



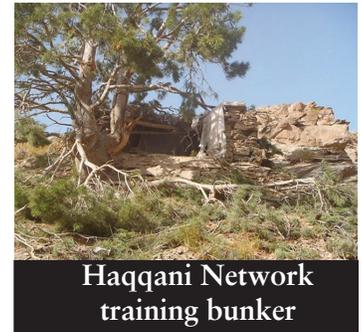
Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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Haqqani Network training bunker

HUNT FOR THE “FIFTH COLUMN” COULD BE THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR LIBYA’S REBELS

The brutal and as yet unexplained murder of General Abd al-Fatah Yunis and two of his aides on July 28 has left Libya’s Benghazi-based rebels eyeing their comrades with suspicion as rumors circulate of deception and betrayal in the rebel ranks. The hunt is on to uncover regime loyalists operating within the rebel movement at the same time tribal rivalries threaten to shatter the rebel cause. The search for “Fifth Columnists” could have disastrous results for the unity and effectiveness of the rebel forces, whose leadership is dominated by individuals closely and recently tied to the Qaddafi regime.

At the time of the murders, General Yunis was mysteriously separated from his usual security detail and was accompanied only by two officers in his command. After being shot and possibly tortured, the bodies of General Yunis and his two aides were burned and dumped on the outskirts of Benghazi. Without reliable information on the killing from the Transitional National Council (TNC), rumors regarding the cause of the general’s death continue to spread in Benghazi. Some suggest General Yunis was acting as a double agent to sabotage rebel efforts, others claim he was actually murdered by “Fifth Column” Qaddafi loyalists or by rebels (possibly Islamists) seeking revenge for activities carried out while he was Qaddafi’s Interior Minister. Several days before the killing, Yunis claimed to have documents providing “conclusive evidence” Algeria was providing arms to Qaddafi’s forces (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 25), adding another element of intrigue to the case.

Demonstrations by the late general’s Obeidi tribe followed the murder, many demanding justice, others calling for retribution against the TNC, which they

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blame for the killings. The Council has promised an investigation, but the slow pace and lack of information on its progress has only served to further infuriate many Obeidi tribesmen, who for now are being held in check by tribal elders.

Yunis was replaced by the former commander of the Tobruk garrison of the Libyan Army, Major General Sulayman Mahmud al-Obeidi, a member of the same tribe as Yunis. Under the command structure introduced on July 13, all armed rebel factions are to come under the command of the civilian defense minister, Dr. Jalal Muhammad Mansur al-Digheily, though some members of the rebel coalition are now demanding al-Digheily's resignation.

On July 31, rebel troops in western Benghazi attacked the factory headquarters of a rebel militia known variously as the Yusuf Shakir Brigade (possibly named for Dr. Yusuf Shakir, a former Libyan dissident and current state television apologist for the Qaddafi regime) or al-Nida'a. The five-hour battle left four rebels and 11 members of the Shakir Brigade dead. A rebel spokesman claimed that the roughly 40 member militia was a front for Qaddafi loyalists and included Moroccans, Algerians, Egyptians and Africans. As well as allegedly playing a role in the murder of General Yunis, a rebel spokesman claimed the group was planning car bombings and assassinations after mounting a prison break that freed a number of high-profile prisoners at the same time as the Yunis murder (al-Jazeera, July 31; *Tripoli Post*, July 31; *Financial Times*, July 31). The fighting was said to have begun after the militia refused an order to disarm and disband (AFP, July 30). The rebels also occupied the headquarters of the Obeida ibn al-Jarah militia (named for a companion of the Prophet) on July 28, claiming the militia's leader had confessed to killing General Yunis (*Financial Times*, July 31).

Rebel spokesman Mustafa al-Sagazly announced that 63 people had been arrested in security sweeps of Benghazi led by the February 17 Brigade, a rebel militia led by Isma'il al-Salabi that is emerging as the dominant power in the rebel army. Al-Salabi said his Brigade was still looking for "high-ranking prisoners of war" who escaped from two detention centers and are believed to be on the loose in Benghazi (AFP, August 1).

According to Ali Sulayman Aujali, the rebel representative in Washington, the rebel leadership has been aware for some time that there are Qaddafi loyalists active in Benghazi: "There are a few people whom the council

knew have relations with the regime, but the people of Libya thought they were with the revolution" (*Washington Times*, August 1).

Mustafa al-Sagazly, the TNC deputy interior minister, claimed that Qaddafi loyalists in Benghazi were receiving orders from Tripoli through encoded messages broadcast on al-Jamahiriya state television (*Financial Times*, July 31). It is uncertain whether these allegations had anything to do with the controversial June 30 NATO bombing of Libyan state television in Tripoli, an operation that killed three television technicians and wounded scores of civilians.

Meanwhile the loyalist forces, which are usually described as "demoralized" in Western media accounts based on rebel sources, consistently mount spirited counter-attacks to retake lost ground even though they lack any effective defense against punishing NATO airstrikes, actions not usually seen in dispirited or demoralized forces. Though the rebel line maintains that most of Qaddafi's men are only waiting for an opportunity to defect, nearly five months have passed without any significant increase in defections from the rank-and-file, many of whom have had ample opportunity to cross the lines by now. Those eastern-based troops who defected early in the struggle continue to contribute little to the rebel effort, which is still dominated by poorly-trained amateurs who view orders as suggestions and follow only those commanders they like. Rivalries and distrust have made creating a single military leadership difficult enough – extending a centralized command and control system throughout the rebel ranks will be extremely difficult.

The violent dissension within the rebel movement has emboldened the Qaddafi regime, which has withdrawn an offer of a ceasefire if NATO stops its bombing campaign. The government is also now offering an amnesty for rebels returning to the fold, sweetened by offers of promotions and various other rewards (Reuters, August 3). The regime has also taken the opportunity of sowing further discord in the rebel ranks by announcing it is in contact with leading figures in the TNC, including former Qaddafi loyalists Mahmud Jibril and Ali Essawi, as well as Islamist leader Ali al-Salabi (AFP, July 30). In an August 3 interview with the *New York Times*, Sa'if al-Islam Qaddafi (son of the Libyan leader) said the government had formed an alliance with Ali al-Salabi against the rebels. Al-Salabi acknowledged having discussions with regime representatives, but denied forming a pact with them (AFP, August 4).

Psychologically at least, Qaddafi has the upper hand on the rebels, whose military leadership, cobbled together from ex-Qaddafi loyalists, CIA assets and radical Islamists, is in danger of being consumed by distrust, paranoia and internal disputes. If further rebel purges follow, the rebel movement stands at risk of complete collapse.

AFGHAN TALIBAN STATEMENT SEEKS LEGITIMACY FOR ISLAMIC EMIRATE

Statements from Afghanistan's Taliban movement have begun taking on a more diplomatic tone as the movement grows ever more confident of an eventual victory over foreign forces that are beginning to question the value of extending their deployments. A July 28 statement entitled "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan: Rethinking Afghanistan" took the opportunity to jab at American fiscal sensitivities by reminding the United States that the cost of its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had precipitated a "head-long descent into financial meltdown" (alemarah.net, July 28).

America's reputation as a world leader in human rights has similarly suffered through the "gross human rights violations by American interrogators in the Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and Bagram jails," as well as drone attacks and night raids "in which thousands of innocent men and women have lost their lives."

Despite the great financial cost and the blows to America's international reputation, the Taliban insists the American intervention in Afghanistan has succeeded only in destabilizing the region and imposing a corrupt government of former warlords who ship foreign aid funds through the Kabul airport to "clandestine bank accounts."

To bring an end to the conflict (and to further the unspoken aim of legitimizing the Afghan Taliban and the Islamic Emirate), the Taliban statement suggests the following:

- The war in Afghanistan must be separated from the "war on terrorism," with the Afghan mujahideen no longer being referred to as "terrorists."
- Afghans must be given their independence according to the UN Charter.

- Based on its performance over the last decade, the Islamic Emirate should be recognized as a political and military power.

- Afghans should be given the right of self-determination to form an Islamic government.

- U.S. and other foreign troops should coordinate a "face-saving" withdrawal with Taliban forces.

- Afghanistan's neighbors must build "an environment of cooperation and trust" with the Islamic Emirate.

In return for these steps, the Islamic Emirate pledges "as a proven military and political force" to commit to the stability of the region following the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Mauritania Confronts Structural Problems as It Steps Up Counterterrorism Efforts

By Anouar Boukhars

The past six weeks have seen an escalation of hostilities between Mauritanian troops and the forces of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The first signs of this escalation occurred on June 24, when Mauritanian forces raided, with Malian help, an al-Qaeda camp in the Wagadou forest in Northeastern Mali, killing fifteen militants (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, July 7). Unlike its sanctuaries in the remote desert of Mali and Algeria, AQIM's decision to establish a forward operating base (a mere 70 km away from Mauritania) was a bold move that put the group within striking distance of Mauritania's

urban centers (*Jeune Afrique*, July 6). The make-up of the AQIM contingent (half of its members were Mauritians) also raised alarms in Mauritanian circles, as it confirmed accounts of the rising number of Mauritians in AQIM. Mauritania's military operation in Mali was therefore necessary to signal resolve and demonstrate an ability to dismantle sanctuaries from which the country can be attacked. However, shortly after the Mauritanian operation, another heavy-armed confrontation broke out on July 5 when scores of AQIM fighters attacked an army base in the eastern Mauritanian town of Bassiknou, near the troubled border with Mali (Agence Nouakchott d'Information, July 5). This was a retaliatory strike intended to show the versatility of AQIM and its continuing ability to mount attacks inside Mauritania.

These fierce battles have been closely watched by political and military leaders in the fragile Sahelian states most threatened by AQIM's destabilizing activities and their backers in the West. The latter, especially the United States and France, are eager to see how effective their investments have been in boosting the military capabilities and counterterrorist cooperation of their African allies. The military encounters also provided an opportunity to observe AQIM's capabilities and how they were affected by the group's alleged supply of weapons smuggled from Libya (*Jeune Afrique*, March 25). The performance of the Mauritanian forces and the cooperation of Mali must have been a welcome development, as was clearly expressed in Nouakchott by the head of the United States African Command (AFRICOM), General Carter Ham. "I congratulated [the Mauritanian president] for the success of the Mauritanian army in its fight against AQIM, in collaboration with Mali and other countries in the region," said Ham after a meeting with President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (AFP, July 12). French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, also on a visit to Mauritania, praised the country's "exemplary fight" and stressed the need for other countries to stay "more engaged" (AP, July 11). This was a veiled reference to Mali, which has long been seen as a lukewarm partner in the war on AQIM, preferring to maintain neutrality in a fight some Malians consider not their own.

Mauritania, by contrast, emerged as one of the nations most determined to strike at AQIM within and beyond its territory. This aggressive counterterrorism campaign finds its roots in the massacre perpetrated by AQIM in September 2008, shortly after the coup that brought Abdel Aziz to power, when 11 Mauritanian soldiers and one civilian were captured and decapitated

outside of Tourine in an attack claimed by AQIM (Akhbarmauritania.info, September 18, 2008; al-Fajr Media Center, September 23; see also *Terrorism Focus* Brief, October 1, 2008). Since then, Abdel Aziz has taken the offensive against units of AQIM led by Yahya Abu Hamam, an Algerian tasked with mounting terrorist operations against Mauritania (*Jeune Afrique*, July 6). Obviously, Mauritania's struggle with terrorism predates the 2008 attacks. The terrorist threat first emerged in earnest in 2005 with the deadly attack perpetrated by the GSPC against the Lemgheity barracks, killing 15 Mauritanian soldiers (*El-Watan* [Algiers], July 6, 2005; al-Jazeera, June 5, 2005). More worrisome for Mauritania and its Western allies has been the ability of the terror network to make recruiting inroads in the country.

The recruits share the same difficult background. They are young, hail from the poor neighborhoods on the periphery of Nouakchott and possess little education. [1] This profile has reignited the debate about the drivers of extremism and terrorism. As many authoritative studies have shown, socio-economic deprivations do play a role in radicalization, but they do so indirectly and often in conjunction with other "causal factors." In the case of Mauritania, it is chronic weak governance, extreme inequalities and structural social injustice that enable violent extremism. Rapid urbanization of society has aggravated social tensions in the country by weakening traditional mechanisms of social regulation. A USAID report on Mauritania clearly documents a trend whereby the vulnerability of youth to extremism "increases where family, clan and ethnic-based structures that used to constrain anti-social or violent behavior have frayed or disappeared, where the state has shown itself unable to create alternative mechanisms of social regulation, and where former avenues of sociability have faded away." (2) It is within this context that radical Salafist ideas thrive. Salafi-Jihadi groups in internet forums, mosques, and prisons have taken full advantage of the dissolution of these societal controls and the pervasive marginality of significant numbers of youths to lure them into extremist groups.

The Mauritanian government has undertaken several steps and initiatives to combat extremism. In addition to improving its fighting capability and modernizing its military equipment through the acquisition of high-performance aircraft and other materiel, the government has bolstered its legal system. New anti-terrorism legislation tries to balance security and legality, as establishing the legitimacy of counterterrorism laws is

essential to gaining popular support for prosecuting the country's war on extremism and terrorism. The government has also tried to delegitimize the ideological justifications for radicalism by hiring hundreds of new imams to preach in the country's mosques as well as engage extremist prisoners through a dialogue with state-sponsored Islamist scholars and clerics. (3) The goal is to rehabilitate violent extremists as well as to demobilize and de-radicalize potential recruits.

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Notes:

1. Alain Antil and Sylvain Touati, "Mali et Mauritanie: pays sahéliens fragiles et états résilients," *Politique Etrangère* 76(1), Spring 2011, pp.59-69.
2. Guilan Denoeux, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," USAID, February, 2009.
3. Cédric Jourde, "Mauritania 2010: between individual willpower and institutional inertia," *IPRIS Maghreb Review*, March 2011, pp. 1-6. See also *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, February 4, 2010.

Haqqani Network Growing Stronger at the Expense of the Tehrik-e-Taliban

By Arif Jamal

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) seems to be slowly disintegrating as various commanders try to pull it in different directions. A clear indication of this process came when the TTP Commander in the Kurram Agency, Fazal Saeed Haqqani, announced that his group had seceded from the TTP (for Fazal Saeed Haqqani, see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, July 2011). Fazal Saeed Haqqani also announced the formation of a new group called Tehrik-e-Taliban Islami Pakistan (TTIP) (*Dawn* [Karachi] June 28). Haqqani said his group was not happy with the TTP's policy of attacking civilian targets, a major reason for the split. However, Haqqani and his group have been involved in the murders of innocent Shi'a Muslims. In the very first statement to dissociate his new group from the TTP, Haqqani announced that his group would not carry out any attacks on the Pakistani security forces (*The News* [Karachi] June 28). He also announced that the United States is the TTIP's "main enemy" (*Daily Times* [Lahore] June 28).

The action of Fazal Saeed Haqqani has completely eliminated the TTP from the Kurram agency, as Haqqani vowed that he would not allow the TTP to operate there: "It is my area and I will ensure that no locals or outsiders oppose our policies and create problems for us in Kurram Valley" (*The News*, June 30). Like Maulvi Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, Fazal Saeed Haqqani is closely allied with the Haqqani Network in Afghanistan (*Dawn*, July 5). The Haqqani Network desperately needed a foothold in the Kurram agency, which only Fazal Saeed Haqqani could provide. According to Mansur Khan Mehsud of the FATA Research Center, Fazal Saeed Haqqani is occupying a portion of the main road, the Thall-Parachinar road, connecting Kurram Agency with the rest of the country. While still a TTP commander, Fazal Saeed Haqqani did not allow Shi'a Muslim residents to use that road. Consequently, they had to go to Afghanistan first to go to other parts of Pakistan. [1] With Fazal Saeed Haqqani in charge of that road, the Haqqani Network and other Taliban militants can use the Kurram Agency as their base to carry out attacks inside Afghanistan or to provide sanctuary. [2]

NATO forces in Afghanistan identified the Haqqani Network as the group responsible for a brazen attack using nine suicide bombers against Kabul's luxury Intercontinental Hotel on June 28 that killed 20 people, including the suicide bombers (AP, June 30). Shortly afterward, the Haqqani Network suffered a major blow when NATO troops and Afghan Special Forces mounted a raid on a Haqqani Network training camp in Afghanistan's Paktika Province. The July 20-22 operation killed more than 50 insurgents in a base said to be used as a staging point for Haqqani Network and foreign fighters. A large stockpile of arms was seized in the operation, which NATO sources said was based on intelligence provided by disenchanted insurgents (*Daily Times*, July 23; AFP July 22; Reuters July 22).

Nevertheless, Fazal Saeed Haqqani's rebellion against the TTP has immensely strengthened the Haqqani Network while weakening the TTP. According to one report, TTP commander Hakimullah Mehsud has become more and more isolated over the last year (*Express Tribune* [Karachi], July 5). On June 27, Hakimullah suffered a setback when unknown persons killed Shakirullah Shakir, a spokesman for the Fidayeen-e-Islam [suicide-bombing] wing of the TTP. Shakirullah was to replace Qari Hussain Mehsud, who was killed in an October 2010 drone strike and was known as *Ustad-e-Fidayeen* (master [or teacher] of the suicide bombers) (*Daily Times* [Lahore] June 28). Commander Tariq Afridi's Taliban group in Darra Adamkhel and Khalid Omar's Mohmand group are already operating independently of the TTP. Lashkar-e-Islam in Khyber Agency, led by Mangal Bagh, is pro-Army and does not accept TTP patronage. The TTP breakup is a great success for Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has been working for some months to deliver Kurram Agency to the Haqqani Network so that it could operate more freely in view of the emerging regional scenario (see *Terrorism Monitor*, December 16, 2010). Distrust among the TTP militants seems to be growing. According to another report, Hakimullah Mehsud and his deputy Waliur Rehman rarely meet; when they do, they do not meet alone and only after making sure neither of them is carrying arms (*Dawn*, July 5).

Fazal Saeed rebelled against the TTP on the eve of the military operation that started on July 3. Army troops moved into the central Kurram agency from the town of Sadda and Tal area in Hangu District, backed by helicopters, tanks, and artillery. The aim of the operation was to destroy the militants still loyal to Hakimullah Mehsud (*The News*, July 4). Although this

military operation was ostensibly initiated against the militants, Shi'a Muslim residents believe it is equally directed against them. A knowledgeable Pakistani columnist, Dr. Mohammad Taqi, says that the operation is aimed at opening the Thall-Parachinar road for the Haqqani Network and other pro-Army jihadi groups (*Daily Times*, July 7). More importantly, it is aimed at punishing those people in the Kurram Agency who have resisted the Haqqani Network and the Pakistan Army's support for the Taliban. The balance of power has shifted in favor of the Haqqani Network for the first time with Fazal Saeed Haqqani openly on their side. Although several local Shi'a leaders in Upper Kurram vow to fight back, it is safe to say that they are losing the battle, at least for now. [3]

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Notes:

1. Mansur Khan Mehsud, "TTP Divided in Kurram Agency," FATA Research Center, n.d., <http://www.frc.com.pk/linkc/articlecont/41>.
2. For the strategic importance of this road for the Pakistan army and the Haqqani Network, see Dr. Mohammad Taqi, "Comment: The Sham operation in Kurram," *Daily Times*, Lahore, July 7. Available at http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C07%5C07%5Cstory_7-7-2011_pg3_2.
3. Telephone interviews with some local leaders through research assistant, July 2011.

Syrian Unrest Raises Sectarian Tensions in Lebanon

By Chris Zambelis

As the turmoil affecting Syria persists with no apparent end in sight, fears about the potential impact of the crisis on Syria's neighbors remain at the fore. Among all of its neighbors, the complexity that defines Syria's relationship with Lebanon and the characteristics of Lebanese society and politics - linked inextricably in so many respects to Syria - leave Lebanon especially vulnerable to a spillover of violence and instability from Syria, which continues to enjoy tremendous influence in Lebanon even after withdrawing its troops from the country in 2005.

Since the state launched its crackdown against opposition protestors demanding the end of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's reign, thousands of refugees fleeing the unrest at home have fled into northern Lebanon as well as Turkey and Jordan. While some Syrian refugees who made the journey have returned home, approximately 2300 remain in Lebanon (*Daily Star* [Beirut], July 23). With a sizeable Syrian community in Lebanon - a popular destination for Syrian guest workers - the nation has experienced public displays of solidarity organized by Syrians both in support of and against Damascus. Rallies organized by pro- and anti-Syrian Lebanese factions in Beirut and elsewhere have also raised the political temperature across Lebanon (*Peninsula* [Doha], April 21; *al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], March 31).

The most alarming repercussions of the crisis in Syria for Lebanon to date occurred on June 17 in Lebanon's northern city of Tripoli. Anti-Syrian demonstrations organized by Sunnis there degenerated into armed clashes between Sunni militias and gunmen from Tripoli's minority Alawite community. It remains unclear which side initiated the violence that left six men dead and several others wounded. Members of both factions accuse each other of shooting first (*al-Jazeera* [Doha], June 17). The clashes occurred during a protest staged by an estimated 600 Sunnis in support of Syria's opposition forces (*al-Jazeera*, June 17). Tripoli's predominantly Sunni community is aligned with Lebanon's March 14 Alliance, a U.S. and Saudi Arabian-backed bloc featuring Sa'ad Hariri's Future Movement. The March 14 Alliance opposes Syria and its Lebanese allies, namely the ruling March 8 Alliance that

includes Hezbollah and its benefactor, Iran. In contrast, Tripoli's Alawite minority is allied with the March 8 Alliance and looks to Syria for support. Alawites, a tiny minority in Lebanon who number between 50,000 to 60,000 members and are largely clustered in Tripoli and its environs, are a Muslim sect viewed as heretical by many Muslims. [1] Yet in spite of their minority status in Syria - Alawites make up about 12 percent of Syria's population - Alawites tend to dominate Syrian political life; President al-Assad, among other leading figures in Syria, is an Alawite.

Tripoli has witnessed a number of sectarian clashes and other bursts of political violence in recent years, including incidents involving Sunnis and Alawites. Coming during a period of turmoil in Syria, the latest episode of violence in Tripoli exemplifies how events in Syria can impact Lebanon, inciting old rivalries and instigating new tensions.

Flashpoint Tripoli

Tripoli, the second largest city in Lebanon, is a microcosm of the treacherous field of Lebanese politics. Due to its volatile sectarian character and its role as a stage for an array of fickle allegiances and feuding rivalries between Lebanese and foreign actors, Tripoli has often served as a dangerous flashpoint, the June 2011 clashes being a case in point. Sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Alawites erupted into days of violence in 2008 in the form of acts of arson, armed gun battles, sniper fire, mortar and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) attacks, all taking place against the backdrop of the heightened antagonism between partisans of the March 14 Alliance and the March 8 umbrella group in Tripoli. The ensuing strife left eight dead and scores more wounded before a Beirut-brokered ceasefire enforced by Lebanese security forces was put into effect (*Daily Star*, June 24, 2008). Sectarian tensions between Tripoli's Sunni majority and its Alawite minority are particularly evident along neighborhood fault lines drawn up during the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, namely the Sunni-dominated Bab Tabbaneh quarter and the adjacently located Jabal Mohsen district, which is home to a mostly Alawite community.

Tripoli is also ground zero for Lebanon's radical Salafist movement, a trend that has gained a following among the city's Sunnis. In 2007, Tripoli saw clashes between Salafist militants associated with groups such as Fatah al-Islam (Victory of Islam - FAI) and Jund al-Sham (Soldiers of the Levant - JaS), rival militias, and Lebanese security

forces. Salafist radicals were also implicated in a series of terrorist attacks in Tripoli and neighboring areas as well as bank robberies. Lebanese security forces fought the Salafists in the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp located just outside of the city, eventually laying siege to the camp following months of conflict (see *Terrorism Focus*, June 24, 2008). The noticeable rise of Salafist influence in Tripoli in recent years, a pattern that includes the appearance of foreign-born militants in the area with experience fighting in Iraq and other theaters, has added a dangerous ingredient to the city's already combustible mix (al-Jazeera, May 24, 2007). The most extreme Salafists view Alawites, as well as the Shi'a and other sects, as heretics and apostates. Salafist militiamen in Bab Tabbaneh are implicated in the most recent clashes against their Alawite rivals (*Daily Star*, June 26, 2008).

Tripoli's Very Public Politics

Visitors to Tripoli are quickly struck by the display of posters and banners fastened to the city's walls, utility poles, and storefronts, all broadcasting the political allegiances and ideological affinities of its denizens. As an essentially Sunni city that is among the most religiously conservative by Lebanese standards, posters and banners lauding prominent Sunni figures, including the late Lebanese Prime Minister Rifik Hariri and Sa'ad Hariri, are readily apparent. It is also common to encounter images of the late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and other Iraqi Ba'athist officials associated with the Sunni insurgency. The flag of Lebanon crossed with the flag of Saudi Arabia – a key supporter of the March 14 Alliance and the Lebanese Salafist movement – is also evident throughout the city. The Islamic flag known as *al-Raya*, featuring a black background and the Arabic inscription of the *Shahada* (the Islamic creed) in white, is popular among the city's Salafists. In contrast, those who make their way through Jabal Mohsen and other Alawite areas will encounter posters and banners showcasing the allegiances of the local Alawites. Syrian flags and images of President Bashar al-Assad are displayed proudly alongside the familiar yellow and green Hezbollah flag and images of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah. The logo of the Arab Democratic Party (ADP), an Alawite party that supports the March 8 Alliance and Syria, is also displayed throughout the area. [2]

The undertones of sectarianism in Tripoli were expressed through a claim by ADP leader Rifaat Eid, who accused Sa'ad Hariri's Future Movement of involvement in the

recent violence: "Tripoli has become like Kandahar. They [the Future Movement] distribute weapons to incite Sunni-Alawite clashes... We accuse Hariri of having personally led the fighting in Tripoli, and we believe that he funds the Salafist terrorist groups that attacked us" (iloubnan.info [Beirut], June 19). A July 29 demonstration in Tripoli saw Sunnis set ablaze the flags of Syria, Hezbollah, and Israel. The protestors also chanted slogans in support of the opposition in Syria and called for Beirut to rein in Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon (*Daily Star*, July 30).

The Syrian Angle

According to the logic expressed by the ADP leader, the March 14 Alliance, along with Saudi Arabia, view the Salafists in Tripoli and other Sunni militants in Lebanon as a useful check against the influence of Hezbollah, the powerful Shi'a militia and political party, and its patrons, Syria and Iran. In this context, the current turmoil in Syria provides the March 14 Alliance with an opportunity to undermine Syria's influence in Lebanon and, by extension, Hezbollah and the ruling March 8 Alliance that engineered the ouster of Sa'ad Hariri from the prime minister's role in January 2011 (al-Jazeera, January 25).

For its part, Damascus may also sense an opportunity in Tripoli to bolster its embattled domestic position and help stave off international pressure stemming from its crackdown against the opposition forces. Syria's capacity to destabilize Lebanon is well known, as are the regional and international fears of such a scenario. Given the present circumstances, Damascus may view a crisis in Lebanon culminating in sectarian conflict as a possible way to redirect attention away from its own predicament and strengthen its case that the fall of the Ba'athist regime will be felt far and beyond Syria's borders, namely in the form of a renewed civil war in Lebanon. Rami Makhlouf, a first cousin of President al-Assad and powerful business mogul who, in the eyes of the opposition, personifies the corruption of the regime, seemed to play on these concerns regarding the future of the region if the regime in Damascus were to fall: "They should know when we suffer, we will not suffer alone" (*New York Times*, May 10).

The Hezbollah Factor

The ouster of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a bitter enemy of Hezbollah and ally of Israel, reinforced Hezbollah's position. Hezbollah was quick to throw

its weight behind the opposition forces who struggled against Mubarak in pursuit of political freedom and democracy, portraying their efforts through a narrative of resistance akin to its own mission (See *Terrorism Monitor*, April 1).

The upsurge of opposition against the Ba'athist regime in Syria, which is led by a sizeable segment of Syrian society who are echoing demands analogous to those voiced by the Egyptians previously endorsed by Hezbollah, has presented the group with a dangerous dilemma. After initially opting to ignore the crackdown by Damascus, the escalating breadth of the demonstrations coupled with the concomitant resort to repression by the Syrian security forces has prompted Hezbollah to address the unrest threatening its ally. Emphasizing Syria's role in regional affairs, particularly in supporting the resistance against Israel, Shaykh Nasrallah affirmed Hezbollah's support for Damascus: "We, in Lebanon and especially in Hezbollah, are highly grateful to Syria, its leadership, its President Hafiz al-Assad and President Bashar al-Assad ... We believe – I personally believe and this is not built on analysis but rather on direct discussions and declarations – that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad believes and is serious and determined about reform.... I know that he is ready to take very great reform steps but with serenity, care and responsibility" (al-Manar [Beirut], May 25). Responding to accusations by Syrian protestors and their Lebanese supporters that the movement was aiding Damascus in its crackdown, Hezbollah retorted: "Repeating these lies is an attempt to justify and persuade Western intervention in the internal Syrian situation... it [Hezbollah] completely rejects such interventions, and supports reform and stability, which would secure the development and welfare of the Syrian people" (al-Manar, July 30).

Regional geopolitics dictates that Hezbollah stand by Damascus. In contrast, Hezbollah's rivals in Lebanon, namely the March 14 Alliance and its Salafist allies in Tripoli, as well as foreign actors including the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, see Hezbollah's dilemma in regards to Syria as an opportunity to weaken its position and that of its allies - Syria, Iran, and Hamas (the so-called "Resistance Axis") - in Lebanon and the broader Middle East.

Conclusion

As the protests and violent counter-protests continue across Syria, the results for Lebanon will be dire. The recent sectarian clashes in Tripoli illustrate that

sectarianism in Lebanon remains a tinderbox. Moreover, competing factions in Lebanon and beyond appear keen to enter the fray through local and transnational proxy forces eager to resort to violence and other forms of hostility to further their respective agendas at each other's expense.

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Notes:

1. Some estimates place the number of Alawites in Lebanon as high as 150,000. Demographic data in Lebanon is often politicized to bolster and/or diminish the perceived influence of certain ethnic and sectarian communities.
2. Observations gleaned from author's visit to Tripoli, Lebanon, December 2010.