

TERRORISM FOCUS

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PAKISTANI ISLAMIST FATWA REFUTES TALIBAN’S JIHAD

In a surprising move, a group of Pakistani clerics best known for their hardline views on Islam’s role in society have gathered to issue a fatwa condemning suicide-bombing and the current trend of individuals or organizations declaring jihad against the state at any moment they feel appropriate. Brought together under the umbrella of the Mutahidda Ulema Council (MUC), the conference agreed “only the state has the authority to call for jihad, and individuals or groups are not authorized to do that” (*Daily Times* [Lahore], October 16).

The meeting brought together an unlikely assemblage of Pakistani religious leaders. The council included representatives from the Jamaat Ahl-e-Sunnat (a Barelvi Sunni movement largely based on the non-Pashtun population of the Punjab) and their ideological opponents in the conservative Deobandi Jamaat Ulema-e Islam. The Shia Ahl-e Tashee was present, as was the Sipah-e Sahaba, a banned radical Sunni organization involved in terrorist violence against Shias. Representatives from minority Sunni groups like the Ahl-e Hadith and Jamaat-e Islami were also present. The conference was hosted in Lahore by the Jamia Naeemia (led by Maulana Sarfaraz Naeemi), a group known for its harsh criticism of perceived government failures to implement strict applications of Islam in the social and political spheres of Pakistan.

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Conference delegates were unanimous in their rejection of suicide-bombing as haram (forbidden) and najaaiz (illegitimate), though the statement added: "It seems as if the government is covertly backing these attacks so that patriotic citizens may not assemble and launch a mass drive for the defense of the country" (*The News* [Islamabad], October 14). While moderate Islamic leaders like Mufti Munibur Rehman have issued fatwas against suicide-bombing in the past, few members of the MUC group of clerics have any affiliation to "moderate" trends of Islamic interpretation (*Daily Times*, October 16). Despite the criticism of the government, the clerics' condemnation of suicide bombing was welcomed by Pakistan's Interior advisor, Rehman Malik.

The conference also issued a number of demands on the Islamabad government, including an immediate stop to military operations in the Bajaur and Swat frontier districts, an alliance between Pakistan and Iran, and the public revelation of any secret deals made between ex-President Pervez Musharraf and the United States. The clerics condemned the recent U.S. nuclear trade deal with India as dangerous to Pakistan, which has just completed its own deal for Chinese nuclear assistance (Press Trust of India, October 2; *Daily Times*, October 16; October 19).

Tribal lashkars (ad-hoc military formations) have been formed in the frontier region in recent weeks to combat Taliban militants, but since the MUC meeting the Taliban have struck back with deadly suicide attacks against tribal jirgas (assemblies) convened to discuss eliminating the militants (Geo TV, October 18; KUNA, October 19). The attacks suggest that even a fatwa issued by hardline Islamists is now insufficient to slow the rapid escalation of violence in the tribal regions.

IDENTITY OF KIDNAPPERS OF CHINESE OIL WORKERS IN SUDAN STILL UNCLEAR

Nine Chinese oil workers were abducted on October 18 from a small oil field in the South Kordofan region of Sudan. It was another example of the insecurity that plagues oil operations in Sudan and is the third abduction of petroleum industry employees this year. The men are employees of Chinese oil giant China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and were doing contract work at the time for the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating

Company (GNPOC), a consortium made up of Chinese, Malaysian, Indian and Sudanese elements (*al-Jazeera*, October 19; Reuters, October 19; *Sudan Tribune*, October 19). Security forces are reported to be scouring the area but have been hampered by rain and the thick bush and forest of the area.

Sudan and China have agreed to joint efforts to obtain the release of the kidnapped oil workers (SUNA, October 20). A crisis cell has been formed within the Chinese embassy to deal with the issue (*Sudan Vision*, October 20).

A spokesman for Sudan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a Darfur rebel group with national ambitions, of carrying out the abductions (SUNA, October 20). The Chinese embassy has not yet had any contact with the kidnappers (AFP, October 20). Despite government claims of JEM involvement, there is a strong possibility the kidnappers are members of the local Arab Messiriya tribe. Part of the cattle-owning Baqqara Arab group of western Sudan, the Messiriya are angry over the inequitable distribution of jobs and oil wealth from industry facilities located on their traditional grazing lands. JEM claims the Messiriya have joined their operations against Kordofan oil facilities in the past in reaction to a government disarmament campaign (see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 11). Four Indian oil workers and their Sudanese driver were kidnapped by the Messiriya last May (*Sudan Tribune*, July 27). Though it has warned Chinese oil companies to leave the region in the past, JEM has neither confirmed nor denied participation in the current kidnapping – JEM units are often far-flung and operate with a great deal of autonomy.

China's efforts to fuel its rapid economic growth have led it into some high-risk areas where social and political instability have dissuaded others from working. Two Chinese engineers were kidnapped in Pakistan by the Taliban and have been held in the Swat valley since August 29. In a recent escape attempt one man reached a government checkpoint while the other fractured his leg and was recaptured by the Taliban (Geo TV, October 18).

The Kordofan abductions come at an embarrassing moment for the Khartoum government. Chinese special envoy to Africa Liu Guijin is scheduled to arrive on Friday to discuss the Darfur crisis. Chinese support for Khartoum is

beginning to wear at its international credibility and there are reports that China has advised Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir to begin cooperating with the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has recently indicted him for war crimes in Darfur (Sudan Tribune, October 18). China has also recently opened a consulate in the southern capital of Juba in an effort to develop relations with the oil-rich Government of South Sudan (GoSS) as it prepares for an independence referendum in 2011.

Jihadis Recommend Internet Guerrilla Warfare in Response to Hacking of Islamist Websites

The recent hacking and shutting down of some jihadi websites has raised concerns among jihadi forum members seeking alternatives in case all jihadi forums go down. These forums have, in many terrorism cases, been a launching pad and deployment point for jihadi activities. One still-operational jihadi forum posted a message entitled "Guerrilla Warfare on the Mountain Range of the Internet," offering contingency plans for the disruption of existing websites and proposals for new methods to keep jihadi internet communications and propaganda efforts alive (alhesbahweb.net, September 28).

Posted by a forum participant nicknamed "Riah al-Ghobar," the message says that it is time to devise plans to counter the Western campaign against major jihadi forums. The suggested plans should be implemented in case all jihadi forums are attacked and shut down. Al-Ghobar begins his posting by laying out the components of internet guerilla warfare (IGW) and ways to implement these tactics on the web.

Firstly, al-Ghobar outlines "email support" as the number one method of digital warfare. This method can be carried out by members who follow jihadi events and view video clips without participating in militant activities. It is important for this category of jihadis to sign up and receive jihadist material through their emails. Therefore, they are instructed to open new email addresses and register with the "email support" group. After the creation of new email addresses and considering internet security precautions such as the use of secure proxies, mailing lists are compiled and divided into groups of participants and moderators.

Secondly, virtual jihadis should install Encrypted Messenger software and add to it the compiled email addresses. Each moderator should have his own messenger group to discuss issues or jihadi events and future jihadi activities in coordination with other moderators. Next, al-Ghobar suggests jihadis surf the internet, searching for forums and email groups in order to join them and gradually disseminate the Salafi-Jihadi ideology among their members. Once a certain forum is targeted, moderators may instruct participants to register at these groups and start a dialogue directed at convincing the members of the merits of jihad. Although small forums and email groups would welcome the increase in group members, they might also reject the Salafi-Jihadi influence and ban the jihadis. In that case, jihadis should be persistent in the face of such rejection and if the targeted website insists on banning them, they should attack the website and shut it down in a coordinated group effort.

The spread of Salafi-Jihadi ideology will not be impeded when jihadi websites, such as alhesbah or eklaas, are shutdown, says al-Ghobar, who adds: "If our forums are blocked, truth will spread through the many email addresses of influential people that we should search and add to our lists." The enemy will not be able to restrain this campaign, especially when the guerilla network expands. Al-Ghobar believes his plan would spare jihadis unwanted scrutiny by security forces because each member of the network will belong to a small cell connected to another cell through one jihadi who would remain anonymous.

Al-Ghobar concludes his plan by emphasizing the procedures necessary for secure internet communication, such as proxies recommended by alhesbah and ekhlaas website administrators and encryption programs, revealing that he has already obtained and tested the necessary software for his proposed plan. Until his internet invasion battalions can be launched, al-Ghobar suggests uploading websites to the internet with specious domain names.

There are disadvantages to al-Ghobar's concept of internet guerrilla warfare. The decentralized structure of al-Ghobar's scheme might cause slackness, consequently leading to disconnection among jihadis. Female jihadis, who al-Ghobar regards as the spearhead of all jihadi operations for their commitment and perseverance, might get involved in unreligious practices through private

contacts between males and females. According to Islam, females are not allowed to communicate privately with marriageable males. To overcome this religious taboo, al-Ghobar suggests females communicate over the internet through a male sibling or unmarried relative.

Forum participants responded positively to al-Ghobar's proposed IGW and contributed to the plan with further comments and revisions. To encourage members' participation, one participant suggested the imposition of new regulations banning non-active members from the forums. Another member added the need to build strong infrastructure for the proposed IGW, comprised of flexible email addresses, strong proxies and decentralized administration, comparing the plan, once implemented, to a nuclear fission-like chain of action spreading jihad across the internet. Other participants asserted their willingness to become part of jihadi media support groups in crisis situations. To evade scrutiny by security forces, forum members suggested changing the name of the jihadi encryption software "Secrets of the Mujahideen" into something less suspicious and dividing the groups non-geographically to avoid identification and restriction by intelligence services (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 27, 2007).

The question is whether we are better off without jihadi websites. The decision to shut down jihadi websites should be based on the separate examination of each website. The decision making process must weigh the intelligence value against the security risk posed by the website, information attainable only through prolonged monitoring and analysis of the activities and contents of rogue jihadi websites.

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PKK Attacks Prompt Security Cooperation between Turkey and Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government

The decades-long armed conflict between Turkey and the guerrillas of the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK) has witnessed a number of

major policy shifts by key participants in the past year. The greatest such shift thus far – one in the “sea-change” category – may very well sound the death knell for the PKK, already very much on the defensive in its northern Iraqi redoubt. Following a deadly October 3 PKK attack on a Turkish military outpost in Aktutun, no less a figure than Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and nephew of long-time Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) leader and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) President Massoud Barzani, stated that the PKK attacks were aimed at harming relations between Turkey and northern Iraq's Kurds (*Hurriyet*, October 9). The idea that an Iraqi Kurdish leader would make such a statement would have been virtually unthinkable over the past twenty five years.

The catalyst for the change in the PKK's political and cultural environment was the Aktutun attack that killed seventeen Turkish soldiers and wounded twenty more, followed shortly after by an attack on a Diyarbakir police shuttle bus that killed six and wounded approximately two dozen others (*Hurriyet*, October 9; *Today's Zaman*, October 9).

Allegations that Turkish military intelligence was aware of PKK intentions to attack Aktutun a month before it happened have not bolstered public confidence in Turkey's current approach to security issues (*Taraf*, October 14). The revelations prompted an angry response from the Chief of the Turkish General Staff, Ilker Basbug, who denounced 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” (*Sunday's Zaman*, October 14).

The first of the significant policy shifts in the effort to untangle what has become one of the world's longest-lasting military conflicts – almost a quarter of a century – occurred in November, 2007, when the U.S. administration gave Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan assurances that Turkey's military would receive real-time, actionable intelligence that would permit a more effective prosecution of the war against PKK guerrilla forces and their facilities in Iraq's mountainous northern region (see *Terrorism Focus*, November 6, 2007). The initial Turkish counterattacks took place on December

16, when Turkish aircraft struck numerous PKK targets in northern Iraq, soon evolving into precision operations of an unprecedented scope (al-Arabiya.net, December 22, 2007).

While U.S.-supplied intelligence information on PKK guerrillas and facilities has been invaluable to Turkey, it has not been a complete success. As in other military conflicts, conventional and unconventional, the PKK has adapted its tactics to the enhanced Turkish capabilities, and Turkish casualties have continued to mount. Turkey, though, has also continued to implement additional phases of a multi-pronged counter-offensive, including measures beyond purely military ones.

In the diplomatic sphere, it has become obvious in recent weeks that Iraqi Kurds maintain a fairly robust but low-key presence at the national level with Turkey, aimed at enhancing relations with their northern neighbor on a broad spectrum of issues. The relationship took a considerable step forward when senior Turkish officials Murat Ozcelik (special envoy to Iraq) and Ahmet Davutoglu (principal foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Erdogan) met face to face with Nechirvan Barzani in Baghdad in May of this year (*Today's Zaman*, October 14). An analogous Kurdish representative to Ankara is Bahroz Galali of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the party of Iraqi President and PUK leader Jalal Talibani (*Hurriyet*, October 13). The solidity of the new relationship was demonstrated on the day of the Aktutun attack, when Safin Dizayee, representing KRG president Massoud Barzani, met with Turkish officials at the Foreign Ministry in Ankara (*Today's Zaman*, October 13). Publicly announced visits by Turkish officials to Iraq, with a concentration on Kurdish matters, are suddenly in evidence. Turkish President Abdullah Gul is expected to visit Baghdad in the coming weeks to meet with President Talabani. Prime Minister Erdogan has already concluded a visit to Baghdad (Anatolian News Agency, July 10). Gul's visit follows a return visit earlier this month to Iraq by Turkish representatives Özcelik and Davutoglu, this time to meet KRG President Massoud Barzani in sessions both sides termed "positive" (*Today's Zaman*, October 15). According to Turkish intelligence sources, Massoud Barzani may begin talks with the PKK aimed at bringing the group's attacks on Turkish targets to a halt (*Today's Zaman*, October 16). KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani is also expected to visit Ankara in the near future (Turkishny.com, October 13).

Turkey's goal is the long-held objective of lessening and eventually eliminating the threat posed by increasingly sophisticated and lethal PKK attacks inside Turkey. In addition to maintaining KRG efforts to reduce PKK access to Turkish border-crossing points from the Iraqi side, Ankara also hopes for Kurdish efforts to cut PKK supply lines inside northern Iraq. Ankara also wants Iraqi Kurdish authorities to implement stricter controls at the Irbil and Sulaimaniya airports as a means of cutting the access of PKK members from other countries to the group's camps in northern Iraq (*Hurriyet*, October 15). In addition, Ankara will propose joint military operations against the PKK, which would represent a significant change from the KRG's defensive approach (*Hurriyet*, October 11). The proposal for the establishment of a buffer zone within northern Iraq, another measure now being debated among Turkish officials, would also, of necessity, require the concurrence of KRG authorities and the Baghdad administration (*Hurriyet*, October 9).

The seriousness with which Turkey views the value of this multifaceted approach to the PKK problem was shown clearly in the recent creation of a new organization within the civilian sphere that will oversee the gradual transfer over four years of responsibility for combating domestic terrorism from the military to special operations units under the command of the Interior Ministry. The decision was announced after an October 14 meeting of the Higher Counter-Terrorism Board (Terorle Mucadele Yuksek Kurulu - TMYK), which includes senior military officers, senior police officers, the heads of intelligence organizations, and cabinet-level ministers of the Justice, Defense, Interior and Finance departments. The TMYK is chaired by Prime Minister Erdogan. It was also announced at the meeting that a new era has begun for Ankara, one in which a coordinated approach to terrorism including legal and social measures will be instituted alongside purely military countermeasures (*Hurriyet*, October 14; *Today's Zaman*, October 16; see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 16).

Turkey has not, however, abandoned the military option, as shown by the October 12 bombings of PKK bases within Iraq, even as talks with Iraqi Kurdish leaders were continuing. The air raid was the seventh such mission since the October 3 PKK attack on the Aktutun border post (*Today's Zaman*, October 14).

The public response by Iraq's Kurdish leaders can be safely presumed to be very discomfiting to the PKK's remaining leadership. While once free to transit northern Iraq to conduct attacks within Turkey, the group has found itself beset by a seemingly unending series of attacks by Turkish aircraft and artillery, guided by precise targeting information. To the precisely aimed munitions of the Turkish military can now be added Nechirvan Barzani's precisely aimed charge that the PKK attacks aim to harm relations with Turkey. No longer can the PKK depend on hearing its pronouncements echoed by other parties in northern Iraq, with a blanket condemnation of all things Turkish and acceptance of all things Kurdish, including the PKK.

Indisputably, the shift in U.S. foreign policy permitting the provision of real-time, actionable intelligence to Turkish military forces led to major enhancements in Turkey's efficiency against the PKK in the field. The shift in the long-held policy of Kurdish groups such as the PUK and KDP of siding with the PKK will have even greater potential consequences, because the most precise information possible on the PKK will come from other Kurdish groups. Time may be running out for a continued PKK presence in northern Iraq.

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“Doctor’s Plot” Trial Examines Unexpected Source for UK Terrorist Attacks

Londoners were awakened once again to the very real terrorist threat they faced late on the evening of June 29, 2007. In a callous move aimed at targeting revellers in a central London nightclub, terrorists left two improvised explosive devices in old Mercedes cars outside the Tiger Tiger bar just off London's Trafalgar Square. Planted so that those fleeing the first bomb would run into the second, the devices were set to go off using mobile phones as remote detonators. However, the bombs failed to explode and staff members of the club called emergency services after noticing white vapour coming out of one of the cars, a strong smell of gasoline, and blankets covering objects in the back seat of the closest car (*Guardian*, October 10).

The details of what happened next have only emerged now in the ongoing Woolwich Crown Court trial of two of the alleged plotters, Dr. Bilal Abdullah (a second-generation physician, born in the UK, but of Iraqi heritage) and Dr. Mohammed Asha (Saudi born, with Jordanian citizenship) (BBC, October 8). London fireman Andrew Shaw told the court he was surprised to find the car door unlocked when he approached it and noticed a strong smell of gasoline. Having identified the source of the smell as a gas cylinder in the vehicle, he pulled at it, only to notice that there were “shrapnel, nails and bits of metal alongside another cylinder... I saw two mobile phones and wires coming from the phones. At that point it didn't take long for the penny to drop. I just thought it's a bomb or improvised device” (BBC, October 16). As the bomb squad made its way to the device, the prosecution claims that two of the alleged bombers, Dr. Bilal Abdullah and Indian-born Dr. Kafeel Ahmed (now deceased), escaped from the scene on bicycle rickshaws common to central London. Travelling separately, it is alleged that Dr. Ahmed was using an umbrella to hide his identity from closed circuit television cameras (CCTV) located throughout the city (*Guardian*, October 10).

The second device was only discovered the next morning, when staff at a car pound nearby heard about the device found outside the nightclub and noticed a similar vehicle in their lot emitting a strong smell of petrol. The vehicle was left illegally parked in a bus lane near the first device and had been ticketed and towed by London traffic wardens (BBC, June 29, 2007). Both vehicles had been packed with 60 litres of petrol, nails, and gas cylinders, with mobile telephone triggers. It has now been revealed that the reason the devices failed to explode was insufficient oxygen in the vehicles prevented the petrol from igniting despite repeated attempts at detonation (*Guardian*, October 10).

The men are alleged to have brought the cars to London from a bomb factory they created in the Scottish village of Houston, near the Paisley hospital where Dr. Abdullah worked. The two men were seen repeatedly entering and exiting the property at odd hours by neighbours who recalled that the men always entered by the side entrance. The vehicles used were purchased through a British second-hand car magazine and were paid for in cash (*Daily Record*, October 10). The Scottish connection became apparent when a Jeep Cherokee packed with gas cylinders was driven into Glasgow International

Airport's departures lounge on June 30, a day after the unsuccessful Tiger Tiger bombing (*The Scotsman*, October 10).

Having entered a secure area by tailgating a Glasgow cab through security barriers, the two men were seen throwing a petrol bomb of some sort from the car as they shouted "Allahu Akbar" and tried to detonate their car bomb in a suicide attack that went awry when the vehicle became stuck on metal railings. Witnesses report that Dr. Ahmed then poured petrol from the window and became engulfed in flames when he threw a petrol bomb into the pool of gasoline. Once again, the main device failed to explode, and airport staff, police, and passersby were able to extinguish Dr. Ahmed, who continued to struggle even as he burned. Dr. Abdullah attempted to flee, but was brought down by police with baton blows to his legs and shins (BBC, October 17; *Guardian*, October 17). CCTV footage of the incident has been presented in court.

Dr. Ahmed died almost a month later from injuries incurred during the fire. It was reported in court that while being driven from the airport to a local police station, Dr. Abdullah apparently admitted he was a terrorist, saying "Are you aware of the damage Britain does to other countries? Yes, we are terrorists, but..." at which point the conversation was broken as he was led away by other officers (BBC, October 17).

The second man charged, Dr. Mohammed Asha, was detained by police with an unidentified female on the evening of Saturday June 30, while driving along the M6 motorway near Sandbach in Cheshire (BBC, July 2, 2007). Asha is believed to be the financier of the operation. The brother of Kafeel Ahmed, Dr. Sabeel Ahmed pled guilty earlier this year on charges of failing to disclose an email to the police in which his brother told him about his mission and directed him to his online testament and other documents. Sabeel was sentenced to 18 months in prison in April this year; however, with time served, he was immediately released and deported to India (*The Times*, April 12).

Both Dr. Asha and Dr. Abdullah (who has a wife and two children) pleaded not guilty to charges of conspiring to commit murder, claiming that they intended to merely

carry out a campaign to scare the public and to alert them to ongoing British activities in Iraq and the oppression of Palestinians (*Guardian*, October 10). The prosecution labelled this defence as "ludicrous" and have provided video evidence of Dr. Abdullah purchasing gas canisters, as well as email and internet communications showing Abdullah and Ahmed calculating ways to fund the operation through bank loans (*Guardian*, October 10). Dr. Asha is accused of providing money and advice from behind the scenes (BBC, October 15).

At this point, potential international connections to the plot remain unclear. Speculation has built around Dr. Abdullah's Iraqi heritage and the similarity of the attempted attack to bombings in Iraq. Abdullah visited Iraq between May and July of 2006, a journey prosecutors claim provided him with the motivation for the attacks (*The Scotsman*, October 10). Despite early media claims of a connection with al-Qaeda in Iraq, the prosecution has not pursued this avenue, though prosecutor Jonathan Laidlaw did present what is alleged to be a will recovered from a burned laptop in the Jeep Cherokee used in the Glasgow attack, "addressed to, amongst others, the leaders of jihad in Iraq, to [Osama] Bin Laden and to the brothers or soldiers of jihad in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Palestine and other areas of the world..." (BBC, October 10).

What is of greatest concern to counter-terrorism officials about this plot is the fact that it happened at all. Reports after the event indicated the security services were aware of some of the individuals involved (*Telegraph*, July 7, 2007). For the British public and press, much has been made of the fact that the suspects were medical healers. The trial has yet to answer the important question of what motivated these doctors to stray so far from the ethics of their profession.

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A Mujahideen Bleed-Through From Iraq? A Look at Syria

By Michael Scheuer

Al-Qaeda's organizational goal in Iraq was to acquire contiguous territory from which to spread its influence and operatives, as well as those of its Islamist allies into the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and Turkey. Having been weaned as an insurgent in Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden has consistently refused to commit large al-Qaeda resources to jihads lacking country-wide maneuver room or Pakistan-like contiguous safe haven. The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, therefore, opened a chance for the above-described expansion by al-Qaeda and its allies that would not have been possible under a Saddam-controlled Iraq.

This is the first of four articles that will assess the initial stages of the penetration of the Levant by al-Qaeda and other Islamist groups. This piece will look at Syria, and will be followed by analyses of the bleed-through from Iraq into Lebanon, Jordan, and Israel. The quartet of articles will seek to assess the validity of the recent claim by the state-run Syrian newspaper *Al-Thawara* that because of the war in Iraq "the [Levant] region is throbbing with terrorists." (quoted in *Christian Science Monitor*, September 29).

After crushing the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) at the city of Hama in 1982 – killing up to 20,000 people and leveling a quarter of the city – President Hafiz al-Assad adopted the traditional and traditionally unsuccessful tack of Arab tyrants of trying to use government largesse to co-opt Syria's remaining Islamists and thereby moderate their message. Under al-Assad's program tens of thousands of new mosques were built; 22 higher-education institutions for Koran-based learning were opened; regional Sharia schools for men and women were started; and Muslim students from more than sixty countries were invited to receive their Islamic schooling in Syria (*Daily Star* [Beirut], January 12, 2005).

Al-Assad's son Bashar, however, is discovering that his father's efforts to co-opt Syrian Islamists have yielded not a tame, state-sponsored Islam but a trend toward militant Islamism in both urban and rural areas of Syria.

After the September 27 terrorist attack in Damascus, an Arab journalist suggested:

The Syrian regime fell – as have others – in[to] the famous illusion that they can toy with the terrorist fundamentalist bear at the beginning of the day and then get rid of it or put it back in the cage at the end of the day! This is an illusion that is repeated and always repeated in the Middle East region. No side wants to learn from the experience of others. Toying with religion or attempting to revolutionize religion or some of its aspects and then trying to benefit from this revolution on the political level without any repercussions or consequences is the biggest illusion of all. It is the first and last mistake because if you commit this mistake once it would be fatal and there would be no second time! (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 30).

Compounding the failure of cooptation for Damascus is the fact that the senior al-Assad's Hama operation, although massively murderous, was not comprehensive: the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was not wiped out. Besides members who survived Hama and remained in Syria, a number of senior SMB leaders escaped and were welcomed in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states where they found succor, academic posts, and a safe haven in which to reorganize and plan for revenge. The bin Laden family was among the many wealthy, non-royal Saudi families that had hosted SMB leaders both before and after Hama. Indeed, Osama in his youth met senior SMB leaders on their pilgrimage, and while living in Sudan (1991-1996) several SMB members worked for or were supported by al-Qaeda's multiple businesses.

It is important to note that an al-Qaeda-led mujahideen bleed-through from Iraq to Syria had fertile ground in which to take root in 2003. Notwithstanding the ubiquitous and brutal Syrian security services, there was a Damascus-permitted militant Islamist environment to be exploited when the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq occurred. Not only had the targets of regime cooptation become more militant, but there were also SMB remnants in the country, as well as the long-time official presence of Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, and various Palestinian resistance groups.

Into this made-to-order milieu, then, came hundreds and perhaps thousands of young Muslim men from across

the Arab and Muslim worlds, eager to enter Iraq and join the fatwa-sanctioned jihad against the U.S.-led coalition. Bashar al-Assad's regime allowed these men to enter Iraq, trusting that they would make life miserable for U.S. forces, kill enough American troops to force a U.S. withdrawal and end up being killed before they could head for home. Washington singled out Damascus for sole responsibility for this cross-border flow of would-be mujahedeen, but al-Assad's regime was the focal point for the flow because of the easy physical access to Iraq that it afforded. Al-Assad certainly assisted his domestic Islamist firebrands to get to Iraq, but the non-Syrian Muslims who came to Syria en route to Iraq were sent by their own governments – Egypt, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Sudan, etc. – in an effort that mirrored Assad's: send the young Islamists to Iraq to fight and die and thereby create a safety valve that lessens the pressure from domestic Islamist militancy. Obviously, al-Assad indulged the other Arab regimes by permitting the flow through (*Al-Ghad*, [Jordan], October 11). This is the same method of operation that most Arab and many Muslim regimes used during Moscow's occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89).

Having now tightened up Syria's borders with Iraq under pressure from Washington and the French government, Bashar al-Assad is now running a country-size hotel for a variety of ill-tempered Islamist guests (*al-Akhbar* [Beirut], September 30; NOW Lebanon, September 27). In addition to long-term tenants Hamas, Hizballah, and the secular Palestinian fraternity, Syrian security has to keep tabs on newer and not fully domesticated guests: a growing Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organization; a militant "official" clergy that is stoking greater Islamic fervor at the grassroots level; more than a half-million Iraqi refugees; a multinational assortment of veteran mujahedeen stranded in Syria after leaving Iraq; and would-be fighters who got to Syria but were prevented from entering Iraq. Among the veteran fighters are a contingent of Syrians who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan – some commentators are calling them the "Syrian Afghans" – with military skills they can impart at home and in other countries of the Levant (*al-Hayat*, September 28).

All told, President Bashar al-Assad – a man not as skilled as his father or as able to control the regime's security services – is faced with a growing Islamist threat to the stability of his regime. While the regime is not in danger of falling, it is likewise not in the same position as it was in the "seventies and eighties when the [Syrian] authorities

were able to liquidate, with the use of force only, what they then called the conspiracy of the 'Muslim Brothers'" (*al-Hayat*, September 28). For the foreseeable future, al-Assad and his security forces will have to deal with internal Islamist anger and threats – based on Damascus's decision to tighten its borders to prevent jihadis going to Iraq, and its indirect talks with Israel – in a manner that is not so severe and brutal as to promote the coalescing of the disparate Sunni militant groups now in Syria.

They also will have to cope with an external threat by better controlling the Syria-Lebanon border to prevent the infiltration of Islamist fighters angry with Damascus and eager to strike back for the blocking of routes to Iraq. President Assad and other Syrian officials have already claimed the border is being infiltrated by violent, Saudi-backed "Salafists," "Takfiris" and other "extremist forces" from northern Lebanon, and several Arab commentators have noted that this is a legitimate concern for Damascus because northern Lebanon lies close to Syria's "Sunni belt", once a hotbed of support for the SMB (*Christian Science Monitor*, September 29; Quds Press, October 10; AP, September 28). Damascus's recent decision to sign a security-cooperation deal with the Lebanese regime shows the depth of the Assad regime's concern with the Islamist threat, but the time may be passing when either Damascus or Beirut can fully control the Sunni militant forces operating on or from their territory.

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