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PJAK in Northern Iraq: Tangled Interests and Proxy Wars

By Thomas Renard

The Kurdish area in northern Iraq has become one of the most complex fronts in the war in Iraq, a place where Iranian, Turkish, Kurdish, Iraqi and American interests clash. An often perplexing role in the region's conflicts is played by the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK), an Iranian Kurdish offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that engages in frequent clashes with Iran's Revolutionary Guards. PJAK claims its aims "are to unite the Kurdish and Iranian opposition, to change the oppressive Islamic regime in Iran and to establish a free democratic confederal system for the Kurds and the Iranian peoples" (PJAK Press Release, May 7). Iran regularly accuses the movement of being a U.S.-funded proxy, but recent PJAK claims that Turkey used U.S. intelligence and U.S.-made bombs in an air raid on a PJAK target have brought the U.S.-PJAK relationship into question.

Soon after the May 1-2 bombing, a PJAK spokesperson announced: "We have changed our stand toward the United States government and we are standing against them now ... Maybe someday ... individual combatants might launch suicide attacks inside Iraq and Turkey, and even against American interests" (AP, May 5; *Today's Zaman*, May 5). PJAK's leadership quickly refuted the announcement, describing it as "untrue and fabricated" and in violation of PJAK principles. This did not prevent them from venting their anger with the United States: "The USA tells the world that it has a strategic conflict with the theocratic regime in Iran. But when the Kurdish people in Iran wage a sacrificing, modern struggle for the democratization of the country, they provide the means for an

attack on them” (PJAK Press Release, May 7).

War on the Iranian Border

Earlier this week, Turkish warplanes bombed PKK bases in northern Iraq several nights in a row (*Today's Zaman*, May 13). During previous raids on May 1-2, Turkish warplanes bombed northern Iraq's Qandil Mountains, where Kurdish fighters are thought to be hiding. A military statement claimed that more than 150 rebels were killed during the operation (*Today's Zaman*, May 5). However, it appears that targets of the bombings were, at least partly, PJAK members, and not exclusively PKK fighters. This would be a sign of increased security cooperation between Turkey and Iran.

PJAK fighters and Iranian troops regularly fight across the Iraq-Iran border, which is part of “Greater Kurdistan” according to the Kurds. On April 14, Iranian artillery shelled PJAK positions in the Qandil Mountains, killing one high-level commander (*Hurriyet*, April 15). The timing of the shelling—just before a counter-terrorism meeting between Iranians and Turks—was interpreted as a signal of cooperation from Tehran (see *Terrorism Focus*, April 22). On May 4, Iranian forces captured leading PJAK commander Resit Ehkendi in an operation carried out in the Iranian region of Sakiz. The prosecutor will seek the death penalty for terrorist activities, murder, armed robberies and other illegal activities (Anatolia, May 7). The capture occurred in the context of heightened combat between Kurdish rebels and Iranian and Turkish troops (Anatolia, May 10).

Turkish-Iranian Cooperation

Turkey and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding stating their willingness to develop cooperation on security issues during the 12th Turkey-Iran High Security Commission held in Ankara last month. The fight against the Kurdish insurgency was part of the memorandum. “The escalation in terrorist activities in the region is harming both of the countries,” the document said. “The most effective method for dealing with this illegal problem is an exchange of intelligence and cooperation in the security field” (*Today's Zaman*, April 18).

Although worrisome for the United States, this cooperation is unlikely to become very effective, at least in the short-term. Indeed, Turkish officials have publicly expressed their distrust toward the Iranian regime (*Today's Zaman*, April 21). It should also be remembered that the previous High Security Commission meeting in

February 2006 had reached a similar agreement with little improvement in cooperation (*Sabah*, April 14). Turkey and Iran are powerful regional actors with divergent agendas. Therefore, both countries are likely to remain competitors, although casual cooperation is possible.

More worrisome to the United States is the growing Iranian influence in northern Iraq, where Iran has established relations with most Kurdish groups. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), for instance, whose leader is Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, sees Iran as a crucial trading partner and as a potential ally to ensure Kurdish security. Last August, “Iranian pressures” allegedly compelled Talabani's PUK peshmerga militia to attack Kurdish guerrilla fighters (*International Herald Tribune*, October 22, 2007).

Parallel to the growing influence of Iran in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish support to the PKK and PJAK decreased substantially in Iraq, as indicated by the following: First, the skirmishes with the PUK; second, Kurdish guerrilla fighters in Iraq now concentrate mainly in the isolated Qandil Mountains, where, despite their remoteness, the insurgents are on the run after the recent air raids, according to the Turkish military (*Today's Zaman*, May 13). Third, the PJAK leadership recently accused Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), of collaborating with Turkey and Iran, warning that this could lead to a “national tragedy” for Kurdistan (*Hawlati* [Sulaymaniyah], May 11). Barzani has condemned PJAK multiple times. In an interview with the pan-Arab daily *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Barzani claimed:

[The KRG is] determined to maintain the best relations possible with all neighboring countries. Iran is a very important neighbor for us, and we have a very long common border with it. Regrettably, Iran's occasional artillery bombardments of the border area within the Kurdistan Region because of the presence of PJAK elements mar these relations. I again reassert that we will not allow any armed group to attack any neighboring countries from the territory of the Kurdistan Region (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 10).

A U.S. Proxy in the Struggle with Iran?

Iran accuses the United States of backing PJAK. Iranian intelligence claims to have evidence of such support, but

have not produced any proof. Many analysts, however, believe that Iranian assertions might be correct. Undoubtedly PJAK offers a tempting asset for the United States to carry out operations against Iran. It is well known, for instance, that the United States collaborated with the Iranian Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and even before, although the group was—and is—classified as a terrorist organization by the State Department. Although the United States allowed Turkey to conduct several cross-border raids against the PKK in order to secure a strategic alliance, the United States is unlikely to collaborate with Iran against PJAK. On the contrary, the Bush doctrine of regime change is more likely to lead to the support of anti-Tehran insurgents. PJAK vehemently denies any suggestion of U.S. support: “PJAK is a self sufficient and independent organization. It depends on the Kurds’ and Iranian people’s support, contrary to the Iranian dictatorial regime misinformation campaign that PJAK is getting help from the USA and the West” (PJAK Press Release, May 7).

Osman Ocalan, brother of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan and a founder of PJAK, claims that PJAK has a “good relationship” with the United States and that Americans offer “some military, economic and medical assistance” to the movement (*Los Angeles Times*, April 16). According to Robert Baer, a former CIA operative with close ties to Kurdish northern Iraq: “I understand that the U.S. provides intelligence to PJAK so that they are better able to protect themselves in any conflict with the Iranians. This force protection intelligence is given to them through the Delta Forces” (Spiegel Online, April 14).

Last summer, PJAK leader Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi visited Washington. Officially, he was given a cold shoulder and did not meet any member of the administration. Therefore, it is not clear whether his visit was an attempt to create contacts with the United States—suggesting that such contacts are nonexistent—or whether a planned secret meeting occurred in Washington.

Whether the United States supports PJAK or not, the relationship between the two parties has been generally good so far. Since the beginning of May, nevertheless, tensions have arisen between PJAK and the United States. PJAK leaders, who are usually supportive of the United States, accused Washington of sharing intelligence with Turkey and—indirectly—with Iran, as well as claiming that the Turkish Air Force dropped U.S.-made gas

bombs on Qandil during the May 1-2 air raids (Kurdish Aspect, May 7).

The United States is not the only Western country that has paid close attention to PJAK. With a large Kurdish population, Germany also monitors the activities of the group. Last July, Tehran sent a verbal note to the German ambassador to protest against German indifference to PJAK’s “terrorist activities.” Several German citizens are thought to be fighting in PJAK’s ranks. Should one of those fighters kill Iranians or be captured, it could create major diplomatic tensions between Tehran and Berlin and also have a potential impact on German relations with Ankara, and on the large Kurdish and Turkish communities in Germany.

Conclusion

PJAK was created for three reasons: To establish Kurdish activities in Iran; as a means of escaping the PKK terrorist designation; and to obtain U.S. support in actions against the Iranian regime. Although PJAK claims to be different from the PKK, its history, its goals and its leadership suggest that the two groups remain tightly connected [1]. PJAK counts somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters. Interestingly, half of the members are women, which are gathered under a branch named the Eastern Kurdistan Women’s Union (YJRK). Fighters are trained in hit-and-run tactics and armed with Kalashnikov rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, Russian-made sniper rifles and machine guns.

During the last few years, the Kurdish insurgency has become more than a remote fight for Kurdish nationalism. Untangling the varied national interests at work in the area could have a dramatic impact on the region’s long-term stability. The current balance is extremely fragile and every player acts with extra precaution in an effort to maintain their alliances while pursuing their individual interests.

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Notes

1. Soner Cagaptay, Zeynep Eroglu, “The PKK, PJAK, and Iran: Implications for U.S.-Turkish Relations,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1244, June 13, 2007.

Darfur's JEM Rebels Bring the War to Khartoum

By Andrew McGregor

Last weekend's daring raid on greater Khartoum by Darfur's rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) has shaken the regime and effectively disrupted the already morbid peace process in West Sudan. Though often referred to as a Darfur rebel group, JEM in fact has a national agenda, much like John Garang's Sudanese Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), which always maintained it was a movement of national liberation rather than a southern separatist group. Until 2006, JEM was also involved militarily in the revolt of the Beja and Rashaida Arabs of Eastern Sudan against Khartoum.

The Zaghawa tribe that straddles Darfur and Chad dominates the JEM leadership, marking a major challenge to traditional Arab superiority in Sudan (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 7). While some of the leaders of Darfur's badly-divided rebel groups have fought the rebellion from the cafés of Paris, JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim has remained at the front, forging a disparate group of refugees, farmers and ex-military men into the strongest military force in Darfur and the greatest threat to the Sudanese regime.

Greater Khartoum consists of the capital, Khartoum, the city of Omdurman on the western side of the White Nile, and the industrial suburb of Khartoum North on the north side of the Blue Nile. Khartoum itself is protected by broad rivers to the west and north, making assaults from these directions extremely difficult. Despite decades of warfare in Sudan's provinces, Khartoum has not experienced any fighting in its streets since 1976, when Libyan-trained Umma Party rebels—also from West Sudan—fought running gun-battles in a failed attempt to overthrow the military government.

The once dusty and decaying Sudanese capital has undergone an astonishing transformation in recent years due to growing oil revenues and massive investment from the Gulf, Malaysia and China. Khartoum has increasingly become an island of prosperity surrounded by a vast and impoverished hinterland that now calls for an equitable distribution of the national wealth.

Across the Desert to Khartoum

On May 8, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) reported they had learned of “preparations made by rebel Khalil Ibrahim to conduct a sabotage attempt and a publicity stunt through infiltrating the capital and other towns” as well as noting that “groups riding vehicles” were headed east from the Chadian border (*Sudan Tribune*, May 8). A JEM commander reported that the column consisted of 400 vehicles and took three days to reach Khartoum (AFP, May 11). Notably absent from the attack were forces from the Sudan Liberation Army – Unity (SLA-Unity), another Darfur rebel group that has operated in a military alliance with JEM for the past two years.

A government spokesman claimed that the armed forces met the rebel column in Kordofan, at a point 75 mi west of the capital, where a portion of the rebel force made a run for Omdurman after most of the column had been stopped by a government attack.

JEM claims to have hit the Nile north of Omdurman, seizing and looting the Wadi Saidna Air Force base, 10 miles north of Khartoum. This claim has not been verified, but eyewitnesses reported seeing an attack on the base (*Sudan Tribune*, May 11).

On Friday night, May 9, Khartoum's embassies received calls from the government warning them of a possible rebel attack on Khartoum (AFP, May 10). Despite the incoming reports of a JEM column heading east across the desert, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir continued performing the *umrah* (the minor pilgrimage) in the holy cities of Saudi Arabia. With Bashir in Saudi Arabia, the acting president was First Vice President Salva Kiir Mayadrit of the SPLA, who maintains he was in constant contact with al-Bashir until his return late on May 10.

Assault on the Suburbs

On May 10, some 150 armored pick-up trucks reached the outskirts of Omdurman. With helicopters in the air, security personnel poured into the streets, setting up checkpoints and securing potential targets. The bridges linking Omdurman to Khartoum across the White Nile were blocked.

Despite bold claims from JEM spokesmen that their forces were “everywhere in the capital,” it appears that few, if any, of the rebels managed to penetrate much farther than the suburbs of northern Omdurman, where

their burning pick-up trucks could be seen after the battle. Claims by rebel commanders that their troops had seized the bridges and entered Khartoum appear to have been wishful thinking or an attempt to unnerve the regime.

Throughout the attack, media-savvy JEM field commanders were on the phone to major international media sources, giving progress reports with the sound of gunfire and explosions in the background. A commander called Abu Zumam claimed his forces had entered Omdurman and were preparing to seize the National State Radio building (Radio Omdurman). Another JEM commander named Sulayman Sandal was also in constant contact with media. As the government counter-attacks began to drive JEM fighters from the city, Commander Sulayman insisted: “This was just practice. We promise to hit Khartoum one more time unless the [Darfur] issue is resolved” (AP, May 11). The commander claimed JEM forces had initially seized all of Omdurman, but were beaten off due to the inexperience of JEM troops in urban warfare (AFP, May 11).

Sudan’s official news agency SUNA claimed that JEM’s “military commander” Jamal Hassan Jelaladdin was killed on the outskirts of Khartoum in the morning of May 11. SUNA also reported the deaths of Muhammad Saleh Garbo and Muhammad Nur al-Din, described as the leader of the attack and the JEM intelligence chief, respectively (SUNA, May 11). JEM reported that no one by these names were in the rebel ranks, but claimed Jamal Hassan had been captured and summarily executed after his vehicle broke down (*Sudan Tribune*, May 12).

What Were the Targets?

JEM spokesman Ahmad Hussein Adam declared that Wadi Saidna air force base was targeted because it was “the base from where all Sudanese military planes go to Darfur” (AFP, May 10). Heavy civilian losses were reported in Northern Darfur in the weeks preceding the raid on the capital. JEM recently accused Khartoum of recruiting 250 Iraqi pilots to carry out bombing missions in Darfur following combat losses and a reluctance by Sudanese pilots to continue bombing civilian targets (Sudanjem.com, May 4).

State radio facilities head the list of desirable targets on any coup-leader’s target list—in this case Radio Omdurman was no exception. JEM may have anticipated that the residents of Khartoum were only awaiting a sign to rise up against the government, but there appeared to

be no verifiable instances of tri-city residents offering material support to the rebels. With residents confined indoors by a curfew, parts of the city were remarkably quiet.

When the bridges across the Nile were secured by Sudanese security forces it became impossible to complete JEM’s objectives. There does not appear to have been any backup plan for this fairly predictable circumstance. When asked by the BBC how he plans to deal with this problem in his promised return to the capital, Khalil Ibrahim responded; “I am not empty handed. I took a lot of things from Khartoum—a lot of vehicles, ammunition and money” (BBC, May 12). There are reports that a large quantity of weapons and ammunition were seized at the Wadi Saidna air base.

According to VP Salva Kiir, the rebel targets in the capital included Radio Omdurman, the military headquarters and the presidential palace beside the Blue Nile (*Sudan Tribune*, May 13).

Mopping Up

When the JEM attack crested in the suburbs of Omdurman many fighters found themselves without any means of escaping the city. Some surrendered while others were reported to have doffed their camouflage gear in favor of civilian clothing. Gunfire continued throughout the weekend as security forces tried to flush out hidden JEM fighters. Reports of gunfire in the center of Khartoum were apparently the result of edgy security men firing on a group of civilians hiding in a building (BBC, May 12). When the fighting had stopped, government forces stated 400 rebels and 100 security men had been killed.

Security forces reported seizing 50 rebel pick-up trucks while battered prisoners were repeatedly displayed on state television. With continuing reports that Khalil Ibrahim had gone into hiding in Omdurman after being injured when his truck was hit by gunfire, Sudanese state television broadcast his photo for the first time, encouraging viewers to report any sightings. A reward of \$125,000 for information leading to the JEM leader’s capture was later doubled to \$250,000.

Despite the lack of any public support in Khartoum for the rebels, security forces quickly decided that the attack must have relied on a fifth column within the city. This prompted mass arrests of Darfuris in the capital, especially those of the Zaghawa tribe (Sudan Human Rights Organization statement, Cairo, May 13). Some

Darfur groups reported the arrest and beatings of thousands of Darfuri laborers working in the capital (al-Jazeera, May 13). Other reports claim dozens of Zaghawa in the city have been executed (*Sudan Tribune*, May 13). A JEM spokesman described the arrests as “ethnic cleansing” (*Sudan Tribune*, May 10).

Sudan’s leading Islamist, Hassan al-Turabi, was detained for questioning by security forces due to his former association with JEM (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 17, 2005; July 1, 2005). Khalil Ibrahim was once described as a follower of the controversial al-Turabi, but there appear to be few, if any, ties remaining between the two. Turabi and several other members of his Popular Congress Party were quickly released after questioning.

The Role of the Army and Security Forces

The majority of the rank-and-file in Sudan’s army comes from the African tribes of Darfur and Kordofan. They are typically led by Arab officers from the Northern Province of Sudan. Most of the fighting in the capital appears to have been done by government security services and police rather than the military. VP Salva Kiir notes that the army did not intervene until it became clear the rebels had been repulsed (*Sudan Tribune*, May 13). Some mid-level army commanders are reported to have been arrested after the attack.

Reacting to public criticism of the military’s failure to stop the assault long before it reached Khartoum, a presidential adviser claimed that the military had intentionally drawn the rebels “into a trap” (*Sudan Tribune*, May 13). Sudanese Defense Minister Abdel-Rahim Muhammad Hussein was roundly condemned by members of parliament who called for an inquiry as to how JEM forces could reach the capital. (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 14; *Sudan Tribune*, May 14). While some MPs called for his resignation, the Defense Minister blamed the U.S. embargo for the lack of surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft.

After returning to Darfur, Khalil Ibrahim thanked the neutrality of the Sudanese army, which “welcomed him” (*Sudan Tribune*, May 13). This statement alone will create chaos in the security structure as the government seeks out real, potential and imagined collaborators.

Reaction of the SPLA

JEM frequently states its commitment to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed by the

southern Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Army (SPLA) and the ruling National Congress Party (NCP). At the same time, it is vehemently opposed to the idea of southern separation—the CPA calls for a referendum on southern separation in 2011, a position that has interfered with JEM efforts to forge stronger ties with the SPLA. Regarding any attempt to overthrow the government as interference in implementing the CPA, the SPLA’s military commanders offered Khartoum the use of SPLA troops still under Salva Kiir’s command.

Proxy War with Chad?

Last March, N’Djamena and Khartoum signed yet another in a series of worthless peace agreements after an attack by Sudanese-supported rebels nearly deposed the Zaghawa-based government of President Idriss Déby. Khartoum has accused Chadian forces of mounting a diversionary attack on the SAF garrison at Kashkash along the Chad/Sudan border “meant to support the attempt of sabotage of the rebel Khalil Ibrahim” (*Sudan Tribune*, May 10). The SAF claimed to have successfully repulsed the Chadian troops, forcing them to pull back across the border.

On his return from pilgrimage, Bashir severed relations with Chad and laid the blame for the raid on the “outlaw regime” in N’Djamena: “These forces come from Chad who trained them ... we hold the Chadian regime fully responsible for what happened.” Perhaps unwilling to admit the military potential of the Darfur rebels, Bashir claimed: “These forces are Chadian forces originally, they moved from there led by Khalil Ibrahim who is an agent of the Chadian regime. It is a Chadian attack” (AP, May 11). The SAF claimed that most of the prisoners were Chadian nationals. A Chadian government spokesman quickly denied any official involvement in the attack (AFP, May 10).

Chadian officials reported that uniformed Sudanese security forces broke into all the offices of the Chadian embassy in Khartoum, seizing documents and computers (*Sudan Tribune*, May 11). The Sudanese Foreign Ministry claimed: “We have evidence there was communication between [the rebels and] the government of Chad and the embassy of Chad in Khartoum” (AFP, May 11).

China Stays Aloof

Though China has natural concerns over the effect of a regime change in a country that is now one of its largest foreign oil suppliers, the reaction from Beijing was

supportive but muted. JEM has made clear its opposition to China's oil operations in Sudan, attacking Chinese oil facilities in Kordofan (see *Terrorism Focus*, September 11, 2007). JEM is also angered by the Chinese supply of arms and warplanes to the Khartoum regime. China was one of the few non-African countries approved by Khartoum for participation in UNAMID, contributing a group of military engineers to the Darfur peacekeeping efforts. In a Foreign Ministry statement, China condemned the attacks but hoped "the Darfur armed rebel group could join in the political process as soon as possible and resume negotiation with the Sudanese government, for the early signing of a comprehensive peace agreement, to realize peace, stability and development in Darfur" (Xinhua, May 11).

What Next for the Regime? For JEM?

Khartoum declared negotiations with JEM to be at an end on May 14, but this will make little difference since JEM was already not part of the ongoing negotiations with other Darfur rebel groups. Presidential adviser Mustafa Osman Ismail promised government retaliation instead: "From this day we will never deal with this movement again other than in the way they have just dealt with us" (Xinhua, May 11). President Bashir has also claimed that Israel funded the assault, calling Khalil Ibrahim "an agent... who sold himself to the devil and to Zionism" (AP, May 14). The government is demanding that JEM be declared an international terrorist organization by the United States and the UN (Radio Omdurman, May 13).

The raid on Khartoum was a reminder to the Northern Arab regime that it might all come crashing down one day and that their continued wealth and power is by no means guaranteed. After the raid, Khalil Ibrahim provided this justification for the attack: "The Sudanese government killed 600,000 people in Darfur and they are living at peace in Khartoum" (al-Jazeera, May 13). Whether the raid results in greater conciliation efforts and distribution of wealth to the provinces is yet to be seen. Past experience suggests that the government's response will be increased violence and repression. Large-scale retaliation against Chad is virtually inevitable. In the meantime Khartoum may have to deal with a sudden reluctance on the part of international investors to put their money into an uncertain situation.

Khartoum will undoubtedly implement measures to prevent a repeat of the attack, but JEM has also learned several important lessons in this operation. It is difficult

to believe that JEM intended to hold and seize the city at this time, but the operation may lay the groundwork for a larger effort in the future. More plausible is Khalil Ibrahim's claim that he intends to exhaust and divide the Sudanese military by spreading the war far beyond Darfur (AP, May 13). According to the JEM leader, "This is just the start of a process and the end is the termination of this regime" (BBC, May 12).

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Yemen's Three Rebellions

By Brian O'Neill

Politics in Yemen has always been a violent affair. Two of its four presidents have died unnaturally—one in a hotel room surrounded by drugs and prostitutes; his successor, suddenly and absurdly, by an exploding briefcase. The next man to take office, a young tank commander named Ali Abdullah Saleh, was not expected to fare much better.

He did, though, and is approaching his thirtieth year in power. He survived and, through his intimate knowledge of Yemen's tribal politics, consolidated his rule. He oversaw the unification of his country with the formerly socialist South Yemen, and then crushed the south in a civil war. He never fully expanded his government's writ over the chaotic, tribal north, but he stayed in power and kept his country together better than anyone could have predicted.

Until now. President Saleh faces three separate rebellions: A tribal, sectarian battle in the north, economic and social riots in the south, and a pervasive enemy in a younger and more brutal generation of al-Qaeda. These are happening while Yemen faces crushing demographic and natural pressures, from its exploding population to its dwindling water supplies to its aging leadership. Saleh has held his country together, but the fragile, violent quilt-work that makes Yemen is now threatening to come quickly apart.

The Believing Youth of the North

Tribal rebellions have never been rare in Yemen, but the al-Houthi rebellion, now in its fourth year, seems to be a different, lingering animal. It has transformed itself from

Saleh's persistent headache into a long and catastrophic war that has claimed thousands of lives and threatens the tribal and sectarian balance which the president has meticulously massaged over the years.

The rebellion started in 2004 when Hussein Badr al-Houthi, a shaykh of the Zaidi sect of the Shiite branch, proclaimed that Saleh's government had become too aligned with the United States and Israel. Longing to reestablish the Zaidi Imamate (1918-1962), al-Houthi led his Shabab al-Mu'mineen (Believing Youth) into battle. This came after government crackdowns on the shaykh's unlicensed mosques.

Shaykh Hussein Badr al-Houthi was killed in September of that year and was jointly replaced as commander by his son and son-in-law, while his father took the reins as spiritual leader. There were back-and-forth negotiations, stall tactics, cease-fires, and more battles over the years. The government accused the rebels of receiving aid and training from co-religionists in Iran, which may have been true or may have been a way for Saleh to link his domestic concerns with the broader Arab fear of the emerging "Shiite Crescent" (and thus to obtain more outside assistance). None of these allegations have been proven.

Then, on May 2, a motorcycle-borne bomb exploded in a mosque in Sa'ada, killing over a dozen people and wounding scores more (*Yemen Times*, May 5). Immediately, the violence began again as accusations flowed from both sides. More than 50 people were killed in a battle near the town of Daffaa (*ArabianBusiness.com*, May 5). Both sides in this war have accused the other of targeting non-combatants, with the Sa'ada governor claiming the al-Houthis "kill innocent people and set fire to their farms" (*NewsYemen*, May 5). This bombing, though, marked a new and spectacular level of violence.

Immediately, speculation rose as to the identity of the slaughter's architect. Abd al-Malik al-Houthi—brother of Hussein Badr al-Houthi—was quoted as saying: "The renewed tension is due to the repeated aggressions of the army ... which is using tanks and other weapons in unjustified operations" (*ArabianBusiness.com*, May 5). While he stopped short of saying the government planted the bombs, his calls for a fair and legitimate investigation leads one to believe he is not discouraging that speculation.

But this rebellion has hurt the Saleh government, and renewed fighting is not in its interests. Cynically, one could say that a planted bomb that looks like an al-Houthi attack would hurt the rebellion, but Saleh knows his country. The north has never fully accepted the government of Sana'a, and continued fighting only helps further delegitimize his regime. This leaves a previously unknown faction or al-Qaeda as suspects in the attack. This would be a difficult but not impossible operation for al-Qaeda given the security in Sa'ada. Their motivations for doing so will be dealt with below.

The Restless South

Civil wars rarely seem to happen along an east/west axis; similar climates help produce similar economies and ideas—it is typically when different regions are yoked together that violence is produced. So it is with Yemen. North and South Yemen have had different histories, colonial experiences, and economies. Though it seems antithetical to the romantic idea of an ancient, eternal Yemeni state, it could be argued that having two separate countries made more sense.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, the socialist south, known as the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, was faced with a failed economy and little external support. It had also never recovered from a brutal internecine war of its own during the 1980s. So it turned toward the north, and unification with the Yemen Arab Republic.

Speeches of brotherhood were given; promises were made. But the speeches never translated into reality, as Saleh squeezed out southern politicians and attempted to make the south part of his extended patronage network. Eventually, in 1994, civil war broke out. Saleh used his superior army and, more importantly, veterans of the Afghan jihad to crush the godless south. Aden, which had been an open and secular city—where mini-skirts were far more popular than the hijab—fell under the harsh rule of victorious jihadis. It would be an exaggeration to say that Shari'a had been implemented, but the typical southern way of life had been disrupted [1].

Beside the difficulties of the new way of life, the south chafed in other ways. Its economy never improved and many blamed the north for lack of interest in helping out its rival. The influence of the jihadis was felt. Though it seems insignificant, the destruction of the city brewery marked a dramatic change of daily rhythm, and the buildings became cold and gray concrete hulks. More

strikingly, terrorism began to hit the south, with both the al-Qaeda variety and homegrown groups such as the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army influenced by returning jihadis.

Commodity shortages have been hitting the south, including a severe diesel shortage (NewsYemen, April 23). While these shortages intensified, dissatisfaction with a number of issues strengthened. In January of this year, citizens were killed during a riot protesting the lack of “rights and benefits” accorded to citizens of the south. The rally was held in Aden during the Forum for Forgiveness and Reconciliation, an attempt to get past the divisiveness of the civil war (al-Jazeera, January 13). Instead, it sharpened the divide. Youths complained they were not allowed into the army; army retirees claimed they were not getting their benefits (al-Jazeera, April 1). In April, hundreds were detained following a massive protest two days after a government soldier was killed (*Yemen Times*, April 8).

Perhaps most threatening of all was the re-entrenchment of old players and the reopening of old wounds. On April 8, the *Yemen Times* reported that demonstrators were in “Al-Dahle’s main street chanting ‘Get out, Colonialization,’ and ‘Revolution, Revolution South.’” Ominously, a former president of the south, Ali Naser Mohammed, signaled his approval of the riots, demonstrations and discontent (*Yemen Observer*, April 5).

It seems clearer than ever that the tenuous grafting of north onto south never really fit. It is far from too late to fix the situation—a little more aid, a more just hiring procedure and a reining in of Islamist interference would make southerners feel less colonized in their own country.

The Pervasive Threat

In the last year, a new generation of al-Qaeda has taken over from Yemen’s old guard. This group has been hardened by the battles in Iraq and shared experiences in prison. The leaders and primary soldiers escaped from a Yemeni prison in 2006, and have since consolidated their own power while seeming driven to unravel Saleh’s.

Their first big blow was against Spanish tourists in July 2007. They have since attacked foreign and local interests, including the U.S. Embassy and the Customs Office (see *Terrorism Focus*, April 16). Al-Qaeda seems immune to the standard Yemeni tactic of negotiation

and compromise that Saleh has used with the older generation. Though it seems contrary to ideas of justice to let the bombers of the USS *Cole* walk free, Saleh has to balance domestic concerns and local passions to avoid letting his country slip into the abyss.

But that seems to be the exact strategy of the hard new guard of al-Qaeda. They are working at undermining tourism revenue and shaking any faith people have in the government with attacks on foreigners and random violence against citizens. A recent statement proclaimed their desire to “control Yemen’s waterways” by organizing attacks on “commercial, tourist and oil tankers” (NewsYemen, April 30; *Terrorism Focus*, May 13). This will eat away at another source of revenue and further weaken Saleh.

In the Middle, Nearing the End

Ali Abdullah Saleh has held his country, and his office, for a staggeringly long time. But events seem to be swirling faster now. The history of Yemen is catching up with his efforts, and demography is working to accelerate these damning trends. Using jihadis to fight his secular war may have irretrievably poisoned unification. Buying time with northern tribal leaders allowed him to shift focus from sectarian discontent, which led to the al-Houthi rebellion. Making deals with al-Qaeda emboldened a new generation.

All of these decisions made sense at the time and even in retrospect one feels the hands of the government were tied. Governing Yemen is a series of ad hoc decisions, assuaging the immediate concern while punting other issues down the road. President Saleh is getting older, and a new generation of leaders is awaiting its turn. It is unknown whether new leaders will be able to save the waterless, booming population from fragmenting into a failed state. But now, near the end of his tenure, President Saleh has to make decisions to save his new/ ancient country from both its short-term difficulties and the catastrophes that loom over the near horizon.

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Notes

1. Joseph Kostiner, *Yemen: The Torturous Quest for Unity, 1990-94*, RIIA, London, 1996.

The Bengali Taliban: Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh

By Wilson John

The April 30 sentencing of four cadres of the outlawed Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to 26 years of hard labor for throwing bombs at a local court in 2005 returned the focus to Bangladesh's struggle against pressing odds to contain the rise of Islamic extremism (*Daily Star* [Dhaka], May 1).

The government has been hunting down JMB leaders and cadres ever since the group carried out an audacious series of blasts in 63 districts of a total of 64 across Bangladesh, planting 458 locally-made bombs while distributing leaflets which declared, "We're the soldiers of Allah. We've taken up arms for the implementation of Allah's law the way the Prophet, Sahabis [companions of the Prophet] and heroic Mujahideen have done for centuries...it is time to implement Islamic law in Bangladesh" (*Bangladesh Observer*, August 18, 2005). In the crackdown that followed, two top leaders of the group, Shaykh Abdur Rahman and Sidiqul Islam (alias Bangla Bhati), were executed in 2007; several hundred cadres have also been arrested from different parts of the country. Many of these have since been given tough sentences by a judiciary which was once high on the list of JMB's potential targets.

Though the crackdown was ordered by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government under pressure from the Bangladesh Army and public outrage, it was the caretaker government run by the Army which saw the increasing clout of groups like JMB as a direct threat to its authority. The Army is deeply skeptical of political parties like the BNP, its rival Awami League (AL) and the ultra-conservative religious party, Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI), which aligned with the Pakistan Army during the independence struggle and opposed the creation of Bangladesh [1].

Political Connections

JMB drew its ideological and political support from JeI—both executed JMB leaders Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai were active members—which was the reason why the BNP government, which relies on JeI support, dragged its feet in taking a strong action against religious extremist groups despite credible evidence [2].

Both Rahman and Bangla Bhati were members of Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), the student wing of JeI, during their college days and maintained close contacts with JeI leaders [3].

In fact, Bangladeshi intelligence agencies warned the government back in 2003 about JMB and the threat it posed to the state (*Daily Star*, August 28, 2005). The group was banned in February 2005 after a key leader—a university professor and ideologue, Dr. Mohammad Asadullah al-Ghalib—revealed the group's plans to overthrow the civilian government through violence (*New Age* [Dhaka], February 28, 2005).

Set up in 1998, JMB is one of several extremist and terrorist organizations in Bangladesh waging a fratricidal war against the young nation-state with the aim of establishing an Islamic state. This type of political violence has existed since 1971, when largely Bengali East Pakistan wrested independence from Punjabi-dominated Pakistan. Though substantive evidence of the JMB's links with global jihadi groups like al-Qaeda has yet to surface, JMB's transnational terrorist linkages—ideological and material—are evident.

Creation of the JMB

JMB's founder and spiritual leader was Shaykh Abdur Rahman of Jamalpur district in Bangladesh. Abdur Rahman studied at Madina University and worked as a translator and interpreter at the Saudi Embassy in Dhaka before traveling to Afghanistan to take part in jihad (*Daily Star*, August 28, 2005). He most likely followed in the footsteps of the 3,500-strong batch of recruits dispatched to terrorist training camps by Harkat-ul Jihad al Islami (HuJI), an al-Qaeda-friendly Deobandi group. His association with HuJI, widely regarded as al-Qaeda's South Asia arm, could also be noted from his reported links with two foreign—likely Arab—trainers who came to Bangladesh in 1995 to train militants from the Bengali-related Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic group fighting for independence from Myanmar (*al-Jazeera*, April 2, 2007). Rohingyas formed the backbone of the Bangladeshi terror groups often known as the Bangladesh Taliban and had considerable presence in the Korgani town of Karachi, one of HuJI's key operational headquarters from where it assisted al-Qaeda and other groups.

These trainers had come to Bangladesh on the invitation of Asadullah al-Galib, a professor in Rajshahi University and head of the militant Islamist Ahle Hadith Andolan

Bangladesh (AHAB). Al-Galib was a close ally of Abdur Rahman and part of the triumvirate—Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai being the other two—which ran JMB till 2005. Arrested in February 2005, al-Galib today awaits trial in scores of terrorism cases. The foreign trainers coached the Rohingyas for the Afghan jihad first and then trained local recruits for five to six years. In 1998, after returning from Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman and al-Galib decided to launch their own militant outfit in Bangladesh, calling it Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh. There are also reports that one of Rahman's close associates, Faruq Hossain (alias Khaled Saifullah), was a HuJI leader and had learned bomb-making in the terrorist training camps of Afghanistan (*Daily Times* [Lahore], January 24, 2005; *Daily Star*, March 2, 2006). The contours of the outfit were decided at a 1998 meeting the duo had at Chittagong, the nerve center for extremist activities in Bangladesh (al-Jazeera, April 2, 2007). The first meeting of the JMB commanders was held in early 2002 at Khetlal in Joypurhat, but a series of arrests of some senior leaders, including Abdur Rahman's younger brother, Aatur Rahman—who was being groomed as the military commander of the group—forced JMB to go underground and expand their activities across the country (*New Age*, October 2, 2005).

The Political Agenda

JMB has a clear political agenda: It aims to capture power through armed revolution and run the country by a Majlis-e-Shur (Central Committee) under Islamic laws. The group also wants to rid Muslims of “anti-Muslim” influences, particularly those related to women, an ideology it shares with the Taliban. Abdur Rahman, however, denied any linkages with the Taliban and said in a May 2004 interview: “We are called part of al-Qaeda, Taliban or [an] Islamist militant organization. We are not like that ... If the people of Bangladesh give us the responsibility of running the nation, we will accept it ... We would like to serve people in line with Hilful Fuzul (a social organization founded by the Prophet Muhammad) to serve the destitute” (*Daily Star*, August 28, 2005).

Before the crackdown, the JMB was led by a seven-member Majlis-e-Shura, comprising its top leadership, including Abdur Rahman and Bangla Bhai. The group had 16 regional commanders and 64 district heads, besides hundreds of operational commanders. The cadre was organized in three tiers (*Star Weekend Magazine* [Dhaka], December 5, 2005). The first tier was known as Eshar, where the 200 members were full-timers and

reported directly to the Central Committee. The second tier was Gayeri Easher and had about 10,000 members. The third tier was Sathis or Sudhis (assistants) consisting of younger foot soldiers. For operational requirements, the group divided the country into nine divisions—one division each in Khulna, Barisal, Sylhet and Chittagong, two each in Dhaka and Rajshahi (*The Independent* [Dhaka], September 22, 2005).

Training for Terror

A close ally of the group is the Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), considered to be a more radical and violent wing of JMB. The leadership, structure, objectives and operational methodology of JMJB were similar to that of the JMB. Both groups had strong bases in the northwestern districts—Rajshahi, Naogan, Joypurhat, Natore, Rangpur, Bogra—and the southern districts of Bagerhat, Jessore, Satkhira, Chittagong and Khulna. At the height of its activities, the group had networks in 57 districts working through madrassas and educational institutions and at least 10 training camps at Atrai and Raninagar in Naogaon, Bagmara in Rajshahi and Naldanga and Singra in Natore. The recruits were trained with the help of video footage of warfare training at al-Qaeda's now defunct Farooque camp in Afghanistan, pro-Taliban videos and recorded speeches of Osama bin Laden. Recruits are also spurred by motivational speeches, leaflets and graffiti written and distributed across the country.

The JMB also had a suicide squad called Shahid Nasirullah Arafat Brigade; members had an “insurance policy” from the group (UPI, March 2, 2006). Bomb-making was a specialized task which was stressed during training, most of which takes place in open fields, mosque grounds and in wooded areas.

The group relies on the following sources of funding: Robbery and extortion, illegal tolls or taxes on traders and other businessmen in the areas they control, donations from local patrons, expatriate Bangladeshis and charities and NGOs based in West Asia. A joint 2005 report prepared by Bangladesh's Special Branch, National Security Intelligence (NSI) and Defense Forces Intelligence pointed out that 10 Islamic charities and NGOs were promoting and funding extremist groups like JMB [4].

The massive crackdown and the harsh sentencing of JMB leaders and cadres since August 2005 have crippled the group considerably. But recent arrests of younger

cadre members, media reports of regroupings in remote areas of Gaibandha District of north Bangladesh [5] and a continuing manhunt for the new leader of the JMB, Maulana Saidur Rahman—a former JI leader—raises fears about the possibility of JMB’s renewed attempts to make a comeback in a country which is vulnerable to the increasing spread of al-Qaeda ideology (*Gulf Times* [Kuwait], October 2, 2007; *Daily Star*, January 19).

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Notes

1. A detailed analysis of the nexus between JeI and extremist groups like JMB can be found in: Hiranmay Karlekar, *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005. See also *Terrorism Monitor*, January 13, 2005.
2. Selig Harrison, “A new hub of terrorism?” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2006. Refer also to: Maneeza Hossain, “The Rising Tide of Islamism in Bangladesh,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 3, February 16, 2006, Hudson Institute; Ajit Doval, “Islamic terrorism in South Asia and India’s strategic response,” *Policing*, Vol. 1, 2007, Oxford University Press.
3. For a good reference to the politics of extremism in Bangladesh, see: Liz Philipson, “Corrupted democracy,” *Himal South Asian*, August 2006.
4. Chris Blackburn, “Terrorism in Bangladesh: The Region and Beyond,” Paper presented at the Policy Exchange Conference in London on November 14, 2006; *New Age*, September 22, 2005.
5. A report prepared by Dhaka-based NGO The Bangladesh Enterprise Institute; “Trend of Militancy in Bangladesh and Possible Responses,” quoted “a suspected militant commander, Mustafizur Rahman Shahin, who was arrested in Pabna, as saying that some 5,000 operatives are active across the country.” See also *The New Nation*, February 29; *Bangladesh Today*, February 29.