

TERRORISM FOCUS

Volume V ■ Issue 26 ■ July 16, 2008

IN THIS ISSUE:

- * BRIEFS.....1
- * Invisible Mujahideen Training Camps and the New Resistance Strategy in Iraq.....2
- * Investigation of Turkey's "Deep State" Ergenekon Plot Spreads to Military...4
- * Local Islamist Movement Massacred in Chad after Threatening Holy War...5
- * Saudi Salafism a Stronger Force in Islamist Militancy than Recanting Clerics
By Michael Scheuer.....7



LIBYAN ISLAMIC FIGHTING GROUP TO RENOUNCE VIOLENCE FROM PRISON?

As part of a dialogue and reconciliation process, imprisoned leaders of Al-Jama'ah al-Islamiyah al-Muqatilah (The [Libyan] Islamic Fighting Group - LIFG) appear ready to renounce political violence (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 6). Although the LIFG was closely tied to al-Qaeda and responsible for several assassination attempts on Libyan President Muammar Qadhafi in its struggle to establish an Islamic state in Libya, the ongoing dialogue is sponsored by the president's son, Sayf al-Islam Qadhafi, who played an important role in the release of over 90 members of the LIFG from Libyan prisons last April.

A former member of the LIFG Shura Committee, Nu'man Bin Uthman (a.k.a. Noman Benotman), is playing a leading role in the dialogue with former members of the Shura Committee held in Tripoli's BuSalim Prison. Now a London-based political activist, Bin Uthman is a veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and was based in Sudan with Bin Laden and other al-Qaeda and LIFG operatives in the 1990s. Bin Uthman claims that Bin Laden specifically forbade the LIFG from mounting attacks in Libya or attempting to assassinate its leaders.

Participants in the dialogue include some of the leading members of the LIFG, such as the group's amir, Abdullah al-Sadiq (a.k.a. Abd al-Hakim Belhaj), arrested in Thailand in 2004; Abu Hazim (a.k.a. Khalid al-Sharif), held in Afghanistan's Bagram Air Base Prison by U.S. forces until his deportation to Libya two years ago; Afghanistan veteran and religious leader Abu al-Mundhir (a.k.a. Sami al-Sa'di), arrested in Hong Kong in

For comments or questions about our publications, please send an email to pubs@jamestown.org, or contact us at:

1111 16th St., NW, Suite #320
Washington, DC 20036
T: (202) 483-8888
F: (202) 483-8337
<http://www.jamestown.org>

The Terrorism Focus is a fortnightly complement to Jamestown's Terrorism Monitor, providing detailed and timely analysis of developments for policymakers and analysts, informing them of the latest trends in the War on Terror.

Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.

Copyright ©2008



2004; Shaykh Miftah al-Duwwadi (a.k.a. Abd al-Ghaffar); Mustafa Qanfid (a.k.a. Abu al-Zubayr), military leader of the LIFG; and Abd al-Wahab Qayid Idris, the older brother of senior al-Qaeda leader Abu Yahya al-Libi. According to Bin Uthman, some LIFG members have been sentenced to death, but these sentences may be reviewed in light of “the American onslaught on the Islamic world while focusing on the importance of preserving security and stability in Libya.”

Libyan security authorities are reported to be most interested in the dialogue as a means of averting further acts of militancy within Libya. The participation of Libyans such as Abu Yahya al-Libi (Muhammad Hassan Qayid) in the anti-Coalition jihad in Afghanistan was not raised in the talks (for Abu Yahya, see *Terrorism Focus*, July 31, 2007; August 14, 2007; July 1, 2008). The jailed LIFG leaders gave Bin Uthman a message to pass along to those Libyans still active in al-Qaeda. Though the LIFG once had hundreds of active members, it is now largely non-operational.

FATAL AMBUSH OF UN PEACEKEEPERS IN DARFUR RAISES QUESTIONS ON FUTURE OF UNAMID

The July 8 ambush of a United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) patrol came amid growing tensions in Sudan generated by the International Criminal Court’s indictment of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes, military maneuvers around Khartoum and declarations from Darfur’s strongest rebel movement that it intends to repeat its long-distance May assault on the national capital.

The deadly ambush occurred near the village of Umm Hakibah, roughly 100 km (60 miles) southeast of Darfur’s provincial capital of al-Fasher. The dead included five soldiers from Rwanda (probably the most effective detachment now in UNAMID) and two policemen, one from Ghana, the other from Uganda (*Sudan Tribune*, July 13; *New Vision* [Kampala], July 13). A further 19 were wounded and three UNAMID armored cars destroyed during a two-hour gun battle. The identity of the attackers has not been confirmed, but the accounts of survivors describing men on horseback wearing Sudanese Army-style fatigues suggested the attack was the work of the Janjaweed, a largely Arab militia sponsored by Khartoum. A later UNAMID statement claimed the attackers were carried on 40 vehicles (presumably pick-up trucks) equipped with heavy machine guns, anti-aircraft weapons and recoilless rifles (*Sudan Tribune*, July 11). Jean-Marie Guehenno, the UN’s head of peacekeeping operations,

described the ambush as a “well-prepared” operation in a government-controlled area that used weapons and equipment not usually employed by rebel groups (AFP, July 11).

Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army – Unity (SLA-Unity) condemned the ambush in a statement (Reuters, July 11). The two rebel movements dominate the Darfur resistance through a military alliance. Elements from both forces were believed to be behind the massacre of 10 African Union peacekeepers at Haskanita last September. A Sudanese foreign ministry spokesman claimed that the Umm Hakibah attack was the work of SLA-Unity, but a statement on a website believed to be close to Sudanese intelligence services described the attackers as “an armed group loyal to the Justice and Equality Movement” (Sudanese Media Center, July 10), a claim quickly denied as “government propaganda” by a JEM spokesman (*Sudan Tribune*, July 10).

UNAMID differs little in size, composition or capability from the 9,000-man African Union force it replaced at the beginning of the year. Only a few hundred of the projected 17,000 additional troops that were to form UNAMID have actually arrived. African Union troops have repainted their helmets in UN blue, but still lack basic transportation equipment as well as vitally needed helicopters (for the problems with UNAMID, see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 8, 2007). Australia suspended its UNAMID deployment of a small force of military specialists in the wake of the Umm Hakibah attack (*Sydney Morning Herald*, July 13). Political activists led by actress Mia Farrow are now calling for the deployment of controversial U.S. private security firm Blackwater Worldwide, notorious for their free use of weapons in Iraq, including a 2007 massacre of 17 civilians in Baghdad that led to an FBI investigation (*Financial Times*, June 19; BBC, October 8, 2007).

Invisible Mujahideen Training Camps and the New Resistance Strategy in Iraq

Reacting to the latest decline in jihadi operations in Iraq in particular and in the world in general, a jihadi forum has discussed the need to reevaluate mujahideen tactics. The main posting is entitled “Towards a New Strategy to Resist the Occupier” (tamkeen.iraqserve.com, June 6). In the same context, another posting entitled “The Secret Camps for Preparing the Mujahideen” instructs jihadis to take up the creation of secret mujahideen training camps

(tamkeen.iraqserve.com, June 7).

A forum participant, nicknamed Burkan, believes the Islamic *umma* (community) must devise a new strategy for an apparently imminent World War III. According to al-Burkan, the Islamic jihadi movements are the only parties capable of leading the Islamic nations to victory in this war, therefore the jihadi movements must revise their tactics to avoid mistakes made in the last five years of the Crusader/Zionist onslaught on the Muslim *umma*. The strategy should serve as guidance to Islamic youth in facing “the biggest military might known to mankind”—the United States. In reviewing the confrontation with the Soviet Union’s military in Afghanistan, al-Burkan brags about the mujahideen’s victory over the legendary Soviet Army, stressing the need for optimism in achieving the same victory over the West’s fragile and dissolute imperialism, regardless of the colossal military might it possesses. The expansionist culture of the West can only be defied by a strong and coherent culture. Therefore, the first step in implementing the new strategy is to strengthen the *umma*’s Islamic values. Al-Burkan adds that the collapse of Western imperialism will result in an unprecedented political vacuum when the “tyrant regimes” that currently rule the Middle East are driven out.

Secondly, jihadi movements must change their combat and confrontation techniques in the new phase. These new tactics should involve secret guerrilla warfare using loosely organized jihadi cells. This tactic proved effective in the first Afghan jihad and the conflicts in Bosnia and Chechnya, says al-Burkan. Because the enemy succeeded in countering the tactics of secret cells in Iraq by setting up a local force of collaborators (the Awakening councils) and isolating the occupied country from its neighbors, jihadis must revert to solo operations. This technique should be used in “indirectly-occupied” countries, meaning attacks against Western interests in other Islamic countries designed to force the enemy to leave directly-occupied countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Al-Burkan admits the failure of centralized, hierarchical, secret jihadi groups and suggests solo jihad as a means of avoiding infiltration and capture by the enemy’s secret services. However, al-Burkan stresses the need to reevaluate suicide attacks. Jihadis and religious scholars must be very careful when it comes to authorizing suicide attacks in the upcoming phase of confrontation with Western forces. Jihadi movements need the support of the populace in establishing the Islamic Amirate, therefore they should avoid the indiscriminate killing of

innocent Muslim bystanders in suicide attacks. Other, easier jihadi combat techniques should be sought to enable as much participation from the *umma*’s youth as possible. It is the duty of jihadi cell leaders to train individuals in new combat methods and update the target lists to include those targets most effective in weakening the Crusaders. In a direct incitement of violence against civilians, al-Burkan alleges that all civilian Westerners are combatants because they pay tax and help their government against Muslims; therefore the Shari’a law that stipulates a non-combatant should be excluded from killing does not apply to them.

In another posting entitled “The Secret Camps for Preparing the Mujahideen,” al-Burkan talks about the advantages and requisites of secret training camps as follows:

- The camps do not have a designated location, therefore the maintenance and running costs are affordable by the participating jihadis without having to receive funds that would compromise the training cell.
- Such camps require only two to three training leaders experienced in weapons, communications, intelligence and human resource management.
- The trainees should be no more than five in number, hand-picked from the same age group. The trainees should be youths motivated by jihad and operating on a need-to-know basis.
- Physical training should be conducted in sports clubs, martial arts centers and on beaches.
- Military tactics and weapons training should be carried out in the desert where the dunes provide protection from curious intruders and security forces.
- Finally, each training cell must have a trusted religious authority or scholar guiding the prospective jihadis. The shaykh may issue *fatwas* (religious decisions) on possible targets selected by the training cell. The shaykh must also help strengthen the trainees’ resolve for jihad and purge from them any hesitation or second thoughts.

Jihadis are currently facing increasing difficulties in recruitment, training and sustaining a terror campaign. Many other postings on the main jihadi websites

continuously suggest new tactics for the mujahideen to evade offensives by security forces. Although the strategy of secret training and solo jihad presents complications for security services, the major factor in the success of such clandestine activities is good cover, which relies on extensive training generally unavailable to jihadis in the way it was earlier in the conflict.

Abdul Hameed Bakier is an intelligence expert on counter-terrorism, crisis management and terrorist-hostage negotiations. He is based in Jordan.

Investigation of Turkey's "Deep State" Ergenekon Plot Spreads to Military

The arrests of two retired Turkish general officers on July 6 are the latest detentions in an ongoing investigation into Turkish government allegations of a conspiracy to overthrow the government. Most alarming among the allegations against the conspirators is that, in addition to seeking to shape public opinion in their favor through use of the Turkish media, the plotters planned to use assassinations of Turkish citizens as a tactic to bring about the intervention of the Turkish military, a charge that, if proven, would be tantamount to carrying out terrorist acts to overthrow the government (*Independent*, July 2). The alleged plot, known as the Ergenekon case, is known to have been underway since 2003. The investigation has resulted in the arrest of two dozen or more individuals from not only Turkey's military sphere, but also political leaders, members of the Turkish media, a prominent ultra-nationalist attorney and others (*Independent*, July 2). Turkish authorities reportedly have uncovered a network of conspirators and seized weapons and explosives (*Today's Zaman*, July 6). As a measure of the intended scope of the plot, the conspirators reportedly aimed at nothing less than the reshaping of Turkey's military and parliamentary establishments—along with the national-level bureaucracy and local governments—countering many of Turkey's existing legislative and national security policies and even the rewriting of Turkey's Constitution (*Today's Zaman*, July 8).

The two most prominent names among the arrestees, because of their former high-ranking positions and their continuing access to present-day officials, are retired generals Sener Eruygur, former commander of Turkey's Gendarmerie Forces (a paramilitary responsible for rural security), and Hursit Tolon, former commander of the Turkish First Army (*Hurriyet*, July 6; *Milliyet*, July 6).

Showing the scope of the secularists' dissatisfaction, other suspects include Mustafa Balbay, *Cumhuriyet* newspaper's Ankara representative, and Ankara Chamber of Commerce President Sinan Aygun. The names are among those mentioned in the seized diaries of another senior Turkish military officer—retired Admiral Ozden Ornek, former commander of Turkey's naval forces (*Turkish Daily News*, July 4).

General Eruygur presently heads the Ataturkist Thought Association (ADD) (Bia News Center [Ankara], July 4). The ADD is named for Mustafa Kemal "Ataturk," the founder of modern secularist Turkey in 1923, following the collapse of the Ottoman regime and the nationalist victory in the subsequent Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923). A number of observers see the government's coup allegations as a counter-offensive to the present court case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), brought by secularists seeking to outlaw the Islamist political party and ban its officials from political office. On the day of the latest arrests, the AKP was engaged in court fighting charges leveled by Turkey's chief prosecutor (*Independent*, July 2).

The key piece of government evidence to emerge is a diary maintained by retired Admiral Ozden Ornek, an Ergenekon insider. The document details the names of the participants in Ergenekon, the plans for carrying out the coup and the motivations of the participants—including a deep-seated fear of the possible future course and outcome of the Cyprus issue. An important June 12 raid on an Istanbul residence may have resulted from the seizure of Ornek's diary. Turkish authorities reported that the raid uncovered a network of conspirators, along with a cache of hand grenades, explosives (TNT) and fuses (*Hurriyet*, July 14). A number of suspected plotters were also arrested (*Haber Panorama*, July 2). Even beyond the information that the Ergenekon conspirators were actively involved in preparing to overthrow the Turkish government, the Ornek diary contained the names of two abortive plots in 2004—codenamed "Sarıkiz" (Blonde Girl) and "Ayisigi" (Moonlight)—in both of which General Eruygur played an active leadership role (*Today's Zaman*, July 4). Evidence of a third coup plot, "Eldiven" (The Glove) was also found in the home of General Eruygur (*Taraf*, July 7; *Hurriyet*, July 14).

Information corroborating the material found in the Ornek diary was recovered from the personal computer of General Eruygur. A startling allegation derived from that information suggested the Ergenekon organization had plans for a bomb attack on Taksim Square, one of

Istanbul's busiest areas. With a callous disregard for the lives of Turkish citizens, it was hoped the bombing would kill a large number of people and injure hundreds more, creating a level of chaos sufficient to bring about the intervention of Turkey's military forces in response. The killing and wounding of such a number of people would place the action on a scale with, for example, November 2003's twin al-Qaeda attacks in Istanbul. In addition to the bomb attack, the plotters planned to assassinate a senior army general and the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeals, Abdurrahman Yalcinkaya. The irony in the latter assassination target is that the core goal of the plotters was the replacement of the AKP government, and Yalcinkaya is presently engaged in the court proceedings designed to disband the AKP and dissolve the Turkish government on charges of the constitutional offense of being anti-secular (*Today's Zaman*, July 8).

Ominously, the Ergenekon plotters demonstrated a level of seriousness when they enlisted the aid of an individual named Osman Gurbuz (a.k.a. "Fake Green"). Arrested during the roundup of suspects, Gurbuz allegedly headed a team of attackers who fired indiscriminately into three Istanbul coffee houses and a business office in the infamous "Gazi" incident in Istanbul in 1995, an attack that killed one person and wounded dozens more from the local Alevi community. Nearly two dozen Alevis were killed in anti-police protests in the days following the attack (*Sabah*, July 4; *Radikal*, July 7).

Modern-day Turkey is no stranger to coups d'état—both attempted and successful—over the decades since its establishment. The Ergenekon plot and 2004's Sarikiz, Ayisigi and Eldiven conspiracies are merely the most recent. Turkey's military establishment has intervened three times to remove the government of the day and deliver a return to the military's perception of strict Kemalist principles. In 1960, then Premier Adnan Menderes, President Celal Bayar, the Cabinet and Parliament were removed from power; Premier Menderes was later executed. The years 1962 and 1963 saw two additional attempts at coups d'état, both of which were witnessed personally by this writer. The government of Suleyman Demirel was forced to resign in 1971 under the threat of military intervention, following years of left- and right-wing demonstrations and violence that swept a number of nations in the region. Widespread violence in Turkey again led the Turkish military to intervene on September 12, 1980, for the second time against Suleyman Demirel. Turkish military Chief of Staff Kenan Evren announced that the military was acting to stem anarchy in Turkey and to preserve the republic founded

by Kemal Ataturk.

This latest episode in the ongoing tug of war between Turkey's secularists and its reformers exhibits a number of departures from the past: First, although not entirely unprecedented, the Ergenekon plot appears to have received minimal support, in large part because of the absence of widespread anarchy in Turkey, the primary "spur" for the Turkish military in the past; second, the contest between Turkey's secularists and its reform-minded factions has been carried out this time as much within the legal system as outside of it, as witnessed by the ongoing court battle against the AKP (*Turkish Daily News*, March 17); third, the Turkish judicial establishment (police, courts and internal security) has demonstrated a convincing willingness in their investigation of the Ergenekon case to move quickly and decisively against those, including the military, who seek to move against Turkey; fourth, state-of-the-art technology such as computers is a two-edged sword—while they can aid members of an organization greatly in the management of an effort, they also tend to record an abundance of evidence that in this case will go a long way to bringing about an end to Ergenekon. The Ergenekon case may very well prove to have been a sea change in the manner in which the internal affairs of Turkey are conducted.

Frank Hyland served in the National Security Agency, the Central Intelligence Agency's Counter-Terrorist Center and the National Counter-Terrorism Center.

Local Islamist Movement Massacred in Chad after Threatening Holy War

An alleged rising led by an Islamic preacher in the oil-rich southern region of Chad was repressed with great loss of life by government forces in the first days of July. The incident in the town of Kouno came in response to calls for an international jihad from Ahmat Ismail Bichara, a fiery 28-year-old religious leader, and the destruction of most of the town by his followers.

Kouno lies over 300 km (190 miles) southeast of the capital of N'Djamena, on the Chari River near Sarh (formerly Fort Archambault), the capital of Chad's Moyen-Chari province. The main ethnic group in the region is the non-Muslim Sara, most of whom follow traditional animist religions. A small minority of Sara became Christians during the French colonial era. Kouno was the site of a major battle between French colonial forces and

the freebooting Muslim army of Rabih al-Zubayr in 1899. Today Kouno lies in the midst of Chad's newly productive southern oil fields. Most of Chad's Muslims live in the north and east of the country as well as the capital near the western border, but small communities of Muslims can be found throughout the south, where they generally live in harmony with the non-Muslim majority in the region.

Ahmat Mamahat Bachir, Chad's Minister of the Interior, described the preacher and his followers as "terrorists" and "extremists," adding that Bichara was a "typical suicide guru" (al-Jazeera, July 2; AFP, July 2). Bichara issued a manifesto declaring his jihad on June 3, calling on local Muslims to join a campaign against "Christians and atheists" that would extend as far as Denmark, where cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad were published in 2006 (TchadActuel, July 3). The confrontation came after Bichara rejected the advice of envoys from Chad's Higher Council of Islamic Affairs.

After Bichara's followers went on a rampage in Kouno, destroying four churches, 158 homes, a medical clinic and a police station, government forces decided to respond in force. The preacher, who took down the Chadian flag over the local administration building and replaced it with a banner proclaiming "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is his Prophet," refused all efforts to negotiate with security services, claiming he was an emissary from God. The government assault apparently began as Bichara's followers were listening to what was described as an inflammatory sermon. Other accounts suggest that Bichara's people attacked the security forces, which used firearms only after tear gas failed to disperse the would-be jihadis (AFP, July 2).

Independent accounts of the fighting are not available, but Chad's security minister described Bichara's followers as "intoxicated by indescribable extremism... almost mad" as they "threw themselves" against the fire of security forces in the belief they were immune to bullets (Reuters, July 2). The "clubs, poisoned arrows and swords" used by Bichara's followers proved to be of little avail against the gunfire of government troops, nor did the amulets that were supposed to provide protection from bullets save those who were hit. The use of such amulets in the region goes back to the very first encounters with firearms—despite a distinctly poor track record in deflecting lead they continue to find a place around the necks of local fighters. The number of dead was given variously as somewhere between 66 and 72, with over 50 seriously wounded. Four security men were killed and

four wounded in two days of fighting.

Bichara survived the government assault only to be captured by security forces and removed to N'Djamena with seven of his lieutenants. Brought by authorities to a press conference, the small and bearded shaykh appeared "tranquil and detached," according to an AFP correspondent. Bichara informed the gathering he received his inspiration from the Quran, which demands: "All Muslims must make holy war" (AFP, July 2).

Ahmat Ismail Bichara was born in the village of Mongo in the Guéra region of Chad, just north of the Moyen-Chari district where the young religious leader settled in 2005 after attending various Quranic schools. Bichara opened a Quranic school four kilometers from Kouno, where he gradually developed a following that built a thatch-roofed mosque and village around his school. In the new community women were veiled and kept separate from the men, customs unknown in Chad's traditional Islamic practice (TchadActuel, July 3). Bichara was fond of delivering sermons urging holy war in the face of the impending end of the world, declaring his determination to restore justice and combat the corruption of the Islamic faith.

Justice Minister Jean Alingyué promised a judicial inquiry into the massacre would be opened, with a team of investigators sent to Kouno, before adding derisively that Bichara "thinks he speaks with the Prophet" (TchadActuel, July 2).

It is uncertain how much resonance Bichara's brief holy war may have with the rest of Chad's Muslim population, who are largely Sufis with little in common with the Salafist trend of al-Qaeda-style militancy. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, warriors from Chad's north and east provided strong resistance to French and Italian efforts to overpower the regional dominance of the fiercely independent Sanussi order, which had created an Islamic Saharan confederacy from their bases in Cyrenaica and Fezzan. With the Sanussis a spent force after the First World War—when they took the side of the German and Ottoman Empires—many of Chad's Muslims are today members of the North African Tijaniyya order of Sufis, which have a reputation for cooperation with government, even during the period of French occupation. The Tijaniyya are themselves often in theological conflict with other Sunnis, due to several unorthodox beliefs, including the claim that the order's founder Ahmad al-Tijani (1737-1815) received a revelation from the Prophet that was not given to the Prophet's Companions first.

Despite the Quixotic nature of Bichara's poorly-armed jihad on Denmark, the suggestion that government corruption may have played a part in inspiring the brief insurrection is significant. Reaction to corruption was a prime factor in the support provided to Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi ("the Expected One") in his successful 1880s revolt in neighboring Sudan against its Turko-Circassian rulers. It is reported that Bichara claimed he was invested with "divine power" and was the true Mahdi (TchadActuel, July 3). Bichara appears to have attempted to combine intrusive Salafist religious practices with a more traditional Sufi-based tradition of political opposition that is usually centered on a religious figure, in this case Bichara with his reported claim to be the Mahdi.

The knowledge that Chad's petro-wealth is failing to penetrate further than the ruling faction provides fertile ground for the growth of militant preachers using the same apocalyptic language employed by Bichara and the earlier Sudanese Mahdi. Chad's armed opposition is currently dominated by Zaghawa-led militants who promise little more than a newer version of President Idriss Déby's Zaghawa-dominated government. This does not, however, represent the extent of Chadian dissatisfaction with the national government, rated internationally as one of the world's most corrupt. In the current international and economic environment it is possible that Islam may provide a rallying point for the vast majority of Chad's Muslims who have little access to power or revenues from the oil industry. The Interior Minister's claim that "Chad is a secular state, one and indivisible," may be put to the test.

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

Saudi Salafism a Stronger Force in Islamist Militancy than Recanting Clerics

By Michael Scheuer

In the past month, the media have reported an attack on India's embassy in Kabul, killing 41; an attack on the Red Mosque in Islamabad, killing 10; an attack on the U.S. consulate in Istanbul, killing six; a raid by the Taliban and its allies on a U.S. firebase in Afghanistan's Konar Province that killed nine American soldiers and a July 15 suicide bombing in Iraq that killed 28 Iraqi military recruits. While these events seem grim, fear not. The Western media continue to argue that victory is close

over al-Qaeda and its allies. "Cheer up. We're Winning this War on Terrorism," says the *London Times*; "Turning Their Backs on Terror," claims *Der Spiegel*; "Al-Qaeda's Vietnam," trumpets the *New York Post* (*The Times*, June 27; *Der Spiegel*, July 14; *New York Post*, June 17). How does one reconcile the former events with the latter analysis? And how pertinent is either to assessing the strength of Islamist extremism?

The war-against-Islamists-is-won media boom began in April, with articles by Western journalists claiming al-Qaeda is being destroyed by the recantations of former Islamist theoreticians (*New Republic*, June 11; *New Yorker*, May 26). The recantations, it was argued, are turning Muslims from al-Qaeda and its allies and persuading them to accept U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world and life under repressive police-state regimes. That the recanters' words drew attention from Islamists is clear, but the argument that the recantations—delivered from Egypt's prisons and the Saudi police state—spelled doom for Islamism seems overdrawn. A prominent Salafist cleric, Shaykh Husayn Bin Mahmud, put the point nicely. The recanting "is just acting forced by the prison guards," Bin-Mahmud wrote. "Tell [the recanter] that we would listen to him when he tells us to retract when he is standing between Usama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri in Afghanistan, enjoying his freedom and safety and the safety of his family. How can we listen to him when we know he is in Husni [Mubarak's] prison and knowing how Muslim prisoners in particular are treated?" (alhanein.com, November 25, 2007). Ayman al-Zawahiri put it more logically, asking: "Why is the jihad against the Russians in Afghanistan an individual obligation, whereas in Iraq today, it is one of the cardinal sins?" (Al-Sahab Media Production Organization, December 16, 2007).

The recantations making a splash in the Western media are part of a bigger project conducted by several Arab states—led by Saudi Arabia—to make the United States and its allies believe Islamism's strength is ebbing. Their campaign is made easier, of course, because the West desperately wants to believe such claims. The Arab regimes, in fact, built a cottage industry of recanting; earlier in this decade, Riyadh ran television shows featuring recanting jihadi clerics that earned the mocking name of "the series of repentance" (alhanein.com, November 25, 2007). Today, the Libyan regime is about to join the recanting caravan. Saudi-controlled media in Europe, for example, are publishing teasers about the coming renunciation of "armed violence" by the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group—long an al-Qaeda ally. Its now slickly groomed spokesman, Nu'man bin Uthman, says

the group's imprisoned leaders will soon publicly oppose violence (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 7).

Beyond recanting clerics, the Saudis, the Egyptians, and the Yemenis have trumpeted "re-education programs" they are running to "rehabilitate" captured Islamist fighters, while incarcerated, right-thinking, regime-paid clerics tell the former mujahideen that "religious deviants" led them astray and are taught regime-approved interpretations of Islam. They are also prepared to reenter society with classes in trades, art and music. This program of what the West might call "tough love" is being hailed by Riyadh, Cairo, and Sana as a success, these claims meshing with the West's faith in reforming flawed human beings by therapy [1]. There are suspicions that re-educated graduates are released on condition they go to Iraq or Afghanistan to fight infidels, which was the method the Saudi and other Arab regimes used to unload firebrands during anti-Soviet jihad.

Finally, Riyadh has gone the extra mile to apply soothing eyewash to Western eyes by having its clerical hirelings claim—Quranically speaking—that black is white, as well as by engaging in a startling ecumenicalism: "Aggressions against Muslims and occupation of [their] land," the kingdom's Grand Mufti, Sheikh Abdul-Aziz Al al-Sheikh, said in July, "cannot be a justification for explosions..." Later in his statement, the Grand Mufti let slip the main point of his message, which was to protect the al-Saud family, not the West. "Obeying the Muslim ruler without sedition," al-Sheikh said, "is a basic principle of Muslims who follow the path of the Prophet" (Reuters, July 3).

Later, Riyadh had the senior religious bureaucrat Shaykh Saleh al-Laheedan, chairman of the Saudi Arabian Supreme Judiciary Council, attack bin Laden: "Osama is a preacher of evil," said Shaykh al-Laheedan. "If a man performs prayers in [the] night and then disobeys the rulers of his country, how can he be a good man? No doubt, such people are sinners." Again, this cleric's main message was that the Saudis must be obeyed (*Gulf News*, July 10). The Saudis also are calling for more cooperation among world religions and are mulling the opening of a Christian church in the kingdom. This month it even sent King Abdullah—who met Pope Benedict XVI last year—to open an interfaith conference in Madrid that was organized by the Saudis' Muslim World League (AFP, July 14).

Just as reality is juxtaposed with over-optimism above—Islamist attacks contrasted with claims al-Qaeda and its allies are losing—the Saudi-led Arab campaign to

make the West see a mirage of a fading-Islamist threat is marred by reality. In Egypt, for example, President Mubarak's security forces continue to harass and arrest members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Yemen, President Salih is confronting attacks from both al-Qaeda-in-Yemen and hostile Shia tribes, and it is clear the Islamist tide in Saudi Arabia is not receding. So far in 2008, Saudi security services have arrested more than 700 Islamists suspected of planning attacks on oil, security, and industrial facilities and Riyadh is forming a 30,000-man force to protect these targets. In addition, Saudi officials admit they have neither won the ideological battle with "religious deviants" nor stopped terrorist fundraising; they also say Islamist cells exist across most of the country. Adding to internal frictions are simmering animosities between Sunnis and Shias, after leading Sunni scholars in June ascribed "infidel principles" to Shia doctrine (*Saudi Gazette*, June 27; *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 18; Reuters, July 2).

Again, how can the foregoing contradictions be reconciled, and an assessment made about the strength and future viability of the Islamist threat? Perhaps the best way to get a handle on this issue is to understand that much of the above—the attacks, the recanters, the re-education camps, Riyadh's ecumenical outreach—is a diversion from the key variable in the future vitality of Islamist militancy: The doctrine of Salafism and its continuing proliferation. Bin Laden and his allies are overwhelmingly Salafist; men and women who profess an austere, semi-martial brand of Sunni Islam based on the Quran, the Sunnah and the traditions of the "pious ancestors," the first four generations of Islamic leaders. Salafism is Saudi Arabia's state religion; it is taught at all levels of its school system to Saudis and others who come from abroad to study or are the children of immigrant Muslim workers and it is the faith Riyadh exports to all areas of the world via a large, well funded proselytizing program staffed by Salafi clerics educated in the kingdom. Salafism is the engine of contemporary jihad; its base is in Saudi Arabia; and no amount of jihadist recanting or damning by the "king's clerics" will stunt Salafi jihadism as long as the doctrine is taught and continues to grow in popularity:

In Kuwait, followers of the Salafi current won a majority of parliamentary seats in the 17 May [2008] elections. In Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood elected a [Salafi] conservative, Hammam Said, to be their general guide. He is the first Jordanian of Palestinian origin to lead the group since it was founded in 1946. In Egypt, [Salafi] conservatives running the

Muslim Brotherhood show no intention of allowing a new generation of younger reformers to take over. In Palestine, Hamas's hawks have been consolidating their position since the movement seized Gaza a year ago, while "pragmatists" are being increasingly sidelined. Wherever you look in the Arab world, Islamist conservatism of the brand known as "Salafist" is gaining ground while moderates seem to be running out of steam. Even regional television stations seem more interested in conservatives than in mainstream or opposition moderates. Also, many social institutions have fallen into the hands of the Salafis.

Recently, the Salafist trend has widened its appeal to the Arab public. No longer confining themselves to conventional preaching places, such as the mosque and home gatherings, conservatives are using hi-tech methods, including blogging and Facebook. I have met a few young Salafist men who haven't the slightest interest in updating the content of their beliefs, but nonetheless are computer savvy and networking online all the time. The moment has come for their brand of Salafist discourse, they believe. And they are using the latest technology to connect with thousands of their generation (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, July 10-16).

As Salafism spreads, it is vital that the West sees that the Salafism taught in the Muslim world is not an aberrant form of Islam; it is a respected—indeed, honored—set of beliefs and is being taught accurately. A 2004 essay mounted on the Saudi dissident website *Al-Hijaz* makes this point; the essay merits more attention than it has received. The anonymous author writes that the Salafi mujahideen are a huge problem for the Saudi and other Arab governments because they are the true voice of that version of Islam. While the regimes may be stronger in military terms, the author argues they will ultimately be defeated by the Salafists:

In our opinion, the Saudi government is losing on the ideological front, although it may win temporarily on the front of confrontation by security means. The reason is that the dominant ideology feeding the current of violence is an indigenous ideology, not an intruder into the kingdom. It is an ideology that the official religious establishment espouses and that it considers a sound standard for the entire world, except when it comes to applying it

to the Saudi case and to the al-Saud family. Thus the graduates of the Salafi school, who have embarked on violence have added nothing to this ideology; they simply have applied it. They have been honest in using it and faithful to their belief... It is not correct to maintain that the ideas held by the [Salafi] practitioners of violence are eccentric or [applying a] false doctrine. In fact they are the prevailing view among the Saudi Salafi religious current in the kingdom. If members of the official current use this ideology, it is called sound; if the practitioners of violence use it, it is called eccentric (*Al-Hijaz*, August 15, 2004).

The author warns that seeing Salafists as deviants is self-defeating because their violence is "authenticated ... on the basis of texts, pronouncements and fatwas by senior scholars. These are clear texts subject to no ambiguity or misreading" (*Al-Hijaz*, August 15, 2004). The answer to whether al-Qaeda's ideology can be defeated is not, therefore, to be found in recanting clerics and reeducated militants paraded by the Arab regimes. It will be answered by their willingness to remove Salafism from schools and missionary activities. To date, the evidence is that Salafism has over the last decades—and especially since 9/11—experienced a Saudi-sponsored expansion from the Arab heartland to rest of the Muslim world.

Michael Scheuer served in the CIA for 22 years before resigning in 2004. He served as the Chief of the bin Laden Unit at the Counterterrorist Center from 1996 to 1999. He is the once anonymous author of Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror and the newly released Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam After Iraq. Dr. Scheuer is a Senior Fellow with The Jamestown Foundation.

Notes

1. The chief of the Saudi Senior Islamic Scholars Commission, Shaykh Abdullah al-Motlaq, recently briefed the media on the "success of the ongoing counseling program," and asserted that "Saudi scholars are in the forefront of those carrying out [the] intensive campaign against extremists in the kingdom" (*Gulf News*, July 10).