



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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Shi'a Hazaras

## IRGC COMMANDER DESCRIBES IRANIAN VICTORY OVER KURDISH INSURGENTS

The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corp maintains that it was the Guards' ability to confront Kurdish guerrillas on their own terms that led to an apparent defeat of the Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistan (Party of Free Life of Iranian Kurdistan - PJAK) after a three-month offensive.

Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Mohammad Ali Jaffari suggested that PJAK had mistakenly believed that Iranian forces would use "classic warfare" tactics incapable of defeating guerrillas in the field: "The IRGC's capability in both classic and asymmetric and guerrilla warfare surprised the PJAK terrorist group so much that they surrendered... Since the IRGC enjoys asymmetric and guerrilla warfare capability, in addition to its capability in classic wars, the PJAK group was encountered in its own method... and they realized that we have the ability to deploy troops and defeat everyone everywhere" (Fars News Agency, October 8; ISNA, October 8).

Following a series of border incursions by teams of PJAK fighters, Iran deployed a force of 5,000 IRGC troops and Border Guards to largely ethnic-Kurdish northwestern Iran, where they destroyed a PJAK base in the Jasosan Heights near Sar Dasht city in West Azerbaijan Province (Fars News Agency, September 26; see *Terrorism Monitor*, August 19). The offensive halted for a month following a Ramadan ceasefire negotiated by northern Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), but operations resumed when it became clear PJAK had not used the break to withdraw to their bases in northern Iraq. The IRGC also claimed that PJAK had used the Ramadan ceasefire to dig tunnels in the Jasosan

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Heights along the border and to receive weapons and equipment supplied by the U.S. Consulate in Arbil (Fars News Agency, October 8).

After a number of battlefield setbacks that included the death of PJAK deputy commander Majid Kavian (a.k.a. Samakou Sarhaldan), PJAK unsuccessfully tried to have the ceasefire renewed, an impossibility so long as PJAK occupied Iranian territory (Sepah News, September 7). KRG president Masoud Barzani, wary of the possible implications of sending Kurds to secure the borders from other Kurds, instead urged both PJAK and their senior partner, the Parti Karkerani Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers Party - PKK) to come to settlements with their respective Iranian and Turkish opponents (AFP, September 7).

By September 21, the IRGC was claiming to have killed over 180 PJAK fighters while driving the group out of northwestern Iran (Payvand Iran News, September 21). PJAK claimed to have killed 600 Iranian soldiers in its resistance to the Iranian offensive, a figure that has little basis in reality (AFP, September 15). The real figure is more likely in the dozens. Iranian Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi said that PJAK had agreed to stay one kilometer away from the Iranian border but promised that Iranian forces would continue taking action against PJAK until the group was destroyed (Mehr News Agency, October 9).

Brigadier General Ali Shademani, Deputy Head of the Operations Department of the Iranian Armed Forces, told Iran's official press that PJAK was a creation of the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel and would be replaced by these nations once it became clear PJAK would not succeed in its objectives (Press TV, September 29). PJAK in turn has accused the United States of providing intelligence about the Kurdish insurgents to Turkey which is then shared with the Iranians, though Ankara has denied passing on U.S. intelligence reports to Tehran (Rudaw.net, September 10).

Some Turkish media sources reported that the effective leader of the PKK, Murat Karayilan, was captured during Iranian operations in mid-August. The Iranians allegedly located the PKK commander by using intelligence provided by Turkey's Milli Istihbarat Teskilati (National Intelligence Organization – MIT). It is widely suspected in Turkey that Iran intervened to save Murat Karayilan from being killed by Turkish bombing by arresting and later releasing the PKK leader (Hurriyet, October 17). In this scenario it has been speculated that the PJAK

withdrawal from its forward bases in Iran was the price of Karayilan's freedom (*Yeni Safak*, October 12; *Today's Zaman*, October 12; *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 11).

Karayilan affirmed that he was not under detention in Iran when he appeared on the PKK-affiliated Roj TV in early October, a declaration Iranian authorities supported by saying they had no information regarding the alleged arrest of Karayilan (Rudaw.net, October 18). Turkish authorities expressed satisfaction with Iran's denials, saying Turks should "turn a blind eye" to the allegations while refuting a rumor that Karayilan had been captured by Syrian forces (*Hurriyet* October 14).

#### SALAFIST ATTACKS ON SUFI SHRINES IN LIBYA MAY INDICATE PROLONGED SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

A sudden series of attacks on Sufi shrines and tombs in and around the Libyan capital of Tripoli by heavily armed men in uniform has shocked the large Sufi community in Libya and may indicate the development of a pattern of sectarian attacks similar to those against Sufi groups in Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia and elsewhere. Supporters in Tripoli welcomed the attacks, claiming the Sufis were using the shrines to practice "black magic" (AP, October 13).

In Tripoli, the attackers broke into the shrines of Abdul Rahman al-Masri and Salim Abu Sa'if, exhuming and taking away their remains while burning relics and other items found at the shrines. Similar attacks were reported elsewhere in Tripoli and in the nearby town of Janzour. Some of the attackers boasted of having come from Egypt for the purpose of destroying Sufi shrines (AP, October 13). Tripoli's revolutionary military council is currently headed by Benghazi Salafist militia leader Abd al-Hakim Belhadj.

Salafists in general oppose the construction of elaborate tombs for Muslim holy men or their visitation in the hope of securing their intercession through pilgrimage and prayer. The sentiment runs so strongly in the Salafist community that Saudi Wahhabis even once tried to destroy the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad in Medina.

In Somalia, heavily armed al-Shabaab fighters have used hammers and other tools to destroy Sufi shrines and graves while chanting “Allahu Akbar.” According to an al-Shabaab official, such operations would continue “until we eradicate the culture of worshiping graves” (AFP, March 26; see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, April 2, 2010). Al-Shabaab’s anti-Sufi approach led to the foundation of Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Jama’a (ASJ), a Sufi-dominated militia devoted to the destruction of al-Shabaab’s Salafi-Jihadists.

In recent years the ever-mercurial Gaddafi backed away from his regime’s anti-Sufi policies (largely directed at the once-powerful Sanussi order) and began to encourage the wider adoption of Sufism by Libyan Muslims as a means of countering the growth of Islamism in centers like Benghazi. To this end Tripoli was the surprising host of the Second World Sufi Conference, held in the Libyan capital last February (Tripoli Post, February 15).

Transitional National Council head Mustafa Abdul Jalil denounced the attacks, describing them as “not on the side of the revolution,” while urging a noted religious leader in the rebel ranks, al-Sadiq al-Gheriani, to issue a fatwa condemning such attacks. Al-Gheriani has already said he opposes the construction of such shrines, but does not advocate their forcible removal while the successful rebel forces still lack a unified command (AP, October 13).

In neighboring Egypt there have been reports that Salafists intend to destroy a number of Sufi shrines and mosques, beginning with the mosque housing the tomb of al-Mursi Abu’l-Abbas and continuing with the destruction of 15 other Sufi mosques in Alexandria. Sufis in that city have supplied the Egyptian military with a list of 20 mosques that have already been attacked by Salafists. Street-fights have broken out elsewhere in Egypt as Salafists use the post-Revolution breakdown in law and order to attack Sufi shrines (*al-Masry al-Youm*, April 12). Sufis in Egypt are reported to be forming self-defense committees.

## Perspectives on the Islamist and Salafist Parties in Egypt: Similarities and Dissimilarities

Hani Nasira

As part of the growing political process that opened up after the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, there are now fourteen Islamist parties in Egypt, a dramatic change from less than a year ago, when all such parties were banned. These religious parties mushroomed after some were approved by the Committee of Political Parties and others after a decision was passed by the Administrative Court endorsing their establishment. [1]

Without a clear cut separation between the religious and the political, the Islamic movement in Egypt has recently tended towards political factionalism. Accusations and counter accusations have become common between various groups; the Fadhila Party, for instance, accused the Assla Party Chairman, Major General Adel Abdul Maqsood, of stealing 3500 records of party members when he left the party and adding them to the members’ list of his own party. This accusation was rejected by Abdul Maqsood, saying the remaining Fadhila members are the ones who abandoned the party when they tried to hijack the party by merging it with non – Salafist parties to form a single political front. [2]

Many other Islamist parties withdrew from the Democratic Alliance (al-Tahalof al-Dimqurati) led by the Muslim Brotherhood’s new political formation, al-Hurriyya wa al-’Adala (the Freedom and Justice Party) when it became clear the Brothers wanted to monopolize the election lists for the Egyptian parliamentary elections scheduled for November 28, 2011 and the Shura Council election on January 22, 2012. The Nour Party withdrew from the group due to what is perceived as the alliance’s support of secularism.

The Salafist groups largely declared their opposition to the Egyptian Revolution, though some Brotherhood youths participated in the Revolution’s leadership. In spite of the fact Gama’a al-Islamiya (GI) distanced itself from the Revolution and did not attribute any of its struggles or achievements to itself, the Salafist groups have been among those most ready to exploit Egypt’s post-revolution politics and the least flexible in the face of what is seen as policies contradicting Salafist

objectives, such as reevaluations of concepts such as citizenship and nationality. The Salafists have also accused the Revolutionary youth of being fanatics or even traitors.

The Salafist stand on the Coptic issue became evident in a series of violent incidents following the Revolution,

- On March 4, the Two Martyrs Church in the Giza Province village of Soul was torched by a Muslim mob. Local Copts remain angry after prosecutors declined to charge anyone in the attack (Ahram Online, April 13).
- Violent clashes between Copts and Muslims over another church burning on March 8-9 left at least ten dead and hundreds injured in the Moqattam district of eastern Cairo (Egyt.com News, March 9).
- In April, Salafists joined the Muslim Brothers in a two-day protest in Qena to oppose the appointment of a Coptic governor, General Emad Shehata Michael (Ahram Online, April 16; *al-Masry al-Youm*, April 18).
- In May, Salafists assaulted one church and torched another in a violent sectarian clash provoked by a local Muslim who claimed his Christian wife was being held inside the church after converting to Islam (*al-Gomhurriya*, May 9).

The Salafists' insistence on a national Islamic identity after the revolution and their animosity towards religious minorities are a basic and prominent element in the discourse of the Salafist political parties. In the 10,000 word manifesto of the Salafist Nour Party, the terms "non-Muslim" and "citizenship" were each mentioned only once, as was the term "civil state." "Human Rights" was only mentioned within the context of the right to healthcare. "Democracy" was mentioned twice, but only within the context of Islamic terms of reference. [3]

The Salafist al-Asala (Authenticity) Party seems closer in its discourse to Sayid Qutb's political thought than it is to the Salafist line of thought. The party emphasizes that their first principle is governance based on "the divine law (Shari'a) for its people and the enforcement of this law, as well as annulling all the other laws that are in contradictions with that of Allah, and never to accept

man-made laws and only embrace the divine laws of Allah" (*al-Masry al-Youm*, October 16).

The Islamist parties and al-Haya'a al-Shari'a lil Islah are currently seeking to unite the efforts of the Islamists to endorse an Egyptian Islamic constitution.

In spite of all the apparent similarities among all these parties and their agreement to stifle democracy, citizenship and governance, one can notice three basic contradictions common to their manifestoes and practices:

1) The parties have allowed political competition to challenge their common Islamic purpose in establishing an Islamic state in post-revolutionary Egypt. This competition is manifested in elections, political conflict, the formation of alliances against other parties and the accusations and counter-accusations that dominate relations between the Salafist parties.

2) Egypt's Salafist parties have incorporated nationalism into their political platforms, a deviation from usual Salafist practices. Salafist parties have regional and nationalistic ambitions such as forming an Islamic axis with Iran and Turkey to further the establishment of a revived Caliphate, as mentioned in the manifestos of the Bena'a wa'l-Tanmiyya (Building and Development) Party, the party of the al-Gama'a al-Islamiya. [4] Other Salafist parties have issued calls for an Arab unity axis or have issued similar nationalist calls.

3) Once the struggle for constitutional reforms began, the Islamist parties unanimously agreed on opposing and challenging the sectarian parties and civil organizations. To this end they decided to carry out a media and religious battle against them before the elections slated for November. On the other hand the Salafist parties completely identify themselves with the Army and its policies designed to open the political process (Ikhwan Online, October 12). The spiritual mentor of the Salafist school, Yasser Borhami, described the sectarian parties as "cartoon infidels that are not worthy of any alliance" (Elbadl.net, October 8).

The post-Revolution proliferation of Salafist political parties is actually impeding their progress towards establishing an Islamic state in Egypt. Political discord prevents the creation of an effective alliance and the parties' close identification with sectarian street violence is unlikely to enhance their appeal to more moderate Egyptian Muslims.

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Notes:

1. Among the Salafist parties to be recognized by the Party Committee in Egypt are al-Amal al-Islami (Islamic Action), al-Hurriyya wa al-'Adala (Freedom and Justice Party) the Wasat (Center) Party, al-Nour Party, Asala al-Salafi and the Bena'a and Tanmiya Party. The latter was approved by the Administrative Court after it was rejected by the Party Committee because its platform is based on religious beliefs. It was not clarified how this party differs from the other previously approved. The Salafi al-Fadhila Party is still waiting to be approved by the Committee, as is the Tawhid al-Arabi (Arab Union), an offshoot of al-Amal al-Islami. Other parties are still preparing their papers to be presented to the Committee include al-Salam and Tanmiya Party (led by some former jihadists), the Egyptian Tayyar Party, al-Wasatiya Party (led by Karam Zuhdi, the former Chairman of the Shura Council of the Jama'a Islamiya Party), the Masr al-Bena'a Party( led by Nidal Hamad) and the Nahda Islamic Party (led by Muhammad Habib, former Deputy Supreme Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Dr. Ibrahim al-Za'afarani, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood's Shura Council.
2. <http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?t=443388>
3. Hani Nasira: "Islamists Contrasts, A Case of al- Nour Party," al-Hayat, July 3, 2011.
4. For the Bena'a wa'l-Tanmiyya Party manifesto, see <http://misralbenaa.com/>.

## Sectarian Violence Escalates in Balochistan as Shi'a Holy Month Approaches

*Derek Henry Flood*

Recent incidents in which dozens of Shi'a Hazaras have been killed by Sunni militants have put Balochistan's religious minority on a knife's edge. On October 4, a bus ferrying Shi'a men to work at a vegetable market on the outskirts of Quetta was assaulted by unidentified motorcycle-borne gunmen. The attackers dragged 13 men off the bus, lined them up and sprayed them with Kalashnikov fire (AP, October 4). On September 23, three Hazara men going to work at a coal mine outside Quetta were murdered after their van was stopped by Sunni extremists (Express Tribune [Karachi], September 24).

On September 20, a group of Shi'a pilgrims were traveling to Taftan, the lone official border crossing with Iran, when they had their bus boarded near the town of Mastung by Sunni Deobandi militants who forced 26 male passengers off the coach whom they identified as Shi'a (Samaa TV, September 20). The captives were then shot execution style on the roadside in front of their families. Notably, in December 2010, militants attempted to assassinate Balochistan's top politician, Chief Minister Nawab Aslam Raisani, because of his pledge to protect Shi'a civilians in his jurisdiction (AFP, December 7, 2010). A suicide bomber approached Raisani's convoy in Quetta, killing one and injuring nine, though the Chief Minister escaped unscathed.

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area - at 43 percent of its total land area, has a proportionally tiny population when compared to eastern Pakistan and is vastly underdeveloped despite the region's immense natural resources. Balochistan is ethnically divided along rough north-south lines, with Baluchis running from the center on south to the ancient coastal trading ports of Makran on the Arabian Sea. The coastal region includes the former fishing village of Gwadar, recently redeveloped into a major deep-sea port with Chinese funding. The province's northern reaches hugging the southern Afghan provinces of Nimroz, Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul are populated by Sunni Pashtuns.

Balochistan hosts insurgents active in both Iran and Afghanistan while being torn apart internally by both ethno-nationalist and sectarian militancy. The province has been plagued with a multitude of complex security problems since Pakistan's founding in 1947. These challenges have only worsened since the American war in Afghanistan began a decade ago. Though anti-Hazara violence predates the 2001 American invasion and occupation of Afghanistan by several years, incidents of violence continue as Taliban factions and their Sunni chauvinist allies in Pakistan accuse the Hazara of collaborating with Western militaries since the Mullah Mohammed Omar-led emirate was deposed ten years ago.

The Hazara community of Quetta, Balochistan's provincial capital, migrated from the Hazarajat region in central Afghanistan when Afghan Amir Abdul Rahman declared jihad on their ethno-religious community at the end of the nineteenth century. This exodus forced them to seek protection from the colonial administrators of the British Raj who ruled what is today Pakistan. Almost exactly a hundred years on, the Afghan Taliban carried out a campaign against the Hazaras as they consolidated their rule over Afghanistan that many international human rights campaigners labeled ethnic cleansing. As Persian speaking Shi'a with origins in Central Asia, a radical fringe of Pakistani Sunni religious polemicists view them with perpetual disdain.

Regular attacks on Hazaras in Balochistan began in the late 1990s in the wake of an urban sectarian war between Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) and Sipah-e-Mohammad Pakistan (SMP). These groups were supported by Saudi and Iranian state patrons respectively in the context of a religious proxy conflict on Pakistani soil. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), an ever-more radical Sunni movement that splintered from the SSP, continues to carry out mass attacks on Shi'a. The unabated spate of anti-Hazara violence may very well be linked to the presence in Quetta of the Afghan Taliban leadership, the Quetta Shura.

When the Taliban were at war with the Hazara Hizb-e-Wahdat during the fall of Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998, Pakistani sectarian groups fought alongside the Taliban. The agendas between the two movements blended to a degree as the Taliban adopted an anti-Shi'a bent and LeJ took on some broader jihadi themes in its sectarianism.

When Mazar-e-Sharif ultimately fell to Taliban forces, large-scale reprisal killings were carried out against Hazara civilians trapped inside the city. [2] Since the city fell to Hizb-e-Wahdat, the ethnic-Uzbek Junbish-e-Melli militia of Rashid Dostum and the ethnic-Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami forces of Marshal Mohammed Fahim (with the backing of American Special Forces) in November 2001, the Taliban's contempt for the Hazara has yet to ebb. Hazara fighters fought aggressively against a Taliban prisoner uprising at the fort of Qala-e-Jangi north of Mazar-e-Sharif following the city's fall. With the ouster of the Taliban, many Pakistani Sunni jihadis returned to Pakistan, where some are believed to be behind the current wave of violence Hazara activists are calling genocide.

Attacks on Quetta's Hazara minority began in 1997 with virtually all attributed to LeJ. LeJ ideology employs the inherently controversial concept of *takfir* whereby they grant themselves the authority of declaring other Muslims apostates worthy of death. LeJ recently distributed a letter in Quetta essentially declaring war on the Hazara: "All Shiites are worthy of killing. We will rid Pakistan of unclean people. Pakistan means land of the pure and the Shiites have no right to live in this country We have the edict and signatures of revered scholars declaring Shi'ites infidels. Just as our fighters have waged a successful jihad against the Shiite Hazaras in Afghanistan, our mission in Pakistan is the abolition of this impure sect and its followers from every city, every village and every nook and corner of Pakistan" (Asia Times Online, October 5).

Balochistan's highest ranking policeman, Inspector General Tariq Khosa, laid the blame for the sectarian violence on weak-willed politicians who have allowed rural tracts of the province to be guarded by militias called the Balochistan Levies Force who are accountable for their district's own law and order. This arrangement leaves many areas off limits to formal Pakistani law enforcement responsible to Islamabad.

These tribal militias were originally raised by British colonial administrator Robert Grove Sandeman in the late 19th century in order to co-opt restive tribesmen rather than attempt to impose order on Baloch culture from the top down (Baloch Hal, June 24, 2010). After years of "police rule," the century old militia system—having been dissolved by the regime of Pervez Musharraf—was restored by popular demand in April 2010 by the Balochistan Provincial Assembly (Associated Press of Pakistan, April 6, 2010; for Pakistan's tribal levies, see

*Terrorism Monitor* Briefs, February 26, 2010).

Some have challenged the idea of provincial responsibility for Balochistan's security, suggesting it might be better to place it in the hands of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Pakistan Army rather than the Balochistan Levies or local and federal police structures.

With the ISI busy countering the machinations of their Indian rivals in neighboring Afghanistan and the Pakistan Army in conflict with groups like the Balochistan Liberation Army, it seems that violence directed at Balochistan's Shi'a minority by the LeJ is simply a low security priority for Islamabad in light of the central government's well defined intelligence and military footprint in the province.

Pakistan's security priority is the Baluchi nationalists fighting for a separate state - whom they accuse of being backed by Indian intelligence - rather than sectarian jihadis repeatedly murdering an underrepresented minority (Indo-Asian News Service, September 5, 2006; Daily Outlook Afghanistan, October 8). President Asif Ali Zardari asked the Hazara community to remain steadfast in the face of such slaughters, pledging to provide protection for Hazara pilgrims en route to Shi'a holy sites in Iran, though he outlined nothing more specific in terms of security for the Hazara (*Frontier Post*, October 14). When Interior Minister Rehman Malik chaired a meeting that called for Iran-bound pilgrims to be protected by the Pakistani state, Inspector General Khosa responded by stating such protective measures were already in place, though many Hazaras might be skeptical of such an assertion (*Express Tribune*, October 6).

At the end of November the Shi'a holy month of Muharram will be observed in Quetta by the city's estimated 400,000 Hazaras. With their high visibility, public Ashura processions (marking the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali in 680 CE) will be vulnerable to LeJ suicide bombers. So long as Malik Ishaq, the group's leader, and the LeJ leader in Balochistan, Usman Saifullah Kurd, remain at large, the security of Hazaras in the province will continue to deteriorate (*News International*, October 7; see *Militant Leadership Monitor*, July 2011).

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Notes:

1. Ravi Shekhar Narain Singh Singh, *The Military Factor in Pakistan*, New Delhi, 2009, p.386.
2. The Taliban killings of Hazara inside Mazar-e-Sharif in August 1998 were reprisals for the execution of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Taliban fighters in May 1997 when Taliban forces and their foreign jihadi allies tried and failed to capture the city. See Human Rights Watch, "Backgrounder on Afghanistan: History of the War, The Third Phase: The Taliban's Conquest of Afghanistan, October 2001," <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/asia/afghan-bck1023.htm>.

## Saudi Arabia's "Iran Initiative" and Arab Tribalism: Emerging Forces Converge in the Arab World

*Carole O'Leary and Nicholas Heras*

Seeking to roll back the influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Arab world, the recent "Iran Initiative" of Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah is a major development in Middle Eastern power politics that will have a significant impact on the security of the region.

Saudi Arabia is working to focus the Arab Sunni bloc, including Sunni Arab tribes and Sunni Arab Islamic political parties, on the perceived Iranian threat to the Sunni Arab heartland. In light of the ongoing Arab uprisings in the region, it is important to understand the complex and interrelated roles that tribes and Sunni Islamist political parties play in Arab states today and the roles they may take on in the future. Sunni Islamic political parties in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Jordan and Yemen, for example, are tied in a complex web of relationships to tribes and tribal politics.

Efforts to combat terrorism and inhibit the ability of radical Islamic movements to fill the political void in Arab Uprising states should include a focus on the tribes inasmuch as they are an important sociopolitical component in these states. Tribes have existed in the Middle East for thousands of years and are a stable form of traditional Middle Eastern communal identity that has weathered the storms of colonialism and modernity. Persons holding a tribal identity are not limited in their economic activities. Tribesmen and women can be pastoral nomads, village agriculturalists, shopkeepers, professors at universities, heads of transnational corporations or leaders of modern Arab states.

Take the case of Iraq. Since 2003, many Iraqis have come to rely more on traditional tribal leadership in the context of the power vacuum created when the old regime collapsed. Deterioration of the economy, unemployment, an insurgency and the rise of militias that fueled sectarian based violence in many parts of Iraq created an opening for the reemergence of traditional tribal forms of leadership and community that provided local-level security and the rule of law throughout much of Iraq. Tribes can and will work to support U.S. interests if such interests are perceived to be complimentary and

if incentives are provided (e.g. the critical success of the United States in turning around the situation in Iraq in formerly highly violent tribal areas like Anbar where local sheikhs were cooperating with al-Qaeda in Iraq).

### Arab Tribalism in Context

All Arab tribes, regardless of sectarian identity issues, believe they are related by blood and tied together in a history going back to the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula. Thus, while it is true that Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood have strong ties to tribes in Syria and Libya, it is also the case that Arab tribesmen and women can and will resist efforts by Islamist groups to control them, both for practical reasons (e.g. funding from state regimes to support tribal sheikhs and local community development) but also because tribesmen and women understand their shared identity through the metaphor of family (i.e. the power of tribal bonds based on blood kinship [real or imagined] can at times trump the persuasive power of religious ideology).

Sometimes labeled as a backward or pre-modern form of social organization, tribalism can be a constructive element in supporting democratic processes and in contributing to conflict resolution. Arab regimes have used both "carrots" and "sticks" to control their tribes. For example, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have worked to peacefully integrate tribes into their nation building process through education, provision of resources and incentives to abandon semi-nomadism in favor of settling in villages and adopting farming. Others states, like Syria, Libya, Yemen and Saddam Hussein's Iraq did not hesitate to use fear, violence and deprivation of resources to control their tribes when incentives failed.

Regardless of whether individual tribal leaders have been executed, co-opted, or exiled by the leaders of Arab regimes, tribalism remains a potentially powerful form of political mobilization in the Arab world. Tribes can provide a productive avenue for efforts to inhibit radical Islamist groups from co-opting politics in today's vulnerable and unstable Arab states. Moreover, there are clearly democratic ideas and traditions within the traditional Arab tribal system. These ideas include notions of equality, consensus building and the place of the shaykh as the first among equals. To these can be added practices such as mediation, negotiation and compensation, all of which come under *'urf* or traditional tribal law. These key cultural concepts and practices are antithetical to radical Islamists, especially



those that condone terrorism and suicide attacks. The Iraqi case proves the point; with very few exceptions, authentic Iraqi Arab Sunni shaykhs and their tribesmen and women were driven out of desperation, alienation and fear to align themselves with foreign or domestic Islamist terror groups.

### Saudi Arabia Rallies the Sunni World

The Saudi regime contends that Iran is both an immediate and existential threat to the Arab world. To combat this threat, King Abdullah seeks to channel the energy and fervor of Sunni Arab Islamist groups and the Arab tribes and focus them on the “threat” of Iran. Specifically, Saudi Arabia seeks to diminish Iranian influence and Iranian-supported Shiite institutions and leaders in the Arab heartland. In order to bolster this strategy outside of the region, King Abdullah has already started sending his emissaries to China, Russia, and Japan to sign technical partnership agreements in order to establish a web of economic ties with these strategic states (*Arabian Business*, March 18; *Christian Science Monitor*, February 23). [1]

King Abdullah has issued a series of decrees to protect the internal security of the Kingdom in the face of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen. Involving the disbursement of hundreds of billions of dollars to ready the Kingdom for conflict with Iran, these orders can be grouped into three types:

- Satisfying the citizenry through salary increases and other incentives.
- Satisfying the armed forces through creating more than 60,000 new officer level positions, offering promotions for military officers whose promotions had been on hold due to the lack of vacancies and the creation of a new committee to solve the problems of members of the army and police.
- Most importantly, a series of decrees providing more funding and powers to strengthen the authority of the Wahhabi religious establishment; including an order directed to the media to refrain from criticizing or challenging the religious establishment and to support the Commission for the Enforcement of Religious Law.

Sunni states in the region, including Egypt, Turkey, Morocco and Tunisia are vital to the new foreign policy initiative and are being courted through traditional methods of consensus building. The King sent Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Sa’ud al-Faisal to Turkey, Egypt and elsewhere to share thoughts and gain perspective (*al-Masry al-Youm*, April 12). Since al-Faisal concluded these visits, we have begun to see real changes in, for example, the attitude of the Turkish government towards the regimes in Bahrain and Syria.

### Focus on Syria

Syria is a key “battleground” for the new Saudi foreign policy effort. If the regime collapses, Syria’s Arab Sunni tribes will play a pivotal role in the development of post-Assad governance. The future success of the Syrian Islamists rests in no small part on the decisions that will be taken by Arab tribal leaders in key parts of Syria, including the oil-rich al-Jazirah region of northeastern Syria and the region of southwestern Syria that includes Dera’a, along the Jordanian border. [2]

Saudi Arabia’s attempt to activate Sunni Arab resistance to potential Iranian inroads in Syria may have a good chance of succeeding. There is clear evidence of past cooperation between Syrian Arab tribesmen and radical Islamists (both Syrian and foreign). The al-Jazirah region in particular was a major transit point for the movement of jihadi fighters (including al-Qaeda members) into Iraq, at least until late 2007. Syrian tribesmen, due to their intimate knowledge of the terrain of the area and family connections on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, benefitted immensely from the payments they received for smuggling weapons and fighters into Iraq. Many of these same smugglers found themselves in opposition to the Syrian regime as government troops began to pour into the region in June to repress growing anti-government sentiment (*The National* [Abu Dhabi], June 16).

Syrian tribal shaykhs and tribesmen interviewed referred to the out-migration of tribal youth away from their traditional communities to GCC states (most prominently Saudi Arabia) as the reason for any increased Islamic adherence amongst tribal youth in the region. Some of these youth have noticeably changed their dress and mannerisms, displaying an outward piety that suggests an increase in the power of Saudi-style Islam to attract Syrian rural tribal youth.

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## Conclusion

With the recent political and social upheavals in the Arab world, it is important to understand the role of Saudi Arabia in influencing the decision making that is driving Arab tribal leaders and Sunni Islamists in states like Syria, Libya and Yemen today. In this context, the Saudi initiative is, from the Saudi point of view, a forward-looking policy that will confront and defeat what it perceives as an unacceptable level of Iranian influence in the Sunni Arab heartland.

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## Notes:

1. This section benefited greatly from the analysis of Dr. Faiz al-Alawy, formerly a professor at Baghdad's Technical University. The term "Iran initiative" was coined by the authors of this article and does not occur in King Abdullah's decrees and/or announcements referenced here.
2. This section draws extensively from interviews conducted by the authors in 2008-2011 in Lebanon and Syria. Although there are no official figures on tribal demographics in Syria, the authors have come up with a reasonable estimate of the total number of tribesmen and women who comprise the six largest tribes in the northeast region, based on numbers provided by local shaykhs. Thus, the Shammar have around 600,000 members, the Baggara and the Ougaidat 400,000 members each, the Taie 350,000 members, the Ounaiza 300,000 members, and the Jabbour between 250,000 and 350,000 members. Over 60% of Syrian Arab tribesmen and women reside in the al-Jazirah region in Raqqa and Hasakah Provinces, with significant numbers of tribesmen also residing in the provinces of Aleppo and Dera'a.