



# Terrorism Monitor

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## Taming the ISI: Implications for Pakistan's Stability and the War on Terrorism

By Tariq Mahmud Ashraf

The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is Pakistan's premier intelligence agency. As such, it has found itself at the center of a dispute between Pakistan and the United States over the prosecution of the War on Terrorism, a dispute fuelled by the two nations' varying strategic aims. Established just a year after the country's independence in 1947, the ISI has grown immensely in size, activity and influence over the years. The concept of the ISI being a truly "joint" or "inter-services" organization is a falsehood, since this organization has been always dominated by the Pakistan Army, with barely a smattering of involvement from the other two military services. Moreover, its Director General is always a serving Lieutenant General of the Pakistan Army, answerable only to the Chief of the Army Staff and not to the civilian government, the Ministry of Defense or the Joint Staff Headquarters. <sup>1</sup> By this reckoning, the ISI is essentially an extension of the Directorate General Military Intelligence (DGMI) at the General Headquarters (GHQ), rather than a tri-service national-level institution.

The excessive involvement of the Pakistan Army in the affairs of state has led the ISI to focus on internal/domestic intelligence gathering. While this internal emphasis of the ISI has its roots in the Ayub Khan era (1958-69), its external activities got a significant boost during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-1989), when the ISI was put in charge of managing the Afghan mujahideen

<sup>1</sup> The only exception to this rule was the appointment during the late Benazir Bhutto's tenure as Prime Minister of Lieutenant General (Retired) Shamsur Rehman Kallu, which was very short-lived and has never been repeated.



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and their fight against the Soviet invaders, with the active backing of the United States and the financial support of Saudi Arabia.

The links of the ISI with the Islamic militants who routed the Soviet Union from Afghanistan have remained intact ever since and became a major bone of contention between the United States and Pakistan after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. Many U.S. military and government officials have voiced their concern over ISI's links with the Taliban, and some have even blamed the ISI for sabotaging U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. The American press has charged that the ISI has used the privileged information it has about American attacks against the Afghan Taliban to forewarn the latter. In fact, the American government believes that a recent suicide-bombing at the Indian embassy in Kabul was carried out by the ISI. In India, the case is even worse: the ISI is blamed for anything violent that happens inside India that the Indian government cannot otherwise explain (*Daily Times*, September 17).

This backdrop precipitated three significant events: firstly, visits by high-level U.S. intelligence officials on July 12 to meet the new Pakistani leadership and apprise it of the evidence linking the ISI to the Taliban; secondly, the abortive July 26 attempt by the elected government of Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani to place the ISI under the Ministry of Interior; and thirdly, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher's statement during an interview on September 17 that the Pakistan Government needed to seriously rein in the ISI and curtail its sphere of activities (*The News* [Islamabad], September 18).

#### U.S. Evidence of ISI's Links with the Taliban

Stephen R. Kappes, the Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) accompanied Admiral Michael Mullen, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff on a secret visit to Islamabad on July 12. This visit was aimed at confronting Pakistan's most senior officials with new information about ties between the ISI and militants operating in Pakistan's tribal areas. The trip was a follow-up to a previous secret visit to Pakistan in January, during which U.S. Intelligence officials sought to press former President Pervez Musharraf to allow the CIA greater latitude to operate in the tribal territories. According to one senior U.S. official, Mr. Kappes delivered a very pointed message, declaring that "Look, we know there's a connection, not just with Haqqani

but also with other bad guys and ISI, and we think you could do more and we want you to do more about it" (*New York Times*, July 30).

During Prime Minister Gillani's visit to the United States he was reportedly provided with incontrovertible evidence of the ISI's continuing links with religious-extremist elements. The Prime Minister, on his return to Pakistan, blithely denied there was a significant problem. Reportedly, PM Gillani had an exclusive meeting with the CIA Director where he was briefed by the latter regarding ISI's continuing links with the Taliban and was provided with a U.S. "charge-sheet" against the ISI (*Dawn* [Karachi], September 17).

#### Gillani's Decision to Shift Control of ISI

In a move aimed at appeasing the United States while simultaneously projecting its own control and influence, Prime Minister Gillani's government issued instructions on July 26 for control of the ISI to be shifted to the Ministry of Interior, currently headed by Zardari's trusted aide Rehman Malik. The timing of the decision was significant, coming on the eve of PM Gillani's visit to the United States and just two weeks after the secret visit of Mr Kappes to Pakistan (*The News*, August 5). As expected, the decision to place the ISI under the Ministry of Interior had to be withdrawn almost immediately under pressure from the powerful Pakistan Army. In retrospect, this decision served no other purpose than to re-establish the limits of power of the democratic government in Islamabad vis-a-vis the Pakistani military.

While there is no doubt that some Pakistanis detest the ISI's political shenanigans, it is also true that most realize the good that the agency has done for the country in the domain of warding off threats to Pakistan's national security. Given the current climate where the United States is increasingly perceived as following a policy aimed at downsizing Pakistan geographically and militarily in favor of strengthening India and securing the Central Asian theatre, it is not surprising that the ISI has started being viewed as "Pakistan's first line of defense" (*The News*, August 5).

#### Richard Boucher's Statement on ISI Reform

Expressing his dissatisfaction at the lack of control exercised by the Pakistan government over the ISI, Deputy Secretary of State Boucher stressed the imperative of reforming the ISI at a private luncheon

in Washington, saying “It has to be done” (*Dawn*, September 17). It might be possible that Gillani made some commitment regarding reining in the ISI during his meetings with Bush administration officials that he was unable to implement on his return, precipitating the outburst from Richard Boucher. Diplomatic sources have indicated that the United States is trying to work out an arrangement with Pakistan for curtailing ISI’s power. Under this new arrangement, the ISI wing which deals with internal security is to be transferred to the Interior Ministry and the agency is to be asked to reduce its role in the war on terror.

The U.S. reckons that such an arrangement would be acceptable to the new civilian government in Islamabad because it can end the agency’s interference in Pakistan’s domestic politics and thus prevent future military takeovers. Taking away the agency’s authority to deal with the militants could help the United States meet its goal of severing the ISI’s alleged links to the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

When the proposal was first discussed with Pakistan’s civilian government, they were not sure they could accomplish this task since they felt that the civilians were still too weak to take on the ISI. Boucher’s statements indicate that the Americans believe that Asif Ali Zardari’s victory in the September presidential elections has created a civilian regime in Islamabad with all the powers it needs to reform the ISI (*Dawn*, September 17). In the hostile environment that exists in Pakistan today as a result of U.S. cross-border raids into Pakistan and the conduct of the war in Afghanistan, any American policy overture and declaration is bound to be viewed with immense suspicion, and the calls to de-fang the ISI are no exception. With anti-Americanism on the rise, any person or institution targeted by the United States automatically becomes popular and gains favor with the masses. While not all Pakistanis are enamored with the ISI, most view its performance on the external front favorably. To some extent, this is evident even in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where in reaction to U.S. cross-border violations a tribal jirga in Miranshah declared that they would fight alongside the Pakistan Army against any intruders and threatened to attack Afghanistan if the violations did not stop. In the same vein, the extremist militants hiding in FATA have gained greater sympathy and support from the local tribesmen just because they are actively opposing the U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan.

### Implications for Pakistan’s Stability

Beset as it is with enormous internal challenges ranging from soaring inflation to extreme insecurity to crippling energy shortages, the Zardari – Gillani government truly finds itself in a bind. While the U.S. administration might incorrectly assume that the civilian government is now in a strong enough position to take on the Army by attempting to transform the ISI, the truth is that the ever-present danger of yet another military take-over is precisely what must be giving Zardari and Gillani sleepless nights. Given that the United States would like to ensure the stability of the newly established democratic order in Islamabad, pitting the Zardari - Gillani regime against the powerful Pakistan Army at this stage could well amount to tolling its death bell. Many believe the ISI is indeed more powerful than the people sitting in cabinet or holding other offices of power. Additionally, there is doubt over whom, if anyone at all, controls this entity (*The News*, Sept.18). Having a military person at the helm of affairs in former President Musharraf was precisely what was keeping the Pakistan Army quiet and satisfied. With his departure from the scene, the Army returned to viewing the political set-up with utmost wariness and would not hesitate to intervene whenever it perceives that the vital national interests of Pakistan are being compromised by the civilian government.

### Impact on the War on Terrorism

From the Pakistani perspective, supporting the Taliban stemmed from the country’s security imperative of “strategic depth,” predicated on having a friendly regime on the north-western frontier. President Musharraf’s decision to withdraw all support for the Taliban and support the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan created a quandary that left the ISI stuck in the middle – it could neither go against what Musharraf wanted nor could it allow its influence and linkage with the Taliban to be completely broken. As such, a dichotomy crept up into Pakistan’s posture towards Afghanistan in general and its support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism in particular. It is highly probable that Musharraf went along with this duplicitous policy of simultaneously supporting the United States without compromising the ISI’s links with the Taliban.

Despite its help in fighting al-Qaeda, the ISI is viewed with deep suspicion by U.S. officials who believe that it retains links to the Taliban and other militants blamed for supporting attacks on U.S. forces. While it is true to state that the ISI has strong links with the Taliban, it is

equally important to understand that the maintenance of those links is perceived by most in Pakistan to be an insurance against the possibility of an anti-Islamabad and pro-India Afghanistan. While eliminating the menace of religious extremism and militancy from FATA is definitely construed by Pakistan to be in its national interest, the possibility of an unfriendly Northern Alliance-dominated and pro-Indian regime in Kabul is certainly not in line with Pakistan's national aims and objectives. From the Pakistani perspective, the war in Afghanistan must end with a favorable and supportive regime in power in Kabul, even if this is made up of the Taliban. From the U.S. point of view, the possibility of the Taliban being allowed to come into power is not considered. It is against this backdrop that one must view the involvement of the ISI with the Taliban – not as abetting terrorism but as protecting Pakistan's national interest.

An approach based on separating al-Qaeda from the Taliban might allow the U.S. and Pakistan to work together to achieve their respective aims. Currently, the threat faced in Afghanistan is two-fold: the one posed by the international jihadis of al-Qaeda and the other from the local Taliban. While the former is the focus of U.S. and Coalition forces, the latter is the primary threat with which the Afghanistan and Pakistan governments must contend. Whereas the former is threatening virtually the entire world with acts of terrorism, the latter is essentially a liberation struggle against a foreign invasion of Afghanistan. In order to win in this campaign, it is vital that a rift be driven between al-Qaeda and the Taliban. In the implementation of this strategy, the ISI can play a significant role, not only because of its links with the Haqqani group but also its ties with Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

In a significant development, the latest shuffle at the senior level of the Pakistan Army saw Lieutenant General Nadeem Taj, the ISI Director General, being replaced after merely a year in office by Lieutenant General Ahmed Shuja Pasha. While some construe this as an attempt to remove known Musharraf loyalists from power, others contend that this could well be an attempt to harmonize the efforts of the military and the ISI in fighting terrorism, since the new DG ISI oversaw the conduct of all military operations against terrorist elements in FATA in his previous assignment as Director General Military Operations at GHQ (*Dawn*, Sept. 30).

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the imperative of curtailing of its involvement in Pakistan's domestic situation, the ISI's external role needs to be maintained, and its links with the Taliban need to be exploited by the United States and Pakistan to their own respective advantage. To avoid the possibility of setting Pakistan's democratic development back at least a decade, it is vital that any strategy implemented must be seen to further the interests of both allies rather than being perceived as being detrimental to the interests of either. The appointment of Lieutenant General Ahmed Shuja Pasha as the DG ISI is a significant step in the direction of harmonizing the military and intelligence components of the War on Terrorism and could be a major step in removing U.S. apprehensions regarding the ISI.

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## PKK Party Congress Sets Long-Term Strategy Based on Threat Perceptions

By Nihat Ali Ozcan and Saban Kardas

**T**he Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK) was established in 1973 against the background of Cold War politics. In the formation of the PKK's institutional culture and practices, the prevailing Marxist ideas and strategies adopted by other leftist movements of the time played a major role in their ideology. Influenced by the experiences of various Marxist organizations around the world, the PKK's organizational structure was based on three pillars: a party organization acting as the ideological center and running the movement according to strict hierarchical rules, a military wing to carry out subversive military activities, and a "front" organization to oversee the activities of all PKK supporters in both legal and extralegal domains. Even after the Cold War came to an end, the PKK maintained its adherence to these institutional practices and behavioral habits. In this essay, we will evaluate one of the deep-seated

practices of the PKK, party congresses. In particular, we will examine the PKK's threat perceptions as reflected in the conclusions of the tenth party congress, held on August 21-30 in shelters in the mountainous terrain of northern Iraq. We will also discuss the PKK's response to these challenges in the context of recent developments.

### The Role of Congresses in the PKK's history

The PKK has sought to project itself as more than a mere armed organization terrorizing a local population to reach some short-term goals. On the contrary, it defines itself as a party advocating a well-established political program through the application of a long-term strategy. To preserve this image, the PKK went to great lengths to hold party congresses even under dire circumstances. PKK congresses have served as a platform for evaluating the organization's performance during previous years, assessing the existing situation and setting the agenda of the organization for subsequent years. So far, the PKK has held ten congresses. Although the organization has sought to hold its congresses approximately every five years, in some cases it convened extraordinary meetings. Since it had its first congress in Turkey in 1978, the PKK has convened two congresses in Lebanon, four in Syria and the latest three in northern Iraq.

Prior to the actual PKK congresses, militants conduct preliminary meetings in their respective regions to determine the agenda of the convention, as well as select the delegates who will attend. The ceremonial value attached to them aside, the congresses perform three main functions. First, in addition to reaffirming the loyalty of the delegates to the imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan, they help incoming members of the organization's leadership cadres solidify their legitimacy. Second, members of the PKK assess the organization's past activities, as well as the state of political and military conditions prevailing in the region and discuss new strategic goals and alternative instruments for future activities. These deliberations are conducted under the influence of a dogmatic attachment to Marxist principles. Third, by utilizing the milieu of the conferences, the PKK seeks to foster a sense of motivation among the members while boosting their morale.

The conduct of delegates at congresses helps sustain the internal legitimacy of leadership cadres in several ways. Abdullah Ocalan has been the unchallenged and unquestioned leader of the PKK in all these gatherings. Over time, he has come to assume a symbolic role as the unifying element of the entire movement, and as

such a "personality cult" was created around his name. According to the established practice in congresses, the members of the organization, except for Ocalan, engage in self-criticism before their comrades; they reflect on their past mistakes and acknowledge their weaknesses in fulfilling their duties. In essence, these almost ritualistic acts serve to shake the reliability of the leading figures of the PKK other than Ocalan before other delegates. As a result, through the discussions as well as ceremonies during the sessions, the congresses not only legitimize the leadership cadres but also ensure the continuation of the organization's loyalty to the leader.

Another function of the congresses is their role in providing a platform for analyzing the past, present and future conditions of the organization in line with its ideological disposition. In general, despite the drastic changes in world politics, the PKK's discourse is still heavily influenced by Marxist thinking. For instance, it is commonplace to hear criticisms of capitalism in congresses. Similarly, the members of the organization seek to demonstrate their comprehension of Ocalan's teachings through bombastic flattery of their leader. The rulings concerning the future direction of the organization are also framed in line with its ideological discourse. Therefore, decisions taken at congresses have strategic value for the evolution of the organization. The PKK publishes the conclusions of congresses in print or on the internet to communicate its goals to the public.<sup>1</sup>

Lastly, congresses help motivate members of the organization. The proceedings of congresses contain short, clear and effective slogans to mobilize members. Following congresses, militants accelerate their attacks to demonstrate their loyalty to the organization and their determination to carry out the conclusions.

Of the ten congresses the PKK has held so far, the following stand out in particular: The third congress held in 1982 called for the return of the PKK militants from Lebanon to Turkey to initiate an armed struggle against the state. The fifth congress in 1995 prioritized the political struggle over the armed struggle. The eighth congress of 1999 decided to cease terror attacks following Ocalan's capture and the ninth congress of

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1 For instance, see: Abdullah Ocalan, *PKK 4. Kongresine Sunulan Politik Rapor* (Istanbul: Zagros Yayinlari, 1993); Abdullah Öcalan, *PKK 5. Kongresine Sunulan Politik Rapor* (Istanbul: Gunes Ulkesi Yayinlari, 1995); Abdullah Öcalan, *PKK Olaganustu 7. Kongresine Sunulan Politik Rapor* (Istanbul: Mem Yayinlari, 2000).

2005 agreed to halt attacks against Turkish security forces. Such decisions have marked important turning points in the PKK's overall strategy.

#### Decisions of the Tenth Congress, August 2008

The PKK convened its latest congress in northern Iraq on August 21-30. Delegates met in mountain shelters under the threat of airstrikes from Turkish jetfighters. In the traditional spirit of the congresses, the latest gathering declared the forthcoming period as "Freedom to Ocalan." The tenth congress also maintained the tradition of assessing the past, present and future of the organization. The statements following the congress indicate one of the biggest current sources of concern is the new situation created by the meeting between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and U.S. President George Bush in November 2007.<sup>2</sup> After this meeting, the United States started to share actionable intelligence with Turkey, with alarming results for the PKK. The closing statement of the congress maintains that the United States, along with Turkey and Iran, is determined to eliminate the PKK.

The PKK's major concern appears to be the decision of the Barzani-led Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to reconsider its relations with the PKK, which may result in it abandoning the PKK (*Firat Haber Ajansi*, September 8). If the KRG indeed withdraws its support from the PKK, this development will likely have a grave impact on the organization's use of the terrain of northern Iraq as a safe haven. So far the PKK's activities in this region have been largely unhindered, which at times has led the Turkish government to accuse the KRG of actively supporting the PKK. Nonetheless, the PKK is uneasy about prospects for U.S. pressure on Barzani as well as a possible rapprochement between Turkey and Barzani (*Referans*, October 14). To forestall such scenarios, the PKK congress expresses its support for Barzani on the Kirkuk question (*Firat News Agency*, September 8).

The conclusions of the congress also indicate that the PKK is concerned about the fate of its "front" organization (*Firat News Agency*, September 8). PKK supporters established various associations and political parties in the legal domain to advocate for Kurdish nationalism and compete in Turkish electoral politics. Since entering the legal political sphere in the 1980s, Kurdish nationalists have operated a series of political

parties such as the Democratic Party (DEP) and the Democratic People's Party (DEHAP), a new entity arising each time the last manifestation was shut down by the state. The most recent of these is the Democratic Society Party (Demokratik Toplum Partisi – DTP), founded in 2005. These groups nonetheless maintained organic ties with the PKK, steadfastly refusing to condemn PKK violence. The legal advocates of ethnic nationalism benefited from the violence as fear became an important factor in mobilizing people around their agenda. Continued connections or support for the PKK eventually led the Turkish state to close down many of these organizations. Despite continued protestations from DTP leaders that they do not act as a front for the PKK, the party has recently faced court proceedings designed to shut it down. At a recent meeting with three leading DTP MP's, Deputy Prime Minister Dengir Mir Mehmet Firat (himself of Kurdish origin) told the MP's, "We know your reality. The type of relations you have with the PKK are an obstacle for the prime minister's efforts to implement solutions to the problem. We want you to recognize the PKK as a terrorist organization" (*Hurriyet*, October 19).

As a matter of fact, the threat to the PKK's front organizations was unwittingly aggravated by its decision to refrain from attacking civilians following the 9/11 terror attacks in order to cultivate a more sympathetic image (*Ozgur Politika*, March 14, 2002). Having lost the leverage of being able to "penalize" civilians, the PKK encountered serious problems in disciplining its front organizations. The most common problems were encountered in mobilizing people for street demonstrations or providing logistical support for armed militants (*Firat News Agency*, September 18). Having been freed from fear of punishment, the priorities of sympathizers changed during the calm years between 2001 and 2005. They started to ignore the demands of the organization. To avoid this handicap, the PKK set up more militant shadow organizations (such as the Freedom Hawks of Kurdistan) and sought to motivate its supporters and terrorize its opponents. In some cases, the PKK executed civilians on charges of being government agents (*hezaciwanan.com*, August 11, 2004). The conclusions of the tenth congress show that the PKK is eager to regain the leverage of punishment, threatening cadres that have failed to conform to the organization's ideology (*Firat News Agency*, September 18).

2 For Murat Karayilan's statements, see *Firat News Agency*, September 18.

The final statement of the congress, as well as ensuing developments, show that the PKK perceives another

serious threat to its front organization: the growing power of the governing Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi -AKP) in the region as the March 2009 municipal elections approach (*Milliyet*, October 21). Current predictions indicate that the DTP, which currently controls municipalities in several cities such as Diyarbakir, will face a serious challenge from the AKP. Losing municipalities may cost the PKK dearly; even if its front organization avoids a total collapse, it will still face a severe crisis. Maintaining control over local municipalities is crucial, not only because they provide material resources to the organization and boost its supporters' morale, but also because a political presence helps build the legitimacy of the movement domestically and internationally.

A parallel development further disturbed the PKK. The new Turkish Chief of Staff Ilker Basbug, unlike his predecessors, has sought to establish channels of communication with local people in southeastern Turkey. Moreover, Basbug has drawn attention to the economic and social problems in the region. Perceiving this outreach as a threat to its interests, the PKK threatened those people who attended a meeting Basbug held with the representatives of various NGOs in Diyarbakir.<sup>1</sup>

### Threats to Survival

In short, the PKK seems to perceive threats to its survival both inside Turkey and in northern Iraq. Its assessment of current threats – namely, the prospect that the PKK may lose its safe havens in northern Iraq and the challenges posed by upcoming municipal elections and other local developments to its front organization – led the delegates attending the tenth congress to focus on two alternatives: first, increasing the medium-intensity armed attacks; second, revitalizing mass public demonstrations in urban areas, marked by the visible attendance of women and children (Firat News Agency, September 18 ). Through these moves, the PKK plans to raise the tension in the run-up to the municipal elections and mobilize people along ethnic lines. It expects that if the people are confronted with the brutal face of the state, they will cast their votes based on ethnic identity. This mode of thinking largely explains the aggressive attitude the PKK has adopted lately, through intensifying its attacks on Turkish security forces and agitating Kurdish people in southeastern Turkey and the major cities in western Turkey.

<sup>3</sup> For Basbug's meetings, see *Radikal*, September 5 and *Terrorism Focus*, September 24; for the PKK threat, see *Firat Agency*, September 18.

This new strategy was put into effect shortly after the congress. The number of terror incidents increased dramatically; between August 30 and October 20, around 180 attacks were reported, the most notorious being the one against the Aktutun border station on October 3, which took the lives of 17 Turkish soldiers ([www.tsk.mil.tr](http://www.tsk.mil.tr); see also *Terrorism Focus*, October 21). At the same time, the PKK was successful in mobilizing civilians. To protest Prime Minister Erdogan's trip to Diyarbakir, PKK sympathizers organized illegal demonstrations in various cities on the grounds that Ocalan was mistreated in prison, which disrupted provision of basic services in many places. DTP deputy Emine Ayna stated, "Ocalan is seen as a leader by many Kurds. If there is any physical violence toward him, this violence is directed at Kurds" (*Turkish Daily News*, October 23). With demonstrators threatening local businesses into shutting down their shops, the municipalities controlled by the DTP did not collect garbage and halted public transportation as part of the PKK's protest of the AKP ([kanaldhaber.com](http://kanaldhaber.com), October 20).

### Conclusion

To counter the political and military threats from inside and outside Turkey, the PKK has initiated proactive policies in line with the conclusions of the tenth congress. If it fails to mobilize ethnic sentiments among Kurdish speaking constituents, the DTP might have to concede electoral success in the 2009 municipal elections to the AKP, which has been making political inroads in southeast Turkey. Recent developments highlight the PKK's determination to raise tensions in Turkey to reverse this process.

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## Terrorism Comes to Damascus: Syria Faces its Own Islamist Threat

By Fadhil Ali

After a generation of internal stability Syria was struck by a terrorist attack in its capital of Damascus on September 27. According to an official Syrian source, 17 people were killed and 14 injured when a car bomb detonated in a crowded area on the busy main road that links the city with Damascus international airport. Though the explosion took place near the headquarters of the Palestine Security Service, a branch of Syria's extensive security complex, all of the casualties were reported to be civilians, save for a military officer and his son. Later reports cited claims by Syrian opposition groups that the officer killed was Brigadier General Abdul Karim Abbas, who was questioned by the international commission investigating the assassination of Lebanese Premier Rafik Hariri (Naharnet, September 29; *Middle East Times*, October 6). The car was estimated to have held 200 kg of explosives. General Bassam Abdul Majeed, the Syrian interior minister, described the attack as a terrorist act (sana.sy, September 28).

A day later Syrian authorities issued a statement with more details about the attack. Authorities detailed the results of the initial investigation:

[A] terrorist was driving the car used in the attack. The vehicle is a GMC, plate number 83115 and had entered the country on September 26, 2008, through a border check point coming from a neighboring Arab country... the process of identifying the suicide attacker is continuing by checking the DNA of his dead body... the investigation with the arrested suspects has shown that the terrorist attacker is linked to a Takfiri [Islamic extremist] group. Members of that group had been arrested previously and their interrogation and the search for fugitives will continue (sana.sy, September 29).

The Syrian statements did not initially specify the group alleged to be involved or the country from which the car originated. In addition to non-Arab Turkey and Israel, Syria shares a border with three Arab countries: Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon.

After announcing the arrest of the alleged Syrian ringleader charged with responsibility in the Damascus bombing, President Assad claimed that some members of Lebanon's anti-Syrian "March 14" political coalition were financing terrorist activities in Syria. The president added that Syria was threatened by "radical fundamentalist groups in north Lebanon trying to use Syria as a passage between Lebanon and Iraq" (Ya Libnan, October 17).

### The Missing Name

Syrian security forces have had a number of clashes with the jihadi group Jund al-Sham (the Army of Greater Syria) over the last few years. Jund al-Sham was founded in Afghanistan in 1999 by associates of the late Jordanian leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (killed in 2006). The group is the only jihadi organization referred to by name by the Syrian government when it attributes similar attacks or when commenting on confrontation with Islamic militant groups. In March 2006 the Syrian security forces killed Mohammed Ali Naseef, the most wanted figure of Jund al-Sham, in an armed clash near Damascus. In September 2006 the Syrians foiled a car bomb attack on the American embassy in Damascus. The Syrian government then used the same phrase, a "Takfiri terrorist group," to describe the organization that was supposedly behind the attack (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 13, 2006). It is possible that Jund al-Sham is the unnamed group suspected of carrying out the September 27 bombing.

### Jihadis Accuse the Government

For days after the attack there was a conspiracy theory presented by jihadis to explain the incident. The pro-jihadi web magazine of the al-Yaqeen Media Center wrote that the attack was arranged by the Syrian regime in order to win the sympathy of the world: "The Syrian regime, which was labelled as the biggest obstacle for regional security, has gained the sympathy of the West. The formal statements showed U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice strangely supporting the regime. She also met the Syrian foreign minister after a long break [in relations]." Al-Yaqeen Media Center criticized the official Syrian story, saying that the 200 kg of explosives that the regime said was used in the attack would have left a bigger hole. It also accused the regime, which it refers to as the Nusayri (Alawite) regime, of covering up the facts and criticized it for letting only the state-



run Syrian TV crew into the site of the explosion.<sup>2</sup> The analysis suggests that the explosion happened by mistake but was used by Syrian authorities to their advantage:

Why did the regime arrest dozens of Salafi Sunni theological students a few hours after the attack? What is the link between the way the accident was presented in the media and the Syrian military gathering on the border with Lebanon? Does the Nusayri regime want to intervene in Lebanon to help the Maronite Crusader Lebanese army in its preparations for a battle against the honourable Muslims in Tripoli? (...) The impression is that the regime itself made the accident and sacrificed 17 innocent people...

### The Missing Source

In an exclusive interview with a Lebanese newspaper three days after the attack, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said that northern Lebanon has become a real base for extremism, which represents a danger to Syria (*al-Bayrak*, September 30).

The sectarian conflict between the anti-Syrian Sunnis and pro-Syrian Alawites escalated and turned violent last summer in Tripoli, the biggest city in northern Lebanon. In early September, President Assad, a member of the powerful Alawite minority, considered the situation in Lebanon still fragile; speaking at a summit in Damascus attended by the leaders of France, Turkey and Lebanon, Assad said that there will be no stability in Lebanon without terminating the problem of the extremism of the Salafi powers in northern Lebanon (*al-Jazeera*, September 5). A few days after that warning, the Syrian president sent 10,000 soldiers to the border with

1 The Alawites or Nusayris are a syncretistic Shiite sect incorporating a significant degree of Christian and pre-Islamic traditions in their belief system. The true nature of Alawi theology is kept secret and is known only to a small number of initiates. Dating back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the sect is concentrated in the Syrian Mediterranean coast. They are estimated to be a minority in Syria (about 10%, compared to 70% Sunni Muslims). In 1970 the late President Hafiz al-Assad became the first Alawite ruler of Syria while leading the secular Arab-nationalist Baath Party. Although Sunnis are well represented in the government and the Baath Party in Syria, Alawites control the sensitive strategic and security positions in the country. Alawites represent an even smaller minority in neighboring Lebanon, where they live mainly in the northern part of the country. Nusayri is the traditional name for the sect – the term “Alawite” (followers of Ali) only came into general use in the 1920s.

northern Lebanon. A spokesman for the Lebanese army said that his country asked Syria for clarification about the reason of the deployment and Syria replied that it was for internal security reasons (*al-Arabiya*, September 22).

With Syria increasing the size of its force on the border after the September 27 bombing, Lebanese Sunni leader Saad al-Hariri, who heads the anti-Syrian “March 14” alliance in parliament, accused President Assad of threatening Lebanon’s sovereignty. Al-Hariri stated, “We want to tell the international community and especially our friends in France that it is dangerous to endorse any direct or indirect intervention by the Syrian regime in Lebanon under the excuse of countering the extremists’ attacks” (*BBCArabic.com*, September 30). The French government of President Nicolas Sarkozy has taken steps lately to refresh relations with Syria, reversing the hard line taken by former President Jacques Chirac.

### A Blast in Tripoli

Two days after the Damascus bomb, a bus carrying Lebanese soldiers was bombed in Tripoli. Seven people were killed in the attack, which was the third of its kind targeting the Lebanese army. Lebanese security forces arrested two Lebanese and a Palestinian in operations in Tripoli and the nearby al-Bidawi Palestinian refugee camp, claiming the suspects were part of a terrorist cell responsible for the attacks. The cell was believed to be tied to the Palestinian Islamist extremist group Fatah al-Islam. The arrests came after a visit to Damascus by Brigadier General Edmond Fadel, the newly appointed director of Lebanese military intelligence (*al-Hayat*, October 13, *al-Akhbar* [Beirut], October 16). Syrian media claimed the arrested men also confessed to involvement in the Damascus attack (*Souria al-Ghad*, October 14). At the same time, a pro-Syrian Lebanese newspaper reported Lebanese security forces had started to pursue Syrian opposition elements in Lebanon (*As-Safir* [Beirut], October 14).

### Al-Absi Detained in Syria?

The Lebanese army battled Fatah al-Islam for nearly four months last year in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp near Tripoli. The fighting ended in September 2007 when the camp fell to Lebanese forces, but without the arrest of Fatah leader Shakir al-Absi, who disappeared as Lebanese troops entered the camp.

It was reported that Shakir al-Absi had been arrested in Syria. Lebanese and other pan-Arab media reported that the Syrians told the French president Nicolas Sarkozy in early September that al-Absi was in a Syrian prison (*Al-Quds al-Arabi*, September 4). President Assad later stated that al-Absi's daughter had been arrested and was providing information on plans to target Syria (*Ya Libnan*, October 17).

Syria has become the main crossing point for foreign fighters going to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Four years later, Syria seems to have changed its policy, possibly angering various jihadi groups intent on infiltrating fighters across the Syrian/Iraqi frontier. In late 2007 then-Coalition commander General David Petraeus praised Syria's cooperation in reducing violence in Iraq; "Syria has taken steps to reduce the flow of the foreign fighters through its borders with Iraq" (VOA, December 6, 2007).

The Damascus bombing was the third serious security incident in Syria this year. In February, Imad Mugnyiah, a top military figure of the Lebanese Hezbollah, was killed by a car bomb in Damascus (BBC, February 13, 2008). In August, Brigadier General Muhammad Sulaiman, a top aide of President Assad and his liaison to Hezbollah, was assassinated by a sniper in the Syrian coastal city of Tartous (*al-Hayat*, August 07, 2008). Brigadier Sulaiman had given testimony to the international commission on Rafik Hariri's death only days before his murder (*Middle East Times*, October 6).

Syrian statements about terrorist activities on Syrian soil are usually ambiguous; the regime has been always secretive when it comes to security affairs. Yet this policy might have become inappropriate after the recent attack and assassinations. Syria, which has historic links with various terrorist organizations and individuals, has felt the heat of major attacks in urban areas. The image of a stable and secure country has been shaken severely after recent events. Syria needs a new approach to handle the current situation – its previous policy of accommodation and sponsorship of various terrorist movements is unlikely to placate the anti-Baathist, anti-Alawite Salafi-Jihadi groups.

Without Syrian cooperation it would have been difficult to reduce the violence in Iraq. However, Syria was also pursuing its own interests by securing its own territory. Although permitting terrorists to transit from Syria into Iraq provides leverage against Washington, a terrorist safe haven in Iraq would be dangerous for Damascus.

Syria has now sent an ambassador to Baghdad, two years after the two countries announced that they would restore ties, ending a 24-year break in diplomatic relations. As the Iraq security forces continue to develop, both countries have an interest in creating an effective system to control their borders.

### Conclusion

Lebanon has been suffering sectarian violence and terrorist attacks since the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in February 2005. Three years after its withdrawal from Lebanon, Syria still has influence and allies in Lebanon. Damascus could use that influence to encourage a genuine national reconciliation between the Lebanese. The recent move to establish diplomatic relations with Beirut is an encouraging sign and a historic development in the relationship between the two countries, as Syria has traditionally regarded Lebanon as a temporarily detached part of a greater Syrian state. Recognition of Lebanese sovereignty will enable both parties to coordinate their efforts against terrorism. The current Lebanese President Michel Sulaiman has good relation with the Syrians and was head of the Lebanese Army during the period of Syrian military and political domination of Lebanon. Nevertheless, the Sunni fear of marginalization in Lebanon needs to be addressed, especially as Syrian and Lebanese security forces take measures against cross-border Salafi-Jihadi terrorism.

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