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Afghanistan's National Army: The Ambiguous Prospects of Afghanization

By Antonio Giustozzi

Over the last few years the Afghan National Army (ANA) has often been presented as a success story. This certainly holds some truth, at least in comparison with Afghanistan's national police, which is widely seen as a complete failure. The ANA is reasonably well behaved and quite popular throughout most of Afghanistan. Its initial difficulties in retaining troops within the ranks seem to have been addressed to some extent and both the desertion and absence-without-leave (AWOL) rates are down from the high levels of 2002-2006. AWOL rates in particular have declined dramatically over the last 18 months, to a relatively low 8 percent, from about 33 percent in 2006 [1]. This appears to be the combined result of a presidential decree turning absence-without-leave into a crime, a widespread media campaign, rising unemployment and rising food prices, which force even less than enthusiastic recruits to stick to the ANA. The number of infantry battalions now stands at 36, while the army as a whole numbers 37,000 men: Still substantially short of its personnel projections, but way above the 22,000 which it numbered at the end of summer 2007 [2]. These relative successes have turned the ANA into one of the pillars of the much touted "Afghanization" strategy. The term "Afghanization" itself is used with some ambiguity within the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), sometimes implying a gradual withdrawal of foreign troops; at other times it implies the gradual shift of the weight of the fighting from the international contingents to the Afghans. A number of European countries seem to lean toward the first interpretation, while Washington clearly opts for the second [3].

Difficulties in Operating Independently

To the extent that Afghanization is meant to allow a withdrawal of foreign troops, the ANA still has several weaknesses. The main one is its extreme dependence on embedded trainers. Five years on, not a single battalion has graduated from the embedded training program, even though the original plan was for two years. A number of battalions, perhaps as many as 12, are considered to be led by sufficiently skilled officers capable of operating without advisers [4]. However, as the insurgency grew into a relatively large conflict through 2005-2007, the ANA has grown dependent on close air support, administered through the embedded training teams. The ANA does not have any personnel trained to handle close air support, nor does it seem bound to develop such skills in the foreseeable future [5]. The fighting tactics that ANA officers have been learning from their trainers are largely based on American tactics; the infantry's main task is to force the enemy to reveal itself, allowing the air force to wipe it out with air strikes. There is little evidence that ANA units would be able to control the battlefield without such air support, or that they are learning the necessary skills.

The ability of the ANA and the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MoD) to plan and conduct complex operations on their own has not yet been tested; the few autonomous operations carried out by ANA units are simple ones, usually with back-up from foreign units and always with the embedded trainers present [6]. Tight international sponsoring of the ANA also means that it is usually not operating in very small units, which would be most effective in engaging and pursuing the insurgents in the absence of overwhelming air support. Usually the task of engaging the insurgents in close combat is left to the Special Forces of various foreign contingents. Several ANA officers complain about the fact that the training received by the infantry battalions is too "conventional" [7]. By not practicing effective counter-guerrilla tactics, the necessary skills are not being developed, and it will not be possible to rapidly produce such skills in the event of a substantial change in the involvement of foreign troops in the war.

Another dubious aspect of Afghanization is the limited logistical capabilities of the ANA. Although its logistical units are now being developed, the ANA's difficulties in recruiting skilled staff casts some doubts about the future efficiency of its logistics once the foreign contingents hand over these responsibilities to the ANA.

Ethnic Fault Lines

With regard to its long-term viability, another problematic aspect of the ANA is represented by its internal ethnic fault lines. Since 2005 both the MoD and the Americans have securely guarded any data about the ethnic composition of the ANA, but there is evidence that a genuine ethnic balance has not yet been achieved; even more worryingly, although a point was initially made that units would be ethnically mixed, it is now obvious that they are not. Tajiks are still overrepresented, particularly in the officer corps. According to one estimate, 70 percent of the battalion commanders are Tajiks [8]. This figure is in stark contrast with the Afghan army of the pre-war period, where the overwhelming majority of field officers were Pashtuns and ethnic minorities were mainly relegated to logistics and administration.

Recruitment to the army is not going well in a number of Pashtun regions affected by the insurgency, mainly because of a campaign of intimidation carried out by insurgents against the families of soldiers, which discourages potential recruits from joining and has forced a number of soldiers not to re-enlist. The situation is compounded by the habit of the MoD to deploy only predominantly Tajik units to the war zones of the south and southeast, presumably to avoid the risk of "fraternization" and to enhance the cohesion of the units. As a result, there are very few Pashtuns fighting against the insurgency within the ranks of the ANA. Although friction between ANA units and the local population or even between ANA and locally recruited police is reported, there is no evidence that this is a driving factor in the insurgency. However, such friction and the fact that many soldiers and officers do not speak Pashto must certainly limit the cooperation that these units are able to enlist locally, particularly in remote rural areas. Even the few Pashtuns who serve in these units are usually not from the region where they are deployed, but from other Pashtun-populated regions. Therefore, they lack local knowledge even if they can understand the language spoken by the villagers.

These characteristics of the ANA units deployed in the south, southeast and east are compounded by the unreliability and ineffectiveness of the police, which in principle should contribute local knowledge to the counter-insurgency effort. Locally recruited police forces are more often than not militias in disguise, which fight for their own agenda and are locked in local rivalries. These forces do not effectively cooperate with the ANA

and are not reliable sources of information [9].

Perhaps more relevant in the long term is the risk of ethnic tension compromising the unity of the ANA, once foreign troops have been withdrawn or their presence substantially reduced. Given battalions which are largely ethnically homogeneous and with many within the officer corps having a background in ethnically-based political factions, the stage seems set for serious trouble in the event of a foreign withdrawal. Moreover, the army, whose size is now planned at 80,000 but may grow further, is already unaffordable for the revenue-stripped Afghan state and will one day have to be downsized, raising the prospect of serious disgruntlement among officers.

Conclusion

At some point ISAF will have to allow the ANA to be tested on the battlefield in conditions resembling those which it will meet in the event of a withdrawal of foreign forces. Apart from being a test of Afghanization, such a trial—if successfully passed—would also enhance the credibility of the ANA and the legitimacy of the government, as well as increase the leverage of Kabul in any negotiations with the Taliban. The test could, for example, consist of leaving the ANA alone to manage a province or region without external support. The fact that such a test has not been attempted yet in more than six years of international tutoring might reflect a relative lack of confidence in the capabilities of the ANA, or the fear of the political consequences of a failure.

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Notes

1. *Stars and Stripes*, Mideast edition, May 8, 2007; Video Teleconference with Major General Robert W. Cone - Commander of CSTC-A (Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan), March 26, 2008.
2. American Forces Press Service, April 7.
3. Author's personal communications with diplomats in Kabul, April 2008.
4. A. Giustozzi, "Reconstructing the Defence Sector," Chapter in *Deconstructing the Afghan Security Sector*, LIT Verlag Security, 2008; A. Giustozzi, "Auxiliary

force or national army? Afghanistan's 'ANA' and the counter-insurgency effort, 2002-2006," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 18(1), March 2007, pp.45–67.

5. Author's personal communication with a senior American officer and a NATO diplomat, Kabul, April 2008.
6. Author's personal communication with British army officers and journalists, London, November 2007; personal communication with military attaché, Kabul, October 2007.
7. Author's personal communication with military attaché, Kabul, April 2008.
8. Author's personal communication with UN official, Kabul, April 2008.
9. Author's personal communication with British, Dutch and American officers and diplomats, 2007-2008; personal communication with senior Ministry of the Interior official, Kabul, October 2007.

Europol Reveals Trends in Jihadi Terrorism in Europe

By Thomas Renard

Terrorist activities in Europe increased dramatically in 2007, according to the annual report published by Europol, the European Union's criminal intelligence agency [1]. Terrorists carried out—or attempted to carry out—583 attacks last year, a 24 percent increase from the previous year. Accompanying this increase in terrorist activities was an increase in counter-terrorist operations: 1,044 individuals were arrested for terrorism-related offenses, a 48 percent increase compared to 2006.

Most terrorist attacks were claimed or attributed to separatist groups in the Basque country, Spain (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA), or in Corsica, France (Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale di a Corsica, or FLNC). ETA and FLNC were responsible for 517 attacks, constituting 88 percent of all terrorist actions. Arrests among separatist groups were also responsible for the large increase in arrests in the European Union (EU) in 2007. Spain saw a seven-fold increase in arrested suspects compared to 2006, while France registered a 68 percent increase. In total, arrests among separatist groups represented more than half of the total arrests.

Islamist terrorism was statistically much less significant. Only four attacks were recorded: Two failed bombings in the United Kingdom (the Glasgow attacks), and

two foiled plots in Germany (the Sauerland cell) and Denmark (the Glasvej case). The number of arrests could indicate a general decrease in jihadi activities. Indeed, EU police forces arrested 201 jihadi suspects, 56 fewer than in 2006. However, it should be mentioned that these numbers do not include arrests in Great Britain, which refuses to communicate precise statistics, although Britain did indicate a 30 percent increase in jihadi arrests. Including the British data could result in an increase of the arrests between 2006 and 2007.

Despite the comparatively low number of attacks, Islamist terrorism is still perceived as the main threat to European security. The reason for this assessment cannot be measured in number of attacks or arrests; it is an estimate of potential damages. “Most investigations into failed and foiled Islamist terrorist attacks in the EU in 2007 showed that Islamist terrorists continue to aim at causing indiscriminate mass casualties,” claims the report. “This is not only observed in the choice of targets but also in the methods and explosives used.”

Several European countries are currently—or were until very recently—at a very high level of terrorism alert. This was the case, for instance, in France, the UK, Spain and Belgium. On April 22, Gerard Bouman, head of the Algemene Inlichtingen-en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD—Dutch domestic intelligence), confirmed that the threat of jihadi terrorism is growing in the Netherlands [2], especially since the release of the Islamophobic movie “Fitna” by Dutch extreme-right politician Geert Wilders (AP, April 22).

The Europol report underscores several interesting trends in Islamist terrorism in Europe:

- First, “although the majority of all arrested suspects for Islamist terrorism continue to be North African citizens, the member states reported a high number of arrested suspects with the nationality of the country of arrest.” This seems to confirm a growing threat of homegrown terrorism that has been observed for several years.
- Second, this increase in homegrown terrorists is partly the result of an increase in quantity and a “new quality” in jihadi propaganda in Europe (see *Terrorism Focus*, February 20). It is now widely recognized that propaganda on the internet has a central importance in recruitment. Hence, some recent developments

appear particularly worrisome. For instance, al-Qaeda’s media arm, al-Sahab, now offers English subtitles or translations. In order to target some specific audiences, certain jihadi websites have recently decided to translate jihadi material into other languages, such as German, despite some apparent difficulties in using the language correctly (*Die Welt*, February 8). Similarly, the website al-Ikhlās recently launched two new forums in French and Italian [3].

Recruitment constitutes an important part of jihadi activities in Europe and arrests related to this activity have increased. The observed developments in propaganda and recruitment suggest that al-Qaeda is taking roots in Europe and could potentially become stronger in the near future. On April 18, European ministers of justice reached agreement on a law that would condemn, among other things, online propaganda and recruitment (AFP, April 18). This new law—which must still be approved by the European Parliament—should facilitate EU cooperation with internet providers and, eventually, allow the identification of cyber-terrorists. According to Gilles de Kerchove d’Ousselghem, the EU counter-terrorism coordinator, there are approximately 5,000 jihadi websites that contribute to the radicalization of European youth.

- Third, propaganda and recruitment serve multiple purposes. Some would-be jihadis are recruited by local cells to carry out operations in their own countries. Some are “self-recruited” through the media, and constitute a “new generation” of terrorists [4]. Some limit their support to financing terrorism. Others, finally, decide to join the jihad abroad, in Iraq—which remains the main destination for European fighters—in Afghanistan, or, increasingly (according to French intelligence), in Somalia.
- Fourth, the remaining core leadership of al-Qaeda in Pakistan still largely commands, controls and inspires jihadi terrorists in Europe. Europol, however, recognizes the rising importance of groups isolated—or more autonomous—from al-Qaeda’s core leadership, and their potential threat to European security. “This expansion of the ‘al-Qaeda franchise’ has the potential to constitute a threat to the EU’s security,” claims

the report. “It could provide al-Qaeda with access to new centers of support which it can motivate and exploit.”

- Fifth, the report emphasizes the strategic importance of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan for European security. Should the situation in Iraq improve or the war terminate, Iraqi fighters—European or not—could relocate to other places and continue to wage jihad. Former Iraqi fighters could, for instance, carry out operations in Europe, establish new cells, or teach their know-how to young, would-be terrorists. In other words, there is a risk that the Iraqi generation will follow a similar path to the 1980s Afghan generation.

The problem with Afghanistan and Pakistan is more imminent. European citizens receive training in Pakistani tribal areas camps, either to go fight in Afghanistan, or to bring jihad back to Europe. “Al-Qaeda and affiliated pro-Taliban groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan are increasingly recognized as one of the main drivers of Islamist extremism and terrorism in the EU,” says the report. This statement underscores the European dilemma in facing terrorism. On one hand, EU members recognize that their domestic security is related to the evolution of the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. On the other hand, however, they refuse a greater commitment in those regions for various other reasons, including electoral concerns.

Finally, a last interesting trend relative to Islamist terrorism in Europe concerns judicial sentences. In 2007, one-third of jihadi terrorist suspects were acquitted, while only one-fifth of separatist terrorists were discharged. This seems to indicate two things. First, the strong emphasis on Islamist terrorism by security services has led to a certain “paranoia” and abusive arrests that could ultimately hurt European efforts in countering radicalization. However, it should also be emphasized that some individuals were acquitted due to a lack of evidence, but could still be related to terrorism. Second, the better records in jailing separatist terrorists prove that European intelligence agencies have a greater knowledge of separatist groups and more effective strategies to counter them than is the case with Islamist terrorism.

Although a large part of the Europol report is dedicated to Islamist terrorism, it also includes other chapters on separatist terrorism, left-wing terrorism, extreme-right terrorism, and single-issue terrorism. Four points concerning those other forms of terrorism are worth a quick highlight:

- Attacks by separatist groups continue to overwhelmingly outnumber any other form of terrorism.
- ETA activities remain largely based in Spain, with logistical support in France. However, Portugal noticed an increase of Basque activities within its borders.
- ETA is starting to use propaganda videos in order to recruit among youth. This confirms that terrorist groups copy successful strategies developed by other groups, in this case al-Qaeda’s model.
- Extreme-left terrorism is regionally in decline. However, these activities increased in Italy. Moreover, French Interior Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie declared recently that left-wing groups constitute a resurgent threat to domestic security (AFP, February 10).

Looking at the number of attacks, separatist groups are more active than jihadi terrorists. However, jihadi groups are still perceived as the main threat to European security due to their potential for damage. Moreover, it appears that the Islamist threat is growing. Al-Qaeda is taking roots in Europe, seducing an increasing number of EU citizens, although the influence of the core leadership remains important. In terms of counter-terrorist strategies, the EU as a whole—as well as EU members individually—are taking some steps to increase their efficiency. Nevertheless, they are still better at fighting separatist movements than at countering jihad.

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Notes

1. “TE-SAT 2008 – EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report,” Europol, April 2008.
2. “Jaarverslag AIVD 2007,” Algemene Inlichtingen-en Veiligheidsdienst, April 2008.
3. “Islamist Website Al-Ikhlās Launches French, Italian Forums,” MEMRI Islamist Websites Monitor Project,

April 4, 2008.

4. Marc Sageman, "The Next Generation of Terror," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2008.

Confronting the Sadrists: The Issue of State and Militia in Iraq

By Fadhil Ali

On April 26, Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr stood down from his threat to wage an all-out war against the Iraqi government and the coalition. A week before, the anti-American cleric had issued a statement threatening to declare an open war if the security crackdown by the Iraqi and U.S. forces against his loyalists was not called off. Al-Sadr said that he was giving a final warning to the Shiite-led Iraqi government to "take the path of peace and stop violence against its own people." Al-Sadr's statement went on: "If [the Iraqi government] does not stop the militias that have infiltrated the government, then we will declare a war until liberation" (al-Jazeera, April 19).

The statement was read out in the mosques of Sadr City, a largely Shiite district of Baghdad. There were calls for jihad against the U.S. forces and calls for the Iraqi government to release detainees and end the siege on the poor district of eastern Baghdad. Sadr City is populated by more than two million people and is a main stronghold of Muqtada's Jaysh al-Mahdi militia (JaM).

Neither the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki nor the U.S. forces showed any intention of submitting to al-Sadr's threat. The Iraqi-American joint operations continued, with over 1,070 people killed in Iraq in April, most of them in the violence between Shiite militias and government/Coalition forces (AFP, April 30).

Major General Rick Lynch, the commander of the U.S. Army in central Iraq, threatened to hit back if al-Sadr launched war: "If Sadr and Jaysh al-Mahdi become very aggressive, we have got enough combat force to take the fight to the enemy." General Lynch also called on al-Sadr to play a positive role: "I hope Muqtada al-Sadr continues to depress violence and not encourage it" (*Kuwait Times*, April 21). Al-Sadr, currently pursuing theological studies in the Iranian city of Qom, made his open war threat while his followers' strongholds

in southern Iraq were falling and Sadr City and other Shiite neighborhoods in Baghdad were under military pressure.

On February 22, al-Sadr renewed the six-month suspension of JaM activities. The suspension was initially imposed by al-Sadr after inter-communal clashes during a religious festival in the holy Shiite city of Karbala were blamed on the JaM. The decision to renew the suspension was not opposed but many figures from al-Sadr's movement were ready to end the ceasefire as they claimed they were increasingly targeted by government forces.

Days after this decision, al-Sadr announced that he had retired and admitted that he had failed to achieve his main goals: "What made me retire is the continuing presence of the occupation... I have succeeded neither in liberating Iraq nor in making it an Islamic society; it might be my dereliction, it could be society's or it could be both.....Many of those who were close to me have left me for worldly reasons, and a dominant independent trend was one of the secondary reasons behind my isolation" (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 8). Al-Sadr also revealed that he was thinking seriously of reconstructing his movement but did not clarify how he would do so while isolated in Qom. He indicated that he had undertaken advanced religious studies to become a senior Shiite cleric (ayatollah), which will give him great spiritual and institutional influence (see *Terrorism Monitor*, February 7).

The Assault of the Nights

Basra is the second largest city in Iraq. Being the only Iraqi port and enjoying a rich oil-producing industry, it became the scene of a power struggle among the various Shiite militias and factions after the invasion. By the end of 2007 the British Army handed over security responsibilities to the Iraqi government.

On March 25 al-Maliki himself was in Basra, where he launched "The Assault of the Nights," a security operation intended to disarm the illegal militias. It was clear that the JaM was the main target. On the threshold of the operation, the main powers in Basra, in addition to the JaM, were the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), led by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, and al-Fadhila (Islamic Virtue Party), led by Ayatollah Muhammad al-Yaqubi. The influential mayor of Basra, Muhammad al-Walili, is a member of al-Fadhila Party.

The ISCI is the main rival of al-Sadr's movement in Shiite Iraq. Thousands of members of the Badr Organization—the military wing of the ISCI—have joined Iraqi government forces in post-invasion Iraq, especially when Bayan Jabur Solagh, a senior member of the ISCI, was Minister of the Interior (May 2005 - June 2006). The ISCI and the Badr Organization also influence other affiliated armed groups. The ISCI currently dominates the provincial councils in central and southern Iraq as most Sadrists boycotted the previous election in January 2005.

After the Operation

The fighting in Basra stopped when al-Sadr called on his followers to lay down their arms and clear the way for an exchange of prisoners and a cessation of government raids against his followers (see *Terrorism Focus*, April 1). 600 were killed and 2,000 injured after a week of fighting which rapidly extended from Basra to Baghdad and other parts of central and southern Iraq. Despite the call for a ceasefire, the fighting continued, with mortar and rocket attacks on Baghdad's "Green Zone." The JaM was still armed: "We are committed to [al-Sadr's] orders but we will not hand our weapons over as they are for resisting the occupation," said Hazim al-Arako, a senior aide of Muqtada (*al-Hayat*, April 1). The Iraqi and U.S. forces did not release any detainees and kept raiding al-Sadr's strongholds throughout the country.

Many looked at the operation as a victory for al-Sadr after he had shown that he still had control of his militia. Iran also appeared as another winner as the settlement for the crisis was agreed upon in the Iranian city of Qom, where al-Sadr studies (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 5). Hundreds of Iraqi soldiers and officers surrendered to the JaM, including some who did so in front of TV cameras. In his testimony before Congress, General David Petraeus, commander of the U.S. Army in Iraq, described the operation as not adequately planned (BBC, April 8).

Muqtada under Pressure

Though al-Maliki could not prove himself a remarkable military leader in the field in Basra, he nevertheless gained political support when he returned to Baghdad. The Political Council for National Security, made up of leading Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish politicians, backed al-Maliki and called on all parties to disband their militias or risk being barred from participating in political life. Al-Maliki had the council's full support in the campaign

against the militias and the outlaws (*al-Hayat*, April 6). Next al-Maliki presented al-Sadr with a difficult choice: "The decision was made that [the Sadrists] no longer have the right to participate in the political process or take part in the upcoming election unless they end al-Mahdi Army" (CNN, April 7). Moreover the Sunnis decided to rejoin al-Maliki's government—they withdrew in August 2007—and urged al-Maliki to take action against the Shiite militias they blamed for sectarian killings.

Despite the political progress, the fighting continued. On April 11, Muqtada's right hand man and brother-in-law, Riyadh al-Nuri, was assassinated in Najaf. Al-Sadr called for calm and blamed the "occupier and its tails"—referring to the Americans and the Iraqi government—though al-Nuri might have been killed by his own people (Alalam, April 12). On April 19, the Arab newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat* published a letter allegedly written by al-Nuri asking al-Sadr to purify the movement and disband the JaM; a source close to al-Nuri accused extremists from the movement of the assassination. The head of al-Sadr's parliamentary bloc neither denied nor confirmed the allegations. No matter who killed al-Nuri, it was a blow to al-Sadr and his followers and it raised the possibility that Muqtada himself might be next. Al-Qaeda's second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri mocked al-Sadr, describing him as a dissembler who was being used by Iranian intelligence (AKI, April 18).

The Iranian ambassador to Iraq, Saeed Kazemi Qomi, denounced the American operation in Sadr City saying that it led to the killing of innocent people, but added that Iran supported the Iraqi government in its operation in southern Iraq. In Sadr City, alleged field commanders from the JaM said that the militia is now unified under the command of al-Sadr. They added that Iran had stopped sending weapons to the JaM but the weapons they already had are sufficient for a year of continuous fighting. For the first time, al-Maliki warned Iran from intervening in Iraq's internal affairs (*al-Arabiya*, April 25).

Al-Maliki's Four Conditions

Al-Maliki set four conditions for the JaM in order to bring an end to the military operations:

- Heavy and medium weapons must be turned in to government security forces;
- The militia must cease interference in state affairs

- and institutions;
- The militia must cease interference in the army and security forces;
- Wanted individuals must be turned over and lists compiled of those involved in violence (al-Arabiya, April 25).

The next day the U.S. army issued a statement announcing that U.S. and Iraqi forces had taken control of Hay Hiteen, the last stronghold of al-Sadr in Basra. At the same time Iraqi forces backed by U.S. air support were raiding the last stronghold of the JaM in the southern city of al-Kut (BBC, April 26). U.S. forces were barely involved in the opening round of the operation, but by this time they had become heavily involved after some Shiite units proved unreliable in fighting the Shiite militias.

Despite these setbacks, al-Sadr refused to submit to al-Maliki's conditions (Radio Sawa, April 27), though he did retract his open war threat and called for an end to the bloodshed. In a statement, al-Sadr said that his threat was directed to the occupier—i.e. the U.S.-led Coalition—while calling on Iraqis not to use arms against fellow Iraqis, not to use violence to impose law and not to divide Iraq. Significantly al-Sadr called on the resistance not to use the cities as military operational fields against the occupier (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 26). It is not clear if al-Sadr meant to make an essential change of his tactics; since the invasion, all JaM battles have been fought inside the cities and residential neighborhoods. As al-Sadr rejected al-Maliki's four conditions, the Iraqi prime minister responded: "The Iraqi government will not retreat until the JaM and other Sunni groups are disarmed and until al-Qaeda is destroyed." Al-Maliki accused JaM of using civilians in Sadr City as human shields (BBC, April 30). Baha'a al-Araji, an MP and member of al-Sadr's movement, suggested the Iraqi presidency act as a mediator and a guarantor between the Sadrists and al-Maliki. This would be preferable to Iran, which hosted the initial peace deal in the beginning of the fighting.

The Crisis Continues

The first days of the anti-JaM operation revealed the poor performance of some Iraqi government units and a lack of coordination with the Coalition forces, demonstrating that any major campaign in the future should be well prepared politically and militarily.

The Iraqi government can bar al-Sadr's movement from participating in the upcoming provincial election but it cannot change the fact that millions of Iraqis are sincere followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. The cleric might have declined pursuing "open war" at the moment, but he is still capable of waging a popular uprising that would raise the number of casualties on both sides. April became the deadliest month for the U.S. Army in Iraq since September 2007 (BBC, April 30).

The ban on militias has focused on the Sadrists. The peshmerga militias of the two major Kurdish parties and the ISCI Badr Organization have found their way into the Iraqi forces while the poor Shiites who are the raw material of the JAM are still suffering from unemployment and negligence. The same applies to the Sunni fighters of the Awakening movement who have been trying in vain to join the Iraqi forces. A program of rebuilding the Iraqi forces on a base of national loyalty is essential to reduce violence. There may be steps in this direction—al-Maliki recently called for the recruitment of 25,000 Shiite tribesmen to the Iraqi security forces (al-Hayat, April 6). To fight extreme ideologies, the Iraqi government must direct greater efforts and funding to development and reconstruction projects in impoverished Shiite areas; otherwise, the crowded slums will continue to produce extremists and criminals.

Fadhil Ali is a freelance journalist based in Iraq who specializes in Iraqi insurgent groups.

Susurluk and the Legacy of Turkey's Dirty War

By Gareth Jenkins

On April 23 the Turkish Council of State ordered former Interior Minister Mehmet Agar to stand trial for allegedly "forming a criminal organization" in the dirty war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) during the 1990s, a period most Turks refer to as the "Susurluk" era (*Turkish Daily News*, April 23; *Sabah*, April 23; *Today's Zaman*, April 22). It will be the first time a former government minister has faced charges related to one of the darkest chapters in recent Turkish history, the repercussions of which still haunt Turkey today.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the PKK's first insurgency was at its peak, there were frequent

rumors that the Turkish state was conducting a campaign of torture and assassination against suspected PKK sympathizers, including the formation of death squads and the recruitment of ultranationalist hitmen from the Turkish underworld. No unequivocal evidence could ever be produced and the claims were routinely dismissed by the Turkish authorities as PKK propaganda.

However, in the early evening of November 3, 1996, a truck pulled out of a gas station into the path of a speeding Mercedes just outside the town of Susurluk in western Anatolia. Three of the four passengers in the car were killed instantly and the fourth seriously injured. When local journalists arrived at the scene to cover what they had assumed was another traffic accident, they discovered that the three dead were Huseyin Kocadag, a prominent police chief; Abdullah Catli, a wanted Mafia hitman and convicted heroin smuggler who was carrying six different sets of identity documents issued by the Turkish authorities; and Catli's mistress, Gonca Us, a former beauty queen. The injured passenger was Sedat Bucak, a member of parliament for the ruling True Path Party (DYP) and the leader of a Kurdish clan which was one of the main contributors to the pro-state militia known as "Village Guards," used by the government in its war against the PKK. In the trunk of the Mercedes the journalists found a small arsenal of weapons, including several handguns fitted with silencers.

On November 8, 1996, Agar resigned as Interior Minister following allegations that he had provided false documents for Catli, including signing his gun permit. But his parliamentary immunity meant that Agar was able to avoid prosecution. Under intense public pressure, the government grudgingly agreed to a parliamentary inquiry. In the 350-page report published in April 1997, members of the parliamentary committee conducting the investigation repeatedly complained that they were prevented from having access to documents and interviewing state officials believed to have been involved [1]. The inquiry nevertheless uncovered enough evidence to demonstrate that the victims of the traffic accident in Susurluk were just part of a vast matrix of security and intelligence officials, ultranationalist members of the Turkish underworld and renegade former members of the PKK.

During the course of the parliamentary inquiry, officials from Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) admitted that they had started recruiting ultranationalist members of the Turkish underworld in the early 1980s. In return for immunity from prosecution for their other

activities—such as trafficking heroin through Turkey into Western Europe—ultranationalists in the Turkish Mafia had been used first to assassinate members of the militant Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and then, particularly from the late 1980s onward, suspected PKK members or sympathizers. Sometimes they clearly had an additional motive. In the early 1990s, after then Prime Minister Tansu Ciller warned that the Turkish state would punish those who financed the PKK, several leading ethnic Kurdish heroin traffickers were murdered, and their routes taken over by members of the ethnic Turkish underworld.

But "Susurluk" was more of a culture of immunity than a single network controlled by a specific power center. In addition to MIT, other branches of the security services were also running assassination campaigns. They included elements in the military, particularly those associated with what Turks call the "deep state," the Gladio-style covert networks originally established by NATO as stay-behind forces trained to conduct insurgent operations in the event of a communist takeover (see *Terrorism Focus*, January 29). One of the most active was Gendarmerie intelligence, officially known as Gendarmerie Intelligence and Anti-Terror (JITEM). The Interior Ministry also ran covert organizations, either on a local level or through specially formed units controlled from Ankara. Much of the funding for covert operations came from extra-budgetary funds which were free from any oversight. Similarly, many of the weapons used in covert operations were purchased and distributed secretly, often from the international black market.

Although the command structures of the covert organizations were usually staffed by long-serving security or intelligence officials, the assassinations themselves were often carried out by former members of the PKK. Known in Turkish as "confessors," they were offered immunity from prosecution or reduced jail sentences in return for switching sides and targeting their former comrades. In recent years, several former confessors have published accounts of their activities, relating how they would abduct, interrogate, torture and then execute suspected PKK sympathizers [2].

No reliable figures are available for the number of people who were killed or disappeared as the result of such operations, but it is conservatively estimated to be several thousand. Most of the killings occurred in the predominantly Kurdish southeast of Turkey, where self-censorship and pressure from the authorities ensured that most of the assassinations and disappearances received

little or no coverage in the mainstream national press. The assassins were often imprisoned PKK militants, who had been released for a few hours to carry out the murder in return for a promise of early release from jail. Many of the killings occurred in broad daylight in front of witnesses, who were sometimes able to identify the assailant. Although relatives of the slain were frequently able to name the assassin, it was very rare for the Turkish authorities to investigate. Even today, the murders of thousands of suspected PKK sympathizers during the 1990s remain officially classed as “unsolved.”

However, not only did the Susurluk accident occur in western Turkey—where it was much more difficult for the authorities to control the media—but it came at a time when the PKK was already in retreat on the battlefield. As the perceived threat from the PKK diminished, what had always been a very tenuous central control over the various groups and individuals recruited for the assassination campaigns declined still further. Many began to concentrate more on making money—particularly through extortion and narcotics trafficking—than on combating the PKK. The result was the emergence of rival factions and turf wars, which frequently descended into violence as competing groups started to target each other. But, even if they were now more criminal rather than covert organizations, they could still usually rely on the protection of the state to keep them out of jail. Although there were a number of prosecutions in the years immediately following the Susurluk accident, most of the accused were relatively low-level operatives and were either acquitted or received very light prison sentences.

Nevertheless, the arrests in January of an ultranationalist gang called Ergenekon demonstrated that Susurluk still has the ability to cast a shadow over Turkish politics (see *Terrorism Focus*, January 29). Several of the leading members of Ergenekon were among those named in the parliamentary investigation into Susurluk in 1997, even if they have recently started targeting what they regard as the anti-secularist Justice and Development Party (AKP) rather than the separatist PKK. However, unlike in the 1990s and despite the claims of many in the Islamist media, rather than being a product of elements in the Turkish security apparatus, Ergenekon appears to have been born of frustration at the perceived failure of the same forces to confront the AKP; prompting a handful of remnants from the Susurluk era to try to take matters into their own hands.

The presence in the Ergenekon gang of so many figures familiar from Susurluk has underlined the extent to which the majority of those responsible for the darkest chapter in what remains the largely untold story of Turkey’s war against the PKK have escaped judicial retribution. For several years, it appeared as if Agar would avoid ever having to appear in court. It was only when he failed to retain his seat in the general elections of July 22, 2007, that he lost his parliamentary immunity and became vulnerable to prosecution. No politicians have yet been convicted for their role in the Susurluk scandal. But it is unlikely that all were unaware of what was being done with the extra-budgetary funds and clandestinely acquired weapons that they channeled to the covert operations. It would be ironic if Agar now faces the prospect of a prison sentence when it was Tansu Ciller, the former DYP leader and prime minister from 1993 to 1995, who, on hearing of Catli’s death, declared that those who killed for their country were as deserving of praise as those who died for it.

Apart from the human cost of the dirty war of the 1990s, perhaps the most pernicious legacy of Susurluk is the damage it has done to the Turkish people’s trust in their leaders. Before a careless truck driver proved otherwise, many would have dismissed as absurd the suggestion that their government could be recruiting Mafia hitmen, running death squads and releasing convicted terrorists to conduct extrajudicial executions. But, in a country which is always awash with improbable conspiracy theories, it is now so much more difficult to dismiss even the most outlandish; after all, at least one of them is known to have been true.

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Notes

1. Fikri Saglar and Emin Ozgonul, *Kod Adi Susurluk*, Boyut Kitaplari, 1998.
2. For example: Timur Sahin and Ugur Balik, *Itirafci: Bir JITEM’ci Anlatti*, Aram Yayıncılık, 2004.