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Looking to the Levant: Internationalizing the Iraqi Insurgency

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

A number of Iraqi insurgents are increasingly turning their guns outward—rhetorically at least—toward the Levant (Jordan, Gaza, the West Bank, Israel and Lebanon) in general and Israel in particular. It is no secret that Osama bin Laden has renewed calls for the destruction of Israel and the liberation of Palestine, and has also stepped up efforts to set up bases of operations around the Levant in its attempt to restore the Caliphate over every former territory of Islam, from Spain to Iraq. At a time when al-Qaeda is enhancing its Israeli-Palestinian agit-prop and is developing networks in Lebanon and Palestine, the rhetoric of Iraqi insurgents—whether involuntarily or by design—might play into the hands of al-Qaeda’s master plan for the region.

Iraq a Cornerstone for al-Qaeda’s Expansion Toward the Levant

Since 2003, Iraq has become the main front of al-Qaeda’s war against the West. Iraq has served as a recruiting poster for would-be jihadis from all over the world and as a training ground for thousands of foreign and Iraqi fighters. Maybe more importantly, it appears clear now that al-Qaeda has skillfully exploited the situation in Iraq to establish a base in the heart of the Middle East—something it had never accomplished before—a conveniently located stepping-stone from which to launch the liberation of Jerusalem through the infiltration of operators into the Levant and the spread of its brand of Salafist-jihadist ideology.

In his July 2006 commentary on Israel’s war against Lebanon, al-Qaeda ideologist



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1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320
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Fax: (202) 483-8337

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Ayman al-Zawahiri said:

By Iraq being near Palestine it is an advantage; therefore the Muslims should support its mujahideen until an Islamic Emirate of jihad is established there. Subsequently it would transfer the jihad to the borders of Palestine with the aid of Allah, then the mujahideen in and out of Palestine would unite and the greatest conquest [i.e. that of Israel] would be accomplished [1].

In May 2007, al-Zawahiri reinforced the same point:

The jihad in Iraq today, by the grace of Allah, is moving from the stage of defeat of the Crusader invaders and their traitorous underlings to the stage of consolidating a mujahid Islamic Emirate which will liberate the homelands of Islam, protect the sacred things of the Muslims, implement the rules of the sharia, give the weak and oppressed their rights back, and raise the banner of jihad as it makes its way through a rugged path of sacrifice and giving toward the environs of Jerusalem, with Allah's permission [2].

Al-Qaeda in Iraq Calls for Jihad in Palestine

Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) logically appears to be al-Qaeda's greatest ally in its plan to subvert the Levant. The group, echoing al-Qaeda's leaders and ideologues, has consistently claimed the suffering of the Palestinians epitomizes the suffering of Muslims around the world, treating their plight as a symbol of the so-called Western war on Islam. Consequently, AQI has made it clear that its enterprise in Iraq was one of the struggles that will lead to the liberation of Jerusalem. In an April 2006 speech, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi declared: "In Iraq we are very close to al-Aqsa Mosque of the Messenger of Allah, so we fight in Iraq and our eyes are on Jerusalem which can only be restored by the guiding Quran and sword of victory" [3].

More importantly, AQI's development in Iraq seemed to follow the path outlined by al-Qaeda's leaders. After al-Zawahiri announced that the mujahideen should unify and create an emirate in Iraq, AQI formed the Islamic State of Iraq, an emirate designed to unify all the mujahideen fighting in Iraq under the banner of Islam [4]. When al-Zawahiri called on Iraq to become a consolidating base from which to launch the liberation of all Muslim lands last May, the leader of the Islamic State

of Iraq, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, made similar references while emphasizing the duty of Iraqi Muslims to join the ranks of the mujahideen and reject the Coalition's engagement mechanisms—such as Awakening Councils, political parties and local concerned citizen groups [5].

Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq in Collusion

The rhetorical and operational collusion between the two plans has become even more apparent in recent months. First, al-Zawahiri has repeatedly condemned the Palestinian factions—Fatah and Hamas—for either endorsing negotiations to achieve a two-state solution (Fatah) or for engaging in the democratic political process (Hamas). Al-Zawahiri contends that these actions are a betrayal of jihad and true Islamic tenets. Second, Osama bin Laden reminded his supporters:

I reassure my people in Palestine specifically that we will expand our jihad, Allah willing, and will not acknowledge the Sykes-Picot border, nor the rulers installed by colonialism... if [America] and its agents are defeated in Iraq, then hopefully not much will remain before the mujahideen from Baghdad, Anbar, Mosul, Diyala and Salah al-Din will go to liberate Hittin [6] for us—Allah willing—and we will not acknowledge the Jewish state's existence on one inch of Palestinian land like all the Arab rulers did when they accepted the Riyadh initiative years ago.

During remarks on the Israeli blockade of Gaza, ISI leader al-Baghdadi expressed views perfectly congruent with al-Qaeda's leadership: "Our conversation today is our view of terminating the struggle with the Jews in the Land of Congregation and Resurrection [Palestine]." According to Baghdadi, because Israel is a religious state and because there is "no difference between Judaism and Zionism," Israel has no claim to statehood. Like al-Zawahiri, he heavily criticizes Fatah and the secularist-nationalist Palestinian leadership who he says has achieved nothing after years of lying. Like al-Zawahiri, he repudiates Hamas as betraying Islam and the *ummah* (Islamic community) [7].

Maybe more worrisome, anecdotal evidence suggests that both al-Qaeda and the ISI have moved beyond the motivational phase and into a more operational one. A document calling for the implementation of a three-year plan to move from Iraq into the Levant recently surfaced on the web. The document calls for the establishment of Salafist-jihadist cells in Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon

(al-boraq.info, January 28). Meanwhile, al-Baghdadi is recommending actions that fit within that plan. In particular, he calls for the creation of a Salafist creed and belief group in Palestine and advises the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades— Hamas’ military wing—to secede from Hamas and act on its own according to sharia principles. Finally, U.S. military commanders have recently noticed that several ISI leaders are leaving Iraq in response to the increased U.S. military pressure there (AFP, February 11). Although their whereabouts and future plans remain unknown, their escape from Iraq at a time when al-Qaeda/AQI have established the liberation of Jerusalem as their ultimate goal begs the question of their potential role in making this happen.

Are Nationalist and Islamist Insurgents Joining the International Jihad?

At the same time, non-al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgents in Iraq have increasingly commented on international issues and affairs as they relate to Islam or the Palestinians. In effect, these groups are using selected events to show that Islam is under existential attack and/or that the West does not care about Muslim suffering. For example, the Islamic Army in Iraq (IAI), a large insurgent group which has cooperated temporarily with the United States on the ground in Iraq, recently delivered a vitriolic indictment of Western policies in the Middle East, accusing the United States of seeking to control the economic wealth of Muslims, facilitating Western cultural domination and enabling the establishment of a “Greater Israel” that would include Iraq [8]. A larger alliance that includes the IAI along with more nationalistic movements—such as the Islamic Front of the Iraqi Resistance and the Mujahideen Army—the Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance (PCIR) condemned Denmark for the re-publication of cartoons that seemed to equate the Prophet with terrorism. The group says that retaliatory strikes are to be expected [9]. Central to al-Qaeda’s strategy, such stories reinforce the idea that the West in general and the United States in particular are seeking to dominate and subjugate the Islamic world.

The continuously stalled peace process between Israel and the Palestinians as well as Israel’s deadly incursions into Gaza and the month-long Israeli blockade all figure prominently in the nationalist and Islamist insurgents’ propaganda. In late January, the Reformation and Jihad Front, Hamas-Iraq and the Islamic Front for the Iraqi Resistance (JAMI) strongly condemned the Israeli blockade of Gaza [10]. Meanwhile, the Jihad and Change Front (JACF), along with al-Furqan Army, the

Conquering Army, the Brigades of Martyrs in Iraq and the Army of Ansar al-Mujahideen issued a statement of support to the Palestinians, claiming that they “will strike the occupier on our land [i.e. the United States] and give him a taste of defeat and shame” while their “eyes are on al-Aqsa” [11]. Recently, the IAI released a documentary equating the U.S. occupation of Iraq with the Israeli blockade of Gaza [12]. The visuals are well done and professional and their subtext speaks to all—Arab and non-Arab, Muslim or non-Muslim—who view what Israelis do in Gaza and what Americans do in Iraq as oppression. The visuals can be both interpreted within a secular/anti-imperialist framework—most common in Europe and parts of Asia—or within an Islamist framework—most common in the Middle East. However, the speech accompanying the images, in Arabic, calls for jihad against the infidels and vows to liberate Palestine from Israeli aggression.

This use of radical Islamist rhetoric by nationalist and Islamist Iraqi insurgents will most probably have a pernicious effect in the future. Whether the leadership of these groups actually intends to transform their operations into international jihad is not yet known. However, regardless of the intentions of these leaders, their use of such rhetoric, their focus on the resemblance between Iraq and Palestine and their use of religious justifications to examine the “crimes” committed by the West against Muslims play exactly into the hands of al-Qaeda’s plan for the Middle East.

Pascale Combelles Siegel is a Virginia-based independent defense consultant specializing in perception management.

Notes

1. Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, “The Zio-Crusaders’ War on Gaza and Lebanon,” As-Sahab Media Production Company, July 27, 2006.
2. “Third Interview with Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri,” As-Sahab Media Production Company, May 5, 2007.
3. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, “A Message to the People,” Mujahideen Shura Council, April 25, 2006.
4. The Mujahideen Shura Council in Iraq, “Announcing the Establishment of the State of Iraq,” October 15, 2006.
5. See for example, “Between Perversion of Creed and

Tenets of Jihad,” Statement by the Islamic State of Iraq, August 27, 2007.

6. The former Palestinian town of Hittin was the site of Salah al-Din’s 1187 victory over the crusaders that allowed the re-conquest of Jerusalem.

7. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, “Religion is Sincere Advice,” Islamic State of Iraq, February 14.

8. “A message from the Islamic Army leader\Bush and Sarkozy...Political alliance or wealth and power share,” Islamic Army in Iraq, January 25.

9. “Response to Denmark,” Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, February 18.

10. “Formation of a campaign of the Iraqi resistance to support Gaza,” Political Council of the Iraqi Resistance, January 21.

11. “Start of the Campaign of the ‘Twins’ Operation in support for our brothers in Gaza and All of Palestine,” Joint statement by the Furqan Army, the Conquering Army, the Brigades of Martyrs in Iraq and the Army of Ansar al-Mujahideen, January 23.

12. The video is available on the video-sharing website LiveLeak: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a8f_1202716268

A Military Analysis of Turkey’s Incursion into Northern Iraq

By Gareth Jenkins

The recently concluded eight-day Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq marks the beginning of a new phase in Turkey’s nearly 24 year-old struggle against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Despite the Turkish military’s claims to have inflicted high casualties and severe damage to the PKK’s infrastructure in the region, in the medium term the greatest impact of the operation is likely to be psychological.

The incursion was the first major Turkish ground operation into northern Iraq in over a decade and followed over two months of aerial bombardments of PKK camps and bases in the region. By launching a ground operation in winter, when most of the

mountainous terrain was still deep in snow, the Turkish military forced the PKK onto the defensive by demonstrating that organization’s presence in northern Iraq is no longer immune to attack—whether by land or from the air—at any time of the year.

Following an eight-hour artillery and aerial bombardment of suspected PKK positions, Turkish ground forces crossed the border into Iraq on the evening of February 21. Initial Turkish press reports suggested a large-scale invasion by at least two brigades, comprising 10,000 troops backed by tanks and targeting a range of PKK positions along the Iraqi-Turkish border. There was even speculation that the ultimate target was the PKK’s main bases and training camps deep in the Qandil mountains of northeast Iraq, some 60 miles (100 kilometers) from the Turkish border.

However, following the withdrawal of Turkish troops on February 29, it became clear that the operation had been much more limited in size and intent. At a press conference on March 3, Turkish Chief of Staff General Yasar Buyukanit announced that only “one regiment”—which in Turkey consists of three battalions—had been airlifted into northern Iraq and that no tanks or other vehicles had crossed the border (*Radikal*, *Milliyet*, *Hurriyet*, March 4). He also said that the operation had been concentrated in the Zap region of northern Iraq, close to the Turkish border town of Cukurca. The camps and caves in the valleys and ravines of the Zap region have long been one of the PKK’s most important forward bases and served as a platform for infiltrations into Turkey. It appears that the Turkish forces penetrated a maximum of 9-10 miles (approximately 15 kilometers) into Iraq.

The Turkish media later reported that the three battalions comprised a total of 1,400 commandos drawn from the Turkish Second Army and the Gendarmerie. They are reported to have been airlifted in stages across the border into the foothills of the Zap region by around 30 S70 Sikorsky Blackhawk helicopters, after which they marched toward the PKK camps on foot (*Milliyet*, March 5). Photographs released by the Turkish General Staff (TGS) showed the commandos dressed for winter warfare, carrying their own supplies and equipped with night vision goggles.

Defining the Aims of the Turkish General Staff

During the operation, the TGS refused to confirm or deny reports in the Turkish media about the size or targets of

the incursion. This now appears to have been part of a deliberate policy to confuse the PKK and disrupt its response. At his press conference on March 3, Buyukanit noted that deception was one of the arts of war. He said that in the run-up to the incursion, the Turkish military had tried to divert attention from the coming attack on the Zap region by bombing PKK positions around Avasin. It also attempted to move tanks out of its base in Bamerni in northern Iraq—which is around 40 miles (64 kilometers) to the west of the Zap region and one of four semi-permanent Turkish military bases established in northern Iraq in 1997—in order to persuade the PKK that some form of operation in the vicinity was pending (*Radikal*, March 4).

Buyukanit said that intelligence reports indicated that around 300 PKK militants were located in the Zap region immediately prior to the incursion. He claimed that during the eight days of the operation the Turkish military had killed 240 of the militants, mostly during night attacks. On the Turkish side, 24 soldiers and three members of the Village Guards militia are reported to have died. Buyukanit also said that, in addition to the element of surprise, one of the reasons for the TGS's decision to launch the attack in winter was that the snow made it very difficult for the PKK to use its stocks of explosives. According to the general, ground and air attacks resulted in the partial or total destruction of 126 caves, 290 shelters, 12 command centers, six training centers, 23 logistical facilities, 29 signals and communications facilities, 40 trenches and 59 anti-aircraft emplacements (*Hurriyet*, *Sabah*, *Milliyet*, *Radikal*, March 4); the figures have not been independently confirmed. The TGS has not released information on the quantities of arms and logistical supplies seized or destroyed during the operation.

In a statement posted on its website, the TGS insisted that the aim of the operation was to destabilize rather than to destroy the PKK. "It is not possible to completely destroy the terrorist organization through a single operation," it said. "But it showed the organization that northern Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists" (tsk.mil.tr, February 29). "We needed to give [them] a lesson and we did," added Buyukanit at his press conference on March 3. "This was not the last. We shall give them other lessons. Operations will continue as the need arises" (*Radikal*, *Hurriyet*, March 4).

The PKK Claims a Victory

The limited scope of the operation has enabled the PKK

to dispute the TGS's version of events. Since the Turkish military withdrew, PKK websites have been lauding what they describe as the organization's heroic resistance. The PKK's military wing, the People's Defense Forces (HPG), has claimed it repulsed a Turkish attempt to push deeper into northern Iraq toward the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil mountains, killing over 130 Turkish soldiers (HPG Press Bureau, March 3). From his hideout in the Qandil Mountains, Murat Karayilan, the chairman of the PKK Executive Committee and currently the most powerful individual in the organization, described the incursion as a major PKK victory (*Rizgarionline*, March 3).

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the incursion came as a shock to the PKK and will force it to reconsider its deployments close to the Iraqi-Turkish border, perhaps distributing its forces and supply depots more thinly and relocating some of them deeper into northern Iraq. The movement is probably already re-establishing some form of presence in the Zap region and has traditionally had little difficulty in rebuilding its supplies or recruiting new members. In fact, previous large-scale attacks by the Turkish military have tended to produce an increase in the number of young Kurds seeking to join the organization.

Despite its claims to have repulsed the Turkish incursion, the PKK will feel under pressure to demonstrate its continued capabilities by staging some form of operation inside Turkey. The organization has always attached considerable importance to its claim to be the sole legitimate representative of Turkey's Kurds. Maintaining this claim involves intimidating and assassinating potential rivals; not least in order to ensure that, should the Turkish government ever decide to enter into negotiations over the rights and freedoms of its Kurdish minority, the PKK is its natural interlocutor.

Opening the Urban Front

The PKK's claim to pre-eminence has always been based on its use of violence. However, a combination of being forced onto the defensive in northern Iraq in preparation for expected future Turkish incursions and the disruption and damage caused by the military operations themselves is likely to reduce, though not eradicate, its ability to return to the offensive when the spring thaw melts the snow in the mountain passes along the Iraqi-Turkish border. However, the PKK probably now poses a greater threat not in its traditional battlegrounds in the mountains of southeastern Turkey but in the cities,

including the metropolises in the west of the country, not so much in its own right but in its potential to trigger a violent Turkish nationalist backlash through mass demonstrations or a high-casualty bombing.

Until recently, the PKK's urban bombing campaign consisted primarily of small improvised explosive devices (IEDs) built around a few kilos of A4 or C4 explosives. Since fall 2007, however, the organization has demonstrated a new willingness to inflict mass casualties. On January 4 it detonated a car bomb outside a school in Diyarbakir (see *Terrorism Focus*, January 8). In recent months Turkish security forces have seized large quantities of artificial fertilizers which are believed to have been stockpiled by the PKK for use in vehicle-delivered IEDs. After the Turkish military launched its ground operation on February 21, the PKK warned that it would step up its urban bombing campaign inside Turkey if Ankara persisted with its attacks on the organization in northern Iraq (Firat News Agency, February 24).

PKK supporters staged a series of demonstrations across Turkey even after the Turkish military began to withdraw from northern Iraq on February 29. On March 1, more than 1,000 PKK supporters clashed with police in Diyarbakir (DHA, March 1). On the same day, police defused an IED which had been left at a bus stop in Adana (*Vatan*, March 2). On March 2, police broke up a demonstration of 500 PKK supporters who had tried to march to Taksim Square in the center of Istanbul (*Radikal*, *Milliyet*, *Hurriyet*, March 3). On the same day, more than 30 people were arrested during violent clashes at a rally by PKK supporters in the city of Batman (DHA, March 2). More protests can be expected in the weeks ahead, particularly in the run-up to the Kurdish New Year on March 21.

At the press conference on March 3, Turkish Land Forces Commander General Ilker Basbug called for the government to take measures to address the often desperate socio-economic conditions in southeastern Turkey that ensure a steady supply of recruits to the PKK. "They are poor, unemployed and without hope," said Basbug. "These uneducated children believe the propaganda. Unfortunately, there is no counter-propaganda from the government. Economic measures must be taken which reach these children. Measures must be taken to bring them down from the mountains" (*Radikal*, *Milliyet*, March 4).

But Cemil Cicek, the spokesman for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), dismissed suggestions that the government was contemplating any new policy initiative. "Nobody should expect us to announce a special package of measures to bring the terrorists down from the mountains," he said. "If we do, then the terrorist organization will claim 'if it wasn't for me then these measures wouldn't have been taken'." (*Radikal*, March 4).

Conclusion

The Turkish military incursion into northern Iraq has probably achieved its primary purpose of destabilizing the PKK and forcing it onto the defensive by demonstrating the vulnerability of its camps and bases in northern Iraq to both air and ground assault. Further Turkish commando raids can be expected. Although it would be technically difficult, the PKK will now no longer feel safe from an airborne commando raid against its headquarters deep in the Qandil mountains. However, most subsequent Turkish ground operations are likely to focus on the region closer to the Iraqi-Turkish border, particularly areas which have traditionally been used as springboards for PKK infiltrations into Turkey.

The PKK launched a series of mass attacks against military targets inside Turkey in fall 2007 in the apparent knowledge that, although it would suffer heavy losses, the killing of a large number of Turkish soldiers would increase the pressure both on the civilian government and the TGS to strike at the organization's camps and bases in northern Iraq. The PKK appears to have calculated that the United States would intervene to prevent Turkey from launching any cross-border operations, thus handing the organization a major propaganda victory by demonstrating Turkey's impotence. These hopes received a major blow in November 2007 when the United States agreed to begin providing Turkey with actionable intelligence, which the TGS subsequently used to launch a series of air strikes against PKK positions in northern Iraq, later demolished completely by the ground operation of February 21-29.

Further Turkish commando raids will degrade, though not destroy, the PKK's infrastructure in northern Iraq and its ability to infiltrate militants into Turkey. Given the failure of its change of strategy in fall 2007, the PKK is likely to return to the tactics it has used since resuming its insurgency in 2004: namely, concentrating primarily on the use of land mines, sniper fire, ambushes and guerrilla raids by small units of 6-8 militants.

Despite the bravado of its public rhetoric, the PKK is aware that it is unlikely ever to defeat the Turkish military on the battlefield. Its main aim appears to be to engage in a long-term campaign of attrition in the hope that continued violence will eventually persuade the Turkish authorities to open political negotiations. But there is currently no indication that Ankara is prepared to negotiate with the PKK. As a result, there is a danger that frustration might lead the PKK to try to raise the stakes by shifting the main focus of its campaign away from the mountains and onto the streets of Turkey's cities by attempting to provoke ethnic clashes between Turks and Kurds. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in aggressive nationalism among both Turks and Kurds. To date, the Turkish authorities have been remarkably successful in preventing ethnic tensions from escalating into inter-communal violence. But the danger remains.

Gareth Jenkins is a writer and journalist resident in Istanbul, where he has been based for the last 20 years.

Baitullah Mehsud: Scapegoat or Perpetrator in Benazir Bhutto's Assassination?

By Afzal Khan

Baitullah Mehsud, chief of Pakistan's Tehrek-e-Taliban (Movement of the Taliban), was declared a "proclaimed offender" on March 1 with a warrant of arrest issued for him by an anti-terrorist court in Rawalpindi for allegedly masterminding the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in that city on December 27, 2007. Four others still at large have had warrants issued for their arrest, while another four suspects remain in custody after their arrests in January and February. Those in custody have allegedly confessed their links to the plot and the leading role of Baitullah (*Dawn* [Karachi], March 1).

Despite this, there are signs that Baitullah may not have been directly involved in the operational aspects of the assassination plot. As an unrelenting foe to the Pakistani military in the hard battleground of South Waziristan, he may have already had his hands full. In addition, he is reported to be leading his Pakistani Taliban to aid the Afghan Taliban under Jalaluddin Haqqani and his sons in neighboring Afghanistan during various forays against U.S.-NATO forces there (*Newsline* [Karachi], February).

Making the Links to Baitullah

In the first place, days after Bhutto's assassination, retired Brigadier Javed Iqbal Cheema, a spokesman for Pakistan's Interior Ministry, became the laughingstock of the Pakistani nation when he appeared on television and claimed that Bhutto died from neither a bullet wound nor the explosion that followed. He claimed Bhutto was the victim of a freak accident that fractured her skull against a metal lever as she climbed down from the roof of the armored van and stumbled when the van was rocked by the explosion. This contradicted widely viewed television footage that clearly showed a gunman firing at her from almost point-blank range just before the explosion that killed 21 other people (*Weekly Pulse* [Islamabad], January 3).

To add to the controversy, Brigadier Cheema played an audio tape that purported to have captured a conversation between Baitullah and one of his religious leaders in which Baitullah congratulated those who carried out the assassination. The original tape was not shown and there was no proof that the voice was that of Baitullah (*Dawn*, December 28; *Newsline*, January).

Earlier, Pakistani media had widely reported that the medical doctors who tried to revive Bhutto in the hospital had noticed possible bullet entry and exit wounds in the neck and head. But no autopsy was allowed by security forces and the body was hurriedly flown to her ancestral home in Sind province for burial. Thereafter, more than one medical report surfaced that pointed to a shrapnel wound from the bombing or fracture of the skull from a blunt object. Bhutto's aides, who cradled her body in the armored van after the explosion, also claimed to have seen bullet entry and exit wounds in her neck and head (*Newsline*, January).

A subsequent and belated Scotland Yard investigation conducted without an autopsy—denied by Bhutto's husband Asif Zardari—left the cause of her death in a murky area, citing a blunt force injury to the right side of her head and the appearance of a neck wound from an undetermined source in the final report (*Dawn*, February 9).

Baitullah, through his spokesman, denied his involvement in the killing, saying that it was not in the Pashtun tribal tradition to kill women. But there were earlier reports of threats against her life from Baitullah and other Pakistani Taliban leaders in the context of her unwelcome return to Pakistan as a perceived "stooge

of America.” President Musharraf is, of course, seen by Baitullah as the main collaborator in the United States’ terrorism war in Waziristan, Swat and other areas in the tribal borderland abutting Afghanistan.

Involvement of the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi?

As the elected leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah has become fair game for various accusations, especially since his movement has attracted al-Qaeda members, Kashmiri jihadis and criminal elements. Among these is the banned Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi), a group whose leaders took refuge among the Taliban in Afghanistan during the 1990s when Punjab police were after them. This fundamentalist Sunni group centered in southern Punjab province became notorious for assassinations of rival Shiite leaders, politicians and professionals.

Indeed, a telephone call to the Asia Times Online Bureau Chief in Karachi from an al-Qaeda commander in Afghanistan claimed that they assassinated Bhutto to “terminate an American asset which vowed to defeat the mujahideen.” The commander said the “death squad” consisted of Punjabi associates of the underground anti-Shiite militant group Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, operating under al-Qaeda orders (Asia Times Online, December 29, 2007). The Bhuttos are Shiite.

But according to a poll conducted by GlobeScan for BBC Urdu before the release of the Scotland Yard report on February 8, the largest number of respondents at 39 percent believed that “Pakistan’s security agencies or people linked to them” were responsible for Bhutto’s assassination. Other responses were 24 percent blaming “some other party,” and 21 percent saying that they did not know. Only 16 percent believed the government’s contention that Pakistani Taliban leader Baitullah and his al-Qaeda network carried out the assassination (*Dawn*, February 14).

Pakistan’s Interior Ministry had previously linked Baitullah to the October 18, 2007 suicide attacks on Bhutto as she traveled from the airport to her residence in Karachi. In that connection, police on February 26 arrested Qari Saifullah Akhtar, a well-known Kashmir jihadi leader who had previously gone underground for other crimes. But some days later, Interior Ministry spokesman Brigadier Cheema told newsmen that there was no record of Qari Akhtar’s arrest (*Dawn*, March 4).

Tehrek-e-Taliban Operations in the Tribal Areas

On the eve of the formation of a new civilian government, Pakistan’s interim government and new military chief appear to be keen on pursuing Baitullah. The military went into action again in South Waziristan after Baitullah brazenly captured the Sararogha Fort in a night attack on January 15 that overwhelmed the skeleton force of Frontier Corps troops manning it. After other forts were attacked, regular army troops backed by aircraft and artillery moved in a three-pronged attack on the Mehsud tribal territory in central South Waziristan. Supply roads to many Mehsud villages in the snowy mountains that rise to 11,000 feet were cut off and there was an effective blockade. In the ensuing stalemate and harsh weather conditions, both sides were ready for another ceasefire. Baitullah was reported to have first made the move on February 6, ordering his Taliban forces to stop attacking the Pakistani military not only in Waziristan but also in Swat and other tribal areas (Geo TV, February 6).

But there is speculation that apart from the pressure of the impending parliamentary elections on February 18, the indefinite ceasefire appeared to have been quickly accepted by the military because that same day, on February 6, a military helicopter crashed soon after it took off from Wana, the agency’s headquarters. Among the eight killed was Major General Javed Sultan, the commander of the Kohat garrison, who was also in charge of military operations in South Waziristan. Two brigadier-generals were included among the dead. A military spokesman ruled out hostile action and blamed the crash of the U.S.-made Bell 412 helicopter on a technical fault (*Daily Times* [Lahore], February 7). However, Indian security officials tracking developments inside Pakistan believe that the helicopter may have been shot down (*Times of India*, February 7). Helicopters have been known to be vulnerable to rocket-propelled grenades fired from mountainsides in previous conflicts in Afghanistan.

A Coming Offensive Against Baitullah’s Command

There is more ominous news ahead for Baitullah. Pakistan’s military appears to be preparing for a new offensive against him and there is speculation that it may be done in coordination with U.S.-NATO forces attacking the Taliban in a spring offensive from the Afghan side of the border. U.S. officials say that the Pakistani tribal region has become a growing threat because it provides a safe haven to al-Qaeda, which is believed to be deepening its ties to the Afghan Taliban,

Baitullah's Pakistani Taliban and other militant groups. Top U.S. defense officials have already publicly offered help to Pakistan against these militants (*The News* [Karachi], March 1).

Already the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) has agreed to send a limited number of its officers to train the Frontier Corps in counter-insurgency. Besides providing help with their high-tech equipment, these Special Forces may also accompany Pakistani troops for purposes of surveillance and coordination (*Asia Times Online*, February 21).

In a possibly life-threatening development for Baitullah, targeted missile strikes from across the Afghan border and U.S. Predator drone attacks appear to be on the rise. An unmanned Predator killed al-Qaeda leader Abu Laith al-Libbi near Mirali in North Waziristan on January 28, while a further eight suspected militants were killed by a missile attack in the Kalosha area of South Waziristan on February 28. The militants reportedly included four Arabs, two Turkmen and two Punjabis. Local tribesmen reported seeing a pilotless drone over the area (AFP, February 28).

Conclusion

It increasingly appears that Baitullah may have been more of a scapegoat rather than a perpetrator in the assassination of Bhutto. In the shadowy world of the many Islamist groups, renegade elements of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and rival politicians who have hated Benazir Bhutto, Baitullah registered more clearly in the public eye. The proscribed Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (Army of Jhangvi) could very well be the real culprit. But in the tradition of blaming all terrorist acts on Osama bin Laden, Pakistan's military and the U.S. government have found it convenient to lay the blame squarely on Baitullah, especially since he has become such a public figure in the global war on terrorism. The elimination of Baitullah would now meet with greater public approval.

Afzal Khan is a political and terrorism analyst of the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. After many years as a Writer-Editor with the former U.S. Information Agency and as a Terrorism Editor for London-based Jane's Information Group, he is now a contractual writer for the State Department specializing in the Middle East and South Asia region.

Oil Industry at the Heart of the Zaghawa Power Struggle in Chad

By Andrew McGregor

It was only a few years ago when the African nation of Chad was being promoted as a groundbreaking example of a new model of transparent oil revenue distribution that would relieve poverty and initiate development. Tribalism and kleptocratic rule would no longer be part of the familiar equation of vanishing oil wealth in other parts of Africa. Instead, only a few weeks ago, the world witnessed blood running in the streets of the Chadian capital of N'Djamena as rival factions of the minority Zaghawa tribe battled for the right to empty Chad's ever-growing coffers. This unwelcome instability only adds to a downward spiral of violence in a region already beset by political and ethnic violence in neighboring Darfur and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Chad is host to hundreds of thousands of refugees from Darfur and the Central African Republic, as well as Chad's own internally displaced peoples. Most Chadians live in grinding poverty overseen by a political and administrative structure routinely viewed as one of the most corrupt in the world. Despite this, the February 2-3 attack on N'Djamena by 300 armed pick-up trucks full of rebels had less to do with righting these glaring inequities than with replacing President Idris Déby's Zaghawa faction with other Zaghawa factions eager to take control of Chad's sudden oil wealth.

Role of the French

Formed as a territory of France after the conquest of a number of small sultanates and the expulsion of the Libyan Sanusis in the early years of the 20th century, Chad gained independence in 1960. There is a strange relationship between Chad and France that began in 1940 when Chad, through its governor, Felix Aboué—actually from French Guiana—was the first overseas territory of the French empire to declare for Free France. General Leclerc had the first Free French military successes in Chad before marching into southern France, together with thousands of Chadian troops. In the process Chad became inextricably tied with the mythology surrounding the creation of modern, Gaullist, post-war France. In practice this often translates into seemingly inexplicable French support for the government of the day in Chad, regardless of corruption or inefficiency.

The French military presence in Chad is officially referred to as Operation Epervier (Sparrowhawk), which began in 1986 as a means of supplying French military assistance in the form of troops and warplanes to the regime of President Hissène Habré as the Libyan army tried to seize the uranium-rich Aouzou Strip in northern Chad. When General Déby overthrew the increasingly brutal Habré in 1990 the French looked on. Though the dispute with Libya was settled in 1994, the French military mission stayed on as a “deterrent.” Today it includes about 1,200 troops, six Mirage aircraft and three Puma helicopters (*Le Figaro*, April 19, 2006). Typically the French supply the regime with intelligence and logistical assistance. France has limited commercial interests in Chad and is largely uninvolved in the nation’s oil industry.

Rebel leader Mahamat Nouri notes that Chad and France share a “community of interests in history, religion, blood and culture,” while adding that the French government—and not the people of France—have befriended Déby against the people of Chad (TchadVision, February 27).

Chad’s Oil Industry

Crude oil was first discovered in Chad in the late 1960s, but development of a local industry was delayed due to the remoteness of the land-locked country, lack of infrastructure and political instability. The oil boom changed all that, and today a consortium run by ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco and the Malaysian Petronas operate Chad’s oil industry. Three oil fields in the Doba Basin are currently in operation, with estimated reserves of 900 million barrels (Afrol News, December 22, 2004).

A 2000 deal between Chad, the World Bank and a consortium of oil companies called for the construction of a \$3.7 billion pipeline from Chad’s oilfields to the Cameroon port of Kribi on the Gulf of Guinea. Three years later 160,000 barrels per day were running through the pipeline, gradually growing to the peak capacity of 225,000 barrels per day. The agreement called for 70% of Chad’s revenues from the project to go toward infrastructure development and poverty relief. Transparency and accountability were to be the key in avoiding the widespread corruption of other oil-rich African countries.

In practice very little of this new affluence trickled through the hands of the regime. Increased spending

on weapons began almost immediately while electricity remains unknown outside of the capital. A failed rebel assault on the capital in April 2006 led a shaken President Déby to begin diverting an even greater share of oil revenues toward arms purchases for the army and the Republican Guard. Unfortunately for Déby, the World Bank had already suspended roughly \$125 million in grants and loans and payment of an equal amount of royalties in January after the President unilaterally changed the terms of the 2000 agreement. Déby simply threatened to turn off the taps and things suddenly began to swing his way. Under pressure to keep the oil flowing in Chad, the World Bank offered a new deal doubling the amount of oil revenues going directly to the government for unsupervised spending to 30%. With oil having now crashed through the \$100 a barrel barrier, there is suddenly enormous and unprecedented wealth available to whatever faction can seize and control it. The Sudanese may be training and supplying the Chadian rebels, but they do not need to give them a reason to fight.

The government is actively encouraging new exploration in the promising Lake Chad Basin as only the existing Doba Basin oil fields are subject to the oversight and supervision terms of the 2000 agreement. The distribution of all new revenues from the industry will be completely unsupervised by outside agencies. Unfortunately the industry has created very little local employment, most of which is menial and low-paying.

The Zaghawa and the Chadian Power Structure

The struggle for Chad and its oil industry is part of the growing commercial and political strength of the non-Arab Zaghawa in Chad and Sudan. The Zaghawa are a small indigenous semi-nomadic tribe that once controlled a string of petty sultanates running across what is now northern Chad and Darfur. Despite their small numbers, they have become politically and economically powerful and are challenging the dominance of Sudan’s Jallaba (Nile-based Arabs) over Darfur. Déby’s support for Zaghawa-dominated rebel groups in Darfur has led to reciprocal Sudanese support for Zaghawa factions seeking to depose Déby.

Traditionally the Zaghawa are divided into several groups, including the Zaghawa Kobe, Zaghawa Tuer and Zaghawa Kabka. They are closely associated with a similar tribe, the Bidayat. Their growing strength in the region does not necessarily imply unity—the Zaghawa are heavily factionalized. The president of Chad, Idris

Déby, is a Zaghawa, but his strongest opposition is formed from other groups of Zaghawa, many of them led by his relatives. It is some measure of the growing power of the Zaghawa that, despite comprising only two percent of Chad's population, they are still able to divide their forces in a struggle for power to the exclusion of every other ethnic group in the nation. Déby is kept in power by the Zaghawa-dominated Armée Nationale Tchadienne and the Garde Républicaine (largely Zaghawa Kobe).

In neighboring Darfur, the strongest of the anti-Khartoum rebel groups is the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The leadership is strongly Zaghawa and is supported by Chad, though there have been disputes over JEM recruiting from the ranks of the Chadian army. Sudanese sources claim that a leading JEM commander was killed while assisting Chadian troops against the rebels in N'Djamena (Sudan News Agency, February 4). Darfur's National Movement for Reformation and Development (NMRD) is drawn mostly from the Zaghawa Kabka and includes former leading members of Chad's Garde Républicaine and the state intelligence service. The National Redemption Front (NRF) is another Zaghawa-dominated rebel movement that receives military support from N'Djamena.

Chadian Opposition

The Chadian opposition takes the form of a bewildering array of acronym movements that shift, merge and realign almost daily. The rebel movements are largely defined by tribal rather than ideological differences and operate from bases inside Sudan (AFP, January 8). Sudanese support for the rebels has been an effective way to delay the undesired deployment of the European Union peacekeeping mission to Chad and the Central African Republic

The leading rebel groups have developed a unified military command. These groups include the Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement (UFDD), the Rassemblement des forces démocratiques (RAFD), and the UFDD-Fondamentale. The UFDD are mostly Gura'an from the Tibesti region—the tribe of Déby's predecessor, Hissène Habré—and are led by Mahamat Nouri, the former Chadian ambassador to Saudi Arabia. The RAFD is a coalition led by twin brothers Tom and Timane Erdimi, who also happen to be Déby's nephews and former cabinet ministers in his government. Most RAFD fighters are Zaghawa defectors from the Garde Républicaine. The UFDD-Fondamentale is led by an

Arab, Abdul-Wahid Makaye.

The Rebel Assault

Like an earlier assault on N'Djamena in April 2006, the rebels were eventually driven off, but only after severe fighting in the streets of the capital. Rebel tactics typically draw on the highly mobile land cruiser-based tactics perfected in the 1980s by Zaghawa and Tubu fighters against Libyan troops in northern Chad. There are reports that the 300 Toyota Land Cruisers used in the assault were purchased by Khartoum, while the entire operation was planned by Salah Gosh—head of Sudan's National Security and Intelligence Service—and the Sudanese defense minister, Lt. General Abdelrahim Muhammad Hussein (*Al-Sudani*, February 7; *Sudan Tribune*, February 7).

Chad often refers to the rebels as radical Islamists in an effort to garner international support and has accused Saudi Arabia of recruiting mercenaries associated with al-Qaeda to fight alongside the rebels, going so far as to make an official complaint to the UN Security Council (*Al-Wihda*, May 5, 2007; AFP, November 30, 2006; Reuters, December 1, 2006). As one rebel spokesman has noted: "We have no Islamist ideology... It is now a fashion in the world to call one's enemy an Islamist or a terrorist" (*Al-Wihda*, November 26, 2006). After the assault on N'Djamena, the Chadian Interior Ministry put over 100 prisoners on display for the press, describing them as "Sudanese mercenaries, Islamic militants and members of al-Qaeda" (Reuters, February 13).

The defeat of the rebel attack even as it reached the presidential palace in N'Djamena was more likely due to poor training and coordination on the part of the rebels than to French intervention. The timing of the assault reflected Khartoum's urgency in deposing Déby and ending Chadian support for Darfur's rebels before the arrival of the European Union peacekeeping force made this a practical impossibility.

France provided logistical and intelligence support to the president's forces during the fighting. The French Defense Ministry confirmed that it arranged for ammunition for Chad's Russian-built T-55 tanks to be flown in from Libya for use against the rebel offensive (Reuters, February 14). Oddly enough, the Chadian prime minister accused Libya of supporting the rebel attack (*Sudan Tribune*, February 7). Other reports that French Special Forces participated in the fighting in N'Djamena have been denied by Paris (*La Croix*,

February 8; *L'Humanité*, February 9).

Chadian Reaction

Following the assault, President Déby instituted a State of Emergency, set to last until March 15. Déby's forces are fortifying the capital to deter similar attacks. Armed vehicles will no longer be able to strike across the savanna into N'Djamena with the construction of a three-meter deep trench around the city that will force all traffic to go through fortified gateways. The trees that offer the only refuge from N'Djamena's blistering heat are also being cut down after rebels used some cut trees to block roads during the raid (Reuters, March 3; BBC, March 4). The regime is also seeking to buy half a dozen helicopter gunships from Russia or other East European sources.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Chad in late February in a show of support for President Déby that included a call for a more effective democratization process (TchadVision, February 28; African Press Agency, February 27). Earlier, Sarkozy had declared his intention to make a clean break with French neo-colonialism in Africa, but his quick reversal on Chad demonstrates the deep roots of the French government's "FrançAfrique" network that seeks to preserve commercial and strategic interests in the former colonies. Despite Sarkozy's visit, France may already be preparing for the post-Déby era by granting asylum to Chadian opposition leader Ngarlejy Yorongar. Full details are lacking, but Yorongar is reported to have been arrested on February 3, held in a secret N'Djamena prison—probably in the headquarters of the state intelligence service, the Direction des Renseignements Généraux—and finally dumped in a cemetery on February 21 before finding his way to Cameroon. Another opposition leader, Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, was arrested at the same time but has not been seen since (AFP, March 4; Al-Wihda, March 6). Former Chadian President Lol Mahamat Choua was also detained, but was later released.

European Union Peacekeeping Force in Chad (EUFOR)

A 14-nation EU peacekeeping force began deploying in February but is not expected to be fully operational until the end of March. The majority of the 3,700 troops will be French, with the second largest contingent of 450 troops coming from Ireland. EUFOR is commanded from France by Irish Major General Pat Nash and in Chad/CAR by French Brigadier Jean-Philippe Ganascia.

EUFOR deployment was delayed by the rebel strike into N'Djamena which came at precisely the same time deployment was set to begin. EUFOR allows the French to expand France's military presence in traditional overseas areas of influence like Chad and the CAR in a way that would raise eyebrows if done unilaterally. Though it has said little publicly, France is worried about the growing U.S. military encroachment into Africa through the establishment of AFRICOM and various counter-terrorism training programs, including one in Chad. The spokesman for the rebels' unified military command, Abderahman Koulamallah, describes the EUFOR deployment as "a low maneuver by the French government to try and rescue Déby" (Al-Wihda, March 7). Other rebels speak of EUFOR as a French commitment to "liquidate" the opposition (TchadVision, February 16).

Conclusion

Following mediation from Senegal, Chad and Sudan have agreed to sign another in a series of peace agreements on March 12 at the Organization of the Islamic Conference summit in Dakar (AFP, March 6). There is little reason to hope that this agreement will be any more effective than those that have preceded it. Rebel leader Mahamat Nouri has denied reports of negotiations with the Déby regime, claiming the president "treated us as nobodies. He has no intention at all to negotiate while we have been demanding national dialogue, round-table meetings, etc., for 20 months in order to resolve our problems permanently. But we never received any response" (Radio France Internationale, February 21).

In an effort to retain power, President Déby has purged the general staff several times in the last few years and has lost many of his most powerful supporters in the military. The president is seriously ill and would like to be succeeded in the presidency by his son Brahim, but this is unlikely to happen. Far from becoming the hoped for example of a way out of the factionalism and corruption that has tended to accompany the discovery of oil reserves in Africa, Chad has developed a bloody intra-tribal struggle for control of oil revenues with little hope for stability and progress in sight.

Dr. Andrew McGregor is the director of Aberfoyle International Security in Toronto, Canada.