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General Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad

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Reviving the Iraqi Ba'ath: A Profile of General Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad

By Fadhil Ali

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq not only toppled Saddam Hussein, but it also put an end to three and a half decades of political domination by the Ba'ath party over Iraq. Despite a proliferation of political parties and militant organizations eager to take or at least share power in a new Iraq, the Ba'athists, who once held a monopoly on power and remain convinced they are the only legitimate government in Iraq, are still active and reorganizing. The Iraqi Ba'athists, however, have split into two factions, one based in Iraq and the other in Syria. The latter group is led by General Muhamad Yunis al-Ahmad, a once relatively obscure member of Saddam's general staff who has emerged as a claimant to the leadership of the Iraqi Ba'ath party.

From Pan-Arabism to Regional Rivalry

The Arab al-Ba'ath Socialist Party was founded in Syria in the mid-1940s as a pan-Arab nationalist organization with the aim of unifying all the Arabic-speaking countries. The party first ruled Iraq in 1963 after a successful coup attempt against Prime Minister General Abdul Karim Kassim. A few months later the Ba'athists were overthrown and suppressed by General Abdul Salim Arif. The party returned to power in 1968 after another coup. Saddam became the second man of the regime, which crushed all of its political rivals. In 1979

Saddam became president until the 2003 U.S. invasion ended the second Ba'athist reign in Iraq. Although Saddam was not popular in Iraq, hundred of thousands of Iraqis were members of his party. Many were sincere party members, but others had to join the organization to pursue their education or keep their jobs as government employees.

Since the late 1960s, Iraq and Syria were ruled by two rival wings of al-Ba'ath. The personal and political animosity between Syria's President Hafiz al-Assad and President Saddam Hussein dominated regional politics for decades. The pan-Arab party command was split in two, with Ba'athists around the Arab world having to choose between the Iraqi or Syrian faction. The Syrians were unable to welcome the fall of Saddam as it put them under direct American pressure. As a result, Syria became a gateway for foreign fighters on their way to Iraq.

Al-Baath was outlawed after the war. The members of the top four levels of the party were excluded from public life by order of U.S. Ambassador Paul Bremer, the administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority. Saddam and most of the leading figures of his regime were captured one by one. Some Ba'athists, however, did not accept the defeat easily and formed underground organizations. One of those is led by Syrian-based General Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad, a senior member of al-Ba'ath under Saddam.

Reviving the Party in Syria

General al-Ahmad's highest post under Saddam was his membership in the supreme command of al-Baath party. The general seems to have an ideal resume for someone who would want to build a Ba'athist paramilitary organization, having worked in the so-called Political Guidance Directorate of the former Iraq Army. That department was in charge of ensuring the complete control of al-Ba'ath over the Iraqi armed forces through a network of loyal officers in every unit. After that, General al-Ahmad occupied a senior post in the military bureau of the party.¹

¹ Information on al-Ahmad from an interview with General Wafiq al-Samarai, head of Iraqi military intelligence in early 1990s. General al-Samarai fled the country and joined the opposition, eventually becoming the top military advisor to current Iraqi president Jalal al-Talibani. Al-Samarai points out that the main area of al-Ahmad's activities is in and around the northern city of Mosul, with a presence in al-Anbar, Kirkuk, and Diyala.

Al-Ahmad was not one of the 55 most-wanted Iraqi officials depicted in the famous set of playing cards distributed by the U.S. Army during the invasion. A few months later the Coalition acknowledged their oversight by issuing a million dollar reward for information leading to his arrest (Middle East Online, February 18, 2004).

General al-Ahmad was mentioned when Moyasad Yaseen Ahmad, the leader of the Jaysh Muhammad (The Army of [the Prophet] Muhammad) insurgent group, was arrested. The government said the captured insurgent had visited Syria, where he met with General al-Ahmad to coordinate joint efforts in the insurgency (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 17, 2004). On December 6, 2004 the Iraqi government-owned *al-Sabah* newspaper reported:

A group of fugitive members of al-Ba'ath held a conference in the Syrian city of al-Hasaka lately. They elected the (criminal) Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad as secretary-general of the party in Iraq. The attendees offered to stop the insurgency in six hours if the Iraqi government allowed them to participate in the political process. It was not clear how serious the offer was. But the Iraqi government continues its effort to capture al-Ahmad, labeling him as a terrorist who leads and funds insurgent groups.

Al-Ba'ath after Saddam

Saddam Hussein was the secretary-general of the Arab Ba'ath socialist party since 1979. Even after his capture in 2003 he was still recognized by the Iraqi Ba'athists as the supreme leader. Following Saddam's execution in December 30, 2006, General al-Ahmad made his most serious attempt to succeed the late party leader by calling for a general conference of the party in Syria to elect a new leadership. The move was condemned by the followers of former vice-president Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, who had already claimed Saddam's succession. Unlike the conference of 2004, this meeting ignited a huge controversy among the Ba'athists. Al-Douri criticized Syria for supporting an American conspiracy against the Iraqi Ba'ath, though shortly afterwards his spokesman played down those remarks (*al-Arabiya*, January 22, 2007).

The conference was held without any direct media coverage; no pictures were available from the event. General al-Ahmad ordered the expulsion of al-Douri from the party, but al-Douri had already ordered

the dismissal of al-Ahmad and 150 other members. The Iraqi Ba'ath party has since split into rival wings (Almalafpress.net, April 25, 2007).

Although the supporters of al-Douri accused al-Ahmad's group of being keen to contact the Iraqi government, this has not yet been proved. Former Iraqi presidential advisor General Wafiq al-Samarai was reported to have met with al-Ahmad's aides in Jordan in 2007 (alnazaha.org, April 28, 2007), but denied ever meeting with any of al-Ahmad's representatives in an interview with Jamestown. Al-Samarai said that he believed al-Ahmad's organization would remain a secret armed group and its leading figures would stay in Syria.

Al-Ahmad's Role in the Insurgency

In two TV interviews in 2007, General Gazwan al-Kubaisi, the second man in al-Ahmad's group, portrayed the strategy of his party in the insurgency:

We asked our supporters in Iraq to join other groups as our abilities are still weak... We do not care who is leading the insurgency, whether the Islamists or the Ba'athists, [so long as] the Islamist armed groups are filled with Ba'athists... We are open to cooperation with any armed group that targets the occupier enemy [the Coalition forces] and the collaborating government but not the Iraqi people.

Al-Kubaisi also called for the Americans to withdraw their troops from Iraq and claimed his party could help in securing such a withdrawal:

They should leave and not stay for years - we could help them to withdraw without losing face. Our conditions are: They should release all the Iraqi prisoners from their jails and from [those of] the collaborating government. They have to hand over the collaborating government to be tried by Iraqis. They must rebuild everything that was damaged in Iraq. They must apologize to the Iraqi people, to the Arab nation, to all Muslims and to humanity for the crime of letting Safavids execute Saddam Hussein (al-Arabiya, August 29, 2007; Al-Baghdadiyah TV [Cairo], December 9, 2007).²

² "Safavids" refers to the Safavid Dynasty that ruled Iran and large areas in west Asia in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Iraqi Ba'athists use the term to refer to the Iranians and their allies in the Iraqi Shiite parties. As secu-

In addition to General al-Ahmad and General al-Kubaisi, the Syrian-based Ba'ath faction is believed to include most of the remaining leading figures of the party, including Mezher Motni Awad, To'ma Di'aiyef Getan, Jabbar Haddoosh, Sajer Zubair, and Nihad al-Dulaimi.

Aside from the military representation in al-Ahmad's group, the organization is also believed to have made some inroads among the majority Shi'a. Although al-Ahmad and his senior aides are Sunnis, his organization has many Shiites in the middle level. Al-Douri has held to conservative Islamic policies based on his Sunni faith. Al-Ahmad, however, took the opportunity of returning to the party's original pan-Arab nationalist secular ideology. This has proved attractive to some former Ba'athist Shiites from southern Iraq, especially those who have not been integrated into post-war Iraq as a result of their party membership (Almalafpress.net, April 25, 2007; see also *Terrorism Focus*, January 21).

Still, al-Ahmad seems to have failed to overthrow al-Douri. Al-Douri's followers are more active on the internet and most of the pro-Ba'athist websites recognize al-Douri as the head of the party. Al-Ahmad does not even have exclusive support from the Syrian government and his group is susceptible to Syrian interference in Iraqi Ba'athist affairs. Also, Syrian support is not necessarily an advantage for the Iraqi Ba'athists. In addition to the historical animosity between the Ba'ath membership in the two countries, the Iraqis could not ignore that Syria is the main ally of their rival, Iran.

Conclusion

Despite their differences, both factions of the Ba'ath party have the same ideology and goals. Al-Ahmad will have to work hard to gain the support of what is left of the Ba'athist base. The image of being under the influence of the Syrian government will not help him in this context. Al-Ahmad probably will focus on the military side where his experience and contacts lay. The strategy used against al-Qaeda in Iraq will not automatically work against al-Ba'ath. Iraq and Syria have recently ended a 24-year break in diplomatic relations, which should encourage the two countries to raise the level of security coordination between them. This will deny General al-Ahmad and his group the

larists, the Ba'athists do not deny Shiite Islam, but by using the term Safavid they show their disrespect for the Iranian interpretation of Shiite Islam. The Ba'athists believe that the origin of Shiite Islam is Arab, not Persian.

safe haven they have been enjoying for years. The Iraqi government efforts to integrate more former al-Ba'ath loyalists will make it harder for al-Ahmad or any other Ba'athists to re-structure an influential organization by recruiting segregated former comrades.

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Primary Threat to India Remains Home-Grown Left- and Right-Wing Terrorism

By Chietigj Bajpae

While the fedayeen-style terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 drew attention to the recurring role of Pakistan-based militant groups in fuelling instability in India, home-grown left- and right-wing extremists continue to present a growing and potentially more significant threat to India's security. In the case of left-wing terrorism, the Naxalite (communist) insurgency represents a long-standing, well-entrenched, and widespread threat to India's security and governance structures.¹ Meanwhile, right-wing terrorism, represented in a string of attacks attributed to home-grown Islamic and Hindu extremist groups, although in its infancy, presents a new and unfamiliar threat that has caught India's security establishment unprepared. The Mumbai terrorist attacks have revived the debate on upgrading India's anti-terrorism infrastructure. Whether these initiatives lead to a substantive improvement in the country's security environment or are mere token gestures to appease the electorate ahead of the country's parliamentary elections by May 2009 remains to be seen.

A Growing Red Corridor

Despite the world's focus on the disputed territory of Kashmir as the focal point of a two-decade insurgency and potential nuclear stand-off between India and Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described the four-decade Naxalite insurgency as the greatest threat to India's internal security (*The Hindu*,

¹ The term Naxalite comes from the West Bengali village of Naxalbari, where a 1967 uprising was led by a faction of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M). It is applied today to a variety of left-wing militant groups.

March 6, 2007). Since the merger of the People's War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Communist Center (MCC) into the Communist Party of India (Maoist) in September 2004, the Naxalite insurgency has grown to now affect some 170 districts across 13 states in central and eastern India (*Business Standard* [India], June 30 2007). The insurgency, which emerged in the town of Naxalbari in West Bengal in 1967, claimed more than 800 lives in over 1,500 incidents in 2007 according to India's Home Affairs Ministry, with the greatest concentration of attacks in the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Andhra Pradesh (South Asia Terrorism Portal). Naxalite attacks have grown in both intensity and frequency, fuelled by a number of grievances, including:

- A growing income gap across the urban-rural divide
- The discrimination and marginalization of tribal groups (adivasis) and low-caste Hindus (dalits or "untouchables")
- Allegations that the government has strayed from its anti-poverty agenda
- Land disputes, notably opposition to the transfer of agricultural land for industrial use for the development of Special Economic Zones.

Insurgents have employed a combination of strategies including human wave and hit-and-run tactics to overwhelm towns and security force compounds (which are subsequently raided of weapons), assassinating government officials, and attacking infrastructure being developed by foreign multinationals.

The territorial gains of the Naxalite insurgency have undermined the authority of state and central governments through the creation of parallel "people's governments" within Compact Revolutionary Zones where the rebels practice land redistribution, operate people's courts, and raise funds through extortion and taxes. The insurgency has also threatened India's growth and development by undermining the stability of strategically important regions that are rich in mineral and energy resources, including coal, iron ore, manganese, and bauxite. Notably, India depends on coal for 75 percent of its electricity consumption while 85 percent of India's coal reserves are concentrated in five states plagued by the Naxalite insurgency (*Asia Times*, August 6, 2006). The threat posed by the insurgency to India's foreign investment was highlighted as Naxalites fuelled protests in Orissa against a US\$12 billion steel project by the South Korean Pohang Iron and Steel

Company (Posco), which is the largest single foreign investment in India since the country launched its market reforms in 1991 (*Financial Express* [Mumbai], May 23, 2007).

The threat posed by the Naxalite insurgency is exacerbated by its reported links with other insurgent groups in South Asia, including separatist groups in India's northeast and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M). The CPN-M is of particular significance to the Naxalite insurgency, given that they are ideological brethren and the CPN-M has achieved the transition from an insurgent group to a legitimate party in Nepal's politics while maintaining its armed cadres and radical ideology. On a tactical level, concerns also remain over Naxalite insurgents and Nepali Maoists obtaining arms, training, and sanctuaries in each others' territories.

The government's approach toward the Naxalite insurgency has so far recorded limited success, with each affected state developing its own security response. Some, such as the Greyhound paramilitary force in Andhra Pradesh, are more successful than others. Notably, the development of a civilian militia in Chhattisgarh state, the Salwa Judum, has fuelled concerns over Naxalite attacks on civilians and human rights violations by both sides (Tehelka.com, November 25, 2006). The central government has reacted to the insurgency with the deployment of 33 Central Paramilitary Reserve Force (CPRF) divisions to the affected regions and the development of 26 India Reserve battalions in 2006 (*Express India*, February 28, 2007).

India's Talibanization

On the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, India is faced with the growth of religious extremism. India prides itself on the fact that due to the country's democratic and secular credentials its 150 million Muslims have escaped the radicalization that other countries have experienced. However, this illusion has been broken by a string of multiple-bomb attacks on India's heartland in recent years, all attributed to new home-grown Islamic extremist groups operating under such names as the Deccan Mujahadeen, Indian Mujahedeem, the Islamic Security Force-Indian Mujahdeen, Lashkar-e-Qahar, Tehriq-e-Qasas, and Inquilabi Mahaz. In 2008 alone there was a series of high-profile attacks, including those in Mumbai (November), Assam (October), New Delhi (September), Ahmadabad (July), Bangalore (July), and Jaipur (May).

To be sure, the growth of home-grown Islamic extremism in India under the banner of such groups as the Indian Mujahedeem and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI) has been fuelled by foreign terrorist groups such as the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, and the Bangladesh-based Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HUJI). These foreign militant groups have shifted their strategy from attacking India's periphery in the northeast or in Indian-administered Kashmir to targeting symbolic and strategic targets in India's heartland in order to fuel sectarian tensions and undermine confidence in India's burgeoning economy. A related goal has been to fuel tensions between India and Pakistan in order to undermine the Composite Dialogue peace process that has been underway since 2004. The Mumbai attacks also fuelled speculation of an attempt by militants to divert military and intelligence resources to Pakistan's eastern border with India and away from its western border with Afghanistan, which has emerged as a sanctuary for Islamic extremist groups.

However, the economic marginalization of India's Muslim population and the growing influence of Hindu extremist groups under the banner of the Sangh Parivar (which include the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and Abhinav Bharat) have also acted as a catalyst for the growth of indigenous Islamic extremism in India. Hindu extremism has usually taken the form of communal (religious) riots, such as those against the minority Christian community in Orissa and Karnataka states in 2008, in Gujarat in 2002, and in Mumbai in 1992-3. However, this has been supplemented by sporadic incidents of what could be termed Hindu terrorism, as demonstrated in September 2008 when bomb blasts struck the Muslim-majority towns of Malegaon in Maharashtra state and Modasa in Gujarat. Contrary to the traditional view that Islamic fundamentalism is a foreign import to South Asia from the Wahhabi strand of Hanbali Sunni Islam in the Middle East, the region has its own well-established brand of indigenous Islamic extremism in the form of Deobandism. Originating in the Indian town of Deoband in the 19th century as a branch of Hanafi Sunni Islam, the movement has inspired radical groups such as the Afghan Taliban and Pakistan's Jamiat-Ulema-Islami (JUI).

National Security Response

In the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks in November 2008, the Indian government introduced several measures to upgrade the country's national security and intelligence infrastructure. The country's new Home

Minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, has unveiled the National Investigating Agency Bill and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act Amendment Bill, which have established a National Investigation Agency to oversee intelligence analysis and tighten existing anti-terrorism legislation through the establishment of fast-track courts, tightening bail provisions, and increasing the number of days of detention without charge from 90 to 180 days (*Asia Times*, December 17, 2008). Coordination and dissemination of information will also be enhanced through the establishment of subsidiaries of the Multi-Agency Centre (MAC) in all state capitals (*Times of India*, January 2, 2009). The country's elite National Security Guards (NSG) will also be upgraded through the deployment of the Black Cat commando force to several regional hubs and the provision of better equipment. The government is establishing 20 counterterrorism training schools to train commandos from state police forces (*Asia Times*, December 17, 2008).

The government has also pledged to upgrade security along the 7,500-km Indian coastline following revelations that the militants that struck Mumbai in November came via sea. Plans include the development of a new coastal command to oversee the Coastal Security Scheme unveiled by the Home Ministry in 2005, as well as improvements to coastal surveillance through the adoption of over 100 advance patrol vessels over the next five years. Radar coverage will be upgraded and nine additional coastguard stations will be created to supplement the existing 13 (*Daily Times* [Lahore], December 21, 2008).

Despite the newfound sense of urgency in upgrading the country's national security and intelligence apparatus, these initiatives face significant political, bureaucratic, and operational barriers. Notably, state governments have voiced concern over losing their law enforcement powers with the establishment of a National Investigation Agency. Concerns also remain that these measures are merely a cosmetic attempt to improve the government's re-election prospects ahead of general elections expected in May 2009. The measures also combat allegations that the government has been "soft on security" since it rescinded the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) in 2004. However, these measures make only limited progress in attempting to improve state and local police, who are usually the first responders to terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the continued reliance of the NSG on the military for its personnel rather than state and local police has resulted in tactics more akin to those used

in conventional military operations rather than urban counterterrorism operations. Finally, the government faces an uphill battle in overcoming well-entrenched inter-agency rivalry and understaffing in the country's key intelligence organisations, such as the Research Analysis Wing (RAW) which is responsible for external intelligence; the Intelligence Bureau, which monitors internal security; the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), which oversees military intelligence; the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), and the National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO) (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 24, 2008).

Opposing Sides of the Same Coin

Even before the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the U.S. State Department's 2008 annual report on terrorism identified India as one of the countries most vulnerable to terrorism, second only to Iraq in terms of the number of fatalities from terrorist attacks. The report also noted that the Indian government's counterterrorism efforts had been undermined by the country's inefficient law enforcement and legal systems, stating, "The Indian court system was slow, laborious, and prone to corruption. Terrorism trials can take years to complete. Many of India's local police forces were poorly staffed, lacked training, and were ill-equipped to combat terrorism effectively" (*Economic Times* [New Delhi], May 2, 2008).

While Naxalites and religious extremists are ideological opposites, they share certain traits. Both are fuelled by the alienation felt by politically and economically marginalized communities: low-caste Hindus and tribal groups in the case of the Naxalites, or Muslims in the case of Islamic extremist groups. Unlike the insurgencies in Kashmir and India's northeast, the Naxalite and home-grown religious extremist groups in India are not looking to fuel secession or redraw the borders of the state but rather to alter the identity of the state. While both are indigenous movements, they are also fuelled by external sources, whether Nepali Maoists in the case of the Naxalites, or militant groups and members of the intelligence services in Pakistan and Bangladesh in the case of Indian Islamic militancy. Finally, the lack of coordination between national, state, and local security services has prevented a containment of the Naxalite and religious extremist threat.

The solutions to these insurgencies overlap. In the case of the Naxalite insurgency, a long-term solution is necessary that ensures India's rapid economic

growth remains inclusive and sustainable for its largely rural population. The fact that 60 percent of India's population continues to depend on agriculture for its livelihood while the agricultural sector accounts for only a fifth of India's GDP suggests the need for a second "Green Revolution" that revitalizes and modernizes India's agricultural sector and addresses issues of land reform and redistribution. It is not a coincidence that tribal and low-caste communities have fuelled the Naxalite insurgency, given that India's tribal population accounts for as much as 40 percent of the country's internally displaced population while 40 percent of India's scheduled caste population owns less than an acre of land. The Indian government's attempt to solve these inequalities through affirmative action policies or quotas for employment and university placements and a separate legal code for Muslims have only reinforced divisions and rivalries between caste, religious, and tribal groups. Instead, there is a need to target outdated social practices that fuel caste, tribal, and religious discrimination, and upgrade education, healthcare, and general infrastructure at the village level. On the security front there is a need to upgrade national security and intelligence infrastructure and inter-linkages while seeking local solutions to local instabilities.

On the international front, there is a need to weaken the external catalysts that have fuelled these home-grown insurgencies through an improvement in counterterrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing. There is also a need to clamp down on terrorist financing, safe-havens, and arms trafficking networks. Notably, India has established a Counter Terrorism Joint Working Group (CTJWG) with 16 countries, including the United States, which has met nine times since its formation in 2000. However, these initiatives are unlikely to have a significant impact until counterterrorism cooperation is strengthened within South Asia, notably between India and Pakistan. The establishment of the Joint Anti-Terrorism Mechanism (JATM) between India and Pakistan in 2006 is significant in this respect. Furthermore, Pakistan's reversion to democratic rule in March 2008 and the civilian government's recognition of the threat posed by Islamic extremism (manifested in the Pakistani military's operations against militant sanctuaries in the northwest frontier region) are positive signs that both countries are facing a common enemy. However, the continued support for Islamic extremists operating in Afghanistan and India by elements of Pakistan's military and intelligence services, coupled with the long-standing distrust between India and its

numerous neighbors, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, continue to remain a barrier for any substantive anti-terrorism cooperation in the region.

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Balochi Nationalists Intensify Violent Rebellion in Iran

By Chris Zambelis

The conflict between Iranian security forces and ethnic Baloch insurgents led by the Jondallah (Soldiers of God - an obscure militant group also known as the People's Resistance Movement of Iran) that has been raging in Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Balochistan since 2003 is experiencing an increase in hostilities. The latest spate of violence was sparked by Iran's refusal to heed Jondallah's June 2008 demand that it release Abdulhamid Rigi, the brother of Jondallah founder and leader Abdulmalak Rigi, along with three other jailed members of Jondallah. Pakistani authorities detained Rigi and his associates in Quetta in neighboring Pakistan's Balochistan province for attempting to pass as Pakistani nationals. The men were later transferred into Iranian custody (Fars News Agency [Iran], June 15, 2008; Press TV [Iran], June 14, 2008; *Dawn* [Karachi], June 15, 2008). After the handover, Jondallah ambushed an Iranian police outpost and abducted 16 police officers in Saravan, a town located near the Pakistani border. The Iranian hostages were reportedly then transferred over the Iranian-Pakistan border into Pakistani Balochistan (Fars, June 19, 2008).

In another incident, Iranian security officials arrested a prominent Baloch cleric in early August 2008, setting off a wave of protests in the province. Iranian authorities then bulldozed the Abu Hanifa mosque and school in Zabol a few weeks later and arrested students and members of the congregation, sparking further outrage among the Baloch (Roos Online [Iran], January 12).¹

1 For more details regarding these and related incidents in Sistan-Balochistan from a radical Sunni Iranian perspective that is staunchly critical of the Shia Islamic Repub-

Jondallah later released a video that was aired on al-Arabiya news channel claiming that they had executed 2 of the 16 police officers they were holding and were prepared to kill the rest of the hostages if Iran failed to release 200 of its members currently held in Iranian prisons (Fars, December 30, 2008). Jondallah also assassinated an Iranian official in Sistan-Balochistan, prompting another crackdown by the security services. While Jondallah is reported to have freed one of the hostages under mysterious circumstances sometime in September 2008, a December 5 announcement by Iranian authorities claimed that all of the hostages had been executed. The statement also promised “massive retaliation” against Jondallah (Press TV, September 9, 2008; Fars, December 6, 2008).

A Resort to New Tactics

Tensions in Iranian Balochistan flared again when Jondallah introduced a new tactic in its violent campaign against Tehran by executing a suicide car bombing on December 28, 2008, against the headquarters of Iran’s joint police and anti-narcotics unit in Saravan (*Daily Times* [Lahore], December 30, 2008). The attack killed four officers and injured scores more. The bombing was highly uncharacteristic of Jondallah’s previous operations (Rooz Online, January 12). While suicide car bombings have been used to great effect by Iraqi insurgents, especially among groups representing the radical Islamist strain of the Sunni Arab insurgency and increasingly by militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan, similar attacks are unheard of in Iran. Jondallah’s violent track record has generally entailed terrorist attacks and guerilla-style operations against Iranian security forces and other symbols of the state across Sistan-Balochistan, as well as abductions and assassinations of state officials (see *Terrorism Monitor*, January 11, 2008; *Terrorism Focus*, February 28, 2007). The introduction of suicide bombings into the conflict points to a new and increasingly violent stage in Jondallah’s struggle against Tehran, one that is sure to elicit harsher crackdowns by Iranian security forces and contribute to wider instability in the region.

The identity of the bomber also adds to the significance of Jondallah’s attack. By all accounts, the bombing was executed by Abdulghafoor Rigi, the younger brother

lic, refer to the official website of the Sons of Sunnah Iran, “Iran’s War Against Sunni Muslims,” October 20, 2008, <http://sunnairan.wordpress.com/2008/10/20/irans-war-on-sunni-muslims/>. The same site carries an extensive list of Sunni Islamist websites opposed to Iran and Shi’a Muslims.

of Jondallah leader Abdulmalak Rigi. According to Baloch activist sources, the attack was intended to serve as an example for others within the Baloch nationalist movement to follow, in Iran and beyond. At the same time, the same sources also emphasize that suicide bombings are not compatible with Baloch values, but have become necessary due to the nature of the Baloch struggle and Iranian repression.² The suicide attack is also being compared to the first and, until recently, only suicide bombing by a Baloch militant; in 1974, Abdul Majeed Lango targeted Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a suicide bombing in Pakistani Balochistan, but failed to hit his target.³

While Jondallah’s emphasis has been to attack Iranian targets in Sistan-Balochistan, the group threatened to carry out more suicide attacks in other parts of Iran, including in major cities such as Tehran.⁴ Despite this apparent threat, there are no indications that Jondallah has a genuine interest or ability to expand its violent campaign outside of Sistan-Balochistan in the foreseeable future. Suicide attacks against Iranian targets in Sistan-Balochistan, however, especially those targeting Iranian security services, may become more common.

Roots of the Baloch Insurgency

To understand the roots of the Baloch insurgency, it is important to consider Iran’s complex ethno-national and sectarian composition. Iran’s ethnic Persian and Farsi-speaking population represents only a slight majority of Iran’s total population of approximately 70 million, a population that includes sizeable Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, and Baloch ethnic communities. A large majority of Iranians are Shi’a Muslims. In contrast, the ethnic Baloch minority in Iran numbers between one and four million, nearly all of whom are Sunni Muslims. Iranian Balochistan is also one of Iran’s poorest and most underserved provinces. Tehran has great difficulty administering law and order in the region, having to rely instead on harsh security crackdowns that alienate the public. Given its poverty, lawlessness, and porous border with Pakistan, Iranian Balochistan has emerged

2 Reza Hossein Borr, “The Armed Struggle in the Eastern Parts of Iran Entered a New Phase When the First Suicide Mission Was Carried Out in a Military Base in Sarawan, Baluchistan, on 29 December 08,” January 1, 2009, http://www.thebaluch.com/010109_report.php.

3 See “An Overview of the Baloch Students Organization,” <http://www.balochistaninfo.com/magazine%20of%20balochistaninfo/BSO2.htm>.

4 Reza Hossein Borr, op cit.

as a smuggler's paradise, a reputation that has made it both a regular target of the Iranian security services and an attractive base for enterprising criminals. These factors contribute to the belief among many Baloch - and other ethnic and sectarian minorities in Iran - that the highly centralized Sh'ia Muslim and Persian-centric face of the Islamic Republic operates a policy of state-sponsored discrimination and cultural subjugation of non-Persian and non-Shi'a minorities (see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 2, 2007).

Baloch disaffection with the Islamic Republic must also be seen in the context of the Baloch historical narrative. Iranian Baloch, for instance, identify strongly with their kin in neighboring Pakistan, which is home to the region's largest Baloch community, and the Baloch community in Afghanistan. Baloch family and tribal links also span across the Iranian, Pakistani, and Afghani borders. Iranian Baloch look to their kin in Pakistan, who have been waging a war for self-determination for decades. Baloch nationalists often refer to the lands where all Baloch reside as "Greater Balochistan," and Iranian Balochistan as "West Balochistan." The Baloch narrative is also shaped by a feeling that the legacy of colonialism has left the Baloch people divided and without a homeland, much like the predicament facing the Kurds in the Middle East (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 29, 2006).

The Baloch also feel as if they have no allies, as even regional rivals of Iran have a history of collaborating to curb Baloch nationalist aspirations to further their mutual interests. Iran and Pakistan, for instance, have a history of jointly suppressing Baloch nationalism through harsh measures, as both countries perceive Baloch activism as a threat to their territorial integrity. Pakistan's speedy handover of Jondallah members to Iran reflects one aspect of Iranian-Pakistani security cooperation in this area. The politics of energy pipelines also help foster closer cooperation between Iran and Pakistan in suppressing Baloch nationalism. The greatly coveted Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline that will carry natural gas from Iran's South Pars field to Pakistan and India will traverse both Iranian and Pakistani Balochistan on its way to India and possibly even to China down the line (Fars, December 31, 2008; January 16). For Iran and other countries with a stake in IPI, the potential for insurgent groups such as Jondallah to threaten critical energy infrastructure is cause for serious concern. The threat of attacks by Jondallah against regional energy infrastructure will surely increase if the Baloch feel that

they are not reaping any of the benefits of the revenue earned by Tehran from its gas exports via IPI.

Radical Islam and Baloch Nationalism

Given the Sunni faith of its members and its violent history, some observers suggest that the group maintains ties to radical Sunni Islamists. Tehran also regularly accuses Jondallah of maintaining ties to Sunni extremists such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban in what likely amounts to an effort to tarnish Jondallah's image abroad. Iran also happens to accuse Jondallah - among other minority ethno-national and sectarian insurgent groups operating on its territory - of receiving support from U.S., British, and Saudi intelligence in an effort to destabilize the Islamic Republic from within by fomenting ethnic and sectarian strife (Press TV, June 14, 2008). Jondallah fervently denies any links to radical Sunni Islamists and any suggestion that it operates at the behest of foreign intelligence services (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 29, 2006).

Despite reports linking Jondallah to radical Sunni Islamists, there is no hard evidence linking Jondallah to radical Sunni extremists such as al-Qaeda or the Taliban. Since its inception, Jondallah has been keen to frame its cause as a mission to improve the daily lives of the Baloch in Iran. At the same time, Jondallah has also presented its struggle in sectarian terms, essentially as a struggle between a besieged Sunni minority and an aggressive Shi'a Islamist order. While Jondallah's emphasis on sectarian grievances may lend credence to the argument that the group does harbor radical Sunni Islamist leanings akin to al-Qaeda or the Taliban, in reality this approach most likely reflects the group's effort to showcase its plight as an ethnic and sectarian minority community that faces systematic discrimination within Iran. In fact, given that the name Jondallah is imbued with religious overtones typical of radical Sunni Islamist movements, the group's decision to begin referring to itself as the People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PRMI) - in addition to Jondallah - may have represented an attempt to reintroduce itself internationally amid growing concerns about the spread of al-Qaeda's brand of radical Islam (see *Terrorism Focus*, February 28, 2007).

Baloch leader Abdulmalak Rigi has stated that Jondallah and the Iranian Baloch are not interested in independence from Iran, but only seek to achieve a better life for the Baloch minority, within a state that respects their human rights, culture, and faith. During

an October 2008 interview, the Baloch leader also stated that Jondallah is prepared to lay down its arms and to enter Iranian politics: “If we were allowed to practice our rights in full, we are willing to drop weapons and enter political life.”⁵ Jondallah’s stated willingness to enter the political process in Shi’a Islamist-dominated Iran also suggests that the group’s radical activities and violence are meant to further nationalist objectives as opposed to radical Islamist objectives.

Jondallah’s decision to execute a suicide bombing nevertheless raises questions regarding the potential influence of radical Islamist ideologies on the larger Baloch nationalist movement in Iran, even if only among a fringe minority within the larger movement. At the very least, Jondallah’s decision to resort to suicide bombings indicates that tactics used by radical Islamists in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are serving as a template for other militant groups to emulate in their own campaigns across the globe. There are also indications that radical Sunni Islamists in Iran and abroad who are strongly opposed to the Islamic Republic are following events in Iranian Balochistan closely, as evidenced by the growing number of extremist websites and chat room forums appearing in Arabic, Farsi, English and other languages concerning the plight of the Baloch and other Sunni minorities in Iran. The radical fringes of Sunni Islam consider Shi’a Muslims to be heretics and non-believers. Sunni extremists who subscribe to al-Qaeda’s brand of radicalism also consider Shi’a Muslims and Iran as secret allies of the United States and part of a conspiracy to undermine Sunni Islam. Increasing violence and instability in Iranian Balochistan may eventually attract foreign fighters to Iran. Jondallah’s threat to expand its violent campaign outside of Iranian Balochistan will also highlight the plight of Sunnis in Iran and may therefore attract radical Sunni Islamists to the Baloch cause.

Conclusion

While concerns regarding the spread of radical Sunni Islamist ideologies within the Baloch nationalist movement in Iran will continue to receive attention, there is no conclusive evidence linking Jondallah to al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or affiliated groups. By all accounts, the trajectory of Jondallah’s militancy will continue to emphasize the plight of the Baloch as a disaffected

minority within Iran. At the same time, the ongoing violence and instability in Iranian Balochistan can potentially draw radical Sunni Islamists to the Baloch cause. There is also evidence that radical Sunni Islamists are paying closer attention to events in Iran, a trend that is likely to continue due to the widely held belief among many Sunni extremists that Iran and Shi’a Muslims constitute an enemy akin to the United States.

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Hindu Radicals Pose Terrorist Challenge to the Sub-Continent

By Wilson John

The charge sheet filed in a Mumbai court on January 20 against 11 members of the radical Hindu group Abhinav Bharat – including a serving Military Intelligence officer, a retired Indian Army Major, and nine other activists – has brought the growing landscape of Hindu terrorist cells in India into the open (*The Hindu*, January 21).

In the last decade a few radical Hindu groups have carried out systematic hate campaigns against minority communities, particularly India’s 150 million Muslims, including mob violence (as in Gujarat in 2002) and bombings (such as the 2004 blast in Nanded, Maharashtra). The September 29, 2008, Malegaon bomb attack in which the Hindu militants are charged was the first sophisticated bombing to be planned and executed by a Hindu terrorist group (*Times of India*, January 20).

Pursuing the Hindu Rashtra

The Malegaon bombing was intended to be the first of a series of attacks the group had planned throughout India to establish a “Hindu Rashtra,” or Hindu India. The 4,528-page charge sheet, citing 389 witnesses,

5 Quoted in Sons of Sunnah Iran, “Iranian Sunni Group Wants to Enter Political Life,” October 24, 2008, <http://sunnairan.wordpress.com/2008/10/24/iran-sunni-group-jundallah-wants-to-enter-political-life/>.

accused Lieutenant Colonel Shrikant Prasad Purohit, retired Major Ramesh Upadhyay, self-styled religious preachers Sadhvi Pragnya Singh and Dayanand Pandey (a.k.a. Swami Amritanand), and others of executing a bomb blast in Malegaon, a Muslim-dominated city in Maharashtra, one of India's prosperous west coast states. The bomb, strapped to a motorcycle, killed six persons and injured more than 70. The accused have been charged under the Maharashtra Control of Organized Crime Act (MCOCA), a tough law that has survived criticism while other severe laws fell after intense public scrutiny.

What really took the country and the Maharashtra Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) by surprise was the involvement of a serving military officer in a terrorist act. Lieutenant Colonel Purohit, ironically, had trained the ATS when it was formed in 2004 (*India Today*, January 20). Purohit is the first serving Indian Army officer to be formally charged with aiding and abetting terrorism since independence. Purohit surrendered to the investigating officer in the Malegaon case, Joint Commissioner Hemant Karkare, in October. Karkare was later killed by Muslim terrorists in the Mumbai terror attack of November 26, 2008.

Several serving and retired army officers were questioned after Purohit was detained (IBNLive [India], November 25, 2008). Investigators complained that the Indian Army stalled the progress of the investigation by not cooperating with them to find out how Purohit managed to forge documents used to obtain a fake identity card from the military cantonment at Deolali for bomb maker Sudhakar Chaturvedi. Purohit's role in procuring a license for Chaturvedi's revolver from the army quota also remains a mystery (*Outlook Magazine*, December 1, 2008). One of the officers later told police that he was misled into joining meetings of Abhinav Bharat in Faridabad and Kolkata after Purohit convinced him that it was a covert military intelligence operation (*Indian Express*, January 22).

The investigators were also keen to find out whether Purohit had access to explosives and weapons used for training and whether the Army had any knowledge about missing weapons and explosives from depots and other establishments where Purohit was stationed (*Outlook Magazine*, December 1, 2008).

Organizing the Abhinav Bharat Group

The charge sheet for the first hearing of the case on February 12 says Purohit set up Abhinav Bharat (Young India) in Pune (Maharashtra state) in June 2006 "with the intention of propagating a Hindu Rashtra with its own constitution and aims and objectives such as Bharat Swaraya, Surajya Suraksha ('self-rule, good rule and security')" (*Frontline* [India], January 31-February 13). Purohit borrowed the group's name from another extremist group, one of whose members was involved in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (*Indian Express*, February 1, 2009). The older Abhinav Bharat organization was dissolved in 1952. The prosecution says the group's ultimate agenda was to create a Taliban-like organization to promote its plans for a Hindu nation. The group had even worked out the design for a national flag - saffron in color, with a gold border.

Abhinav Bharat had plans to raise funds from top corporate houses like Tatas and Mahindras under the guise of a disaster management company (*Times of India*, January 26). The court says Purohit collected funds for himself and Abhinav Bharat to promote a "fundamentalist ideology." Though a chunk of the money was used by the group's treasurer, Ajay Rahirkar, to procure explosives and other weapons, an advance was quietly paid to a builder in Nashik (Maharashtra) for a house for Purohit (*Zee News* [India], January 20; *Samaylive.com*, January 20).

The group also thought of approaching Israel for assistance but, according to ATS chief K.P. Raghuvanshi, there is no evidence such a contact was made. Raghuvanshi also indicated the possibility some of the suspects were in touch with Maoists in Nepal, but again there was no hard evidence to prove the link (*The Hindu*, January 21). Recordings of a meeting which Purohit and others attended in Faridabad (Haryana state) in January 2008, point to at least two operations carried out by the group prior to Malegaon. Evidence has raised the possibility of the group's involvement in the February 2007 bombing of the Samjhauta Express and twin blasts in Hyderabad in May, 2007 (*Indian Express*, November 17, 2008; January 24, 2009; *Rediff.com*, November 15, 2008)

The charges claim the group held meetings at various places - Ahmedabad, Ujjain, Bhopal, Kolkata, Jabalpur, Indore, Faridabad, and Pune - where Purohit and his associates absorbed men from diverse backgrounds to their cause while sketching plans for terrorist attacks.

The unifying theme of their discussions was their belief that the future of Hindus in India was in jeopardy (*The Hindu*, January 21). There is also evidence the group was planning to bring out Hindu extremist literature on the model of Muslim jihadi literature. A laptop seized from one of the accused revealed a cache of jihadi publications (*Sakaal Times*, January 23).

Purohit's plan was to utilize the infrastructure used by a national youth organization, the Bharat Scouts and Guides, to train the recruits. The group had even bought land in Maharashtra to set up a training camp (*Times of India*, January 26). After training, the recruits were to be employed in security agencies.

The Malegaon bombing was planned in January 2008. According to the court, the group decided to bomb Muslim-dominated Malegaon because, Purohit said, "There is a huge population of Muslims in Malegaon. If something is done in Malegaon, it would be like avenging the atrocities against the Hindus." There were two other reasons for choosing Malegaon - first, September was the month of Ramadan and mosques would have large Muslim gatherings to offer prayers. Second, the group thought it would be easy to mislead the investigating agencies since a jihadi group, the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), had carried out a bombing in Malegaon in 2006 (*The Hindu*, January 21).

The Sri Ram Sene Organization

Sri Ram Sene is another Hindu extremist group that has been indulging in violence against minority communities in Karnataka state. Pramod Muthalik Desai, generally regarded as a fanatic rabble-rouser, set up Sene in 2004 after he fell out with Bajrang Dal, an extremist group that once had a fairly strong presence across the country but had lost its appeal due to infighting and a police crackdown on its activities.

The Sene, with a membership of 2000, mostly 18 to 25 year olds, many of them unemployed, has been following an agenda aimed at preserving the Hindu culture by opposing fashion shows, women drinking in public places, inter-religious and extra-marital relationships, and fundamentalism in other communities (*Indian Express*, February 1). The Sene members work in tandem with other extremist groups like Bajrang Dal and Hindu Jagaran Vedike. A gang of Sri Ram Sene hooligans recently thrashed young men and women at a pub in Mangalore. Pramod Muthalik Desai and 28 others charged in the attack were released on bail at the

end of January, only to turn around and threaten anyone found celebrating Valentine's Day, an expression of "anti-Indian culture" (IBN Live, February 3; *Economic Times*, January 31).

Pramod Muthalik Desai met Colonel Purohit at least once in Kolkata (February 2008) to discuss the Abhinav Bharat's plans. The Kolkata meeting was organized by another radical named Tapan Ghosh, who ran a little-known militant group called Hindu Samhati (*India Today*, January 28).

Related Groups

Another link in the chain of Hindu extremism has been the involvement of a former Member of Parliament in militant activities. According to police, MP BL Sharma attended a meeting of Abhinav Bharat in September 2007 at Nashik, where plans for a series of terrorist attacks were discussed (*Times of India*, February 3). Sharma was a member of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the parent body of the Bajrang Dal militant group. The VHP acquired considerable strength and acceptability in Indian society after it took the lead in demolishing the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh) in December 1992. VHP leader Praveen Togadia denies reports he met with Pramod Muthalik at a Mumbai hotel on August 1, 2008 (*Outlook Magazine*, December 1, 2008; *Times of India*, November 24, 2008). Another connection has developed with Nagaraj Jambagi, a close associate of the Sri Ram Sene leader who was recently arrested by Karnataka police in connection with the May 2008 Hubli blasts (*Tehelka News Magazine*, February 7).

Police officers investigating different violent incidents involving these groups believe that many of them had set up training camps in several parts of Maharashtra, Adilabad in Andhra Pradesh, northern Karnataka, and also in parts of Gujarat (Rediff.com, November 10, 2008). Sri Ram Sene runs one such camp, though Muthalik maintains that the camp was not a terrorist training camp but focused on training "Anti-Terror Squads" (Rediff.com, November 10, 2008).

Conclusion

What is worrisome is that groups like Abhinav Bharat will increasingly draw support from some influential and resourceful sections of the Hindu community as a counter-response to Islamic groups like the Indian Mujahideen (IM), which has already shown a tendency to exploit the communal divide in the country. If not

countered adequately and in time, these early symptoms of a cycle of violent religious hatred could seriously test India's efforts to counter multi-dimensional terrorist threats without damaging the pluralist fabric of its society.

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