



Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME IX, ISSUE 34 ♦ SEPTEMBER 9, 2011

IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS.....	1
PAKISTAN'S MILITARY URGES TRIBAL UPRISING AGAINST MILITANTS IN NORTH WAZIRISTAN By Zia Ur Rehman	3
THE BANGSAMORO ISLAMIC FREEDOM FIGHTERS AND THE FUTURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES By Dan Cox	5
JIHADISTS IN SYRIA: MYTH OR REALITY? By Murad Batal al-Shishani	7



Abd al-Hakim Belhadj

Terrorism Monitor is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation. The Terrorism Monitor is designed to be read by policy-makers and other specialists yet be accessible to the general public. The opinions expressed within are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jamestown Foundation.

Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.

TALIBAN ISSUE STATEMENT ON USE OF CHILD SUICIDE BOMBERS

Afghanistan's Taliban movement is seeking to deflect a wave of criticism surrounding its alleged use of children as suicide bombers following a public appearance by President Hamid Karzai with eight children the president said were recruited by the Taliban for "martyrdom operations." The eight children were being sent back to their families after being rescued by national security services, while another 12 juveniles were being sent for education and reintegration programs before they are similarly returned home (Reuters, August 30).

In the latest incident, a 16-year-old was detained on August 27 in the Baharak district of Badakhshan while wearing a suicide vest. The teenager was stopped while on his way to bomb a local mosque (Frontier Post [Peshawar], August 28).

A report released only days later by Human Rights Watch described "an alarming increase in recent months of suicide bombings and attempted suicide bombings by children." According to the group's Asia director, "The Taliban's use of children as suicide-bombers is not only sickening, but it makes a mockery of Mullah Omar's claim to protect children and civilians." [1]

In response the Taliban issued a statement describing the charges as a "ploy against the mujahideen" by an enemy that is reeling from suicide bombings that the Taliban refer to as "effective tactical enterprises." [2] To malign this tactic, the "invaders and their internal puppets" have presented the children of employees of their spy agencies as would-be martyrdom-seekers. The movement reminds observers that the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has already issued a ban on the recruitment of children in the ranks of the mujahideen. The ban is



For comments or questions about our publications, please send an email to pubs@jamestown.org, or contact us at:

1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320
Washington, DC • 20036
Tel: (202) 483-8888
Fax: (202) 483-8337

Copyright ©2011

contained in Article 69 of the Taliban Code of Conduct (or *Layha*), an effort to impose a unified disciplinary code on Taliban fighters. [3]

The movement insists it has not faced any shortage of manpower, suggesting that there are so many volunteers for martyrdom operations that would-be suicide bombers must wait months for an opportunity to carry out “their jihadist task.”

According to the Taliban statement, there are three Shari’a-based preconditions for recruits willing to carry out martyrdom operations:

- The volunteer’s intention “should be for the sake of Allah”
- The volunteer should have the capability of inflicting heavy losses on the enemy
- The volunteer should be armed with full military training and capacity.

The Taliban use the statement to reject the concept of using children as mujahideen or as martyrdom-seekers, pointing out that such use would only inhibit the success of martyrdom operations as an effective military tactic as they lack the “physical and mental capacities” and “deep Islamic knowledge and motive” necessary to bring the task to completion.

Notes:

1. Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan: “Taliban Should Stop Using Children as Suicide Bombers,” August 31, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/31/afghanistan-taliban-should-stop-using-children-suicide-bombers>.
2. “Statement of the Islamic Emirate in Response to the Propaganda about Recruitment of Children in Martyrdom-seeking Attacks,” September 5, 2011.
3. Muhammad Munir, “The Layha for the Mujahideen: an analysis of the code of conduct for the Taliban fighters under Islamic law,” International Review of the Red Cross, No. 881, March 31, 2011, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/article/review-2011/irrc-881-munir.htm> .

ISLAMIST COMMANDER OF REBEL FORCES IN TRIPOLI SAYS HE IS VICTIM OF A SMEAR CAMPAIGN BY WESTERN INTELLIGENCE

As a former leading jihadist and the current commander of rebel military forces in Tripoli, Abd al-Hakim Belhadj is without doubt one of the most controversial figures in the Libyan Revolution. Belhadj (a.k.a. Abu Abdullah al-Sadiq) has been often described in foreign media reports as the leader of a Libyan jihadist faction sympathetic to al-Qaeda, a faction that some charge “could easily turn their guns from the Bab al-Aziziya compound towards the Libyan National Transitional Council, targeting it for being ‘secular’ and an ally of the ‘Crusaders’ ” (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 28).

Belhadj is a veteran of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). Belhadj is now leader of al-Haraka al-Islamiya al-Libiya Lit-Tahghir (Libyan Islamic Movement for Change), an armed group composed largely of LIFG veterans. He is reported to have led the final assault on the Bab al-Aziziyah compound at the head of roughly 1,000 men of the Nalut-based February 17 Brigade. Belhadj rejects the idea he is in any way connected to al-Qaeda and has given interviews to Spanish and French media in an effort to clarify his position and aims. The rebel commander has used every opportunity to make it “very clear that I have nothing to do with al-Qaeda” and insists there are no al-Qaeda fighters under his command, but he “cannot vouch for those whom I do not know” (ABC.es, September 6).

The veteran jihadi took the opportunity of speaking to a Spanish news agency to deny recent allegations in a police report obtained by El Confidencial Digital that he had been in telephone contact with Serhane bin Abdelmajid Fakhret (a.k.a. “The Tunisian”) prior to the March 2004 Madrid train bombings (ABC.es, September 6). [1] Fakhret was the leader of the cell that carried out the bombings, and blew himself up along with four other suspects during a police raid in Madrid in April, 2004 (BBC, April 4, 2004). Belhadj claims Spanish intelligence officials interrogated him while he was in Tripoli’s notorious Abu Salim prison, but were satisfied he had no connection to the Madrid train bombings. In Belhadj’s view, the police report was written before the interrogation and the charges are part of a “media smear campaign conducted by the Spanish, British, U.S., French, and Italian intelligence services. All of them have had ties to the repressive regime of al-Qaddafi and now want to get rid of those who witnessed

their wrongdoings.”

Belhadj has given contradictory accounts of his travels in the 1990s, claiming to have spent time in Turkey, Afghanistan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and other places. There are suspicions that Belhadj lived in Hong Kong for some time, which is where he is alleged to have been in contact with the Madrid bombers. He has claimed to have been arrested by CIA agents in Malaysia in March 2004, but has elsewhere claimed he was arrested by Malaysian authorities at the request of Libyan intelligence, or boarded a plane to the UK with the help of the British High Commission in Malaysia, then deplaned and tortured by CIA agents in Thailand before being handed over to the Libyan regime by MI6. Belhadj says he wants an apology from the British government and is pursuing legal action. Dominic Asquith, a British diplomat, was reported to be seeking a meeting with Belhadj earlier this week to discuss the charges (Telegraph, September 6). Belhadj has also claimed to have spent six years in Abu Salim prison, where he says he was held in a windowless cell for a year and forbidden from showering for three years, but has said at other times he was detained for four and a half years at the headquarters of the secret service (headed by Musa Kusa) before being transferred to Abu Salim for the remainder of his six years of detention. (Le Monde, September 3). Belhadj was freed in March 2010 along with other imprisoned Islamists after renouncing violence in a deal negotiated with Sa'if al-Qaddafi.

Belhadj claims not to harbor feelings of revenge towards the Americans for his alleged torture at the hands of the CIA, having turned his case against the Americans over to his lawyers: “Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has done terrible things in the field of foreign politics... At that time, they were capable of anything. People who had nothing to do with international terrorism suffered unjustly. They included [the LIFG] on that list, but our goal at that time was the same that we had at the beginning of this revolution: to overthrow the regime... The support provided by NATO and the international community means that things have changed and they want to make up for the mistakes they made in the past. However, we are the same people whom they used to call terrorists” (ABC.es, September 6).

In the face of questions about the rebel commander's past, President Nicolas Sarkozy's office stepped up to defend him, revealing that the French president's military chief of staff, General Benoit Puga, had met with Belhadj and was able to form a “personal opinion

of him that does not correspond at all to the accusations against him” (AFP, August 31).

Note:

1. <http://www.elconfidencialdigital.com/Articulo.aspx?IdObjeto=29893>

Pakistan's Military Urges Tribal Uprising against Militants in North Waziristan

By Zia Ur Rehman

While U.S. pressure on Pakistan for a full-scale operation against the Haqqani Network and other militant groups in the North Waziristan Agency is growing, the Pakistani military is urging the local Wazir and Dawar tribes of the North Waziristan to initiate a “Wana-like uprising” to expel foreign militants from their area and minimize the chance of the government taking military action should the situation grow worse (*Daily Times* [Lahore] August 18).

With the help of militants led by South Waziristan's Maulvi Nazir, the Ahmadzai Wazir tribes of South Waziristan successfully flushed out Uzbek militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from Wana and other Wazir-dominated areas of South Waziristan in a spring 2007 popular uprising sparked by the brutality of the Uzbeks. [1] Many of the Uzbek militants who arrived in the area when their bases in Afghanistan were closed in late 2001 relocated to North Waziristan after their eviction from South Waziristan.

Elders of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribes said that they would not allow fleeing Uzbeks and militants of the Mahsud tribe in their areas who might attempt to sneak in from North Waziristan if the military goes on the offensive against the Haqqani Network and other local militant groups (*Daily Times*, June 1).

Located between the Khost Province of eastern Afghanistan and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province of northwest Pakistan, North Waziristan is the second largest tribal region of Pakistan's Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA). It is considered today to be the epicenter not only of violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan but also a major source of international terrorism. Along with its geographic isolation, difficult terrain, and relatively stable coalition of tribal militants, the region has become the most important center of militancy in FATA because of the impunity with which militants in the area have operated. [2]

The most important militant group operating in the region is the Haqqani Network, an Afghan insurgent group led by Maulvi Jalaluddin Haqqani. Haqqani left his native Khost province and settled in North Waziristan as an exile during the republican Afghan government of Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan in the early 1970s. His son Sirajuddin, who became a key insurgent leader in Afghanistan in mid 1980s, manages the network's organization from the North Waziristan and carries out attacks on U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan (see *Terrorism Monitor*, March 24, 2008; August 4). [3]

The second most important North Waziristan-based militant group is led by Hafiz Gul Bahadur, a key militant leader known for hosting foreign fighters belonging to al-Qaeda and other Arab groups as well as the Haqqani Network (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 10, 2009). Bahadur was announced as Naib Amir (deputy head) under the leadership of Baitullah Mahsud upon the formation of the 2007 Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organization of various militant groups operating in FATA (*The News* [Islamabad], December 15, 2007). However, Bahadur later formed an anti-TTP bloc by joining hands with Maulvi Nazir's South Waziristan-based group because of tribal rivalries with the Mahsuds and disagreements over TTP attacks against Pakistan security forces, stating that the bloc had been formed to defend the Wazir tribes in North Waziristan and South Waziristan (*Daily Times*, July 2, 2008). Bahadur and Nazir belong to the Utmanzai and Ahmadzai sub-clans of the Wazir, respectively. [4] The Haqqani Network and Bahadur are considered "good Taliban" by the Pakistan military authorities as they don't carry out attacks inside Pakistan and focus only on Afghanistan.

Besides the Haqqani Network and Bahadur's group, North Waziristan also provides shelter to several local and foreign militant groups, such as the Islamic Jihad

Union (IJU), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Army of Great Britain, Ittehad-e-Jihad Islami (IJI), the TTP, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami, the Fidayeen-e-Islami, Harkat-ul Mujahideen, the Jaish-e-Mohammad and the Lashkar-e-Taiba (*The News* [Islamabad] August 18). Mir Ali area and Shawal valley of North Waziristan have been a safe haven for successive waves of all sorts of militants fleeing U.S. or Pakistani military operations. [5]

The United States considers the role of the Haqqani Network and other militant groups in North Waziristan in the insurgency in Afghanistan to be among the most difficult challenges NATO faces. Due to intense American pressure, the Pakistani military is thinking of carrying out a limited operation in North Waziristan primarily targeting al-Qaeda, foreign militants and the TTP rather than the Haqqani Network (*Dawn* [Karachi] June 1). Because of the reluctance of Pakistan authorities to act in the region, U.S. drones have targeted the Mir Ali, Dattakhel and Miramshah areas of North Waziristan extensively, with five out of six drone strikes in Pakistan now being recorded in North Waziristan. [6]

North Waziristan elders say that the local population is very frustrated with the presence of foreign militant groups, especially the Central Asians, for their encroachment on Wazir lands and insensitivity to local tribal customs. The foreigners' land ownership is a direct challenge to the tribal power structure of Waziristan. Unlike the Central Asians, the Arab militants of al-Qaeda never interfered in local tribal affairs. Lately some innocent people belonging to the Utmanzai Wazir tribe have been killed by foreign militants who accused them of spying on al-Qaeda and Taliban movements to direct CIA-operated drones. The murders have only created more hatred for the foreigners among local tribesmen. [7]

The tense relationship between local and foreign militant outfits operating in North Waziristan has been displayed several times in the past years, particularly in November 2006, when the IMU and IJU openly accused Bahadur and other Waziri militant commanders of betraying them and jumping into the government camp by demanding their eviction from North Waziristan (*The News* [Islamabad], November 12, 2006). Because of their interference in the local affairs of the territory, Central Asian militants are now compelled to stay in the Mir Ali area of North Waziristan, where they have the support of a local militant group led by Maulvi

Manzoor Dawar. North Waziristan elders report that General Mehmood told elders of the Utmanzai Wazirs and Dawars that military action will be taken if the two tribes didn't move against the foreign militants (*Daily Times*, August 18).

Though members of militant groups in tribal areas have almost the same anti-U.S. and pro-al-Qaeda worldview, they are not especially disciplined when it comes to tribal matters. Pakistan's military is trying to exploit the tribal nature of Taliban militant groups operating in North Waziristan and South Waziristan. This characteristic has become apparent many times, especially when Bahadur-led militants warned the Mahsud-led Taliban in neighboring South Waziristan not to launch attacks against the Pakistan security forces and formed an anti-TTP coalition based on tribal rivalries with the Mahsuds. [8] Pakistan military officers in the region are encouraging the tribes of North Waziristan to follow the example of the Ahemdzai Wazir tribes and have announced their support of such actions. However, the situation is quite different from South Waziristan, where local Ahmadzai tribes stood united behind Maulvi Nazir. The North Waziristan situation is complicated by a lack of tribal unity. An offer of money from al-Qaeda or other sources can obstruct such uprisings in North Waziristan. As there is no consensus yet for the launch of a united front against the foreign militants as well as the TTP's Mahsud militants, the Pakistani military is likely to assign the mission of uniting the Utmanzai Wazir and Dawar tribes to Bahadur (*Daily Times*, August 18).

A tribal uprising against foreign militants in North Waziristan at the behest of the Pakistani military will not only help in flushing out the foreign militants from the territory but will also maximize the disunity among the militants and put pressure on the Mahsud militants of the TTP. However, the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda will obviously try to obstruct the government's plan to incite tribal rebellion against foreign militants.

Zia Ur Rehman is a journalist and researcher and works on militancy, human rights and development in Pakistan's tribal areas. He is a Pakistan Pashtun belonging to the Swat Valley and has written for The Friday Times, Central Asia Online, HIMAL South Asian, New York Times, The News and other media publications.

Notes:

1. Telephone interview with an elder of Ahmadzai sub-tribe, August 26, 2011; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, January 14, 2008.
2. Telephone interview with Ahmed Wali, a senior journalist and researcher, August 28, 2011.
3. Telephone interview with Bannu-based journalists who wished not to be named, August 26, 2011.
4. Telephone interview with an elder of the Utmanzai sub-tribe, August 26, 2011.
5. Telephone interview with Bannu-based journalists, August 26, 2011.
6. Telephone interview with Abdullah Khan, director of Conflict Monitoring Center, Islamabad, August 22, 2011.
7. Telephone interview with an elder of Utmanzai sub-tribe, August 26, 2011.
8. Telephone interview with Bannu-based journalists, August 26, 2011.

The Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and the Future of the Peace Process in the Southern Philippines

By Dan G. Cox

The emergence of a new rebel movement under renegade Islamist commander Ameril Umbra Kato is threatening a 14-year-old peace process in the Muslim south Philippines. Though Kato's Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) consists of only 100 to 200 men, their impact on the ongoing peace process is far greater than their numbers might indicate (for Kato, see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, April 3, 2009).

The ongoing insurgency in the southern Philippines, mainly concentrated on the island of Mindanao and the smaller Sulu archipelago, is an insurgency steeped in history. The introduction of Islam to the southern Philippines in the 13th Century laid the foundation for

the historical and modern calls for secession. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was the original and most united modern insurgent threat, but this group failed to gain autonomy for the southern islands and the insurgency split in 1974 with the creation of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The MILF eventually adopted a political insurgency forsaking terrorism in favor of negotiated settlement. The more militant members of the MILF did not agree with this approach and soon the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) was spawned. The Abu Sayyaf Group seems to have lost its way and has been marginalized through both the joint military actions of American and Philippine forces and local police efforts, leaving it a small but still dangerous criminal organization.

The MILF seemed to have gained some political traction with the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and negotiation of the later Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD), which would have created an autonomous Bangsamoro homeland. Though implementation of the latter agreement was blocked by the Philippines' Supreme Court, it appeared as if the central government in Manila was finally going to offer some concessions to the insurgents in exchange for peace and stability. Under the 2008 agreement between the MILF and the Filipino government, locals in the southern Philippines were due to elect their own officials in August 2011 (*Manila Standard Today*, May 25). However, the elections have been delayed by the central government until 2013. President Benigno Aquino argues that the elections for ARMM officials would be seen as more legitimate if they were timed with the national elections scheduled for 2013 (*The Philippine Star*, August 17). This is perceived by many to be a tactic by the government to delay expanded autonomy in the southern Philippines. The minority leader and Albay Province representative, Edcel Lagman, argues that the delay is unconstitutional while Dr. Dalumabi Lao Bula of the Mindanao women's group Bai Labi Almujaadillah adds the move will allow the government to delay the peace process indefinitely (*The Philippine Star*, August 17).

The resulting delay has been devastating to the peace process in that it has created yet another splinter in an already fractious insurgency. Though the MILF and the government are renegotiating the MOA-AD, Kato insists that his group is demanding the full implementation of the agreement, though it need not cover all of Mindanao (Interaksyon [Quezon City], August 17; *Inquirer* [Mindanao], August 27). The establishment of

the BIFF has caused so much chaos in certain regions of Mindanao that the local vice mayor of the city of Davao, Rodrigo Duterte, is calling for the national government to take action to rein in the BIFF. Vice Mayor Duterte is concerned as fighting between the BIFF and MILF has already displaced 550 families since the conflict began on August 9 (*Mindanao Times*, August 15).

The MILF seemed to be gaining credibility after joint talks were held between President Aquino and the leader of the MILF, Al Haj Murad Ibrahim, in Tokyo on August 4 (*Philippine Star*, August 18). But the recent decision to delay the elections for two years, combined with the splintering of the MILF, has diminished the MILF's prestige and could lead to a withdrawal of support from many locals sympathetic to the insurgency.

The violence, thus far, has been confined to insurgent on insurgent. At least 23 combatants have been killed in BIFF attempts to establish control over land held by the MILF in Datu Piang, Maguindanao province. Some local officials have, surprisingly, begun to call for the cessation of ARMM negotiations until the MILF can negotiate or force a ceasefire with the BIFF. (*The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 16). This may be an indication that locals have become exhausted from the fighting and instability in the region.

One could simply conclude that the recent events are further indication of ineptitude on the part of both the national government and the insurgents in forging a lasting peace. But a more nuanced examination of the current situation in its recent historical context could offer a view of a sophisticated national government strategy of offering false conciliation and dragging out negotiations interminably until the insurgency splinters into oblivion. Given the fact that the national government has now intentionally, or inadvertently, enticed insurgents to fight with and ultimately kill one another, there seems to be no incentive for government officials to pursue local elections or an expansion of the ARMM agreement.

Dan G. Cox is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the United States Army School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

*Disclaimer:
Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, the U.S. Army Command*

and General Staff College, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

Jihadists in Syria: Myth or Reality?

By Murad Batal al-Shishani

In a speech on June 20, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad identified three components of the unrest in his country: citizens with legitimate grievances and needs that must be addressed; criminal elements; and “radicals” seeking to destabilise the country. He accused external forces, outlaws, and radicals of exploiting the “movement seeking legitimate reforms” (BBC Arabic, June 20).

Since February 2011, Syria has witnessed a series of demonstrations and protests demanding the ouster of the president Bashar al-Assad and his family and an end to the rule of the Ba’ath party. The protesters insist on the peaceful nature of their political movement, but in order to justify its violent reaction against them the Syrian regime claims that they are confronting “Takfiri-Salafi armed groups” and “outlaw gangsters.”

When Bashar’s father Hafiz Assad (1930-2000) clashed with the Muslim Brotherhood during his four-decade rule, he applied similar descriptions for his opponents. In a speech aired on Damascus Radio on June 30, 1979, the late Syrian president said:

They [the Muslim Brotherhood] have exploited the atmosphere of freedom in order to tempt some young people into committing crimes and to cause [them] to become enemies of Islam. We cannot be lenient with this group, which has committed various acts of murder and one of the most odious massacres ever known in the history of Islam. [1]

Democratic Protests

Both presidents accused “extremism”, but the historical contexts are different; in the late 1970s and the early 1980s there was an armed opposition to Syrian regime and the latter responded by using disproportionate measures of violence, causing the death of tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians. Currently, although the Syrian regime is confronted by peaceful demonstrations inspired by the success of revolutions in

Egypt and Tunisia, it has responded in a fashion similar to the Hafiz Assad’s crackdown on Islamists in the early 1980s, killing more than 2000 civilians since the uprising began six months ago (*Guardian*, August 8).

According to a report based on the testimony of Syrian opposition figures and prepared by the Henry Jackson Society (a London-based association devoted to democratization), the Syrian opposition is a democratic-leaning movement in which “the Islamist quotient among the opposition is very low.” [2] Al-Qaeda leader Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri indirectly confirmed the absence of jihadis from the Syrian scene when he addressed a video message to Syrian protesters saying:

Our brothers and fellow Muslims of the *Sham* [Levant], the land of *Ribat* [steeds of war] and jihad, Allah knows that if it weren’t for the raging war with the New Crusades in which we are engaged, and were it not for these borders restrictions penned by Sykes and Picot and sanctified by our rulers, my brothers and I would be at your side today, in your midst defending you with our necks and chests... but we are consoled by the fact that *Sham*, the land of Islam and martyrdom, has enough mujhaideen for themselves as well as others. [3]

While all indicators show that no “Takfiri-Salafi armed groups” are leading the democratic protests in Syria, it seems that the Syrian regime seeking to tailor a message to the West, which seems to be willing to listen to Arab regimes once the spectre of “Jihadism” is raised. However, the violence that the regime is using against protestors might inadvertently lead to radicalization and the emergence of new jihadists as well as provoking existing Syrian jihadists, pushing them out into the streets in revolt.

Syrian Jihadists

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 played a major role in increasing the numbers of Syrian jihadis. With the Syrian government turning a blind eye, regions bordering Iraq, like the Bou Kamal area, became hubs for facilitating the entry of jihadis to Iraq to fight the Americans. Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, then the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was also very keen to create the Levant branch of al-Qaeda, hence he was relying on jihadis from the region.

Since then the number of Syrian jihadists has increased. For instance, according to figures compiled by the author, Syrians formed a high proportion of the Salafi-Jihadists in Iraq, coming in second place by nationality with 13% of the Arab volunteers in Iraq. [4]

It seems that the activity of the Syrian Salafi-Jihadists was not limited to Iraq and Syria. They also formed a high proportion of jihadists acting on Lebanese soil before and during the confrontations at the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp between the Lebanese authorities and militant Islamists in 2007. Syrians formed about 13% of those jihadists, after the Saudis with 16%, Palestinians from the refugee camps with 31%, and Lebanese with 33%. Seven per cent came from other sources. [5]

The increasing number of Syrian jihadists is also combined with the production of thousands of pages of literature theorizing a confrontation with the Syrian Alawite regime. The most well-known writings in this context are those of Abu Musa'b al-Suri (a.k.a. Mustafa bin Abd al-Qadir Sitt Maryam Nasr, currently believed to be imprisoned in Syria after rendition by the United States).

Al-Suri wrote several books on jihad in Syria and his vision of the Levant region, and Syria in particular, based on two levels: first, an intellectual theorizing, and at the second level, a focus on strategies for a revolution or confrontation with the Syrian regime, which he sees as a kafir regime representing "Nusayris" (a pejorative term for Alawites) and Ba'athists. [6]

Following the death of Hafiz al-Assad, al-Suri wrote a book entitled *Ahl as-Sunna fi'l-Sham fi Muwajihat al-Nusayria wa'l-Salibeen wa'l-Yahoud* (The Sunni People in the Levant in the Face of Nasiriyah, Crusaders and Jews.) Al-Suri focuses on two fundamental issues in this work: the "Nusayri" sect and its unjust dominion in Syria and the Syrian state apparatus in its entirety, which, according to al-Suri, is supported by the West to establish peace with Israel. Al-Suri sees a Sunni revolution in Syria as a strategic solution: "We must highlight the basic identity of this confrontation with the Alawi Nusayris, focusing the axis of confrontation towards the correct key to this jihadi conflict between truth and falsehood, [which] is the Sunnis in the face of the Alawi Nasiriyah."

Another well-known jihadi writer, Husain Bin Mahmoud, wrote a March 26 article entitled "Demashq:

Qa'dat a-Jihad fi al-Ard" (Damascus: the Jihad Base on the Earth), in which he presented several *hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad that emphasize the qualities of the Levant for jihadists, being the "land of faith and science," the home of "the best soldiers on earth," and "the best place to migrate to." [7]

Stressing the sectarian understanding of the situation in Syria according to the jihadists' perspective, Bin Mahmoud claims 80% of the people in Syria are Muslims who are being repressed by a "non-Muslim" Alawite minority and asks how a "despicable, humiliated minority became superiors of the best soldiers on the earth?" In answering himself, Bin Mahmoud says that the people of the Levant were humiliated when "they replaced the banner of jihad with [the banner of] national resistance, and replaced the identity of Islam with nationalism, and the doctrine of Islam with Ba'athism and socialism."

Like most jihadists tackling the Syrian issue, Bin Mahmoud expects the people of Syria to have a role in jihad: "When the people of the Levant come back to the righteous, and the sound of bullets [is] exalted, and young people shout in the squares, 'God is great,' and the voices of minarets start to call for jihad, then I [will] preach the gospel of Muslims in the East and the West [that] infidels will be destroyed...and then woe to the infidels and its people from the soldiers of al-Sham."

Conclusion

Obviously, al-Qaeda and affiliated Salafi-Jihadist groups have an ideological and geopolitical perspective towards Syria, but their project is based on promoting a sectarian division inside Syria that is at odds with the Syrian protestors' ambition of having a post-Assad democratic state. This has prevented the jihadists from exerting political influence during the on-going crisis despite the allegations of the regime.

However, the violence that the regime is using to deal with protestors could serve as a source of radicalization that could activate the jihadists inside the country. If this happened, the Assad regime would face a political and security catastrophe by having to deal with "real" jihadists ready to engage the regime with violence.

By their peaceful political activity, the young protestors in Syria are building a barrier to prevent Salafi-Jihadists from making inroads into the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, the government is paving a way for their entry by its

violent repression of a peaceful opposition movement.

Murad Batal al-Shishani is an Islamic groups and terrorism issues analyst based in London. He is a specialist on Islamic Movements in Chechnya and in the Middle East. He is a regular contributor to several publications in both Arabic and English. He is also author of the book “The Islamic Movement in Chechnya and the Chechen-Russian Conflict 1990-2000”, Amman, 2001 (in Arabic), and “Iraqi Resistance: National Liberation vs. Terrorism: A Quantitative Study,” November 2005 Iraqi Studies Series, Issue 5, Gulf Research Center-Dubai.

Notes:

1. Quoted in Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle For Power in Syrian: Politics and Society Under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, I. B. Tauris, 1996, p.95.
2. Michael Weiss, Hannah Stuart and Samuel Hunter, *The Syrian Opposition: Political analysis with original testimony from key figures*, Henry Jackson Society, London, 2011 <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/cms/harriercollectionitems/SyrianOpposition.pdf>.
3. Al-Zawahri video message entitled *Ei’zul Shariq Awaloh Demashq* (the Glory of the East Begins with Damascus), disseminated on jihadist web forums on July 27. Downloaded from: <http://aljahad.com/vb/showthread.php?t=9054>.
4. The Saudis came in first with 53%. See *Terrorism Monitor*, December 2, 2005.
5. Figures compiled by the author from open sources.
6. The term “Nusayri” refers to followers of Abu Shu’ayb Muhammad ibn Nusayr (d. 863 AD).
7. <http://muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=446295>.