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DESPERATE MEASURES: SOMALIA'S AL-SHABAAB JOINS AL-QAEDA

In what he described as “good news” that would “annoy the Crusaders,” al-Qaeda leader Shaykh Ayman al-Zawahiri announced the incorporation of Somalia’s al-Shabaab militants as an official new chapter of al-Qaeda on February 9. [1] Al-Shabaab leader Shaykh Ahmad Abdi Godane “Abu Zubayr” appeared in the 15-minute videotape to pledge his movement’s obedience to al-Zawahiri and promised to follow “the road of jihad and martyrdom, in the footsteps that our martyr Osama bin Laden has drawn for us.”

The merger may be the first step in an al-Qaeda effort to ensure the survival of the movement by expanding into the larger Islamic world through the creation of official al-Qaeda affiliates without the so far apparent and unstated requirement for an Arab leadership.

Faced with increasing military opposition and severe blows to its revenue streams, al-Shabaab faces the options of gradual annihilation in the field or scaling back operations to a more asymmetric model based on a diminished interest in holding territory and a greater use of terrorist tactics in an expanded zone of operations that would certainly include Somalia’s neighbors and possibly reach to the foreign supporters of Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

The announcement was remarkably ill-timed, coming only days ahead of an international conference in London in which many Western countries were already expected to announce some increase in their levels of military and

economic support for the TFG and AMISOM. The al-Qaeda merger will almost inevitably result in greater levels of support than donor nations may have originally intended. The timing of the announcement seems inexplicable, unless al-Qaeda has started to believe its own propaganda efforts and actually believes such an announcement will send the TFG's international supporters reeling in fear and dismay. The timing of the merger is also unlikely to meet with universal approval from Shabaab commanders and will exacerbate existing fissures within the movement's leadership. TFG minister of information Abdikadir Husayn Muhammad suggested the unification could be a good thing for Somalia: "When Ayman al-Zawahiri described the merger between al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda as 'good news,' it is also 'good news' for us, and the time when al-Shabaab terror group used to disguise itself as a Somali Islamic organization has come to an end" (Jowhar.com, February 10).

The February 23 conference, hosted by the UK government, has been convened to address political instability and piracy in Somalia. There have been claims in Somalia, particularly from al-Shabaab, that the conference will discuss the "re-colonization" of Somalia, but TFG officials have urged Somalis to wait for the outcome of the meeting (Shabelle Media Network, February 11). According to al-Shabaab spokesman Shaykh Ali Mohamud Raage: "It's the imperious nature of the Brits that sees them meddling in Islamic affairs in the hope of reviving a hopeless dream of a British Empire" (AFP, February 14). In a recent speech in Mogadishu, TFG president Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad insisted al-Qaeda were the colonialists and everyone in Somalia was required to do their part in "liberating" Somalia from their grasp (Shabelle Media Network, February 13). There is also speculation in Somalia that the African Union peacekeeping mission may be taken over by the UN following the London conference, possibly even in a mission led by Turkey (Dayniile Online, February 10). Al-Shabaab ordered businesses and schools in areas under its control to close for a one-day celebration of their merger with al-Qaeda (Radio Simba [Mogadishu], February 13; Shabelle Media Network, February 13). At one such rally in Afgoye, Shaykh Ali Mohamud Raage promised "mujahideen fighters worldwide" that "the unification is a sign of the return of the Islamic caliphate worldwide" (AFP, February 13).

The existing cooperation between al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab over the last few years has yielded little for either group: al-Qaeda does not possess the weapons, funds or military assets to tip the conflict in al-Shabaab's

favor, while Somalia's crumbling infrastructure, prevailing xenophobia and isolation provides a poor safe haven for terrorists operating in the global arena. Non-Somali jihadists generally find Somalia an unattractive theatre and unification is unlikely to change this. The merger will also endanger al-Shabaab's diaspora fundraisers, recruiters and volunteers who have had some success so far in meeting terrorism-related charges with claims they were inspired solely by nationalism and not the Salafist-inspired global jihad. U.S. drones operating out of Djibouti can be expected to increase surveillance missions and targeted attacks of al-Shabaab leaders within Somalia.

Kenya is scheduled to increase its Somali commitment from the existing 2,000 men deployed in southern Somalia to 4,700 men under AMISOM command in the Middle and Lower Juba regions of Somalia, though Kenyan authorities maintain the KDF must complete Operation Linda Nchi before Kenyan troops can join AMISOM (*East African* [Nairobi], February 14). Uganda and Burundi are also preparing to increase their deployment to a total of 12,000 troops from the current level of 9,500.

KDF spokesman Colonel Cyrus Oguna noted international anti-terrorist protocols can now be applied against al-Shabaab and claimed that al-Shabaab's revenue stream has been "totally disrupted" since the Kenyan incursion into southern Somalia: "In our own assessment, 75% of revenue collection of al-Shabaab has been disrupted" (KTN Television [Nairobi], February 11; AFP, February 11).

Somalia may now be faced by more al-Shabaab terrorist attacks such as the Mogadishu suicide bombing on February 8 that killed 16 civilians and severely wounded 30 more (al-Andalus Radio [Afgoye], February 8; Africa Review [Nairobi], February 8). Somali MP and former information minister Tahir Muhammad Gili speculated that the merger would result in al-Shabaab changing its tactics to "carry out more bombings and transfer battles outside Somalia, particularly to Somalia's neighboring countries, since those countries have troops inside Somalia at the moment. (al-Jazeera, February 12).

Note:

1. "Glad Tidings: Announcement of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen Officially Joining al-Qaeda," As-Sahab Global Media Front, shamikh1.info, February 9.

THE BATTLE FOR KUFRA OASIS AND THE ONGOING WAR IN LIBYA

An escalating tribal conflict in the strategic Kufra Oasis has revealed once more that Libya's Transitional National Council (TNC) is incapable of restoring order in a nation where political and tribal violence flares up on a regular basis, fuelled by a wave of weapons liberated from Qaddafi's armories. Though this is hardly the first clash between the African Tubu and the Arab Zuwaya tribe that took control of the oasis from the Tubu in 1840, it is certainly the first to be fought with heavy weapons such as RPGs and anti-aircraft guns, an innovation that is reflected in the various estimates of heavy casualties in the fighting.

Fighting began on February 12 and has continued to the present. Well over 100 people have been killed in less than two weeks; with many hundreds more wounded (Tripoli Post, February 22). Tensions had been running high between the Arab and Tubu communities throughout last year's political turbulence and the current fighting appears to have been sparked by the alleged murder of an Arab by three dark-skinned men the Zuwaya believe to have been Tubu. The latter have also been affected by a canard promoted by Qaddafi that suggests the Tubu only arrived in southern Libya during the Italian occupation of Libya or later, an assertion that could easily lead to efforts to expel the Tubu from the region. A newly formed group called the National Rally of Tubus has issued alarming warnings that the clashes in Kufra were part of an effort to cleanse the region of its traditional Tubu presence: "Kufra is a disaster area and what is happening in the town is genocide and the extermination of the Tubu" (AFP, February 15).

The Tubu fighters are led by Isa Abd al-Majid Mansur, who backed the rebel forces in last year's revolution. Isa Abd al-Majid is head of the Tubu Front for the Salvation of Libya (TFSL), founded in June, 2007. The TFSL confronted Libyan security forces in a five-day battle at Kufra in 2008 during which the movement threatened to sabotage the important Sarir oil fields in southeast Libya (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 11, 2008). The Zuwaya claim that al-Majid is now supported by mercenaries from Chad and Darfur (Reuters, February 13). Despite playing an important role in the Libyan revolution, the Tubu have experienced little change since the Qaddafi regime, when the Tubu were subject to loss of their Libyan identity cards and were denied access to health and education facilities. Isa Abd al-Majid denies that the TFSL seek to divide Libya: "We

are not seeking a separation; we are like all other Libyan opposition movements. We are calling for the restitution of our rights." (al-Alam TV [Tehran], August 15, 2007).

During the Libyan insurrection, the Tubu formed the rebel-allied "Desert Shield Brigade" under veteran Tubu militant Barka Wardougou, conducting long-range raids on Murzuk and al-Qatrun (*Ennahar* [Algiers], August 20, 2011; AFP, July 23, 2011). Wardagou is the former leader of the Niger-based Tubu movement Front armé révolutionnaire du Sahara (FARS).

Having already been active in armed opposition to the Libya government for some years prior to the 2011 revolution, Isa Abd al-Majid foresaw a time when the rest of the Libyan people would join the struggle against the Qaddafi regime: "We claimed our rights, but [Qaddafi] marginalized us and denied our rights. He even said [the Tubu] are all foreigners. Even when al-Qaddafi visited Qatrun, he said we should be distributed over Benghazi and the coastal regions and we should leave the border areas [in southern Libya]." (al-Alam TV [Tehran], August 15, 2007) Today, most Tubu live in northern Chad, ranging through the deserts and seasonal pastures surrounding their headquarters in the Tibesti Mountains. Much smaller communities live in eastern Niger and southeastern Libya. Though the latter is a traditional part of the Teda Tubu homeland, some Chadian Tubu have arrived in recent decades and live in shantytowns around Kufra.

In 1895 the leadership of the Sanussi Brotherhood relocated to the oasis to avoid entanglements with the Ottoman authorities in northern Libya. The Sanussis transformed the oasis into an anti-colonial bastion until its conquest by a massive column of heavily armed Italian troops in 1931. Kufra's strategic importance and airstrip meant that Italian occupation was short as Free French colonial troops and British forces from the Long Range Desert Group took the oasis in 1941, transforming Kufra into a base for long range strikes across the desert on Italian and German forces in northern Libya. Though the Libyan garrison declared itself for the rebels early in last year's revolution, loyalist forces retook the oasis at one point during its campaign to establish control over the all-important oil and water resources of Libya's southern deserts (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, May 8, 2011). Some 40,000 people live in Kufra (roughly 10% of them Tubu), which dominates a number of trans-Saharan trade routes.

The Zuwaya claim the Tubu are being helped by hundreds of “mercenaries from Chad” - one local government official described 40 4X4 vehicles full of soldiers attacking the “May 5 military camp” at Kufra and warned that if military aid from Benghazi was not forthcoming, Kufra would be forced to declare independence (Reuters, February 13).

TNC military chief General Yusuf al-Mangush has denied reports of foreign fighters in the region and urged elders from the Zuwaya and Tubu to meet (Reuters, February 18). TNC chairman Abd al-Jalil, a former Qaddafi loyalist, has claimed that the fighting in Kufra was started by Qaddafi regime loyalists who were “seeding sedition” (AFP, February 21). Sources within the Zuwaya have confirmed the TNC has been shipping arms and fighters to the Kufra Arabs to combat what a TNC spokesman described as “smugglers helped by foreign elements” (*Daily Star* [Beirut], February 15). A Zuwaya source confirmed that a plane carrying weapons and fighters had landed at Kufra airport on February 13 to aid the Arab fighters there (AFP, February 14).

The Libyan Defense Ministry has promised military intervention if the fighting does not end soon, but has otherwise taken no action to end the conflict so far (Reuters, February 20).

Iranian Crisis Spurs Saudi Reconsideration of Nuclear Weapons

Nicholas A. Heras and Andrew P. Dean

Rising tension in the Persian Gulf over the Islamic Republic of Iran’s purported ambition of developing nuclear weapons could lead to a nuclear arms race between Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. On December 5, 2011, one of the most important members of the Saudi royal family, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, stated that a nuclear armed Iran would cause Saudi Arabia to seriously consider obtaining nuclear weapons as well (*Agence France Presse*, December 5, 2011). Further adding fuel to speculation, a recent report in the *Times* of London, citing an unidentified Saudi security source linked to the Saudi Strategic Missile Force asserted that in the event of an Iranian nuclear weapon being developed, Saudi Arabia would immediately purchase nuclear weapons and begin enriching its own uranium, possibly directly from Pakistan (*Times*, February 9).

At present, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) allies are maintaining a public position of support for a WMD-free zone in the Middle East (AP, January 25, 2012). In conjunction with this policy, Saudi Arabia is expanding its peaceful nuclear power generating capability as a means of addressing rising domestic energy demand while saving valuable oil assets for export. The Kingdom is maintaining an aggressive policy of seeking multilateral agreements to address its need for nuclear power plants, research nuclear reactors, and manufacturing capability for nuclear fuels. To achieve this goal, Saudi Arabia has signed nuclear technology agreements with Argentina, South Korea, France, and China (*Arab News*, January 16, 2012).

Beyond the pursuit of peaceful nuclear technology, Saudi Arabia’s announcement it was considering pursuing nuclear weapons to counter a growing Iranian threat leads to many strategic questions about the Kingdom’s likely deployment methods in the event it were to develop or receive nuclear weapons and the political costs that the Saudi government would incur with some of its closest allies for seeking to possess nuclear weapons. The United States, in particular, has expressed strong disagreement with a potential “Saudi

nuke,” both as a matter of policy towards promoting a nuclear weapons free Middle East, and due to questions amongst U.S. lawmakers whether or not the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a trustworthy ally. Although the Saudi and U.S. governments reached a tentative, non-binding agreement for U.S.-Saudi cooperation for civilian nuclear technology in 2008, no formal agreement exists between the two nations (*Wall Street Journal*, July 30, 2011). In the past year, senior United States lawmakers have severely criticized the possibility of Saudi Arabia’s acquisition of nuclear weapons. The chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R), captured the mood against supporting nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia by stating that Saudi Arabia’s “ties to terrorism and terror financing alone should rule it out as a candidate for U.S. nuclear cooperation,” (*Agence France Presse*, July 30, 2011).

In the event of a policy decision to counter an Iranian nuclear weapon with a nuclear weapon of its own, Saudi Arabia has several existing platforms for deploying nuclear warheads. At present, the Royal Saudi Air Force has dozens of operational tactical fighter aircraft and short-range bombers that could double as delivery vehicles for nuclear warheads such as the B61. These aircraft include Saudi Arabia’s aging fleet of Panavia Tornados, soon to be replaced by the more capable European Typhoon, and the F-15S, and the F-15SA. These latter aircraft were the subject of a recent \$29.4 billion purchase made by the Kingdom that will include 84 new F-15s and modernization packages for the 70 existing F-15s in the Royal Saudi Air Force (*DefenseNews*, December 29, 2011).

In addition to the Royal Saudi Air Force’s air-to-ground capabilities, the Kingdom possesses one of the most robust networks of ballistic missile sites in the Middle East. It is estimated that Saudi Arabia currently possesses 40-60 aging Chinese-manufactured CSS-2 medium-range ballistic missiles, and an estimated 9-12 launchers to fire them. The CSS-2, or East Wind system, is capable of delivering only non-nuclear payloads within a 2,800 kilometer radius. The Saudi CSS-2 missiles are currently aimed at major population centers within Iran, but are terribly inaccurate and undependable, which raises questions about the Saudi leadership’s willingness to deploy such weapons (*Nuclear Threat Initiative*, November, 2011).

Iran’s nuclear ambitions, coupled with Saudi Arabia’s sizable but outdated ballistic missile system, increases speculation about recent sales discussions between the Saudis and Chinese for a nuclear-capable, highly accurate upgrade, such as the Dongfeng 21 (DF-21 or NATO-designated CSS-5). If the Saudis were to purchase the DF-21, a medium-range, road-mobile ballistic missile, it would signify a considerable operational improvement in accuracy, mobility, and lethality. The DF-21 is capable of delivering 250 or 500 kiloton conventional warheads accurately within a 2,150 kilometer range. The road-mobile feature, provided by the Transporter-Erector-Launcher (TEL), makes the DF-21 more survivable as they are more difficult to target. (*Missile Threat*, February 14, 2012).

Saudi military planners will seek to exploit deficiencies in Iran’s missile defense. Iran’s indigenously developed Bavar 373 missile defense system, which was developed after Russia reneged on the delivery of \$800 million worth of S-300PMU missiles, may be Iran’s greatest vulnerability. The Russian-made S-300 is widely recognized as one of the world’s most advanced missile defense systems. The Iranian government, however, claims that their alternative is equally capable, a claim that is difficult to corroborate given Iran’s historical need to acquire advanced radar and electronics technologies from suppliers abroad like North Korea, Russia, and China (*UPI*, November 23, 2011).

The now public insinuation of a Saudi “nuclear option” has upped the ante in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Middle East region, and would severely strain relations between Saudi Arabia and some of its strongest allies, including the United States. In over a year of turbulent events in the region, Saudi Arabia has asserted itself vis-à-vis Iran in intervening militarily against popular demonstrations against the Saudi allied al-Khalifa monarchy in Bahrain, in developing its “Iran Initiative,” and by helping Qatar to spearhead a G.C.C. policy of supporting anti-Assad movements in Syria, a longtime Iranian ally. Prince Turki’s statement and the continued assertions by individuals knowledgeable about Saudi nuclear strategies indicate that Saudi Arabia is motivated to confront an Iranian nuclear weapons program with a nuclear weapons program of its own. Saudi Arabia has the technology and the strategic partnerships necessary to quickly develop a nuclear weapons capability.

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Have the Niger Delta's MEND Militants Resumed Operations in Southern Nigeria?

Mark McNamee

Even as Nigeria struggles with a wave of religiously-inspired violence in its northern states, there are now indications that a relatively dormant insurgency in Nigeria's oil-rich southern states may be restarting in an attempt to take advantage of Nigeria's precarious security situation. Jomo Gbomo, a purported spokesman for Nigeria's Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), announced in a February 5 email statement that the group had attacked and destroyed an oil trunk line in Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta region the previous day. Gbomo complained that "rather than address serious issues facing the nation and its citizens, [Nigerian President] Goodluck Jonathan squanders public funds on tribalistic sycophants and thugs calling themselves ex-militants." He also threatened more violence in the coming weeks, and confirmed that MEND fighters had also been responsible for an attack a week earlier on the compound of the Minister for Niger Delta in Delta State (*Vanguard* [Lagos], February 15).

With these attacks, Gbomo formally announced a "new phase" in the group's struggle, following a lull in violence after a truce was signed in late 2009 between the government and a majority of MEND's senior commanders, who accepted an amnesty. The operation, if indeed conducted by MEND, would constitute the group's first confirmed attack since November 2010 (*Daily Champion* [Lagos], February 10). Meanwhile, the elite Joint Task Force (JTF) assigned to pacify the Delta region has dismissed the threat, avowing that the attack had come from disgruntled militants and criminal gangs unassociated with MEND who were still trying to take advantage of benefits offered by the now-expired amnesty program. The JTF went so far as to publicly identify the seven suspects behind the attacks, insisting that they were unaffiliated with MEND (*Vanguard*, February 7).

Sporadic attacks continued into 2010 and 2011, albeit at nowhere near the level of violence that pervaded the region prior to the amnesty. In the most significant attack to date since the amnesty, on October 1, 2010, the nation's Independence Day, alleged MEND militants detonated two car bombs in Abuja outside the

justice ministry and a third bomb near a venue where the president was participating in celebrations. The bombings, which killed 12 people, were tied to Henry Okah, an ex-MEND leader who did not accept the amnesty and fell into disfavor with the leadership (*This Day* [Lagos], October 3, 2010). Alhaji Dokubo-Asari and other amnestied senior MEND leaders condemned the bombing and denied MEND involvement (*The Guardian* [Lagos], October, 6, 2010).

The ambiguity of MEND's composition and relation to other similar insurgent groups significantly complicates assessments of its operations, vitality, and the future threat it poses to the nation and to the region as a whole. Dokubo-Asari noted in 2009 that "MEND was created not as an organization but as a name for the purpose of issuing unified statements" (Sahara Reporters [Lagos], January 1, 2009). Often described as an umbrella organization, MEND is a loose web of armed groups that exists in the Delta amongst a number of affiliated, favorable, and even hostile organizations that also operate in the area. Some of these related groups have been known to disobey MEND ceasefires and engage in autonomous activity. Adding to the obscurity, the identity of Jomo Gbomo is also questioned – Gbomo may in fact be a fictitious identity used by several MEND commanders or even possibly Henry Okah himself (*Daily Independent* [Lagos], November 5, 2010; *This Day*, October 6, 2010; *Vanguard*, February 15).

Indicative of its loose structure, MEND has splintered into several factions in recent years and, while nearly all the senior commanders in the field and their respective followers have accepted the amnesty and are observing a ceasefire, some factions have not. Certain of these, claiming to speak for all of MEND, continue to perpetrate infrequent pipeline attacks in the region and issue threats, much to the irritation of MEND's senior figures (*The Nigerian Voice*, October 5, 2010; *Leadership* [Abuja], November 21, 2011). The JTF insists the pipeline attack in early February was perpetrated by one of these separate and insignificant splinter groups (*Vanguard*, February 7).

Fears would be much allayed if the JTF is correct. At the height of the Delta insurgency prior to the 2009 amnesty, MEND cut Nigeria's oil output by more than a quarter and production shutdowns from attacks caused an average drop in production of 1 million barrels per day, yielding billions of dollars in losses (*This Day*, October 8, 2010; *Leadership*, November 22, 2010). Production levels have increased to previous levels since

then and the region has calmed significantly because of the amnesty. Moreover, Nigeria cannot afford a separate security situation in its economically vital south, considering the increasingly deadly activities of Boko Haram in the north and center of the country.

Meanwhile, the northern unrest has also served to unsettle Delta militants. In response to Boko Haram violence, southern insurgents have indicated their willingness, even eagerness, to violently repel the group, with some offering to work with federal security forces to pacify the north (*The Nigerian Voice*, September 21, 2011). Soon after dozens of southern Christians were slaughtered by Boko Haram outside Abuja on Christmas Day 2011, other Delta militants threatened to attack major oil installations and military bases in the south if the government failed to protect civilians from Boko Haram (*Leadership*, January 9, 2012). Dokubo-Asari likewise warned that the nation was "on the precipice of a civil war" and that southern Nigerians were poised to take up arms to fight the northern Islamists, but were restraining themselves "only out of respect for the president" (*Daily Trust*, January 4, 2012).

Leaving north-south hostility aside, it is difficult to envision how MEND would initiate consistent, high-level attacks in the Delta. With former leaders having distanced themselves from militancy and this most recent attack, mobilization of the requisite resources for a sustained and comprehensive movement is rather improbable. Moreover, since 2009, a number of self-described MEND spokesmen have made baseless and bombastic threats similar to the rhetoric issued in the wake of the most recent attack; more often than not, these threats have failed to materialize in action (*Daily Champion*, September 30, 2011; *Vanguard*, July 15, 2011; January 21, 2011). Thus, based on recent activity in the Niger Delta, there is little to suggest a revival of the violence to pre-2009 levels in the near future.

On the other hand, while that degree of unrest should not be anticipated, a potential increase in violence is possible, as the roots of violence in the region remain: an excess of instability combined with an abundance of oil. Many worry that the positive results of the amnesty are short-term and the current calm will not last, citing stories of ex-militants who have either returned to fighting in the Delta or have turned to offshore piracy in the Gulf of Guinea (*African Confidential*, October 21, 2011). At this time, when Boko Haram poses the most significant security concern for the federal government, the activities of MEND and associated Delta insurgents

constitute not so much a signal of a return to the violence of pre-amnesty days, but more a reminder that the region remains impoverished, unstable, and dissatisfied – making long-term, sustainable peace an unrealistic expectation. Neither an anomaly nor the harbinger of an apocalyptic trend, the February pipeline attack likely reflects both the continued low-level dissatisfaction in the region as well as the limited capability of marginal gangs to threaten the southern oil industry.

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Negotiating an Endgame in Afghanistan: Qatar Hosts the Taliban

Chris Zambelis

As the insurgency in Afghanistan rages on, recent events appear to confirm earlier reports pointing to a U.S. interest in taking the once inconceivable step of engaging the Taliban in negotiations (see *Terrorism Monitor*, November 25, 2008; *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, February 11, 2010). Washington is setting its sights on withdrawing most, if not all, of the 130,000 troops it commands under NATO auspices when Kabul assumes responsibility for Afghanistan's security in 2014. Despite the chronic violence and instability that endures in Afghanistan, the U.S. administration looks to harness the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and domestic concerns revolving around economic issues in an election year to extricate itself from what is now the longest war in American history. In doing so, the administration recognizes the tremendous influence the Taliban wields across Afghanistan – militarily, culturally, politically, and economically – as well as in Pakistan. Amid questions surrounding the nature of its motivations, Qatar – a U.S. ally whose rising diplomatic star continues to confound close observers of Middle East politics, has positioned itself to serve as an interlocutor to initiate preliminary talks between the warring parties on Washington's behalf.

Reports that U.S. Special Envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman met with representatives of the Afghan Taliban in Qatar in January to explore the prospect of opening a dialogue with the insurgent movement remain fraught with speculation. A delegation of ranking Taliban members, including Tayyab Agha, a former secretary to Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar, former Taliban foreign minister Shir Muhammad Abbas Stanekzai and former Taliban ambassador to Saudi Arabia Shabuddin Delawar traveled to Doha in January to establish a formal office in the Persian Gulf emirate (*Telegraph* [London], January 26; *Tolo News* [Kabul], January 28; *The News International* [Islamabad], January 28). The allegation that Grossman met with the Taliban officials in Doha originated from a senior Afghan official who spoke anonymously due to the sensitive nature of the subject (AFP, February 8). Grossman recently toured Afghanistan, Turkey,

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, India, and Qatar to tout a plan to initiate comprehensive peace and reconciliation talks to end the war in Afghanistan. Pakistan, a critical piece in the Afghan puzzle, rebuffed a U.S. request to have Grossman visit the country amid heightened tensions between Washington and Islamabad (al-Jazeera [Doha], January 18). The United States has refused to comment on Grossman's alleged meeting with the Taliban. Grossman did, however, laud the Taliban's decision to establish a presence in Qatar to help advance efforts to end the war, though he qualified his support by adding that the United States wants to see the group condemn terrorism, break with al-Qaeda, and work to support peace in the region (VOA, January 22; Al-Jazeera, January 12).

Playing Politics

In a gesture of diplomatic goodwill, Washington is reviewing a Taliban request that it release five of its leaders currently imprisoned at Guantanamo Bay as a starting point for peace talks (al-Jazeera, January 12; Reuters, February 2). The Taliban is meanwhile doing its part to affirm that it is taking diplomacy seriously: A former ranking Taliban official extolled the credentials of the representatives dispatched to Doha, who he described as well-educated, fluent in English, and "moderate," but at the same time "committed" to the movement (*Telegraph*, January 26; *The News International*, January 28). Lost amid the delicate back channel diplomacy surrounding the future of Afghanistan is the Afghan government's anger over Qatar's willingness to host the Taliban diplomats. Afghanistan would later recall its ambassador to Qatar in protest. To counter the Qatari initiative, Afghan president Hamid Karzai suggested that exploratory peace talks be held in a different country, such as Saudi Arabia or Turkey. According to Karzai: "Americans cannot negotiate on our behalf with the Taliban and with us on behalf of the Taliban" (Tolo News, February 17).

Significantly, the Taliban proclaimed its presence in Doha as a declaration of victory over its adversaries (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Voice of Jihad, January 15; see also *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, January 26). The statement announcing the Doha office highlighted the Taliban's credentials as an organic, capable, and legitimate actor in Afghan politics. The Taliban leadership also appears keen to demonstrate to its supporters and detractors alike that its decision to explore the possibility of entering into peace talks should not be interpreted as a

sign of weakness or surrender.

The Taliban statement suggests that the group was always amenable to dealing with matters in a pragmatic and respectful manner:

Everyone concerned should choose the rational and logical path of solving issues with Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. If the present invaders had chosen a lucid path instead of incursion, they would not have faced such a huge personnel and financial loss in Afghanistan (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Voice of Jihad, January 15).

Defining the Taliban

Painting an accurate portrait of the myriad competing interests at work in Afghanistan is, by any stretch, a daunting enterprise. The complexity inherent in enlisting the Taliban as a stakeholder at the negotiating table raises important questions about the approach of Washington to Afghanistan. Despite the major differences between the two groups, the United States has often equated the Taliban with al-Qaeda. The ultraconservative variety of Sunni fundamentalism espoused by the Taliban always represented a regional and insular current that operated within the confines of Afghan society. This holds especially true for the ethnic Pashtun population that comprises the Taliban's main constituency. Al-Qaeda, in contrast to the Taliban, is a transnational activist movement with a global worldview and the Taliban's alliance with the movement was controversial among many Taliban leaders who disapproved of the relationship. The Taliban remains a highly fractious movement that is divided along village, tribal, ethnic, and regional lines. As the Taliban builds its presence in Doha, two salient questions arise. First, how does the United States define the Taliban? Second, does the Taliban representation in Doha accurately reflect the larger Taliban current in Afghanistan?

In this regard, the United States faces a series of dilemmas. The United States continues to offer a \$10 million reward for information leading to the capture or killing of Mullah Omar. The role of the numerous insurgent groups that rival the Taliban for influence, including the Hizb-i-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Hizb-i-Islami Khalis (HIK) and the Haqqani Network, must also be taken into account. The Haqqani Network, a Taliban ally that has emerged as one of the most lethal threats

to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, strongly opposes negotiating with Washington. Reports have also surfaced alleging that the United States has already reached out to the numerous other insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan.

The Taliban representation in Qatar will likely be able to persuade many of its devotees to adhere to whatever course of action it chooses to pursue as a result of its diplomacy. At the same time, there are indications that segments of the Taliban's rank-and-file are angry over the decision taken by their leaders to engage with their enemies without consulting them. Many Taliban fighters are determined to reject any compromises with Washington or Kabul made on their behalf in Qatar, including orders to lay down their arms (IWPR Afghan Recovery Report, January 30). The Taliban's role in facilitating Afghanistan's lucrative opium trade is almost certain to be near the top of any negotiation agenda. According to the United Nations, opium production levels in Afghanistan in 2011 surpassed previous record highs. Any attempts by the Taliban to curtail the lucrative opium trade as a possible concession to Washington during future negotiations is sure to alienate many of its followers (Khamma Press [Kabul], February 18).

The Question of Pakistan

The rise of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an assembly of ethnic Pashtun tribal militias based in Pakistan's northern tribal areas that attempted to replicate the Afghan Taliban on Pakistani soil, has plunged Pakistan into chaos. As much as they share a common ideological pedigree and operational links, it is unclear how the Afghan Taliban's foray into diplomacy will impact the situation in Pakistan. Washington is certain to craft its demands to the Afghan Taliban with an eye on the deteriorating situation in Pakistan. Yet the evolution of events in Pakistan in recent years shows that the Pakistan Taliban is organic to its surroundings. As a result, the Pakistan Taliban is not likely to follow any dictates issued by its Afghan progenitor it deems contrary to its own interests. That Islamabad continues to view the Taliban in Afghanistan as a crucial ally in the larger context of its rivalry with India adds another layer of complexity to the ramifications of peace talks. Paradoxically, as Pakistan reels from al-Qaeda- and Taliban-inspired militancy within its own borders, it continues to view a Taliban-dominated landscape in Afghanistan as a means to enhance its strategic depth. Islamabad's support for the Taliban has long been a point

of friction between Pakistan and Afghanistan. This reality, combined with the dire state of U.S.-Pakistan relations, means that Islamabad will be projecting itself into the negotiations to ensure that its interests are protected.

Reflecting their shared concerns about Washington's effort to engage the Taliban in Doha at the expense of the interests of regional actors, Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari, Afghan president Hamid Karzai, and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad used the occasion of the third annual Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran trilateral summit in Islamabad to call for an Afghan-led peace initiative that is free of foreign intervention (Press TV [Tehran], February 16; *The News International*, February 19). There is yet the question of how the Taliban will react to U.S. demands regarding its association with al-Qaeda, but as more of al-Qaeda's members are captured or killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban's position with respect to al-Qaeda may become less and less important as a host of other pressing issues take precedence.

Conclusion

Given the many variables involved, it is too early to envisage a realistic outcome to any substantive negotiations that may transpire between the United States and the Taliban. The multitude of competing interests in play foreshadows an increase in violence and possibly severe instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the months ahead. An agreement to consider the initiation of formal peace talks, even tentatively, is likely to be viewed by the United States, the Taliban, and other critical stakeholders as a rationale to strengthen their respective negotiating leverage in relation to one another. In the framework of Afghanistan, these dynamics are a recipe for further bloodshed before any progress becomes apparent.

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