



Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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Syrian anti-regime
protestors

DARFUR REBEL LEADER DISCUSSES SECESSION, SECULARISM AND TIES WITH ISRAEL

Abdul Wahid Muhammad al-Nur, the Fur leader of the Darfur rebel movement known as the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement – Abdul Wahid (SLA/M-AW) has returned to Africa after five years in Paris. He recently discussed a variety of issues with pan-Arab daily al-Sharq al-Awsat, including his rejection of secessionism as a solution to the Darfur crisis, his support for a secular government in Khartoum and his controversial support for diplomatic relations with Israel (al-Sharq al-Awsat, May 19).

Al-Nur has come under strong criticism from other rebel leaders in Darfur for leading his movement “from the cafés of Paris.” Al-Nur, however, justified his absence from the battlefield as necessary due to “pressure” applied by Eritrea and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) of South Sudan, as well as turmoil resulting from splits in the original Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M), founded by al-Nur and several others at Khartoum University in 1992.

Al-Nur insists the creation of a “liberal, secular and democratic state” can only be achieved by toppling the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and making its leaders accountable for war crimes in Darfur. According to al-Nur, “secularism is the answer for all of Sudan so religion cannot be used to kill people, annihilate them, oppress them, and confiscate their rights.” The rebel leader draws a distinction between secularism and atheism, citing examples from the time of the Prophet Muhammad of issues whose resolution was achieved without reference to religious law. The Salafists, says al-Nur, view Islam only in terms of punishments, these being applied only against the poor.

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Al-Nur visited Israel in February 2009 after establishing an SLA/M office there a year earlier (Sudan Tribune, February 27, 2008). Both moves were controversial, as they appeared, at least superficially, to validate President Omar al-Bashir's long-repeated claims that the rebellion in Darfur was orchestrated by Israel. His visit came in the company of a number of prominent European Jews and was reported to have included meetings with Israel's Mossad spy agency (Ha'aretz [Tel Aviv], February 16, 2009; Associated Press, February 16, 2009). During his time in Paris, al-Nur became close to Jewish philosopher Bernard Henri-Lévy, who claims responsibility for convincing French President Nicolas Sarkozy to begin military operations in Libya and recognize the Benghazi-based rebel government. Though Khartoum has never recognized Israel, al-Nur maintains that his movement would establish diplomatic relations with Israel should it take power and would allow the opening of an Israeli embassy in Khartoum.

The SLM founder was coy about his exact whereabouts amidst continuing criticism regarding his absence from the front, saying only that he was now "in the heart of Africa." "Nobody knows if I am in the field or not, this is one of our secrets... the Sudan Liberation Movement is a political movement that has a military wing. This means that my physical presence is not important because I am directing a military battle that requires planning, field commanders, diplomatic efforts, communication, and negotiation."

The South Sudanese were forced into a referendum on secession by the NCP, says al-Nur, who believes in a unified Sudan, though he respects the choice of the southerners. Nonetheless, he says his relationship with the SPLA/M has deteriorated recently despite government claims the SPLA/M is supporting his movement. Al-Nur rejects talk of secession for Darfur (which remained an independent sultanate until 1916) but says he cannot prevent others from discussing the possibility given the political atmosphere created by the NCP.

After years of continuing splits within the original SLA/M ("Every three people can now form a faction while sitting under a tree"), al-Nur has been engaged in a major campaign to reunify the Darfur opposition, signing unification deals with the SLM-Minni Minawi, the SLM Juba-Unity and the Revolutionary Democratic Forces Front (Radio Dabanga, May 28; Sudan Tribune, May 15; May 20).

LIBYA'S WARFALLA TRIBE SWITCHING LOYALTIES?

Four decades of changing tribal policies in Qaddafi's Libya, combined with the effect of urbanization on traditional ways of life, has made any attempt to gage the loyalties of Libya's tribes one of inherent difficulty. In the case of Libya's largest tribe, the Arab-Berber Warfalla, this is certainly the case. Incorporating over one million of Libya's six million people, the loyalty of the Warfalla to the Qaddafi regime is considered to be one of the most important factors in the survival or demise of the existing power structure.

Shortly after the Libyan rebellion began, early reports suggested the Warfalla had gone over to the rebel side in wholesale fashion. However, these reports ignored the complexity of the issue of Warfalla loyalty and did not take into account several factors, including the importance of the Warfalla in the Libyan security apparatus and the ability of the regime's patronage system to purchase or coerce loyalty when necessary. As cash and arms flooded into Warfalla communities, it soon became apparent that the regime was able to continue to count on the loyalty of large numbers of Warfalla.

The Warfalla, together with the Qadhafa and the Magarha, have traditionally been considered the pillars of the Qaddafi regime, dominating the security services and the leadership of the military. In the case of the Warfalla, however, this support has been inconsistent, most notably in the mounting of a coup attempt by Warfalla members of the regime in 1993 as a result of their rivalry with the Magarha for top positions within the government. The failure of this attempt to overthrow Qaddafi naturally resulted in a temporary decline of Warfalla influence in the Libyan power structure as many leading members were purged and eventually executed. Nonetheless, the Warfalla remain prominent in the regime's "revolutionary committees," a paramilitary force entrusted with securing loyalty to the Qaddafis, by force if necessary.

Even the Warfalla stronghold of Bani Walid, a city in the Misrata district, has witnessed both pro and anti-regime demonstrations. The tribe's paramount leader, the U.S.-educated Mansour Khalaf, has made an art of riding the fence in these difficult days, persuading both sides to refrain from public demonstrations and professing loyalty to the regime while hesitating to commit Warfalla fighters to the regime's preservation.

A recent conference of Libyan tribal leaders held in Istanbul may indicate the beginning of a major shift in loyalty away from the Qaddafi regime (though it should be noted that many Warfalla in the Benghazi region have been committed to the rebellion from the start). Over 100 tribal leaders, most of them Warfalla, met on May 28-29 to call for an end to the fighting in Libya and the removal of Mu'ammar Qaddafi and his sons from the Libyan government (al-Jazeera, May 29; Tripoli Post, May 30). Many of the delegates were described as senior professionals from Libya, while others were dissidents who have been living in exile for some years. The Istanbul conference followed earlier meetings in Dubai and Qatar and its location was intended by its organizers as a means of acknowledging Turkey's support for the Libyan people in the ongoing crisis (Today's Zaman, May 29).

Delegates to the conference agreed on the following points:

- The “full participation” of Bani Walid in the rebellion, a step that would relieve pressure on besieged Misrata and the Berber mountain communities of western Libya.
- The need to end the bloodshed, eliminate “tyranny,” and remove the Qaddafi family from any positions of power or influence in Libya.
- A warning to all those involved in violating human rights on behalf of the regime that they would be held to account for their actions.
- A request to the Libyan leader not to leave the country “because we want to bring you to justice, we will have you tried for the 42 years that you have enslaved us” (Tripoli Post, May 29, al-Jazeera, May 29).

After the regime learned of the conference on May 29, there were reports that government security forces had entered Bani Walid, resulting in a series of clashes in which at least 11 people were killed (al-Jazeera, May 29).

However, it is unrealistic to believe the Warfalla act in concert under a unified leadership when the “tribe” is actually more of a confederacy of 52 sub-tribes spread across Libya, each with its own local leaders, local concerns and varying degrees of affiliation or loyalty to the existing regime. Similarly, like many of the

other major Libyan tribes, large numbers of Warfalla are urbanized residents of the coastal cities. As such, intermarriage with other tribal groups and separation from traditional tribal leaders has reduced the number of Warfalla who take direction from the traditional leadership. While a shift in allegiance on the part of some tribal leaders may result in a decline of support for the regime, such support was never unanimous in the first place – thus such a shift can be expected to have at best a significant but relatively limited impact on the struggle for Libya. While various Warfalla have declared support either for the regime or the opposition, it would be accurate to say most members of the tribe continue to wait in pragmatic fashion for some definitive change in the regime's fortunes before making a final and likely irreversible decision on the direction they will take in the future of the Libyan state.

Salafists, Copts and Sectarianism in Egypt after the Revolution

By Hani Nasira

Egypt's Salafist movement has made good use of the liberties won in the January 25 Egyptian Revolution, despite its small role in the demonstrations that deposed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak.

The Egyptian Salafists held conferences countrywide to determine their course in an uncertain future. [1] Salafist youth, blessed by the elders, sought to create the “Nour Islamic Party,” a significant change in a movement known for its rejection of party politics as a Western innovation, and something for which they used to criticize other Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. [2] As the new law on political parties forbids religious parties, the Salafists have been

careful to deny al-Nour is a religious party (Ahram Online, May 25). Like new political parties created by the Brotherhood and the formerly banned al-Gama'a al-Islamiya, al-Nour maintains that it is open to membership from the Coptic community.

Salafists have witnessed remarkable transformations in their approach recently, including changes to their earlier stance against al-Qaeda by lamenting the death of the terrorist group's leader. Following the death of Osama bin Laden, Shaykh Yasser Borhamy was among a number of Salafist leaders who denounced the assassination, making a May 2 speech entitled "Bless you Osama, Bless You Mujahideen," congratulating Bin Laden for his martyrdom and emphasizing that the American action was part of a larger crusade, as Bin Laden and his followers had said. [3] Shaykh Yasser's position contradicted that of most Salafist shaykhs and views outside Egypt as well as the history of the Egyptian Salafist call itself and its previous criticism of al-Qaeda.

The Salafists' intellectual hostility to secular and civil trends as well as the Copts was obvious during the battle over constitutional amendments leading up to the referendum of March 19, described by one of them as "the battle of ballots." [4] After the referendum, the Salafists criticized their exclusion from the national dialogue and denounced the post-referendum statements made by Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Yahya al-Gamal, who suggested changing the second article of the Egyptian constitution, which says "Islamic Shari'a is the principal source of legislation," to "Islamic Shari'a is a principal source of legislation." Salafists saw the suggested change as a concession to Coptic demands for recognition of Christian law in the second article and called for his dismissal because of his "secular" views (alqanat.com, March 25; al-Masry al-Youm, March 26).

They also rejected the views of Coptic businessman Naguib Sawiris, who likened the veil to the Iranian chador and described Christians as persecuted. Salafists, on the contrary, see Sawiris' views as manifestations of sectarian sedition. [5] For Salafists, the most serious issue is what they describe as the Copts' continued and increasing sectarian inclination, both before and after the revolution.

The most dangerous stances of the Salafists, although acquitted of various sectarian incidents after the revolution, are their hard-line religious views regarding the ongoing sectarian incidents and their justifications for Muslim participation in religious violence.

However, Salafist leaders denied participating in a series of incidents, beginning with the March 8 burning of St. George Church in Atfih, Giza Governorate, through to the severing of the ear of a Coptic man in Qena Governorate in late March and the sectarian incidents in the Cairo suburb of Imbaba on May 8.

Leading Salafist Abdel Moneim al-Shahat wrote a defense of the movement after some members cut off the ear of a Coptic teacher named Ayman Anwar Mitry in Qena Governorate, describing the incident as a lie and saying that the truth is that he was accused of shameful sexual behavior and that those who accused the Salafists are giving in to Christian sectarianism which, to him, equals religious sedition, as they "coddle Christians and persecute Muslims." [6]

The Salafists' antagonism towards the Copts was also displayed after the appointment of a Christian governor, General Emad Mikhail, for Upper Egypt's Qena governorate last April. General Mikhail, as former deputy head of Central Security in Giza, was also associated with the violent response of the security services to the late January demonstrations against the Mubarak regime. Salafist followers of Sayed Qurasy were enraged by the appointment and played a leading role among those who staged a sit-in (including Muslim Brothers) to cut the rail-line passing through the governorate to support their demands for a Muslim governor. The Salafist call states that "an unbeliever has no mandate over a Muslim." The Salafists believe Copts should be ineligible for senior positions to reflect respect for the religion of the majority as well as to avoid coddling the minority. [7]

Concerning the destruction of St. George Church in Giza Governorate, the Salafists issued a statement on March 13, in which they called for the rejection of "Christian bullying" from abroad and the disarmament of all parties. They also called for avoiding provocative deeds and statements and delegating lawyers to assist detainees held in the destruction of the church. The Salafists also urged local Muslims not to hinder the army in the rebuilding of the demolished Church. [8]

Again, there was similar behavior regarding Imbaba incidents; the group's spokesman Shaykh Ali Hatem gave a statement denying what happened and warning the country may be driven into the ditch of sedition. He also highlighted the importance of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Copts, whom he described as partners in the homeland.

Hatem also condemned the stance of the tendentious media, asserting the seriousness of external bullying and the crime of calling for foreign interference in Egypt's affairs. The solution, he added, comes through the extension of state authority over all places and individuals, legal accountability and the necessity of getting rid of the practices of the former regime, which stirred the flames of sedition by extraditing citizens, searching mosques and churches and confiscating arms to prevent crime. [9]

A number of Salafists have founded a coalition to defend new male and female converts from Christianity to Islam after the incidents that followed the alleged conversions of Wafaa Constantine (2004) and Camilla Shehata, and the rumors spread by the Salafists that they were detained by the Church. Demonstrations demanding the "release" of Camilla escalated in early May until she appeared on Egyptian television on May 7 to deny her alleged conversion to Islam, insisting on her Christianity. A number of Salafists remained skeptical of her status. Among the Salafists who have joined the coalition are their secretary-general, Hossam Abul Bukhari, (founder of the CamillaShehata.com website), Shaykh Abdel Moneim al-Shahat and Dr. Muhammad Abdel Maksoud, all prominent symbols of the Salafist call in Egypt. The coalition has also attracted a number of Islamist activists from various other groups, including Shaykh Hafiz Salama, one of the most prominent Islamist veterans in Egypt, the group of Shabab Muhammad, a leading dissident from the Muslim Brotherhood, and Nizar Ghorab, the lawyer for Abboud and Tarek al Zomor, cousins who were jailed for their role in the assassination of President Anwar Sadat and released by the ruling military council after the overthrow of Mubarak. [10]

One day after Camilla Shehata appeared on television to assert her Christianity, Salafists gathered outside Cairo's Mar Mina Church following rumors another alleged female convert, Ameer Fakhry, was being held against her will inside. The church is located in the Imbaba district of northwest Cairo, a battleground between security forces and radical Islamists in the 1990s. Attacks on the church later spread to the nearby Church of the Virgin Mary, which was torched, and a nearby apartment building, resulting in the death of 15 people and the wounding of 186 others (Daily News Egypt, May 11; Reuters, May 27). According to military officials, 191 people detained in the violence would face military tribunals.

Salafists maintain that the Coptic Church, after the revolution, must differ from the Church in the era of Mubarak, during which Salafists insist the Coptic Pope, Shenouda III, the clerics and Copts in general were allowed to detain converts to Islam. Yasser Borhamy, the leader of Salafists in Alexandria, described these alleged activities as an extreme provocation by the Church. [11]

Making use of the problems of religious converts and hostility towards the Church are not new tactics for the Salafists. It is a dogmatic call in origin that focuses on defending its vision regarding the right doctrine in the light of Ibn Taymiyya's 14th century teachings. Though Salafists generally remained aloof from the events of the revolution, there is no doubt that the revolution has provided the Salafist call with a new impetus and allowed the movement to carry out provocations in the name of preventing "sectarian coddling" of Egypt's Christian community.

Hani Nasira is an Egyptian writer who specializes in ideological movements.

Notes:

1. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=26303>.
2. <http://ar-ar.facebook.com/pages/%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%8A/198097886894880?sk=wall>.
3. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=25906>.
4. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=25036>.
5. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=25227>.
6. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=25687>.
7. AkherKalamprogramonOnTvchannel, April 19, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD4paQI1oik>.
8. <http://www.forsanelhaq.com/showthread.php?t=216820>.
9. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=26031>.
10. <http://www.forsanelhaq.com/showthread.php?p=1443540>.
11. <http://www.anasalfy.com/play.php?catsmktba=19693>.

India Pressures Pakistan on Other Terrorist Fugitives after Bin Laden's Death

By Animesh Roul

The secret U.S. operation in Pakistan's garrison city of Abbottabad in early May has exposed Pakistan's terror underbelly. The operation that resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden triggered severe international criticism against Pakistan for allegedly sheltering the al-Qaeda chief for almost six years. In addition, it has amplified existing frictions in Indian-Pakistani relations, particularly those surrounding Pakistan's alleged role in orchestrating a series of terrorist incidents in India and suggestions that individuals involved in those incidents are, like Bin Laden, taking refuge in Pakistan.

The U.S. operation generated speculation regarding the possibility of neighboring India carrying out similar "hot pursuits" inside Pakistani territory designed to target perpetrators of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks believed to be at large in that country. India's internal affairs minister, Palaniappan Chidambaram, was the first to react officially, reiterating the long-held Indian view of Pakistan as a "terror sanctuary." He maintained that the perpetrators of the Mumbai attacks, as well as their controllers and handlers, continue to be sheltered in Pakistan (The Hindu, May 2). His remarks were soon followed by those of Chief of Army Staff General Vijay Kumar Singh and Air Chief Marshal Pradeep Vasant, whose speculation in the local media about India's capacity to carry out secret operations similar to those of the U.S. Navy Seals prompted sharp reactions from the Pakistan Foreign Office and Army. Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir characterized these remarks as "bravado" and cautioned any kind of misadventure or miscalculation from Indian side would result in "catastrophe" (The Hindu, May 6; Daily Times [Lahore], May 5).

Amidst this verbal posturing, the bilateral atmosphere further deteriorated with several exchanges of fire at the international border. A number of ceasefire violations were reported in the Nikowal and Budhwar areas of the Ranbirsingh Pora sub-sector along the border in Jammu/Kashmir on May 14 and 15. Earlier, rockets were fired from the Pakistan side of the border on Indian positions in the Poonch sector on May 5 (NDTV.com, May 15; The Hindu, May 16).

To Pakistan's anxiety, India carried out a weeklong military exercise code-named "Vijayee Bhava" (Be Victorious) in Rajasthan's Thar Desert (bordering Pakistan's Sindh province) to test the operational effectiveness of its army and air force (Times of India, May 10; Daily News and Analysis [Mumbai], May 15). Even though the exercise was planned well in advance, its focus on helicopter-borne troop deployments and rapid mobilization raised eyebrows in the Pakistani establishment regarding its timing and intent.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) chief, Ahmed Shuja Pasha, reacted sharply, indicating that if India was to emulate the American operation it would invite an appropriate military response. He also added that a contingency plan is already in place for such an eventuality, and that "rehearsals" are being carried out and targets inside India have been "identified" (Dawn [Karachi], May 15).

A guarded India downplayed Pasha's claim, but nonetheless held a comprehensive security review to take stock of responses in the event of a crisis situation arising out of Pakistan (Hindustan Times, May 17). India also expressed concern regarding the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in the wake of frequent terror attacks on its military establishments, especially the May 22 Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) attack on the Mehran naval base in Karachi that destroyed two PC-3 Orion surveillance aircraft (India Today, May 25). Pakistani investigators have recently alleged foreign involvement in the attack, claiming the attackers used Indian-manufactured transmitters to communicate and were heard speaking Hindi by eye-witnesses (Pakistan Observer, May 26).

During Home Secretary-level talks held on March 28-29, India presented Pakistan with a list of 50 fugitive terrorists it believed were dwelling in Pakistan. Among those on the list were Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) founder Hafiz Saeed, Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) chief Maulana Masood Azhar, underworld don Dawood Ibrahim, al Qaeda/Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI) commander Illyas Kashmiri and Hizbul Mujahideen's Syed Salahuddin. Significantly, the list also included the names of two serving Pakistani army officers tied to the Mumbai terrorist attack, "Major Iqbal" (a.k.a. Chaudhery Khan) and Major Samir Ali. The list also contains the names of top leaders of the Indian Mujahideen, though many IM fugitives named in earlier lists were surprisingly dropped in the latest compilation (Indian Express, May 10). To India's embarrassment, however, its intelligence agencies wrongfully included

the names of two individuals who were later found to be in India – one, Feroz Abdul Khan, has been in an Indian prison for 15 months, while the other, Wazhur Qamar Khan, is living in Mumbai on bail (AFP, May 20; Rediff.com, May 21). India has promised to submit a corrected list in two weeks (Economic Times [New Delhi], May 30). The exchange of lists of fugitives has been a regular Indo-Pak bilateral ritual since 2004.

India appears to have seized the opportunity to reiterate its long standing claim that many hardcore terrorists and underworld criminals have been sheltered in Pakistan, though publicly ruling out any military adventures inside Pakistan's territory. New Delhi has also underscored the issue of terrorist camps inside Pakistan and its claims that Pakistan used U.S. financial assistance to further its rivalry with India (The Hindu, May 28).

Pakistan has been accused of fomenting militancy in the region through rogue elements in its armed forces and in Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the ISI, which remains a common link among the activities of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, the LeT and a host of terrorist groups nurtured and supported by the agency. In the wake of ongoing revelations by LeT operative David Coleman Headley, it is becoming clear that the ISI provides shelter and covert support for these terrorist organizations to meet its own strategic objectives in Afghanistan and India.

Meanwhile, the United States has also delivered Pakistan a list of five wanted terrorists that includes Osama bin Laden's deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Omar, Taliban warlord Sirajuddin Haqqani and al-Qaeda operative Atiya Abdel Rahma (PakTribune [Rawalpindi], May 28).

Many in Pakistan believe that India is trying to capitalize on the deteriorating situation in Pakistan by putting undue pressure on a country already fighting terrorists for its own survival. Despite the embarrassing errors on the Indian list of terrorist fugitives, the delivery of both the Indian and American lists has put Pakistan in a tight spot regarding international perceptions of its anti-terrorist efforts. The onus is now squarely on Pakistan to determine a means of eliminating its growing reputation as a "terror-sanctuary" in the post Bin Laden era and demonstrate some seriousness in fighting terrorists hiding within its borders.

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Unrest in Syria Inspires New Wave of Kurdish Activism

By Chris Zambelis

As the momentum of opposition demonstrations targeting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gains in the face of an increasingly violent crackdown by the state, questions are emerging as to the survivability of a regime widely considered to be among the most autocratic in the region. Like others in the Arab world toiling under decades of authoritarianism, Syrians are protesting the absence of democratic freedoms, disregard for human rights and widespread corruption pervading their society. As legitimate grievances engendered over time define a discourse of dissent, underserved segments of Syrian society, including persecuted ethnic minorities such as the sizeable Kurdish community, are also finding their voices (al-Jazeera, April 8). Encompassing all corners of the country, the unrest in Syria has reached the northern and northeastern provinces where most of its ethnic Kurdish minority population reside, particularly in Aleppo, al-Raqqah, and, especially, al-Hasakah province, which borders Kurdish-dominated regions of Turkey and Iraq. Kurdish neighborhoods and towns across other parts of Syria are also witnessing displays of dissent.

The specter of Kurdish nationalism continues to haunt governments in the region that rule over restive Kurdish populations, namely Turkey, Iraq and Iran, as well as Syria. Initially, there was little evidence to indicate that Syrian Kurds were expressing their grievances amid the current uprising through an ethno-nationalist lens analogous to the calls for autonomy or independence by Kurds in Turkey and Iran, which are experiencing Kurdish insurgencies, or Iraq, where Kurds enjoy a quasi-independent status guaranteed through Iraq's federalization. Most Syrian Kurds appear to be venting their ire against the state as Syrians, not Kurds. At a rally in the town of al-Amouda, located in al-Hasakah province, protestors chanted "God, Syria, freedom, and that's it," a play on a popular Ba'athist chant, "God, Syria, Assad, and that's it." Protestors also carried Syrian flags and banners reading "Respect for the heroes of freedom" and "We are all Syria" (Alliance for Kurdish Rights, April 1). Yet there have been instances where Kurdish grievances were articulated through a Kurdish nationalist discourse. At a March 20 rally during celebrations marking the festival of Nowruz (Persian New Year) that is traditionally commemorated

by Syrian Kurds (though repressed by authorities) in the largely Kurdish city of al-Qamishli (also in al-Hasakah province), demonstrators brandished Kurdish flags while leading chants of “long live Kurdistan” (Alliance for Kurdish Rights, March 22).

Given these trends, the manner in which political instability in Syria impacts the position and expectations of Syrian Kurds and, more broadly, the larger question of Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East, warrants closer examination.

Western Kurdistan

The Middle East is in the throes of a reinvigorated Kurdish nationalism following the establishment of what, in essence, represents a semi-independent Kurdish state that emerged under the auspices of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. Depending on the political leanings of the sources – demographic data regarding Kurdish minorities are often heavily politicized – as many as 30 million Kurds live as marginalized ethnic minorities who experience social, cultural, linguistic, and political discrimination in a transnational territory spread over Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria or, as Kurdish nationalists like to call it, “Greater Kurdistan.” In this context, the territory occupied by Syrian Kurds is considered “Western Kurdistan” or “Syrian Kurdistan.” The Kurdish population in Syria is estimated to number between one and a half to two million out of a total of around 22 million Syrians, making it the largest non-Arab minority in one of the region’s most ethnically and religiously diverse countries. Kurds in Syria are forbidden to use the Kurdish language in education and other official venues. Other expressions of Kurdish identity are either prohibited or strongly circumscribed to satisfy the regime. Kurds also are also among the poorest communities in Syria and influential Kurdish figures are subject to arbitrary arrest and torture (al-Jazeera, May 9). Most Syrian Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but the community includes significant numbers of Alawites, Shiites, Christians and adherents of other smaller sects. Syrian Kurds also share ties with familial and tribal networks that extend over the borders into Turkey and Iraq, as well as a sense of transnational Kurdish identity.

Tensions between the Syrian state and the Kurdish community, while modest in scale compared to the experiences of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran in terms of the amount of bloodshed over the years, are nevertheless real. A series of incidents in recent years is illustrative

of the hostilities simmering below the surface in Syrian society in regard to the position of the Kurdish minority. For example, in March 2004 a heated exchange between rival Kurdish and Arab football fans in al-Qamishli took on political overtones as Kurds reportedly brandished Kurdish flags and chanted slogans praising U.S. President George W. Bush and Iraqi Kurdish leaders Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani. Subsequent clashes between the fans prompted a heavy-handed crackdown by security forces that left 36 dead and hundreds injured, most of them Kurds. The incident prompted Kurds to organize across Syria, leading to further clashes between Kurds and the security forces and attacks by Kurds against symbols of the state. This period of hostilities represented the largest display of domestic disorder witnessed in Syria in decades (Asia Times, April 9, 2005; Christian Science Monitor, March 17, 2004). Less dramatic displays of unrest among Kurds have also prompted clashes with Syrian security forces in Kurdish neighborhoods of major urban centers such as Damascus and Aleppo.

A Question of Citizenship

Kurdish immigrants from neighboring Turkey made their way to Syria from the 1920s to the 1950s to escape poverty and seek out the fertile but uncultivated farmland available in al-Hasakah province. In 1962 Syrian authorities revoked the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds in al-Hasakah on the grounds they were not born there. The rise of Arab nationalism also placed Kurds in a difficult position in relation to the authorities in Damascus, with Kurds being viewed as a threat to Syrian unity and sovereignty. [1] Known locally as al-ajanib (“the foreigners”), the Kurds in Syria lacking citizenship number as high as 300,000 today. Treated as foreigners by the state, Kurds lacking citizenship are forbidden to own property, enroll in state universities, work in public sector jobs, or obtain a Syrian passport to travel abroad. Some tens of thousands among this community, known as al-maktoumeen (“the hidden”), lack even basic identification cards, making it impossible to receive health care and other services available even to the Kurds who lack citizenship. Seizing the opportunity to vent their frustrations amid the upheaval, Syrian Kurds remain in the forefront of anti-government demonstrations. Syrian Kurds in Lebanon (a popular destination for Syrian guest workers) have taken to the streets of Beirut and other cities in a show of solidarity with their fellow Kurds back home (Kurdish Globe [Erbil], May 28). In an effort to mollify Kurdish protestors, President al-Assad issued a decree

on April 7 granting Syrian nationality to Kurds lacking the required credentials. In a related move designed to curry favor with the Kurdish community, 48 Kurdish political prisoners were also released from prison after being detained for over a year for political activities (al-Jazeera, April 8).

In spite of the regime's systematic efforts to suppress Kurdish identity in Syria, until the late 1990s the regional geopolitics of the time dictated that Damascus support Kurdish nationalism against Turkey. Syria provided extensive operational and logistical support for the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party - PKK), a militant group that has oscillated between calls for independence and autonomy for Turkish Kurds. Much has been said of the friendly shift in Syrian-Turkish relations in recent years. At one point, however, these countries had a contentious relationship. Territorial disputes stemming from Syria's claim for Turkey's southern Hatay Province as well as disagreements over Turkey's water usage (the construction of a network of dams along the upper Euphrates River reduced Syria's access to vital water resources) characterized relations between Syria and Turkey for decades. Turkey's alliance with Israel, Syria's regional archrival, was also behind Syrian support for the PKK.

Syria's support for the PKK was such that Damascus turned a blind eye to the group's recruitment of thousands of Syrian Kurds. With little regard for the plight of Syrian Kurds or their attachment to Syria, PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan boldly suggested that Syrian Kurds would consider moving back to Turkey – presumably after the establishment of an independent state, or at least, an autonomous Kurdish region within Turkey. This position meshed perfectly with Syria's policy of highlighting the “foreignness” of many of its Kurds in its efforts to suppress Kurdish identity. [2] Tensions reached their peak when Turkey threatened to invade Syria in 1998 over the latter's support for the PKK. The marked improvement in relations between the former rivals is best seen in the development of bilateral security relations. Having abandoned its support for the PKK, Damascus is now actively cooperating with Turkey to root out the group. In a recent example of Syrian-Turkish cooperation, Syrian authorities extradited two PKK members wanted for alleged involvement in militant activities to Turkey in May (Today's Zaman, May 19). At least 125 alleged members of the PKK have been handed over to Turkey by Syria since 1998 (Today's Zaman [Istanbul], May 19; Anatolia News Agency [Ankara], May 26).

A Spillover Effect

Facing a steady rise in attacks by the PKK, Turkey has expressed concerns over the deterioration of order in Syria, especially in its Kurdish regions, and the potential impact on the PKK and the trajectory of Kurdish nationalism more broadly.

While Turkey was able to count on Syria to work to prevent its territory from being used by PKK guerillas in operations against Turkey, the ongoing turmoil gripping Syria is preoccupying Damascus with far more pressing matters. Making matters worse for Turkey, the unrest in Syria has occurred against the backdrop of threats issued by the PKK to sow chaos across Turkey through a campaign of violence, terrorism, and public unrest in the run-up to general elections scheduled for June 12 (Today's Zaman [Istanbul], February 19). There is evidence that the PKK is exploiting the tumult in Syria to bolster its operations. On April 1, Turkish forces clashed with PKK guerillas in southern Hatay province, killing seven militants. Turkish forces also seized a cache of arms and explosives, including rifles, rocket launchers, grenades, and plastic explosives. The guerillas reportedly infiltrated the border from neighboring Syria (Hurriyet [Istanbul], April 1). Turkish authorities also claim to have foiled two other attempts by the PKK to infiltrate the border from Syria in January and February (Today's Zaman, May 15). Furthermore, the PKK was implicated in an attack against the security convoy accompanying Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the northern city of Kastamonu on May 1, which left one dead and two wounded (al-Jazeera, May 4). An explosion at a bus stop in Istanbul on May 26, which left eight injured, was also blamed on the PKK (Today's Zaman, May 26).

In addition to the Syrian crisis potentially strengthening the PKK's capacity to operate within Turkey by providing a staging area and logistical hub for planning and mounting attacks, Turkey is also wary of the impression that an emboldened Syrian Kurdish community could leave on its own Kurdish population amid a renewed push by Kurdish nationalists to ramp up the pressure on Ankara. The PKK is watching events in Syria closely. Lamenting the loss of its onetime ally due to Syria's rapprochement with Turkey, PKK founding member Cemil Bayik referred to Syria as a “province” of Turkey in a statement published on the PKK's official website (PKKOnline.com, October 15, 2009). Most recently, the PKK has called on Syria to negotiate with the Kurds. Murat Karayilan, the group's acting commander,

proposed that Syria provide autonomy for its Kurdish community and recognize Kurdish identity, while adding: “If Kurds revolt [in Syria] it would have much more effect” than the revolts in the Arab community (eKurd.net, March 31).

In light of the threat posed by the PKK, a lesser but nevertheless pressing concern for Turkey stems from the prospect of al-Qaeda-style militants exploiting the instability in Syria to mount attacks against Turkey. Turkish authorities recently announced they had uncovered a plot by al-Qaeda to attack southeastern Turkey’s Incirlik Air Force Base, a major hub for U.S. and Turkish air forces. Authorities suggested the attacks were to have been executed by two Syrian militants (Today’s Zaman, April 6; see also Terrorism Monitor Brief, April 22).

Conclusion

As the protests and counter-protests persist across Syria, Kurds appear determined to continue to agitate for greater rights as both Syrians and Kurds. Overtures by the state aimed at appeasing Kurdish anger are not likely to have much of an impact.

With the PKK having upped the ante in its campaign against Ankara while demonstrating a growing interest in the plight of Kurds in Syria during the current turmoil, events in Turkey may also come to shape the course of events for Kurds in Syria. Syria’s Kurds have not yet opted for organized violent resistance to achieve their goals, even while participating in militant actions involving Kurds outside of Syria. However, while there is no evidence to suggest that Kurds in Syria are prepared to take up arms along the lines of their kin in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, the further breakdown of order in Syria coupled with harsher crackdowns and greater militancy in neighboring Kurdish communities may prompt a recalibration of Kurdish activist strategy in Syria.

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Notes:

1. David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 473-74.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 479-80.