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Khurasan Mujahideen
in Waziristan

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SYRIAN REGIME DEPLOYS MILITARY IN NAVAL PORT OF LATAKIA

For the first time in his 11 years as ruler of Syria, President Bashar al-Assad has deployed elements of the Syrian military against a domestic target – the protesters that had taken to the streets of the Syrian port of Latakia to demand political and economic reforms (Reuters, March 28). The insertion of the military on March 27 came as official sources reported the death of 12 individuals in Latakia on March 26, including demonstrators and security officials (Syrian Arab News Agency [SANA], March 27).

Though the region surrounding Latakia is dominated by members of the ruling Alawite faith, the city itself (350 km northwest of Damascus) is a mix of Alawites, Sunni Muslims and Christians. Since a 1966 internal coup within the Ba'ath Party, Alawites have dominated Syrian politics despite being a national minority that many orthodox Muslims believe has only superficial connections to Islam. Alawites continue to dominate the highest ranks of the Syrian military and the intelligence services.

Latakia was recently in the news as the port where two Iranian naval ships docked after passing through the Suez Canal (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 10). While in Latakia, Iranian Admiral Habibollah Sayyari and Syrian naval commander Lieutenant General Talib al-Barri signed an agreement of mutual naval cooperation (Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran Radio 1, February 26). The small Syrian Navy consists of two frigates, at least ten missile attack craft and a host of smaller craft. Latakia is one of four ports used by the Syrian Navy. Syrian officials were incensed by remarks from Muslim Brother and well-known Islamic scholar Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who told a Doha mosque congregation that Arab regimes such as Syria's were failing to learn from each other's mistakes, continuing repressive policies despite the "train of the Arab revolution" having

arrived in Syria. Al-Qaradawi described Assad as “a prisoner of his corrupted entourage” and predicted that the Syrian army would play “a decisive role” in determining Syria’s future (*Gulf Times*, March 26). Assad’s media advisor responded to the shaykh’s charges by saying: “According to all Koranic or faith logic, it is not up to a cleric to incite sedition; and this is not one of the tasks of men of religion at all” (*al-Watan* [Damascus], March 27).

The Assad regime has taken extraordinary lengths to pin responsibility for the disturbances on a host of foreign sources rather than acknowledge discontent within Syria. On March 11, Syrian security forces reported seizing a shipment of arms from Iraq that was crossing the border into Syria in a refrigerated truck (SANA, March 11). Iranian and Hezbollah sources have described an anti-Syrian conspiracy centered on the Tayyar al-Mustaqbal (Future Movement) led by former Lebanese Prime Minister Sa’ad Hariri. Syrian authorities tied the movement to the reported seizure of seven boats from Lebanon to Latakia with cargoes of weapons, money and narcotics. Hariri was also connected to Prince Bandar bin Sultan of Saudi Arabia, who was accused of “guiding the complex American and [Saudi] Arabian plan for creating unrest in Syria” (Fars News Agency, March 29). A Lebanese MP denied the allegations, noting the Future Movement did not even have weapons to defend itself (LBC, March 29). Syria’s Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun, took to national TV on March 25 to confirm that external “instigation” is seeking to undermine the anti-Israel “resistance” (Day Press [Damascus], March 26). Israel’s Foreign Ministry in turn attempted to implicate Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah in the attacks on demonstrators by saying demonstrators heard some members of the security services speaking Farsi (Hezbollah members speak Arabic rather than Farsi) (Israeli Defense Force Radio, March 27; *Jerusalem Post*, March 28).

Syrian officials also blamed the violence in Latakia on Palestinians from the al-Raml refugee camp outside the city. The allegations were denied by Ahmad Jibril, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC), which runs the camp and is known for its loyalty to the Syrian regime. The Syrian claims were strongly criticized in the Jordanian press, which asked why Palestinian refugees would volunteer to shoot demonstrators who are their “kin and neighbors” (*al-Dustur*, March 28; *al-Ra’y*, March 28). A Syrian spokesperson noted that among those arrested in Latakia were one Egyptian, one Algerian and five

Lebanese and pointed to a foreign conspiracy: “The only side happy with what is happening in Syria is Israel, and some members of [U.S.] Congress who are mobilizing against Syria” (*al-Watan*, March 27). Damascus has been organizing pro-government marches in which the participants stress “their rejection and condemnation of the organized foreign campaigns targeting Syria’s safety, stability and national unity” (SANA, March 26).

In his first remarks on the unrest in Syria, President Assad declined on March 30 to repeal the 1963 emergency law with its wide powers for repression, a key demand of the protesters. Having identified the source of Syria’s unrest as a “foreign conspiracy,” the president’s speech was followed by hundreds of protesters taking to the streets of Latakia to chant “Freedom” (Reuters, March 30). The Syrian cabinet resigned en masse on March 29 as Facebook activists try to organize massive anti-government rallies for Friday, April 1.

UGANDA’S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH LIBYA’S MU’AMMAR QADDAFI

In a surprise announcement, Uganda has offered refuge to Libya’s embattled leader, Mu’ammur Qaddafi (AP, March 30). The offer came at the same time as Ugandan government institutions began seizing Libyan assets and investments in Uganda. Libya has extensive investments in Uganda through its Libyan African Investment Portfolio. Among those assets seized are Uganda Telecom (69% Libyan ownership) the Tropical Bank (99.7% Libyan ownership) and the four-star Lake Victoria Hotel (99% Libyan ownership) (*New Vision* [Kampala], March 29; *Daily Monitor* [Kampala], March 1). Total Libyan investment in Uganda is estimated at \$375 million. Libya is also a major source of funds for the African Union and the Ugandan-dominated African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Qaddafi’s most controversial involvement with Uganda came in 1979, when he sent 2,500 Libyan troops together with armor, rockets, artillery and air cover to support Ugandan dictator Idi Amin from an invasion by Ugandan dissidents supported by Tanzanian regulars. Only a year after Major General Idi Amin seized power in Uganda, Qaddafi had managed to persuade him to abandon his Israeli patrons in return for substantial cash donations and investment. The deployment was a military disaster. Far from saving Amin, the arrival of the Libyan troops was interpreted by Amin’s defenders (many of whom were Sudanese) as an opportunity to flee Kampala with looted goods as the Libyans provided

cover against the encroaching anti-Amin forces. Many of the Libyans appear to have been told they were going to southern Libya for military exercises. Confusion reigned and the Libyan forces were shattered. Casualties were heavy as the survivors were taken prisoner by the invaders. There were many reports of captured prisoners being executed while some luckier Libyan troops were eventually repatriated to Libya, where Idi Amin also sought refuge before moving on to permanent exile in Saudi Arabia.

Despite this military humiliation, Qaddafi continued to seek influence in Ugandan affairs, an agenda that was assisted by a 1981 encounter with future Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni, at that point still a guerrilla leader opposing the Ugandan government of Milton Obote (possibly an even worse leader than Idi Amin). Museveni had also fought with the Ugandan dissidents against Libyan troops in Kampala in 1979, though this did not initially pose a problem in the relationship between the two men. Qaddafi began supplying Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) with supplies of badly needed arms and munitions, enabling Museveni's triumph in 1986.

The skyline of Kampala is dominated by the massive Qaddafi National Mosque, an elaborate building funded by the Libyan leader, who incensed Uganda's Christian majority at the 2008 opening by claiming the Bible was a forgery and inviting Ugandan Christians to visit Mecca. Qaddafi was also scheduled on the same trip to unveil a plaque near the Tanzanian border honoring the Libyan soldiers who intervened on Amin's side in 1979. However, the event was cancelled and Qaddafi made a hasty return to Tripoli after a prominent Ugandan Muslim, Shaykh Obeid Kamulegeya, allegedly informed Qaddafi that Museveni's faction of fighters had been responsible for the slaughter of captured Libyan troops at a Roman Catholic convent outside of Kampala (Uganda Record, December 21, 2010). A year later there were reports that Ugandan intelligence had discovered Libya had sent funds to support anti-Museveni riots in September 2009 (Kampala FM, September 20, 2009).

Some light on Museveni's views of Qaddafi was shed by U.S. embassy cables exposed by Wikileaks. In 2007, Museveni complained to Africa Bureau Assistant Secretary Jendayi Frazer that Qaddafi was using bribery and intimidation to persuade West African states to sign on to a union of African states under Qaddafi's leadership (cable of September 14, 2007, carried by the *Guardian*, December 7, 2010). Frazer again met with Museveni several months after Qaddafi's abrupt

departure from Uganda. While the Ugandan leader continued to be critical of Qaddafi's efforts to create a "United States of Africa," Museveni now confided he was afraid Qaddafi would try to kill him by attacking his plane in international airspace (cable of June 18, 2008, carried by the *Guardian*, December 7, 2010).

Given Libya's lengthy and complicated relationship with Uganda, President Museveni penned an open letter on his views of the relationship published by Ugandan dailies (*New Vision*, March 22). Museveni began by listing a series of "mistakes" by the Libyan leader. These included:

- Backing Idi Amin under the mistaken assessment that Uganda was a "Muslim country" where Amin and other Muslims were oppressed by Christians.
- Qaddafi's insistence on creating a "United States of Africa" under his own leadership.
- Proclaiming himself an African "King of Kings" by bypassing legitimate African political leaders to appeal directly to traditional African leaders such as local kings or chiefs, most of whom now perform only ceremonial roles in Africa.
- Ignoring the plight of South Sudan to support the Arab leadership of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, now wanted on war crimes charges laid by the International Criminal Court.
- Failing to distance himself from terrorism and the use of indiscriminate violence.

Nevertheless, Museveni also listed a number of qualities possessed by the Libyan leader while describing the importance of Qaddafi's provision of arms to Museveni's fighters in 1981: "Qaddafi, whatever his faults, is a true nationalist. I prefer nationalists to puppets of foreign interests." Describing the Libyan leader as a "moderate," Museveni pointed to the development of Libya during Qaddafi's time in power, his advocacy of women's rights and his opposition to "Islamic fundamentalism."

The Ugandan president also had harsh words for the Libyan rebel movement: "Regarding the Libyan opposition, I would feel embarrassed to be backed by Western war planes. Quislings of foreign interests have never helped Africa... If the Libyan opposition groups are patriots, they should fight their war by themselves... After all, they easily captured so much equipment from

the Libyan Army, [so] why do they need foreign military support? I had only 27 rifles [when Museveni started his campaign to liberate Uganda].”

Chechens, Filipinos and Moroccans, though proof of these assertions was not provided (*Dawn* [Karachi], March 9).

Because of drone attacks, the militants who once freely roamed markets have now receded to compounds. High-value targets move as many as three times a night, avoid funerals and trackable technology, and rely on motorbikes or their feet to move about. Most drone attacks are based on intelligence from sources on the ground and information from local citizens, said Brigadier (Retd.) Mehmud Shah, a former secretary of security for the tribal area (Central Asia Online, January 28).

The killings of important leaders of al-Qaeda, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the Haqqani Network and other militant groups have compelled the militants operating in North and South Waziristan to execute people suspected of spying and leave their bodies on the roadside with notes pinned to their chests branding them as “U.S. spies” and traitors. [2] The bodies are often mutilated and beheaded. In North Waziristan, corpses appear in fields and roadsides almost daily with a dark warning pinned to their tunic: “All U.S. spies will meet the same fate.”

The killings of people accused of spying are mainly carried out by the Ittehad-e-Mujahedeen-e-Khurasan (IMK - Alliance of the Militants of Khurasan), a relatively little-known militant organization. The IMK is a coalition of all the local militant groups and various groups of foreign militants operating in the region. Its main function is intelligence collection and the identification and elimination of spies. The IMK came into existence one year ago at a meeting of all the militant groups in North Waziristan following the deaths of important militant leaders in a series of drone attacks. In order to eliminate the network of local spies providing information on the Taliban to U.S. forces, a 200-member special task force was formed consisting of trusted militants from each group. IMK operatives rely on a strong network of informants in every village and town to find suspected spies. Masked armed men of this secretive organization can select any person belonging to any militant group or clan and kill him if he is proved to be a spy. Except for their top leadership, even the militants do not know the membership or modus operandi of the IMK. [3]

In North Waziristan, Urdu pamphlets issued by the IMK and posted on the walls of the Miramshah Bazaar said no family should help its members if they spy on the

The Khurasan Mujahideen Seek to Eliminate Espionage in Waziristan

By Zia Ur Rehman

Although Pakistani Taliban militants have killed hundreds of people accused of spying for the United States or Pakistan’s intelligence agencies over the past few years in the lawless tribal areas of North and South Waziristan, the incidents of such execution are on rise since the beginning of the year. The killings, some of which were carried out in brutal fashion and videotaped as a warning to would-be-spies, come as many important leaders of al-Qaeda and Pakistani Taliban militant groups have been killed in the escalated drone attacks in the region.

Local tribal elders believe that the recent rise in the incidence of such killings is a warning by the militants to the local population against facilitating the drone campaign in the tribal areas by providing intelligence information. [1] This was confirmed by the Pakistani military’s official version of U.S. attacks in the tribal region, which claimed that most of the people killed in drone attacks were hardcore al-Qaeda and Taliban militants and a fairly large number of them were of foreign origin. On March 9, Major General Ghayur Mehmood, who commands troops in North Waziristan, said in a briefing in Miramshah that between 2007 and 2011, 164 drone strikes had been carried out and over 964 terrorists had been killed. Of those casualties, 793 were locals and 171 were foreigners. General Mehmood claimed the latter included Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks,

Taliban. The pamphlets also stated that there should be no interference if the Taliban kidnap someone on suspicion of spying for the United States and anyone caught doing so could possibly be “killed immediately” (*Daily Times* [Lahore], May 19, 2010). Militants belonging to the IMK distributed pamphlets ordering people they describe as “dacoits [bandits] under the guise of Taliban” to return the money they have looted from local residents. The pamphlet threatened that those involved would meet the same fate as the decapitated spies if they did not return the stolen goods (*Express Tribune* [Karachi] June 27, 2010).

The massive escalation in U.S. drone attacks in North and South Waziristan tribal agencies since the beginning of 2011 has also seen an unprecedented rise in assassinations of suspected spies:

- On February 5, four bodies of tribesmen were found in Karak district, pinned with notes accusing them of spying for Indian and Jewish intelligence agencies (*The News* [Karachi] February 6; *Dawn* [Karachi], February 6).
- On February 8, militants killed Afghan refugee Bakht Jan for allegedly spying for the United States in North Waziristan. His body was found on the Miramshah- Datta Khel road (*Daily Times* [Lahore], February 9).
- The bodies of two *khasadars* (paramilitary personnel) were found in a sack with a warning that anybody else accused of spying on the Taliban would meet the same fate (Central Asia Online, February 10).
- Four bullet-riddled bodies of unidentified persons were found in a deserted place in the Karak district on February 14. Letters recovered from the pockets of the bodies stated that those spying for Israel and India would meet the same fate (*The News* [Islamabad], February 15).
- On March 1, militants in North Waziristan Agency killed four tribesmen suspected of providing intelligence to U.S. and Pakistani intelligence agencies and dumped their bodies on a Miramshah roadside. Notes pinned on their chests read: “We killed them because they were spying for the U.S. Anyone who acts like this will face the same fate” (*Dawn* [Karachi], March 1).

- Four bodies of unidentified persons were found on March 21 in a deserted place in the Datta Khel region of North Waziristan. Notes found in their pockets described their alleged roles in the controversial March 17 drone attack in the region that killed 30 people (*Dawn* [Karachi], March 21).

- Militants are also reported to have killed more than 50 people in North and South Waziristan since the beginning of 2011, though these murders were not reported in the media because of a lack of media access and other factors. [4]

According to local tribal elders, in most cases militants execute so-called spies just to terrorize ordinary tribesmen (Central Asia Online, Jan 28). In some cases, the IMK’s militants are also known to put suicide vests on those accused of spying and detonate the vests in front of large crowds to demonstrate the power of the Taliban. An example of this method was found in the public execution of two men accused of being U.S. spies in the Datta Khel area of North Waziristan last year (Reuters, May 21, 2010).

The organized vigilance of the IMK in hunting down suspected spies has left local tribesmen frightened and reluctant to provide vital intelligence to guide the United States. No senior al-Qaeda or TTP leaders have been killed in drone attacks in tribal areas since the beginning of 2011, which shows the growing number of executions has had a negative effect on U.S. intelligence collection in the tribal agencies.

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Notes:

1. Author’s interview with a local journalist and elders of the Wazir tribe.
2. Author’s interview with a TTP associate and elders of the Wazir tribe.
3. Author’s interview with a TTP associate.
4. Author’s interview with a Bannu-based journalist.

New Tensions in Kirkuk as Kurdish Peshmerga Surround City

By Michael Gunter

The demonstrations occurring in several countries in the Middle East are now also taking place in Iraq. The violence and public protests that erupted in Kirkuk province and elsewhere in Iraq on February 25 have the dangerous potential to escalate into a civil war between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) (Kurd Net, March 2). Given the current divisions between resident Kurds, Arabs, Turkomans and Christians in the disputed city of Kirkuk, the real surprise is that violence in Kirkuk has not yet erupted (see *Terrorism Focus*, February 25, 2009).

Since 2009, the relationship between Baghdad and the KRG has been “characterized by suspicion, animosity and brinkmanship” that “threaten the stability of the [Iraqi] state at a far deeper political level.” [1] As the Baghdad government of Nuri al-Maliki grew in strength and confidence, it naturally sought to reassert its authority over the northern Kurdish part of the country. The 2005 constitution that guaranteed real federalism, and thus semi-independence for the KRG, is now challenged as having been imposed at a moment of state weakness. Many (but not all) Shiite and Sunni Arabs now seek to return to what they see as the rightful situation of a more centralized state, though this will require altering the constitution. Given the inherent demographics and overall assets of the two sides, there is a sense that time is on Baghdad’s side. The inability to form a new government for more than nine months after the national elections of March 7, 2010, only postponed this situation. As the new al-Maliki government takes hold in 2011, however, the Arab position relative to the Kurds will continue to strengthen.

For the past three years, al-Maliki and KRG president Massoud Barzani have been locked in a bitter on again-off again verbal struggle over the situation. During a tense meeting in Baghdad in November 2008, for example, Barzani told al-Maliki, “you smell like a dictator” (*The Economist*, November 27). In August 2008, this type of semantic fireworks nearly resulted in open hostilities over the disputed city of Khanaqin in Diyala province, some 90 miles north of Baghdad on the de facto internal border often referred to as the “trigger line.” Here the Kurdish peshmerga (militia) ignored an ultimatum by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to withdraw

within 24 hours. After some very tense brinkmanship, the two sides each withdrew some 15 miles north and south of the city, leaving security within Khanaqin to be handled by the police (see *Terrorism Focus*, September 18, 2008).

The two sides have come close to fighting on several subsequent occasions. Only the presence of U.S. troops stationed nearby prevented bloodshed. Since late January 2010, former U.S. commander in Iraq General Ray Odierno and his successor General Lloyd Austin have been trying to build trust between the two sides by using them in joint patrols (called combined security mechanisms) and to man checkpoints together. Some 450 peshmerga are involved in these joint patrols working in the three provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk, and Nineveh, though KRG leaders have expressed concern such efforts to build confidence will prove insufficient once U.S. forces leave (*The Economist*, February 11).

Oil-rich and strategically located, Kirkuk represents the center of these KRG-Baghdad tensions. It is “a classic divided city... over which people are prepared to fight and die... The numbers of actors involved, resource dimensions, and international involvement add... layers of complexity that are matched by few other disputes over territorial ‘ownership.’” [2] From an initial Kurdish position of strength in which the KRG appeared ready to take control of Kirkuk under the provisions of Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, the contested city and province now seem the proverbial bridge too far for the Kurds.

On February 25, Arabs and Turkomans planned to protest in Kirkuk against corruption and unemployment. The Kurds believed that these protests would lead to attacks against them and sought to preempt the protests. Therefore, two days earlier, Dr. Najmaldin O. Karim, until recently a prominent spokesman for the Kurds in the United States and now a member of Iraqi parliament from the Kirkuk region, told a press conference in Baghdad that “[Arab] chauvinists were planning to destabilize Kirkuk during the protests” (Kurd Net, March 3). Khalid Shwani, another Kurdish MP from Kirkuk, claimed that the Arab Political Council planned to attack numerous Kurdish administrative and security offices. The following day 8500 to 12,000 heavily-armed peshmerga, including crack units of the Zeravani (paramilitary police), were deployed just west of Kirkuk. The Arab Political Council and Turkoman Front denounced the Kurdish move and demanded its immediate withdrawal. A call for a “day of wrath” to

protest the peshmerga presence was only averted by a police-enforced curfew.

On March 3, Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki demanded through a spokesman that the KRG withdraw its troops: “These troops were deployed without the permission of the central government and the Prime Minister has asked them to draw down immediately” (Kurd Net, March 4). However, Shaykh Ja’afar Mustafa, the Minister of Peshmerga Affairs, announced that the Kurdish forces would not withdraw until the situation normalized (Kurd Net, March 9). He claimed that the Kurds had to protect Kirkuk from al-Qaeda, Arab groups, and Ba’athists and were acting on the basis of intelligence reports that indicated that these groups had been planning to take over the city during the protests (Kurd Net, March 9). Mustafa also asserted that the Kurds were coordinating their actions with the Iraqi army units in the region (Kurd Net, March 2).

The Kurdish military reaction raised fears among Arab and Turkomans residents of Kirkuk that the Kurds were seeking to implement Article 140 by force. Indeed Amjad Shakali, a Kurdish nationalist author who has written regularly about Kirkuk, declared: “Sending Kurdish troops to the disputed areas is a very good thing and a great victory. That step should have been taken in 2003” (Kurd Net, March 2).

A new international dimension of the crisis developed on March 6 when Turkish deputy foreign minister Fereyduñ Sinirlioglu arrived in the KRG capital of Irbil and met with KRG president Massoud Barzani. Turkey has long seen itself as the protector of its Turkoman kinsmen in Kirkuk and opposed KRG annexation of Kirkuk as a dangerous move that might inflame its own restless Kurdish population and the continuing insurgency waged by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). In no uncertain terms, Sinirlioglu urged the Kurds to pull their troops back (Kurd Net, March 9). Given the upcoming Turkish national elections scheduled for June 12, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had to be seen by his countrymen as playing a strong nationalist hand on the Kirkuk issue. However, Jabbar Yawar, the KRG undersecretary to the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, replied: “This issue is no business of the Turkish government” (Kurd Net, March 9).

Ayad Allawi—who represents the Iraqi Sunnis (including Kirkuk’s Arabs and Turkomans) and last year lost a closely contested election to al-Maliki — declared through his spokesman that although the deployment

of the Kurdish forces was “normal . . . the mobilization of those forces without an order from Maliki is illegal because he is the commander in chief of the armed forces in Iraq” (Kurd Net, March 2). Ahmed al-Obeidi, an Arab politician in Kirkuk, suggested that the KRG deployment of troops was a way to deflect attention from the ongoing protests against it by its own citizens in Sulaymaniya. [3] If so, it would not have been the first time in history that a government in trouble domestically had sought to unite its people on an external adventure.

The results from the most recent Iraqi elections held on March 7, 2010 were somewhat disappointing for the Kurds as they showed Kirkuk evenly divided between them and the city’s Arabs and Turkomans. Such demographics would seem to make it even less likely that Kirkuk might be annexed to the KRG. Arabs have accused the United States of favoring the Kurds in the latest Kirkuki imbroglio, but in truth the scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal by the end of 2011 probably invites further tensions over Kirkuk as the U.S. mediator stands down. (Kurd Net, March 3). Fortunately, the worst predictions for Kirkuk have not yet been realized, but whether or not the parties involved can avoid an outbreak of ethnic and sectarian violence in these conditions remains uncertain.

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Notes:

1. For a lucid analysis, see Gareth Stansfield and Liam Anderson, “Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle between Baghdad and Erbil,” *Middle East Policy* 16 (Spring 2009), pp. 134-45.
2. Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009, p. 9.
3. On these events, see Kamal Chomani and Jake Hess, “Pro-Democracy Demonstrations in Northern Iraq/ South Kurdistan,” March 2, 2011. <http://www.mesop.de/2011/03/02/pro-democracy> and Michael Rubin, “Saddam in Kurdistan,” *Commentary Magazine*, February 23, 2011.

Solidarity in Resistance: Middle East Revolutions Strengthen Hezbollah

By Chris Zambelis

As the surge of revolutionary fervor that has taken the greater Middle East by storm continues to spread, many observers are grappling with the political uncertainties that the tumult has produced from Morocco to the Persian Gulf and beyond. The popular uprisings that prompted the ouster of the dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt and threaten the panoply of authoritarian despots that cling to power in other countries have already had a profound effect on regional politics. Despite the highly dynamic and fluid nature of events in the region, it is not too early to assess the impact of these events on the position of prominent actors such as Lebanon's Hezbollah. The movement's place amid the unfolding unrest bears special relevance, considering the open hostility that has characterized its relations with the recently toppled Mubarak regime and other governments threatened by the wave of unrest. The popularity Hezbollah enjoys among a large segment of the very same people that have taken to the streets to demand political freedoms, rule of law, representative government and economic opportunities adds another dynamic worth closer examination.

Solidarity in Resistance

Having weathered the massive Israeli assault during the July 2006 War and deftly outmaneuvering attempts by its political opponents to undermine its position and blame it for the February 2005 assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, Hezbollah's stock as a political party, social movement, and paramilitary force in Lebanese and regional affairs continues to rise.

In characteristic fashion, Hezbollah has not been coy about articulating its positions on the uprisings that have shaken the foundations of power in the Middle East in various media outlets, particularly its own Beirut-based *al-Manar* satellite television network. [1] Initially, however, Hezbollah adopted a cautious approach to the opposition activism that engulfed Tunisia and Egypt. Hezbollah was concerned that a show of support for the protests early on would tarnish their legitimacy and lend credence to allegations repeated by the embattled regimes that the protestors were acting at the behest of

hostile foreign elements aiming to destabilize the region. Hezbollah essentially opted to refrain from issuing an endorsement of the protests until the popular grassroots character of the rebellions entered into the discourse of global media coverage and analysis. Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah encapsulated this point in a statement broadcast during a February 7 event in Beirut organized to support the opposition in Egypt: "In case we announced solidarity earlier, they would have said that the revolution was motivated by Hezbollah or Hamas cells or even by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Then, this real, original and patriotic movement would be accused of serving a foreign agenda" (*al-Manar* [Beirut], February 8).

Hezbollah has since expressed solidarity with what it sees as the assertion of the true will of the Arab and Muslim masses who strive for social, political, and economic justice in the face of illegitimate and corrupt autocracies that it claims are beholden to the United States and Israel. In this regard, Hezbollah has framed the political activism taking place in the region through a larger resistance narrative analogous to the one it applies to its own circumstances, a theme echoed by Nasrallah in remarks directed at the Egyptian opposition: "Our belief says that what you're doing is very great and one of the very important turning points in the history of this nation and region. Your move and victory will change the whole face of our region to the interest of its peoples in general and especially Palestine (*al-Manar*, February 8).

The fall of the Mubarak regime, a longtime enemy of the group, has had special resonance for Hezbollah. In spite of its Shi'a character, Hezbollah is very popular in predominantly Sunni Egypt for its resistance against Israel and support for the Palestinian cause, as demonstrated by the protests in Egypt and the Sunniled Arab world in support of Hezbollah during the July 2006 War and the heroic status Nasrallah has enjoyed since (see *Terrorism Focus*, August 8, 2006). Amid the chaos that accompanied Mubarak's ouster, Hezbollah managed under murky circumstances to free Muhammad Yusuf Mansour (a.k.a. Sami Shehab), a member of the group serving time in an Egyptian prison (*al-Jazeera*, February 7). Egyptian authorities convicted Mansour along with a host of others on espionage, weapons, and terrorism-related charges in 2010. Egyptian authorities claimed, among other things, that Mansour was planning attacks on Egyptian soil (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 12, 2009). While Nasrallah acknowledged Mansour's membership in Hezbollah,

he denied that his activities threatened Egypt; instead, Mansour was leading an effort to support the Palestinians in Gaza (see *Terrorism Monitor*, May 28, 2010). In a masterstroke of political theater that has become a signature of Hezbollah, Mansour appeared in person during the group's annual February 16 commemoration of its deceased leaders in the Dahiyeh, the southern suburbs of Beirut where Hezbollah enjoys tremendous support. Speaking to jubilant crowds through a video feed broadcast on a large screen television, Nasrallah thanked Egyptians for freeing Mansour and highlighted the fact that the Mubarak's decision to step down on February 11 coincided with the anniversary of the 1979 victory of the Iranian Revolution (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting [IRIB], February 17).

Expanding on his observations of the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Nasrallah's televised March 19 speech addressed the wider unrest experienced in Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen: "Our gathering today is to voice our support for our Arab people and their revolutions and sacrifices, especially in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen. The value of this solidarity is moral, political, and ethical.... A great victory was achieved in Egypt and Tunisia. Libya entered civil war, and in Bahrain and Yemen the regimes put their own peoples on the brink of civil war (*al-Manar*, March 20).

Nasrallah singled out Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi over the disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr, the Iranian-born founder of the Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya (AMAL - Lebanese Resistance Detachments) movement and a major figure among Shi'a in Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East. Sadr is credited with helping galvanize Lebanon's Shi'a community to assert themselves in Lebanese politics and society. Sadr went missing under mysterious circumstances along with two others during a visit to Tripoli in 1978 and is widely believed to have been executed by Libya. However, some claim that he is still being held in captivity, a view repeated by Nasrallah amid the current conflict in Libya: "We are looking forward to the day when Sadr can be liberated from this dictatorial tyrant" (*al-Manar*, March 20).

Events in Bahrain, which hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, have also not been lost on Hezbollah, especially the sectarian dynamics underlying the unrest, where a U.S. and Saudi-backed Sunni monarchy led by King Hamad Ibn Issa al-Khalifa rules over a majority Shi'a population that is largely underserved and faces widespread discrimination in daily life. Commenting

on the regime's decision to crack down violently on the peaceful demonstrators and Saudi Arabia's decision to send troops to back its ally, Nasrallah declared: "The regime in Bahrain was not threatened and the resistance was peaceful, yet the army was used against it. This is a first. We heard that some arrested opposition leaders had their houses demolished. This is Israeli style... I ask some in the Arab and Islamic world who are remaining silent about the injustice that our brothers in Bahrain are facing: Why stay silent about these peaceful protests or condemn their movements? Is it because they are Shi'a? If someone in a country belonged to a certain sect, should he be relieved of his human rights? ... No one asked about the religion or sect of the Palestinian, Egyptian, Tunisian or Libyan people (*al-Manar*, March 20). The push to topple President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen also drew a response from Nasrallah: "In Yemen there are many complications, but no doubt that we absolutely cannot be silent about the murder and crimes that are occurring. We salute the resistance of the Yemeni people and their commitment to the peacefulness of their movement (*al-Manar*, March 20).

Geopolitical Considerations

Rhetoric aside, Hezbollah's support for the rush of opposition movements stems from calculated pragmatism; the course of events that is redefining the Middle East, upending the regional status quo, is shaping up in Hezbollah's favor. As a member of the so-called "Resistance Axis," a bloc composed of Iran, Syria and Hamas that stands in opposition to the U.S.-led order made up of Israel and friendly Arab autocracies such as Saudi Arabia, it is easy to see why Hezbollah (and its allies) gained by the current unrest, a point not lost on Nasrallah: "Israel today is wailing over the loss of its last strategic ally in the region [i.e. Egypt] after it lost the Shah in Iran in 1979 and after it lost to a great degree Turkey due to its aggression on Lebanon and Gaza, its murderous policies and its crimes against the Freedom Fleet [i.e. the Gaza Freedom Flotilla] (*al-Manar*, February 8; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, May 28, 2010).

Hezbollah is frequently cited as a threat by the sitting autocrats in the region, a threat that is often portrayed in sectarian terms: Hezbollah's Shi'a character and alliance with Iran, in essence, represents a force for instability and radicalism. In reality, however, the threat posed by Hezbollah to the ruling regimes stems from its penchant for criticizing sitting governments and inspiring domestic opposition among those who tend to

identify with Hezbollah over their own leaders, many of who are viewed as agents of the United States and Israel. From its doctrinaire origins as an outpost of the Iranian Revolution in the Levant, Hezbollah now boasts multiple, overlapping identities that speak to numerous audiences in Lebanon and beyond. As a political party, organic Lebanese organization and transnational Shi'a Islamist movement, Hezbollah is at once a defender of all Lebanese – regardless of sect – and Lebanese sovereignty against Israel, an advocate for pan-Arab and Palestinian nationalist causes, and a force for social justice and resistance. This reality frightens the ruling regimes and is likely to be cause for continued concern.

In spite of Israel's overwhelming military power, it is widely acknowledged that Hezbollah's impressive showing during the July 2006 War helped it achieve an effective deterrence capacity in relation to Israel. With a reputation for living up to its promises and exceeding expectations on the battlefield, it is also worth considering how the changing regional landscape will impact Hezbollah's strategies in a future war with Israel. In this context, Nasrallah's suggestion that Hezbollah engage Israel on its own soil, specifically, in the northern Galilee region, warrants a closer look. During his February 16 speech, Nasrallah declared: "The major achievement of the Resistance is that it complicated the possibility of Israel occupying Lebanon. Even more, today, Israel is concerned that Hezbollah might liberate Galilee... I tell the Resistance fighters to be prepared for the day when war is imposed on Lebanon. Then, the Resistance leadership might ask you to lead the Resistance to liberate Galilee (*al-Manar*, February 18).

Nasrallah's bold statement follows a series of threats that hint at the group's intention to dramatically escalate hostilities in any future conflict with Israel, such as its pledge to target Israel's Ben Gurion International Airport and major urban centers in central and southern Israel in retaliation for Israeli strikes on similar targets in Lebanon: "I say to the Israelis: if you attack Beirut's Rafiq Hariri airport we will attack Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv (*Al-Arabiya* [Dubai], February 10, 2010). Hezbollah has also demonstrated its ability over the years to infiltrate the Israeli security establishment through the successful recruitment of ranking Israeli military and intelligence officers (see *Terrorism Monitor*, June 25, 2009). Given this track record, it is not out of the realm of possibility that Hezbollah will attempt to fight in some capacity in northern Israel in the next confrontation with its archenemy. The symbolism behind such a move would be profound.

While it is unlikely that Egypt will abrogate its commitment to the Camp David Accords in the near future, a major shift in Egyptian foreign policy down the line is not out of the question. Because popular opinion in Egypt and across the Middle East remains strongly opposed to Israel for its continued occupation of Palestinian land and the complicity of Arab regimes in this policy, such as the role played by the Mubarak regime and Palestinian Authority during Israel's 2008 invasion of Gaza, the possibility that Egypt will adopt a foreign policy posture that is more reflective of public opinion should not be ruled out. While it is too early to count Egypt as a member of the "Resistance Axis," even a modest shift in Egyptian foreign policy away from its traditional pro-U.S. and pro-Israel position would bolster Hezbollah in relation to Israel and its other opponents in the region. The weakening of the U.S.-led alliance due to the ongoing protests in friendly autocracies and the simultaneous rise of more representative governments that will cater to public opinion will also continue to play to Hezbollah's advantage.

Conclusion

As the groundswell of domestic pressure continues to spread across the Middle East, Hezbollah's position is poised to improve. At the same time, the latest rumblings of dissent in Syria – a crucial Hezbollah ally – against the ruling Ba'ath regime demonstrates how the contagion of revolution sweeping the Middle East can also come back to haunt the group. Some reports out of Syria indicate that protesters in Dera'a, a conservative and largely Sunni town located along Syria's southern border with Jordan, chanted anti-Hezbollah and anti-Iran slogans alongside calls for political reform. Following in the footsteps of other regimes in the region, Syria has implicated outside agitators in the unrest (*al-Jazeera*, March 26; *Reuters*, March 24). Until this point, Hezbollah has – not surprisingly – avoided addressing the developments in its longtime ally. However events play out in Syria, the broad trajectory of political change witnessed in the region to date has so far strengthened Hezbollah's hand.

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Note:

1. Footage of *Al-Manar* satellite television programming, as well as transcripts and official statements issued by Hezbollah, is available at the station's official website <http://www.almanar.com.lb/>.