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## Is Iran's Mujahideen-e-Khalq a Threat to the Islamist Regime?

By Chris Zambelis

The People's Mujahideen of Iran (PMOI), more commonly known as the Mujahideen-e-Khalq ("people's mujahideen"; MEK), is one of the most organized and controversial Iranian opposition groups. Although it maintains an armed wing—known as the National Liberation Army (NLA)—and numerous front organizations, it derives its greatest strength from the slick lobbying and propaganda machine it operates in the United States and Europe. The MEK also boasts extensive support within U.S. government and policy circles, including many of the most vocal advocates of a U.S. invasion of Iran [1].

The MEK remains on the list of banned terrorist organizations in the United States and European Union (EU). Both parties have indicated no intention of reconsidering their positions. The May 7 decision by the United Kingdom's Court of Appeal to overrule the British government's inclusion of the MEK on its list of banned terrorist organizations, however, may pave the way for both the United States and EU to reassess their positions regarding the MEK down the line. Given the MEK's history of violence and its willingness to act as a proxy force against Iran, such a move would represent a major escalation in hostilities between the United States and Iran, with consequences in Iraq and beyond.

### Ideology

The MEK is an obscure organization with a long history of violence and opposition activities. It emerged in the 1960s, composed of college students and

leftist intellectuals loyal to Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq; the popular leftist nationalist prime minister was deposed by a U.S.- and U.K.-backed coup in 1953 that restored Mohammad Reza Shah to power. Its revolutionary zeal combined aspects of Marxist and Islamist ideologies in pursuit of its goal to overthrow the U.S.-backed shah through armed resistance and terrorism. Its primary targets in the 1970s included ranking officials and symbols of the shah's regime, both within and outside of Iran. The regime responded in kind with brutal repression through SAVAK, the shah's notorious domestic intelligence apparatus. Thousands of members and associates of MEK were killed, tortured and jailed during this period. Consequently, like many Iranians at the time, the MEK viewed the Islamist opposition as a positive force for change. The MEK supported the revolutionary forces and the 1979 seizure of the U.S. Embassy and subsequent hostage crisis led by student activists in Tehran. The group's unique brand of Marxism and Islamism, however, would bring it into conflict with the rigid Shiite Islamism espoused by the post-revolutionary government. The failure of a June 1981 coup attempt intended to oust Ayatollah Khomeini elicited a massive crackdown by the regime against the MEK, forcing the group's leaders and thousands of members into exile in Europe. When France ousted operational elements of the group in 1986, many made their way to Iraq, where they joined Saddam Hussein's war effort against Iran and enjoyed a safe haven [2].

Massoud and Maryam Rajavi, a charismatic husband and wife team that fled into exile in Europe, lead the MEK. From her base in France, Maryam Rajavi currently holds the position of "President-Elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)" after her husband's disappearance sometime in 2003. He is presumed to be in hiding [3]. The Rajavis enjoy a fanatical cult-like following among MEK members and supporters [4]. The group's cult-like character was displayed when 16 followers of the Rajavis staged dramatic public acts of self-immolation over a period of three days in June 2003 across major European and Canadian cities. The protests followed the arrest of Maryam Rajavi and 160 of her followers after a French court ruled that the MEK and its numerous front groups constituted a terrorist organization. According to former members of the group, the MEK's "human torches" are a testament to the stranglehold the Rajavis have over their followers and the extent to which members are brainwashed and manipulated psychologically into blindly following them. The MEK is reported to maintain a list of volunteers ready and willing to perform acts of self-immolation on

the orders of the leadership [5]. Like other cults, MEK members are often separated from their children and families and discouraged from maintaining contact with individuals outside of the group. Former members who defected from the MEK describe the Rajavis as autocrats who demand unquestioned loyalty from their followers (pars-iran.com, January 30, 2006).

Women make up a significant contingent of the MEK's ranks, especially in its armed wing. In addition to its Marxist and Islamist pedigrees, the rise of the Rajavis to the group's leadership led to the introduction of feminist ideologies into the group's discourse. This aspect of the MEK's ideology indicates their attempt to tap into local grievances and international sympathy regarding the position of women in the Islamic Republic [6]. In this regard, the MEK presents itself as a liberal and democratic alternative to the rigid brand of Islamism espoused by the ruling clerics, an image it has cultivated in U.S. and Western policy circles to great effect [7]. The U.K. court based its ruling on the premise that the MEK has renounced violence and terrorism, and that it currently maintains no operational capability to execute future acts of violence.

### Violence and Terrorism

The MEK's long history of violence and terrorism includes the abduction and assassination of ranking Iranian political and military officials under the shah in the 1970s, as well as attacks against the clerical establishment throughout the 1980s. Foreign-based MEK operatives also targeted Iranian embassies abroad in a series of attacks. MEK militants struck diplomatic officials and foreign business interests in Iran under both the shah and the Islamists in an effort to undermine investor confidence and regime stability. Furthermore, the MEK targeted and killed Americans living and working in Iran in the 1970s, namely U.S. military and civilian contractors working on defense-related projects in Tehran (mkowatch.com). The group has never been known to target civilians directly, though its use of tactics such as mortar barrages and ambushes in busy areas have often resulted in civilian casualties.

In addition, the MEK's repertoire of operations includes suicide bombings, airline hijackings, ambushes, cross-border raids, RPG attacks, and artillery and tank barrages. Saddam Hussein exploited the MEK's fervor during the Iran-Iraq war. In addition to providing the group with a sanctuary on Iraqi soil, Saddam supplied the MEK with weapons, tanks and armored vehicles,

logistical support, and training at the group's Camp Ashraf in Diyala Province near the Iranian border and other camps across Iraqi territory. In a sign of the group's appreciation for Saddam's generous hospitality and largesse, the MEK cooperated with Iraqi security forces in the brutal repression of uprisings led by Shiite Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen in 1991 [8]. MEK members also served alongside Iraq's internal security forces and assisted in rooting out domestic opponents of the regime and other threats to Baathist rule.

Despite its history of high-profile attacks, the MEK never posed a serious threat to the Iranian regime. The group never enjoyed popular domestic support, despite its claims to the contrary. Many Iranians actively oppose the clerical regime and sympathize with segments of the opposition. At the same time, most Iranians also regard the MEK as traitorous for joining the Iraqi war effort against Iran and resent its use of violence and terrorism against Iranians at home and abroad (mkowatch.com).

Approximately 3,500 members of the MEK remain in Camp Ashraf. Following an agreement with U.S.-led Coalition forces, MEK units allowed Coalition forces to disarm the group. Decommissioned MEK units are currently under surveillance in Camp Ashraf. Their future status, however, remains a point of controversy. Despite their demobilization, Iran believes that the United States is holding on to the group as leverage in any future confrontation with the Islamic Republic (see *Terrorism Monitor*, February 9, 2006).

#### Political Activism

Although it has been disarmed, the MEK retains the capacity to remobilize, especially if it gains a state sponsor. Nevertheless, it is the MEK's lobbying and propaganda machine in the United States and Europe that enables it to remain a relevant force in Middle East politics and a key factor in U.S.-Iranian tensions. The MEK's political activism falls under the auspices of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI)—an MEK political front organization that also serves as an umbrella movement representing various Iranian dissident groups. These efforts persist despite the fact that U.S. authorities ordered NCRI offices in Washington to shut down in 2003 (*New York Observer*, June 5, 2007).

From Iran's perspective, the U.S. position on MEK is both ambiguous and at times hypocritical. On the one hand, the MEK remains on the U.S. State Department's list of banned terrorist organizations, yet the group

remains on Iraqi soil, albeit disarmed and under surveillance by Coalition forces. The MEK has cultivated a loyal following among an outspoken network of U.S. politicians, former and active government officials, members of the defense establishment, journalists and academics advocating violent regime change in Tehran. The MEK is even credited in some of these circles for disclosing aspects of the Iranian nuclear program [9]. At the same time, it is accused of fabricating intelligence information to boost its profile in the United States (*Asia Times*, March 4). With their call for regime change in Iran and pleas for international support, media-savvy MEK representatives based in the United States appear regularly on the cable news show circuit and other forums in Washington, DC in a campaign reminiscent of the one led by Ahmed Chalabi and the network of Iraqi exiles who mustered American support for the Iraq war [10]. The MEK has also gained legitimacy as a liberal and democratic force for positive change in Iran, despite evidence to the contrary.

#### Conclusion

The MEK will continue to capitalize on the ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran by enlisting the support of elements in Washington seeking a bargaining chip against Tehran. It is important, however, to see this bizarre organization for what it is; that is, to see through the façade of liberalism, democracy and human rights that it purports to represent through its propaganda. The well-documented experiences of scores of former MEK members are reason enough to consider this group and any of its claims with a healthy dose of skepticism.

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#### Notes

1. See "U.S. Policy Options for Iran," prepared by the Iran Policy Committee (IPC), February 10, 2005 at [www.nci.org/05nci/02/IranPolicyCommittee.pdf](http://www.nci.org/05nci/02/IranPolicyCommittee.pdf).

2. For a historical narrative of the MEK's formative years, see Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). For an insider's

perspective on the history of the MEK from a former member, see the website of Massoud Khodabandeh at [www.khodabandeh.org/](http://www.khodabandeh.org/).

3. See the official website of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) at [www.ncr-iran.org/](http://www.ncr-iran.org/) and the official website of Maryam Rajavi at [www.maryam-rajavi.com/](http://www.maryam-rajavi.com/).

4. See “Cult of the Chameleon,” an al-Jazeera documentary on the MEK (broadcast October 17, 2007) at [www.iran-interlink.org/?mod=view&id=3384](http://www.iran-interlink.org/?mod=view&id=3384). For an insider’s perspective on the cult-like character of the MEK, see the website of the Dissociated Members of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran at [pars-iran.com](http://pars-iran.com).

5. For an overview of the events of 2003, including graphic photographs of the acts of self-immolation, see “MKO Human Torches” at [www.mojahedin.ws/art\\_pdfs/MKO-HUMAN-TORCHES.pdf](http://www.mojahedin.ws/art_pdfs/MKO-HUMAN-TORCHES.pdf).

6. For an overview of the MEK’s position on women, see Shahin Torabi, “Women in the Cult of Mojahdin,” March 5, 2003 at [mojahedin.ws/article/show\\_en.php?id=653](http://mojahedin.ws/article/show_en.php?id=653) and Sattar Orangi, “The Strives [*sic*] for the Freedom of Women,” March 13, 2008 at [mojahedin.ws/news/text\\_news\\_en.php?id=1601](http://mojahedin.ws/news/text_news_en.php?id=1601).

7. A. Ashfar, “The Positive Force of Terrorism,” October 10, 2006 at [mojahedin.ws/news/text\\_news\\_en.php?id=842](http://mojahedin.ws/news/text_news_en.php?id=842).

8. See “MKO and Massacre of Kurd and Turkmen Iraqis,” April 19, 2006 at [pars-iran.com/en/?mod=view&id=664](http://pars-iran.com/en/?mod=view&id=664).

9. See “U.S. Policy Options for Iran,” prepared by the Iran Policy Committee (IPC), p. 7.

10. For more details on the MEK’s political activities in Washington, DC see “Ali Reza Jafarzadeh, Front Man for the MEK and NCRI in Washington,” February 2004 at [pars-iran.com/en/?mod=view&id=851](http://pars-iran.com/en/?mod=view&id=851).

## Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Return to the Afghan Insurgency

By Muhammad Tahir

The Hezb-i-Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan, or HIA), sidelined from Afghan politics since the fall of the mujahideen regime to the Taliban in the mid-1990s, has recently reemerged as an aggressive militant group, claiming responsibility for many bloody attacks against Coalition forces and the administration of President Hamid Karzai.

Led by 61-year-old Gulbuddin Hekmatyar—a charismatic engineer, former premier and mujahideen commander once favored by Washington—the HIA most recently claimed responsibility for the April 27 attack on a military parade in Kabul from which President Karzai escaped unharmed, but took the lives of three Afghan citizens, including a member of parliament (Quqnoos, May 25). The Taliban, however, has also claimed responsibility for this attack, leading some to suggest that the attack was a joint operation between the Taliban—which has a weak presence in the north—and Hekmatyar’s followers. Though an apparent attempt to kill President Karzai might appear counterproductive to proposed negotiations between Karzai’s government and Hekmatyar, these proposals, including the possibility of joining the government, have so far all come from the government side (Tolo TV, September 27, 2007). In this sense Hekmatyar’s attack may be viewed as a display of force intended to soften the government position before talks commence.

These offers of talks by the central government indicate the strengthening power of Hekmatyar. Though his name has been largely absent from the Afghan political scene over the last few years, Hekmatyar is now in a position to bargain with the government, conditioning his cooperation on the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the establishment of an interim government followed by general elections (Ariana TV, February 14, May 8; *Pakistan Observer*, May 10).

### Hekmatyar’s Political Base

Born in 1947 in the Imam Sahib district of the Kunduz province of northern Afghanistan, Hekmatyar is a Pashtun, belonging to the Kharoty faction of the Ghilzai tribe. His political career began in 1970 when he adopted a leftist ideology while a student at the engineering



faculty of Kabul University.

As a member of the leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, his first act of violence was the killing of a member of a rival wing, leading to his imprisonment in 1972. The seizure of power by Daud Khan from King Zahir in 1973 helped him to escape to Pakistan, where in 1975 he became one of the founding members of the HIA (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 21, 2006).

During that period the anti-Pakistan policies of the Kabul regime and an emerging Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan helped Hekmatyar catch the eye of the Pakistani leadership and especially the attention of its secret service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which was increasingly displeased by the efforts of the Kabul regime to turn Pakistani Pashtuns against Islamabad. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 and the agreement reached by Pakistan and the Western powers to block the further expansion of the Soviet Union brought Hekmatyar into an advantageous position, as the majority of financial support from the international community to Afghan resistance groups began flowing through him.

Hekmatyar used the Afghan refugee camps of Shamshatoo and Jalozei as recruitment bases for his group (Aina TV, April 22). In these camps, the HIA distributed rations provided by the West for Afghan refugees while also forming a social and political network that operated everything from schools to prisons.

On the other hand Hekmatyar was always accused of spending more time and resources fighting other mujahideen groups than doing battle with the common enemy, not only during the 1979-1989 Afghan resistance against Soviet occupation, but also after the fall of Najibullah Ahmadzai's communist government to the mujahideen in 1992. Hekmatyar's bombardment of the capital in 1994, for instance, is said to have resulted in the deaths of more than 25,000 civilians (Aina TV, May 23, 2007). As a result of this bloodshed, relatively modern-minded residents put up no resistance against the entrance of the fanatically religious Taliban to Kabul in 1996, which eventually led Hekmatyar's foreign supporters—such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—to turn against him, preferring to lend their weight instead to the Taliban.

Disgraced by his former allies, Hekmatyar went to Iran in 1997, sharing with its rulers a common hatred of the Taliban. But almost six years of isolation in Tehran lost

him his power base back home, as the majority of his former party members abandoned their resistance or changed sides and joined the Taliban.

The Iranians may have regarded him as a potentially useful Pashtun card to have up their sleeve, but in practice he turned out to be more of a liability. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, he was not even invited to the Bonn Conference where the foundation of the new Afghan government was being laid. In Hekmatyar's view, this left no alternative but to oppose the new government. Hekmatyar paid a high price for his opposition to the new Afghan government, as intensive pressure from the United States and the Karzai administration led the Iranian government to expel him in February 2002 and freeze his accounts. On February 19, 2003, the U.S. State Department designated him a global terrorist.

While his former allies joined the Afghan government in one form or another, Hekmatyar reportedly lives today in an unknown location in southeastern Afghanistan, somewhere close to the Pakistani border. This location in his decades-old power base has brought him some advantages, as today he is one of the last of the former mujahid leaders to refuse to join the government and who still talks about removing foreign troops from the country by force. In a recent and rare interview, Hekmatyar expanded on his demands:

We want all foreign forces to leave immediately without any condition. This is the demand of the entire Afghan nation. Naturally, if it is within their power, they will never leave Afghanistan and Iraq. They will only leave if staying becomes extremely expensive as compared to leaving. No imperial power leaves its domain willingly—they leave under compulsion. The English left the subcontinent, Africa and Asia only when they were forced to leave. What have the Americans got out of their occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq? What they wanted from the occupation was to have control of the Central Asian and Iraqi oil and to firmly establish Israel in the Middle East. Islamic renaissance shall be suppressed and al-Qaeda will be eliminated. Please tell me which of these objectives they have achieved? (CBS, May 6; Shahadat, May 19)

#### A Shifting Power Structure

The problem of dealing with Hekmatyar is the question that now dominates the local Afghan press. Despite

clear opposition by his Western allies, particularly those in Washington, Karzai is increasingly left with no other option than to engage with Hekmatyar in one way or another.

According to the local press, during the last year there have been several occasions when Karzai has offered to open talks, suggesting that present opponents of the government could take official posts such as deputy minister or head of department. Hekmatyar was not named personally for these posts, but there is little doubt that he was one of the “opponents of the government” that Karzai was referring to (Tolo TV, September 29, 2007).

President Karzai may have many reasons to soften his approach toward Hekmatyar, but one of them is surely Hekmatyar’s increasing involvement in violent activities, the most recent being the attack of April 27. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack but more than one local newspaper suggested that while the Taliban is an obvious suspect, the attack seems more the act of organized and experienced militants, most probably assisted by high-ranking Afghan officials in penetrating a supposedly secure area (*Kabul Weekly*, April 30; Tolo TV, April 27). HIA members—who, according to Deputy Speaker of Parliament Sardar Rahmanoglu, today occupy around 30 to 40 percent of government offices, from cabinet ministers to provisional and other government posts—are better placed than the Taliban to cause harm to the government or its members (Aina TV, April 22).

However this is not the only event that signals the re-empowering of HIA and Hekmatyar. An HIA spokesperson has recently claimed responsibility for many other attacks against the government and foreign troops. These include shooting down a helicopter containing foreign troops in the Laghman province (Pajwak News Agency, January 2), forcing a U.S. military helicopter to make an emergency landing after being shot in the Sarubi district of Kabul (Pajwak News Agency, January 22) and blowing up a Kabul police vehicle in March, which the spokesperson claimed took the lives of 10 soldiers (Pajwak News Agency, January 22; AIP March 8).

Hekmatyar still maintains his bases in Afghanistan and Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, such as in the crowded Shamshtoo camp in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan. There, the HIA runs madrassas, has set up bases for the governing council

of the party and publishes its weekly journal, *Tanweer*, which commonly employs jihadist slogans against the Karzai administration and foreign troops in Afghanistan (Ariana TV, December 12, 2007; *Monthly Kabul Direct*, October 2007).

From the security perspective, the timing of Hekmatyar’s re-emergence is highly critical, as today Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters are increasingly being cornered by Coalition forces. Some elements of the Taliban are disorganized and frustrated, especially after the death of commander Mullah Dadullah last year. The HIA, under the leadership of an experienced guerrilla strategist, is becoming an attractive proposition for not only the Taliban fighters, but all of those opposing the Karzai government and the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Many Taliban fighters were attached to Hekmatyar’s forces in the past in one form or another, so many are basically returning to their former leader, though the numbers involved are unclear.

On the other hand, the HIA is already well-placed within the government, being able to encircle President Karzai politically. As Hekmatyar’s former Deputy Qazi Muhammad Amin Waqad notes: “The party has two to three [Cabinet] ministers, five governors, a deputy minister and many other high ranking officials” (*Monthly Kabul Direct*, October 2007).

### Conclusion

These realities leave no alternative for President Karzai but to try to bring Hekmatyar under the umbrella of the government. If he manages this, he will also gain a measure of legitimacy and popularity among the Pashtun tribes, a popularity he currently lacks. This would then help Karzai to win the support of the religious circles of the Pashtun tribes against the Taliban (*Daily Cheragh*, June 28, 2007).

Not only does Hekmatyar not trust the government’s intentions behind the peace talks, but he places as a condition of his cooperation with the government the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan (*Hasht-e Sobh*, May 19). Due to the reality on the ground, President Karzai is unlikely to accept such a deal.

In addition, President Karzai has other serious obstacles to the appointment of Hekmatyar to the administration. Some of his government partners, such as former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and current Parliamentary Speaker Yunus Qanuni, are unlikely

to welcome such a move, given almost three decades of hostility with Hekmatyar (*Hasht-e Sobh*, May 5). Short of pursuing the military option, the government may seek the mediation of influential regional players like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia in reaching a deal with Hekmatyar (*Monthly Kabul Direct*, October 2007). With Hekmatyar having emerged as a legitimate threat, Karzai needs to act quickly if he does not wish to see the emergence of another serious security challenge to the central administration.

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## Khyber Tribal Agency: A New Hub of Islamist Militancy in Pakistan

By Imtiaz Ali

Pakistan's tribal belt has been the center of global attention for several years because of widespread speculation regarding the presence of al-Qaeda fugitives and Taliban leaders. Since the start of military operations in late 2003, violence and bloodshed has become a routine matter, particularly in the South and North Waziristan tribal agencies along the Afghan border. Besides Waziristan, Taliban militants have also developed a strong presence in the Bajaur and Mohmand agencies. Recently, however, the Khyber Tribal Agency has also been in the news—but not just for al-Qaeda or Taliban-related violence. The strategically located Khyber Agency—an erstwhile peaceful and relatively prosperous and urbanized tribal agency compared to the rest of the six mountain agencies—is inhabited by the Afridi and Shinwari tribes. It is named after the famous Khyber Pass, a vital and important route leading to Central Asia from the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent via Afghanistan. For centuries it has been the key trade route between Central Asia and South Asia. In a not too distant past, visiting the Khyber Pass was almost a must for foreign tourists, but that is no longer the case. An Islamic warlord, Mangal Bagh Afridi, now holds sway in the Khyber Agency just half an hour's drive from Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Though he denies links with the Taliban and al-Qaeda, he openly defends the Taliban's insurgency against U.S.-led Coalition forces in Afghanistan. If this Afghan jihad veteran is to be believed, he has thousands

of fighters under his command who are ready to lay down their lives on his order (*The News* [Islamabad], May 11).

### Militancy in the Shadow of Sectarianism

Unlike many troubled parts of Pakistan's tribal region, the history of militancy in the Khyber Agency is very brief. There was no organized militant group until late 2003, when a local tribesman, Haji Namdar, returned from Saudi Arabia and established an organization named *Amr bil maroof wa nahi anil munkir*, borrowing the name from the Afghan Taliban's "Suppression of Vice and Promotion of Virtue" organization. He placed a ban on music and in some places worshippers had to sign the mosque's register to verify they had offered prayers. His organization sent threatening letters to music and CD shops in Landi Kotal, a town on the main Peshawar-Torkham highway (*Dawn* [Karachi], August 15, 2007). Haji Namdar even established his own private jails with names such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib to punish those who defied his orders (BBC, August 26, 2004). He was the first to establish pirate FM radio stations in the Khyber Agency—a phenomenon which quickly gained currency in the whole region. Tribal officials issued directives for the closure of these radio stations, but these fell on deaf ears (*Dawn*, December 2, 2004). Namdar hired a firebrand religious scholar as the on-air preacher: Mufti Munir Shakir, a controversial mullah who was expelled from his hometown in the Kurram Tribal Agency due to his extreme views against Shiite Muslims. In his FM broadcasts, Mufti, as he is commonly known, rarely targeted any other religious sect with his inflammatory sermons.

The town of Bara soon became a battleground between two sectarian groups: Lashkar-e-Islam, led by Mufti Munir Shakir, and Ansar-ul-Islam, led by Afghanistan-born Pir Saif ur-Rahman. The radicalizing effect of illegal radio stations can be seen in this small Khyber Agency town where these two radical clerics, dubbed "FM Mullahs" by the local press, waged a turf war through their private stations. Both non-local Sunni clerics—Rahman an Afghan national and Shakir from the Kurram Agency—attempted to dominate the area through recruiting followers by propagating their own interpretation of Islam. Rahman was following the Barelvi Sufi tradition, while Shakir was a disciple of the more austere Deobandi form of Islam. Fierce clashes erupted in early 2006 between the rival groups in which heavy weapons were used, resulting in the killing of scores of people (*The News*, October 25, 2006). A

number of new armed sectarian groups emerged in the area due to the silence of law enforcement agencies over the sectarian strife (*The News*, December 16, 2006). In a belated response as the bloodshed between the two groups increased, authorities stepped in by beefing up security in the area and arresting some of the mullahs' supporters. After a hectic series of jirgas held by Afridi tribesmen, both radical clerics were expelled from the area in February 2006.

### The Rise of Mangal Bagh and his Lashkar-e-Islam

With the departure of two controversial radical clerics from the region there was hope that the situation would now stabilize and the mayhem would come to an end. The problem, however, persisted even after the expulsion of both leaders as the number of religious outfits continued to grow and their supporters continued kidnapping and killing members of rival groups. The Mufti group went a step further and organized Lashkar-e-Islam under the leadership of Mangal Bagh Afridi, a 35-year-old local tribesman. Known as “*amir*” (leader) among his followers, Bagh is illiterate and formerly drove a bus. His leadership provided a new momentum to Lashkar-e-Islam and it soon grew more powerful and more militant. Mangal Bagh wants the implementation of religious laws, by force if necessary. The stoning and shooting of two men and a woman on charges of alleged adultery last year in March by the Lashkar-e-Islam was a grim alarm of this worsening situation. A huge crowd assembled to watch the executions after Lashkar-e-Islam announced it through the mosque's loudspeakers (*The News*, March 16, 2007). Mangal Bagh's militants also tried to occupy land belonging to the head of their rival group in Bara, which led to fierce fighting between them and paramilitary troops which resulted in the killing of five tribesmen, including three children (*Pakistan Times*, April 24, 2007).

Since then Mangal Bagh and his Lashkar-e-Islam have run a parallel administration in the Bara subdivision. The group operates its own illegal FM radio despite the official ban as part of its effort to gain the sympathies of the local tribesmen, recruit new fighters and terrorize their opponents. The political administration has completely lost its writ in the area. Members of rival groups even accuse Lashkar-e-Islam activists of extorting money from truckers moving between Afghanistan and Pakistan (*Dawn*, May 20, 2007; *The Nation*, March 4). Mangal Bagh's rising influence can be gauged from the fact that he issues his own “code of conduct” to candidates contesting elections in the Bara subdivision

of Khyber Agency. For example, candidates were warned against holding public meetings; each candidate must use only one vehicle and candidates were not allowed to hoist flags of any political party on their cars and buildings (*Daily Times*, November 27, 2007). In a bid to expand their influence across the Khyber region, his fighters fought with Kokikhel tribesmen in Jamrud and Landikotal, which led to the recent closure of the Peshawar-Torkham highway between Pakistan and Afghanistan for four days (*The News*, April 19). This highway is a main supply route for Coalition forces in Afghanistan. After establishing his stronghold in parts of Khyber Agency, dozens of Lashkar-e-Islam activists with rockets and other heavy weapons attacked Shaikhan village in the suburbs of Peshawar, killing 10 people (*The News*, March 4). Moving a step forward, Mangal Bagh openly offered his services to the people of Peshawar and other settled parts of the NWFP by saying: “I stand by the oppressed against the oppressors. Irrespective of where anyone or both the opponents hail from, I'll help those subjugated, if I can” (*The News*, April 21).

### The Taliban Factor

Unlike the situation prevailing in the other tribal agencies, Tehrek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)—the umbrella group of Taliban factions in various parts of the Tribal belt and NWFP led by militant commander Baitullah Mahsud—has not yet established a strong presence in the Khyber Agency. Even Mangal Bagh has clearly denied any kind of link with the Taliban despite Baitullah Mahsud's insistence that he join the TTP (*The News*, April 21). Similarly, Haji Namdar—founder of the *Amr bil maroof wa nahi anil munkir*—is said to have betrayed the Taliban for the handsome sum of \$150,000 (*Asia Times*, April 26). However, the response for this betrayal was swift when Namdar narrowly survived a suicide bombing. Namdar blamed Baitullah Mahsud and his group for the attack, something quickly admitted to by the Hakimullah group—a local faction loyal to Baitullah—which took responsibility for the bombing. This group is led by one of Mahsud's close aides, Hakimullah Mahsud.

Many believe that the Taliban in the Khyber Agency are getting stronger and stronger. Hakimullah's claim of responsibility for the suicide attack is used as evidence for this growth by those opposed to the Taliban (*Daily Times* [Lahore], May 3). A month ago, more than 1,000 militants with heavy weapons mounted on trucks besieged a village in Mohmand agency and started house-to-house searches for alleged criminals which



led to fierce fighting, killing 13 people. It is said that many of the Taliban from Khyber Agency took part in the operation against what they called “anti-social elements” (*Dawn*, April 28). Similarly, militants seem to have adopted a new policy of kidnapping members of key government and international organizations. In doing so, they exert great pressure on the government to force acceptance of their demands—usually an exchange of prisoners. It seems that militants have chosen the Khyber Agency for most of the kidnappings because of its strategic road link with Afghanistan. Recently, Pakistan’s ambassador to Afghanistan, Tariq Azizuddin, was kidnapped from the Khyber Agency while on his way to Afghanistan. Similarly, paramilitary forces foiled an attempt to kidnap two World Food Program officials last month (*Daily Times*, April 23).

### Conclusion

At a time when local militants of the Pakistan Taliban are making a strong comeback after months of ceasefire by staging new attacks and even suicide attempts against security forces, the Khyber Agency now poses a unique challenge to the government of Pakistan quite apart from what is already happening in the troubled spots of South and North Waziristan. As most parts of the tribal region have witnessed the rising tide of Talibanization since 9/11, the Khyber Agency has tried to avoid such a reality despite its strategic importance and its border with Afghanistan’s Nangargar province. However, some recent events seem to have confirmed the government’s worst fears. This mountain-ringed tribal agency with a vital road link connecting Pakistan with Afghanistan has become an increasingly brazen hub of Islamist militancy. The government exists in name only and has little control over what is happening there. Those who believe that Pakistan may be playing a double game with the West in the war on terror often cite as evidence Pakistan’s failure to contain the formation of dangerous groups like Mangal Bagh’s Lashkar-e-Islam, which has become a symbol of terror and horror not only in the Khyber agency but also in Peshawar and other settled parts of the NWFP (*The Nation* [Lahore], May 23). When considering the grim situation in the Khyber Agency, it is not difficult to believe that the rising influence of Lashkar-e-Islam and other such organizations represents only the opening moves of the militants in what may prove to be a very long struggle for dominance.

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## Turkey Launches Economic Offensive against PKK Recruitment

By Gareth Jenkins

On May 27, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced over \$15.5 billion in additional state funding to complete the Southeast Anatolian Project (GAP), a huge irrigation and hydroelectric scheme in nine predominantly Kurdish provinces in southeastern Turkey. Speaking in Diyarbakir, the largest city in the region, Erdogan promised that the completion of GAP would create nearly four million new jobs in what has long been the most impoverished and underdeveloped area of the country—and the main recruiting ground for militant organizations such as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). “This is a social restoration project,” declared Erdogan. “This initiative will restrict the terrorist organization’s field for exploitation” (*Milliyet*, May 28).

GAP was first launched in the early 1980s and was originally scheduled to be completed by 2010 at a total cost of \$32 billion. At its heart lies a system of 22 dams, 19 hydraulic power plants, and the irrigation of 17,000 square kilometers (approximately 6,500 square miles) of land (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 13). However, a shortage of funds has meant that GAP is currently still only two-thirds complete. Under the “GAP Action Plan” announced by Erdogan on May 27, the entire project is now scheduled to be finished by 2012. In addition to more funding for infrastructure and irrigation, Erdogan also pledged an additional \$850 million for education in the GAP region and a further \$470 million for healthcare (GAP website, [www.gap.gov.tr](http://www.gap.gov.tr)).

### A Turning Point?

Newspapers sympathetic to Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) predictably hailed the GAP Action Plan as a “historic turning point” (*Today’s Zaman*, May 28). Others were less convinced. Several noted that the AKP is already looking ahead to the local elections in March 2009. Erdogan has told party workers that their

main target is to wrest control of the municipalities in southeastern Turkey from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). “Election investment” headlined the acerbically anti-AKP daily *Cumhuriyet* (May 28). Perhaps significantly, in addition to announcing the GAP Action Plan, Erdogan also took the opportunity to lambast the DTP-controlled Diyarbakir municipality.

There are serious doubts as to whether Erdogan’s government has the money to fulfill its promises. The Action Plan estimates completing the project by 2012 will require an extra \$15.5 billion in addition to the \$5.8 billion already allocated to GAP under existing state investment plans for 2008-2012 (GAP website, [www.gap.gov.tr](http://www.gap.gov.tr)). Yet the Turkish economy was already beginning to slow even before the international credit crunch triggered by the collapse of the U.S. sub-prime market. The AKP has also been badly shaken by the repercussions of its heavy-handed attempts to lift the headscarf ban in Turkish universities (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 11) and the March 14 application to the Turkish Constitutional Court for the party to be closed down (see *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 17). In recent weeks there have been increasing signs that the AKP is prepared to try to boost its popularity by relaxing the fiscal discipline that has characterized its economic policies since it first came to power in November 2002. On the same day that Erdogan announced the GAP Action Plan, the Turkish Industrialists’ and Businesspersons’ Association (TUSIAD) publicly warned the AKP government of the dangers of its increasingly populist economic policies (*Dunya*, May 28; *Milliyet*, May 28). At a time when the budget deficit is already beginning to grow, it is hard to see how the AKP can find an additional \$15.5 billion for the GAP Action Plan without jeopardizing the medium-term prospects for the country’s economy as a whole.

### Undercutting Political Militancy

Nevertheless, even if it is not the only factor, Erdogan is probably right to assert that there is a relationship between the social and economic underdevelopment of southeastern Turkey and political militancy. Turkey’s predominantly Kurdish provinces lag far behind the rest of the country in every socioeconomic indicator. Per capita income in the poorest provinces of the GAP region, such as Hakkari, is estimated to be approximately one-tenth of the levels in the relatively prosperous provinces in western Turkey. According to official figures from the Turkish Statistical Institute, in 2006 there were 143 hospital beds for every 100,000 people in the GAP

region, compared with 301 in the Aegean region in western Turkey ([www.turkstat.gov.tr](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr)).

Similarly, in 2007, there was one teacher for every 30.1 school students in the GAP region, compared with 19.2 in the Aegean region ([www.turkstat.gov.tr](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr)). In some elementary schools in southeastern Turkey it is not unusual for there to be 90-100 students in a class. In his speech in Diyarbakir on May 27, Erdogan promised that additional state investment would reduce the maximum number of students to 48 (*Today’s Zaman*, May 28). However, low income levels mean that many students in the GAP region do not even complete the compulsory eight years of elementary education, either not attending school at all or abandoning their studies early to look for work. Even then, work can be hard to find. Unemployment levels are considerably higher than in the rest of the country. In 2006, the latest period for which official figures are available, the labor force participation rate in the GAP region stood at just 34.3 percent, compared with a still low 48.0 percent in Turkey as a whole ([www.turkstat.gov.tr](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr)). Southeastern Anatolia also has the highest fertility rate in Turkey, with the result that young people account for a large share of the unemployed throughout the region.

It is unlikely to be a coincidence that both the PKK and radical Turkish Islamist organizations have traditionally primarily recruited poor and uneducated youths who either live in eastern Anatolia or have recently migrated to the metropolises of western Turkey in search of work.

“Some of the leaders of the terrorist organizations come from better off families or have an education,” a member of the security forces involved in counter-terrorism told Jamestown. “But the rank and file are nearly all poor and uneducated. It is not that they are stupid, just more naïve, which makes it much easier to persuade them to risk their lives or blow themselves up with a bomb.”

### Socioeconomic Disparity

Although it is unclear how representative the samples are, a survey by the Turkish police of 262 captured members of the PKK reinforces the impression that poorly educated youths are particularly susceptible to recruitment by the organization. Only 11 percent of those questioned had a university education, compared with 16 percent who had graduated from high school and 13 percent who had completed middle school. A total of 39 percent had only an elementary school

education, while 12 percent were literate but had not completed elementary school and 9 percent did not even know how to read and write (Turkish police website, [www.egm.gov.tr](http://www.egm.gov.tr)).

Many of the youths who join the PKK also regard the high levels of unemployment and limited access to public services in southeastern Turkey as being indicative of the attitude of the central government toward the country's Kurds. "They look down on us, try to suppress our culture and kill us if we raise our voices," one young PKK militant told Jamestown. "They don't build schools or hospitals in Kurdish areas or create jobs, even when they promise to do so. They don't allow us to have a future."

### Conclusion

There is no question that the AKP government has done more than any of its predecessors to reach out to the country's Kurds, both in its rhetoric and with practical measures, such as easing some of the limitations on the expression of a Kurdish identity. But many restrictions still remain. Few of those listening to Erdogan's speech in Diyarbakir on May 27 are likely to have been convinced by his declaration that Turks and Kurds "are all free and equal citizens of the same republic" (*Radikal*, May 28).

Perhaps more critically, since it came to power in November 2002, the AKP has failed either to rectify the disparity in socioeconomic conditions between southeastern Anatolia and the west of the country or to reduce the alienation felt by many Kurdish youths. Despite the apparently heavy losses suffered by the PKK in clashes with the Turkish security forces [1], there is still no indication of a decline in volunteers wishing to join the organization.

Even if the AKP is able to find the money to deliver the promises in the GAP Action Plan and create jobs and improve living standards, there are those who worry that—particularly when it comes to militant Kurdish nationalism—it is all too little, too late. "For years, the government deliberately kept the southeast underdeveloped because it thought the Kurds would be easier to control if they were poor and uneducated," a retired high-ranking military official told Jamestown. "It was a mistake and we are paying the price with terrorists like the PKK. But even if we destroy the PKK, are the people there going to forget how they have been treated for decades?"

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### Notes

1. The Turkish military claims to have killed around 650 PKK militants in 2007 and another 500 since the beginning of 2008 (Turkish armed forces website, [www.tsk.gov.tr](http://www.tsk.gov.tr)). These numbers need to be treated with caution as, if true, they would mean that nearly one-third of the PKK's total fighting strength has been killed in the last 17 months.