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## Going to “Plan B”: Negotiations with Taliban May Shape a New Afghanistan

By Chris Zambelis

Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s September announcement that he had sought the support of Saudi Arabia and other key actors to engage Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar with the intent of establishing a formal dialogue to end the violence in Afghanistan appears to mark a major shift in Kabul’s position on the Taliban. Karzai’s efforts have culminated in Saudi-mediated peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban in Mecca in late September and a three-way meeting between Karzai, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari. A second round of talks is just getting underway in Saudi Arabia (*Daily Times* [Lahore], November 16; *Al-Arabiya*, November 23). Karzai later admitted that he had been seeking the assistance of Saudi Arabia—one of only three countries to have maintained diplomatic relations with the Taliban prior to the 9/11 attacks - to help broker formal talks with the Taliban for over two years.<sup>1</sup> In a November 16 statement, the Afghan president upped the ante by issuing an offer of protection for Omar and even the prospect of Taliban representation in his government in exchange for a peace deal (*Dar al-Hayat*, November 20; Pakistan News.net, November 16). To refute allegations from his detractors who see him as an American agent with little control of his own country, Karzai added that those in the international

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also maintained diplomatic relations with the Taliban prior to the September 11, 2001 attacks.



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community who disapprove of his efforts to engage the Taliban can either remove him from power or leave Afghanistan (*Frontier Post* [Peshawar], November 17; *Daily Times*, November 19).

Despite Karazi's diplomatic overtures, the U.S. offer of \$10 million for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of the fugitive Taliban leader, a bounty typically reserved for ranking members of al-Qaeda, still stands.<sup>2</sup> Revered by his loyalists as the Amir al-Muminin (Commander of the Faithful), the head of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan – the official name of Taliban-led Afghanistan – remains an enigmatic and reclusive figure. Omar is widely regarded as the man responsible for cementing the alliance between Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Despite stark differences between the groups, the pact between Omar and bin Laden provided al-Qaeda with a crucial safe haven in Afghanistan; al-Qaeda reciprocated by providing the Taliban with financial and logistical support. As an ethnic Pashtun in a Pashtun-dominated movement, Omar's application of Pashtunwali (The Way of the Pashtuns) – a traditional tribal code that shapes many aspects of Pashtun society in Afghanistan and Pakistan and places a premium on hospitality and the protection of guests – is also likely behind the Taliban's commitment to ensuring the safety of bin Laden and other ranking members of al-Qaeda.<sup>3</sup>

#### Shifting Sands in Washington

Shortly after September 11, the United States mobilized support for invading Afghanistan to capture or kill bin Laden and members of al-Qaeda, and to topple the Taliban regime that had provided them with the sanctuary they required to attack the United States. During his September 20, 2001, address to a joint session of Congress and the American public, President George W. Bush admonished the Taliban for its role in aiding and abetting al-Qaeda. He also demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden, his lieutenants, and foot soldiers in Afghanistan or face serious consequences.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Details regarding the U.S. Government's reward offer for information leading to the arrest or conviction of Mullah Muhammad Omar are available at <http://www.rewardsforjustice.net/index.cfm?page=MullahOmar&language=english>.

<sup>3</sup> For insights into the central role of hospitality in Pashtunwali customs in Afghanistan and Pakistan and how they influence social relationships and politics, see Frederik Barth, *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> See Official Transcript of President George W.

When the Taliban refused to heed Bush's orders, the United States made it clear that it would target the Taliban alongside al-Qaeda, essentially lumping both groups together as a unified terrorist monolith requiring complete destruction.

While the official U.S. position on the Taliban remains unchanged, a number of statements over the last few months by Bush Administration officials, including Defense Secretary Robert Gates and General David Petraeus, indicate that Washington is recalibrating its strategy to deal with the Taliban. General Petraeus's experience in engaging Iraqi insurgents through the establishment of the Sahwat (Awakening) Movement has likely shaped his thinking on the realities of stabilizing Afghanistan. Furthermore, Secretary Gates went so far as to say that the United States is prepared to reconcile with the Taliban in order to achieve peace, but that any reconciliation will not include al-Qaeda (al-Jazeera, October 10). Prominent British politicians and military figures have floated similar ideas in recent months. Brigadier Mark Carleton-Smith, a British commander in Afghanistan, stated the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily and a political deal of some sort is necessary to end the war (*The Times* [London], October 5). A number of prominent researchers also suggest that compromise with the Taliban is not only possible but would be beneficial to promoting peace and stability in the region.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the State Department spokesman criticized Karzai's proposal to meet with Omar and ranking Taliban officials, signaling a possible rift between Kabul and Washington (McClatchy Newspapers, November 17). However, given Karzai's reliance on the United States, it is inconceivable that he would initiate such a bold effort on an issue as politically sensitive as engaging the Taliban in peace talks without the tacit consent and approval of Washington and its allies in the region. Although the prospect of formal talks between Omar and Kabul are highly unlikely, it is possible that Karzai's overtures were aimed at other figures within the Taliban in an effort to sow divisions within the movement (McClatchy Newspapers, November 17).

Bush's September 20, 2001 Speech to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Barnett R. Rubin and Ahmed Rashid, "From Great Game to Grand Bargain: Ending Chaos in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *Foreign Affairs*, 87(6), November/December 2008.

Despite the ultraconservative Sunni fundamentalist brand of Islam practiced by the Taliban, Washington is recognizing that major differences separate the Taliban and al-Qaeda, a reality not lost on regional observers with an intimate knowledge of local politics, such as Owais Ghani, governor of Pakistan's North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and a vocal advocate for engaging the Taliban (*The News International* [Islamabad], October 10). According to Ghani, unlike al-Qaeda, which represents a violent transnational movement with a global agenda and reach, the Taliban is essentially a regional movement driven by narrow local objectives (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, [Cairo] July 17-23). The Taliban is also a highly factionalized and fractured movement divided by tribe, region, town, and village, leaving it vulnerable to internal squabbles and rivalries. The stark differences between al-Qaeda and the Taliban suggest that factions within the Taliban - the so called "moderate Taliban" - may be amenable to compromise with Kabul over their future role in Afghanistan and abandoning its alliance with al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup>

While the debate in Kabul over negotiations with Omar gains momentum, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid denied reports that the Taliban participated in the Saudi-mediated peace talks. He also said that anyone acting on behalf of the Taliban in these efforts was acting without the consent of Omar. He also stated that the Taliban will not consider entering into talks until the 70,000-strong contingent of foreign troops leaves Afghanistan: "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will continue its jihad until foreign forces are out of Afghanistan and Afghanistan is independent" (*Al-Jazeera*, November 17). Meanwhile, in what appears to be an attempt to undermine Kabul's diplomatic overtures, the Taliban issued a videotaped statement on November 17 claiming responsibility for an attack that claimed the lives of 10 French soldiers earlier this year and threatening attacks against Paris unless France withdraws its forces from Afghanistan (*Al-Arabiya*, November 17; see also *Terrorism Focus*, September 2). The Taliban's threat against Paris is believed to represent the first time that the group has directly threatened a target in the West.

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6 Haroun Mir, "The Benefits of Negotiating with Moderate Taliban Leaders," *CACI Analyst* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute), April 18, 2007.

## Hard Realities and Geopolitics

There are indications that the U.S. experience in Afghanistan, coupled with a confluence of other geopolitical factors, is prompting U.S. foreign policy planners to reevaluate their strategy to combat the Taliban and include the possibility of initiating a dialogue.

Although a number of ranking al-Qaeda figures have been captured or killed since 9/11 and numerous attacks against the United States and U.S. interests abroad have been thwarted, the Bush Administration has failed to capture or kill bin Laden and al-Qaeda second-in-command Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Barring a dramatic turn of events prior to the inauguration of President-elect Barack Obama on January 20, 2009, the departing Bush Administration's inability to capture or kill al-Qaeda's two most important figureheads will not be lost on al-Qaeda and its followers. Moreover, in the face of repeated attacks and amid losses of key personnel, al-Qaeda continues to demonstrate an impressive capability to replenish its diminishing ranks, even among the group's cadre of operational leaders and ideologues. In this regard, many observers believe that the decision to invade and occupy Iraq distracted the United States from confronting al-Qaeda. The apparent efforts by the Bush Administration to engage elements of the Taliban should also be seen as a last push to isolate al-Qaeda in the hope of capturing or killing the fugitive al-Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan (or Pakistan) prior to departing office.

In another ominous trend, the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Afghan forces are contending with an increasingly lethal Taliban insurgency that is proving more resilient by the day. The Taliban controls large swaths of Afghan territory, and in many cases has been able to provide order and security in places where NATO is absent. According to a still-classified October 2008 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan, the country is in "a downward spiral" and wracked by worsening violence, terrorism, corruption, political instability, and a vibrant opium trade (*New York Times*, October 8). There is little doubt that the failure to quell the Taliban-led insurgency has allowed al-Qaeda to remain a relevant and viable force. The violence and instability in Afghanistan has also forced the United States to commit valuable resources to stabilizing Afghanistan instead of pursuing al-Qaeda, a mission that is becoming increasingly difficult as NATO allies reconsider their role in the region in the face of

growing domestic opposition at home over extended troop deployments. There are also strong indications that al-Qaeda's continued presence in the region is influencing the way the Taliban fight their battles. From a tactical standpoint, the widespread use of suicide bombings in Afghanistan and in neighboring Pakistan against military and civilian targets, a relatively new phenomenon in both theaters, illustrates the extent to which al-Qaeda influences the Taliban on the battlefield (see *Terrorism Focus*, April 17, 2007).

The escalating insurgency in Afghanistan has also led to the emergence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Movement of the Taliban in Pakistan), an umbrella group of Pashtun tribal militias in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) who look to the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan as a model.<sup>7</sup> The rise of the so-called Pakistan Taliban in the tribal areas, a trend often referred to as the "Talibanization" of Pakistan, presents a new series of challenges and dangers. The spread of violence and instability across Pakistan's tribal areas and increasingly into major cities threatens to undermine stability in Washington's nuclear-armed ally. Widespread public outcries against U.S. raids on Pakistani soil targeting suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban elements are also raising tensions between Washington and Islamabad to dangerous levels. While the country is teetering on the brink of disintegration, Pakistan's tribal areas continue to serve as a safe haven for al-Qaeda leaders, including possibly bin Laden and Zawahiri. The tribal areas also provide al-Qaeda with a base to plot future attacks, representing a unique threat in their own right. Pakistani tribal areas have even become a magnet for foreign-born radical volunteers from Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia (*The Nation* [Pakistan], October 18; *The Daily Times* [Lahore], April 28). At this point, there is no question that the war in Afghanistan has spread into Pakistan proper.

While violence has subsided in Iraq in recent months, the United States is mired in delicate negotiations over its future role in the country. Meanwhile, Iraqi insurgents and militias remain heavily armed and mobilized. On the domestic front, the financial crisis and economic issues have preoccupied the Bush Administration in its waning months. While Afghanistan and foreign policy remain vital priorities, Washington's turn inward is making itself felt in Afghanistan. Serious discussions regarding the prospect of peace talks with the Taliban would have been unheard of a few years ago. The reality on the

ground suggests that an attempt to engage elements of the Taliban in negotiations is not out of the question and may in fact be necessary.

#### Public Reactions

Indications of a possible shift in U.S. strategy toward the Taliban have elicited heated debates in the region. Iran has expressed unease over the prospect of U.S. negotiations with the Taliban. As a longtime rival of the Taliban, Iran has a history of cooperating closely with the United States in Afghanistan, especially after 9/11. At the same time, Iran is wary of the robust presence of U.S. military forces on its western and eastern flanks in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively. Iran understands that while the U.S. remains mired in the violence and instability in Afghanistan (and Iraq), it is unlikely to turn its sights on Tehran. Iran is also concerned about the role of Saudi Arabia - an Iranian rival and staunch U.S. ally - in laying the groundwork for talks that may provide some legitimacy for the Taliban. The prospect of the disintegration of Pakistan also concerns Iran. At the very least, Iran is worried that it will not have an opportunity to help shape a peace settlement in Afghanistan. According to one Iranian assessment, the apparent decision by the U.S. to explore the idea of negotiations stems from popular Afghan opposition to the U.S.-led NATO presence in the region and not resistance by the Taliban. The report also claims that the growing number of Afghan civilian casualties incurred in NATO operations has made the foreign presence in the country untenable (IRNA, October 7). The Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, Dr. Ali Larijani, also criticized the idea of negotiating with the Taliban. Larijani questioned the wisdom of reaching an agreement with "terrorists" at this stage, given that the United States was so quick to launch wars in the name of fighting terrorism (*Voice of the Islamic Republic*, October 8).

#### Conclusion

The debate over whether the United States will engage the Taliban, directly or through a mediator such as Riyadh or Kabul, will continue to draw considerable attention in the months ahead. By all accounts, the departing Bush Administration may be laying the groundwork for a substantial policy shift on Afghanistan by the incoming Obama administration that will feature a framework for initiating talks. Considering President-elect Obama's commitment to focusing on Afghanistan and considering also the realities on the ground and at home, Washington will continue to explore its

7 Graham Usher, "The Pakistan Taliban," Middle East Report Online, February 13, 2007.

options. At the same time, Taliban elements opposed to negotiations are likely to escalate their campaign of violence with the help of al-Qaeda in both Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort to undermine any peace talks.

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## India's Troubled Northeast Region: The Resurgence of Ethno-Islamist Terrorism

By Animesh Roul

The security situation in India's troubled northeast region plumbed new depths in October when two major terror incidents struck Manipur and Assam states. On October 21, nearly 17 people were killed in Imphal and over 30 injured in a powerful bomb blast triggered by suspected militants of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK). The militants were believed to be targeting government security forces (*The Sangai Express*, October 22). A week later, on October 30, neighboring Assam witnessed serial explosions that killed nearly 84 people and left scores of wounded (*Assam Tribune*, November 3). Suspicion in these attacks focused on the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the Bangladesh based Harkat ul-Jihad Islami (HuJI) combine. The attacks consisted of ten low and high intensity bomb blasts within a span of 20 minutes in the cities of Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barapeta and Guwahati. The Assam blasts occurred as recent terror attacks have targeted other parts of India, including Jaipur, Delhi, Ahmadabad and Bangalore (see *Terrorism Focus*, August 5).

### New Methods of Attack

The aim of the perpetrators was a high fatality rate and widespread chaos, as the blasts were aimed at crowded places crammed with office workers and shoppers. Forensic investigations revealed that the bombs used a

cocktail of RDX (hexogen), ammonium nitrate, plastic explosives and TNT with high-tech timer devices (*Economic Times* [India], November 7). For the first time in India, cars laden with explosives were used in the blasts in Guwahati, whereas motorbikes and cycles were used in previous blasts. The trend of using a deadly mixture of explosives, which is a hallmark of Islamist groups like HuJI, is new to the region. HuJI or other Islamist terrorists active in the region (e.g. the Lashkar-e-Toiba or the newly emerged Indian Mujahideen) have been accused of orchestrating a number of such terror strikes in major cities across India in the past. For the first time, however, traces of jihadi footprints are emerging in northeast India.

One hitherto unknown outfit, the Islamic Security Force-Indian Mujahideen (ISF-IM) claimed responsibility for the Assam blasts. Investigating agencies doubted the claim, thinking it may have been sent to derail the investigation (*Hindustan Times*, November 2). Instead, ULFA, the senior terrorist group operating in the region, remains the primary suspect in the October 30 incidents, along with HuJI and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB). All three groups are active in the region and have a strong presence in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar.

The confusion of the present investigation notwithstanding, as many as 23 suspects have been arrested so far by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) of the Assam police in connection with the October 30 serial blasts. SIT sleuths are also zeroing on the involvement of another ethnic militant outfit, the NDFB, along with ULFA and HuJI. The SIT has arrested a Bhutanese national, Tenzing G Zangpo and the self-proclaimed home secretary of the NDFB, Sobin Boro from Guwahati, amongst others. Police sources reported the October 30 terrorist attacks were given final shape at a meeting at Sobin Boro's rented house in Guwahati on October 17. The SIT also claimed to have arrested two more NDFB cadres, Thungri Boro and Dinesh Boro, who, according to SIT, were directly involved in the blasts (*Assam Times*, Nov 18). Both ULFA and NDFB leaderships have issued notes of denial, perhaps fearing a backlash after sensing public outrage.

The magnitude and intensity of the latest terror attacks show the deteriorating security situation vis-a-vis the resurgence of militancy that plagues the region, especially in Assam over the last three decades. State Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi has blamed the attacks on "religious terrorism," an obvious allusion to Islamist militancy, which he suggested posed "a greater danger

than insurgency.” Gogoi pointed fingers at neighboring Bangladesh, indicating that the militant groups in that country were helping extremists to carry out terror strikes in the Assam state and elsewhere in the country (*Times of India*, November 08).

#### The Role of Bangladesh

Assam was a Muslim majority state before independence in 1947. Muslims became a minority in Assam after the post-independence exodus of Muslims to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Indian nationalists have pointed to recent census figures as proof that some districts of Assam have returned to having a Muslim majority as a result of massive illegal migration from Muslim Bangladesh. Assam Muslims deny the claims of migration from Bangladesh, attributing the demographic change to the high birth-rate of Assam’s Muslim community (*Milli Gazette*, December 16-31, 2004).

Bangladesh had denied earlier that any insurgent outfit based in the country was involved in the blasts (*North East Tribune* [Assam], November 2). Dhaka’s denial notwithstanding, the role of Bangladesh has attracted serious scrutiny. It’s commonly believed within India that both Pakistan’s Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) and its Bangladesh counterpart, the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), have assisted ethnic and Islamist terrorists and militants from West Bengal and India’s northeastern states.<sup>1</sup>

According to the federal Home Ministry, the Bangladesh wing of HuJI has provided assistance to ULFA and NDFB, as both Assam-based groups lack the technology and manpower to carry out large-scale operations. ULFA militants have suffered set-backs following intermittent but massive military operations in recent years. Its once-dreaded “28 Battalion” is in complete disarray after arrests and the defection of two companies in June. One theory suggests that the remnants of the ULFA colluded with other likeminded outfits in perpetrating these sophisticated terror attacks to reassert their presence in the area. The other angle being investigated by intelligence officials relates to HuJI and the possibility of links with the ethnic riots of early October, when Assam was hit by clashes between the indigenous Bodo tribes (about 5% of the Assam population) and immigrant Muslim settlers that killed nearly fifty people

1 Jaideep Saikia, *Terror Sans Frontiers: Islamic Militancy in North East India*, Program in Arms Control, Disarmament, and International Security (ACDIS), Occasional Paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, July 2003; Rediff, January 9, 2007.

and rendered thousands homeless in Udalgiri and Darang districts (*The Telegraph* [Kolkata], October 7). According to some sections of the government and police, this could have triggered the HuJI leadership to avenge the deaths of fellow Muslims.

#### Homegrown Jihadis?

Encircled by four countries- Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar) and China, India’s northeast region is home to more than 30 active or dormant terrorist organizations, spread over seven states. At least five major ethnic/Islamist terrorist organizations are actively involved in violence in Assam and elsewhere: the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), the Dima Halim Daogah (DHD), the All Adivasi National Liberation Army (AANLA) and the Muslim United Liberation Tigers of Assam (MULTA).<sup>2</sup> ULFA, an ethnic terrorist group fighting for an independent Assam since 1979, operates several camps in Bangladesh and Myanmar and its top leaders are presently based in Bangladesh. ULFA has a reputation for providing guerrilla and arms training to most of its northeast affiliates, including the NDFB. There are signs that ULFA, a group devoted to sovereignty for Assam, is becoming increasingly Islamized through ties to groups such as MULTA and HuJI, as well as through what India’s central government alleges is patronage by Pakistan’s ISI (Rediff.com, July 25, 2006; *Times of India*, July 25, 2006). A senior Indian Army official, Major General KS Sethi, recently stated that “home-grown terrorist organizations active in the northeast are aiding jihadi elements with logistical support” (*Economic Times*, November 2). If intelligence reports are to be believed, the Bangladesh-based HuJI has active operational links with northeastern militant groups like ULFA, PREPAK of Manipur and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF).

#### Conclusion

The recent terror attacks in Assam were significant for two reasons: this was the deadliest attack ever in the northeast region; and for the first time there were tell-

2 MULTA was founded in 1994 by a local mosque cleric in the wake of the Bodo tribal attacks on Muslim areas in Barpeta district. Its operation area covers Goalpara, Dhubri, Darrang, Nalabari and Naogaon districts. MULTA maintains ties with ULFA and the Bangladesh based HuJI, Jama’atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). See Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, *Fundamentalism in Bangladesh: Its Impact on India*, Akaasha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 187-190.

tale signs of collaboration between ethnic-separatist militants and Muslim jihadi groups with a strong cross-border reach. Evidence to this end is found in the forensic and intelligence reports and further confirmed by the confessions of Tripura-based militants arrested for their alleged role in the October 1 serial bombings in the city of Agartala. Sachindra Debbarma, the main suspect in the Agartala attacks, revealed in his confession that the attacks were planned at an NDFB safe-house in Bangladesh by agents of the Pakistan's ISI, Bangladesh's DGFI and cadres from seven Assam-based militant groups (*Sakaal Times*, November 7).

ULFA has developed the expertise needed to carry out the Agartala terrorist operation. The October 30 attacks, however, were far more sophisticated and seemingly beyond ULFA's capabilities. The Assam government has suggested the involvement of a "third force," besides the usual suspects, the ULFA and NDFB. This elusive third force may have roots in Bangladesh, as claimed by Assam's senior minister, Pradyut Bordoloi (*Press Trust of India*, November 18).

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## Kurdish Islamist Groups in Northern Iraq

By Fadhil Ali

A spokesman of the Kurdish arm of al-Qaeda in Iraq recently announced the group's intention to eliminate Iraq's Kurdish leadership: "To the two Kurdish puppets, Jalal Talabani and Masoud Barzani, I swear by God that we have no mercy or sympathy towards the traitors who sold themselves to the enemies of God. Your throats will be slit." The challenge from the Kurdistan Brigades came in an October video released by al-Furqan, the media arm of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). The Kurdish-language video shows group members doing military training and chanting in Kurdish while masked men read a statement condemning the top Iraqi Kurdish and Shiite leaders. The statement expresses the group's opinion that the religion of the Kurdish people is in danger, as Kurdistan is under the control of the United States, the UK and the Jews. Entitled "Eid Gift #4 - The Kurdistan Brigades,"

the video contained footage of attacks with small arms and road-side bombs on patrols of the security forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (*muslm.net*, October 8; *paldf.net*, October 4).

KRG officials usually refer to the Kurdistan Brigades as a group linked to the Salafi-Jihadi Ansar al-Islam movement, the insurgent group bombed by U.S. forces during the 2003 American invasion. The stance of the Brigades differs from the conclusion reached recently by the exiled leader of Ansar al-Islam, Mullah Fatih Krekar, who said he saw no reason to clash with the ruling parties in Kurdistan at the moment, suggesting patience while waiting for this stage in Iraq's political evolution to pass (*Islam Online*, November 5).

Beside the Kurdistan Brigades, there are four major Islamist political movements active in Iraqi Kurdistan:

- The Islamic Movement in Iraqi Kurdistan (IMIK) - Formed in 1987 in Halabja. IMIK fought against Saddam's regime in the 1980s. In the 1990s IMIK engaged in fighting with Jalal al-Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The movement is led by Mullah Ali Abd al-Aziz Halabji. In its last conference IMIK announced reforms and elected women for the first time to its supreme command. A pledge was also made to play the role of the political opposition in Kurdistan.
- The Islamic Group of Kurdistan (IGK) - Headed by Mullah Ali Bapir, the IGK formed in 2001 as an offshoot of the IMIK. The movement participates in the regional government and parliament. The group does not currently advocate jihad and has announced its willingness to work with Sufi as well as Salafist forms of Sunni Islam.
- The Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK) - Unlike the Salafist IMIK and the IGK, this group, which is the biggest Islamic party in Kurdistan, represents the Muslim Brotherhood in Kurdistan. The IUK is headed by Salah al-Din Muhammad Baha'a al-Din and is considered the third party in Kurdistan, with members in both the central and regional parliaments.
- Ansar al-Islam - A Salafi-Jihadi group founded by radical elements of IMIK in 2001 with the name of Jund al-Islam. The group is headed by

Mullah Krekar, who lives in Norway. In 2003, the movement was driven from its base in Iraq by PUK peshmerga and U.S. Special Forces units. Most members fled to Iran but are believed to have now regrouped in Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the group denies any link to al-Qaeda, it has called for jihad against Coalition forces and still advocates jihad in the Muslim world.

Right after the Iraqi parliament passed a law to pave the way for the formation of autonomous regions within Iraq, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) declared the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq in the Sunni areas of central and western Iraq. The justification was that the Kurds had their autonomous region in the north, while the legislation paved the way for the Shiites to form their own region in the south and center. Nevertheless, the Islamic State, which was initially supposed to extend over the Sunni-Arab part of Iraq, turned out to have a Kurdish wing.

#### Emergence of the Kurdistan Brigades

In the first half of 2007, the name of the Kurdistan Brigades started to appear in jihadi internet forums. On April 21, 2007, a letter signed by Haji Arif, who claimed to be the leader of the Brigades, was placed on a number of jihadi forums. In his letter Arif declared clearly that his group is part of al-Qaeda and presented his group to the public as a Salafi-Jihadi group:

People of Kurdistan, We promise to carry Allah's message and keep it pure by not mixing it with any infidel legitimacy such as democracy and secularism... You will see how we will destroy the enemies of Allah and restore dignity for the bearers of Allah's religion... your brothers in the Kurdistan Brigades will prevent Kurdistan from being a pastureland for the Jews, the Crusaders and their agents (majdah.maktoob.com, April 21, 2007).

Arif went on to condemn the Kurdish leaders, Masoud al-Barzani, KRG president, and Jalal al-Talabani, the president of Iraq. Arif called on the moderate Islamists in Kurdistan, some of whom are involved in the parliament and the regional government, to change their course:

Our demands are for those movements that carry Islamic slogans but are aligned with the secular parties and are part of the so-called regional government of Kurdistan... they are not ashamed of sitting with the American occupiers

as if they have no relation with the war between America and Islam, as if jihad does not include them. We tell them, leave the Americans and their agents and refer to the Quran verses about belief and infidelity.

Arif ends his statement by calling on Muslims everywhere to support his group with funding. Arif also confirmed his group's loyalty to al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and to the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq, Shaykh Abu Omar al-Baghdadi.

The vast majority of the population in Iraqi Kurdistan is Sunni Muslim. Nevertheless, AQI could not operate freely in that area in post-war Iraq. Unlike the rest of the country, Kurdistan was already beyond the control of Saddam's central government. The area was secured by the regional government, controlled by the two main Kurdish parties; Barzani's Partiya Demokrata Kurdistan (PDK) and the PUK, headed by Jalal al-Talabani. For most Kurds the invasion was a historic opportunity to get rid of Saddam's threat, but al-Qaeda did not give up its attempts to influence the Kurds. In an interview published earlier this year on al-Sahab, the media wing of al-Qaeda, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second-in-command, gave his views on the Iraqi Kurds:

The Kurds are a genuine part of the Muslim nation, every Muslim is proud of their sacrifice and history. All Muslims sympathize with the Kurds for the oppression they suffered under the fanatical Ba'athist regime. I think that their brothers the mujahideen in Iraq, whether Arab, Kurdish or Turkman, sympathize with the Kurds and understand many of the Kurds' demands as stated by Shaykh Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (may Allah protect him). But what no Muslim, Kurdish or non-Kurdish, can possibly accept is that Iraqi Kurdistan be ruled by a secular government, loyal to the Crusaders and cooperating with the Jews (Al-Sahab Media Productions, December 2007; see also *Terrorism Focus*, June 24).

The Kurdistan Brigades are active in the border sector between Iraq and Iran, especially around the town of Halabja. This area east of al-Sulaymaniyah is traditionally the main stronghold of the Kurdish Islamists. It was the gateway for the first group of al-Qaeda fighters who came from Afghanistan and set up their camps there. One of those fighters was the then little known Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the late leader of AQI, killed in 2006.



Marwan Naqshabandi, a Kurdish researcher specializing in armed groups, believes that Iran supports the Brigades. In an interview with Dubai's al-Arabiya satellite TV, he indicated that Shiite Iran could get over the sectarian barrier with the Sunni Salafi-Jihadis; "Iran is not a sectarian state but a national one, they are clever in dealing with armed groups out of their territories. Iran is helping the Kurdistan Brigades of al-Qaeda to the extent of hitting the targets set by Iran against its political opponents. I do not believe that the Brigades are strong enough to embarrass Iran or to create trouble inside it." (al-Arabiya TV, November 16).

### Conclusion

It is hard to find concrete evidence that Iran is supporting the Kurdistan Brigades, though the Brigades' need for bases in Iran is crucial. They are isolated geographically from their comrades in the Arab part of Iraq; for example, Mullah Krekar described the long journey his followers in Ansar al-Islam had to undertake when they fled their bases in Iraqi Kurdistan after the American bombing in 2003:

More than 80 fighters were killed and the same amount was captured by the two major Kurdish parties. Fifteen were captured in Iran and the rest disappeared in the Iranian Kurdish villages until they managed to forge identification documents [that] enabled them to pass the Iranian-Iraqi borders through Shiite southern Iraq. They then reached Baghdad, Rumadi Diyala and Mosul, where they are now (Islam Online, November 5).

The Arab and Kurdish branches of al-Qaeda in Iraq will likely work to bridge the geographical gap between them. Full coordination between the regional government of Kurdistan and the Iraqi central government will be required to prevent this. There was a big row recently when Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki wanted to form tribal armed groups backed by the central government in Kurdistan and the surrounding areas, with the Kurds strongly condemning the move. Kurds, worrying that the Sunni Arabs might turn against them, have opposed forming Awakening councils in disputed areas where the population is a mix of Kurd and Sunnis Arab (Moheet.com, November 18). If this dispute develops into a crisis, it would present a golden opportunity for al-Qaeda to connect the mountain bases of the Kurdistan Brigades along the Iranian border east of al-Sulaymaniyah with one of the few remaining AQI strongholds west of al-Sulaymaniyah in the Himreen Mountains.

While the Brigades are urging the moderate Islamists in Kurdistan to turn violent, moderate Kurdish Islamists must try to influence the members of the Brigades, especially those whom they knew and worked with in the past. Both the central and regional governments should support such initiatives in an effort to curb the spread of radical Islam in the relatively secure Iraqi Kurdistan.

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## Turkey's Gendarmerie: Reforming a Frontline Unit in the War on Terrorism

By Andrew McGregor

**T**urkey's paramilitary Gendarmerie, a frontline unit in the War on Terrorism, is about to undergo some of the greatest changes yet in its long history. The reforms call for a radical restructuring of the organization, designed to generate greater efficiency in counterterrorism efforts as well as assist Turkey in its efforts to join the European Union.

The Gendarmerie (Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı - JGK) was founded as part of the 1839 Ottoman Tanzimat reforms. In 1909 it was brought under control of the Ministry of War. The Gendarmes handled interior security during the First World War and played an important part in the War of Independence that followed the Ottoman collapse. Several reorganizations followed before the Gendarmerie became involved in the Cyprus conflict of 1974 ([jandarma.tsk.mil.tr](http://jandarma.tsk.mil.tr)). When the struggle began against PKK militants, the Gendarmerie, as the security body responsible for the rural regions of southeast Turkey in which the PKK operated, was naturally involved. Currently, the Gendarmerie has responsibility for security in 92 % of Turkey's area, containing over one-third of the nation's population.

As a law enforcement agency, the Turkish Gendarmerie falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior, with responsibility for securing public order in areas outside municipal boundaries. The gendarmerie has special responsibilities in the areas of combating smuggling, border control, corrections, enforcing conscription and criminal investigations, as well as

being available to perform duties to be determined by the General Staff. In wartime, however, the organization comes under the command of the Turkish General Staff and falls directly under the command of the military. This arrangement is supposed to make the Gendarmerie a more effective entity during times of crises. In practice, however, the Gendarmerie has little interaction with civilian agencies and tends to act as a department of the Turkish military even during times of peace. The reforms intend to eliminate this impractical two-headed command structure, bringing the paramilitary under complete civilian control.

The Gendarmerie is composed of six branches, operating in 13 regional commands spread over Turkey's 81 provinces:

- Gendarmerie Headquarters and subordinated units
- Internal Security Forces Command (including Gendarmerie commando and aviation units)
- Border Forces Command
- Training Forces Command
- Gendarmerie Schools Command
- Logistics Command

The Gendarmerie is designed to be mobile and is well equipped with armored personnel carriers (APCs), helicopters, and light artillery. The APCs include old but upgraded East German BTR-60PBs, American-designed Cadillac-Gage vehicles, Turkish-built Otokar Akrep and Cobra models, and the Shorland S55, originally designed for service in Northern Ireland. A small force of helicopters includes Sikorsky S-70A28 and S-70A17 Blackhawks, Agusta-Bell AB205A1s, and Russian designed Mi-17 transports. During operations, gendarmerie forces may be transported by helicopter or call in air support from the Turkish Air Force when necessary. The Ozel Jandarma Komando Bolugu (OJKB) is the Gendarmerie's highly-trained Special Forces unit. It specializes in counterterrorism operations (particularly those against the PKK) and public security activities.

Most members of the Gendarmerie are conscript servicemen with only a short training period. NCO's are selected from those soldiers with at least one year of military service. Officers are recruited while still cadets at the Military Academy and take additional gendarmerie training after finishing their infantry and commando training. They will usually stay with the Gendarmerie for the rest of their career. Gendarmes are typically posted away from their home regions to avoid conflicts

of interest. Funerals of gendarmerie conscripts killed fighting the PKK are typically attended by thousands of angry mourners, but their slogans and invective remain directed towards the PKK rather than the government. For the government, this is a useful display of continued public support for a civil conflict that has survived a succession of governments and prevailing ideologies.

### Reforming the Gendarmerie

Based on decisions taken by the Higher Counterterrorism Board (Terorle Mücadele Yuksek Kurulu – TMYK) and the National Security Council (Milli Guvenlik Kurulu – MGK), the new Gendarmerie will focus on border security and the maintenance of order in rural areas. The force will lose its last areas of responsibility in towns and cities. The command structure will also be reformed, with civilians assuming most of the administrative positions. Both police and gendarmerie will be part of a new Domestic Security Under secretariat of the Interior Ministry (*Hurriyet*, October 23; *Today's Zaman*, November 10). The Gendarmerie commander will no longer be listed among the top four generals of the Turkish armed forces (Turk Silahlı Kuvvetleri - TSK) and will become subordinate to the Interior Minister, a reversal of the current protocol (*Today's Zaman*, October 25).

While the TSK General Staff appears to have given its consent to the changes (or has at least decided not to oppose them publicly), there has been opposition from within the Gendarmerie command. A letter from General Mustafa Biyik, on behalf of the Gendarmerie command, demanded a reversal of the reforms, accusing the government of ignoring the wishes of the Gendarmerie general command and the organization's 150 year legacy of service to the state (*Taraf*, October 26). The Gendarmerie is also proving reluctant to transfer command in urban jurisdictions to the national police.

In August, General Avni Atilla Isık, former staff commander of the Turkish Land Forces, became the new commander of the Gendarmerie. While General Isik has shifted to the Gendarmerie from the army, the new Gendarmerie Chief of Staff is Lieutenant General Mustafa Biyik, a career Gendarmerie officer, having joined the organization in 1975 ([jandarma.tsk.tr](http://jandarma.tsk.tr)). Commanders are frequently drawn from the army, returning there after a period with the Gendarmerie.

## Addressing a Controversial Legacy

For a force seeking to prove it has adopted European Union standards, the Turkish gendarmerie is facing an embarrassing assortment of court cases related to abuses of power. A court in Trabzon has ruled that the case of two Gendarmerie sergeants accused of having prior knowledge of the 2007 murder of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink can now go to trial. A gendarmerie Colonel is facing similar charges (*Today's Zaman*, November 12). Former Gendarmerie commander Sener Eruygun is among those charged with participation in the Ergenekon plot (*Yeni Safak*, November 9; NTV November 11). Gendarmerie men are among those implicated in the beating death of a detained protestor last month (Anatolia, November 17; *Hurriyet*, November 17).

The most controversial branch of the Gendarmerie does not appear on the command chart. This is the Jandarma Istihbarat ve Terorle Mucadele (JITEM), the Gendarmerie's intelligence and anti-terrorism department. Long-maintained official denials of JITEM's existence are now collapsing in the courts, as ex-members of Turkey's "deep state" security apparatus testify to their participation in covert and illegal activities over the last few decades as part of the ongoing "Ergenekon" investigation. Without any kind of civilian oversight, JITEM appears to have descended into violence and criminality, and are often only tenuously related to the security of the state. A recently-published book by a former JITEM officer, Abdulkadir Aygan, describes a force for which assassinations were normal business and even attacks on the state itself were considered permissible.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the Ergenekon investigation, retired general Veli Kucuk admitted to being the leader of JITEM after taking over from founder Arif Dogan in 1990 (*Zaman*, January 30). JITEM appears to have been composed largely of ex-PKK members and NCOs of the Gendarmerie, operating in small, largely autonomous cells specializing in false-flag operations. According to Aygan, torture was common and detainees were often killed.

A May 2008 study produced by Istanbul's Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation addressed the problem of the lack of oversight of gendarmerie activities related to national security. According to

1 See also Ferhat Unlu's extensive interview with Abdulkadir Aygan, Sabah, August 25.

author Ibrahim Cerrah, a professor at the Turkish Police Academy, institutional reforms are needed to raise the ethical standards of Turkey's gendarmes and police, which have often resorted to extra-judicial means in countering threats to internal stability:

Legal and ethical violations by some security personnel may occur in the name of perceived higher ideals, such as the protection of the higher interests of the state and the nation, without consideration for any personal interest. However, it has been observed in the past that legal and ethical violations for short-term benefits can in the long run cause more harm than good to the principles defended and to the country... It is a fact that the problem of illegal and unethical acts committed by some security sector personnel is not sufficiently addressed. The most important reason for this is professional solidarity resulting from professional socialization... Members of the security profession are in a kind of unwritten agreement to protect each other and not to speak out against each other, outside of exceptional and compulsory situations.<sup>2</sup>

Independent inspection of the Gendarmerie as required by EU regulations has so far foundered because of the organization's dual allegiance – its connection to the General Staff makes any outside inspection impossible without the approval or even participation of the General Staff itself (*Turkish Daily News*, May 14). The EU's November progress report on Turkey stated; "no progress has been made on enhancing civilian control over the Gendarmerie's law enforcement activities."<sup>3</sup>

## The JGK Commandos

Other reforms directed at Turkey's commando forces will have an impact on the Gendarmerie, which maintains one brigade of commandos to the army's five. The reforms are designed to professionalize the commandos, with only officers and volunteer NCOs of the rank of sergeant and above being allowed to join the force. (*Hurriyet*, May 8). The move to professional troops will solve the problem of conscripts leaving the armed forces once their term of enlistment is up, giving

2 Ibrahim Cerrah, Police Ethics and The Vocational Socialization of the Security Personnel in Turkey, Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), Istanbul, May 2008, p.40.

3 Turkey 2008 Progress Report, Commission of the European Communities, November 5.

the commandos the benefit of experience and continuity in their efforts. The new commandos will receive hazard pay for serving in southeast Turkey, the focus of fighting with the PKK.

### Conclusion

Professionalization of the gendarmerie is being imposed by necessity. As law enforcement techniques become more sophisticated, a lack of education common to many conscripts is beginning to hamper operations, especially those done in conjunction with the generally better-educated police services. Changes in personnel recruitment are being matched by improvements in equipment, with ongoing modernization programs aimed at command and communications systems, weaponry, vehicles and other equipment. With unification under Interior Ministry command, the police and the gendarmerie are being encouraged to carry out greater intelligence cooperation, an ongoing problem in the Turkish security services.

An important indication of the Gendarmerie's new field of responsibility may be found in Ankara's recent approval of the construction of 118 new posts along the border with Iraq, along with the construction of roads linking the posts to urban centers and other necessary infrastructure (*Today's Zaman*, November 14). The Gendarmerie is about to become a frontier force, with long postings in sparsely populated and largely inaccessible regions. In this sense, the Gendarmerie's resistance to losing its last urban areas of responsibility is understandable. The important reforms to Turkey's internal security structure may be seen as part of a general trend in Europe away from paramilitary Gendarmerie-type security services.

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