




# TERRORISM FOCUS

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### MYSTERY OF ARMS SHIP SEIZED BY SOMALI PIRATES GROWS DEEPER

In the holds of the Ukrainian cargo-ship MV Faina, seized by Somali pirates in September, are 33 Russian-designed T-72 battle tanks and a substantial cargo of grenade launchers, anti-aircraft guns, small arms and ammunition. Kenya and Ukraine both insist the arms and armor are destined for the Kenyan Department of Defense to replace Kenya's 1970s vintage Vickers MK 3 tanks (*Daily Nation*, September 29; AFP, September 28). At the moment, Kenya's armed forces do not use any Russian-designed equipment and Kenyan military sources have been reported as saying no training on the Ukrainian/Russian-built equipment has taken place, normal purchasing procedures were not followed and the Department of Defense was only informed of the shipment after it had been seized by the Somali pirates (*Daily Nation*, September 29).

A shipping document found on the vessel by Somali pirates indicates the arms are headed for "GOSS," the usual acronym for the Government of South Sudan. Ukrainian and Kenyan officials insist the acronym stands for "General Ordinance Supplies and Security," an apparently meaningless phrase that some Kenyan military officials say they have never seen before (*Sudan Tribune*, October 8). Kenyan government spokesman Dr. Alfred Mutua says Nairobi is still hopeful the MV Faina will be released "and we will get our cargo" (*Daily Nation*, October 23).

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There are claims from maritime shipping observers that the MV Faina is actually the fifth ship in the last year involved in shipping arms and tanks through the Kenyan port of Mombasa to South Sudan (*The National* [UAE], September 29, BBC, October 7). 50 tanks destined for the SPLA were seized in Mombasa in February, though the fate of this shipment is uncertain (*Sudan Tribune*, February 15; *Al-Ray al-Aam* [Khartoum], February 15, *Juba Post*, February 22). With the status of Sudan's oil fields still in dispute, South Sudan appears to be arming in preparation for a resumption of Sudan's Civil War following the 2011 South Sudan independence referendum. The T-72's would be more than a match for Khartoum's Chinese-designed Type 59 (al-Zubayr) tanks, a copy of the Russian-designed T-54, though more modern Type 96 (al-Bashir) tanks were unveiled in a military parade last December. Nevertheless, an SPLA spokesman denied the weapons were destined for South Sudan, saying the SPLA was not yet "advanced enough" to receive shipments of modern weapons (Reuters, September 29). There are no indications that SPLA personnel are receiving the extensive training needed before they could make use of the MV Faina's cargo.

Khartoum announced last week that senior Sudanese officials will not be attending the October 26-28 Nairobi meeting of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD – an important regional organization that includes Kenya, Sudan, Somalia, Uganda, Ethiopia and Djibouti). The snub comes only days after Sudan cancelled a meeting intended to seal a deal providing Kenya with discounted Sudanese oil (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 22).

Both moves are seen as expressions of Khartoum's displeasure with the use of Mombasa as a port for unauthorized arms shipments to land-locked South Sudan. Under the terms of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between north and south Sudan, all arms purchases by the southern Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) must be approved by the central government. Khartoum has also accused Ethiopia of supplying arms to the SPLA (Reuters, October 13). Shipments of arms to South Sudan do not violate the current UN arms embargo, as has been reported elsewhere.

On October 27, Russia announced that it had been given permission by Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) to take military action against

Somali pirates (ITAR-TASS, October 27). The Russian Baltic fleet guided-missile frigate *Neustrashimy* is now in Somali waters and is prepared to "take part in joint operations against pirates together with the vessels of foreign naval forces" (*Kommersant*, October 28). The MV Faina is currently surrounded by ships of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet determined to ensure the arms are not offloaded. Somalia's Islamic Courts Union (ICU) resistance movement has denied any involvement in the hijacking, noting that the ICU had eliminated piracy in 2006 (Reuters, September 29).

Confusing the issue is a recent statement by anonymous Yemeni government sources that the tanks and other arms on the MV Faina were destined for Yemen, not South Sudan (*Yemen Post*, October 20). Yemen is currently the world's fourth largest importer of Russian arms, many of which are resold to third parties, and has just concluded a deal with Moscow to allow Russian naval ships to "use its ports for reaching strategic objectives" (*Yemen Times*, October 18). The *Neustrashimy* docked in Aden before heading for Somali waters. Amidst the rising tensions, Yemen has announced the postponement of this week's regional summit on piracy, scheduled to be held in the Yemeni capital of Sana'a (*Yemen Post*, October 20).

#### CHINA RELEASES LIST OF OLYMPIC TERRORISM SUSPECTS

China's Ministry of Public Security announced the names of eight Uyghur militants charged with Olympic games-related terrorist activities on October 21. While no actual terrorist incidents were reported during the August games, a Ministry spokesman claimed all the various Uyghur plots were foiled by Chinese security forces (*Xinhua*, October 21).

The suspects are alleged to be members of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM -East Turkistan is the Uyghur term for the western Chinese province of Xinjiang). In the weeks prior to the Olympics, there were video threats from a previously unknown Uyghur Muslim group called the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which claimed responsibility for a number of older incidents they were clearly not involved in before making outlandish threats of massive attacks on Olympic facilities using conventional and chemical weapons. The TIP has not been heard from since. Though a series of bombings and attacks occurred

in Xinjiang in August, none were related to the Olympics (except through timing) and no claim of responsibility was issued by the TIP or ETIM.

There has been little ETIM activity since the death of its leader Hasan Mahsum at the hands of Pakistani troops in October 2003. According to a 2002 Chinese government report that gave exaggerated figures for the size of the movement, the ETIM received training in camps run by al-Qaeda or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Afghanistan prior to 9/11. Chinese security forces claimed Hasan Mahsum received funding from Osama bin Laden, though the late ETIM leader denied any connection to al-Qaeda. The movement received a U.S. designation as a terrorist organization after intense diplomatic pressure from China in 2002.

The new report charges Memtimin Memet (“Memetiming Memeti” in the Xinhua transliteration) with being the successor of Hasan Mahsum as leader of the ETIM. Memet is charged with organizing fundraising and military training before issuing orders in January for terrorist attacks on the Beijing Olympics.

Another alleged militant, Emet Yaqub (“Emeti Yaquf”), seems to be identified as the “Commander Seyfullah” who issued the TIP video threat that was dated July 23 and appeared on the U.S. IntelCenter website on July 25. The Ministry document makes no mention of TIP and cites only a “June 2008” video that threatened the Olympic games with chemical and biological weapons. Most of the suspects are reported to have trained with explosives and poisons, though no actual attacks are claimed.

The Ministry document is extremely vague on locations, dates and other details of the terrorist plots, but attempts to compensate for this with less relevant details, such as aliases, birthdays, education levels and official identification numbers. The report avoids identifying locations for the ETIM’s external activities, referring only to “a South Asian country” and “a certain Middle East country.” The “South Asian country” is most likely Pakistan, which is currently seeking financial and nuclear aid from Beijing.

China is seeking international support in apprehending and extraditing the ETIM suspects, who are believed to be out of the country. The release of the statement

comes as China is lobbying the U.S. to “avoid double standards” and extradite 17 Uyghurs currently held in the Guantanamo Bay prison (Xinhua, October 21; Hsin Pao [Hong Kong], October 23). The men have been found innocent of terrorist activities and were recently ordered released by a court order, though the U.S. administration is appealing the ruling (AP, October 9; LA Times, October 8). Uyghur expatriates claim China is mounting a new campaign of repression against Xinjiang’s Uyghurs now that the Olympic games are over (Sherqiy Turkistan Axbarat Merkizi [East Turkistan Information Center, Munich], October 15).

### **Destruction of Turkish Outpost by PKK Leads to Counterterrorism Reforms**

The PKK’s October 3 attack on the Aktutun military outpost sparked a controversy over whether Turkish counterterrorism strategy is on the right track. In its three decades old battle against the PKK, the Aktutun attack marked the first time the Turkish Armed Forces (Turk Silahlı Kuvvetleri - TSK) was strongly criticized by mainstream media outlets. Two major factors played a role in the surprisingly harsh criticism. First, despite the fact that the PKK has organized four attacks on Aktutun outposts in the last year, the military failed to successfully defend its outpost, with 17 soldiers losing their lives. Second, the TSK failed to manage the sequence of events after the attack.

Soon after the fatal attack, the Turkish press reported that Turkish military intelligence was aware of PKK intentions to attack Aktutun a month before it happened. Liberal daily Taraf published an intelligence report showing that the intelligence service detected and reported the details of the planning process. Along with the military intelligence reports, Taraf also published the three images from American satellite intelligence, which showed the preparation process of the attack (*Taraf*, October 14).

The second source of criticism was the TSK’s failure to inform the public about what actually happened at Aktutun. On October 4, the PKK’s attack was posted on the TSK webpage, which announced 15 soldiers were killed and two were missing while 23 PKK fighters were

killed in the clash (tsk.mil.tr., October 4). It turned out the PKK's reported losses were inaccurate – only nine PKK bodies were found on the scene (cnnturk, October 5).

On October 5, the Deputy Chief of the Turkish General Staff informed the media that the TSK had planned a year ago to move five military outposts to geographically secure places to avoid such an attack. Because of financial shortages the posts haven't been moved yet (*Hurriyet*, October 5). This information sparked a controversy over whether the government provides sufficient financial support to the military (*Hurriyet*, October 6). Even soccer fan clubs became involved in criticizing the government by offering financial help to build a better military outpost (antu.com, October 8). The Finance Ministry responded by releasing a statement denying allegations the military was not financially supported. On the contrary, the Finance Ministry stated that “the Military in 2007 did not use 250 millions Turkish Lira from its budget and returned it back to the treasury” (*Aksam Gazetesi*, October 9).

In addition, an anonymous source told mainstream daily *Hurriyet* that since Turkey's land operation in northern Iraq last February, America had stopped sharing its satellite intelligence (*Hurriyet*, October 6). This disinformation attempt by Turkish sources was immediately rejected by the U.S. embassy in Ankara. An embassy spokesperson told *Hurriyet*: “There is no such termination on the intelligence sharing program with Turkey. It continues as it should be” (*Hurriyet*, October 7). A further explanation claimed the terrorists who attacked the Aktutun outposts did not come from PKK bases in northern Iraq, but from Turkish territory. Because American satellite intelligence devices are not programmed to monitor PKK movements in Turkish territory, the gathering of 300 PKK fighters could not be detected (*Hurriyet*, October 13).

While the TSK has been trying to cover its failure through the release of selected information to pro-state media outlets, *Taraf* reported that the commander of the Air Force, General Aydogan Babaoglu, was playing golf in Antalya while the soldiers in Aktutun were fighting in their posts. Even worse was the fact he was one of the last people to hear what happened in Aktutun, some 24 hours after the clash ended. As the press noted, some of the dead soldiers had already been buried before Babaoglu was informed of the attack (*Taraf*, October 7). The TSK released a press statement to deny the allegations raised by *Taraf*, though the statement confirmed that General

Babaoglu was in fact not informed of the attack until his golf game ended on Saturday, October 5 (tsk.mil.tr, October 8).

The revelations prompted an angry response from the Chief of the Turkish General Staff, General Ilker Basbug, who held a press conference to denounce the publication of classified information; “Those who present the actions of the separatist terrorist organization [a euphemism for the PKK] as successful acts are responsible for the blood that has been shed and will be shed... This is my last word: I invite everyone to be careful and to stand in the right place” (*Today's Zaman*, October 14). While almost all mainstream Turkish media was critical of at least the format and the tone of General Basbug and his apparent threats against the media, he received unexpected support for his statements from Prime Minister Erdogan, who joined Basbug in criticizing Turkey's news organizations; “There is no room in this fight [against terror] for weakness or hesitation. Nobody should dare to show our government or security forces as weak” (*Taraf*, October 17; *Turkish Daily News*, October 17). Erdogan's comments were met with a sarcastic response in some parts of the Turkish media, to which the Prime Minister replied; “Some people in the media are trying to provoke us. Where this is coming from is the question that we have the right to ask” (*Turkish Daily News*, October 18).

The TSK insisted that the aerial photos published by *Taraf* were in fact from Kandil (125 kilometers away from Aktutun) and Kerintepe (20 kilometers away). A publication ban was imposed on further reproduction of the images on the grounds that it might jeopardize the investigation into who leaked the photos to the press (*Bianet*, October 17; *Turkish Daily News*, October 18).

*Taraf's* reporting opened the door for the mainstream media to question what went wrong at Aktutun. Even well known Kemalist intellectuals, who almost always support the TSK, began questioning whether Turkish counterterrorism policies work (*Radikal*, October 7; *Sabah*, October 8). Kemalist Republican Peoples Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi -CHP) leader Deniz Baykal blamed the military's failure on the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP); “There were almost no terrorist actions or attacks [before the AKP took power in 2002]. Terrorism has significantly risen since 2002. The government has either been unable to understand the term ‘terrorism’ or it has chosen not

to understand it. It has not grasped the significance of the fight against terrorism” (*Aksam*, October 8; *Today’s Zaman*, October 8).

Such questioning led the TSK and the government to take a series of new steps. First, the TSK, for the first time in its counterterrorism history, openly invited counterterrorism experts to give their opinion (*Vatan*, October 8). In a counterterrorism meeting between military generals and the government, the generals requested extended powers and the creation of an institution to better coordinate the fight against terrorism (*Radikal*, October 10) Another significant development is the decision of the Turkish National Police (TNP) to send seven thousand men of its Special Forces units to the ethnic-Kurdish region of southeastern Turkey. During the 1990s the Police Special Forces were a leading element in the fight against the PKK, but during the February 28, 1997 political crisis between the Turkish military and the civilian government, the generals put pressure on the government to withdraw police forces from the region (*Yeni Safak*, October 10).

On October 15 the government released its plan to reorganize government institutions in Ankara to better coordinate counter-terrorism efforts (*Today’s Zaman*, October 15). Furthermore, in the National Security Council (Milli Guvenlik Kurulu -MGK) meeting the government’s plan to reorganize the bureaucracy in Ankara to better coordinate state institutions in the fight against the terrorism was approved (*Vatan*, October 21).

The new plan calls for the military to relinquish control for domestic security to the civilian Interior Ministry and its police and gendarmerie units (the latter are now under the effective, if not official, control of the TSK). The government is planning to coordinate all the state institutions to concentrate their efforts on counterterrorism problems by addressing the economic, social and educational aspects of terrorism. It was also announced that the Chief of Staff will be briefing government cabinet members about counterterrorism efforts. This marks the first time in three decades that the Chief of General Staff will brief civilian cabinet members. Prime Minister Erdogan revealed the “briefing will be about the details of the counterterrorism efforts to see what the government can do to coordinate counterterrorism efforts for today and the future” (*Anadolu Ajansi*, October 24; *Hurriyet*, October 28). One consequence of

the transfer of responsibility for counterterrorism efforts is the civilian government will now be accountable when there is a failure such as Aktutun.

After two stormy weeks for the Turkish military, politicians and media, what seemed evident was that most of Taraf’s initial reporting was accurate. Indeed, despite the fact that the TSK received intelligence from various sources, it failed to prevent the PKK from attacking. Making matters worse, the TSK also failed to handle the aftermath of the Aktutun attack, harming its image in the process. By supporting General Basbug, Prime Minister Erdogan has lost his credibility in the eyes of Turkish Kurds and faced protests in his last visit to the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, where Erdogan’s AKP was expecting to be successful in next March’s regional elections (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 24).

On the positive side, however, there is now a clear effort to reorganize the state bureaucracy to better address the terrorism problem and, most importantly, the civilian government will finally be actively involved. Turkish diplomacy is at work and new channels of communications are being established with the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq to uproot PKK bases from its territory. Following the disaster at Aktutun, it appears the civilian government and the military are finally on the same page in Turkey’s war on terrorism.

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## Is al-Qaeda Seeking Allies in Latin America?

U.S. officials have warned of a real danger Islamist extremists could form alliances with wealthy and powerful Latin American drug lords to launch new terrorist attacks against the United States. According to recent remarks made by Under Secretary of Intelligence and Analysis in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Charles Allen, at a two-day conference hosted by SOUTHCOM and the Armed Forces Communications and Electronics Association (AFCEA); “The threat of ties between criminal and drug smuggling networks and Islamic terrorism may be less pressing than in the Near East, but the threats in this hemisphere are genuine, insidious, and not always limited to recruiting and finance.” [1]

It's still unlikely that al-Qaeda or affiliated groups will resort to an alliance with drug dealers in a region where Islamist extremists are still rare. Revealing the existence of such an alliance would have the unwelcome consequence of Salafi-Jihadi organizations losing religious sympathizers in the Middle East. Furthermore the connection between identifying "some extremist group operatives involved in fundraising and finding logistical support" and the willingness to ally with drug dealers in terrorist attacks is unclear.

Others, however, have speculated on the possibility of an alliance between the jihadis and revolutionary leftist groups in Latin America. In an article entitled "Seven Years After September: Has al-Qaeda Achieved its Goals?," Hamed Bin Hasan al-Qahtani, the editor-in-chief of a newly published jihadist electronic journal, predicted that nationalist and Marxist resistance movements in developing countries, and in Latin America, in particular, will switch allegiances, very soon, towards al-Qaeda as they witness the "victories of al-Qaeda, which have never been achieved by any secular movement in the world" (*Qaddaya Jihadyya*, Issue 2, September, 2008).

While such a prediction seems to be a new development in the rhetoric of al-Qaeda and its affiliated Salafi-Jihadi groups, it raises the pivotal question of the possibility of an alliance between Salafi-Jihadis and radical leftist groups in Latin America, based on the common cause of confronting American imperialism and hegemony.

Fred Halliday, a well-known British leftist scholar, concluded in a 2006 article; "that the Islamist programme, ideology and record are diametrically opposed to the left." However, he wrote his article arguing that Islamist groups, because of their attacks on the United States, have won "sympathy far beyond the Muslim world, including among those vehemently opposed from a variety of ideological perspectives to the principal manifestations of its power" (*opendemocracy.net*, September 8, 2006). Nevertheless, Halliday's article served as a reminder to leftists that Islamists are not credible allies.

Olivier Roy, a French specialist on Islamist movements, suggests that Salafi-Jihadis can collaborate with non-Muslim organizations, and can also include members who are not Muslim (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2005).

While it is not possible to confirm whether violent Islamist groups such as al-Qaeda are ready and willing to be allied with secular radical Leftist groups in Latin America, al-Qahtani's predication indicates there is some interest in the region; in terms of recruiting sympathizers and encouraging leftist radical groups to simulate al-Qaeda's tactics.

Pablo Gamez, head of the Latin section of Netherlands International Radio, says in a story on Latin American-Arab relations that George W. Bush's administration and its involvement in the war on terror since 9/11 has led to a loss of American influence in Latin America, which is now rarely described as America's "backyard" in White House agendas. According to Gamez, the emergence of al-Qaeda has led to such a dramatic shift in priorities that, so far as the U.S. foreign policy agenda goes; "South America does not exist anymore" (*arabic.rnw.nl*, May 25, 2006).

Because of negative feelings against the United States, Islamic da'waa (preaching) has flourished in Latin America since 9/11, according to a Brazilian imam (*islamonline.net*, March 27, 2004). While there are an estimated four million Muslims in Latin America (about 8% of the entire population), served by well-established moderate Islamic institutions, the numbers of converts to Islam in the region is increasing (some sources estimate that 50% of Muslims in Latin America are converts). With anti-American sentiments running high, these newly converted Muslims are likely to be targeted by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups as potential jihadis unless the moderate Islamic institutions are able to assimilate these new converts.

The fact that al-Qaeda resorts to recruiting newly converted Muslims has been witnessed in several incidents, such as Germaine Lindsay, one of the 7/7 London bombers; Kibley da Costa, a member of what is known in the British Media as "Osama Bin London's group," who aimed to open training camps in the UK in 2006; or the first female European suicide bomber in Iraq, Belgian Muriel Degauque. Such a strategy could be pursued by Salafi-Jihadis in Latin America.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that al-Qaeda will try to convince radical leftist secular movements to join them as they will not accept non-Muslims in their organizations;

but they are defiantly in favor of such groups simulating al-Qaeda's tactics in attacking the United States. Such attacks would ease pressure on al-Qaeda and, at same time, would confirm al-Qaeda's role as the organization which inspires all other radical groups in the world.

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Endnote:

1. U.S. Department of Homeland Security Press Release, Remarks by Under Secretary Charles Allen at AFCEA-SOUTHCOM "South 2008" Conference Panel: "Narco-Trafficking: What is the Nexus with the War on Terror?" October 8, 2008. See also Columbia Reports, October 9; AP, October 8).

## **Jihadis Criticize Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and the Islamic State of Iraq**

Recent statements from the leadership of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) have generated negative reactions from members of jihadi internet forums. Statements entitled "The Divine Promise" and "The Prophetic State," from ISI leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and ISI Minister of War Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (a.k.a. Abu Ayyub al-Masri) respectively, accused resistance factions of treason and collaboration with the occupation and the Iraqi government (almarsaa.net, October 7). One response entitled "From Jihadis and Jihad Lovers to Shaykh Abu Omar al-Baghdadi" was particularly critical of al-Muhajir, who also serves as the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (alboraq.info, October 14).

Many supporters of the Islamic Army of Iraq, the Muslim Brotherhood's Iraqi Islamic Party and the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance umbrella group approved a posting by a forum member, nicknamed "Shareef," who called upon the ISI Amir al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir to take heed of the great conspiracy being concocted against jihad in Iraq. As a consequence of this conspiracy, true jihadis are being targeted along with apostates by the ISI, with the shedding of honest jihadis' blood as a consequence.

Shareef warns the ISI; "You have tested our patience. We can no longer watch you fall for manipulations by hypocrites and infidels." Shareef was responding to earlier statements by al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajir that accused the aforementioned resistance factions of treason and collaboration with the occupiers and Iraqi government (for al-Baghdadi, see muslim.net, October 2; for al-Muhajir, see al-hesbah.info, October 10).

Shareef questioned ISI's religious criteria for identifying true jihadis ("whose hands are still dripping American blood"), as infidels. This practice revokes the immunity naturally bestowed on all jihadis by Islam and justifies the murder of jihadis and the confiscation of their wealth, leading in the end to further chaos in the Iraqi resistance movement. Al-Qaeda should investigate allegations against the jihadi groups before passing judgments, says Shareef, adding; "It's insane to pass irrational judgments on other jihadi groups without carefully scrutinizing their actions and jihadi practices." Shareef asserts that he and other supporters of jihadi groups accused of misconduct by al-Qaeda are very well informed about the situation in Iraq, refuting al-Qaeda's pretext that common citizens are misled by these groups.

The rivalry among jihadi groups in Iraq has weakened the jihad against the Americans and its apostate government, says Shareef, who calls upon al-Qaeda to draw back from attacking jihadi groups and revert to the tactics implemented at the onset of resistance, when all jihadi groups would join efforts and attack American forces as their number one priority and the Iraqi government as their second priority. Shareef concludes his message by alleging the conflict between jihadi groups is manipulated by the Americans to disrupt jihad. The supporters of al-Qaeda commented on the Shareef's message by saying that Muslim Brotherhood has collaborated with the infidels in Afghanistan and Iraq, leaving al-Qaeda as the guardians of jihad. Other participants were inquiring about ways to deliver Shareef's message to al-Baghdadi and publicize it through international media.

Shareef was not the only one to post criticisms of the ISI. A forum participant, nicknamed "Abu Bakr Aqeeda," posted a message entitled "The Disasters inflicted by the so-called State of Iraq on the Iraqi jihadi project" (muslim.net, October 16, 2008). Although disagreements and differences in opinion are normal and healthy among jihadi groups, killing jihadis because of these differences

is neither religious nor acceptable, says Aqeeda, who accuses al-Qaeda of systematically liquidating fighters from other groups. Since the establishment of ISI, some jihadis, under duress, were given three options: to pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi, quit jihad activities or be killed by al-Qaeda.

To prove his point, Aqeeda posted excerpts of communiqués released by jihadi groups accusing al-Qaeda of killing their fighters, including Jihad and Reform, the 1920 Revolution Brigade, the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Mujahidin Army, Iraqi Hamas, and Ansar al-Sunna. The debate became heated when participants on opposing sides posted conflicting statements by different Salafi-Jihadi ideologues. In support of al-Qaeda, Safar al-Hawali, a renowned Salafi-Jihadi ideologue said “Those who verbally attack al-Qaeda to please the corrupt hypocrites are committing a big sin.” In response, one forum participant posted excerpts of a stark criticism of Bin Laden by a leading Salafist, the late Saudi Chief Mufti, Abdul Aziz Bin Baaz; “Osama Bin Laden is one of the saboteurs of earth seeking rotten evil ways and disobeying the ruler.”

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## **Rumors of Assassination Attempt on Shaykh Nasrallah as Hezbollah Reconciles with Opponents**

During the past week a rumor that Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Shaykh Hassan Nasrallah had survived a poisoning attempt quickly spread in both regional and global media. The report was originally disclosed by Iraqi website Almalaf on October 22. According to Almalaf, Hezbollah’s leader was in critical condition for several days as a result of the poisoning attempt and survived thanks to the prompt intervention of a team of fifteen Iranian doctors who rushed to Lebanon to save the Shaykh’s life.

Almalaf, a website close to the Iraqi government, quoted “Lebanese diplomatic sources” as the basis of story, adding that Israeli intelligence was likely behind the foiled

assassination. Regional and international media reported the news in the following days and most news sources concurred with Almalaf in attributing the responsibility for the plot to the state of Israel. However, reports suggested Lebanese political enemies of Hezbollah, as well as internal opponents of Nasrallah, were behind the attack (*Jerusalem Post*, October 22; *Al-Manar*, October 25).

Hezbollah quickly dismissed the rumor, and Nasrallah personally appeared on the organization’s television channel, *Al-Manar*, to refute the assassination report. During the exclusive interview, Nasrallah said that the story was completely false and added that it was part of a broader psychological war against the organization; “As you can see, I’m sitting here in front of you and I’m telling you there has been no poisoning. This is just an invention of websites.” Furthermore Nasrallah condemned the reports that linked the attempt to alleged internal strife within the group and implied the assassination plot was an “inside job” to challenge the Secretary General’s leadership. In this regard, Nasrallah added: “Investigations are ongoing to discover who did this” (*Al-Manar*, October 25).

It is a fact that since Nasrallah took over the leadership of the organization in 1992 after his predecessor Abbas Al-Mousawi was assassinated, he has been a target for Israeli intelligence, as well as for other political forces. In 2006, Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir* reported an assassination plot by a Lebanese-Palestinian cell in Lebanon had been disrupted by Lebanese military intelligence (*As-Safir*, April 10, 2006). Nasrallah rarely appears in public since the 2006 summer war for fear of assassination by Israeli forces.

However, despite the plausibility of the story, the news of the poisoning plot seems extremely hard to confirm. Although Hezbollah’s denial of the story does not constitute the final proof in determining the accuracy of the report, the assassination plot can be doubted on several grounds, including the extremely generic and ambiguous nature of the original report disclosed only by the Iraqi website Almalaf and the fact that no Lebanese news source reported the episode at the time.

Despite substantial doubts regarding the foiled assassination, it is still interesting to analyze its potential significance, especially given the timing chosen to



release the report. First, the news concerning the plot came only a week after Iranian sources reported that Hassan Nasrallah had appointed his cousin Hashim Safi Al-Din (chairman of the Hezbollah executive office) as his personal successor in the event of an assassination (*Khurshid*, October 13; *Al-Bawaba*, October 13).

Although Hezbollah said it was “unaware” of the succession report and failed to comment on its merit, the choice of Al-Din as a successor seems highly plausible, as Nasrallah himself was the former chairman of the executive office before becoming Secretary General and the position seems a training post for future leaders of the organization (*Daily Star*, October 16).

The announcement also had a broader political relevance, as it followed Israel’s announcement it was ready to use “disproportionate force” in the event of a future war against Lebanon (*Ha’aretz*, October 4). In this sense, Hezbollah sent the message that even the assassination of its leader would not succeed in permanently weakening the organization (*Al-Arabiya*, October 14). Hezbollah’s declarations included a more general warning to Israel regarding a “big surprise” awaiting them in the event of a future attack, as well as a more specific threat to avenge the assassination of Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyeh (*Al-Bawaba*, October 8; *Al-Akhbar*, October 8).

The timing of the disclosure of the foiled assassination plot is also interesting from the point of view of domestic Lebanese politics, as it comes in the context of ongoing reconciliation efforts between Hezbollah and opposing political forces. In late September, Lebanese newspapers reported that Future Movement (Tayyar al-Mustaqbal) leader Saad Hariri and Nasrallah were scheduled to meet to discuss a reconciliation platform (*Naharnet*, September 26). The meeting, after having been postponed due to security concerns, finally took place on October 27, following by several days a meeting between Hariri and Iranian ambassador Mohammad Reza Shaybani to discuss the reconciliation process and enhanced Lebanese-Iranian ties (*Tehran Times*, October 22). Though the substance of the Nasrallah-Hariri talks remained secret, the meeting was generally acclaimed by Lebanese politicians from all factions (*al-Jazeera*, October 27; *Daily Star*, October 28).

The report of the forthcoming summit was followed by a declaration by Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt, stating that if the meeting between Hariri and Nasrallah was productive, he would also be interested in talking to the Hezbollah leadership (*Naharnet*, October 16). Druze leader Jumblatt was, until recently, one of the most vocal opponents of Shaykh Nasrallah and Hezbollah, but now describes their war of words as the product of “moments of terrible psychological and political tension” (*Press TV*, October 20). Hezbollah has been showing interest in carrying on a dialogue with other political factions, although it has specified; “Definitely, when we talk about reconciliations, we do not talk about new political alliances” (*Al-Manar*, September 26). In this context, reports accusing political opponents of plotting against the life of Nasrallah could be seen as an attempt to undermine the ongoing dialogue between Hezbollah and its traditional political opponents within Lebanon.

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