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KENYA'S NAVY JOINS COUNTERTERRORIST OPERATIONS OFF SOMALIA

Kenya's navy has joined the Kenyan military offensive in Somalia with operations designed to end al-Shabaab or third-party resupply or arms, fuel and other material to al-Shabaab-held territories in southern Somalia, secure Kenyan waters from terrorist infiltrators and prepare conditions for a two-pronged land and sea assault on the al-Shabaab-held port of Kismayo. Kenyan forces crossed the border into southern Somalia on October 16 as part of Operation Linda Nchi.

The main objective of the Kenyan campaign is to seize the port of Kismayo, a vital source of revenues for al-Shabaab as well as a connection between the Islamist movement and the wider world. With al-Shabaab's loss of the lucrative Mogadishu markets last August and a summer long drought that created massive out-migration from al-Shabaab-held regions of southern Somalia, the loss of Kismayo would represent a severe body-blow to the Somali militants. Kenyan military sources have indicated that the Kenyan navy will play an important part in the attack on Kismayo (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 30). Kenyan jets have already started bombardment of the port region. Kenya's navy possesses an amphibious assault vessel, though a risky amphibious assault on Kismayo would be ambitious for a nation still in the early days of its first extraterritorial operation.

Kenya's small navy consists largely of a handful of small British-built missile boats, Spanish-built patrol boats and a number of American and Spanish-built inshore patrol vessels (IPVs). In recent years the Kenyan Navy has come under local criticism for failing to do enough to tackle the problems of piracy, narcotics



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smuggling and illegal fishing by foreign trawlers in Kenyan waters (*Nairobi Chronicle*, February 11, 2009). However, Kenya's Navy has been hampered in carrying out deep-water operations by deficiencies in its fleet. The fleet's two Spanish-built patrol boats (*Shuja* and *Shupavu*) have had unexpected range and sea-handling problems, while another ship designed for long-range patrols, the KNS *Jasiri*, has sat in a Spanish dock since its completion in 2005 due to an unresolved dispute between Kenya and the European contractor (*Nairobi Chronicle*, December 16, 2008; DefenceWeb, July 4).

Nonetheless, Kenya's military intervention in Somalia has been greatly aided by the return of the missile boats *Nyayo* and *Umoja* from an over two-year refit in Italy. The two 1987 vintage ships had their Otomat missiles removed as part of the refit but were otherwise extensively modernized. Their return has given the Kenyan military greater confidence in their ability to control the southern Somali coastline during the ongoing operations.

On November 2, a Kenyan patrol boat in Somali waters sank a ship they claimed was transporting fuel and al-Shabaab fighters to Kuday in the Bajuni coral islands off the southern Somali coast. Military spokesmen claimed all 18 al-Shabaab militants aboard the ship were killed (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], November 3; Capital FM [Nairobi], November 3; *The Standard* [Nairobi], November 4). [1] The Bajuni coral islands of Kuday, Ndoa, Chuvaye, Koyama, Fuma Iyu na Tini and Nchoni were traditionally inhabited by the non-Somali Bajuni culture, speaking a dialect of Swahili. Somalis began forcing the Bajuni from the islands during the Siad Barre regime, a trend that actually worsened after the collapse of his government in 1991 as many Bajuni sought refuge in Kenya.

A second ship was sunk on November 4, when a Kenyan ship opened fire on a vessel coming from the region of Ras Kamboni in southern Somalia. According to Kenyan military spokesman Major Emmanuel Chirchir, "The boat was challenged to stop for identification but continued to approach the Kenya Navy at high speed, and consequently they fired on it" (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], November 4).

Soon after the attack, however, Kenyan fishermen in the Magarini district claimed that the eight killed were local fishermen. According to the three survivors, the unarmed fishermen had identified themselves and surrendered before the Kenyan ship opened fire, though the commander of the Kenyan ship denies any such

surrender took place. [2] A district commissioner later affirmed the identity of the survivors as local fishermen (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], November 4). Kenyan officials say the government has issued clear instructions to fishermen that fishing off northern Kenya must be done in the daytime while fishing in Somali waters is prohibited (*The Standard* [Nairobi], November 4).

Kenya's military has also warned merchant ships in the Indian Ocean against helping foreign fighters in Somalia to escape to Yemen. Kenya claims foreign fighters have gathered in Barawe and Marka to escape from the Kenyan offensive (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], November 4).

Notes:

1. For video see <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2011/11/18-shabaab-killed-as-kenya-sinks-boat/>.
2. See Nairobi TV interview, November 7, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBke-R0FEXo>.

WAS AL-SHABAAB'S MOGADISHU WITHDRAWAL A STRATEGIC RETREAT IN THE STYLE OF MOSCOW AND KABUL?

A review of the strategy behind al-Shabaab's August withdrawal from Mogadishu that recently appeared on jihadi websites has compared the pull-out with Russia's scorched-earth withdrawal into the Russian interior during Napoleon's invasion and the Taliban withdrawal into the mountains from Kabul in 2001 (ansar1.info, October 25).

In an article called "Mogadishu... the New Kabul!" author Abu Abdul Malik notes that prior to the withdrawal, al-Shabaab had seized 95% of Mogadishu, but the main facilities of the city, including its port, airport and presidential palace remained under the control of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Ugandan and Burundian troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

High security and inaccessibility prevented al-Shabaab from taking control of the military bases of TFG and African Union troops. In this situation, "a nucleus of the enemy remained which would enable them to grow

through the importation of new weapons and more soldiers and training Somali hirelings from abroad.”

Al-Shabaab’s failure to eliminate these bases led to the further intervention of “foreign advisors from France and America, as well as mercenary Blackwater forces.” The Somali militants concluded that “prolonging this course of action did not serve the interests of al-Shabaab in any way...”

Following the failure of al-Shabaab’s Ramadan offensive in Mogadishu, the perceived solution was to abandon the long urban warfare campaign and turn to guerrilla warfare in areas controlled by AMISOM by forgoing the occupation of the city. This move allowed al-Shabaab to once more resume the offensive initiative by allowing it to determine when and where it wished to engage the enemy and in what numbers. While AMISOM forces were concentrated in a square kilometer of Mogadishu they were almost unassailable; however, forcing the undermanned African Union mission to attempt to occupy the whole of Mogadishu drew the normally reticent AU troops from their bases and spread them out across a city rife with opportunities for ambush. The result has been at least one highly successful attack on patrolling AMISOM forces (see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 3). According to Abu Abdul Malik: “Mogadishu has become what Moscow became to Napoleon. Just let the enemy come out, he will fall in the great Mogadishu trap! ... Let them become intoxicated as Napoleon was intoxicated by Moscow and as the Russians and Americans were by Kabul...”

Turkey Afraid Syria Will Target Its Kurdish Achilles’ Heel

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

Syria ended its support for the Kurdish rebels of the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) in 1998 and expelled PKK-leader Abdullah Ocalan, a move that ultimately led to his arrest in Kenya the next year. Now Turkey fears that Syria could use the PKK again against Turkey after Ankara started to support both armed and non-armed Syrian opposition movements. Turkey’s position is especially precarious after talks with PKK rebels failed and the government increasingly resorted to military and security measures to end the Kurdish insurgency.

Turkish suspicions of Syrian support for the Kurdish insurgents increased after a PKK attack led to the death of 24 Turkish soldiers on October 19. This attack was allegedly carried out by the Syrian wing of the PKK led by Syrian Kurd Fehman Huseyin (a.k.a. Dr. Bahoz Erdal) (*Today’s Zaman*, October 20). This claim, however, does not prove that Syria supported the PKK attack. The PKK claimed the attack was revenge for an earlier Turkish operation that killed high-ranking PKK-members (Rudaw.net, November 1). Nevertheless, Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu warned Syria that they should not think of playing the PKK card (*Today’s Zaman*, October 30).

The PKK is politically active in Syria through the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party - PYD) which was founded in 2003. [1] The PKK has Syrian insurgents among its forces based in the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq. The PYD is one of the strongest political parties in Syria, and is especially active in Efrin and Kobani [2]. Furthermore the PKK recently launched a new satellite television station called Ronahî (Kurdish – “Daylight”) in its efforts to attain more support in Syria [3].

There is speculation that the PKK reached a deal with the Syrian government to stop protests against the regime in exchange for more cultural rights. [4] In March 2011, Ba’ath Party officials met with PYD-members and joined Kurdish New Year celebrations in Qamishli (Mesop. de, April 4). Allegedly in exchange for supporting the regime, the PYD was allowed to open several Kurdish schools across Syria, feely organize meetings and enter Syria from Iraq (Wadinet.de, September 21; Kurdwatch,

November 8). In addition, there are claims in the Turkish press that the PKK supported pro-Assad demonstrations in Lebanon (*Hurriyet*, October 30).

The PYD and PKK, however, have strongly denied claims that they struck a deal with the regime (pydrojava.net, October 30). They even accused Turkey of being responsible for the killing of Kurdish activist Mish'al Tammo by masked gunmen in the northern Syrian town of Gamishli. Despite allegations of cooperation with the regime by its rivals, the PYD decided to reject an invitation by President Assad for a meeting (Ajansa Nuceyan a Firate, June 9).

However, the statements of high-ranking PKK commanders and PYD officials on pro-PKK websites show that the PKK is hostile against any Turkish interference in Syria and is open to deals with the regime. The PKK do not trust the Islamist opposition supported by Turkey. PKK commanders like Cemil Bayik, Duran Kalkan, and Murat Karayilan have called on Syria to accept Kurdish demands and warned Ankara they would fight against any Turkish intervention in Syria [5].

Turkey's Kurdish Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi (Peace and Democracy Party - BDP) also tried to get concessions from Turkey by warning that Syria could use the Kurds against Turkey. BDP co-chairman Selahattin Demirtas told Turkish officials that they should strike a deal with the BDP to pre-empt any move by Assad (*Hurriyet*, October 20).

It seems, however, that the government is not impressed by the efforts of the BDP and is convinced that it can eliminate the PKK and the pro-Kurdish BDP by mass-arrests, continued military operations, and by putting reforms on hold. The powerful Islamist Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen recommended that the government should legalize Kurdish educational rights while destroying the PKK (Herkul.org, Oct 24).

Kurdish international studies professor Jordi Tejel argues that the PKK is under pressure from mass arrests and Turkish military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and therefore could use all the help they can get: "In such conditions, the PKK, as it has done throughout its history, is trying to establish alliances with states that in this moment are in conflict with Turkey for whatever reason. Presently, Iran and Syria are the possible allies." [6]

The PKK has indeed struck deals with Iraq, Syria and Iran when it was under pressure before. However, a rival Kurdish leader argued that the PKK would be hurt if it openly struck deals with the Syrian government (Kurdwatch.org, Sept 17). Journalist and Turkish specialist Gareth Jenkins argues that the PKK is worried that Turkey could intervene in Syria and clamp down on Kurdish demands, adding that "fighting against a Turkish intervention in Syria is not the same as fighting for the Assad regime." [7]

From these observations one could conclude that the PKK is open to a deal with Syria to escape from Turkish pressure, while the BDP wants to use Syria's internal conflict to gain concessions from Turkey for the Kurds. The PKK is a highly pragmatic group due to the Kurds' precarious geographic location, and has worked with other repressive states before in order to reach its goals. The main PKK enemy remains Turkey, as recently confirmed by PKK commander Murat Karayilan (Rudaw, Nov 1). However, any deal could hurt the relationship between the PKK and Syria's Kurds, making it likely the PKK would strongly deny the existence of any potential deal with the Syrian regime.

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Notes:

1. See Ozgur Politika, October 22, 2003.
2. Author's interview with Ibrahim Ali, a Kurd from Efrin on Oct 11 2011.
3. This channel is most likely broadcasting from Europe, and hosted by Newroz TV (TV-channel of the Iranian branch of the PKK, Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistane - PJAK).
4. For example Syria expert Jordi Tejel told this to several journalists and in conferences. Also the website Kurdwatch.org accused the PYD of pressuring Kurdish demonstrators.
5. The leading PKK-troika did several interviews with ANF. See the interviews of Cemil Bayik (ANF, Oct 8), Duran Kalkan (ANF, Oct 9), and Murat Karayilan (ANF, Aug 9 & March 31).
6. Author's e-mail interview with Professor Jordi Tejel on October 13, 2011.
7. Author's e-mail interview with Istanbul-based security expert Gareth Jenkins on October 11, 2011.

Jaish-e-Muhammad's Charity Wing Revitalizes Banned Group in Pakistan

Animesh Roul

Often tagged as the second most lethal India-centric terror group based in the Pakistani Punjab, Jaish-e-Muhammad (Army of [the Prophet] Muhammad - JeM) is once again raising its head under the guise of charity in an apparent attempt to revitalize its fledgling stature in the jihadi landscape of South Asia.

JeM has inherited its terror lineage from three jihadi movements: Harkat ul-Jihadi Islami (HuJI), Harkat ul-Mujahideen (HuM) and Harkat ul-Ansar (HuA). It was the HuM which had actually plotted JeM founder Maulana Masood Azhar's safe release from an Indian prison by orchestrating the infamous Kandahar hijacking incident in December 1999. After a seven-day standoff on a Kandahar airfield, roughly 150 passengers, mostly Indian nationals, were released from Indian Airlines Flight IC 184 when the Indian government agreed to the release of Masood Azhar and two other militants.

Soon after his release Azhar formed Jaish-e-Mohammed in Karachi, splitting away from the HuM due to financial and ideological reasons in late January 2000 along with two other terrorist ideologues, Yousuf Ludhianvi and Mufti Samzai. It was learned later that the sectarian outlook of Masood Azhar created a rift with HuM chief Fazlur Rahaman Khalil, making JeM closer to the anti-Shi'a Lashkar-e-Jhangvi group of Punjab.

A veteran of both the Afghan and Somali conflicts, Masood Azhar directed JeM's cadres in perpetrating a series of attacks in Indian Kashmir between 2000 and 2003 as well as striking India's parliament in 2001 in collusion with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). JeM introduced suicide bombing to Kashmir in an April 2000 attack. Following a ban on the organization in 2002, JeM morphed into Tehrik-e-Khuddam-ul-Islam (TKI) and Tehrik ul-Furqaan (TF), headed by Masood Azhar and Abdul Jabbar respectively. The then President Pervez Musharraf imposed a ban on both KUI and JUF in November 2003, following which JeM terrorists plotted assassination attempts on Musharraf in December 2003 and again in January 2004 (Daily Times [Lahore], January 23, 2004).

Within no time, the seemingly disbanded and defunct JeM restarted operations under the banner Al-Rahmat Trust (ART), headed by Maulana Masood Azhar himself as chief and Maulana Ghulam Murtaza, once head of HuM's Punjab chapter. ART was founded in 2001 and was once managed by Masood Azhar's father, Allah Baksh Shabbir, as an educational and religious charity.

In an August 2011 interview, ART coordinator Maulana Ashfaq Ahmed indicated that ART fundraising was in full swing in the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces (Express Tribune [Karachi], August 19). What is more alarming is that most of JeM's operational arms and publications like Al-Qalam and *Muslim Ummah* are hitting the newsstand with fresh ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation) certifications issued by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting that allow the publications to solicit advertisements.

These publications are thus allowed to solicit donations for causes like building mosques or providing relief during the recent natural calamities. Among other things, Al-Rahmat Trust claims to have taken up the responsibility of monthly funding for around 850 homes of the martyrs and brothers imprisoned in India and the prisons of other countries (Rangonoor.com, May 28, 2010).

A newly updated list of proscribed militant organizations in Pakistan lists JeM and its offshoot TKI as two names of the same organization (Dawn [Karachi], November 6). Surprisingly, the list misses JeM's charity arm al-Rahmat Trust, which openly carries out fund raising activities using legitimate banking channels and by seeking donations for the construction of at least 313 mosques in Pakistan. According to ART's online magazine Al-Qalam, the group has already built 13 mosques and another 24 are under construction. [1] The group also calls on people to donate for social services, to support the households of martyrs and mujahideen, to sponsor Islamic preaching and to struggle for the release of Muslim captives, among other causes. ART was sanctioned by the US Treasury Department on November 4, 2010 as a front organization for the JeM, which received earlier designations as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. State Department in 2001 and 2008.

It is important to note that Al-Rahmat Trust has been instrumental in the recruitment and sponsorship of militants fighting in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indian-administered Kashmir. The JeM/ART is one of the

influential Pakistan based terror organizations that have inspired militancy in Muslim youth, especially in the British and American diaspora. In the past JeM has had active ties to a number of high-profile terrorist suspects, including Rashid Rauf (the Trans-Atlantic airline bomb plot), Shaykh Ahmad Omar (the Daniel Pearl case), James Cromitie (the Bronx Synagogue plot) and two of the July 2005 London suicide bombers, Shehzad Tanweer and Siddique Khan. Another instance of JeM's outreach can be found in the case of the five American youths detained in the Sargodha district of Punjab Province while trying to join either JeM or LeT (*Dawn*, December 11, 2009).

Masood Azhar's speeches and Friday sermons often touch topics such as atrocities perpetrated against Muslims in the Western world and India. [2] Known for giving fiery anti-Western and anti-Indian tirades in the style of Jama'at ud-Da'wah amir Hafeez Saeed, Masood Azhar and his Al-Rahamat Trust are now working hard to revive Pakistan's madrassas as places to recruit and indoctrinate a new generation of Islamic militants.

JeM is one of several terrorist organizations that formed the Muttahida Jihad Council (MJC) in Pakistan to battle Indian troops in Kashmir. In one recent meeting convened by the MJC, the JeM central representative, Mufti Asghar, warned India not to think of the temporary lull in JeM activities as proof of India's successful use of power (South Asian News Agency, October 28). In view of the ART's recent activities, which are certainly overlooked by Pakistani authorities, JeM's possible resurgence in any guise in that country could prove damaging for India, especially in Kashmir where security forces currently claim to have largely neutralized JeM.

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Notes:

1. One such ART flier posted on the Al-Qalam website (<http://www.alqalamonline.com>) seeks donations to be deposited in an account held by Ghulam Muraza at the National Bank of Pakistan's Bahawalpur Branch.
2. For example, Masood Azhar's speech on Dr. Aafia Siddiqui (currently serving an 86-year sentence for firing a rifle at her U.S. interrogators in Afghanistan) and why the Muslims are being humiliated around the world can be seen on YouTube, May 8, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OHA9anqQY8>.

Unrest in Syria Shaping a New Strategic Triangle of Hezbollah, Iran and Egypt

Chris Zambelis

The final outcome of the unrest that continues to shake the broader Middle East remains in the balance. The grassroots protests that ushered in the fall of despots in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and continue to rattle ruling power structures in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere are shaping a new domestic political structure predicated on greater participation, accountability and openness. The geopolitics of the region, as reflected in the condition of longstanding alliances and rivalries between nation states, also stands at the precipice of realignment. The volatility in the region will also impact the status of prominent non-state actors that have come to wield tremendous influence on the region's politics and security, including Lebanon's Hezbollah.

In particular, the uprising that toppled Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, a longtime enemy of Hezbollah and close ally of its nemeses Israel, the United States, and Saudi Arabia, bolstered Hezbollah's position in Lebanon and region-wide. In recent years Hezbollah appeared to reach the apex of its influence and legitimacy in Lebanon, even compared to the period immediately following Israel's withdrawal from its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000. Hezbollah survived Israel's 2006 attack against Lebanon and relentless efforts by members of the international community and its domestic political opponents, led by the March 14 Alliance, to incriminate it in the 2005 assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and isolate Hezbollah and its coalition partners in the March 8 Alliance.

By endorsing the demands of the demonstrators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, Hezbollah, from its perspective, placed itself firmly on the right side of history. As the masses organized to depose leaders they saw as agents of the United States and Israel, Hezbollah was able to tie the popular calls for reform heard across the region to its own narrative of resistance (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 1).

The Syrian Dilemma

With opposition protests against the Ba'athist regime of president Bashar al-Assad engulfing Syria, a staunch ally of Hezbollah, the group is confronting a precarious dilemma. From a strictly operational military perspective, Syria provides Hezbollah with the crucial strategic depth it requires to preserve its military capabilities and deterrence capacity against Israel, especially in areas such as logistics. Hezbollah's concern about the escalating instability in Syria was such that it dispatched a diplomatic delegation to Moscow for the first time to confer with Russian authorities over the deteriorating situation there (*Al-Safir* [Beirut], October 21). Russia is a longtime ally of Syria that continues to support the Ba'athist regime in the midst of growing calls for sanctions and other measures to punish Damascus. Russia, along with China, vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution in October condemning Syria for its crackdown against the opposition protests (*Al-Jazeera* [Doha], October 11).

The unrest in Syria also threatens Hezbollah's equally important benefactor, Iran, during a period of heightened tensions between the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia on one side and Iran on the other. Disputed reports alleging Tehran was behind an elaborate plot targeting Saudi and Israeli diplomatic officials and facilities in Washington and the heightened rhetoric out of Israel regarding possible air strikes on Iran's nuclear program reflect the current climate of tension surrounding Iran and its traditional adversaries (*Haaretz* [Tel Aviv], November 4; Reuters, November 5). Iran joins Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas in what is regarded as the "Resistance Axis," an unofficial alliance that stands against the U.S.-led alliance made up of Israel and authoritarian regimes such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies.

Notwithstanding the strategic military aspects of Hezbollah's relationship with Damascus, arguably it is the group's political and ideological legitimacy it commands in Lebanon and the broader Middle East that is most threatened by its pro-regime stance on the developments in Syria. While it endorsed the wave of popular revolt across the Arab world in recent months, analogous displays of dissent in Syria against the Baathist order put Hezbollah in a difficult position. Having initially adopted a quiet line on the situation in Syria, the growing media attention drawn by the escalating violence and the concomitant crackdown by Damascus prompted Hezbollah to address the situation publicly.

Acknowledging Syria's need to pursue a path of reform and to engage in a peaceful dialogue to end the internecine violence, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah defended al-Assad during a public address in August:

We all say and support the need for major and important reforms in Syria so that it can develop and become better as a result of its important position in the region. We want a Syria strong with reforms. This means that all those who claim they are friends of Syria and are keen on its unity must combine efforts to help calm the situation in Syria and push matters toward dialogue and a peaceful resolution...Anything else is dangerous for Syria, Palestine and the region (*Daily Star* [Beirut], August 27).

Nasrallah pointed to Syria's role in the resistance camp in regards to Israel and the plight of the Palestinians as opposed to the position of pro-U.S. autocracies that continue to count on U.S. and Western support:

America and the West want concessions, not reforms from the Syrian leadership. A proof of this is that there are other countries in the region ruled by dictatorships but they still enjoy protection from America and France ... This land here [south Lebanon] would not have been liberated had it not been for the Resistance, and the Resistance would not have won if had it not been for Syrian support (*Daily Star*, August 27).

During a recent interview featured on Hezbollah's al-Manar television network, Nasrallah again affirmed Hezbollah's support for the Ba'athist regime owing to its stance of resistance to U.S. and Israeli dictates: "the Syrian regime is the only regime that cannot be described as subject to the United States' will" (*Al-Manar* [Beirut], October 24). Addressing critics of the group who highlight its apparent hypocrisy in standing by the Ba'athist regime as it quashes dissent as opposed to supporting the tide of opposition, Nasrallah added: "On this issue, we will talk with transparency, clarity, and responsibility. This is because some sides try to say that there are double standards here... the only Arab president who used to talk about Iraq and the Iraqi resistance was perhaps president Bashar al-Assad

who did not accept all these conditions and refused to succumb.” Nasrallah added that Syria is “a partner in the victory of the resistance movements.” The Hezbollah leader also defended the track record of the regime in Damascus regarding its declared intent to implement genuine reforms: “[Al-Assad] is serious about reforms, can make reforms, and he began reforms.” Expressing his confidence in the resilience of the regime, Nasrallah also opined that Syria had “passed the state of danger” (Al-Manar, October 24). Hezbollah’s position is clear: it will not abandon Syria.

Recalibrating the Resistance

In light of the prevailing geopolitics of the region, the logic underpinning Hezbollah’s stance toward the Ba’athist regime in Damascus is easy to discern. As the multitude of state and non-state actors jockey for position in the course of the regional tumult, it is worth considering that current alliance structures are by no means static. Remarks allegedly made by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in September that called on al-Assad to avert further violence and open dialogue with the protesters, for instance, seemed to indicate the potential for a realignment of sorts, especially as different actors watch as the previous status quo they had so much invested in slowly dissipates. According to the Portuguese translation of a September 7 Radiotelevisao Portuguesa interview with the Iranian president, Ahmadinejad said; “A military solution is never the right solution... We believe that freedom and justice and respect for others are the rights of all nations. All governments have to recognize these rights. Problems have to be dealt with through dialogue” (al-Jazeera, September 8). Iran later denied that Ahmadinejad ever issued such a statement and instead accused hostile forces of distorting his words to weaken the resolve of Iran and Syria (Press TV [Tehran], September 12).

In this context it is worth considering the potential for a regional shift occurring in the existing alliance structures. Many observers are beginning to decipher a slowly emerging new Middle East map, one which may feature a new, recalibrated axis of resistance or concept of resistance (Asia Times [Hong Kong], September 2). The potential fall of the Ba’athist regime in Syria (as unlikely it may seem at this point) and its replacement with a civil war-stricken society or a Salafist-oriented regime would profoundly impact Hezbollah, Syria’s neighbors (particularly Lebanon and Israel) and Iran. Yet there are clues to suggest that a more subtle sequence of shifts are taking place incrementally and on multiple

levels, including the diplomatic, ideological, economic, and defense spheres, the most important of which stem directly from the fall of Mubarak and the ongoing political transition in Egypt.

The fall of Mubarak, a longtime opponent of Iran, has opened a window to a rapprochement between Cairo and the Islamic Republic. Commenting in April on the future of Egypt-Iran relations in the post-Mubarak era, a spokesman at the Egyptian foreign ministry declared: “We are prepared to take a different view of Iran. The former regime used to see Iran as an enemy, but we don’t” (*al-Masry al-Youm* [Cairo], April 17). Coinciding with its apparent willingness to turn a page in its relations with Iran, Egypt has also seemed to float the idea of opening a dialogue with Hezbollah (*Al-Ahram* [Cairo], March 30). For its part, Iran has moved to alleviate the enmity between Cairo and Tehran going back over three decades to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1981 assassination of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat. Iran’s naming of a Tehran street after Egyptian army officer Khaled Islambouli, who assassinated the Egyptian president in retaliation for his signing of the Camp David Accords, is a testament to the former state of relations between Egypt and Iran under Mubarak.

While there are no solid indications that an alliance between Egypt and Iran is in the offing, Egyptian public opinion tends to strongly oppose the staunchly pro-U.S. and pro-Israel orientation of the country since the Sadat era. The rise of a more open and democratic Egypt where public opinion factors heavily into the formulation of its foreign policy will almost certainly pave the way for friendlier ties between Cairo and Tehran. The normalization of ties between the onetime enemies will impact Hezbollah, as it will be less concerned with evading the hand of the once hostile Egyptian intelligence services, allowing it to devote more resources toward deterring Israel. Iran is also eager to diversify its network of relations and alliances in the event that its relationship with Syria becomes irreparably damaged during the ongoing revolt. In this regard, Iran is also likely to court Iraq – a country where it already maintains great influence – as the most likely candidate to replace Syria in the event of the fall of the Ba’athist regime. This is indeed an attractive prospect for Iran, considering the upcoming scheduled withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country.

Israel stands to lose the relative security it enjoyed knowing that it could count on virtually seamless support from the Mubarak regime for its continued occupation of Palestinian land, its actions toward Gaza, and its confrontation with Lebanon. Egypt has also expressed its intent to improve relations with Syria, a trend that will also strengthen Hezbollah (*al-Masry al-Youm*, March 3). Relations between Cairo and Damascus plummeted when Syria criticized Egypt's stance on the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

Conclusion

The evolving strategic triangle linking Hezbollah, Iran, and Egypt cannot be considered in a vacuum. Emboldened actors such as Turkey will also make their presence felt across the region. The recent announcement by the United States of a plan to reinforce its already robust military presence in the Gulf following the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq later this year, a move designed to shore up embattled pro-U.S. regimes amid the continuing rebellions in the region, must also factor into any geopolitical calculus of future scenarios (*Al-Arabiya* [Dubai], October 31). Undoubtedly, the potential loss of Syria as an ally would devastate Hezbollah; however, it would be shortsighted to underestimate the number of available options and the inherent flexibility of Hezbollah and other regional players that will allow them to react and adjust to the Middle East's changing political climate.

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