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Iran's Revolutionary Guard

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TURKEY SEEKING U.S. REAPERS AND SUPER COBRAS FOR COUNTERTERRORIST OPERATIONS

Dissatisfied with the results of a joint venture with Israel to supply the Turkish Armed Forces (Turk Silahlı Kuvvetleri -TSK) with Heron model unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Turkey is turning to the United States in an effort to purchase a much improved and far more lethal version of the Predator UAV known as the "Reaper." The TSK is looking to the advanced drones to enhance its capabilities in combating the Kurdistan Workers Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan – PKK) and to decrease its reliance on intelligence from American sources.

The MQ-9 Reaper has been described as a "true hunter-killer," with lethal capabilities far in excess of those of the highly successful MQ-1 Predator. The Reaper, powered by a 950 hp turboprop engine, is three times as fast as the Predator and can remain in the air far longer with the use of external fuel tanks. The U.S. Air Force's 28 Reapers were first deployed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007. Since then it has also been used in Pakistan. The MQ-9 can be equipped with AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles, AGM-114 Hellfire II air-to-ground missiles (the most commonly used munition in attacks on targets in Pakistan's northwest frontier region), and GBU-12 Paveway II laser-guided munitions.

Turkey's arms procurement agency, the Ministry of National Defense Undersecretariat for Defense Industries (Savunma Sanayii Mustesarligi – SSM) applied to purchase the MQ-9 Reapers made by General Atomics Aeronautical

Systems earlier this year. Export agreements have so far been approved for Britain, Germany and Italy.

Turkey has taken delivery of only two of the ten Israeli-made Heron UAVs originally scheduled for completion by October 2007, though these experienced technical problems at the Batman airbase in southeast Turkey that prevented their deployment (*Today's Zaman*, March 5). Ankara has threatened to cancel the \$185 million contract and is demanding financial penalties from the manufacturers, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) and Elbit Systems, which operate jointly as the Israel UAV Partnership (IUP) (*Haaretz*, May 18; *Anatolia*, May 20). The manufacturers blame the delays on cameras (Airborne Thermal Imaging Systems) being made by Turkey's Aselsan Inc., which specializes in military electronics. IAI and Elbit Systems claim the Turkish made cameras are heavier than the original Israeli versions, reducing the altitude and flight time of the Herons (*Hurriyet*, May 22). SSM chief Murad Bayar says the camera issue has been resolved and after modifications to the engines are completed delivery of Israeli-made Herons will begin in August (*Anatolia*, May 21). Turkey is working on the design and manufacture of a number of locally-made UAVs and is reported to have expressed interest in participating in the development of the jet-powered Talarion, a joint European UAV design built by the European Aeronautics Defense and Space Co. (UPI, June 25). The Talarion is not expected to be available before 2015.

Despite disappointment with the Israeli Herons, Turkey is believed to have signed a \$100 million contract for the supply of IAI's HAROP "loitering munition," an expendable bomb-equipped UAV that remains in the air up to six hours until a target has been selected through the relay of video imagery (*Aviation International News*, June 18). The HAROP is an improvement on IAI's "Harpy." Turkey purchased about 100 Harpys in 1999. Equipped with a 50 pound warhead, the HAROP's flight characteristics make it especially useful in urban warfare.

Ankara is also seeking to purchase American-made AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopters. Purchase of these aircraft was discussed in a June visit to Washington by TSK Chief of Staff General Ilker Basbug (*Hurriyet*, June 24). At present, Turkey operates a fleet of 32 single-engine AH-1 Cobra and nine heavily upgraded AH-1W Super Cobras that have seen extensive service in southeastern Turkey and Iraq. Manufacturer Bell Helicopter Textron no longer makes the Super Cobras

so the TSK is attempting to buy surplus Super Cobras from the U.S. Marines as Bell Helicopter Textron begins manufacturing the new "Z" model of the Super Cobra and upgrading the Marines' older AH-1Ws (*Defense News*, June 29).

A previous effort to purchase the Super Cobras failed due to U.S. needs in Iraq and Afghanistan, though industry insiders claim Turkey's exclusion of U.S. firms from bidding on a lucrative contract for new attack helicopters over technology transfer issues played a major role in the Super Cobras being unavailable for Turkish purchase (*DefenseNews.com*, January 28, 2008; *Today's Zaman*, April 13, 2008). A U.S. offer of AH-64 Apache attack helicopters was declined, due to a lack of infrastructure for the repair and maintenance of these aircraft (*Hurriyet*, June 24). Turkey is hoping for U.S. approval for purchase of the UAVs and helicopters by the end of the year.

Turkey is also reported to be seeking the purchase of a large number of Russian-made Mil Mi-28N anti-armor attack helicopters, though these would have little use against the PKK, which does not use tanks or other armor (*Interfax-AVN*, June 17).

FRENCH CONVERTS TO ISLAM CONVICTED OF RUNNING IRAQI JIHAD NETWORK

Eight men from the Toulouse region of France were handed sentences of six months to six years on July 9 by a Paris magistrate's court for their efforts to support or join the jihad in Iraq (AFP, July 9). The public prosecutor said the defendants "hide behind the argument of the fight against a war of occupation," though this is just a veil to "conceal their hatred of unbelievers" (*La Depeche*, June 19).

The two were captured by Syrian intelligence officials at an al-Qaeda safe house in Syria in December 2006 as they prepared to cross the border into Iraq. They were questioned for two months by Syrian authorities and deported to France in February 2007, where they were arrested and charged as they left the airplane. Further arrests of members of the jihadi network were carried out in the following months.

Sabri Essid and Thomas Barnouin (a.k.a. Thomas Abdelhakim) were both convicted of "criminal conspiracy for terrorist purposes" and given five year sentences with one year suspended and additional terms of three years probation. Several of the other suspects,

including a Moroccan national and five native French converts to Islam, were given six year sentences for their role in recruiting and supporting a jihadi network. One of the defendants, Miloud Chachou, disappeared in Iraq and was tried in absentia. He was given a five year sentence and his arrest warrant was renewed.

Twenty-eight-year-old Thomas Barnouin converted to Islam in 1999 and left his home in Albi (50 miles northeast of Toulouse) to pursue Quranic studies at the University of Medina. While there he became convinced it was his duty to fight the Americans in Iraq. A Saudi contact introduced him to a network that would take him from Jordan to Syria, where he would be infiltrated with other volunteers into Iraq. Barnouin left Medina in 2006 just ahead of a Saudi security sweep, but Saudi authorities had recordings of telephone conversations in which Barnouin described his plan to friends in Toulouse who were also planning to go to Syria. The Saudis alerted Syrian security forces and the safe house was raided in December 2006, leading to the arrest of Barnouin and Essid. Barnouin tried to open fire on the Syrians with an AK-47, but was tackled before he could deploy the weapon (*Le Figaro*, October 15, 2007). Both men expressed their desire to “die as martyrs.”

The spiritual leader of the jihadi network was Shaykh Olivier Qorel, a French citizen in his 60's of Syrian origin. Sabri Essid, a friend of Barnouin, traveled separately from France to Syria via Turkey at the urging of Qorel, who told him; “You will meet your girlfriend again in paradise, but before then sell your car and settle your debts” (*Le Figaro*, October 15, 2007).

An anonymous tip to the French embassy in Tunis alerted French authorities to Sabri Essid's plan to attack a supermarket in Toulouse and the American consulate in Lyon. Police put Essid under surveillance, which soon led to the discovery of a group of militant young French converts to Islam, all members of the same mosque. Unknown to them, their phones were tapped and they were closely observed for an extended period – according to one investigator: “There are miles of literature on each of these guys” (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 21, 2007). The converts were in the habit of getting together to surf jihadi websites on the internet.

It is believed some 60 French citizens have left France to join the jihad overseas since 2003. At least 12 have been killed (including two suicide bombers) while another 30 have returned home to incarceration in French prisons (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 21, 2007).

Jihadis Identify U.S. Plots against China in Xinjiang and Africa

By Abdul Hameed Bakier

In light of the ethnic violence in China's Xinjiang province, various jihadi internet forums focused on the handling of the turmoil by China's security forces. A vast region comprising nearly a sixth of China's total land mass, Xinjiang is home to a number of Central Asian ethnic groups, the largest of which is the Turkic-speaking Uyghur people, until recently the dominant group in the region. Massive government-encouraged post-war migration by Han Chinese has made the Uyghurs a minority in their traditional home, known to Muslims as East Turkistan.

The first response of Salafi-Jihadi forums to any perceived injustice inflicted on Muslims anywhere typically involves citing a conspiracy theory regarding the manipulation of Muslims by the United States. One forum debated China's “brutal” handling of East Turkistan Muslims in a post entitled; “China, the United States and al-Qaeda Organization” (muslm.net, July 7, 2009).

On the trouble in the oil-rich Xinjiang region, a jihadi forum member, nicknamed Ibn Khaldoon al-Jaza'iri, accused the United States of interfering in Chinese affairs by instigating the Uyghur Muslims in East Turkistan to rebel against the government. The prospect of China taking a leading role in the world as the next superpower is disturbing to the United States. Therefore, wherever there are Chinese investments, especially in oil and gas, there are troubles caused by the United States, alleges al-Jaza'iri. The United States tries to impede China's quest for alternative sources of energy badly needed for its rapidly growing economy. For example, China has made big strides in Africa by building strong relations with oil-rich nations based on mutual interests. According to al-Jaza'iri, China exchanges its know-how in infrastructure projects in return for oil from African countries such as Nigeria and Algeria, but the United States uses the Islamic jihadi factions to hinder Chinese efforts to establish a presence in Africa. As an example, al-Jaza'iri gives the terrorist operation in Algeria's Borj Bouaririj district, where al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility for killing 18 Algerian gendarmerie escorting Chinese workers building the highway between Algerian capital and Borj Bouaririj. In this case, al-Jaza'iri does not appear to have done

his homework - the AQIM attack was carried out when the gendarmerie was returning to barracks after having escorted the Chinese workers to their site. The attack was clearly directed at government security forces and not the Chinese workers (Echerouk [Algiers], June 18; Middle East Online, June 21).

Al-Jaza'iri says the constant harassment of Chinese workers by jihadi factions manipulated by the United States raises Chinese investment costs, but adds that jihadis should be careful not to fall for U.S. exploitation and should refrain from attacking Chinese technicians and workers building roads, communication networks and oil facilities for the benefit of Muslims in Islamic countries. It's likely that the United States will attempt to set fire to Eastern Turkistan by directly or indirectly supporting jihadi operations there, similar to what they did in Afghanistan, backed by religious fatwas (religious rulings) from Saudi Arabia's Salafist shaykhs. The "stupid Chinese communist regime," blinded by its hatred for Islam, is expected to fall for the U.S. plan and commit massacres in Eastern Turkistan. Finally, al-Jaza'iri concludes his posting by calling on al-Qaeda leaders to be smart enough not to plunge into the U.S. trap to weaken China.

The majority of forum members disagreed with al-Jaza'iri. "Abu Hamza al-Alawi" rejected the notion that the mujahideen could be manipulated by the United States, adding the mujahideen follow their own agenda regardless of who benefits from their terrorist actions, so long as jihadi objectives are met. The era of U.S. weapons supplies for Muslims to fight communists is over, says al-Alawi, adding that the Western experience with jihadi factions has taught them that Muslims can't be manipulated.

In response to al-Alawi's rebuke, al-Jaza'iri insists the Mujahideen are supported by the West in cases that serve their interests. He contends the West doesn't categorize the Chechen Mujahideen as a terrorist group because they serve the Western objective of weakening the Russian Federation. [1] The Chechen mujahideen are considered a legitimate resistance group by the West, which supplies them with weapons through pro-Western Georgia. Al-Jaza'iri claims the West doesn't perceive the Chechen fighters to be powerful enough to declare an Islamic state that would pose a threat to the West.

Other jihadi forums also focused on the turmoil in Xinjiang. "Abu Hassim al-Ghareeb" urged Muslims not to forget the Turkistan Muslims suppressed by China

and to help prevent the Chinese from liquidating their Islamic identity (hanein.info, July 8). Regarding ways of supporting Turkistan, some forum members suggested boycotting Chinese products and investments in Muslim countries, but other, more extreme members called for jihad against China to return the favor of the Turkistan jihadis who they claim poured into Afghanistan in the 1990s, pledged alliance to the Afghan Islamic Emirate, trained in al-Qaeda camps and fought alongside the mujahideen. In the words of one forum member who urges jihad in China; "Neither boycott nor protests will stop the slaying of our brothers. The solution, known to everyone, is jihad. Who will sell himself to God and rush to the battlefield?" A third forum member called upon global jihad leaders Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri to pay more attention to the revolution in Turkistan and to extend financial and moral support to the Turkistan Mujahideen to make sure they remain adherents of the Salafi creed and part of the global jihadi movement. "Take the initiative. Choose from among them whom you think suitable to lead an Islamic Emirate" said a posting from an Iraqi jihadi forum (faloja1.info, July 8). Again, the jihadi forum members betray their lack of knowledge about East Turkistan - Salafists are extremely rare in the region, where Sufism remains the dominant creed of Xinjiang's Sunni Muslims.

Members of more moderate forums expressed concern over conducting terrorist attacks in China. Any terrorist attacks there would give the Chinese government a legitimate reason to crush Turkistan's Muslims, says "First Lieutenant Ata" - "Muslims should only boycott Chinese products and organize protests in front of Chinese embassies. Any direct external military Muslim interference in Turkistan would only exacerbate the problem" (4flying.com, July 10).

The jihadi forum members' hypothesis of U.S. manipulation of jihadi factions to prevent China from becoming a superpower seems far fetched. China is not powerful enough to threaten Western powers militarily or confront the United States. At best, China could stir up problems for the purpose of making economic gains from the Western world in a way similar to Russia. It is also unrealistic to assume that al-Qaeda and other jihadi factions would play a significant role in a Chinese-Western struggle over Africa or elsewhere. Al-Qaeda terrorist activities in Algeria, for example, are due to an internal Algerian struggle and not to U.S. manipulation of jihadi factions against China's newly established interests in the region.

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Notes:

1. Presumably al-Jaza'iri means the Chechen mujahideen are not categorized as a terrorist group "in practice." Several Chechen mujahideen organizations and individuals have appeared on Western and UN designated terrorist lists.

The Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Threaten France over Hostility to Burkas

By Pascale Combelles Siegel

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Afghanistan's Taliban strongly condemned French President Sarkozy's declaration that the burka, a sign of "enslavement" and "debasement," is "not welcome in the territory of the French Republic" (*Aujourd'hui en France*, June 19; *La Croix*, June 19). Both groups reacted swiftly and angrily, castigating Sarkozy's declaration as yet another example of the Western war against Islam.

President Sarkozy made his statement during a speech before a joint session of the French Parliament on the global economic crisis. Why the president and his advisors decided to weave the burka into a speech on economic policy remains obscure. It may have to do with that the June 9 proposal by 58 representatives, mostly from Sarkozy's center-right Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP), to open a Parliamentary inquiry to examine the issue and "define counter-measures to curb the wearing of the burka and niqab." [1] According to the proposal, the burka is degrading and cannot be tolerated in France under the principles of secularism and gender equality.

Both AQIM and the Taliban reacted swiftly and angrily, hyping the threat to Islamic custom and caricaturing its significance in an effort to rally maximum support against the West among Muslims in both Islamic and Western countries.

AQIM's Amir, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud (a.k.a. Abdelmalek Droukdel), asserted that President Sarkozy's stance reflects a broader Western hostility toward Islam, characterizing Sarkozy's statement as "the essence of extremism, racism and the most manifest form of religious terrorism and incitement to religious hatred" (*Al-Khabar* [Algiers], July 1; As-Ansar.com, June 29). Throughout his communiqué, Wadud used interchangeably the terms "France/French" and "West/Western." Meanwhile, Taliban spokesman Qari Muhammad Yusuf explicitly accused Western leaders of collusion with President Sarkozy: "In clear and simple words, we must say that Sarkozy's recent decision is not his own decision. It is not his idea or theory. It is a general decision that all Western officials have adopted to usurp Muslims' Islamic and human freedoms, to target their social rights and spiritual values. We noticed that no single Western leader or organization has protested against Sarkozy's recent declarations and attitudes; indeed all of them remained silent in satisfaction" (*Sawt al-Jihad*, June 29; As-Ansar.com, June 29).

In the same statement, the Taliban claimed banning the burka "is a decision agreed upon and applied by all officials of Western countries to usurp Muslim freedom and Muslim humanity and target their social rights and moral values." In their zeal to demonstrate collusion between France and the West, both AQIM and the Taliban glossed over the fact that France is the only country that has so far attempted to define the wearing of the burka as being incompatible with national values.

Wadud attempts to play on Muslim fears of greater restrictions on their religion as practiced in the West; "There is no doubt that our Muslim brothers, particularly in France and in Europe in general, are increasingly concerned about the practices of the French politicians and leaders and their harassment against them. Yesterday it was the veil, today it is the burka and tomorrow their dirty hands could be extended to prayer, fasting or pilgrimage." For Wadud, if Muslims do not feel compelled to defend the burka or the niqab, surely they must not feel compelled to defend prayer or fasting.

The controversy poses two problems for French authorities. The first is a security challenge. The Taliban did not specifically threaten further attacks against France and its interests; however, the presence of more than 3,000 French soldiers in Afghanistan, including combat troops involved in interdiction missions along Afghanistan's eastern border with Pakistan, offers easy

targets for retaliation (see *Terrorism Focus*, September 2, 2008). Wadud, for his part, spelled out his threat clearly, writing: “We will do everything in our power to avenge our sisters’ and our daughters’ honor, by striking France and its interests, wherever they may be” (*As-Ansar.com*, June 30). At a time of renewed AQIM activism in Mauritania and Mali as well as Algeria, that threat should be taken seriously.

The second problem is ideological and political. By raising the specter of a possible ban without having a specific policy in mind, Sarkozy has allowed the radicals, whom he presumably wants disempowered, to seize the initiative and mobilize support against the West’s goals in Afghanistan and beyond. Sarkozy’s brief mention of the burka overshadowed several overtures he recently made to the Muslim community. His insistence that “Islam must be recognized in France like any other religion,” his acknowledgement that anti-Muslim discrimination exists and must be confronted, and his belief that the current model of integration does not fulfill its promises for many Muslim youths were completely obscured by the burka controversy.

Possibly anticipating that a strong message condemning the burka might play into the hands of those who argue that the West is at war with Islam, President Sarkozy argued that the burka is not a religious, but a human rights issue. Several Muslim leaders concurred with the French president on this point; Muhammad Moussaoui, president of the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman, and Shaykh Muhammad Sayid Tantawi, Grand Imam of Cairo’s Al-Ahzar Mosque and Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University, both agreed that the Quran only requires women to wear a covering over their heads, nothing more (*Le Monde*, July 2; June 26). However, they also argued that forbidding the burka or the niqab may be counterproductive and contribute to polarizing Muslim and non-Muslim communities in France (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 18).

As things stand now, Sarkozy’s condemnation of the burka has served the radicals’ agenda by allowing them to make their case to a broad audience and to set the terms of the debate. Instead of furthering his vow to address the pitfalls of the current system of integration, Sarkozy has managed only to fuel the radicals’ anti-Western perspective.

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Notes:

[1] Assemblée Nationale, Proposition de résolution no.1725 tendant à la création d’une commission d’enquête sur la pratique du port de la burqa ou du niqab sur le territoire national, Paris, June 9, 2009.

The Role of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij Militia in Iran’s “Electoral Coup”

By Babak Rahimi

Established in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution to defend the Islamic Republic against domestic and foreign threats, Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been accused of playing a decisive role in the re-election of the incumbent President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (*Fars News Agency*, June 12; *Etemad Meli*, July 7). Together with the Basij, a volunteer militia force charged with the task of internal security and suppression of anti-government demonstrations, the IRGC’s role in the June 12 presidential election and its aftermath has largely consisted of campaign activities, the organization of rallies for the president, monitoring the elections and conducting crackdowns on anti-government demonstrations (*Fars News Agency*, May 30; June 6). While the highest authority in the country continues to be the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the June 12 election marks a new stage in the paramilitary’s emergence as a major political force within Iran’s theocracy, entailing a shift in the balance of power towards the Militant Right faction within the conservative establishment.

The Revolutionary Guards Enter Politics

It was during the 2001 re-election of reformist president Mohammad Khatami that the IRGC began to emerge into Iranian politics. This development followed the growth of a tense rivalry between reformers and conservatives in the late 1990s. The re-election of Khatami and the rise of the reformists posed a major threat to the institutionally-based military forces, such as the Guard and the Basij. During the 2004 parliamentary elections, the conservative Guardian Council for the first time approved the candidacy of a number of former Guard officers. In many ways, the politicization of the IRGC was seen by the reformists as a strategic attempt to bring a “security” mindset to the Iranian legislative

branches, a strategy that included the disqualification of a large number of reformist candidates by the Guardian Council. [1]

The political dominance of the Revolutionary Guards became manifest with the victory of the hardliner Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential election, when a number of former officers with close ties to the paramilitary force were assigned to the new administration. Between 2005 and 2008, the IRGC grew in both economic and political influence, with key figures present in the government, including key posts in the Interior Ministry, which is officially in charge of overseeing elections. Moreover, the IRGC gained the full support of the Supreme Leader, who has increasingly become reliant on the paramilitary force to control internal pressure for reforms.

Not Just a Military Force

The second phase of the entry of the Guard into politics came during the 2008 parliamentary elections, when the Supreme Leader appointed Ali Reza Afshar, an ex-IRGC serviceman, to oversee the elections. The appointment marked an unprecedented development in the history of the Islamic Republic, since for the first time elections came under the direct supervision of a former military officer who would be accountable only to the Supreme Leader. The appointment of Afshar followed the bellicose remarks of a number of Revolutionary Guard commanders, who argued aggressively that it would be blasphemy to view the IRGC and Basij as merely military forces, having no involvement in the politics of the country (Mizan, November 21, 2007). [2] Despite opposition from a number of reformist and pragmatic politicians, like Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, against the entry of the Guard and the Basij into politics, the Supreme Leader continued with his push to qualify more former officers to run for the parliament (*Etemad*, December 2, 2007; Iran Student News Agency [ISNA], December 31, 2007). By spring 2008, the hardliners, most of whom are former Guard or Basij officers, dominated not only the parliament but also the new administration.

In summer 2008, however, a major transformation occurred within the IRGC's command, which many reformists believe laid the grounds for an "electoral coup" in the 2009 presidential elections. The new command apparatus included a number of important hardline figures closely connected with the Supreme Leader (such as Mohammad Hejazi and Jafar Assadi)

in senior positions in the Guard's 31 new command units (Islamic Republic News Agency [IRNA], June 16, 2009). Hojjatoleslam Hussain Taeb was appointed to lead the new Basij force, now an integrated unit within the IRGC. The new commanders can be described as major Khomeini loyalists, ideologically close to a number of former officers now serving in parliament and the president's administration.

The reshuffling of the IRGC's command highlights the consolidation of a hard-line faction within the paramilitary unit. To many dissidents, these promotions were seen as an attempt by the Supreme Leader to cement loyalty within the IRGC and stifle opposition against the president, seen by many middle-ranking and pro-reform commanders as too erratic and unfit for the office. The promotion of hardline officers sent a powerful message to the opposition working within Iran's civil society, at that time anticipating the 2009 elections. Aimed at evoking fear in the minds of dissidents, the Guard accordingly displayed its readiness to confront its domestic and foreign foes by conducting a number of military exercises in the Persian Gulf and in Iran's border provinces (see *Terrorism Focus*, July 23, 2008).

The Political Emergence of the Basij

Units of Iran's Basij, a lightly-armed volunteer militia under the command of the IRGC and the Supreme Leader, emerged to play a more important role in the practical aspects of the recent election. Just weeks prior to June 12, the Basij became directly involved in the pro-Ahmadinejad political campaign around the country (the president is a well-known veteran and patron of the Basij). With campaign headquarters in major cities, young Basijis recruited through summer camp programs organized rallies for the incumbent president. [3] Days before the election, Ahmadinejad's Basiji campaigners organized their largest rally at a massive public place (Mossalae Imam) in Tehran. The organizers mobilized supporters from other Basij bases set up in the cities and villages around the capital city, creating the largest pro-Ahmadinejad rally in the pre-election period. During the election, the Basiji forces were present at the voting stations, at times appearing to intimidate some of the younger voters who seemed to favor the reformist candidate, Mir-Hussain Mousavi. [4]

On the campaigning level, the IRGC continued to advance its political influence through propaganda. Some weeks prior to the elections, units of the Guard and some of its leading commanders began a negative campaign against

Mousavi and his supporters that continues to this day (Tabnak, July 7). Drawing similarities with the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, the Mousavi supporters were branded as “green anti-revolutionaries.” After the elections, Mousavi was described as a “traitor” for challenging the legitimacy of the elections by the Supreme Leader’s representative in the IRGC, Abul-Ghasem Alizadeh (Fars News Agency, June 12; Tabnak, July 9). When pro-Mousavi demonstrators stormed into the streets of major cities around the country protesting the election results, the IRGC began to organize major pro-Ahmadinejad rallies televised by state TV (Fars News Agency, June 16).

The most controversial aspect of the IRGC’s involvement in the electoral process lays in the actual vote counts. Some opposition activists believe that many ballots were never counted and the computer system, set up by the intelligence units of the IRGC, contributed a number of votes in favor of Ahmadinejad. The reality, however, might be somewhat more complicated and less conspiratorially determined. What remains certain is the security role the Guard played in crushing the post-election protest movement. Deploying 30% of its forces, plus the Basij militants, the Revolutionary Guards actively participated in both intelligence and anti-riot tactical operations to crush the demonstrations (Tabnak, July 5). The role of the intelligence services was critical in this process, as hidden video surveillance helped the Revolutionary Guard detain a number of protestors, including those who used cell phones to record the events unfolding on the ground. [5] By early July, the IRGC proudly declared victory over a “foreign plot” to topple the regime (Tabnak, July 5).

Conclusion

Opposition groups and dissidents, including the defeated reformist candidate Mousavi, view the above declaration as the latest attempt by IRGC-Basij forces, together with the intelligence-security apparatus, to reshape the Islamic Republic into a military junta. The Guard is now perceived as the main political force within the theocratic establishment, remapping its factional political landscape into a new military oligarchy. It remains to be seen how the opposition will eventually respond, but one development that has certainly shifted the Iranian political scene is the growing might of the Revolutionary Guard. One of the most important implications of this development is the consolidation of a military state that can be described as a theocracy only in name. But a more important implication is the impact

of the post-election period on regional security, as many of Iran’s neighbors, particularly the Persian Gulf states, would perceive the rise of such a junta state as a major threat to their national security. What may have begun as an Iranian internal conflict could eventually lead to a major regional crisis.

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Notes:

1. This observation and many others in this article are based on extensive interviews carried out in Tehran between June 5 and June 18, 2009. For reasons of personal safety in current conditions, the names of those interviewed have been withheld by request.
2. Such statements contradicted Ayatollah Khomeini’s last will, which stated that not only the Revolutionary Guard but also the entire armed forces should refrain from political activities, thus maintaining a separation between the civilian and military spheres. See Ruhollah M. Khomeini, *The Last Message: The Political and Divine Will of His Holiness Imam Khomeini*: www.irna.ir/occasion/ertehal/english/wil/lmnew1.htm.
3. Fieldwork observation, Tehran, May 25-June 10, 2009.
4. Fieldwork observation, Tehran, June 12, 2009.
5. Based on fieldwork, Tehran, June 14-18, 2009.

The Baghdadi Tapes: Supposedly Imprisoned Iraqi Islamist Claims He Still Leads Fight against U.S. Occupation

By Andrew McGregor

Despite the arrest on April 23 of a man identified by Iraqi authorities as Abu Omar al-Husayni al-Baghdadi, the elusive leader of the “Islamic

State of Iraq” (ISI), audio messages keep emerging from an unseen individual who identifies himself as the authentic Abu Omar al-Husayni al-Baghdadi. There are several theories regarding the identification of the mysterious commander of the ISI, an organization closely connected to al-Qaeda in Iraq since its establishment was announced on October 15, 2006.

The latest audio message, over 43 minutes long, emerged earlier this month (Al-Furqan Media Production Establishment-al-Fajr Media Center, July 7). In the audiotape, al-Baghdadi denounces Iraq’s “rejectionist” (i.e. Shiite) government for its celebration of the June 30 American withdrawal from Iraq’s cities in a so-called “Sovereignty Day”: “Even if the occupying Americans have no presence except in a small span of land in the desert of Iraq, away from all forms of lives, every Muslim has to practice jihad against them until their expulsion.”

The ISI leader says little has changed with the withdrawal from urban areas. The Americans still “have the right to interfere in the military, security, and economic affairs; including the right to exterminate, shell, destroy, terrorize, and detain. They have the right to get in and out of the country without any kind of supervision or search. They have the right to loot and plunder the wealth of the country under the guise of exportation, importation, and duty-free [trade].”

Al-Baghdadi has little use for Iraq’s leading Sunni politicians. While the newly elected speaker of parliament, Ayad al-Samarrai (a Sunni Arab and member of al-Tawafuq [Accord Party], the largest Sunni alliance in Iraq’s parliament) praised the U.S. pullback as proof the political process was the best option, the ISI leader insists al-Tawafuq has played “the ugliest role in the history of any agent group that betrays its religion and its country so far,” through its participation in drafting a secular constitution. Tawafuq leader Harith al-Obeidi was assassinated outside a west Baghdad mosque on June 12 in what the Interior Ministry believes was an al-Qaeda operation. The gunman was reported to have either been killed by the mosque’s security guards or to have blown himself up with a grenade (*Times*, June 12).

Al-Baghdadi goes on to describe Sunni Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi (former leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party and a potential presidential candidate) as a “criminal” responsible for forming and supporting the anti-al-Qaeda Awakening Councils. Al-Hashimi resigned as secretary-general of the Islamic Party in early June

amidst speculation he had been named as an al-Qaeda collaborator during the interrogation of the individual who Iraqi authorities claim is the real Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 30). Al-Hashimi describes the allegations as a “tempest in a teapot” and responds: “This is not the first time, and perhaps not the last, that the Iraqi Islamic Party is unfairly accused of links to Al-Qaeda. In this regard, I do not free from blame those who are lying to their people and promoting allegations, the falseness of which they are the first ones to know. I feel sorry for their political reputation, because lies will soon be revealed and because Iraqi citizens remember well al-Baghdadi’s statements and his threats to bring woe and affliction upon the members of the Iraqi Islamic Party” (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 4).

A number of other Iraqis have been arrested as a result of the “confessions” of the imprisoned man the state says is al-Baghdadi, including Abdul Jabbar Ibrahim, a leading Sunni politician, who now stands accused of terrorism.

Dissecting American Policy in Iraq

Al-Baghdadi argues the American withdrawal from the cities is meaningless as “the U.S. occupier has not come to Iraq to withdraw from it.” The Americans are motivated by economic interests and religious “fallacies,” including “defending the Jewish state [of Israel].”

Al-Baghdadi suggests the American pullback has less to do with strategic objectives than with the war being “the key and genuine reason” for the economic crisis in the United States. In addition, the costs of physical and psychological treatment for U.S. combat veterans and their families are steadily increasing. The departure of most of America’s allies from Iraq and the “devilish alliance [the Coalition]” has increased the economic costs of maintaining the occupation. The “doctrinal, military and ethical steadfastness” of the ISI has “astonished the occupation and made it lose its mind.” The result is the U.S. occupation forces have realized that “the Muslim giant will never die, even if it becomes sick.”

Pointing to the bankruptcy of General Motors and other major American companies, al-Baghdadi says the situation is reminiscent of that which preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union. The ISI leader expects an American collapse “during the administration of the black of Washington” (i.e. President Barack Obama). Shortly after last year’s U.S. presidential election, al-

Baghdadi called on the new president to turn to Islam; “I call on you to believe in the one and only God who has no partners. Then declare your Islam so that you may be safe in the worldly life and the afterlife... You have inherited a distorted religion which contains much more falsehood than truth. It was corrupted by [the Byzantine emperor] Constantine and his unjust assistants and followers, who were seeking glory in this mundane world” (al-Furqan, November 7, 2008). Al-Baghdadi went on to suggest an American return to its pre-war policy of isolationism would be rewarded by trade with an independent and Islamic Iraq:

America used to be impartial until World War II, during which it enjoyed security, safety, and development. Once this nation started to lose impartiality and interfere in the affairs of others, it began to lose everything for the sake of a gang of arms and oil dealers who led an entire nation like slaves to destructive wars as a fuel for their endless greed. Today, on behalf of my brothers in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Chechnya, I propose to you what is good for you and for us; namely, to return to impartiality, withdraw your troops and go home, and not to interfere in the affairs of our countries directly or indirectly. We promise that we will not stop the trading of oil or other commodities with you, provided that justice is achieved, and provided the prices are not cheap (al-Furqan, November 7, 2008).

Apparently disappointed with the president’s failure to accept his invitation to “return” to Islam, al-Baghdadi has since described the president as “a hireling who apostatized from his religion [Islam]” (al-Furqan, May 30).

Addressing Iraqi Opposition to the Islamic State of Iraq

The ISI leader is critical of other mujahideen groups active in Iraq, mocking them as “phony names for groups visualized in the imagination of those who created them... These names, phony or real, were then blessed by the new leaders in a plan to overlook the Islamic State of Iraq under the pretext that it only represents 10 percent of jihad forces, and that it has no political program... according to their fabrications, [the ISI] is socially outcast as if it came from outer space.” Al-Baghdadi rebukes those who suggest the ISI has no political program; “Is lifting the banner of secularism in the name of democracy and the call for the return of the Ba’ath Party a political program while the Islamic

State is not?... The time of patriotism, nationalism and Ba’athism has ended for good, along with its advocates, God willing. We believe that this is the time of the holders of the banner which says there is no god but God [i.e. the monotheist Salafists of the ISI]” (al-Furqan, July 7). The statement accuses the Badr Corps, the Mahdi Army and the Da’wah Party of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of forming a “rejectionist [i.e. Shiite] tripartite” ruling group in Baghdad that was “raised in the embrace” of Ayatollah Khomeini and has “unprecedented aggression and hate toward anything that is Sunni or Arab” (al-Baghdadi here ignores the fact virtually all Iraq’s Shiites are Arabs). He alleges the Iraqi Shiites (a majority in Iraq) are using all the “tricks and cunning methods the Persians are famous for throughout their history,” including the utilization of democracy as a means of establishing a Shiite state in Iraq. Al-Baghdadi accuses the “dogs of the Awakening Council” of collaborating in this project (al-Furqan, July 7).

The Zionist-Christian Conspiracy to Drive Islam from Jerusalem

In late May, al-Baghdadi released a statement regarding Christian-Jewish ties on the occasion of the Pope’s visit to the Middle East (al-Furqan, May 30). In a 40 minute audio recording entitled “Al-Aqsa [Jerusalem] Between the Deviation of the Christians and the Deception of the Jews,” al-Baghdadi notes the importance some Protestant Christians (particularly those in America) place on the literal interpretation of the first five books of the Old Testament (corresponding to the Jewish Torah) and the prophecies found therein. According to al-Baghdadi, the Jews found this approach “beneficial to their objectives, especially since this movement [i.e. Evangelical Protestantism] began to work strongly toward the idea of the return of the Jews to the holy land in Palestine.”

Although Catholicism has traditionally rejected Zionism as a literal interpretation of symbolic texts, al-Baghdadi suggests the Roman Catholic Church has lately been infiltrated by Zionists, thus explaining the timing of Pope Benedict’s trip to Israel at a time when that nation is ruled by a “fanatical right-wing government” and his outreach to the Jews while ignoring the suffering of the Muslim and Christian Palestinians.

Al-Baghdadi ties the timing of the trip to Benjamin Netanyahu’s determination to reconstruct the Jewish temple in Jerusalem and the apocalyptic thread of Zionist Christianity that believes the temple must be

rebuilt before the second coming of Christ will occur. He compares the “end-times” beliefs of each of the three religions of the book:

- The Muslims await the return of Issa ibn Maryam (Jesus, the son of Mary) to “break the cross... and kill his enemies the Jews and his Christian worshippers.”
- The Christians await the return of Jesus to “kill the Muslims and all those who do not believe in his religion at the battle of Armageddon.”
- The Jews await the descendant of David [i.e. the Messiah] so he may “kill the Christians and the Muslims.”

Both Christians and Jews believe the establishment of the state of Israel and the return of the Jews to Palestine are the first step in ushering in the return of their Saviour, according to al-Baghdadi, who accuses the Jews of building a tunnel beneath the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque that leads to halls inside the Temple Mount where Jews can pray as “they wait to move to the top floors” when the Islamic holy sites have been destroyed, allowing the reconstruction of the Jewish temple.

According to the ISI leader, Christians and Jews “have disagreed on many things, even on the God that they worship, but they do not disagree on the sanctity of Jerusalem, the return of the Messiah to it, their animosity to Muslims, or the necessity of annihilating them and rebuilding the temple... They are working hard to demolish al-Aqsa.” Al-Baghdadi warns that Muslims are coming from Khorasan [Central Asia], the Maghreb, Somalia and Yemen to foil these plans. The Pope’s call for peaceful coexistence between “the occupiers and the oppressed” demonstrated “his support for the [Zionist] entity’s existence and its right to our desecrated lands.” Al-Baghdadi threatens retaliation against the traditional Christians sects of the Middle East. A series of bombings targeted Christian churches earlier this month (AFP, July 13; Reuters, July 14).

Who Is the Real Baghdadi?

U.S. forces in Iraq have long maintained that al-Baghdadi was a fictitious character played by an actor named Abu Abdullah al-Naima, but later claimed the role of ISI leader had been filled by a real person after the police chief in Haditha claimed in May 2008

that interrogations of al-Qaeda suspects revealed al-Baghdadi was actually a former Haditha native named Hamed Dawood Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi, who had been dismissed from the security services for extremism (Al-Arabiya, May 7, 2008; CBS, May 7, 2008). On May 27, Iraqi security forces reported the arrest of a man they identified as “al-Baghdadi’s brother,” Zaydan Abd Ahmad al-Majmai (al-Sumaria TV, May 27).

U.S. forces have never confirmed the arrest of al-Baghdadi, obviously sharing the same suspicions that cut across Iraqi society. Many members of Iraq’s parliament have expressed their doubts about the identity of the arrested suspect, noting that there have been numerous false reports in the past of al-Baghdadi’s arrest or death (Al-Sharq al-Awsat, April 30). Al-Baghdadi’s arrest was reported three times in one week alone in March 2007.

According to the pan-Arab daily *al-Hayat*, voice analysts have confirmed the voice on the latest audiotapes is the same as the one that appeared on tapes for two years preceding the arrest of the man Iraqi authorities claim is al-Baghdadi (*al-Hayat*, May 28). *Al-Hayat*’s account included an interview with “a prominent Iraqi security source” who suggested authorities had arrested the wrong man: “Al-Baghdadi is a former Iraqi Army officer. He served as a mosque imam in the Al-Hashimiyat region in al-Anbar before he joined the al-Qaeda organization in December 2005... the person who is being held prisoner by the Iraqi Government is Ahmad al-Ahmadi, a former member of the local council in Bahraz.” Various jihadi web forums presented their own versions of the arrest, including suggestions the arrest had been fabricated to attract foreign investment to Iraq, or claims that al-Baghdadi had been detained in Syria and handed over to Iraqi security forces.

The individual claiming to be the true al-Baghdadi has rejected the arrest as a ruse designed to force him into the open; “The key purpose of their lie is to force me to appear, undisguised, in a video. This is a stupid trick that will not force me to do anything. I will appear to the whole world when I want to and when it benefits the mujahideen in the midst of the upcoming victory, God willing... the voice in my audiotapes belongs to me, not to a spokesperson who speaks on my behalf or others and without retouching or alterations (al-Furqan, May 30).

On May 18, Major General Qasim Atta displayed footage of the interrogation of the alleged ISI leader at a media conference. The individual shown stated; “I was born in

1969 and I'm from Diyala [province]. I joined al-Qaeda in 2005 and I formed the Islamic State of Iraq in 2006... I named myself Abu Omar al-Baghdadi because the name Abu Omar represents the Sunnis and al-Baghdadi [represents] the centre of Iraq..." The suspect then went on to describe the internal and external financing of al-Qaeda in Iraq and claimed responsibility for the February 2006 bombing of the Shiite shrine in Samarra that nearly sparked an all-out sectarian war between Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites (AFP, May 18). According to General Atta, al-Baghdadi's real name is Ahmad Abd Ahmad, a 40-year-old former military officer. The general was contradicted by Iraq's National Security Minister, Sharwan al-Wa'ili, who claimed the detained suspect is a former associate of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi whose real name is Ma'ad Ibrahim Muhammad: "He is a former officer of the Republican Guard. Saddam Hussein pardoned him after he was sentenced to death on charges of belonging to Salafi groups. The U.S. and Iraqi forces arrested him several times, but did not discover his identity."

Conclusion

As the controversy over al-Baghdadi's alleged arrest continues, the latest audiotapes show a use of language, phrases and ideas based on a wide knowledge of history, political trends and intellectual concepts consistent with statements released before the arrest of the man Iraqi security forces claim is the real Baghdadi. This consistency and the content of the messages raise questions about the true identity of the ISI's Amir. The audiotapes seem unlikely to be the work of a former low-level security officer or the imam of a local mosque. Baghdad has been unable so far to convince American security forces or even most Iraqis of the legitimacy of their claim to have arrested the real ISI commander. The recent surge in al-Qaeda bombings and assassinations suggests the group remains a dangerous security threat to a restructured Iraqi state, regardless of the real identity of the man giving confessions from an Iraqi prison.

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