

TERRORISM FOCUS

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IN THIS ISSUE:

* BRIEFS.....	1
* Jihadis Dispute Role of Iraq’s Female Suicide Bombers.....	3
* Responsibility for Bombings in Western Turkey Disputed by PKK and the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons.....	4
* Who is Behind the Bombing of the Salafi Mosque in Baku?.....	6
* Mass Attack on French Paratroopers Heralds New Taliban Tactics.....	7



THE AMIR OF THE ABU BAKR AL-SIDDIQ AL-SALAFI ARMY DESCRIBES THE STATE OF THE IRAQI RESISTANCE

A jihadi website recently hosted an opportunity for its readers to pose questions to Abu Muhammad al-Iraqi, the Amir of Iraq’s Abu Bakr al-Siddiq al-Salafi Army, a Salafist group active since 2003 (hanein.net, August 19). The movement is named for the first of the “righteously guided Caliphs,” Abu Bakr, who during his short rule (632-634) initiated the Muslim conquest of Iraq from the Sassanid Persians under his outstanding general, Khalid ibn al-Walid.

Abu Muhammad denies the participation of any Ba’athists in the Abu Bakr Army, asking how Salafis could possibly cooperate with secularists, though he acknowledges a small number of former Iraqi Army officers have joined the ranks of his movement - “they are few and with a righteous doctrine.” According to the Amir, there are no foreign Arab mujahidin in the Abu Bakr Army as a result of an early decision that such a move might prove divisive. Nonetheless, the movement “opened our homes for them and provided them with food, drinks, and assistance.”

The Abu Bakr Army has carried out a number of suicide operations. Abu Muhammad declares “the martyrdom-seeking operations are blessed because they denied the enemies sleep and terrified them.” In response to a question seeking the reason for an apparent decline in jihadi operations, Abu Muhammad suggested; “the decrease is general, and not limited to

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a specific faction, due to the recent situation,” possibly referring to the Coalition “surge.” The Amir also says that the Abu Bakr Army does not claim responsibility for military operations unless it has videotape of the action it can post on the internet; “If we cannot film any operation, regardless of its importance, we do not announce it. For years, this has been our approach and we have carried out innumerable operations of great importance that were tackled by media outlets, but we did not claim responsibility for them.”

Abu Muhammad describes the Baghdad government as followers of “the Jews and Christians,” and thus incapable of negotiating any settlement with the occupiers.

“Our goal is the establishment of an Islamic state that is governed by the Koran and the Sunna, which are interpreted in the Salafi way. This will be the beginning of the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate that will include all Muslims from all different countries and ethnicities. The Caliphate cannot be based on nationalism and patriotism.” The Amir rejects the legitimacy of the Kurdish peshmerga militias and the Shi’a Mahdi Army (which he calls the Jaysh al-Dajjal, or Army of the Antichrist). He condemns the American-allied Awakening Councils, but suggests “many of the Awakening Councils were deceived and were given fatwas allowing them to enter the arena to protect the Sunni areas with the pledge not to attack the mujahideen.”

Unification of the various resistance movements has proven difficult because of “the diversity of different methodologies, the lack of harmony among hearts, the trading of accusations, the hegemony attempts, the interference of external parties, wrong Shari’a policies, and blood shedding.” The leaders of the Abu Bakr Army have discussed the possibility of civil war between these groups, but Abu Muhammad does not expect such a development until the departure of the Americans.

ANTI-OLYMPIC TERRORIST PLOT BY CHINA’S YI ETHNIC MINORITY ALLEGED

While most eyes were turned to the Muslim Uyghurs of Xinjiang as the possible source of a terrorist strike against last month’s Beijing Olympics, there are reports

that members of a little-known Chinese ethnic minority, the Yi, may have been planning their own attack (ICHRD - Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, [Hong Kong], August 21).

According to the Hong-Kong based ICHRD, on August 17 three men belonging to the Yi minority penetrated the security of the Cangkou military airport in Qingdao (Shandong Province), a Yellow Sea port and former German colony in northeast China once known as Tsingtao. The men, who were alleged to be carrying explosives, were discovered by a guard, and after a brief and unsuccessful struggle to seize the guard’s weapon the men fled, leaving behind explosives and personal documents that later led to their arrest. Cangkou airport played an important role as the source of flights monitoring algae formation off Qingdao, the site of the Olympic sailing events. The ICHRD speculated that “the suspects could have been trying to sneak into the airport and capture or hijack a plane, fly to the competition venues, and crash the plane into the Olympic village or among the competing teams.”

The three suspects were identified by security forces as Ehqi Lahe, Jiluo Lahou and Ehqi Lake, all of the Meigu County of Sichuan Province. Qingdao’s Public Security Bureau quickly denied the possibility of a terrorist plot, insisting that the men were part of a criminal gang that intended to steal from the airport (Zhongguo Xinwen She [Beijing], August 21; South China Morning Post, August 22). In a separate report, the ICHRD claimed that five boxes of explosives were stolen from a Meigu County ordnance factory on July 7 (ICHRD, August 21).

Though a 2000 census found more than 7 million Yi in southwest China, the minority is far from homogenous. There is little interaction between many Yi groups, who have developed distinct social systems, costumes, scripts, and languages, often in relative isolation. Some of the more remote sections of the Yi did not come under central Chinese control until after the Communists took over in 1949. Like the Uyghurs, certain Yi scholars maintain that their culture and civilization predates that of the dominant Han Chinese by thousands of years. The Yi are primarily found in the Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces, as well as the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

The Yi of Sichuan Province are deeply impoverished and have lately been disturbed by tourist development of their sacred lands in the region. An April investigative report by the Guangdong *Southern Metropolis* newspaper claimed that thousands of Yi children from the Liangshan district of Sichuan were being sold into slavery “like cabbages” to fuel the need for industrial labor in southern China.

A report from the government-owned Xinhua News Agency stated that 225 pilots from China’s ethnic minorities, including the Yi, were “working hard to ensure normal and safe operation of flights during the ongoing Beijing Olympic Games” (Xinhua, August 21).

Though the ICHRD is basically a one-man operation conducted by twice-imprisoned dissident Frank Lu Siqing, it is regarded as an authoritative source for reports on human rights issues in mainland China by the U.S. government and major news agencies including the BBC, VOA, CNN, and numerous others. Lu Siqing was granted permanent residence status in Hong Kong in 2000 under the “one country, two systems” policy of the Beijing government (AP, August 19, 2000). According to the ICHRD website, Lu Siqing operates a network of 5,000 informers within mainland China. The informers escape police scrutiny by calling Lu Siqing’s pager from a public telephone, a local call. Lu Siqing then calls them back on the same line. Lu Siqing has also suggested providing his informers with tiny “spy-rate” cameras and video cameras to document human rights abuses within China.

Jihadis Dispute Role of Iraq’s Female Suicide Bombers

Lately, jihadi forum participants have been inquiring about the women’s suicide battalion in Iraq and the religious jurisprudence regarding female jihad. A response to the inquiries was posted by Dr. Hani al-Sibai, an Islamist Egyptian Sunni scholar and lawyer. Sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment in Egypt for his activities with Islamic Jihad, al-Sibai now lives as a political refugee in London, where he is the director of al-Maqreze Centre for Historical Studies. The posting, entitled “The Truth about Women’s Martyrdom Battalions of al-Qaeda,” also revealed the presence of female suicide bombers in some parts of Iraq and was circulated and commented on by a number of jihadi forum chatters (al-faloja.info, August 8).

The question posed by forum participants on the subject of female suicide bombers was as follows:

Lately, an increase in women’s participation in martyrdom and combat operations against occupiers in Iraq was noticed. How do you analyze this new phenomenon and what is the truth about the affiliation of women’s suicide battalion with al-Qaeda, specially the ‘That al-Nitaqayn’ battalion? [1] Could we consider this a new tactic of al-Qaeda in Iraq?

Al-Sibai’s answer comes in conformity with Salafi-Jihadi ideology as he divides jihad into two categories:

- *Defensive Jihad*: When Muslim land is occupied by non-believers, jihad is mandatory for all Muslims, male and female. Women are allowed to conduct jihad without the approval of parents or spouse.
- *Offensive Jihad*: When other Islamic countries are being attacked, Muslims are obliged to defend the weak Islamic countries and help them against the invaders. In the Salafi-Jihadi context this constitutes offensive jihad. In this case women are not allowed to travel to participate in jihad without permission from parents or spouse and must be accompanied by an unmarriageable person such as a male relative.

Concerning the affiliation of the women’s battalion with al-Qaeda, al-Sibai says that for the last two years al-Qaeda has melted into the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) along with other Salafi-Jihadi groups and no longer releases communiqués in al-Qaeda’s name. Al-Sibai believes there is no official al-Qaeda female suicide battalion, rather only unorganized female suicide groups composed of wives, daughters, and sisters of slain jihadis in Baghdad, Diyala, and Mosul. They await an opportunity to attack U.S. and Iraqi forces to avenge their dead. Since the occupation of Iraq, according to al-Sibai, women have carried out 23 operations in Diyala, 21 operations in Baghdad, 17 operations in Mosul, eight operations in al-Anbar, and four in Kirkuk. The female perpetrators were mostly wives and daughters of high

ranking jihadi leaders. Although ISI has not confirmed or denied the official formation of groups of female suicide bombers, Am Salameh, the widow of Shaykh Abi Obaida al-Rawi (former al-Qaeda leader in northern Iraq who was killed in an airstrike in 2007), is the Amir of the “That al-Nitaqayn” Martyrdom battalion. In leaflets distributed in Baghdad, Mosul, and Diyala, Am Salameh threatened to hurl an army of women martyrs into Baghdad’s streets. The leaflet read “Tens of women from Fallujah, Baghdad, Diyala, and widows of Mosul are longing to join their lost ones in heaven. The women are very close to their targets” (muslm.net August 7).

Consenting to women’s contribution to jihad, a forum chatter from Fallujah contributed to al-Sibai’s posting, saying Fallujah militants had formed a female martyrs battalion from women who vowed to avenge their men killed by Coalition forces. This formation pledged allegiance to ISI and received training and support from al-Bara Bin Malik’s battalion, the military wing of ISI. Another statement attributed to Shaykh Abu Laith al-Mashhadani, an al-Qaeda’s leader in the Abu Ghraib district of Baghdad, said the women’s battalion reports directly to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. The “That al-Nitaqayn” battalion has carried out tens of martyrdom operation in the last few months, killing many soldiers; “It is worth a thousand of our other fighting battalions” said Shaykh al-Mashhadani (islamonline.net, July29).

On the other hand, another forum chatter posted a link to a picture of a female suicide bomber who blew herself up in Baquba, saying: “This is the picture of our sister. Her body is exposed to the public and security forces are grabbing her body. Is this what we wanted? Our women are exposed in a shameful way?”

Despite a sudden proliferation of such activities, female jihad operations are expected to remain limited due to the constraints imposed by religion on Muslim women. The nature of terror operations necessitates the need to mingle with a male trainer, handlers, and the enemy, which women are not allowed without the company of an unmarried relative or a spouse.

Notes:

1. The battalion is named for Asma’ Bint Abi Bakr, daughter of Abu Bakr, the first caliph (successor to the Prophet Muhammad) and one of the earliest converts to Islam. When the Prophet Muhammad and Abu Bakr were forced to take refuge in the mountains, she tore her cloth belt in two to tie the provisions she took to them, hence the nickname “al-Nitaqayn” (the two belts).

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Responsibility for Bombings in Western Turkey Disputed by PKK and the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons

Two terrorist attacks committed in Turkish port cities in only three days, one in Mersin (on the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey) on August 19 and the second in Izmir (formerly known as Smyrna, on the Aegean Sea) on August 21, have highlighted the difficulty faced by Turkish authorities in their efforts to safeguard their citizens from such incidents (Anatolia, August 19; August 21).

The success of Turkey’s military forces against the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey since December 2007 has resulted in a distinct change in tactics on the part of its Kurdish foes in terms of both locations and modus operandi (see *Terrorism Focus*, April 9). Inevitably, the Kurdish groups have altered the focus of their attacks away from the largely rural southeast to Turkey’s larger cities and shifted, in the cases of the Mersin and Izmir attacks, from their increasingly vulnerable small-unit guerrilla attacks to the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) – car bombs. A corollary is that the latest attacks also illustrate the difficulty in uncovering the responsibility for such incidents because of the use of multiple names by terrorist groups and the near-constant proliferation of factions within some groups.

In Mersin, an individual suspected to have been en route to a location where he intended to carry out a suicide bombing detonated the device in his vehicle while being pursued by police authorities after attempting to avoid a police checkpoint (Today's Zaman, August 25). When police officers stopped a white car on the Adana-Mersin motorway after a reported tip off, the driver realized he would be caught and set off the explosives, killing himself and wounding twelve police officers (Anatolia, August 19; Reuters, August 24).

In the follow-up attack in Izmir, a car bomb was employed against a minibus carrying approximately 40 police officers and a car belonging to the Turkish military, resulting in injuries to seven policemen, three soldiers, and six civilians (NTV, August 21; *Hurriyet*, August 23). The Izmir Governor's Office reported the vacant car, parked on the side of a road in a residential area of the Aegean city, exploded at around 7:45 AM, just as a military car and a police bus approached it. The Governor's Office stated that the device was believed to contain "plastic explosives" and had been detonated remotely (Anatolia, August 21).

In addition to the personnel injuries, the force of the explosion resulted in damage to almost one hundred buildings as well as many vehicles in the area (NTV, August 21). The likelihood of preoperational surveillance in the latter incident is suggested by the fact that the site of the attack is a road reportedly used primarily by police, gendarmes, and Turkish military forces. Security services have detained eight people in connection with the attack during arrests carried out simultaneously in Izmir and Diyarbakir, including the alleged perpetrators, known so far only as Z.B. and B.S. (Bianet, 26-08-2008).

Assessing blame for the attacks was made difficult in the near term by a pair of competing claims of responsibility issued not long after the incidents. The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (Teyrebazen Azadiya Kurdistan – TAK), believed by some authorities to be affiliated with the PKK, posted a statement on its website saying that its members had carried out both attacks (Teyrenkurdistan.com, August 24). Another claim issued by the PKK on August 23 asserted that it had conducted both of the attacks (*Hurriyet*, August 23).

The TAK claim said the attacks were "acts of revenge" against what it characterized as Ankara's mistreatment of its Kurdish population and threatened further such attacks; "Every bullet fired against our people will be responded to with these bloody attacks. We warn that every attack against our people will not go without a response." Identifying the militant who blew up his vehicle near Mersin as Muslum Guneysoglu (code name Kemal), the statement added, "We will continue to claim a heavy price for the attacks against our people and national values" (Kurdish Info, August 24). As recently as last February, the TAK issued threats of such attacks, targeting security forces, tourist centers and economic facilities, in response to Turkish air strikes on hideouts of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq.

Indications of responsibility other than the groups' competing claims can be derived from a number of indicators. In terms of the timing of the attacks, the claim by TAK that it carried out the bombings at a time when such attacks would take at least some of the pressure off the PKK seems to belie the publicly professed differences between the TAK and the PKK. Such differences emerged as recently as 2006, when, following the declaration of a ceasefire by senior PKK official Murat Karayilan, the TAK conducted three bombings of Turkish resort facilities, thereby dooming the ceasefire (see *Terrorism Focus*, October 17, 2006).

Results of the forensic examination of the explosives used in the August 19 attack in Mersin revealed that they were identical to those used in a twin bombing attack in Istanbul on July 27, blamed by Turkish authorities on the PKK (Turkish Daily News, July 29).

Features of the Izmir attack, including the fact that the chosen targets were police and military personnel and that the device was remotely detonated, are reminiscent of the January 3 bombing of a military vehicle carrying almost four dozen personnel in Diyarbakir in Turkey's southeast, another attack blamed by Turkish authorities on the PKK (Turkish Daily News, January 4).

Assessing blame precisely is important to counterterrorism officials in their pursuit of the perpetrators of such incidents and the prevention of further attacks. It is worthy of note, however, that both the PKK and the TAK continue to praise and follow the guidance of Abdullah

(“Apo”) Ocalan, the now-imprisoned titular head of the Kurdish independence movement. If, on the one hand, the TAK is merely the urban arm of the PKK, it portends continued attacks in Turkey’s urban areas, attacks which have already killed and wounded hundreds of citizens this year alone. If, on the other hand, the TAK is an independent group seeking to compete with the PKK for the leadership of the Kurdish independence movement, it may presage an even greater numbers of attacks as each faction strives for leadership. In either case, Turkey is likely facing a period of heightened threat from terrorism.

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Who is Behind the Bombing of the Salafi Mosque in Baku?

Three people were killed and 13 wounded in the bombing of Baku’s Abu Bakr mosque during evening prayer on August 17. Witnesses claimed that a young man threw a grenade into the mosque where up to 200 people were praying. The assailant was able to run away despite attempts to capture him. The Ministers of National Security and Internal Affairs immediately visited the scene of attack, while the investigation was taken under special control of the Azerbaijani president (Turan News Agency, August 18). Gamat Suleymanov, the imam of the mosque (who was wounded in the bombing and is believed to be the main target of the attack), stated that the incident was directed toward disturbing stability in the country. However, he did not point to a specific group that could be behind the bombing (Trend News Agency, August 21).

Abu Bakr is the largest Sunni Salafi mosque in Azerbaijan, where at least 70% of the population follows Shi’a Islam. Built in 1997 in Baku by the Azerbaijani branch of the Kuwaiti Revival of Islamic Heritage society, Abu Bakr became one of the most successful mosques in oil-rich Azerbaijan. While on average Shi’a or other Sunni mosques are able to attract approximately 300 people for Friday prayers, the number of people visiting the Abu Bakr mosque typically reaches up to 5,000 people (See

Terrorism Monitor, July 1, 2005). Imam Gamat Suleymanov is a graduate of the World Islamic University of Madina. In recent years the mosque has been identified as a favorable place for the recruitment of fighters destined for the conflicts in Chechnya or Afghanistan, leading to calls for the closure of the mosque and the arrest of its imam.

There is no single public opinion on the forces behind the bombing. Mass media, experts and public officials offered various versions. Two forces emerge from this speculation that could be responsible for the Abu Bakr attack - external (Russia) and internal (radicals from the Salafi community):

- *External forces:* The fact that the bombing happened at the height of the Georgia-Russian war in Abkhazia and South Ossetia revived old fears that Russia could destabilize the situation in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic. In this context, the bombing could be some kind of “warning” to Azerbaijan not to intervene in the conflict in Georgia and behave “properly.” The opposition Musavat party even issued a statement which did not exclude involvement of Russia in these events (Turan News Agency, August 18). However, a sober analysis would show that Russia could hardly be behind such an attack. Despite the rich history of Russian involvement in the domestic situation in Azerbaijan, the northern neighbor is not much interested in destabilizing the situation in the country. Currently, the Azerbaijani establishment does not act hostile to Russia, and it is therefore not expedient for Russia to act unfriendly to its neighbor. In addition, if the attack were intended to inflame sectarian violence, it failed to take into account the secular nature of Azerbaijani society and the relative absence of religious rivalries.
- *Internal forces:* One of the popular explanations for the bombing is the internal struggle inside Baku’s Salafi community between Abu Bakr-associated leaders and a group of radical Salafists. According to Shaykh Allahshukur Pashazade, the chairman of Azerbaijan’s Caucasian Muslims Office, “The happenings in Abu Bakr mosque are the result of the discord between two groups. These groups

can't stand each other, but this should not emerge as a religious problem... The whole world knows that Azerbaijan is a tolerant country. If there had been a problem in the religious field in Azerbaijan, such acts would have been committed against the representatives of other religions – Jews, Christians” (Azeri-Press Agency, August 18). Authorities have reported the arrest of a police major alleged to be a “Wahhabi” (Salafist) in connection with the attack. A Kalashnikov assault rifle and a large quantity of ammunition were seized in his office (Azad Azarbaycan TV [Baku], August 20).

As early as 2005 - 2006, members of Baku's Salafi community identified a group of Salafis who disagreed with the leadership of Imam Suleymanov, who professes to be apolitical and urges his followers to cooperate with the state. The discord mainly concerned the issue of relations with the government and other religious communities. Those who disagreed with the policy of the Abu Bakr community and its leadership were expelled from the mosque. Those people are called locally Khawarij (“the expelled”) after the seventh century Kharijite sect, which reserved the right to rebel against any Muslim leader who deviated from the path of the Prophet Muhammad and the earliest caliphs. Though the Khawarij have largely passed from history, the term remains popular in Islamic circles as a derogatory term for Muslims who reject religious authority and threaten to divide the community. The Azeri dissidents seek an Islamic state and say that God is their only authority, rejecting the kafir (infidel) government in Baku. The radical Salafis are considered likely to become involved in militant activities. A few weeks before the bombing, an Azerbaijani court sentenced a group of Salafi radicals called “the Abu Jafar Group” for plotting to attack Western diplomatic and oil-industry facilities (Trend News Agency, November 7, 2007). According to trial materials, the organization, consisting of 17 people and headed by Saudi citizen Abu Jafar (Nail Abdul Karim al-Bedevis), was closely linked to al-Qaeda and al-Jihad. Investigators believe that Abu Jafar had trained in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge and participated along with other group members in military activities in Chechnya and Dagestan (Turan News Agency, July 28).

It is most likely that the bombing was indeed implemented by a group of Salafi radicals in disagreement with the policies of the Abu Bakr mosque. In any case, the bombing became the first terror attack committed in a sacred place

in Azerbaijan. Although it is unlikely to lead to the type of sectarian violence experienced in Iraq or Pakistan, it is nevertheless a serious warning to Azerbaijani authorities not to ignore local radicalism by treating it as an external rather than internal problem.

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Mass Attack on French Paratroopers Heralds New Taliban Tactics

Conflicting accounts of a Taliban ambush of an elite French military unit in the Surubi district of Kabul Province on August 18 have raised new concerns about the future of France's politically unpopular deployment in Afghanistan. Ten soldiers were killed and 21 wounded in one of the largest Taliban operations since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. The French troops were part of a fresh group of 700 soldiers committed by French president Nicolas Sarkozy to join over 2,000 French troops under International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command. When the new French troops arrived they relieved two American battalions in the Kapisa region, a strategically important district near Kabul (France 24, July 25). A French officer described the French troops involved in the ambush as “experienced” and “combat-capable” (*Le Figaro*, August 20). Nevertheless, the Taliban made a political statement by targeting the new additions to the French ISAF contingent. The proximity of a major Taliban operation to Kabul has alarmed many within the capital, who point out that previous attacks within Kabul's security belt have heralded the eventual fall of the city to insurgent forces (*Cheragh* [Kabul], August 21).

On August 18, 30 soldiers of the 8^{ème} Régiment Parachutiste d'Infanterie de Marine (8th RPIMa – Airborne Infantry) and another 30 from the Régiment de Marche du Tchad (RMT) were tasked with reconnoitering the Uzbeen valley route between the Tagab district of Kapisa and the Surubi district of Kabul provinces. They were joined

by two sections of Afghan troops and a unit of American Special Forces. Most of the French were carried in Armored Vanguard Vehicles (Véhicule de l'Avant Blindé – VAB), armored personnel carriers built by GIAT Industries.

Formed in 1951 for service in Indochina, the 8th RPIMa was dissolved after being virtually annihilated in the 1954 Battle of Dien Bien Phu, only to be revived in 1956 for service in the Algerian conflict. Since its relocation from Algeria to the French garrison town of Castres in 1963, the 8th RPIMa has been deployed in at least fifteen countries on various missions, including recent deployments in the first Gulf War, Cambodia, Kurdish northern Iraq, the Congo, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. 500 paratroopers of the RPIMa were sent to Afghanistan in June and July.

“Marine” units like the 8th RPIMa are not comparable to the U.S. or British Marines; the name refers rather to the 19th century Ministère de la Marine which was responsible for French armed forces overseas, as opposed to the Metropolitan army, which came under the Ministry of War. The *troupes de marine* became *troupes coloniales* as part of the French Colonial Army in 1900 with a consequent change in the titles of the units involved, but the term “marine” was revived after the postwar collapse of the French empire to signify volunteer units designated for overseas service. The all-volunteer *troupes de marine* include infantry, light cavalry, artillery, and airborne infantry units.

The Régiment de Marche du Tchad is a mechanized unit of the *troupes de marine*. Now based in France, the RMT was formed in 1943 from metropolitan soldiers serving in the Régiment des Tirailleurs Sénégalais du Tchad after rallying to the Free French cause during General Philippe Leclerc's campaign in Chad. 450 members of the RMT were sent to Afghanistan in May; another 150 serve as peacekeepers in Lebanon (*Le Parisien*, October 20). The French force also included a small number of men from the 35^{ème} Régiment d'Artillerie Parachutiste (35e RAP - Airborne Artillery Regiment).

The multinational force struggled through difficult terrain and extreme heat along a difficult and winding mountainous road in an area known for Taliban activity. Army chief of staff General Jean-Louis Georgelin described the ambush as “a well organized trap” on “terrain that was extremely favorable to the enemy” (*Le Monde*, August

21). The ambush was launched at 3:30 PM after the paratroopers left their APCs to reconnoiter a pass on foot. As one survivor pointed out, the pass was nearly three hours out from the column's starting point; “enough time for the Taliban to be warned by their accomplices of our arrival” (*Le Monde*, August 21). French General Michel Stollsteiner, ISAF commander in the Kabul region, stated; “In the past two weeks we had largely secured the zone but you have to be frank, we were guilty of overconfidence” (Reuters, August 25).

French press interviews with survivors of the ambush describe a rapid breakdown in command and communications, with Taliban marksmen taking down French soldiers at will. Among the first to be killed were the deputy section leader and the radioman of the advance unit. The warrant officer in command was shot in the shoulder. Soon afterwards the paratroopers' radio communication with the RMT broke down. Heavily outnumbered, the French remained pinned down and under fire from small arms, machine guns and rocket launchers for four hours without reinforcements. Ammunition for all weapons other than their assault rifles ran out as the soldiers were unable to reach supplies still in their vehicles, although a VAB with a section from the 35^e Régiment d'Artillerie Parachutiste in the rear of the column was able to deploy the vehicle's machine gun and four 120mm mortars in support (*La Depeche*, August 21).

Some of the wounded alleged that their unit was hit by fire from their Afghan allies and NATO aircraft (*Le Monde*, August 21; AFP, August 21). Fire from A-10 Thunderbolts was directed by the American Special Forces while a pair of F-15 fighters passed through without using their weapons because the French and Taliban were too closely intertwined. An initial attempt by American helicopters to evacuate the wounded failed due to heavy fire. French EC725 Caracal helicopters arrived to provide fire support - one helicopter brought in a doctor and ten French commandos from the rapid reaction force in Kabul. A group leader from the rapid reaction force who arrived after a 90 minute drive through difficult terrain described the situation on his arrival; “We couldn't see the enemy and we didn't know how many of them there were. We started climbing, but after 20 minutes we started coming under fire from the rear. We were surrounded” (AFP, September 1). 81mm mortars also arrived with the reinforcements but helicopters were unable to evacuate

the wounded until 8PM. Six hours after the ambush began, Taliban fighters began to break off, though many remained in the area, launching a last attack at 9AM the next day (*La Depeche*, August 24; *Quotidien*, August 21; AFP, August 21).

Despite official assurances that nearly all the casualties occurred in the first minutes of the ambush, other accounts suggested that four soldiers were captured before being killed by Taliban fighters (*Telegraph*, August 19; *Independent*, August 20). An investigative report by French weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* claimed that the column's interpreter disappeared only hours before the operation began, suggesting the French troops were betrayed either by the interpreter or by Afghan troops attached to the column. The report repeated the claim four French soldiers were captured and executed by the Taliban shortly after the ambush began (*Le Canard enchaîné*; August 27).

During the rescue of the wounded, an armored car of the RMT overturned when the road collapsed and the vehicle fell into a ravine, killing a Kanak trooper from New Caledonia and injuring four others (*Oceania Flash*, August 20). A medic from the 2ème Régiment Etranger Parachutiste (Foreign Legion) was also killed after making several forays to bring in wounded comrades from the 8th RPIMa.

Unlike the first-hand accounts carried by the press, French Defense Minister Hervé Morin insisted that reinforcements were sent within 20 minutes and there were no indications of friendly fire (RTL, August 21). Pentagon and NATO spokesmen also denied having any evidence of such incidents. The Afghan Ministry of Defense stated that 13 Taliban fighters, including one Pakistani, were killed in the battle (*Cheragh* [Kabul], August 21). Some French officers claimed 40 to 70 militants were killed, but acknowledged finding only one body (AFP, September 1). Claude Guéant, general secretary of French president Nicolas Sarkozy, maintained "the majority of the assailants were not Afghans" (Reuters, August 23).

A Taliban statement entitled "New and Interesting Information on the Killing and Wounding of the French Soldiers in Surubi" claimed that hundreds of Taliban fighters using heavy and light weapons had overwhelmed a French infantry battalion of 100 men and 18 tanks

(APCs?) and other military vehicles. The statement describes the infliction of "hundreds" of French casualties and the destruction of five tanks and eight other military vehicles before locals descended to loot abandoned French weapons (Sawt al-Jihad, August 22). The region in which the attack took place is considered a stronghold of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i Islami movement, which also issued a claim of responsibility for the attack (Afghan Islamic Press, August 19).

In the aftermath of the attack, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner declared, "Nobody is thinking of leaving Afghanistan," but added a few days later, "We need what is called 'Afghanization', that's to say to pass responsibilities, all responsibilities, as quickly as possible to the Afghans" (AFP, August 21; Reuters, August 25).

The ambush and recent suicide attacks on American outposts reveal an escalation in the violence and effectiveness of Taliban attacks on Western forces in Afghanistan. Added to the steady attrition of NATO, ISAF and U.S. personnel, these new attacks are intended to remind the West that despite seven years of campaigning, the Taliban are as strong as ever. Since the ambush, the French deployment in Afghanistan has come under sharp criticism from the public, the press, and opposition politicians. The French public has never had a taste for involvement in Afghanistan, reflected in a recent *Le Parisien* opinion poll that showed 55% of respondents believe France should withdraw from Afghanistan. With Prime Minister François Fillon calling for a September vote in parliament on the future of the French military commitment to Afghanistan, President Sarkozy's efforts to expand France's role in that country may come at a considerable political cost.

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