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EGYPTIAN ISLAMISTS URGE AL-QAEDA TO DECLARE A TRUCE

Al-Jama’ah al-Islamiyah (JI - The Islamic Group), once one of Egypt’s most feared Islamist terrorist organizations, has issued a statement urging al-Qaeda to observe a ceasefire to better assess the intentions of the new Obama administration in Washington (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 24).

JI has observed its own ceasefire agreement with the Egyptian government since March 1999. The agreement followed a number of spectacular terrorist attacks by the group, such as the 1997 Luxor attack that killed 58 tourists and four Egyptians. These attacks, however, only succeeded in alienating the movement from public support. The targeting of tourists and the tourism infrastructure proved highly unpopular in a nation that relies heavily on revenues from these sources (up to \$4 billion per year in much-needed foreign currency). The group’s often pointless attacks on Egypt’s large Coptic Christian community inflamed sectarian divisions within the country while doing little to further the Islamist cause. In August 2006, al-Qaeda’s second-in-command, Egyptian national Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced the merger of JI with al-Qaeda, but this development was immediately denied by JI leaders within Egypt (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 14, 2006).

The JI’s chief theorist, Shaykh Najih Ibrahim, was released in 2004 after spending 24 years behind bars following his conviction as a ringleader in the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat. Since then

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he has adopted a more conciliatory role in Egypt while rejecting the violence of al-Qaeda: “Their aim is jihad and our aim is Islam.”

Shaykh Najih rejected a call from al-Qaeda strategist Abu Yahya al-Libi for immediate attacks on Britain and other Western nations as retaliation for the Israeli assault on Gaza: “We fear that the al-Qaeda organization might carry out operations that will turn Obama into another George Bush and turn the good [in President Obama’s stated intention to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq and close Guantanamo Bay], albeit small, into evil from which only Israel will benefit” (Al-Arabiya TV [Dubai], January 23; *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 24).

Isam al-Din Darbalah, a long-time JI leader, also issued a statement addressed to all levels of al-Qaeda’s leadership and membership. Noting that President Obama appears ready to abandon “Bush’s dead-end and crazy path,” Isam al-Din urged a four-month ceasefire designed to test American intentions: “Say [to the Western states] without fear: ‘We will not start fighting you in the next four months, unless in self-defense, awaiting fair and practical stands on the part of Obama. We welcome a peace based on respect for the Islamic identity and our peoples’ right to live independently under their creed and shari’a and on the basis of common interests with America and the world for the good of humanity, away from the conflict of cultures.’” While still in prison, Isam al-Din collaborated with Najih Ibrahim and several other imprisoned JI leaders in a reassessment of religious extremism entitled “Correcting Concepts.” He later contributed to a book-length study of al-Qaeda’s strategy that criticized the group for a flawed understanding of reality and the capabilities of the Muslim nation.

AL-QAEDA’S LEADER IN AFGHANISTAN RETURNS FROM THE DEAD TO THREATEN INDIA

Despite Pakistani claims to have killed al-Qaeda’s commander in Afghanistan last summer, the veteran Egyptian militant Mustafa Ahmad “Abu al-Yazid” (a.k.a. Shaykh Said al-Misri) appeared in a 20-minute video last week threatening India with a repetition of last November’s terrorist outrage in Mumbai. Al-Yazid spoke of the shame India endured through its inability to contain the Mumbai attack and warned India that it could expect more of the same if it dared to attack Pakistan:

“India should know that it will have to pay a heavy price if it attacks Pakistan... The mujahideen will sunder your armies into the ground, like they did to the Russians in Afghanistan. They will target your economic centers and raze them to the ground” (Press Trust of India, February 10; BBC, February 10).

Lest anyone think the al-Qaeda commander was in league with Pakistan’s government, al-Yazid urged the masses of Pakistan to overthrow the government of President Asif Ali Zardari and declared that former president Benazir Bhutto was assassinated on the order of al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Abu al-Yazid is a former member of al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian Islamic Jihad group and served several years in prison before leaving Egypt for Afghanistan in 1988. Already under an Egyptian death sentence issued *in absentia* for terrorist activities in that country, Abu al-Yazid spent two years in Iraq before being appointed leader of al-Qaeda forces in Afghanistan in May 2007. The 54-year-old appears to be primarily a financial and logistical manager for jihad activities (in the original intention of al-Qaeda) rather than a military leader (see *Terrorism Focus*, July 3, 2007; March 18, 2008; July 29, 2008).

Reports of Abu al-Yazid’s death in an August 12, 2008, Pakistani airstrike were carried widely in the international press at the time, though Pakistani authorities offered no evidence for their claim. A spokesman for the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) denied the reports of Abu al-Yazid’s death (AFP, August 11).

One of Pakistan’s largest newspapers carried a report saying intelligence experts had determined Abu al-Yazid’s statement was actually the work of India’s external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) (*Jang* [Rawalpindi], February 11). The intent was to “defame Pakistan and show that it has links with Al-Qaeda.”

Jihadis Debate the Poor Response to Bin Laden's Call for Jihad in Gaza

In response to a complaint by a jihadi internet forum member describing al-Qaeda's declining popularity, entitled "Why did nobody listen to Osama?", forum participants refuted the claim while revealing the support al-Qaeda receives in financial and other forms from Muslim sympathizers responding to Osama bin Laden's calls for jihad (al-Boraq.info, February 1).

The posting by a jihadi forum member nicknamed Abu Ibrahim reproached Arabs and Muslims for not answering al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's call for jihad during the 22-day Israeli war on Gaza. Abu Ibrahim said bin Laden urged the Islamic umma (community) to defend Gaza and send donations to al-Qaeda, but nobody volunteered to fight in Gaza nor did any money flow to al-Qaeda. "Negligence of al-Qaeda's pleas has become the normal pattern. Dr. Zawahiri speaks at least once a week, instigating the Islamic umma to carry out attacks and inflict destruction on the enemy, but the umma no longer accepts al-Qaeda rhetoric," says Abu Ibrahim, asserting that Gazans do not want an al-Qaeda presence in Gaza in order to avoid a second war between Hamas and al-Qaeda. Abu Ibrahim ends his posting by saying, "Let the shaykh speak as he wishes. Let Doctor Zawahiri speak once, twice or ten times every week; we are still trying to understand [al-Qaeda's] real objectives, but we will only do what is best for our people."

Abu Ibrahim is a frequent participant in jihadi forums and supports all jihadis in general, but is critical of al-Qaeda's performance in different parts of the world. In other postings Abu Ibrahim accused al-Qaeda of losing focus and committing heinous acts: "I think we are seeing two types of al-Qaeda today - one led by al-Zawahiri that endorses massacres such as in Morocco, and another helpless type of al-Qaeda led by bin Laden." Other forum participants responded quickly to Abu Ibrahim's skeptical view of al-Qaeda and his claim that its reputation was deteriorating among Muslims. A forum participant nicknamed Ibn Ninawa challenged this notion, saying that many people furtively support Shaykh Osama and donate money to al-Qaeda. The jihad operations incited by bin Laden take a lot of planning and do not happen overnight, says Ninawa, who further asserts that the appearances of al-Zawahiri please the Salafi-Jihadis and encourage more al-Qaeda operations in different parts

of the world, such as the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen. Ninawa is confident al-Qaeda's Salafi-Jihadi ideology is prevailing among Islamists, giving examples such as the Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen in Somalia, the Taliban in Pakistan, and other fronts that will open soon, as promised by bin Laden. Ibn Ninawa is a frequent participant in jihadi forums and a strong advocate of al-Qaeda.

Concerning al-Qaeda's funding, other participants said there are businessmen in the Arabian Peninsula that send significant amounts of money to jihad on a regular basis: "The alms (zakat) they pay amounts to millions of dollars. Many financial contributors to jihad are former jihadis who succeeded in making good business and benefiting from some governments' rehabilitation programs designated to neutralize extremists." Ibn Ninawa did not reveal what governments he was referring to, but affirmed that he personally knows some of those businessmen: "Our Shaykh Osama has spent billions of dollars on jihad and now, after his assets were frozen, he set up new business projects under many pseudonyms. Osama is benefitting from these businesses that work for him day and night, besides the money donated by sympathizers." Ninawa added that the smallest amount of cash a jihadi carries to a mission amounts to no less than ten thousand dollars. After the U.S. strikes against al-Qaeda, jihadis in bin Laden's camps, under the protection of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, spread over countries such as Pakistan, Yemen, Algeria, Uzbekistan, Somalia, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Philippines. This does not include countries where clandestine al-Qaeda sleeper cells reside.

Rejecting Abu Ibrahim's claims, another forum participant noted that the number of hits the jihadi website muslim.net received on a bin Laden speech entitled "The Way to Abort the Conspiracies" exceeded five million. The chatters argued that it is not al-Qaeda that brought U.S. forces and destruction to Iraq, but rather the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein. Finally, some forum members said that al-Qaeda is only one branch of the holy war against the tyrants and apostates who do not rule by the Islamic Shari'a - al-Qaeda supports all jihadis, not only the adherents of its Salafi-Jihadi ideology.

The declining popularity of al-Qaeda, at least in Iraq, was evident in a statement released by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (al-Qaeda's Amir in Iraq) calling on his followers to soften

their terror methods to regain the support of Iraqi Sunni tribes in al-Anbar province (alboraq.info January 31). In the statement distributed in al-Anbar mosques, al-Muhajir presented a new strategy designed to perpetuate al-Qaeda's presence in Iraq:

Fiercely attack the enemies and intensify attacks against the occupiers. Cut and blow up their communication lines, destroy the bridges and roads they use, but don't interfere in social issues such as women's head cover[s], satellite dishes and other controversial social issues until further notice. Be careful not to kill Sunni civilians who didn't support apostate tribesmen. Concentrate your efforts on killing the real enemy to avoid starting new battlefronts with Sunni Arabs and don't close the door of repentance in the face of those who turned against us.

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In the Aftermath of Iraq's Provincial Elections, Part One: A Dangerous Year Ahead for Iraqi Kurds

Some ominous signs have appeared for northern Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) following the January 31 nationwide provincial elections. If the elections offer an indicator of the national mood of Iraq, then in this case Iraq's Arabs seemed to show a growing preference for Iraqi Arab nationalist political parties and a strong central government, a preference at odds with the KRG's struggle for greater regional autonomy.

The biggest loser in the provincial elections was the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) party. The ISCI went from being the hegemonic party in Iraq's southern provinces to an embarrassing second- or even third-place showing in most southern provinces. Iraq's Shiite prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, emerged in turn as the elections' biggest winner, greatly improving on the weak following his Dawa party attracted in previous elections. Al-Maliki even seems to have attracted significant numbers of votes

from outside his Shiite sectarian base by downplaying religious themes in favor of Iraqi nationalist slogans and the promise of security and strong government - issues with appeal to Sunni Arabs, secular voters and even Christian Iraqis. Where he was once regarded by many as an ineffective compromise choice for Iraqi Prime Minister, al-Maliki has now managed to shape his image into that of the strong leader many Iraqis believe they need.

Iraqi Kurds view these results with concern. In Iraq's federal level of government, the ISCI has generally worked closely with the Kurdish parties and shared their goal of a highly decentralized Iraqi federalism, with a weak central government in Baghdad. If the provincial elections indicate what the national-level parliamentary elections will look like when they are held in late 2009, Iraq's Kurdish parties will need a few more political allies to compensate for the ISCI's decline. If Arab Iraqi leaders think they can get more votes and support with a platform of Iraqi nationalism and strong central government, as Al-Maliki seems to have done, such political allies may become increasingly hard to find.

Part of al-Maliki's ascendance seems to be occurring at the expense of the KRG. Kurdish relations with al-Maliki went from reasonably positive in 2006 (when Kurdish parties saved al-Maliki's government from collapse as Shiite and Sunni parties withdrew their support), to increasingly tense in 2008 and early 2009. Much of the Iraqi Arab electorate appears resentful of Kurdish gains since 2003, and displays little patience or understanding for Kurdish demands. Politicians like al-Maliki have moved to capitalize on this resentment and burnish their Iraqi nationalist credentials. Al-Maliki and his ministers now increasingly criticize the KRG; at a press conference on November 20, 2008, al-Maliki questioned the activities of the Kurdish peshmerga militias and accused the KRG of violating Iraq's constitution by developing an independent oil industry and opening diplomatic offices in foreign countries (IHT, December 2, 2008).

The KRG struck back by citing what it described as the Prime Minister's own violations of the constitution:

It is unfortunate and deeply regrettable that the [November 20] press conference of Iraq's Prime Minister illustrates efforts being made to take the people of Iraq back to a period we are desperately trying to get beyond. It was a period where the

excessive concentration, or centralization, of economic and political power condemned all Iraqi peoples to unimaginable suffering....Though the Prime Minister has taken the oath to promote and protect the Constitution of Iraq - as it currently exists - it is, indeed, disconcerting when he cites the Constitution in attacking others while apparently violating it when taking unilateral decisions. The Prime Minister is obligated to act within the limits of the current constitution and not in accordance with a future constitution he may prefer (KRG.org, December 1, 2008).

KRG leaders have also condemned al-Maliki's move to recruit and arm "support councils" in their region and the disputed territories south of it. According to the KRG, al-Maliki has approached Arab tribal leaders in northern Iraq (including those who had collaborated in Saddam's military campaigns against Kurdish rebels) in an apparent effort to create a militia directly loyal to him (KRG.org, December 1, 2008). KRG President Masoud Barzani has also accused al-Maliki of marginalizing Kurds in the Iraqi army while appointing his own people to head each of Iraq's 16 army divisions, rather than following the legal parliamentary procedure of choosing such commanders by consensus (*Los Angeles Times*, "Interview with Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani," January 12).

Additionally, al-Maliki has deployed Iraqi army units northwards to areas the Kurds want to incorporate into their autonomous region. The Kurdish Autonomous Region of today consists simply of the areas from which Saddam Hussein withdrew his forces in 1991, and does not include many predominantly Kurdish areas just south of 1991's "Green Line." One such mostly Kurdish town south of the autonomous region is Khanequin, where al-Maliki suddenly sent an Iraqi army brigade in August, 2008, to "help with security." The Arab Iraqi army unit nearly traded fire with the Kurdish peshmerga sent to intercept them before mediation led both forces to agree that neither group would enter the town.

For towns just south of the Kurdish autonomous region's accidental borders - like Khanequin, Makhmour, Kalar, and Chamchamal - the significant oil resources around them only add to the determination of both Baghdad and the KRG to control them. The multi-ethnic demography of larger towns like Kirkuk and Mosul - with Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen, and Christian populations - further complicates the issue. Kurdish leaders who would negotiate away historic claims to areas like Kirkuk or surrender any

measure of Kurdish autonomy would undoubtedly be committing political suicide. Although Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution stipulates that these areas must have a referendum to decide whether or not to join the KRG region, several deadlines for the referendum (the first in December 2007) have already come and gone. Kirkuk did not even get to vote in the 2009 provincial elections, as disagreements over who gets to vote in that province still await resolution (the three KRG provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniya did not have provincial elections either, since they are functioning under a separate KRG electoral calendar). A deadline of March 31, 2009, for a special parliamentary committee to table a new Kirkuk election law will probably be missed as well. In Diyala and Nineweh provinces just south of the KRG, Kurds largely controlled the provincial councils (as they do in Kirkuk) due to a 2005 electoral boycott by Arab Sunnis. Last month's electoral results mean they will be expected to relinquish control of Nineweh (Mosul) to the Sunni Arab Hadba party (which garnered 48.4 percent of the vote to the Kurdish Alliance's 25.5 percent) and control of Diyala to the Sunni Arab Iraqi Islamic Party (which garnered 21.1 percent of the vote to the Kurdish Alliance's 17.2 percent).

These developments, combined with Prime Minister al-Maliki's increasingly tense relations with Kurdish leaders, seem to foreshadow a difficult year ahead for Iraqi Kurds and their leaders. As the security situation in the center and south of Iraq improves, an increasingly confident al-Maliki-led government appears less conciliatory and more aggressive towards Iraqi Kurdistan. According to *The Economist*, "Mr. Barzani is said to have recently told Mr. Maliki to his face: 'You smell like a dictator'" (November 27, 2008). Arab Iraqi voters in turn appear to be rewarding al-Maliki for his assertiveness.

Iraq's Kurds may hope that divisions among the Arab Iraqi political parties remain serious enough to force some of them to maintain Kurdish allies. Failing the emergence of a fractious, weak, and inward-focused political scene in Baghdad, Iraqi Kurds risk a difficult time ahead. If the government in Baghdad continues to consolidate, KRG leaders may find few friends in the region (besides the mountains) to turn to in case of political difficulties, especially given the current plans to withdraw U.S. troops within two years.

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In the Aftermath of Iraq's Provincial Elections, Part Two: Shi'a Militancy Takes a Blow from al-Maliki's Mainstream

Iraqis cast their votes on January 31 in new provincial council elections whose outcome could shape Iraq's balance of power and set the tone for the upcoming general elections in December 2009. With 440 seats contested in 14 provinces, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanon (State of Law) coalition appears to be the overwhelming winner in the elections, though the final results will not be announced until later this month (Aswat al-Iraq, February 5; IRNA, February 5). Holding sway in Baghdad and various southern provinces, al-Maliki has now gained influence in areas where his coalition previously lacked control, especially in southern regions like Basra and Dhi Qar. For the most part, al-Maliki appears to have been rewarded for his forceful action against militia politics, which began with the spring 2008 assault on Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. Now al-Maliki's leadership is supported by voters who desire a more centralized and efficient form of government, such as that developed by al-Maliki in the latter part of his tenure in office.

The clear loser in the elections is the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). A pro-Iranian Shi'a party that was part of the Shaheed al-Mihrab list (a coalition of Shiite political parties), ISCI lost considerable support following allegations of corruption, mismanagement, and incompetence in recent years (al-Jazeera, February 5). With the loss of seven Shia regions that it took in the 2005 elections, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's party is now one of the weakest parties on the political map (Middle East Online, February 5). The news comes as a major blow to the leaders of the ISCI, who hoped that a victory in the elections would help them create a nine-governorate federal region in the south of the country. Meanwhile, Sunni politics saw an increase in voter participation along with the rise of new tribal-political factions in Anbar province like the Awakening Alliance, which won 17 percent of the votes, and the anti-al Qaeda faction of Sunni politician Saleh al-Mutlaq, with 17.6 percent of the votes (Niqash, February 12; al-Jazeera, February 5).

Accordingly, the Salah al-Din province, with a large Sunni population, claimed the highest level of voter participation (65 percent), a sharp contrast from 2005, when Sunnis

boycotted the elections to protest the American influence in Iraqi politics (Fars, February 1). In another example, the Sunni al-Hadba bloc came out on top of the Kurdish factions in the ethnically mixed province of Nineveh, taking away the Shi'a and Kurdish hegemony in Baghdad and the central provinces (Middle East Online, February 5). With 51 percent overall voter participation, the elections have been described as a major success for a country still undergoing a significant transformation after years of single-party rule (IRNA, February 5).

The election results, however, involve a number of salient implications, which can be more complex than early readings suggest. In a sense, the elections signal a shift away from the project of regionalization (federalism) that, according to many Iraqi nationalists, put the country's political stability at risk with the promotion of ethno-sectarian identity politics (Niqash, February 3). But what the results primarily verify is the growing fragmentation of the Iraqi political landscape, marked by major splits between larger Shia parties (like ISCI) and the Dawa. Furthermore, divisions have also emerged within Sunni parties, especially inside the Tawafuq Front, with several parties pulling out of the coalition due to the overwhelming domination of the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) in the Sunni coalition (Niqash, February 3). There is also the newly formed nationalist faction, the Iraqi National Project, which mainly ran on nationalistic rather than sectarian agenda (Middle East Online, February 11). On the Shi'a front, new political trends can be detected with the appearance of independent groups like the Yusuf al-Hububi party in Karbala and the decline of more established pro-federalist Shi'a parties like Fadhila in Basra, winning only 1.3 percent of votes (Aswat Al-Iraq, February 5).

Some troubling signs that merit serious attention have emerged from the election outcome:

- First of all, the latest results of the elections hardly indicate that the State of Law coalition (al-Maliki's faction) has won a sweeping victory, especially in Baghdad and the southern Shi'a provinces where Sadrist still maintain some level of influence, despite the fact that Muqtada al-Sadr's group was banned from participating on the grounds that it maintains a militia (Middle East Online February 9). In Karbala, for instance, where al-Maliki's Dawa party won a clear victory

in 2005, the independent Yusuf al-Hububi party surprised many when it beat out many famous Shi'a competitors in the province. So, in many ways, al-Maliki's grip on power still seems shaky. This is partly because of the way some Shia voters are beginning to see Maliki as someone who backs certain former Ba'athists, a perception promoted by the ISCI ahead of the general elections. Thus, al-Maliki's true degree of success is still unknown.

- Second, there is the possibility of a backlash from the pro-federalist factions, especially the Kurdish bloc, which may lead to the emergence of a more centralized state and a considerable threat to their regional or party interests. This may complicate the political situation even more with regards to the Kurdish claim over Kirkuk, where, due to major differences between Baghdad and Erbil, the provincial elections never took place (al-Jazeera, February 1). In the southern regions, the province of Misan has already begun to see a pro-federalist backlash. More than a week after the elections, a total of 25 parties formed an alliance to launch a civil disobedience demonstration to protest the results of the polls (Aswat al-Iraq, February 12).

- Third, the elections shed light on a deepening rift within the Shi'a bloc, which could enhance competition and a potential outbreak of violence for control over territories. While the ISCI will likely seek to repair its losses in the general elections by becoming more competitive on the local level in provinces like Basra and Diyala, the Sadrists, who appear to have been largely marginalized as a result of Baghdad's political and military tactics in the previous year, could see the current situation as a threat and reconstitute the Mahdi Army. In fact, the Sadrists are already alleging voter fraud in the provinces of Maysan, Najaf, and Dhi Qar, while Sadr has issued a new statement that rejects negotiations of any sort with Washington, recalling the group's commitment to armed resistance (Middle East Online, February 9; Fars, February 1). In many ways, the Sadrist factor is still relevant and the elections bring to light how intra-Shi'a politics are entering a new stage of competition, rather than coming to an end.

- Fourth, the latest string of coordinated attacks southwest of Baghdad, Karbala, and Nasseriya suggests an existing organized insurgent movement that seeks to interrupt the fragile political situation on the ground (Aswat al-Iraq, February 12).

- Finally, there is Iran. For the most part, Tehran's hardliners are aware of their loss of influence in Iraqi politics as a result of the ISCI's decline in popularity and the advent of Iraqi nationalism with the victory of al-Maliki. Yet Iranian newspapers maintained a low-key position on the rise of Sunni political factions and, in some instances, described the latest results as a clear victory for "Islamist" groups with the aim of keeping religion as the basis of the Iraqi political order (Fars, February 5). The ISCI's defeat in the elections was described as a major "victory," while the decline of Shi'a voter participation, especially in the province of Diyala, was primarily blamed on a lack of security in the southern regions (Fars February 1; IRNA, February 5).

Despite the latest setbacks, Iran remains defiant. On the day the initial results of the elections were announced, Mohsen Rezaee, the Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council (a consultative council to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenini) and a leading hard-line politician in the Islamic Republic, asserted that Iran still remains the most influential force in the region (Fars, February 5). The remark could be interpreted as a warning to Washington. It remains unclear how Tehran could change its strategy in Iraq, but the Sadrists, whose leader resides in Qom, could play a vital role in such a process.

Of course, most of the above security factors and their impact on Iraq's security situation will depend on whether or not stable alliances will emerge in the post-electoral period and how such coalitions might affect the parliamentary elections later this year. If the Sadrists, for instance, join forces with al-Maliki's ruling party, the chances of internal Shi'a conflict may be reduced if the ISCI seeks to build a coalition with Kurdish factions (Middle East Online February 11). The political landscape could also look very different if ISCI forms an alliance with the faction of Iyad Alawi, signaling the rise of a major political competition between exiled Shi'a factions (both secular and religious) over key positions in the parliament (Niqash, February 12).

In sum, the elections have exposed a sense of national stability that appears to revolve around the rejection of a decentralized and fragmented form of governance, which many Iraqis fear will put the country's fledgling democracy at risk of a resurrection of unruly militia politics. The advent of a centralist-nationalist mood underscores Iraqis' desire for restored sovereignty in a state that is efficient, centralized, and capable of providing its citizens with security and economic stability without the help of foreign forces.

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Roundup of Kabul Suicide Gang Reveals Ties to Pakistan

Suicide bombings have become a regular insurgent tactic in Afghanistan since 2005, with a special focus on Kabul in the last year. The number of such attacks have grown considerably during the recent years in Kabul, culminating in the February 12 suicide bombings that targeted public buildings in the Afghan capital, killing 26 people and injuring more than 50 (*Afghan Daily* [Kabul], February 12). Perhaps to the surprise of Afghanistan's national security services, these devastating attacks came only days after security forces announced the roundup of a gang of suicide bombers in Kabul.

Since January 2008, Kabul has witnessed six deadly suicide attacks. In most cases, they were claimed by the Taliban. On February 3, Afghanistan's government announced it had traced and broken up the terrorist group behind these attacks. The group is alleged to have drawn its members from two jihadi groups - the Haqqani network and the Kashmir-based Harakat-ul-Mujahideen. Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) announced the arrest of seventeen members of the Kabul suicide group in connection with six suicide bombings since March 2007. This terrorist group was headed by a 23-year-old Pakistani bomb-maker known as Yasir, with all six of the suicide bombers coming from Pakistan (*PakTribune*, February 3; *Deutsche Welle*, February 3). An NDS spokesman named two other Pakistani ringleaders as Ezatollah and Rahimollah. Other members of the group

were responsible for laying mines, carrying explosives, guiding the suicide bombers and scouting locations for attacks (*Pajhwok News*, February 9).

Most recently, the group is believed to be responsible for the deadly January 17 suicide attack on a convoy travelling the road between an American base, Camp Eggers, and the German embassy in the central Kabul district of Wazir Akbar Khan. Five people, including a U.S. soldier, were killed in the bombing (*Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, [Kabul], January 20). The NDS claims the suicide bomber was a native of Pakistan's Swat region named Abdullah. Located in Pakistan's restive North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Swat has been the scene of intense fighting in recent months between Taliban militants and Pakistani security forces. Afghan officials claimed that it was the same gang of Kabul suicide bombers who entered the Ministry of Culture and Information - in the heavily fortified part of Kabul - and killed two people last October (AFP, October 31, 2008).

The group was also suspected of a November 27 suicide attack near the US embassy that killed four civilians and wounded up to 17 (*Daily Annis* [Kabul], February 6, 2009). In a single week, from November 27 to December 5, 2008, the gang conducted three suicide attacks. A November 30 suicide attack on a convoy of German embassy diplomats missed the target and resulted in the killing of two Afghan civilians. Only a few days later, on December 5, a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden car into an Afghan army convoy, killing 13 people including six Afghan National Army soldiers. (Radio Television Afghanistan/ RTA, [Kabul], February 7).

The cross-border Haqqani network currently poses the most serious threat to Coalition forces, having expanded its suicide operations from east Afghanistan into Kabul and Afghanistan's southern regions (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 24, 2008; *Terrorism Focus*, July 1, 2008). The network is led by Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani, a veteran jihadi leader in his late 70s believed to have close ties with Taliban supreme leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. His son, Sirajuddin Haqqani, alias Khalifa ("the Successor"), is considered to be the mastermind of most suicide attacks inside Afghanistan for the last two years. The network is based in Danda Darpa Khel, a town near Miran Shah, the headquarters of the North Waziristan tribal agency in Pakistan, close to the border with Afghanistan. Sirajuddin,

who is in his early thirties, is highly influential on both sides of the border, especially among the new generation of young and aggressive Taliban fighters. The United States has placed a \$200,000 bounty on his head.

Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) is a Pakistani militant group which was established in 1985, aiming to oppose the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. However, at the end of Soviet-Afghan war in 1989, the group entered Kashmir to fight Indian troops. It is suspected that during the past few years HuM has once again started exerting influence in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan's tribal areas and the NWFP. The United States has added HuM to its list of designated terrorist organizations (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, April 30, 2007).

The continuing suicide attacks inside Kabul have gained momentum at a time when the new administration of President Barack Obama is planning a troop surge in Afghanistan and possibly a new counterterrorism strategy. A suicide bombing in Urozgan Province that killed 27 policemen at the same time the NDS was announcing the roundup of the Kabul cell demonstrates the difficulty authorities face in eliminating the threat of suicide attacks (Voice of Jihad, February 2; Afghan Islamic Press, February 2).

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