



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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Phantom Eye

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## AL-QAEDA COMMANDER CALLS FOR REVOLT IN SAUDI ARABIA TO DEAL WITH THREAT FROM U.S. AND IRAN

In an audiotape address entitled “Do Not Lead toward the Wicked,” the naib (deputy leader) of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) called for a jihad against the Saudi royal family as the best way of addressing the threat posed by a united front of Israel, the United States and Iran (UmmaNews.com, March 13; Ansar1.info, March 13). Sa’id al-Shihri (a.k.a. Abu Sufyan al-Azdi) focused his attack on the Saudis and the “scholars of sin” of the religious establishment that support them. Al-Shihri especially condemned the royal family for permitting Shiites to live in the Kingdom’s Eastern Province (al-Sharqiyah). The AQAP commander has appealed in the past to the Saudi military to mutiny against the Saudis and usher in an Islamist regime (see *Terrorism Monitor*, September 9, 2010). Shortly after al-Shihri’s statement was released, the Saudi Embassy in Sana’a warned its staff that al-Qaeda was planning to strike the facility with car bombs (*Yemen Post*, March 15).

The AQAP *naib* suggested that Americans and Zionists were combating Sunni Islam in Pakistan, Yemen and Afghanistan, while Iran was pursuing an aggressive policy in those areas inhabited by their fellow Shiites. Al-Shihri pointed to a recent clash in the largely Shiite city of Qatif as an example of the failure of the Saudis and the “royal scholars” to reveal the nature of the threat posed to Sunni Islam by the “Iranian-armed Rafidites” of Saudi Arabia. “Rafidites” or “Rawafidh” (rejectionists, i.e. of Islam) is a pejorative term used by Salafists or other anti-Shi’a Sunnis. In the past, al-Shihri has indicated he believes the Zaydi Shiites of Yemen are Iranian-controlled “Rafidites” even though their form of Islam is closer to the

Shafi'i Sunnism practiced elsewhere in Yemen than to the dominant form of "Twelver" Shi'ism practiced in Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Southern Lebanon, eastern Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Middle East (*Sada al-Malahim*, Issue 12, February 2010; Aljazeeraatalk.net, February 18, 2010).

An extreme view of Shi'ism commonly held by Salafists holds that the Shi'a are polytheists and outside of Islam, though the view of Cairo's al-Azhar University and the Saudi government (at least officially) is that Shi'ism is a legitimate variation of Islam, thus allowing Shiites to perform the pilgrimage to the Holy Cities of the Hijaz. With Saudi Arabia's international reputation as the homeland of Sunni Islam, it remains little known that some 10 to 15% of the nation's population follows the Shi'i school, these being concentrated in the oil-producing Eastern Province. Al-Shihri urges "the men of Islam" to gather at the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia to defend the Shari'a of Allah from the Americans and their "puppet henchmen." He also warns Iran has rallied its own followers "from Bahrain to Syria, and from Qatif to Sa'ada [the north Yemen capital of the Shiite Houthist movement) for a war against Islam."

Al-Shihri cites a *takfiri fatwa* from the late Saudi Shaykh Abdallah ibn Jibrin that declared the Kingdom's Shi'a population had been exposed to the truth of Sunni Islam but had rejected it, thus making them heretics subject to the penalty of death. Ibn Jibrin also declared it was inappropriate to pray for the success of Lebanon's Hezbollah in its struggle with Israel. (IHT August 3, 2006; see also ibn-jebreen.com). Al-Shihri's emphasis on the principle of *al-wala' wa'l-bara*, or "loyalty (towards the believers) and disavowal (of the disbelievers)" is typical of such Salafist exhortation. In this case Muslims are obliged to combat the Saudis as they "have left Islam," according to the *naib*.

The city of Qatif and surrounding governorate of Qatif referred to by al-Shihri is almost exclusively Shiite and has been the site of numerous disturbances in the last year involving clashes between protesters angered by the Saudi government's allegedly anti-Shi'a policies and the inequitable distribution of oil wealth in the Qatif region, which lacks schools and health facilities. Saudi Ministry of the Interior spokesman Major General Mansour al-Turki says there can be no comparison made between the "legitimate self-defense" practiced by Saudi security forces under attack from protesters and the political violence taking place in neighboring nations (*Saudi Gazette*, February 20; *Arab News*, February 20).

Shaykh Sayyid Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, recently offered his support to the Shiite protesters in the Eastern Province, noting the inequitable distribution of energy revenues: "Protesters there are not calling for toppling the regime, they are rather demanding some reforms, rights and developments in one of the poorest areas in Saudi Arabia, knowing that it is one of the richest areas in oil." In response, the protesters are met only with "bullets and tanks" (al-Manar TV, February 24; AP, February 25).

A prominent Shiite cleric in Qatif, Shaykh Ghazi al-Shabib, has called for legislation against those who willfully spread sedition by promoting sectarianism and *takfir* in the Kingdom (Rasid.com, March 12). Similar calls were made last October by Shaykh Faisal al-Awami, who suggested the root of sectarianism was the "misinterpretation of religion and misuse of the manuscripts" in some religious communities (Rasid.com, October 22, 2011).

Yemen's President Abd Rabbu Mansur al-Hadi has sworn to restructure the army and intensify the fight against al-Qaeda in the midst of allegations that General Ali Muhsin and members of the ex-president's family are supplying weapons and munitions to AQAP and related Islamist militias (*al-Mu'tamar* [Sana'a], March 13; al-Mithaq.net [Sana'a], March 12; *Jordan Times*, March 14).

## SYRIAN FREE ARMY COMMANDER CLAIMS IRANIAN TROOPS AND HEZBOLLAH FIGHTING IN SYRIA

While hard evidence of an Iranian or Lebanese Hezbollah military presence in Syria is in short supply, commanders of the opposition Syrian Free Army (FSA) continue to maintain that large numbers of such forces are in the frontlines of the Syrian regime's efforts to suppress anti-government activism.

On March 1, FSA Brigadier General Husam Awwak (formerly of Syrian Air Intelligence) claimed regime loyalists had been joined by an Iranian armored brigade and Hezbollah fighters acting as snipers, bombers and street-fighters (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 1). According to the Brigadier, the Iranian armored brigade has been deployed since 2007 near Deir al-Ashayir (actually in southeastern Lebanon), close to Palestinian refugee camps controlled by Ahmad Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command (PFLP-GC). Awwak added: "This is the first time that this information is made public." The alleged armored brigade was quickly inflated into Iranian "armored divisions" in the Israeli press (Israelnationalnews.com, March 1). Awwak also claims Hezbollah has sent three brigades (numbered 101, 102 and 103) to Syria, describing the 103rd Brigade as a "terrorist Shiite regiment specializing in assassinations and bombings." Various reports in the Chinese, Israeli, Turkish and Pan-Arab press suggesting 15,000 troops from the Revolutionary Guards' al-Quds unit have deployed in Syria appear to be without foundation.

Hezbollah leader Sayyid Nasrallah has denied the presence of any fighters from his movement in Syria, describing the claims as "an attempt to distort the Resistance's image" (*al-Manar*, February 24). Besides the alleged presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces, FSA officer Ammar al-Wawi suggests followers of militant Iraqi Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr have also joined the Syrian security forces (AFP, March 14).

Iranians travelling or working in Syria are increasingly subject to abduction by FSA forces. At least two parties of pilgrims have been kidnapped. Seven Iranians kidnapped in Homs by the FSA's "Farouk Brigade" appeared in an FSA video confessing they were snipers who "killed a lot of women and children" under the supervision of Syria's Air Force Intelligence unit. However, it was observed that the names of five of the seven "snipers" matched those of five Iranian engineers kidnapped in Homs last

December after spending two years working on a new power plant (Press TV [Tehran], December 24, 2011; February 10; al-Jazeera, January 27).

FSA financing comes both internally and externally from "Syrian merchants, charities and arms traders" according to Awwak. Some armed support came from Libya, but these fighters have returned to Libya due to "the internal situation" in that country. The FSA is still waiting for promised support from the Gulf nations and Egypt. The Syrian Brigadier also made a strange and nostalgic appeal to the Egyptians, reminding them of the political unification of Syria and Egypt in the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958-1961): "We consider ourselves part of the Egyptian army since the days of Egyptian-Syrian unity during Gamal Abd al-Nasir's rule. The so-called First Army of the Egyptian armed forces is still in Syria. We are happy with any support that Egypt gives."

The unification last week of the FSA and the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella opposition group, in a merger facilitated by Turkey appears to be part of an effort to present a united front in order to free up arms supplies from Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 14). However, even as some differences receive a temporary patch-over, new armed opposition movements such as the Syrian Patriotic Army (SPA) and the Syrian Liberation Army (SLA) arise. Some of the many opposition "Brigades" proliferating across Syria oppose the prominence of the Muslim Brotherhood in the SNC, while others have adopted anti-Shi'a, anti-Alawi Sunni extremism as their guiding principle. Some have even adopted the slogan: "Christians to Beirut, Alawites to graves" (*Independent*, March 14). However, based on the Libyan precedent, large quantities of arms from external sources seem unlikely to begin flowing until they can be delivered to a single central authority. SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun has proposed the creation of a Military Council to oversee the distribution of arms to the various armed opposition groups, but does not appear to have the support of the FSA's Riyad al-Asa'd for such an initiative (*Independent*, March 14). The Syrian regime is not experiencing the same problems; Russia's deputy defense minister, Anatoly Antonov, announced on March 13 that Russia will honor its existing weapons contracts with Syria and will continue supplying the Syrian regime with new arms (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 14).

Interestingly, both sides in the struggle for Syria claim that Israel is supporting their opponent. The Syrian

government claimed that Israeli and U.S.-made weapons were seized in Homs from al-Qaeda fighters of Lebanese, Libyan and Afghan origin. An FSA commander called the claims a fabrication: “The fact is that Al-Assad family’s regime alone has been the agent of Israel for 40 years. It is starting today to claim that it is the target of an Israeli-American conspiracy and at times claims it is targeted by al-Qaeda organization. We assert there are no foreign gunmen in Syria other than the fighters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah who are fighting alongside this regime for its survival” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 12; *al-Watan* [Damascus], February 11).

Though the Syrian regime has consistently said that opposition forces are in league with al-Qaeda, some in the FSA command try to associate al-Qaeda with Iran; according to Brigadier Fayeز Qaddur Amr: “Al-Qaeda was created by the Iranian regime, and the rumor of an al-Qaeda presence among us has only served the Syrian and Iranian regimes. Iran created al-Qaeda even in Somalia” (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 12).

It is difficult to say how much the Syrian regime and the armed opposition believe their own tales of foreign jihadis, al-Qaeda operatives, mysterious armored brigades and electrical engineers who moonlight as snipers. Indeed, many of the crimes attributed by the FSA to Hezbollah appear to be the work of the regime’s Shabiha (“ghost”) gunmen. At the moment the FSA leadership may face more immediate threats; Turkish sources indicate a number of Syrians and Turks were arrested this month by Turkish military intelligence after the latter learned of a plot to kidnap FSA leader Colonel Riyad al-Asa’d and other FSA commanders from their refuge in Turkey. The FSA also claimed to have caught a double agent for Damascus who had joined the FSA (*Sabah*, March 3; *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 3). It is highly unlikely that this is the only regime agent to have penetrated the FSA’s upper echelons.

What is clear is that parallel to the very real internecine Syrian conflict exists a war of words and propaganda as each side struggles to win the battle for international opinion and military support.

## Losing the Initiative: The PKK’s Crumbling Strategy

Francesco F. Milan

The winter of 2011/2012 witnessed an intensified campaign by the Turkish government against the Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK) and the network of organizations and individuals that supports it. The armed group, identified as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the European Union, Canada and the United States, has been attacked by Turkey’s counterinsurgency campaign at different levels. Persistent cross-border air strikes continue to hit PKK bases in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, as the Turkish military try to create havoc in PKK’s “safe havens.” Given the difficulty of moving in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and southeastern Turkey during the winter, the PKK has traditionally staged a “tactical retreat” to their bases in winter, transferring operations to their urban branches and returning to the field as soon as possible in the spring.

However, this year the PKK commanders decided to break this cyclical pattern and engage Turkish security forces in a winter campaign. The decision proved short-sighted, as PKK casualties reached into the hundreds, with at least ten fighters dying from exposure in the rough winter conditions (*Today’s Zaman*, December 27, 2011; Firat News Agency, March 12). The campaign also led to a peak in surrenders, as security forces captured dozens of PKK fighters. Some of those who were interrogated have been cooperative and provided substantial information leading to the discovery of several PKK hideouts located in rural areas of southeastern Turkey containing considerable amounts of explosives, weapons and food (*Today’s Zaman*, December 27, 2011; *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 16).

In an attempt to seize the initiative, Turkey’s ruling Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi (AKP – Justice and Development Party) has also been working on a new strategy aimed at exploiting and widening internal divisions within the PKK. The idea, suggested and planned by the Interior Ministry, is to implement a system of bounties for the capture of PKK mid- and high-level cadres. Should it be accepted, the new system is supposed to work within the existing framework of Law No. 221 of the Turkish Penal Code, which grants amnesty to members of terrorist organizations who defect without having participated in any prior criminal action. Accordingly, the strategy aims



at attracting those who only recently joined the PKK and tries to exploit recent waves of defections. Even though it is unlikely to lead to substantive captures, it is expected to create tensions and increase distrust within PKK (*Today's Zaman*, February 29; March 9).

The Turkish government has also tackled the PKK's political infrastructure. Since November, 2011 Turkish authorities have launched an ongoing crackdown on the Koma Civaken Kurdistan (KCK), an illegal political organization that gathers several Kurdish organizations together under one umbrella. The KCK is accused of operating as an urban and political wing of the PKK and of running "a state within a state" in southeastern Turkey through a parallel government that carries out tax collection and administers justice (*Hurriyet Daily News*, November 22, 2011; *Today's Zaman*, December 28, 2011). By arresting several key members, the operation increased communications difficulties between the KCK and the Qandil-based Kongra-Gel (the KCK's executive assembly), chaired by PKK commander Murat Karayilan. Communications with Abdullah Ocalan have been interrupted as well. For years, the PKK's imprisoned founder kept leading the terrorist group via confidential communications with his lawyers, the only visitors he was allowed to have while serving his life sentence in isolation at the Imrali Island prison. However, visits were suspended several months ago, and many of his lawyers were arrested for their alleged ties with KCK, leaving the PKK without Ocalan's strategic guidance (*Today's Zaman*, November 22).

The crackdown on the KCK triggered strong protests by the Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi (BDP – Peace and Democracy Party), Turkey's main Kurdish political party. The party was founded in 2008, just before its predecessor, the Demokratik Toplum Partisi (DTP – Democratic Society Party), was disbanded for its ties with PKK. The BDP has been accused of being the electoral offshoot of the PKK and several of its members and mayors (the BDP runs almost 100 municipalities in Turkey) have recently been arrested for their alleged affiliation with the KCK. Despite its high electoral appeal to Turkey's Kurdish community, BDP leaders have so far lacked political incisiveness, and seem now stuck on the pursuit of long term objectives, while they have not yet managed to engage the government in short term-oriented negotiations.

The BDP's recent proposal for the creation of a governmental delegation to start negotiations with the PKK will hardly lead anywhere, given the fact that the party insists on a general amnesty for all PKK fighters (including Abdullah Ocalan), a clear no-go for the Turkish government (*Today's Zaman*, February 6). The BDP's political feebleness becomes apparent when considering that, behind the scenes; Turkish authorities have already started informal negotiations with the PKK itself. Representatives of the Turkish government have been meeting Abdullah Ocalan on a regular basis and top level officials from the Milli Istihbarat Teskilati (MIT – National Intelligence Organization) met high-ranking PKK members in order to discuss and assess potential proposals. In fact, discussions with Ocalan were close to bringing about some elements of agreement in the summer of 2011, but PKK hardliners expressed their opposition to the talks by staging a major attack on Turkish troops, killing 13 soldiers (*Today's Zaman*, July 27, 2011; February 6, 2012).

The PKK's troubled situation suggests some cautious optimism for Turkey's counterterrorism efforts; in recent months the organization has been hit both at the military and political level. However, it seems the PKK hardliners ultimately have the upper hand, as ambushes against Turkish troops and terrorist attacks in urban areas continue regardless of any top-level negotiation. Paradoxically, the PKK's strategic failure might in fact hinder future negotiations: as the movement becomes more and more fragmented without a proper national platform for political discussion. As long as the PKK hawks keeps refusing any form of dialogue, meetings between Turkey's representatives and PKK leaders are doomed to bring only fleeting results, if any.

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## Oil Conflict Brings North and South Sudan to the Brink of War

*Steven Costello*

The leadership in Juba and Khartoum need to find a breakthrough in their oil dispute or they risk their own survival and the possible outbreak of an unprecedented level of conflict – even for Sudan. In late January the Republic of South Sudan, the world's newest nation, cut off its oil supply to the world market. South Sudan seceded in July, 2011 after decades of brutal civil war. For both Juba and Khartoum, oil provides the vast majority of government revenues. The problem is that 80% of the oil lies under South Sudanese soil but is pumped out via pipeline to Port Sudan in the north. In recent months, South Sudan has accused Sudan of stealing large quantities of oil in transit to the Red Sea, while Khartoum claims that this is compensation for transit fees not paid. Oil revenue was a key issue in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the Second Sudanese Civil War and paved the way for southern independence. However, no agreement was forthcoming and as a result, Khartoum sought \$36 a barrel in transit fees – over ten times the standard rate and far more than the \$1 per barrel the SPLM was prepared to pay (Sudan Tribune, February 7). When Juba refused to meet the fees, Khartoum began siphoning oil as payment, leading South Sudan to turn off the pumps.

Combined with mutual accusations of support for rebel movements and regular border skirmishes, this dangerous standoff, has sparked speculation of a return to full-scale conflict (Sudan Daily Vision [Khartoum], March 14). Everyone is right to be nervous – even Sudan president Omar al-Bashir has said that the two nations are closer to war than peace (AFP, February 3). The mostly Arab Muslim north and African Christian/animist south have been in conflict since before independence from Britain in 1956. Indeed Sudan was born into civil war. The perpetual animosity between the two, built ever stronger on conflict-related deaths in the millions, has created a zero-sum mindset for the ruling elites in both capitals when it comes to north-south relations. This needs to change, and it needs to change fast. Both ruling parties, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in Juba and the National Congress Party (NCP) in Khartoum increasingly risk their own survival the longer this stalemate continues, for if challengers from within feel they can solve these

problems and attempt to take power by force, the whole region will shatter into violence resembling that of past decades.

Although Khartoum itself has seen development due to oil revenue, the rest of the country has been largely neglected by the ruling party. Corruption, tribal nepotism, economic stagnation, and a repressive security apparatus have bred growing resentment within Sudan to Bashir's leadership. There were numerous stories of divisions within the NCP prior to the recent oil stalemate. Since then, the pressure has ramped up even further due to rising inflation and a Sudanese pound in steep decline (Sudan Tribune, February 24). Food and fuel shortages are increasingly common, and the government coffers are further depleted by Khartoum's multiple counter-insurgencies. Bashir and his ruling clique may soon face difficulties in paying Sudan's civil servants and security forces. [1] Together with increasingly disaffected youth and the external pressure of the Arab uprisings, the NCP now finds itself in a precarious position. While the hard-liners in his own party blame Bashir for losing the south (and thus the oil revenues) by signing the CPA, the military have reportedly warned Bashir that they are stretched thin and that a rush to war with Juba would be ill-advised (Sudan Tribune, January 30). If the NCP does not make an oil deal quickly, the cracks in Khartoum could widen, and by extension fuel the low-level insurgencies in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile State, and Eastern Sudan, emboldened by an underfunded military and political turmoil in the capital.

While Juba sees Khartoum's position as weakening, South Sudan has its own internal problems, and the stakes are perhaps even higher. Although the SPLM, led by Salva Kiir, are right to balk at paying ten times the market rate for oil transfers, negotiations should have continued. For Juba, whose focus should be building the groundwork for basic services and economic growth, cutting off the vast majority of its revenue is patently absurd. It would seem some in the SPLM do not realize the fragile position they are in since the signing of the CPA in 2005. The politico-military situation in South Sudan may in the future be increasingly viewed along ethnic lines. [2] In 1991, the SPLA split roughly between South Sudan's two largest tribes, the Dinka and the Nuer (though many Nuer fighters remained under SPLA command). The late leader of the SPLA, John Garang, a Dinka, was widely perceived by his Nuer comrades to be engaging in favoritism to his people. "The Split," as it is known in South Sudan, resulted in horrific levels of inter-communal violence. Over the ensuing decade, the

conflict in the south escalated with several Nuer sub-groups forming their own militias, often funded and encouraged by Khartoum, to fight for control of the oil fields in Unity and Upper Nile states. Upon the signing of the CPA most South Sudanese militias were incorporated into a massive new military of over 200,000 troops (Reuters, June 21, 2011). Nevertheless, various armed insurgencies are ongoing in South Sudan. The SPLM has bought off some rebels while attempting to defeat others by force. Even if some of these “rebellions” are inspired by mercenary warlordism, the narrative among some Nuer and various other ethnic groups in South Sudan is that the country is becoming a Dinka-dominated, one party state.

Whereas there is a long history of political upheaval in Khartoum that some citizens see as inevitable, South Sudan’s experience with statecraft is still in uncharted waters. The sudden shrinkage of the national budget by over 90% is justifiably raising questions about the country’s leadership. The SPLM has announced deals to build new pipelines to Kenya and Eritrea, but these projects will cost billions of dollars and are years away (Reuters, February 22; BBC, February 9). In the meantime, as food and fuel shortages reach crisis levels, inflation skyrockets and signs of capital flight begin, the SPLM does not seem to have contemplated the nightmare scenario: a *coup d’état*. The SPLM and its military upper echelon is made up of elites who not long ago were commanding various rival subgroups of the Southern rebellion and continue to have constituencies in their home regions willing to take up arms on their behalf. In this case the fledgling South Sudan government may prove to be a house of cards as new militant groups emerge seeking control of the state – and by extension oil revenues. It is a certainty that Khartoum would fan the flames of such chaos with weapons and other material support to those forces it sees as operating in its interests.

If the current standoff results in internal political turmoil, we could see the two Sudans facing power vacuums that would surely produce intense levels of political and inter-communal violence on both sides of the border – but particularly in the South as the thin veneer of loyalty to the regime dissolves among elements of the SPLM and the military. African Union-sponsored talks between the two Sudan’s in Addis Ababa led to an accord on multiple issues, but the oil issue evaded solution, with woefully inadequate concessions offered by both sides (Sudan Tribune; March 15). Khartoum is already threatening to abandon even this limited agreement if

Juba does not immediately cease its alleged support of rebel movements in the north. President Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court, will make his first visit to South Sudan since independence in July for further talks on the oil problem, prompting a public debate in Juba (Sudan Tribune, March 18). Behind closed doors, negotiations will surely be acrimonious and rife with suspicion. The leadership in Khartoum and Juba have long looked at each other with a burning hatred, but if they insist on continuing this brinkmanship they would be well advised to prepare for sudden and intense opposition from within their respective regimes.

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#### Notes:

1. Natsios, Andrew, “Sudan’s Oil Crisis is only Bashir’s First Problem,” Foreign Affairs, February 2012 <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137065/andrew-s-natsios/sudans-oil-crisis-is-only-bashirs-first-problem?page=show>.
2. Steven Costello, “A Second Split for South Sudan,” July 7, 2011, [http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/resources/articles\\_papers\\_reports/0093.html](http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/resources/articles_papers_reports/0093.html).

## Predators, Reapers and Ravens: The Drone Revolution in Tactics and Strategy

Brian Glyn Williams

With very little discussion, the United States and as many as 50 other nations have inaugurated what amounts to a “drone revolution” that will profoundly change our very understanding of the security environment. There can be no doubt that unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, represent the future of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency in remote and insecure lands such as Pakistan’s tribal region, Yemen, Somalia, Libya and beyond. [1] Where U.S. boots cannot be placed on the ground to hunt terrorists, drones will increasingly strike at those whom America deems to be its enemies. John Brennan, the president’s top counterterrorism adviser, recently announced that, “The United States does not view our authority to use military force against al-Qaeda as being restricted solely to ‘hot’ battlefields like Afghanistan” (*New York Times*, September 16, 2011). This means that the Obama administration believes it can utilize drones wherever al-Qaeda or allied terrorists may be, from North Africa to the southern Philippines. All signs indicate that the U.S. military and the CIA are planning a future where drones will play an increasingly important role in warfare and anti-terrorist operations.

This of course means more strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the primary focus of current drone operations. As the United States draws down its troops in Afghanistan in 2013-2014 and prepares to hand the fight against the Taliban over to the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, its presence on the ground in this strategic country will be much diminished. It is increasingly clear that the Pentagon will transfer its anti-Taliban combat efforts to small, elite Special Forces groups, manned support aircraft and drones. These elements, which will most likely be based in so-called “Joint Facilities” in Jalalabad (eastern Afghanistan) Kandahar (southern Afghanistan) and Bagram (north of Kabul), will be used to assist the Afghan Army’s defensive efforts or to carry out offensives against Taliban-held sanctuaries. They will also be engaged in “hunt and kill” missions designed to take out local Taliban commanders and disrupt their networks.

With the coming withdrawal of most U.S. troops in Afghanistan, the need for counter-terrorism “personality strikes” (i.e. strikes on high value targets) will be greater than ever. This will certainly mean a continuation of ‘signature strike’ attacks (i.e. strikes based on “pattern of life” activities, such as transporting weapons to a known Taliban safe house or crossing the Afghan border with weapons) on Taliban foot soldiers as well.

The drones will also play a key role in keeping up the pressure on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and al-Shabaab militants in Somalia. New Yemeni president Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi appears to have condoned the recent strikes against the terrorists who have taken advantage of the recent turmoil following the 2011 downfall of the Saleh government to carve out sanctuaries in Abyan Province. In Somalia, U.S. Special Forces and drones are increasingly being used to raid al-Shabaab militants and to monitor pirates who have seized Western captives.

In Libya there were more drone strikes in 2011 during the overthrow of Gaddafi than in Pakistan. The *Global Post* described this as the new model for similar campaigns in the future saying Qaddafi’s death is “the latest victory for a new American approach to war: few if any troops on the ground and the heavy use of air power, including drones” (*Global Post*, May 23, 2011). By contrast, the conventional model of military intervention involving the insertion of ground forces is extremely costly and invites domestic and external criticism in a way that drones do not.

### Drones and American Foreign Policy

Drone-centric alternatives to conventional warfare dovetail with the Pentagon and CIA’s long term plans for counter terrorism and counter insurgency operations in the Islamic world and beyond. Former CIA official Bruce Riedel has said the Obama administration “has made a very conscious decision that it wants to get out of large conventional warfare solutions and wants to emphasize counterterrorism and a lighter footprint on the ground” (*USA Today*, October 1, 2011). President Obama has announced the U.S. military of the future will focus on “intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, counterterrorism, countering weapons of mass destruction, and the ability to operate in environments where adversaries try to deny us access” [2] All of these missions translate to more drones.



While the recent economic crunch has led to huge cuts in the U.S. military's size and budget, the Pentagon has called for a 30% increase in the U.S. drone fleet at a time of steep military cutbacks. This represents a shift from big bloody wars, like the invasion of Iraq which cost almost a trillion dollars and 4,500 American lives, to the model of the aerial campaign in Libya, which cost just over 1 billion dollars with no American loss of life. Other nations are following suit; British military officials have said that almost one third of the Royal Air Force will be drones in 20 years (*Guardian*, July 5, 2011).

In addition to bases in Turkey, Sicily, Afghanistan and possibly once more in Pakistan, drones will be found in forward staging areas some advisers are calling "lily pad bases," like the ones currently found in Camp Lemonier (Djibouti) or Arba Minch (Ethiopia). Such bases may also be built in Jordan and Turkey to help monitor Iraq and in the Seychelles Islands of the Indian Ocean to hunt Somali pirates (AP, December 13, 2011). President Obama has also authorized the building of a new drone base in the Arabian Peninsula to carry out strikes on al-Qaeda operatives in Yemen (YemenOnline, September 22, 2011; *Yemen Observer*, September 22). President Obama's defense budget also calls for funding for the construction of a new "Afloat Forward Staging Base" (AFSB), a launching pad for drones and Special Forces that can be sailed to potential hot spots (AFP, January 26).

### The Drone Revolution

Whether one supports the drone strikes or is opposed to them there is no doubt that drones are here to stay. A few facts about drones will make this fact abundantly clear;

- More than 50 countries have built or bought drones. Even Lebanon's Hezbollah has used Iranian-built drones. Over the next decade more than \$94 billion is expected to be spent globally on drone research and procurement. China unveiled 25 new drone models at an air show in 2011 and Iran claims their *Karrar* (Striker) drones are capable of long-range missions. (*Ressalat* [Tehran], August 23, 2010; *Vatan-e Emrooz* [Tehran], August 23, 2010). Last month 13 NATO nations agreed to jointly deploy a fleet of its own Global Hawk surveillance drones

after seeing how useful the American drones were in the air war against Qaddafi's forces in Libya. NATO has already begun building a €1.3 billion drone base at Sigonella in Sicily (Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata, February 4). Many observers are worried that a future drone race will see other countries besides the United States hunting down their enemies with remote controlled planes.

- In 2000 the U.S. had just 50 drones. Today almost one in three U.S. warplanes is a drone. That translates to approximately 7,500 drones in the U.S. fleet. The majority (5,346) are Ravens, a small hand-launched surveillance drone heavily used by the army in Iraq and Afghanistan (Wired.com, January 9).
- Since 2005 there has been a 1200% increase in patrols by drones (*Economist*, October 8, 2011). The U.S. Air Force trained more drone pilots in 2011 than pilots for fighter and bomber aircraft combined (NPR, November 29, 2011).
- New jet-powered drones threaten to make current inventories of propeller-driven drones obsolete. The U.S. Air Force has begun deploying a new jet drone known as the Predator C or Avenger that will allow it to mount attacks at a much faster speed than the propeller driven Predators and Reapers in its current fleet. The Avenger carries even more ordnance than the Reaper (Wired.com, December 13). The U.S. Navy is developing a carrier-based jet drone known as the X-47B which can fly ten times farther than manned planes and defend aircraft carriers from threats such as "carrier killer" missiles. [3] The U.S. has also launched the "Phantom Eye," a hydrogen-fuelled surveillance drone that can remain aloft for four days at 65,000 feet. [4] Meanwhile, the UK has developed a \$225 million intercontinental jet propelled drone known as the Taranis after the Celtic god of thunder (*Daily Mail*, July 13, 2010). Unlike the Predator and

Reaper, the stealthy Taranis has an internal bomb bay which can carry a wide array of weapons.

- The U.S. Air Force is developing nano-drones like the Wasp which way less than a pound and can fly to 1,000 feet. The Air Force has also planned Project Anubis to build killer micro-drones that weigh less than a pound. The small drones will be used to terminate “high value targets” and will one day fly in swarms against the enemy (Wired.com, January 5, 2010; *Aviation Week*, March 2, 2010).

- The U.S Army recently developed a small backpack size drone known as the Switchblade, a small kamikaze-style aircraft carrying explosives that can be launched from a tube, loiter in the sky and then dive at a target upon command. [5]

- The U.S. Army has developed a surveillance drone that can be flown by the crew of an Apache AH-64D Longbow attack helicopter to help it find its targets on the ground (Military.com, November 2, 2011).

- Predator drones are already being used to monitor the U.S.-Mexican border. Mexico is using much smaller U.S. built drones for the same purpose (Reuters, December 27, 2011; *El Paso Times*, December 17, 2010).

- America has already experienced its first attempt by a terrorist to use a drone to carry out a terrorist act. In September 2011 Rezwana Ferdaus was arrested in the Boston area after the FBI found him plotting to use 7 foot remote control toy planes loaded with C-4 plastic explosives in them to fly into the Pentagon and other targets in Washington DC (CBS, November 4, 2011).

- In December 2010 the U.S. Air Force announced that it had test flown the X-37B, an unmanned space vehicle modeled on the Space Shuttle. This development

caused many drone critics to worry that the Air Force was involved in the development of drones for space warfare (Space.com, December 3, 2010).

While the first drone attack on al-Qaeda in Yemen in 2002 was greeted with tremendous coverage by the international media, drone strikes today have become so mundane that they are now relegated to small articles on back pages of newspapers, if they are picked up at all. Both Democrats and Republicans seem to have accepted this radical development with little real debate as have the vast majority of Americans. In fact 83% of Americans are reported to approve of President Obama’s stepped up drone policy (*Washington Post*, February 7). For Americans, drone attacks in distant locations seem to be an accepted part of the new scheme of things in the post-9/11 world.

As for the CIA, which was so reluctant to get into the drone assassination business prior to 9/11, current CIA head David Petraeus has said “We can’t get enough drones” (*Business Week*, February 5, 2010). Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has said “We are buying as many Reapers as we possibly can” (Politico.com, February 4, 2010). The Air Force’s 147th Reconnaissance’s Wing Commander, Colonel Ken Wisian said of drones “The demand for this kind of capacity is insatiable” (*Houston Chronicle*, June 28, 2010).

#### Conclusion

While America’s CIA is currently the only intelligence agency that flies killer drones beyond its borders, it is perhaps only a matter of time before Russia, China, India, Israel and other countries deploy killer drones abroad in search of their foes. Israel is already deploying its drones in the Gaza Strip, where Palestinian sources say they have killed over 800 people, mostly civilians (Press TV [Tehran], December 4, 2011). David Cortright of Notre Dame University has asked: “What kind of a future are we creating for our children? We face the prospect of a world in which every nation will have drone warfare capability, in which terror can rain down from the sky at any moment without warning” (CNN, October 19, 2011).

As rare voices like Cortright’s ponder the future of remote controlled aerial killers and their impact on war and counter-terrorism, drones are increasingly coming to shape the way the United States and other countries

hunt and kill those they deem to be enemies. Peter Singer, author of *Wired for War: The Robotics Revolution and Conflict in the 21st Century* best sums up the future by writing “the [drone] technology is here. And it isn’t going away. It will increasingly play a role in our lives... The real question is: How do we deal with it?” (Los Angeles Times, November 27, 2011).

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Notes:

1. For an introductory survey of the CIA’s drone campaign in Pakistan see: Brian Glyn Williams, “The CIA’s Covert Drone War in Pakistan, 2004-2010. The History of an Assassination Campaign,” *Studies in Terrorism and Conflict*. 33, 2010.
2. White House, Office of the Press Secretary; “Remarks by the President on the Defense Strategic Review,” January 5, 2012.
3. <http://www.as.northropgrumman.com/products/nucasx47b/index.html>.
4. See video at <http://dvice.com/archives/2012/03/hydrogen-fuel-p.php>.
5. Innovation News Daily, September 6, 2011; see also: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dgvBb5ke-E>.