009 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) study estimates that at least one million Iranians are addicted to opiates; Iranians are believed to consume at least 15 percent of the world's opium, and these figures are believed to be on the rise. [4] Iran's borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan place it along one of the world's busiest and most violent narcotics trafficking routes; 40 percent of the opium that flows out of Afghanistan is estimated to transit Iran before making its way to global markets. Iran also boasts the highest rate of opium seizures in the world. [5] Iran's counter-narcotics efforts, however, have come at a steep price. Tehran is contending with increasingly violent bands of traffickers operating within its borders, many of whom are linked to militant groups in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, in effect blurring the lines between organized crime and violent militancy. Based on current trends, the ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan will only exacerbate Iran's domestic problems relating to the drug trade.

## Conclusion

Iran's strategic calculus in Afghanistan is shaped by the interplay of local, regional, and international dynamics. While the robust Western military presence in the region poses serious challenges to Iran, there is little evidence to suggest that Tehran's strategy involves an intensive effort to support the Taliban's efforts to oust NATO and Coalition forces from Afghanistan. To achieve such an objective would require a far more vigorous and transparent effort on Tehran's part to inflict significant damage on the Coalition on a regular basis. Such an approach would vindicate the claims of Iran's nefarious motives in Afghanistan, thus further harming Iran's standing in the international community. Ongoing violence and instability in Afghanistan is a recipe for future flows of refugees, increased opium traffic, and violent militancy spilling over Iran's borders. Such a scenario is not in Iran's interest.

The rapidly-expanding Taliban insurgency and the growing instability in Pakistan pose the greatest

threats to the U.S.-led Coalition in Afghanistan, not Iran. Instead, Iran appears keen on playing a delicate balancing game that enables it to leverage its influence in Afghanistan, thereby bolstering its bargaining position on issues such as its nuclear program and the political future of Afghanistan and Iraq. At the same time, Iran has the potential to raise the stakes in Afghanistan if need be, as it does in Iraq, and to do so with devastating consequences for the United States in the event of a future crisis; indeed, a potential U.S. invasion of Iran, for instance, or for that matter, a potential Israeli attack on Iran, is sure to play itself out in Afghanistan.

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## Notes:

1. See "COMISAF'S Initial Assessment, Secretary of Defense Memorandum June 2009, Initial United States Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A) Assessment," Stanley A. McChrystal, General, U.S. Army Commander, United States Forces – Afghanistan, International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan, 30 August 2009, 2-10, [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews)
2. Ibid
3. See "Afghanistan and Pakistan: Understanding and Engaging Regional Stakeholders," Karim Sadjadpour, Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, March 31, 2009, <http://www.carnegieeurope.eu/publications/?fa=22913>
4. See "Addiction, Crime and Insurgency: The Transnational Threat of Afghan Opium," United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), October 2009, p. 1.
5. Ibid, pp.2, 7.