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Contents

FEATURE ARTICLE

1 The Unraveling of the Salih Regime in Yemen

By Christopher Boucek and Mara Revkin

REPORTS

4 Using Google Insights to Assess Egypt's Jasmine Revolution

By Joshua Goldstein and Gabriel Koehler-Derrick

9 Accuracy of the U.S. Drone Campaign: The Views of a Pakistani General

By Brian Glyn Williams

11 Haqqani Network Influence in Kurram and its Implications for Afghanistan

By Jeffrey Dressler

15 The Risks of Supporting Tribal Militias in Pakistan

By Daud Khattak

18 The Factors Behind Rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan

By Chris Zambelis

22 Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity

24 CTC Sentinel Staff & Contacts

About the CTC Sentinel

The Combating Terrorism Center is an independent educational and research institution based in the Department of Social Sciences at the United States Military Academy, West Point. The CTC Sentinel harnesses the Center's global network of scholars and practitioners to understand and confront contemporary threats posed by terrorism and other forms of political violence.

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The Unraveling of the Salih Regime in Yemen

By Christopher Boucek and Mara Revkin



Yemeni anti-government protestors demonstrate in Sana'a on March 27, 2011. - Photo by Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images

THE WAVE OF popular uprisings sweeping across the Arab world has caught the region's most entrenched authoritarian regimes off guard. Yet unlike Tunisia, Egypt, and other custodians of an undemocratic status quo, Yemen is no stranger to instability. Long before protesters took to the streets of Sana'a on January 20, 2011 to demand political reforms, the 32-year-old regime of President Ali Abdullah Salih was already struggling to contain a daunting array of security, economic, and governance challenges.

In the south, Yemen faces a rising secessionist movement, while a separate rebellion by Zaydi Huthis rages in the northern province of Sa'da. Meanwhile, al-Qa`ida has made Yemen its most active operational node, finding sanctuary in the Arab world's poorest state. The resurgent al-Qa`ida organization based

in Yemen—al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)—is arguably the most dangerous and immediate terrorist challenge threatening U.S. interests today. Compounding these destabilizing forces is a wide range of systemic problems, including a failing economy, rampant corruption, endemic unemployment, widespread governance deficiencies and abuses, rapid resource depletion, and one of the highest population growth rates in the world. This is exacerbated by the extraordinary abundance of small arms in Yemen, where guns reportedly outnumber people by a ratio of three to one.¹

1 Mohamed al-Qadhi, "Yemen MPs Back End to Presidential Term Limit," *The National*, January 2, 2011. The exact number of small arms in Yemen is unknown, and may in fact number fewer than is commonly believed. See Ahmed Zein, "Armed and Dangerous: Arms Proliferation Inside Yemen," *Arab Insight* 2:1 (2008). A more realistic figure is 10 million small arms, or one per every two Yemenis.

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Whereas neighboring Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are confronted by limited and relatively one-dimensional opposition movements, Yemen's current political crisis has been heightened by the convergence of numerous security threats, the cumulative effect of which may soon overwhelm the government in Sana'a. With government security forces already overextended by the challenge of containing mass demonstrations, AQAP is taking advantage of the opportunity to consolidate its position in Yemen by proclaiming solidarity with anti-government protesters and intensifying its attacks on security targets.² Preventing imminent state failure in a country that is already viewed as an incubator for extremism will require policy solutions as multifaceted as the problems currently facing Yemen's government.

If the current political system is to survive, the regime will have to engage with opposition and civil society actors to reach a negotiated resolution to the country's paralyzing political crisis. Resuscitating stalled negotiations will not be easy, and Yemen's major opposition bloc—known as the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP)—has explicitly sworn off dialogue with the regime and the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party in response to the government's recent violent crackdown on protesters. President Salih has already promised that he will not seek reelection in 2013, but additional concessions will be needed. The Yemeni regime is clearly on the ropes, and Salih's downfall could be imminent. The question now is how, and when, Salih leaves office.

The Downfall of a Regime

Economic and political grievances have been festering for years in Yemen, where approximately 43% of the population subsists on less than two dollars a day and residents of the formerly independent south accuse the central government of monopolizing the country's oil revenues.³ By

January 2011, rising frustration with government corruption and ineptitude—and exacerbated by events in Tunisia and Egypt—brought Yemen's simmering political crisis to a boil.

Shortly after the fall of the Ben Ali government in Tunisia on January 14, 2011, the Salih regime attempted to pacify the discontent with economic concessions. It sought to maintain the allegiance of the military and security forces by announcing pay raises and providing free food and gas. It addressed the concerns of civil servants by putting immediately into effect salary increases for the lowest paid civil servants originally scheduled for October 2011. It cut the national income tax by half, waived university tuition fees for currently enrolled students, and announced a scheme to help new university graduates find employment. It also reportedly increased some subsidies and introduced new price controls. Finally, it extended social welfare assistance to an additional half million families. Left unsaid, however, was how Sana'a would fund these programs.

When economic measures failed to quell the discontent, President Salih turned to political concessions on February 2. In a speech to the parliament and *shura* council—likely encouraged by the United States—he announced that he would not stand for reelection in 2013 and that his son and presumed heir, General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Salih, commander of the Republican Guard, would also not run for president. He “froze” the implementation of a recent controversial constitutional amendment eliminating term limits on the presidency. Salih also stated that regional governors would henceforth be directly elected—while little noticed, this change is important because the future of Yemeni stability will depend on greater local autonomy and a de-evolution of control from the capital to the provinces. Finally, he called for the formation of a national unity government, the re-launching of the stalled National Dialogue process, and the postponement of the parliamentary elections scheduled for April to allow proper preparations.

Although the regime nominally met almost all its demands, the opposition promptly rejected the concessions, not trusting the president to keep his promises. Salih had previously pledged not to seek reelection, but had backtracked on that promise. Moreover, the 2013 date was too distant for the

“The Yemeni regime is clearly on the ropes, and Salih's downfall could be imminent. The question now is how, and when, Salih leaves office.”

faction of protesters seeking immediate change. Initial protests were modest in size, but as Yemenis began to mimic the tactics and slogans of protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, crowds swelled dramatically and quickly spread from their focal point at Sana'a University to the cities of Aden, Ibb, Taiz, and remote northern provinces. Crowds that gathered in Sana'a in mid-March have been estimated to exceed 100,000 people.

While protesters explicitly demanded regime change from the earliest days of the uprising, Yemen's formal opposition—represented by the JMP parliamentary bloc—was initially hesitant to call for Salih's resignation. The JMP's demands focused on reforming the existing political process through dialogue and consultation, rather than overhauling the system altogether. The regime's reluctance to yield substantive concessions coupled with its increasingly violent crackdown on peaceful protesters eventually pushed the opposition away from the negotiating table. On February 28, the JMP flatly rejected Salih's invitation to form a national unity government. For the first time, the JMP endorsed the street protests and called for an immediate end to Salih's 32-year rule.⁴ The JMP hardened its stance against Salih's government on March 20, when it announced that the opposition parties would officially participate in the demonstrations.⁵

See Gavin Hales, “Fault Lines: Tracking Armed Violence in Yemen,” Yemen Armed Violence Assessment, Small Arms Survey, May 2010.

² According to sources in Yemen, the regime has redeployed a variety of security assets to protect government and public facilities in Sana'a.

³ Marisa L. Porges, “Saving Yemen: Is Counterterror-

ism Enough?” *Foreign Affairs*, November 16, 2010. It is thought that the vast majority of Yemenis live on less than one dollar per day.

⁴ Laura Kasinof, “Opposition in Yemen Supports Protesters,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2011.

⁵ Laura Kasinof and J. David Goodman, “Senior Yemeni

Violence Against Protestors Brings Regime to the Precipice

Despite Salih's explicit assurances that his government would not use violence against protesters, as demonstrations escalated throughout the month of February police and security forces fired rubber bullets, tear gas, and eventually live ammunition at massive crowds in Sana'a and other cities. On February 25, protesters in Aden were outraged after a 17-year-old was fatally shot by police.⁶ In a separate incident on March 8, uniformed security forces attacked protesters with guns and bats as they were setting up tents in front of Sana'a University, killing at least one person and wounding 80 more.⁷ In addition to this sustained, state-sanctioned crackdown on civilian protesters, bands of armed regime loyalists—apparently acting with the tacit consent and complicity of state security forces—have attempted to suppress demonstrations with unrestrained thuggery and lethal force.

Violence escalated to unprecedented levels on March 18, when government supporters in plainclothes took up positions on rooftops near Sana'a University and began firing at tens of thousands of protesters following Friday prayers. Not only did state security forces refuse to intervene to prevent bloodshed, but they allegedly joined government loyalists in firing directly at protesters, killing at least 30 people.⁸ The use of lethal force galvanized the resolve of protesters and solidified the opposition's refusal to resume negotiations with the regime. The violence on March 18 changed the situation for many protesters. By late March, the opposition publicly stated that it had definitively ruled out the possibility of dialogue, accusing Salih's government of perpetrating crimes against humanity.⁹

Dozens of government officials and members of the ruling party's parliamentary bloc have resigned their posts in part in protest of Salih's heavy-handed response to the uprising.¹⁰ When prominent members of Yemen's two largest tribal federations, the Bakil and Hashid, publicly endorsed the anti-government demonstrations, it appeared that some of Salih's most reliable allies were turning against him.¹¹ Indeed, on March 21, Yemen's most powerful military commander, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, announced that he was siding with the protesters. Ali Mohsen is commander of the 1st Armored Division and head of the North West Military Region.¹² Additionally, roughly 20 MPs have resigned and approximately half the country's ambassadors abroad have also resigned. Protests continued on March 25, although a planned march on the presidential palace in Sana'a did not materialize.

For years, Salih skillfully exploited divisions among key constituencies to neutralize potential threats to his rule. The current unrest is destabilizing this delicate balance of power, and Salih's regime faces a serious crisis as key constituencies withdraw their support.

AQAP Capitalizes on Discontent

In addition to alienating the opposition, the violent crackdown may exert a radicalizing effect on protesters, particularly in areas of the north and south where there is strong historical precedent for violent rebellions. At present, AQAP is seeking to capitalize on the growing unrest and is attempting to consolidate its influence in Yemen. Saudi national and former Guantanamo Bay detainee Ibrahim al-Rubaysh endorsed anti-government protests across the Arab world in an AQAP audio release on February 26.¹³

Press, March 18, 2011.

10 For a comprehensive overview of those individuals who have withdrawn their support and left the GPC, see "Updated List of Resignations," Waq al-Waq, March 20, 2011, available at www.bigthink.com/ideas/31661.

11 Oliver Holmes, "The Tribe Has Spoken: Yemen's Power Brokers Step In," *Time Magazine*, February 27, 2011.

12 "Salih and the Yemeni Succession," *Jane's Intelligence Digest*, August 28, 2008.

13 "Al-Qaeda's Offshoot in Yemen Calls for Revolt Against Arab Rulers," Associated Press, February 26, 2011. In an audio recording posted to several militant websites on February 26, former Guantanamo Bay de-

One day after al-Rubaysh's recording appeared on several militant websites, the radical cleric Abdul Majid al-Zindani explicitly urged Yemenis to overthrow Salih's regime and establish an Islamic state in its place.¹⁴

Taking advantage of the unstable security situation, AQAP fighters have staged a flurry of attacks on Yemeni security forces and checkpoints in the provinces of Marib, Abyan, and Hadramawt, killing well over a dozen security personnel.¹⁵ It is feared that the frequency and magnitude of these attacks will only escalate as AQAP exploits the current unrest to further challenge the Yemeni government. During the weekend of March 25-27, there were signs of increased AQAP activity in the south, including reports that the group seized an arms factory in Jaar.

U.S. Counterterrorism Operations in Yemen at Risk?

President Salih's government, however flawed, has been a vital partner in U.S. counterterrorism operations in the Arabian Peninsula, and U.S. officials are understandably apprehensive about the possibility of regime change. A post-Salih government would likely be more responsive to Yemeni public opinion, including anti-American sentiment, which was substantially inflamed by a U.S. airstrike in 2009 that reportedly resulted in more than 80 civilian casualties.¹⁶

tainee and leading AQAP figure Ibrahim al-Rubaysh urged Muslims to revolt against Arab authoritarian rulers and establish governments based on Islamic law. In the 10-minute recording, al-Rubaysh applauded the overthrow of former Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and harshly criticized the Saudi government for offering him sanctuary.

14 Laura Kasinoff and Scott Shane, "Powerful Cleric Urges Islamic Rule in Yemen," *New York Times*, March 1, 2011. Al-Zindani has been listed by the U.S. government as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Only weeks before al-Zindani had a different position, and some Yemeni sources have suggested that his switch has more to do with self-interest and his relationship with the regime, rather than a genuine change.

15 "Al Qaeda Men Shoot Down Six in Yemen," *Gulf News*, March 7, 2011; "Suspected Qaeda Gunmen Kill Four Yemen Police," Agence France-Presse, March 11, 2011; "One Soldier Killed and Three Wounded in Abyan," *Yemen Post*, March 13, 2011. Around March 7, AQAP allegedly staged three attacks in one day, marking a worrisome escalation in their attack tempo.

16 Robert Worth, "Airstrike in Yemen Said to Kill 80,"

Officers Call for Ouster of President," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011.

6 "Yemeni Fatally Shot by Police During Anti-Government Protesters," al-Arabiya, February 25, 2011.

7 Khaled Yacoub Oweis and Mohammed Ghobari, "Killing Hardens Opposition Resolve in Yemen," Reuters, March 9, 2011.

8 Laura Kasinoff and Robert F. Worth, "Dozens of Protesters Are Killed in Yemen," *New York Times*, March 18, 2011. Other reports claim more than 50 were killed and over 200 wounded.

9 "Teargas Used on Yemen Protesters," Associated

The chaos of a post-Salih Yemen in which there is no managed transition may lead to conditions that could allow AQAP and other extremist elements to flourish. It is not known who would come to power after Salih were he to leave office. Moreover, it is doubtful that in such a scenario a new Yemeni government would be as accommodating to the United States and its allies on terrorism and security cooperation as the current government. While imperfect, Yemen under Salih has worked closely with Washington on counterterrorism issues, and a number of important relationships have been established.

Conclusion

There is no certainty about how events in Yemen will transpire. Salih cannot rule Yemen until 2013, and the regime has acknowledged that they are seeking an orderly way to transfer power. Even though Salih's most recent position appears to backtrack on earlier pledges to step down, sources close to the regime maintain that negotiations are ongoing.

Yemen's security situation will continue to deteriorate unless a campaign of sweeping political reforms is initiated immediately. One likely scenario is a negotiated settlement by Yemen's power elites resulting in a political transition, perhaps overseen by an informal association of senior Yemeni figures. There is always the potential for conditions to deteriorate into violence, although it appears that most parties want to avoid this. The question then becomes what mechanism will be created to oversee this process—an answer that will be revealed in the coming weeks.

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Using Google Insights to Assess Egypt's Jasmine Revolution

By Joshua Goldstein and Gabriel Koehler-Derrick

AFTER THE FALL of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, numerous commentators identified the prevalence of the Arabic chant "*al-sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*" (the people demand that the regime be overthrown) in protests ranging from Morocco to Bahrain.¹ Scholars and journalists are on firm ground when they assert that the prevalence of this chant across the region is indicative of, in the words of Rashid Khalidi, "eminently reasonable demands for freedom, dignity, social justice, accountability, the rule of law, and democracy" across the Middle East and North Africa.² Opinion is far more divided, however, on what the future holds for countries such as Egypt and Tunisia where the old regime has fallen.

Identifying likely outcomes in fast-paced and dynamic situations like the unrest currently gripping the Middle East is always difficult. "Leaderless" revolutions, such as those in Egypt and Tunisia, are often particularly problematic because conventional tools of intelligence are of limited use: a satellite can estimate a crowd size, but it does not help to identify the ideas that will inspire and sustain protestors. Even high placed human intelligence sources may lack certainty as to who the political actors are that matter among the masses of demonstrators.

This article explores the use of a powerful tool of open source data analysis, Google Insights for Search, which offers unique advantages for gaining insight into these mass movements, and the ideas, thought leaders, and personalities driving revolution. The article applies Google Insights to the recent revolution in Egypt, showing how the tool allows analysts to gain intellectual purchase on three different facets of this

"Jasmine" revolution, namely: the role of religion in post-revolutionary Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, and an electronic straw poll of likely presidential candidates.

Why Google Insights?

One of the central challenges to assessing the likely outcome of a mass social movement as witnessed in Egypt is that researchers lack tools for understanding the impact of the ideas and thought leaders sustaining the social unrest. This problem is exacerbated by the fast pace of events and their unprecedented nature (the very facets that make them so important) because both factors limit the degree to which observers can rely on history to predict what the future holds. Furthermore, because these are mass movements, journalistic anecdotes or intelligence from individual sources may be misleading or a poor tool for intuiting what the masses want, and how much they want it. In this particularly challenging research environment, tools that quickly survey a large cross section of the Egyptian population should be of enormous interest to social scientists.

Google Insights is a free service and allows researchers to conduct near-instant analysis of the search terms typed into Google's search engine.³ While the search results of this new tool need to be more comprehensively tested and the robustness of its findings are open to discussion, an assessment of 30 days of searches from January 25, 2011 until February 22, 2011 provides some counterintuitive conclusions that are explored in more detail below.⁴

3 Yahoo Clues currently only offers data on U.S. searches. Bing's "social" is a comparable tool but follows social media sites Twitter and Facebook, not overall search trends. Bing also does not allow users to filter results by country.

4 All analysis was conducted exclusively on searches in Egypt, using Arabic script except where noted. According to Alexa (a website that measures traffic), google.com is the second most popular website in Egypt. Google.com is the fourth. It is important to note that the Egyptian government severed internet access in the country from January 25 to February 1-2. During that time period, no data could be collected.

1 The authors would like to thank Nelly Lahoud, Arie Perliger and Steven Brooke who all provided substantive feedback and comments.

2 Rashid Khalidi, "Reflections on the Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt," *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2011.

Traditional Measures of Public Attentiveness

Why are internet searches relevant? What additional insight does this tool provide researchers to developments on the ground in Egypt? To answer these questions, it is essential to understand what Google Insights can and cannot measure and compare its strengths and weaknesses to conventional tools for taking the social temperature in Egypt.

It is important to note that Google Insights is different from a public opinion poll. While public opinion polls measure aggregate attitudes, Google Insights helps better understand public "attention." This is defined by Jens Newig in his study of environmental regulation as "the scarce resources—time and others—that citizens willingly dedicate towards thinking about publicly debated issues."⁵ This concept is frequently measured as a "relative intensity (resource employment per unit time) or as a ratio (resource employment dedicated to one issue as compared to another issue competing for attention)."⁶ Crucially, because Google Insights measures change over time and has a lag of only 48 hours, it provides a constantly updating view of developments on the ground.

To estimate public attention, researchers traditionally utilize two tools: public opinion polls and media analysis. Public opinion polls ask respondents about their "most important problem," with responses aggregated, normalized and displayed against a number of pre-determined issues. This approach faces a host of problems exacerbated by the social upheaval sweeping the region, including high cost and difficulty of repeated polling. In an alternative method, media coverage-based approach, researchers code news stories as a proxy for public attentiveness and standardize two issues against one another. The problem with this approach is that it is difficult to estimate both the impact of the media and the direction of causality between public attention and media.⁷

5 Jens Newig, "Public Attention, Political Action: The Example of Environmental Regulation," *Rationality and Society* 16:2 (2004).

6 Joseph Ripberger, "Capturing Curiosity: Using Internet Search Trends to Measure Public Awareness," *Policy Studies Journal* (forthcoming).

7 Stuart N. Soroka, "Issue Attributes and Agenda-Setting by Media, the Public, and Policymakers in Canada," *In-*

Measuring Public Attentiveness

Google, the dominant global search engine, provides real-time insight into individual "attentiveness," but on a massive scale. This "database of intentions" has recently provided new opportunities for research across a range of different fields. Most notably, search data has helped scientists predict outbreaks of influenza,⁸ economists predict changes in car, home sales and unemployment levels,⁹ and sociologists predict consumer behavior such as attending movies or purchasing movies or video games.¹⁰ Search results are particularly appealing during moments of great upheaval (as long as the internet stays operational) because they can suggest results in near real-time at minimal cost compared to existing survey methodologies.

Google Insights allows users to compare interest in up to five terms over time. Results, sorted by time frame and location, are normalized, scaled and returned on a graph, which can be downloaded in a comma separated values (CSV) file for further analysis. Testing for convergent validity using vector auto-regression and correlation analysis, Ripberger compares Google Insights with a *New York Times*-based media attention measure and finds strong positive and statistically significant correlation coefficients for a variety of terms such as global warming, health care and terrorism.¹¹

Challenges to Validity

There are at least four significant challenges to using Google Insights to measure and identify the forces animating Egyptian internet searches and perhaps more broadly Egyptian society.

First, using internet search leads to a selection bias. While internet access is not universal in Egypt (and indeed there is great variation in internet access throughout the Middle East),

ternational Journal of Public Opinion Research 14:3 (2002).

8 Jeremy Ginsberg et al., "Detecting Influenza Epidemics Using Search Engine Query Data," *Nature* 457 (2009).

9 Nikolaos Askitas and Klaus Zimmermann, "Google Econometrics and Unemployment Forecasting," *Applied Economics Quarterly* 55:2 (2009).

10 Sharad Goel et al., "Predicting Consumer Behavior with Web Search," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in the United States of America* 107:41 (2010).

11 Ripberger.

this may not be a challenge in the long run if internet access continues its impressive growth.¹² Furthermore, it is not necessary to wait for near universal accessibility if the population of interest is young people, who were widely credited with being the driving force behind the revolution and who

"The findings from this study cut against the characterization of the Brotherhood as a behemoth among a disorganized opposition and bolsters a far more cautionary tone on the group's capacities and influence expressed by experts who have extensively studied the group."

also have higher levels of connectivity.¹³ While there is little reason to believe that certain segments of Egyptian society prefer Google's search engine to other options, there is some risk of an echo chamber effect if there is no diversity (particularly political) in the demographic of Google search users.

Second, Google Insights only allows normalized data, so it is not clear how large the raw numbers of each search term are. While this can be mitigated somewhat by experimenting with different cross category searches, the findings may have little validity if the overall number of search terms is quite small. This is a major concern, but one that can be mitigated by additional experimentation and drawing on additional sources of data, particularly site traffic.

12 Internet access and use has dramatically increased during the past five years in Egypt. For statistics, see <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=egypt&d=ITU&f=indIcode%3aI99H%3bcountryCode%3aEGY>.

13 A 2008 study by the Egyptian government provides some basic data on typical internet users in Egypt. For details, see "The Future of Internet Economy in Egypt," Egyptian Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2008.

Third, the information about the intention behind the search—such as whether a person is searching for a political party for a class research project, out of curiosity or because of an interest in joining the party—is not known. It is important to stress the distinction between attentiveness and opinion. In their paper on consumer behavior, Goel et al. found a “wide variability in the predictive power of search...and substantial differences in the relative value of search data compared to alternative sources.”¹⁴ This is a key point to consider and should serve as caution for other researchers never to rely on Google Insights alone in their own research.

Fourth, in some countries individuals may be cautious about openly searching for texts or videos of opposition figures, particularly in countries where there is a high degree of government internet monitoring. Tunisia (until recently) stood out among Arab countries as an example. This is much less of a concern in the period of this study because of the collapse of internal security services in Egypt and because most of the searches examined were not in any way illegal. There is little reason to think, therefore, that Egyptians were deterred in what they searched for in the 30-day period of this study.

While all of these challenges show the limitations of using Google Insights exclusively to draw conclusions about Egypt's future, with a firm understanding of the distinction between attentiveness and public opinion the authors feel that using this tool has identified some major insights into the ideas, thought leaders, and issues animating Egypt during this crucial period.

Religious Leaders

One major concern that is essential for understanding the implications of Egypt's revolution is trying to determine the role religion will play in a post-Mubarak Egypt. This is a complicated question to answer because prominent religious leaders (particularly the shaykh of al-Azhar University, the epicenter of Sunni religious education) have long been viewed as

tied to the political establishment.¹⁵ This meant that the most important independent Egyptian religious figures (until the revolution) resided outside of the country. Two prominent religious figures have returned home since the uprising: Amr Khaled, a young, charismatic televangelist, and

“Moussa is clearly the opposition leader who people are most interested in and his search results lend support to reporting that he is currently a front-runner for the presidency.”

Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a television personality with his own show on al-Jazira and a popular and far more conservative religious authority. Perhaps not surprisingly given the preponderance of younger Egyptians on the net, a comparison of searches for these two religious figures shows unequivocally Khaled's predominance online.

To determine whether this method is valid there must be some evidence that Google Insights is actually measuring ground truth in Egypt—in other words, that daily events in Egypt are impacting overall search levels. A number of tests confirm that Google searches are reflecting interest in these two popular religious figures in Egypt. For example, a sharp spike in searches for the prominent conservative cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi on February 18 is undoubtedly a reflection of his first public sermon in Tahrir Square, watched by millions of Egyptians and largely interpreted by commentators as a sign of his prominence and even preeminent position among religious scholars in Egypt.¹⁶ While al-Qaradawi

is undoubtedly an influential figure, examination of search data from January 25 to February 22 demonstrates that his influence is not particularly significant on the internet and searches for Islamonline (in Arabic script and English), a site associated with al-Qaradawi, were also flat.

Instead, it is the young, charismatic preacher Amr Khaled who currently dominates the Egyptian internet. Confirming research by the *Washington Post* on Facebook activity after the revolution,¹⁷ Khaled is undoubtedly the most popular religious figure on the internet in Egypt. In the roughly 30 days of this study, Khaled had five times more searches for his name in Arabic script than al-Qaradawi. Such was the surge of attentiveness to Khaled that he actually surpassed searches for the Lebanese pop star Nancy Ajram—a result that suggests the genuine and intense amount of attention Khaled's charismatic and youth-oriented religious message is generating in the post-revolutionary period.¹⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood

As demonstrations swelled across the country, numerous articles speculated about what role the Muslim Brotherhood would play in Egypt's future.¹⁹ Particularly given the Brotherhood's lengthy experience in opposition, its legions of supporters and established leadership, most authors presumed that the Muslim Brotherhood would be the most significant and influential party in the Egyptian opposition.²⁰ Because of the Brotherhood's history of violence in the 1950s and 1960s and emphasis that Egypt should be governed by Shari'a (Islamic law), some authors viewed an Egypt dominated

17 “A Social Foothold in Egypt,” *Washington Post*, February 3, 2011.

18 Amena Bakr, “Major Muslim TV Preacher Amr Khaled Heads for Cairo,” Reuters, January 28, 2011. In Khaled's case, his search results were almost certainly boosted by his return to Egypt on January 28 (in the midst of the internet blackout) and his revelation that he was kept from publicly preaching in Egypt by the Mubarak regime.

19 Nathan J. Brown, “Will Slow and Steady Win the Race?” *Foreign Policy*, February 28, 2011.

20 David D. Kirkpatrick and J. David Goodman, “Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to be Political Party,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2011; Richard Allen Greene, “Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood: A Force to be Feared?” CNN, January 31, 2011.

14 Goel.

15 Searches for Shaykh Tantawi, the long-standing leader of al-Azhar, show no significant activity except for a spike in searches in the month of his death in March 2010. There were limited searches for the grand imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed al-Tayib, in the 30-day period of this study.

16 David D. Kirkpatrick, “After Long Exile, Sunni Cleric Takes Role in Egypt,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2011.

by the Brotherhood as diametrically opposed to the interests of the United States as well as Israel.²¹

While the Muslim Brotherhood is an experienced and important force in Egypt's political opposition, there is little evidence to suggest that the group's ideas and agenda are attracting significant attention online in Egypt. This finding should be tempered by the knowledge that the Brotherhood has long had access to newspapers and television, and therefore the internet is only part of how the group spreads its message.²² A further factor may be that unlike other opposition groups, the Brotherhood, because of its identifiable hierarchy and existing infrastructure, actually has resources to lose if it makes a strategic error, and therefore is taking a cautious approach until political upheaval subsides. In the words of one long-time observer of the Muslim Brotherhood, "The group has very long time horizons and remains committed to a long-term goal of bottom up social change."²³ In an era of suddenly wide-open political possibilities, however, the Brotherhood's innate conservatism may be working against it (at least online) as Egyptians look for new political leaders and parties.²⁴

The findings from this study cut against the characterization of the Brotherhood as a behemoth among a disorganized opposition and bolsters a far more cautionary tone on the group's capacities and influence expressed by experts who have extensively studied the group.²⁵

While the Muslim Brotherhood may be powerful on the ground, its virtual presence is not generating significant levels of attentiveness. Searches for prominent leaders of the Brotherhood—including spokesmen Essam el-Erian and Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fotouh, Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie, former Supreme Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akif, and other leaders including lawyer Sobhi Salih and former MP Mohammed al-Baltagi—did not return enough results for Google Insights to graph.²⁶ Additional searches for "the brotherhood" in Arabic and "ikhwanonline" (the Muslim Brotherhood's main website) showed only modest results after the Egyptian government restored the internet on February 1.

The recent news that a younger cohort of Brotherhood members, many of whom were the first to join the protests (against the wishes of more senior party members), are now openly discussing forming their own political party could provide an opportunity for future analysis about the impact of this generational rift online.²⁷ The Brotherhood may also lose supporters to the breakaway Wasat Party, founded by former Brotherhood member Abu al-'Ila Madi, which received a notable spike in searches on February 19 when it was recognized as the first official religious party in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Finally, contrary to speculation that the Brotherhood would receive a boost by delegating former International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Mohammed ElBaradei to lead negotiations with the government and his robust defense of the right of the Muslim Brotherhood to contest elections, ElBaradei did not figure prominently in online searches of opposition figures. A comparison of searches for the leading opposition figures including Mohammed ElBaradei, Ayman Nour, and Amr Moussa shows Moussa fast outpacing other

rivals.²⁸ While ElBaradei generated more searches than opposition figure Ayman Nour, he was outclassed by the current head of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, by a ratio of 5:1.²⁹ This is a real testament to the success of the strategy employed by the Mubarak government to get the charismatic Moussa out of the public eye by relegating him to the Arab League. Yet with the Mubarak regime gone, Moussa is clearly the opposition leader who people are most interested in and his search results lend support to reporting that he is currently a front-runner for the presidency.³⁰

Separately, the significant increase in attentiveness to well-known figures such as Amr Moussa was absolutely dwarfed by searches for two individuals who were virtually unknown less than a year ago: Khalid Said and Wael Ghonim. Searches for Khalid Said, a young man allegedly killed by police officers in Alexandria in 2010, and Wael Ghonim, a Google marketing executive who founded a Facebook page commemorating Khalid (We are All Khaled Said) and was detained for a period of 12 days by government security officials, were both "breakout" searches for the period of study.³¹ While there is evidence that searches for these two individuals may be trailing off, they were the most popular of the search terms tested and demonstrate two key points: Egyptians do turn to Google's search engine to find out more about the personalities and figures that they hear about in the news, and the surge in searches demonstrates the internet's power in Egypt as an increasingly important alternative source of information, even in a country saturated with satellite channels and a raucous free press.

21 Sallai Meridor, "What Israel Fears in Egypt," *Washington Post*, February 9, 2011.

22 Personal interview, Steven Brooke, February 20, 2008.

23 Ibid.

24 The results of the overwhelming approval of the amendments to the constitution in late March might call into question this assessment. Numerous commentators credited the Brotherhood with the approval because of the significant push urging its followers to vote "yes" on the amendments. That being said, the "yes/no" nature of the referendum and the variety of competing rationales for voting either way make it difficult to interpret the Brotherhood's overall impact. Searches for "Constitutional Amendments" for the period of March 16 to March 20 were well below searches for "Japan" and "Libya" (in Arabic script).

25 Lorenzo Vidino, "Five Myths About the Muslim Brotherhood," *Washington Post*, March 4, 2011; Steven Brooke and Shadi Hamid, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Role in

the Egyptian Revolution," *CTC Sentinel* 4:2 (2011).

26 Because of the weakness of political parties under the Mubarak government, searches for political parties (with the exception of the Brotherhood) turn up far fewer results than prominent individuals.

27 Issandr El Amrani, "Egypt and Tunisia's Unfinished Revolutions," *Time Magazine*, March 6, 2011.

28 Nobel laureate Ahmed Zewail and Tariq Bishri, the historian and legal scholar in charge of the Constitutional Reform Committee, were also included in this test but returned few results.

29 This supports polling results from a Pechter Middle East phone poll cited by The Washington Institute for Near East Policy taken from February 5-8, 2011.

30 Amr Moussa's prominent role in the Arab League leading the discussion of a "No Fly Zone" in Libya means that this gap in attentiveness has only increased in late March.

31 According to Google, this indicates growth greater than 5,000%.

Avenues for Future Investigation

As with all major shifts in foreign affairs, opinion among experts seems to be polarized into two main camps around the question of “whither Egypt?” In the first camp are the optimists: those who view the fall of the Mubarak regime as a Berlin Wall type event, nothing less than a sea change in the politics of the region. These authorities view Egypt’s peaceful revolution as part of a broader “Arab Spring” and note that political change has irreversibly arrived in the region.³² Even the most hardened dictators such as Libya’s Mu`ammar Qadhafi and Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Salih have been put on notice. These same authors note that Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and the conservative al-Nahda party in Tunisia have played only a minor role in the revolutions in those two countries and big ideas such as *hurriyya* (freedom) and *dimuqratiyya* (democracy) are the watchwords of the young and jubilant protestors in Tunis and Cairo, not Muslim Brotherhood slogans, much less the jihad called for by al-Qa`ida.

At the other end of the spectrum are those experts who tend to deemphasize the significance of the *ancien regimes*’ fall from power. These skeptics of the “Arab Spring” thesis note that in Egypt the military is still in charge, the government consists mainly of Mubarak appointees, and Egyptians are unlikely to remain enamored with democracy when faced with rising food prices and continuing political instability—only able to resort to weak, fractionalized opposition parties with little power to address Egypt’s pressing political problems.³³ This more cautious camp tends to accept as fact that the Muslim Brotherhood is the best organized and most popular opposition movement, that Egyptian military officers enjoy economic and political benefits that they are unlikely to give up easily, and that jihadists such as Ayman al-Zawahiri and Atiyah Abdul al-Rahman are undoubtedly recalculating their communications strategy to take maximum advantage of the political opportunity provided for them by this new and uncertain future.³⁴

Numerous scholars have written about how hard it is to predict the type of unprecedented events like the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.³⁵ Those who have studied this issue from the perspective of the intelligence community (who are often the first to be excoriated for failing to “predict” these events) note that events of this magnitude are often missed because analysts rely far too much on history as the guide to what the future holds. Particularly when looking at events that are literally unprecedented, history’s predictive power is considerably reduced.

A second issue of concern is the so-called “signal to noise.” This is the problem of identifying insightful and relevant data points (signal) from a sea of information (noise). This process typically occurs only after the revolution, war, or terrorist attack has taken place, with the U.S. Congress or the media holding intelligence officials’ collective feet to the fire for not predicting with enough accuracy that the Japanese would attack Pearl Harbor or that the shah would fall in Iran. The problem is that information viewed retroactively always points far more definitively to a decisive outcome than in the days before the incident actually occurs.

This longstanding debate on “intelligence failure” does not even touch the fraught problem of what to do about the immediate future. While critics are pressing the intelligence community about how they “missed” Egypt, these same experts are undoubtedly struggling to provide relevant insights into how developments will unfold now that the protestors have ousted the dictator and the cloak and dagger politics of the post-revolution are in full swing. Will religious fundamentalism grow in Egypt? Will the Muslim Brotherhood dominate a fractured and ineffectual opposition? Now that the hated security apparatus is on the defensive, will jihadists have the opportunity to regroup?

These are daunting, but crucial questions. Research using preliminary experimentation with Google’s Insight for Search service supplemented with extensive discussions with regional experts and methodological testing has provided some interesting and counterintuitive results about the ideas and personalities currently shaping Egypt’s future. While there are still numerous methodological challenges to this approach, Google Insights presents real promise as a new tool for overcoming some old and enduring challenges as researchers and academics try to address the all important question: “whither Egypt?”

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32 Roger Cohen, “From Oklahoma to Tobruk,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2011.

33 George Friedman, “Egypt: The Distance between Enthusiasm and Reality,” Stratfor, February 14, 2011.

34 Michael Scheuer, “Why the Middle East Revolts Will

Help al-Qaeda,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 2011.

35 “Why Didn’t the U.S. Foresee the Arab Revolts?” *New York Times*, February 24, 2011.

Accuracy of the U.S. Drone Campaign: The Views of a Pakistani General

By Brian Glyn Williams

ONE OF THE most contentious issues related to the Central Intelligence Agency's drone campaign in Pakistan is the estimated number of civilians killed by these strikes. Those against drone strikes in Pakistan argue that the attacks kill a disproportionate number of civilians. Others, however, argue that the number of civilian casualties is small, and that the operations have led to the deaths of many senior Taliban and al-Qa`ida leaders. Finding evidence to confirm either argument has proved difficult. Journalists rarely enter the tribal areas where the strikes occur, so analysts are left to rely on government statements when trying to assess militant and civilian casualties.

Recently, however, the Pakistani general in command of forces in the embattled North Waziristan tribal agency told reporters that "a majority of those eliminated [in drone strikes] are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements." Until this statement, the Pakistani military and government had not confronted the perception created by Pakistani media and anti-U.S. politicians that U.S. drones target, almost exclusively, civilians. This article explains the significance of the general's comments, which should serve to temper what appear to be broad misconceptions about the accuracy of the U.S. drone campaign.

Negative Views on Drones in Pakistan

Typical of the negative view on drone strikes in Pakistan are the recent words of Maulvana Sami ul-Haq of Jamiat Ulama-i-Islam (the Community of Islamic Scholars), a Pakistani Islamist party. On March 8, 2011, Sami ul-Haq said in a conference in Lahore that U.S. drone strikes kill "dozens of innocent people daily."¹ Muhammad Ahmed of the popular Buzz Pakistan website similarly wrote that the "USA did more than 100 Drone attacks in Pakistan in the past 3 years, if you read news about these drone attack you will see that in

these drone attack only 1% terrorists was killed and other 99% people who died in these attack was innocent civilians of Pakistan. 75% of them were 10 to 15 year old teenagers."² The *Pakistan Observer* reported, "The US drones or the predator planes which have been on the killing spree in Pakistan's northern belt since August 2008 and have so far killed over fourteen hundreds people with the big majority as the innocent civilians (as admitted by the international watch dogs)."³

On the ground in Pakistan, accounts suggest that civilians believe the conventional wisdom that the drones are indeed uniquely adept at killing civilians and missing their actual terrorist targets.⁴ Such perceptions are fed by Pakistani journalists, 67% of whom consider drone strikes in and of themselves to be "terrorist acts" on par with suicide bombings.⁵ Pakistanis are clearly influenced by media reports, such as Amir Mir's April 2009 story in the Pakistani newspaper *The News International*, where he claimed that U.S. drone strikes killed 687 civilians yet only 14 al-Qa`ida leaders between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper reported that this translated to over 50 civilians killed for every slain al-Qa`ida member. Mir cited private "figures compiled by the Pakistani authorities" in his article.

In January 2010, another Pakistani daily described an increased death toll for the year 2009 and claimed, "Of the 44 Predator strikes carried out by U.S. drones in the tribal areas of Pakistan

over the past 12 months, only five were able to hit their actual targets, killing five key al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, but at the cost of over 700 innocent civilians...for each al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorist killed by the American drones, 140 civilian Pakistanis also had to die."⁷

Such reports have been, on occasion, uncritically picked up and passed off as fact by Westerners. In May 2009, David Kilcullen and Andrew Exum published an opinion piece in the *New York Times* which claimed that "press reports suggest that over the last three years drone strikes have killed about 14 terrorist leaders. But, according to Pakistani sources, they have also killed some 700 civilians. This is 50 civilians for every militant killed, a hit rate of 2 percent—hardly 'precision.'"⁸

Civilian Casualties Exaggerated?

In all of the above cases, those citing high civilian casualties have not explained their methodology for accumulating data, and they have only pointed to confidential Pakistani government statements. Yet a careful analysis of the Pakistani media's own accounts of drone strikes reveals a striking contradiction. In most specific cases when a drone strike occurs, Pakistani sources describe the majority of victims as "militants," not "civilians." A case-by-case analysis of Pakistani and Western reports of drone strikes by this author and two colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth found that a mere 5% of the victims of drone strikes were described as "civilians" in press accounts.⁹ A study by Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann at the New America Foundation similarly found that in 2010 approximately 6% of those killed in drone strikes were listed as "civilians" in media reports.¹⁰ Research completed by *The Long War Journal* on drone strikes from 2004-2011 indicates that approximately 108 civilians were killed

2 "Drone Attacks in Pakistan," Buzz Pakistan, March 17, 2010. Buzz Pakistan is one of the most widely visited Pakistani blog sites that deals with political issues in that country. Many Pakistanis get their news and have their opinions shaped by Buzz Pakistan and similar sites, which often pass off opinions as facts.

3 "Drone Strikes Kill 6 in NWA," *Pakistan Observer*, March 12, 2011.

4 Personal interviews, Pakistani civilians in Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Peshawar, Swat Valley and Chitral, Summer 2010. The New America Foundation and Terror Free Tomorrow conducted a poll of 1,000 FATA residents in July 2010 and found "only 16 percent think these [drone] strikes accurately target militants; 48 percent think they largely kill civilians and another 33 percent feel they kill both civilians and militants."

5 "Fallout of the Davis Case," *Dawn*, February 21, 2011.

6 "60 Drone Hits Kill 14 al-Qaeda men, 687 Civilians," *The News International*, April 10, 2009.

7 "Over 700 Killed in 44 Drone Strikes in 2009," *Dawn*, January 2, 2010.

8 "Death from Above, Outrage Down Below," *New York Times*, May 16, 2009.

9 Avery Plaw, Matthew Fricker and Brian Glyn Williams, "New Light on the Accuracy of the CIA's Predator Drone Campaign in Pakistan," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:41 (2010).

10 Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "The Year of the Drone," New America Foundation, accessed March 18, 2011.

1 "Sami for Greater Alliance to Stop Drones," *The Nation*, March 8, 2011.

in drone strikes while 1,816 Taliban and al-Qa`ida extremists were killed—their study also relied on press reports.¹¹

Despite studies of this kind in the United States, the Pakistani military and civilian government that cooperate in varying degrees with the CIA in carrying out drone strikes have sought to distance themselves from the campaign. Official criticisms of the drone campaign by Pakistani officials lend credence to inflated claims of civilian deaths. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, for example, said “continuing drone attacks on our territory, which result in loss of precious lives and property, are counterproductive.”¹² The Pakistani defense minister claimed the strikes were creating “outrage and uproar among the people.”¹³ Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani described the strikes as “disastrous.”¹⁴

Pakistan’s government has done little to confront the perception that U.S. drones target, almost exclusively, civilians. U.S. Senator Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, summed up American frustrations with the Pakistanis when he said, “For them to look the other way, or to give us the green light privately, and then to attack us publicly leaves us, it seems to me, at a very severe disadvantage and loss with the Pakistani people.”¹⁵

Pakistani General: Drone Strikes Accurate

On March 9, 2011, the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn* published an interview with a member of the Pakistani military that seems to inadvertently support the drone strikes. In the strict hierarchy of the Pakistani military, it is unusual for a general of this rank to speak out on such a sensitive topic without the authorization of his superiors. His statement is all the more remarkable when it becomes clear that the general involved is leading troops in the strategically sensitive and Taliban-

dominated North Waziristan Agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. This is the area that has been the main target for drones, many of them targeting members of the pro-Taliban Haqqani network that allegedly has ties to Pakistani intelligence services. As someone serving on the ground in this targeted region, the general has tremendous insight into the drones’ targeting patterns and effectiveness.

Surprisingly, the general’s conclusions seem to support Western scholars whose studies have shown that the drones kill comparatively few civilians. As stated in the *Dawn* article:

In a rather rare move, the Pakistan military for the first time gave the official version of US drone attacks in the tribal region and said that most of those killed were hardcore Al Qaeda and Taliban terrorists and a fairly large number of them were of foreign origin. General Officer Commanding 7-Division Maj-Gen Ghayur Mehmood said in a briefing here: “Myths and rumours about US predator strikes and the casualty figures are many, but it’s a reality that many of those being killed in these strikes are hardcore elements, a sizeable number of them foreigners. Yes there are a few civilian casualties in such precision strikes, but a majority of those eliminated are terrorists, including foreign terrorist elements.”¹⁶

The report further stated that,

the Military’s 7-Division’s official paper on the attacks till Monday said that between 2007 and 2011 about 164 predator strikes had been carried out and over 964 terrorists had been killed. Of those killed, 793 were locals and 171 foreigners, including Arabs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Chechens, Filipinos and Moroccans. In 2007, one missile strike left one militant dead while the year 2010 was the deadliest when the attacks had left more than 423 terrorists dead. In 2008, 23 drone strikes killed 152 militants, 12 of them were foreigners or affiliated

with Al Qaeda. In 2009, around 20 predator strikes were carried out, killing 179 militants, including 20 foreigners, and in the following year 423 militants, including 133 foreigners, were killed in 103 strikes. In attacks till March 7 this year, 39 militants, including five foreigners, were killed.¹⁷

According to the article, “Maj-Gen Ghayur, who is in-charge of troops in North Waziristan, admitted that the drone attacks had negative fallout, scaring the local population and causing their migration to other places. Gen Ghayur said the drone attacks also had social and political repercussions and law-enforcement agencies often felt the heat.”¹⁸

The story created considerable controversy in Pakistan itself where support for the drone strikes is low. The website *Pakistani Patriot*, for example, published an article entitled “Fire Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood,” which stated:

It was disgusting to see Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood espouse the position that is anathema to Pakistani interests, contrary to Islamabad’s policy, belies the facts, and goes against the grain of the wishes of the people of Pakistan... His statement is wrong, dead wrong. General Mehmood doesn’t know the facts if he says that most of those killed in the aerial attacks by CIA-operated pilot-less planes in north-west Pakistan were “hardcore al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists”... Major General Mehmood should be stripped of his stars and put in jail for “approving” the attack on civilians in Pakistan, for tolerating the violation of Pakistani sovereignty—and justifying illegal murders.¹⁹

Not all of the voices have condemned General Mehmood. A subsequent article in *Dawn* supported the new tone set by General Mehmood when it stated:

Is the army hinting that the strikes are a useful and precise

11 “Charting the Data for US Airstrikes in Pakistan, 2004 – 2011,” *The Long War Journal*, accessed March 18, 2011.

12 “Petraeus, in Pakistan, Hears Complaints About Missile Strikes,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2008.

13 Ibid.

14 “Bigger Role for US CIA Drones in Pakistan,” *Australian*, October 28, 2008.

15 “US Officials Working to Sway Hearts and Minds in Islamabad,” *Eurasia Insight*, July 8, 2009.

16 “Most of Those Killed in Drone Attacks Were Terrorists: Military,” *Dawn*, March 9, 2011.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 “Fire Maj. Gen. Ghayur Mehmood,” *Pakistani Patriot*, March 10, 2011.

tactic in neutralising identified militants and terrorists? If that is the case, then the military and political leaders should publicly change their stated position and matters should move on — the battle against local and foreign terrorists hiding in the country's north-western regions is far from over. Some of the social and political repercussions to which Maj-Gen Mehmood referred would be reduced if the drone strikes were acknowledged as an effective technique and thus legitimised in the public discourse. More importantly, if the army is recognising the utility of such strikes, greater cooperation between Pakistani and US forces could yield success in the long term.²⁰

Implications

In light of their importance, it is not surprising that General Mehmood's comments were widely reported by the Western media. There has been considerable speculation in the press about whether the general spoke on behalf of the Pakistani military establishment, or on his own. Pakistan Army spokesman Major General Athar Abbas called General Mehmood's comments a "personal assessment," which would seem to indicate he was not speaking for the Pakistani military establishment as a whole when he spoke on the drones.²¹

There is, however, little precedent for a general of Mehmood's rank speaking out on such a sensitive topic without the approval of his superiors. To do so would be a grave breach of military decorum, if not a breaking of direct orders, and would certainly lead to the end of an offending officer's career. The fact that no one in the Pakistani military or government has rejected Mehmood's statements is indicative. Clearly, there are voices in the Pakistani military who support the drone strikes against an enemy that many in Pakistan's military establishment have come to see as the greatest threat to the Pakistani state.²²

In the heated anti-American climate following the recent arrest of CIA agent Raymond Davis, who many suspect of having been tasked with spying in North Waziristan, Mehmood's comments could be an olive branch to the Americans. When combined with the recently announced release of Davis on March 16, Mehmood's unprecedented words of support for the oft-criticized drone strikes serve two purposes. First, they undermine those voices in Pakistan who speak in exaggerated terms of "dozens of innocent people" being killed "daily" in drone strikes by providing a "boots on the ground" rejection of these claims. Second, they serve to alter the Pakistani government and military's official discourse on the drones, which has thus far been characterized by formulaic criticisms of the drones for killing "innocent civilians."

Those making public statements on the drones, both in Pakistan and in the West, must now take General Mehmood's on-the-ground perspective about the effectiveness of the drone's targeting into consideration. It remains to be seen whether the discourse in Pakistan will change after years of reflexive criticism of the drones, but Mehmood's bold words of support for the drone strikes seems to be a start.²³

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Haqqani Network Influence in Kurram and its Implications for Afghanistan

By Jeffrey Dressler

THE HAQQANI NETWORK is one of Afghanistan's most capable insurgent groups. Based in Pakistan's North Waziristan Agency, the Haqqani network's senior leadership directs the insurgency in Afghanistan's southeastern provinces of Khost, Paktika, and Paktia. The network is important not only because of its tactical and operational proficiency, but because it links foreign terrorists, such as al-Qa`ida, to operations inside Afghanistan.

In the last few years, however, the Haqqani network has come under growing pressure in North Waziristan. The group has been targeted by repeated drone strikes in Miran Shah, and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has severed a number of the network's infiltration routes in southern Khost and eastern Paktika. According to the outgoing commander of U.S. forces in southeastern Afghanistan, this increased pressure has made it difficult for the senior Haqqani leadership to direct and provide resources to the insurgency in the southeast.¹ Meanwhile, the United States has prodded Pakistani security forces to launch full-scale operations in North Waziristan targeting the Haqqanis, as well as the affiliated national and transnational terrorists they harbor.² Thus far, Pakistan's military has largely failed to launch such operations despite international pressure.³

In response to attacks on its North Waziristan bases, the Haqqanis, under the leadership of Sirajuddin and Badruddin Haqqani (sons of the infamous mujahidin commander Jalaluddin Haqqani), have expanded

against Haqqani network members. But it is clear that drone strikes against Pakistani Taliban militants who are targeting the Pakistani state are welcomed by Pakistan's military.

23 For an overview of the drone debate, see Brian Glyn Williams, "The CIA's Covert Drone War in Pakistan, 2004-2010: The History of an 'Assassination Campaign,'" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33:10 (2010).

20 "Drone Attacks," *Dawn*, March 11, 2011.

21 "Pakistani General, in Twist, Credits Drone Strikes," *New York Times*, March 9, 2011.

22 One could make the argument that Pakistan's military and intelligence services do not support drone strikes

1 U.S. Colonel Viet Luong, news briefing, teleconference from Afghanistan, U.S. Department of Defense, December 28, 2010.

2 Jeffrey Dressler, "The Afghan Insurgent Group that Will Not Negotiate," *The Atlantic*, October 25, 2010.

3 Baqir Sajjad Syed, "US Patience on N. Waziristan Wearing Thin, Warns Biden," *The News International*, January 13, 2011.

their Pakistan-based sanctuary into Kurram Agency. They have accomplished this with the help of myriad other insurgent and terrorist groups, and some allege with the aid of the Pakistani security establishment.⁴ Recent Haqqani interference in Kurram and the network's brokering of a peace deal between long-feuding Sunni and Shi'a tribes in the region have important implications for U.S. efforts in eastern Afghanistan, the Haqqani network's ties with al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups, and the international community's tenuous relationship with Pakistan.

This article explains the strategic significance of Kurram, and then examines how the Haqqani network has been able to increase its influence in this tribal agency by exploiting sectarian tensions.

Kurram Agency's Strategic Significance

Kurram is approximately 1,305 square miles and is the third-largest agency in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).⁵ Adjacent to North Waziristan Agency, Kurram juts into eastern Afghanistan and is strategically located between the Afghan provinces of Paktia and Nangarhar. The area, referred to as "Parrot's Beak" for its unique shape, became one of the main staging grounds for mujahidin forces battling the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s.⁶ Kurram is only 60 miles from Kabul and provides easy access to strategic areas such as Khost, Gardez and Jalalabad. The adjacent Afghan district of Jaji in Paktia Province played host to Usama bin Ladin and his cadre of Arab volunteer fighters during the 1980s. These fighters transited through Kurram to move between Jaji and Jalalabad, building roads to facilitate easy access.⁷ In Jaji, Bin Ladin

constructed *mas`ada*, Arabic for the "Lion's Den," which eventually became a cavernous cave complex serving as the forward deployed position for foreign fighters assisting in the anti-Soviet jihad.⁸

Today, Kurram Agency provides the Haqqani network and affiliated foreign fighters significant advantages. Upper Kurram enables relatively direct access to Kabul, in addition to providing the southeastern insurgency with easy access to its base of operations along the Paktia-Khost border in Afghanistan's southeast. From Upper Kurram, the Haqqani network can project force into Kabul, as they did from their stronghold in Logar until their operations were significantly degraded by U.S. and coalition forces during the course of late 2009-2010.⁹ The network is best known for carrying out spectacular suicide attacks in Kabul that have targeted Afghan, ISAF, and Indian infrastructure. Following U.S.-led operations to dismantle Kabul-focused Haqqani operations nearing the southern approaches of Kabul in the fall of 2009 and spring of 2010, spectacular attacks executed in the Afghan capital have become increasingly rare. Yet the Haqqanis have presumably sought new routes to access the Afghan capital.¹⁰ Striking Kabul is of enormous benefit to the Haqqanis: it provides them with worldwide recognition and credibility, and likely helps with funding and recruitment. The network's attacks on Indian targets in the capital may also bolster Pakistani intelligence support for their operations.¹¹

was considered one of the most capable and effective mujahidin military commanders in the battle against the Soviets. By the late 1980s, Haqqani had become a "militant folk hero," operating fundraising offices in the Persian Gulf and hosting Arab volunteers in his territory, according to Steve Coll.

8 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 129.

9 Jeffrey Dressler, "The Haqqani Network: From Pakistan to Afghanistan," Institute for the Study of War, January 2011.

10 Ibid.

11 The Haqqani network is allegedly responsible for the following attacks targeting Indian interests in Afghanistan: SVBIED detonated outside the entrance to the Indian Embassy in July 2008; SVBIED detonated outside the entrance to the Indian Embassy in October 2009; attack on a Kabul guesthouse used primarily by Indians in February 2010. For details, see *ibid*.

The Kurram region has other human terrain and strategic advantages. The Haqqanis' presence in Upper Kurram is in and around the villages of Mata Sangar and Bashura, where the network has allied with the Sunni tribesmen who were hitherto under constant siege by Shi'a Turi tribesmen.¹² Bashura and Mata Sangar are host to both Haqqani and foreign fighters, including al-Qa`ida.¹³ Mata Sangar was also the location of the well-publicized September 2010 NATO cross-border helicopter raids that resulted in Pakistan temporarily closing the Torkham Gate, a key transit hub for supplying ISAF operations in Afghanistan; it is not clear whether NATO was targeting the Haqqani network in the raid, although Haqqani fighters are prevalent in the village.¹⁴

From Mata Sangar and the surrounding areas, Haqqani network fighters and their affiliates (such as al-Qa`ida or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan) have easy access to their primary bases of operation along the Paktia-Khost border in Afghanistan, principally in the districts of Jani Khel, Paktia and Sabari, Khost.¹⁵ To protect their presence along the Paktia-Khost border, the Haqqanis have allied themselves with elements of the Sunni Moqbil tribe who dominate the area. U.S. soldiers with experience in Paktia believe that the Moqbil are paid by elements of the Pakistani security services to assist Haqqani operations.¹⁶ These same soldiers think that the Haqqanis are provided sophisticated improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by elements of the Pakistani security establishment to

4 There is no direct evidence linking the Pakistani security establishment to the Haqqani network's expansion in Kurram. Many Western analysts, however, believe that the Pakistani security establishment is likely offering some assistance to the Haqqani network, as they see the group as a potential proxy force for gaining influence in Afghanistan after the eventual departure of international troops.

5 "Kurram Agency and the U.S. and Pakistan's Divergent Interests," Stratfor, November 2, 2010.

6 Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 329.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 62. Loy-Paktia (Paktia, Paktika and Khost) was the territorial stronghold of Jalaluddin Haqqani who

12 Personal interviews, U.S. Special Forces previously deployed to southeastern Afghanistan on the condition of anonymity, February 5, 2011; Personal interview, Dr. Mohammad Taqi, Pakistani journalist, February 15, 2011.

13 Personal interviews, U.S. Special Forces previously deployed to southeastern Afghanistan on the condition of anonymity, February 5, 2011.

14 *Ibid*.

15 Fighters moving into Paktia from Upper Kurram follow a narrow valley that passes through Chamkani district and provides easy access to the Haqqanis' main southeastern sanctuary, stretching from southern Chamkani district of Paktia in Hokumzai village, south through Jani Khel into Khost's northern Sabari district.

16 Personal interviews, U.S. Special Forces previously deployed to southeastern Afghanistan on the condition of anonymity, February 5, 2011.

restrict U.S. forces' ability to interfere with Haqqani operations in southeastern Afghanistan.¹⁷

Sunni vs. Shi'a in Kurram

Kurram's significance for the Haqqani network is not only its strategic advantages, but also its long history of tribal conflict. The region is home to the Haqqanis' Sunni allies, the Bashura and the Moqbil, but it is also home to a significant population of Shi'a tribes: the Turi, Bangash, and Hazara. Major sectarian clashes between these Shi'a tribes and Sunni Pashtuns in Kurram first occurred in the 1960s and resumed again in the mid-1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ The clashes have often centered on land or resource disputes, although tensions have usually been heightened during the annual month-long Shi'a holiday of Muharram, which has caused heightened tribal conflict.

Frequent large-scale clashes between Sunni and Shi'a tribes in Central and Upper Kurram occurred between 2007 and 2010.¹⁹ Both the Sunni and Shi'a tribes in the area were proxies for a variety of militant groups. Sunni tribes (Mangal, Moqbil, Para Chamkani, Ali Sherzai, among others) are allegedly supported by such groups as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, Sipah-i-Sahaba, Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, al-Qa'ida and Haqqani fighters.²⁰ Shi'a tribes (Turi, Bangash, among others) are allegedly supported by Iranian-affiliated Kurram Hizb Allah and the Mahdi Militia.²¹

The Shi'a have been under increased pressure from a variety of actors during the past several years. Shi'a tribesmen in and around Kurram's capital of Parachinar were largely unable to traverse the Parachinar-Thall road, a key highway that stretches from Upper Kurram to Lower Kurram and continues into Peshawar. Sunni tribesmen and Taliban militants control the lower half of the road, effectively preventing the Shi'a from traveling to Peshawar to

“Expanded sanctuary in Kurram provides the Haqqanis and affiliated fighters the ability to access their strategically-located sanctuary along the Paktia-Khost border and provides the network with easier access to Kabul, and therefore a vantage from which to begin attacks on the capital again.”

buy goods, receive medical care, or visit family. With the lower half of the road too dangerous to traverse, the Shi'a were left with two options: either travel into Paktia to get to the provincial capital of Gardez, or travel through the Afghan east exiting through Nangarhar to reach the Pakistani city of Peshawar.²² Both of these options were unattractive, as many Shi'a travelers have experienced abuses at the hands of Afghan Pashtuns, Afghan Border Police officials, and Pakistani Frontier Corpsmen that man checkpoints in Kurram.²³

Rather than intervening to enforce peace, the Pakistani military has instead been accused of negligence by the Shi'a. In October 2010, for example, the Pakistani security establishment blocked five main routes from Pakistan

into Afghanistan, the routes used by the Shi'a.²⁴ The purpose of this blockade was likely to increase pressure on the Shi'a to broker a truce with the Sunnis. At the same time, Taliban fighters increased pressure on Shi'a positions. As a result, the Shi'a tribes of Upper Kurram, mainly the Turi, were hemmed in by Taliban militants to the south and east and Pakistani security forces to the north and west.²⁵ They were unable to receive basic goods and medical care. For the Shi'a in Kurram, the status quo had become untenable.

Exploiting Sectarian Tensions to Gain Access to Kurram

It appears that this sectarian tension in Kurram was partially stoked by outsiders who manipulated local Sunni tribes in and around Upper Kurram.²⁶ The Haqqani network, along with other Taliban militants, is likely the main force behind the manipulation of tribal conflict in Kurram.²⁷ Through their relationship with affiliated groups, the Haqqani network appears to have laid siege to Shi'a communities in Upper and Central Kurram to establish a new sanctuary for themselves in this area of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.²⁸

The exploitation of tensions between rivals is a familiar Haqqani tactic used in pursuit of strategic objectives.²⁹ For example, in northern Khost and southern Paktia, a dispute over pine nuts broke out between the majority Mangal tribe and the Moqbil tribe during the late summer of 2009.³⁰ The Haqqanis provided the Moqbil with heavy weaponry, which in effect stymied the Mangal offensive.³¹ The Haqqanis then inserted themselves

17 Ibid.

18 Imtiaz Ali, “Shiite-Sunni Strife Paralyzes Life in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency,” *Terrorism Focus* 5:17 (2008).

19 More recent clashes between Sunni Moqbil and Shi'a Turi on the Kurram-Paktia border allegedly erupted over disputed water rights, although *The Long War Journal* alleges that this is a fabricated story to allow the Pakistani military to intervene on behalf of the Haqqanis. See “Siraj Haqqani Sheltering in Kurram, Near Area of U.S. Helicopter Strikes,” *The Long War Journal*, October 22, 2010.

20 “The Future of South Asia: Panel Discussion with Mike Waltz,” New America Foundation, November 10, 2010.

21 Mansur Khan Mahsud, “The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Kurram,” New America Foundation, April 2010.

22 Tayyab Ali Shah, “Taliban Exploit Shi'a-Sunni Divide in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8:15 (2010).

23 Personal interviews, U.S. Special Forces previously deployed to southeastern Afghanistan on the condition of anonymity, February 5, 2011.

24 “Pakistan Army Blockades Anti-Taliban Tribe in Kurram,” BBC, October 26, 2010. Although reported simply as “Taliban” fighters, the description of the fighters as well as their intentions to target Kabul suggest that they belonged to the Haqqani network.

25 Ibid.

26 Mariam Abou Zahab, “Sectarianism in Pakistan's Kurram Tribal Agency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 7:6 (2009).

27 Arif Jamal, “Haqqani Network Shifting from North Waziristan to Pakistan's Kurram Agency,” *Terrorism Monitor* 8:45 (2010).

28 Ibid.; Mohammad Taqi, “Kurram: The Forsaken FATA,” *Daily Times*, November 4, 2010.

29 “The Future of South Asia: Panel Discussion with Mike Waltz.”

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

as peace brokers to settle the dispute between the two warring parties. In return for settling the dispute, the Haqqanis were praised by the Moqbil, while they received sanctuary for training camps and infrastructure in Mangal tribal territory in northwest Khost.³²

A similar situation appears to have occurred in Kurram. Although the Haqqani network was likely involved in supporting tribes against the Shi'a in Kurram, they also brokered peace between the two parties.³³ Reports of Haqqani involvement in mediation efforts between Sunni and Shi'a tribes in Kurram first surfaced in March 2009, during a meeting that was also attended by the powerful TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud.³⁴ These initial talks failed to broker a truce, as fighting continued throughout 2009 and 2010.

Between November 2010 and January 2011, several more rounds of talks were held. These talks were attended by Jalaluddin Haqqani's brothers, Ibrahim and Haji Khalil Haqqani, and they coincided with increasing pressure on the Shi'a in Upper Kurram.³⁵ The negotiations were held in Parachinar, Islamabad, and Peshawar, with attendance from Shi'a and Sunni tribal leaders, key militant leaders, and representatives of the Pakistani government.³⁶ Although these meetings appeared to make some progress, no deal was reached.³⁷ Despite the failure

to reach an agreement, as a gesture of good faith (and to demonstrate their influence among Pakistani Taliban), the Haqqanis secured the release of six Shi'a hostages who were abducted from Lower Kurram in July 2010.³⁸

In early February 2011, a 220-person *jirga* (tribal gathering) comprised of Shi'a and Sunni leadership, as well as Haqqani network members, appeared to reach a peace deal between the warring factions in Kurram.³⁹ In exchange for stopping Pakistani Taliban attacks on the Shi'a and the blockading of the Parachinar-Thall road, Shi'a tribesmen will now in effect allow insurgents, including those from the Haqqani network, the right to travel through their territory and into Afghanistan.⁴⁰ The agreement went into effect on February 5, 2011, according to *jirga* chief Malik Waris Khan Afridi and Interior Minister Rehman Malik.⁴¹ The details of the accord have not been made public, but it is likely that the parties involved will defer to the Murree Accord of 2008, reached by the Sunni Mangal and Shi'a Turi in Kurram. The Murree agreement called for the return of captured or deceased tribesmen, the opening of the Parachinar-Thall road and the resettlement of internally displaced peoples who fled the violence.⁴² According to individuals with knowledge of the final talks that brokered the current truce, Haji Khalil Haqqani was instrumental in reaching a settlement after both sides were allegedly pressured by elements of the Pakistani government to heed his authority.⁴³

On February 8, 2011, the Kurram TTP, led by Fazal Saeed, announced that they would extend "all-out" support to the political administration and security forces of Pakistan to implement the

peace agreement reached between elders of the Sunni and Shi'a sects of Kurram.⁴⁴ As the most important powerbrokers in FATA, the Haqqanis seem to possess tremendous influence over the TTP.⁴⁵ Indeed, the two organizations have been known to collaborate and their leaders are on good terms; the TTP's former leader, Baitullah Mehsud, fought under the Haqqanis before starting the TTP. Baitullah and hundreds of his loyal fighters also fought alongside the Haqqani network in Jani Khel, Paktia during the summer of 2008. Furthermore, Baitullah's successor and current head of the TTP, Hakimullah Mehsud, was reportedly a favorite of Siraj Haqqani to lead the movement due to Hakimullah's willingness to focus on attacks in Afghanistan. The Haqqanis' previous efforts to help broker the peace between the TTP, rival Taliban groups and the Pakistani government indicates that these militants are willing to pledge *wak* (authority) to the Haqqanis to settle disputes.⁴⁶ It was said that as long as Siraj remained in the area, "the guns remained silent."⁴⁷ Although there are multiple rumors circulating around Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that the Haqqani network may have co-opted large segments of the TTP in the Waziristans, Kurram, and Orakzai and subsequently convinced the TTP leadership to focus more assets on the fight in Afghanistan, this is difficult to verify through open source reporting.⁴⁸

32 Ibid.

33 Daud Khattak, "A Haqqani-Brokered Peace in Kurram Agency?" The AfPak Channel, February 16, 2011.

34 Zulfikar Ali, "Taliban Trying to End Tribal Clashes in Kurram," *Dawn*, September 16, 2010.

35 Jalaluddin Haqqani's brother Ibrahim and son Nasraddin were both detained by Pakistani authorities in December 2010. Safe-houses in major Pakistani cities often serve as "detention" facilities where individuals are allegedly allowed to continue their activities, yet from a safe location. See Julie McCarthy, "Taliban-Allied Group Widens Influence in Pakistan," National Public Radio, November 15, 2010. Some reports incorrectly claim Haji Khalil and Ibrahim are sons of Jalaluddin Haqqani.

36 "Haqqani's Two Sons Mediating in Kurram," *Dawn*, October 21, 2010.

37 In mid-January 2011, the Pakistani government agreed to provide helicopter services between Parachinar and Peshawar for Shi'a affected by the ongoing crisis. The timing of this announcement is interesting given the government's previous inattention to the plight of the Shi'a and could be viewed as a "good faith" gesture on behalf of the Pakistani government, knowing that an

eventual deal between Sunni and Shi'a factions was not far away.

38 McCarthy.

39 Personal interview, Mohammad Taqi, Pakistani journalist, February 3, 2011.

40 Khattak.

41 Qaiser Butt, "Kurram Tribal Region: Peace Accord Signed to End Years of Bloodshed," *Express Tribune*, February 4, 2011.

42 "Kurram Rival Tribes Agree on Peace Accord," *The Nation*, October 16, 2008.

43 Personal interview, Mohammad Taqi, Pakistani journalist, February 3, 2011.

44 "TTP Warns Violators of Kurram Peace Deal," *The News International*, February 8, 2011.

45 For details, see Imtiaz Ali, "Baitullah Mehsud - The Taliban's New Leader in Pakistan," *Terrorism Focus* 5:1 (2008); Alec E. Metz and Harold Ingram, "The Pakistan/Afghan Divide: Baitullah Mehsud and Mission Creep," *The Culture & Conflict Review* 2:2 (2008); Personal interviews, U.S. Special Forces previously deployed to southeastern Afghanistan on the condition of anonymity, February 5, 2011. According to Hakimullah Mehsud, the Pakistani Taliban movement originated in Khost while fighting for the Haqqani network under the important commander Maulvi Sangeen. For details, see Claudio Franco, "An Analysis of Hakimullah Mehsud's Handwritten Autobiographical Notes," NEFA Foundation, October 2009.

46 Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Uzbeks, Go Home," *Newsline*, April 11, 2007.

47 Ibid.

48 Personal interviews, Pakistani reporters covering security dynamics in FATA, January 2010-February 2011. One possible explanation for the Haqqanis' co-option of large segments of the TTP is that defeating ISAF and Af-

Conclusion and Outlook

The recent Haqqani-brokered peace agreement between Sunni and Shi'a factions in Kurram will have negative implications for security and stability efforts in southeastern and possibly even eastern Afghanistan.

First, it appears that elements within the Pakistani security establishment continue to provide some support to the Haqqani network. Instead of relying on Pakistan's government to dismantle the Haqqani network, ISAF efforts should focus on defeating the Haqqani network inside Afghanistan, thus rendering alleged Pakistani support for the network ineffective and irrelevant. ISAF is moving in this direction through its new "defense in-depth" strategy.⁴⁹

Second, the Haqqani network, al-Qa`ida, and affiliated foreign fighters will enjoy new sanctuary in Kurram (without Shi'a interference) from which to project force inside Afghanistan's southeast. This will relieve pressure on the Haqqanis in North Waziristan by essentially doubling the area for which ISAF and Afghan forces must now account.

Third, expanded sanctuary in Kurram provides the Haqqanis and affiliated fighters the ability to access their strategically-located sanctuary along the Paktia-Khost border and provides the network with easier access to Kabul, and therefore a vantage from which to begin attacks on the capital again.

Perhaps most importantly, if the Haqqanis have co-opted significant portions of the TTP in the Waziristans, Kurram and Orakzai, it will provide the network with new influence in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan and an infusion of fresh fighters to help seize Loy-Paktia. Furthermore, the growing role of the Haqqani network

as powerbrokers and arbitrators among Pakistani Taliban must not be overlooked. Through these means, the Haqqanis have managed to increase their worth to the Pakistani establishment at the precise time that the international community is pressuring Islamabad to act against the Haqqanis.

Despite Haqqani intervention and what appears to be a recognized peace agreement between Sunni and Shi'a factions in Kurram, previous agreements have failed to hold. Although in its infancy, the most recent agreement has the full backing of the Pakistani government, Haqqani network, Sunni and Shi'a tribal elders, and seemingly relevant factions of the TTP. It is possible that smaller factions of the local Taliban who are not subsumed under the TTP umbrella may not have signed-on to this agreement, but given the presence of the Pakistani military, Haqqani network, the TTP and others, it is unlikely that these groups would be willing to challenge the brokered peace. Whether or not the agreement holds in the long-term depends, in part, on the very influence and power of the Haqqani network.

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The Risks of Supporting Tribal Militias in Pakistan

By Daud Khattak

FOR THE PAST 10 years, Taliban and al-Qa`ida militants have been highly active in Pakistan's northwest region. As these fighters expanded their presence in Pakistan after 2001, civilians increasingly became victim to Taliban violence. Beginning in 2007, tribal leaders in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (KP) resumed organizing militias, known as *lashkars*, to counter the Taliban and their al-Qa`ida supporters.¹ The Pakistani government encouraged the establishment of these anti-Taliban *lashkars* following the military's failure to rein in the Taliban and other militant groups on its own.

The Taliban responded to the formation of *lashkars* by deploying suicide bombers to assassinate tribal leaders and to inflict massive casualties on *lashkar* members during tribal gatherings. Today, *lashkars* have become increasingly frustrated with what they perceive as an inadequate amount of Pakistani government assistance, such as a failure to supply more ammunition, food, vehicles, and money. The government's relationship with the *lashkars* is quickly deteriorating, and there are growing concerns that *lashkars* in both FATA and KP could disband. If this were to occur, it is likely that many *lashkar* members would resort to criminality, while others would join the Taliban's ranks. Even more concerning, at least one *lashkar*

ghan forces in eastern Afghanistan would allow sanctuary from which TTP fighters could launch an offensive on the Pakistani state and pursue their strategic objectives.

⁴⁹ ISAF has implemented a new strategy for limiting the effect of militants' cross-border activity. The strategy, called "defense in-depth," deploys multiple layers of security along the most-trafficked infiltration routes. Defense in-depth is not designed to fix militants on the border; rather, it is designed to effectively target them once they infiltrate. See Carlotta Gall, "Petraeus Sees Military Progress in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, March 8, 2011.

¹ Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province, is considered the "settled areas" of Pakistan's tribal regions. The districts within KP are under the control of the provincial government, and Pakistan's police and courts operate within the territory. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas, on the other hand, do not have regular police and courts. Instead, FATA is governed by a colonial-era law called the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). Due to the severity of punishments under the FCR, it is often called draconian and criticized by civilians in FATA and human rights bodies. A government official, called the political agent, is responsible for implementing the law in FATA—each agency has a separate political agent. The political agent is the representative of the KP governor, who is the representative of the president of Pakistan.

leader actually threatened to use his militia to fight against the government on the side of the Taliban.

This article provides a recent history of *lashkar* formation in Pakistan, and warns that the government's support of these militias poses future risks for Pakistan by creating powerful, armed tribal forces that could eventually threaten the writ of the state in the country's northwest region.

A Recent History of Lashkars

The practice of forming *lashkars* to enforce *jirga* decisions is an old and popular custom among Pashtun tribes.² It has played a vital role in ensuring peace in FATA where the writ of the government is weak. Similar enforcement mechanisms also exist in Pakistan's settled areas of KP.³ The formation of *lashkars* in KP is rare, however, due to the presence of the police and other law enforcement agencies that serve to settle disputes and enforce the law. In both FATA and KP, *lashkars* were never designed to be permanent fighting forces. Instead, they were formed to resolve a dispute, and then disbanded after the dispute was settled.

After Taliban and al-Qa`ida fighters fled into Pakistan in late 2001, the *jirga* tribal system was thrown into disarray, and *lashkar* formation was temporarily halted.<sup>4</sup> It quickly became clear that any tribal leader or member who spoke against the Taliban was killed. Indeed, the Taliban and its al-Qa`ida allies murdered tribal elders with regularity, labeling dissenters as spies or pro-government agents. All three pillars of the tribal system—the *jirga*, *hujra*, and mosque—were attacked, leaving no room

for the *lashkars* to exist. While the exact numbers are not known, it is estimated that some 700-900 tribal elders and other notables were assassinated between 2002 and 2010 in the tribal areas.⁵ For the Taliban and al-Qa`ida,

“For the Taliban and al-Qa`ida, murdering tribal leaders was central to destroying tribal unity and eliminating competing centers of authority.”

murdering tribal leaders was central to destroying tribal unity and eliminating competing centers of authority.

Yet in 2007, the government encouraged the formation of tribal *lashkars* to combat Taliban influence. This was the first time in history that the Pakistani government actively supported the formation of *lashkars*.⁶ Unfortunately, the results of this initiative have been devastating for many villages in Pakistan's tribal and settled areas, with scores of militia members and civilians slaughtered by Taliban suicide bombers.

The latest of these attacks occurred in Adezai village, a town of 7,000 people located 12 miles southeast of Peshawar in KP. On March 9, 2011, a suicide bomber attacked members of the *lashkar* while they were at a funeral, killing 37 people.⁷ The same *lashkar* was victim of a Taliban attack in November 2009, when a suicide bomber assassinated the Adezai *lashkar's* leader, Abdul Malik. The Adezai *lashkar* is just one example of the Taliban's targeting campaign. Militants have targeted *lashkar* leaders

and members in nearly every village and town that has formed a militia to combat the Taliban.

Lashkars as Permanent Fighting Forces

Besides the problem of *lashkars* being no match for the more powerful Taliban, the formation of *lashkars* is militarizing society in the tribal areas. Many *lashkar* members are involved in long-standing family feuds, or have a history of criminal activity such as engaging in car theft or kidnap-for-ransom. With the government encouraging the formation of *lashkars*, it is indirectly allowing some militias to engage in more criminal activity with the inadvertent sanction of the state. There are reports that some *lashkars*, having the license to prohibit weapons in cities and villages, have begun to extort civilians under the guise of providing them security. In some areas, well-known gangsters and other criminals have joined *lashkars* to avoid arrest by law enforcement, or to be protected from rival groups. In Adezai and Bazidkhel, for example, some *lashkar* volunteers have reportedly asked affluent citizens for protection money.

When questioned about the presence of criminals in *lashkars*, the former inspector general of police in KP, Malik Naveed Khan, admitted that some *lashkar* leaders and volunteers were indeed involved in criminal activity.⁸ He added, however, that the Taliban were a bigger threat than the criminals and that the government has chosen to work with the “lesser evil.”⁹ Asked whether he could see *lashkars* as a potential threat to the peace and security of the region, Khan said that the *lashkars* “are not as dangerous as the Taliban because the government keeps their records and has information about their families and villages.”¹⁰

Despite Naveed Khan's assurances, there is reason for alarm. In recent months, *lashkar* leaders have started to speak negatively about the government, with some groups threatening to join the Taliban if the government fails to provide more assistance in the form of weapons and other aid. The current

2 A *jirga* is an assembly of tribal elders where disputes are resolved. For example, a tribal *jirga* will decide issues such as family feuds, or other problems relating to the tribe. Both parties in the dispute are bound by the *jirga's* decision.

3 *Lashkars* in the settled areas were until recently known as *cheegha*. *Cheegha* or *chagha* means a “cry.” Usually, a village elder or tribal leader will call people together to face a particular problem or threat. Due to the recent popularity of the term “*lashkar*,” *cheegha* militias are now also called *lashkars*.

4 *Hujra* is a community guest house in the Pashtun system where they welcome guests as well as gather to discuss key issues and make decisions. The political agent is a government officer responsible for maintaining peace in a specific area with the support of the tribal elders.

5 Syed Irfan Ashraf, “New Strategy of Soft Targets,” *Dawn*, December 14, 2010.

6 The government did, however, raise *lashkars* to fight in Kashmir in 1948, but the circumstances were different. In 1948, the government of Pakistan covertly pushed the tribesmen, known for their fighting skills, to go and fight Indian forces in Kashmir. This was an invading army of tribesmen and could be considered a kind of *lashkar*. Nevertheless, before 2007 the government never supported the formation of *lashkars*. *Lashkars* would be formed and disbanded by tribal elders, not by the government.

7 Ali Hazrat Bacha, “Suicide Attack on Funeral Prayer Leaves 43 Dead, 52 Injured,” *Dawn*, March 10, 2011.

8 Malik Naveed Khan was the key figure in organizing anti-Taliban *lashkars* on the outskirts of Peshawar.

9 Personal interview, Malik Naveed Khan, March 2011.

10 Ibid.

leader of the Adezai *lashkar*, for example, threatened the government on March 9, saying that he and his men would join the Taliban if they did not receive more ammunition.¹¹ He also threatened to disband the militia. Even if the Adezai *lashkar* leader's threat to join the Taliban was posturing, if he were to simply disband the militia it is likely that many members—who are now trained and armed—would be more inclined to find daily sustenance through criminal activity or joining a Taliban faction.

“Besides the toll that lashkars have on Pakistan's civilian population, the even greater concern is that encouraging and arming tribal militias will backfire if these newly-minted fighters turn against the state.”

The Adezai *lashkar* is not alone. After the Taliban attacked the Shalbandai village *lashkar* in Buner District in 2008, the villagers threatened to disband the militia.¹² The constant Taliban attacks further exacerbate *lashkar* members' anger at the government for its perceived inaction.

There are a number of reasons why government support is not more forthcoming. It appears that government leaders may be withholding support for some *lashkars* based on the political affiliation of its tribal chief. Some also argue that elements within Pakistan's intelligence agencies do not want to see the Taliban defeated at this stage—presumably because intelligence sources may see the Afghanistan-focused Taliban as a potential strategic asset—which may also be why they are not providing more support to the *lashkars*. Farhat Taj, a well-known columnist for Pakistan's *Daily Times*, argued that the government in KP privately admitted that they were under

pressure from the security agencies not to support the *lashkars*.¹³ “Popular jirga-backed lashkars are an anomaly in the ISI scheme of things for strategic depth in Afghanistan,” argued Taj.¹⁴

Pakistan's government now faces a major decision: whether to continue to support *lashkars*, or to disband them. Both options have negative repercussions. Continuing support, while not necessarily problematic in the near-term, could strengthen the *lashkars* to the extent that they could pose a future threat to the government. Withdrawing support, on the other hand, would result in *lashkars* disbanding, which would drive armed *lashkar* members into criminal activity or into the ranks of the Taliban. Clearly, if the government is eventually going to disband these militias, it will want to do so before the militias become more powerful and further entrenched.

If some *lashkars* decide to join the ranks of the Taliban, and the two agree on power-sharing arrangements in an area, it would clearly mark a severe setback for the government. This outcome is certainly possible. Abdul Malik, the Adezai *lashkar* leader who was assassinated in November 2009, was a Taliban commander before he switched sides to become a *lashkar* leader. The same is likely true among *lashkar* cadre.

Conclusion

Pakistan's current strategy of encouraging *lashkars* to fight the Taliban is fraught with danger. Arming civilians to fight the Taliban could push Pakistan toward more instability and further bloodshed. *Lashkars*, in general, are not prepared to fight the Taliban. Moreover, the Taliban not only strike at *lashkar* cadre, but also target civilians in the villages where *lashkars* are formed. Taliban attacks can actually push civilians further away from the government, especially when civilians perceive that the government is withholding adequate amounts of support for *lashkars*.

Instead of arming civilians for war, Pakistan's government should focus on spreading its security blanket outward—such as by spending a larger portion of the aid it receives from the United States on strengthening law enforcement mechanisms in the tribal areas. It should also focus on meeting the needs of civilians in the tribal areas by providing education, health care, jobs and other steps to reduce poverty. Most Taliban fighters come from tribal regions where jobs are scarce, public schools are non-existent, and most of the inhabitants live in poverty.

Besides the toll that *lashkars* have on Pakistan's civilian population, the even greater concern is that encouraging and arming tribal militias will backfire if these newly-minted fighters turn against the state. Indeed, it was not that long ago that Pakistan armed militias so that they could fight against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Today, many of those same militants now belong to the Pakistani Taliban, actively fighting their former sponsors in Islamabad. Encouraging and arming *lashkars* could also backfire in the future, sowing new seeds of instability in the troubled Pakistani state.

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11 Javed Aziz Khan, “Adezai Lashkar to Go On if Supported by Govt,” *The News International*, March 14, 2011.

12 They eventually did disband the militia in April 2009 when the Taliban marched into Swat.

13 Farhat Taj, “Adezai and the ANP,” *Daily Times*, March 12, 2011.

14 Ibid.

The Factors Behind Rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan

By Chris Zambelis

WHEN VIEWING IRAN, the locus of international attention remains fixed on the quarrelsome condition of U.S.-Iran relations and the tensions surrounding its nuclear program. The domestic political landscape in Iran, specifically the numerous ethnic and sectarian minorities in the country, is also beginning to draw more attention. Through collective displays of peaceful activism to organized campaigns of violence, a number of movements purporting to stand for the interests of ethnic and sectarian minority communities who see themselves as victims of state-directed oppression are increasingly capturing the spotlight. The September 22, 2010 bombing that occurred during the annual festivities surrounding “Sacred Defense Week” in the predominately ethnic Kurdish city of Mahabad appears to illustrate this pattern of dissent.¹ The attack in Mahabad killed 12 bystanders and injured dozens more.² Seemingly targeting a procession of soldiers, the victims of the attack were primarily children and women, including two wives of Iranian military commanders.³

No individual or group claimed responsibility for the bombing, although Iran quickly named a number of potential culprits, including what Iranian authorities described as “counter-revolutionaries” such as armed Kurdish nationalist militants associated with *Partiya Jiyana Azadi Kurdistan* (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, PJAK).⁴ Mahabad and

surrounding regions in northwestern Iran have been the scenes of frequent clashes between PJAK guerrillas and Iranian security forces during the last few years.⁵ In spite of the questions surrounding the perpetrators of the attack in Mahabad—PJAK continues to deny any role in the bombing—the trajectory of violence in northwestern Iran between Kurdish militants led by PJAK and state security forces points to a deeper current in Iranian society characterized by growing unrest among Iran’s restive ethnic Kurdish minority.⁶

This article explores the circumstances behind the rise of PJAK in the context of Kurdish identity and nationalism in Iran, the range of tactics and operations employed by PJAK, and weighs the impact of Middle East geopolitics on Kurdish militancy in Iran.

The Regional Landscape

Except for the Kurds residing in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), a federal division of Iraq that exists as a quasi-independent state, upwards of 30 million Kurds live as embattled ethnic minorities who endure varying degrees of political, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural discrimination in a geographic space that encompasses large swaths of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria—territories Kurdish nationalists refer to collectively as “Greater Kurdistan.”⁷ Countries that host Kurdish minorities tend to deem demands for greater rights and representation for Kurds and subsequent manifestations of Kurdish nationalism, ranging from separatist

aspirations to calls for autonomy, as threats to their respective territorial integrities.

PJAK itself is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), originally based in neighboring Turkey but, more recently, Iraq.⁸ Driven by an ideology of Kurdish nationalism imbued with secular and socialist principles that has fluctuated between demands for an independent Kurdistan to securing considerable autonomy for Kurds in Turkey, the PKK has waged a campaign of violence and terrorism against the Turkish state that has claimed more than 40,000 lives since 1984.⁹

Heavy losses incurred at the hands of Turkish forces coupled with the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, the group’s founder and leader, in February 1999 drove the remaining PKK factions numbering in the low thousands (from a previous peak of between 15,000-20,000 fighters) to take refuge in northern Iraq with the tacit support of elements of the KRG and local sympathizers.¹⁰ The PKK rooted itself in Iraq’s Qandil Mountain range, located in northeastern Iraq and stretching into Iran. The rugged terrain remains a PKK stronghold. Having abandoned a number of unilateral cease-fires with Ankara over the years, the PKK regrouped and returned to armed struggle following the U.S. invasion of Iraq.¹¹ The PKK’s presence in the Qandil Mountains also paved the way for PJAK’s rise. The federalization of Iraq, which elevated the political status of Iraqi Kurds, emboldened the cause of Kurdish nationalism in the region,

1 Mahabad is located 40 miles east of the Iraqi border in Iran’s northwestern province of West Azerbaijan.

2 “Iran Terror Attack Kills 12, Injures 80,” Press TV [Tehran], September 22, 2010.

3 Borzou Daragahi, “Bombing at Parade in Iran Kills 12, Including a Child,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2010.

4 In addition to implicating Kurdish militants in the attack at Mahabad, Iran has also fingered hostile foreign intelligence services in the operation. See “Iran Arrests 2 Over Mahabad Attack,” Press TV, September 22, 2010. Also see Tom A. Peter, “Iran Blames ‘Terrorist Attack’ On Kurdish Separatists,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 22, 2010.

5 The armed wing of PJAK is known as the East Kurdistan Defense Forces.

6 In a statement by Kardo Bokani, an activist associated with PJAK, published on the group’s official website (www.pjak.org), PJAK denies any role in the September 22, 2010 bombing in Mahabad. Instead, PJAK accuses Iran of masterminding the attack in an effort to use it to tarnish the reputation of PJAK and Kurdish causes in Iran. See Kardo Bokani, “Iran is Behind the Explosion in Mahabad,” PJAK.org, September 27, 2010.

7 Accurate figures for Kurdish populations in the Middle East are difficult to discern, as estimates are often politicized. Kurds, for instance, are widely believed to inflate their actual numbers in an effort to exaggerate their significance; regional governments, on the other hand, are known to deliberately undercount the number of Kurds living within their borders to diminish their perceived influence. See Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 2.

8 Statements made by PJAK members confirm the group’s operational links to the PKK; however, there appears to be a dispute as to whether PJAK operates as a section of the PKK or as an independent movement that seeks inspiration from the PKK. See Derek Henry Flood, “The ‘Other’ Kurdistan Seethes with Rage,” *Asia Times Online*, October 16, 2009.

9 “Turkish Troops Killed in PKK Attack,” al-Jazeera, June 19, 2010. While the PKK resorted to armed resistance in 1984, the group emerged on the scene in the late 1970s.

10 Current estimates of PKK strength vary from as low as 2,000 core members to as high as 8,000 fighters. Also see Thomas Seibert, “PKK Attacks Turkish Position from Iraq,” *The National*, October 4, 2008; Yahya Ahmed, “Iraq Kurds Back PKK Despite Hardships,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, April 28, 2008.

11 Francesco Milan, “Turkey Battles Resurgent PKK,” International Relations and Security Network, February 2, 2011.

serving to inspire Kurds in Iran to take up arms against Tehran sometime in 2005 to achieve self-rule.¹²

Home to most of its estimated 3,000 fighters, the Qandil Mountains serve as PJAK's operational hub for launching attacks against Iran.¹³ The strategic significance of the Qandil Mountains to PJAK's capacity to operate cannot be underestimated. Threatened by the prospect of a resurgent Kurdish nationalism, both Turkey and Iran have targeted the region through airstrikes and heavy artillery, and deployed special operations forces to root out Kurdish insurgents representing both the PKK and PJAK.¹⁴

Iranian Kurdistan

Numbering between five and eleven million, Iran's Kurdish community represents a significant ethnic minority among Iran's approximately 72 million people.¹⁵ Most Kurds in Iran reside in the country's northwestern provinces of Kermanshah, Ilam, Kurdistan, and West Azerbaijan.¹⁶ For Kurdish nationalists, the geographic space occupied by Iranian Kurds represents "Eastern Kurdistan," in essence the eastern frontier of "Greater Kurdistan."¹⁷ The territories comprising Iranian Kurdistan hold a special place in the hearts of Kurdish nationalists.¹⁸ Emerging on January 22, 1946, the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, a self-styled Kurdish mini-state supported by the Soviet Union during its occupation of northern Iran

in World War II, represented the first Kurdish independent state until it was brought back under Tehran's fold less than a year later.¹⁹ Iranian Kurds suffered under the regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi, who went to great lengths to suppress expressions of Kurdish identity and aspirations for achieving autonomy in Iran. As a result, Iranian Kurds of all faiths tended to support the Iranian revolution that ousted the Shah in 1979. The fledgling Islamist regime, however, adopted a similarly harsh plan for suppressing the aspirations of Iranian Kurds, prompting a mass armed uprising that was eventually crushed.²⁰

The territories comprising Iranian Kurdistan are among Iran's poorest and least developed.²¹ Iranian Kurds are the frequent victims of human rights abuses. Accused of engaging in terrorist activities, Kurdish activists, including individuals with no ties to PJAK or other militants, are often detained and executed by the regime on terrorism and sedition charges.²² As a result, many Kurds in Iran see themselves as victims of a genocidal campaign directed by the ethnic Persian-dominated Shi'a Islamist state. Having exhausted all attempts to achieve self-rule for their community in Iran through peaceful means, Iranian Kurds, in the eyes of PJAK, have been left with little choice but to take up arms.²³ PJAK's stated goals, however,

do not include calls for the unification of the region's disparate Kurdish populations into a single country or the secession of Iran's Kurdish regions from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Instead, PJAK claims to be fighting for the rights of Kurds in the context of their predicament as victims of an oppressive

"PJAK is waging an asymmetric campaign that combines guerrilla-style insurgency operations with terrorist attacks targeting Iranian security forces."

order. For PJAK, the establishment of a federal Iran that would guarantee Kurds substantial autonomy—a goal similarly shared by other embattled ethnic and religious minority groups in Iran—would satisfy the demands of Iranian Kurds. Nevertheless, while officially advocating for an autonomous status for Kurds, PJAK is known to boast members keen on seeing the formation of a "Greater Kurdistan" down the road.²⁴

Most Iranian Kurds are Sunni, yet sizeable numbers of Shi'a as well as some Christians are represented in the community. The conflict between PJAK and the state is not, however, a sectarian one. Kurds in Iran tend to share a sense of transnational identity with fellow Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria shaped by a historical memory of collective statelessness and persecution. Tribal- and clan-based kinship networks based on local allegiances have nevertheless left Kurds divided politically in Iran and elsewhere. At the same time, the historical persecution experienced by Kurds continues to bind disparate Kurdish populations in the region under a banner of resistance.

12 Although PJAK's resort to arms is believed to have first occurred sometime in 2005, the group claims to have operated as a political movement as early as 1997. See James Brandon, "Iran's Kurdish Threat: PJAK," *Terrorism Monitor* 4:12 (2006).

13 "Five PJAK Rebels, Two Revolutionary Guards Killed in Iran Clashes," *Ekuord.net*, August 26, 2010.

14 Susan Fraser, "Turkey, Iran Launch Coordinated Attacks on Kurds," *Associated Press*, June 5, 2008.

15 According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), the Kurdish population in Iran is between 8-11 million. Some Kurdish sources estimate the number of Kurds in Iran to be as high as 12 million.

16 The eastern province of Khorasan is also home to a small Kurdish community. Smaller Kurdish populations are present in other parts of Iran.

17 PJAK and other Kurdish nationalists often refer to the lands dominated by ethnic Kurds in Iran as Eastern or East Kurdistan.

18 In spite of the existence of a Kurdistan Province, predominantly Kurdish regions of Iran are often referred to collectively as Iranian Kurdistan.

19 Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), pp. 243-267.

20 Kamal Nazer Yasin, "Iranian Kurdistan: A Simmering Cauldron," *International Relations and Security Network*, November 12, 2007.

21 Only Iran's southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchistan, which is home to most of Iran's ethnic Baluch minority, suffers from greater poverty and underdevelopment. Incidentally, Sistan-Baluchistan is also in the throes of its own ethno-nationalist insurgency led by Jundallah (Soldiers of God), a group claiming to act on behalf of the Baluch, a predominantly Sunni population that sees itself, much like the Kurds, as victims of state-led repression. For more background on the Baluch insurgency in Iran, see Chris Zambelis, "Resistance and Insurgency in Iranian Baluchistan," *CTC Sentinel* 2:7 (2009).

22 For an assessment of the human rights situation in Iranian Kurdistan, see "Iran: Human Rights Abuses Against the Kurdish Minority," *Amnesty International*, 2008.

23 In addition to PJAK, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Kurdish Communist Party of Iran (Komoleh), the two main Iranian Kurdish opposition

parties that have abandoned armed resistance against Tehran in favor of political activism and which operate openly in Iraq and beyond, also helped give rise to PJAK. See Reese Erlich, "Brad Pitt and the Girl Guerrillas," *Mother Jones*, March-April 2007.

24 Brandon.

Tactics, Targets and Operations

Like its PKK precursor, PJAK has assumed the role of armed guardian of Kurds in Iran. Relying on bases it shares with the PKK on the Iraqi side of the Qandil Mountain range, as well as positions and cells on Iranian soil, PJAK is waging an asymmetric campaign that combines guerrilla-style insurgency operations with terrorist attacks targeting Iranian security forces, especially Iranian police and members of the elite Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).²⁵ PJAK's toolbox of tactics and operations features small unit ambushes, such as the August 12, 2010 attack against a convoy of IRGC officers traveling through the city of Urmia in West Azerbaijan Province that left three officers dead and one wounded.²⁶

PJAK has also executed improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attacks against Iranian security forces. PJAK claimed responsibility for downing two Iranian military helicopters with RPGs in February and August 2007, killing more than 30 Iranian soldiers.²⁷ In addition to targeting security forces, PJAK also attacks representatives of the Islamic Republic's legal system, including judges and prosecutors, a pattern that represents a form of retaliation for the large number of arrests and executions of Kurdish political activists.²⁸ PJAK also frequently targets religious and political officials for assassination, including ethnic Kurds who are seen as collaborators of the regime. While PJAK is careful to avoid civilian casualties, civilian collaborators, such as paid informants or others assisting Tehran's efforts to root out the group—Kurdish or otherwise—are considered legitimate targets. Critical infrastructure, including energy pipelines, has also been targeted by PJAK in an attempt to disrupt the Iranian economy.²⁹

PJAK's objectives are indirectly bolstered by an organized political network consisting of human rights and lobbying organizations, Iranian Kurdish political parties operating in exile, and independent supporters that advocate on behalf of Iranian Kurds in the diaspora, especially in Europe where the group counts on the sizeable

“PJAK will continue to exploit hostilities between the United States and Iran as a window of opportunity to further its cause on the ground and within international public opinion.”

Kurdish diaspora for political, financial, and material support.³⁰ Organizations operating outside of Iran and united in their advocacy for the federalization of Iran along ethnic and regional lines helps to strengthen PJAK's cause.

PJAK also operates a sophisticated information campaign that includes a network of websites containing political material framed in human rights and democracy discourse in Kurdish, Farsi, English, and other languages.³¹ PJAK uses online and other media venues to claim responsibility for its attacks as well as to publicize its positions on events impacting Kurds in Iran and the wider region. PJAK uses the internet to lionize fallen fighters and to demonstrate solidarity with the plight of Kurds elsewhere. To strengthen its own case regarding the disadvantaged position of the community it claims to represent, the struggles of other besieged minority groups in Iran also receive

PJAK's attention on its website.³² While devoted to the cause of Iranian Kurds, PJAK's membership is diverse; in addition to Iranian Kurds, the ranks of PJAK include ethnic Kurds from across the region, including the former Soviet Union.³³ Women also figure prominently in all aspects of PJAK's operations, including fighting on the front lines. Women are estimated to compose about half of PJAK's ranks.³⁴

A Foreign Hand?

Rooted in local factors and regional currents, Kurdish militancy in Iran is an organic phenomenon. Nevertheless, in an attempt to refute PJAK's sway among Iranian Kurds, Tehran previously referred to the group as the PKK. To further discredit PJAK's claims about the position of Iranian Kurds in the Islamic Republic and the legitimacy of its goal of achieving Kurdish self-rule, Iran has accused the group of operating as a proxy of hostile foreign intelligence services, namely the intelligence services of the United States (PJAK leader Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi visited Washington in 2007 under unclear circumstances³⁵) as well as those operated by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom.³⁶ Iran believes

32 For instance, PJAK broadcasts reports issued by pro-Baluch nationalist sources advocating on behalf of ethnic Baluch in Sistan-Baluchistan.

33 Brandon.

34 Erlich.

35 Richard A. Appel Jr., “Kurdish Militants' Other Front: Iran,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2007.

36 Yaakov Katz, “Dagan Urged Support for Iranian Minorities to Oust Iranian Regime,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 29, 2010. The disclosure of classified U.S. diplomatic cables leaked by Wikileaks contain alleged statements made by Meir Dagan, the former director of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, to U.S. officials in August 2007 calling for the support of Kurdish opposition groups, as well as Baluch, Azeri, and student opposition movements, against Tehran. Israel's relations with Kurds date back to the implementation of its “periphery strategy,” a foreign policy that saw Israel aim to establish open and secret relations with non-Arab countries as well as ethnic and sectarian minorities in the region in an effort to outflank Arab countries around it. Israel is also known to maintain business ties to Kurds in Iraq. See Anat Tal-Shir, “Israelis Trained Kurds in Iraq,” *Yedioth Ahronoth*, December 12, 2005. Incidentally, Tehran also implicated Israel in the September 22, 2010 attack in Mahabad. See “Iran Blames Mahabad Attack on Israel,” *Press TV*, September 22, 2010. Also see Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Network 1 Television [Tehran], November 10, 2010.

25 Guillaume Perrier, “Iraqi Kurdistan-based Kurdish PJAK Guerrillas Do Battle with Tehran,” *Guardian*, August 31, 2010.

26 “In PJAK Ambush, 3 Iranians Killed,” *Press TV*, August 13, 2010.

27 Damien McElroy, “Kurdish Guerillas Launch Clan-destine War in Iran,” *Telegraph*, September 10, 2007.

28 “Three IRGC Troops Killed in NW Iran,” *Press TV*, April 21, 2010.

29 “Iran Accuses PKK of Thursday's Gas Pipeline Attack,” *The Journal of Turkish Weekly*, October 2, 2006.

30 Thomas Renard, “Kurdish Activism in Europe: Terrorism Versus Europeanization,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6:13 (2008). PJAK commander Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi, along with other senior PJAK leaders, helped coordinate the group's activities from their base in Germany. See Stefan Buchen, John Goetz, and Sven Robel, “Germany Concerned About PJAK Activities,” *Der Spiegel*, April 14, 2008; “PJAK Ringleader Arrested in Germany,” *Fars News Agency*, March 7, 2010.

31 More details can be found on PJAK's official website at www.pjak.org.

that the United States is directing a campaign in conjunction with its allies to instigate domestic social and political dissent and violent upheavals inside Iran. Any potential invasion of Iran by the United States or Israel over its nuclear program, in Iran's view, would be preceded by a campaign of violence led by the numerous ethno-sectarian insurgent and political opposition groups operating within Iran and abroad.

In light of Iran's claim of a U.S. role behind PJAK, the United States designated PJAK a terrorist organization on February 5, 2009.³⁷ The U.S. decision to blacklist PJAK, along with other militant groups targeting Iran in the past, was widely interpreted as a diplomatic gesture to Iran amid the backchannel talks between Washington and Tehran over the latter's nuclear program and other sensitive issues.³⁸

Iran has also linked PJAK and Kurdish nationalists more broadly to violent Sunni Salafists, including al-Qa`ida and al-Qa`ida-aligned or inspired Kurdish groups, based in northern Iraq. For example, while accompanying Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his October 2010 trip to Lebanon, Iranian intelligence minister Heidar Moslehi implicated "Kurdish Salafi groups" in the September 2010 attack in Mahabad and other strikes in Iranian Kurdistan.³⁹ Tehran also blamed the September 2009 assassination of Mamousta Sheikholeslam, the Kurdistan Province's representative in Iran's Assembly of Experts, as well as a spate of similar assassination attempts targeting government and religious officials on al-Qa`ida elements based in northern Iraq. Al-Qa`ida factions originating in northern Iraq were also blamed for the attempt on the life of an Iranian judge

and the September 2009 murder of a Sunni Kurdish cleric supportive of Tehran.⁴⁰ In addition to eliciting confessions for the assassination by the alleged perpetrators, Iranian authorities also claimed to have uncovered a cache of weapons and explosives that included suicide vests destined to be used in future attacks against public officials in Iran directed by al-Qa`ida in northern Iraq.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, Iran also announced on December 30, 2010 that it had detained alleged members of al-Qa`ida in West Azerbaijan Province.⁴²

The potential role of foreign state actors keen on destabilizing the Islamic Republic by sowing internal unrest, or involvement by Sunni extremist groups in militancy in Iranian Kurdistan, cannot be ruled out. At the same time, the available evidence indicates that the persistent grievances felt by Iranian Kurds are what fuel PJAK and other Kurdish opposition movements. In this context, if outside forces—both state actors hostile to the Islamic Republic and radical Sunni extremists—are involved, they are exacerbating an already tenuous situation on the ground.

Conclusion

Violent rebellion in Iranian Kurdistan led by PJAK will continue to test the domestic stability of the Islamic Republic in its Kurdish regions. In light of the myriad challenges facing Iran in both the domestic and regional spheres, however, there are no indications to suggest that PJAK in and of itself can pose a serious threat to the overall durability of the regime. In this regard, the nature of the threat posed by PJAK to Tehran should be considered in the

larger context of domestic tensions stemming from ethno-religious strife among Iran's numerous ethnic and religious minority communities and other centers of political opposition to the incumbent Islamist authorities. Geopolitical turbulence related to the delicate position of Kurds in neighboring countries, especially Iraq, as well as the troubled state of U.S.-Iran (and Israel-Iran) relations will also profoundly impact PJAK's reach. The empowerment of their kin in Iraq will continue to inspire PJAK to maintain pressure on Iran. Likewise, in spite of the U.S. decision to blacklist it as a terrorist organization, PJAK will continue to exploit hostilities between the United States and Iran as a window of opportunity to further its cause on the ground and within international public opinion.

In the near-term, Iran is likely to deal with Kurdish dissent through harsher repression, an approach that is sure to provoke more determined resistance. Ultimately, alleviating the entrenched grievances and mistrust Kurds feel toward the state will require a sustained commitment by Tehran to improve the lives of Iranian Kurds by implementing far-reaching social, political, and economic reforms in Iranian Kurdistan.

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37 "Treasury Designates Free Life Party of Kurdistan a Terrorist Organization," U.S. Department of the Treasury, February 4, 2009.

38 In a similar move, the United States announced on November 3, 2010 that it designated Jundallah a terrorist organization. The People's Mujahidin of Iran (PMOI), more commonly known as the Mujahidin-e-Khalq (MEK)—another militant group Iran sees as acting at the behest of U.S. and hostile intelligence agencies—was designated as a terrorist organization by the United States in 1997.

39 Kaveh Ghoreishi, "This Time, Salafi Kurds are Suspects," *Rooz Online*, October 18, 2010.

40 "Attempt on Iranian Judge's Life," Press TV, September 16, 2009; "Pro-Ahmadinejad Cleric Killed in West Iran," Reuters, September 13, 2009.

41 "Al-Qaeda Terrorists Confess to Recent Attacks in Iran," Fars News Agency, October 11, 2009.

42 The most radical Sunni extremists, particularly violent Salafists, tend to view Shi'a Muslims—who they often refer to as *rafida* (rejectionists)—and, by extension, Iran, as heretical and apostate. See "Iran Arrests Seven Al Qaeda Members," Reuters, December 31, 2010. In a related point, Iran also accuses its regional rival Saudi Arabia of actively supporting Sunni extremists targeting the Islamic Republic. Iran's claim that Jundallah receives support from Saudi Arabia is a case in point. See Scott Peterson, "Iran, Still Haunted by Jundallah Attacks, Blames West," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 15, 2010.

Recent Highlights in Terrorist Activity

February 1, 2011 (UNITED STATES): The Federal Bureau of Investigation announced that it recently warned Wall Street that al-Qa`ida may be plotting an attack against financial institutions. The threat information, however, was “not imminent and not specific.” – *UPI, February 1; Bloomberg, February 2*

February 1, 2011 (IRAQ): Gunmen armed with silencers killed an Iraqi National Intelligence official in his car near Taji, Salah al-Din Province. – *Reuters, February 2*

February 2, 2011 (PAKISTAN): A timed explosive device ripped through a crowded market in Peshawar, killing at least nine people. The target may have been a nearby police station, but the bomb was instead left in a busy commercial area. – *BBC, February 2*

February 2, 2011 (ALGERIA): An Italian woman was reportedly kidnapped in Algeria by militants belonging to al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb. – *Voice of America, February 18*

February 2, 2011 (MAURITANIA): A vehicle carrying al-Qa`ida militants exploded during a gunfight with Mauritanian soldiers, leaving at least three militants dead. – *Reuters, February 2*

February 3, 2011 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated explosives amid a crowd of security personnel and civilians in Ramadi, Anbar Province, killing nine people. – *CNN, February 3*

February 4, 2011 (RUSSIA): Terrorist leader Doku Umarov released a video statement threatening that 2011 will be “a year of blood and tears” for Russia. Umarov, Russia’s leading Islamist rebel, said that attacks against Russia would stop only if Moscow withdrew from the North Caucasus region. – *AFP, February 5*

February 5, 2011 (MAURITANIA): A suspected al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb militant blew himself up in southern Mauritania after being chased by security forces. A second suspect was captured. – *Reuters, February 5*

February 7, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated explosives at the customs compound in Kandahar, killing two people. A U.S. soldier was among the dead. – *New York Times, February 7*

February 7, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): The acting district governor of Khost Province, Sayed Mohammed Hamidi, was assassinated by four Taliban gunmen on motorcycles. – *New York Times, February 7*

February 8, 2011 (PAKISTAN): A bomb destroyed four NATO supply tankers on the outskirts of Peshawar. – *AFP, February 8*

February 10, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): Afghan officials announced that a cell of suicide bombers active in Kabul was directed for three years by an imprisoned Taliban commander. The commander, Talib Jan, managed to run the cell from Kabul’s main prison, Pul-e-Charkhi. – *New York Times, February 10*

February 10, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber killed the district governor for Chardara in Kunduz Province. Six other people were also killed in the blast. – *Los Angeles Times, February 11*

February 10, 2011 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber drove a vehicle into a tent for Shi`a pilgrims in Dujail, Salah al-Din Province, killing eight people. – *CNN, February 10*

February 10, 2011 (PAKISTAN): A boy in a school uniform detonated a suicide bomb at a Pakistani army recruitment center in Mardan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, killing 31 cadets. According to Reuters, a Pakistani “intelligence official said he [the bomber] was 12 years-old but government officials later said he was around 19 or 20 years old.” – *Reuters, February 10*

February 11, 2011 (EGYPT): President Hosni Mubarak resigned as leader of Egypt and transferred authority to the Egyptian military. – *Voice of America, February 12*

February 12, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): Taliban fighters used car bombs and rocket-propelled grenades to attack the police headquarters in Kandahar. During the assault, at least 17 Afghan security personnel were killed, as well as two civilians. – *New York Times, February 12*

February 12, 2011 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber detonated explosives on a bus carrying Shi`a pilgrims, killing at least 50 people. The incident occurred between Baghdad and Samarra. – *CNN, February 13*

February 12, 2011 (PAKISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated explosives near a bus station in the town of Bhat Khela in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. Three Pakistani soldiers were wounded. – *AP, February 12*

February 13, 2011 (YEMEN): Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-`Awlaqi released a new audio statement criticizing the Yemeni government for cooperating with the United States in airstrikes targeting militants in Yemen. – *CBS News, February 13*

February 14, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): U.S. military commander Richard Mills told reporters that “the heart of the insurgency” in Helmand Province has “been beaten.” According to *USA Today*, “Mills said coalition forces have succeeded in disrupting the Taliban’s ability to control and resupply its insurgents in Helmand province, and that militants have had to take refuge away from populated areas.” – *USA Today, February 15*

February 14, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber targeted the Western-style City Center shopping mall in Kabul, killing at least two security guards. – *Wall Street Journal, February 14*

February 14, 2011 (RUSSIA): A suicide bomber killed one Interior Ministry soldier outside a police station in Dagestan Province. Shortly after the attack, a suicide bomber in a vehicle detonated explosives after being stopped for inspection by security guards not far from the scene of the first explosion. One police officer was killed in the second bombing. – *Reuters, February 14; RIA Novosti, February 15*

February 15, 2011 (UNITED STATES): Guantanamo Bay inmate Noor Uthman Mohammed pleaded guilty to providing “material support to terrorism” before a U.S. military tribunal. Mohammed, a Sudanese national, was reportedly the deputy commander of al-Qa`ida’s Khaldan training camp in Afghanistan. – *AFP, February 15*

February 16, 2011 (UNITED STATES): CIA Director Leon Panetta told Congress that if Usama bin Ladin or Ayman al-Zawahiri were captured, they would probably be moved to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. – *Washington Post, February 17*

February 18, 2011 (GLOBAL): A new audio statement from al-Qa`ida second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared on Islamist web forums. In the statement, which was recorded before the fall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on February 11, al-Zawahiri called for Mubarak’s ouster and tells Egyptians to establish an Islamic state. “Secularism entered our countries through military occupation, oppression and massacres,” he said. “Western secularism is animus to Islam and supportive to Zionism.” – *Bloomberg, February 20; New York Times, February 18*

February 18, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber in a vehicle detonated explosives near a police checkpoint in a crowded shopping area in Khost Province, killing one police officer and 10 civilians. – *New York Times, February 18*

February 18, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A gunman dressed in an Afghan National Army uniform opened fire on German soldiers at an outpost in Pul-i-Kumri, Baghlan Province. Three German soldiers were killed. – *New York Times, February 18*

February 19, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): Multiple Taliban suicide bombers stormed into a branch of Kabul Bank in Jalalabad and detonated their explosives, killing at least 40 people. At the time of the attack, policemen were in the bank collecting salaries. Among the dead was Alishah Paktyamwal, the police chief of Nangarhar Province. – *AFP, February 19; Voice of America, February 20*

February 21, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber killed at least 28 people at a government office in Kunduz Province. – *AP, February 21*

February 21, 2011 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber in an explosives-laden vehicle attacked a police station in Samarra, Salah al-Din Province, killing at least 12 police officers. – *AP, February 22*

February 21, 2011 (SOMALIA): Suicide bombers in an explosives-laden truck attacked a police station in Mogadishu, killing an estimated 18 people. At least 14 policemen were among the dead. – *Bloomberg, February 21; New York Times, February 21*

February 24, 2011 (UNITED STATES): Zachary Adam Chesser, who was convicted of encouraging terrorist attacks against the writers of the television show *South Park*, was sentenced to 25 years in prison. He also tried to travel to Somalia to join the terrorist group al-Shabab. – *BBC, February 24*

February 24, 2011 (UNITED STATES): According to newly unsealed federal documents, the U.S. government is charging Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari with trying to acquire bombmaking materials and plotting to attack targets such as the Dallas home of former President George W. Bush. Aldawsari, a 20-year-old Saudi Arabian student in Texas, is charged with attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction. According to *USA Today*, “A North Carolina chemical company alerted federal agents about Aldawsari on Feb. 1, after he attempted an online purchase of 10 bottles of the toxic chemical phenol. The chemical can be used to make the explosive trinitrophenol, also known as TNP, court documents say.” – *USA Today, February 24*

February 24, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated explosives in Spin Boldak, Kandahar Province, killing an Afghan intelligence official. Authorities believe that the intelligence official, who approached the bomber, managed to prevent a more deadly strike. – *Los Angeles Times, February 25*

February 24, 2011 (IRAQ): A suicide bomber killed at least 12 people in Ramadi, Anbar Province. Authorities believe that the bomber tried to assassinate the deputy head of the provincial council in Anbar, but the official was not hurt. – *AP, February 24; CNN, February 24*

February 24, 2011 (IRAQ): The Iraqi government said it killed the Islamic State of Iraq’s military leader, Al-Nasser Lideen Allah Abu Suleiman, in the town of Hit, Anbar Province. Suleiman replaced Egyptian Abu Ayyub al-Masri after he was killed in a joint Iraqi-U.S. raid in April 2010. – *BBC, February 25; AP, February 25*

February 24, 2011 (PAKISTAN): A U.S. aerial drone killed at least four militants in North Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. – *Voice of America, February 24*

February 26, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A suicide bomber detonated explosives amid a crowd of people in Faryab Province, killing at least three civilians. According to the *New York Times*, “The crowd had gathered for a game of *buzkashi*, which involves men on horseback trying to grab a dead goat from each other.” – *New York Times, February 26*

February 26, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): A roadside bomb killed nine civilians, including women and children, in Khost Province. – *AFP, February 25*

February 27, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): Two bombs exploded at a dog fight in Kandahar, killing at least 14 people. The attack occurred in Arghandab district. – *BBC, February 28*

February 27, 2011 (AFGHANISTAN): The Afghan Taliban announced that they recently captured Canadian national Colin Rutherford, claiming that he is a spy. The Canadian government, however, identified Rutherford as a tourist. – *National Post, March 1; Reuters, February 28*

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

February 27, 2011 (SOMALIA): The terrorist group al-Shabab warned that Kenya “would pay” for allegedly helping Somali government soldiers attack al-Shabab fighters in Somalia. In response to the threat, police in Kenya increased security in public areas. – *AP, February 28*

February 28, 2011 (UNITED KINGDOM): A British jury convicted Rajib Karim of plotting to blow up a plane. During the trial, prosecutors charged that Karim was in contact with Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al-`Awlaqi who helped plan the attack. Al-`Awlaqi allegedly wrote to Karim, “Our highest priority is the US. Anything there, even on a smaller scale compared to what we may do in the UK would be our choice. So the question is with the people you have is it possible to get a package or a person with a package on board a flight heading to the US?” Karim worked for British Airways. – *ABC News, February 2; Guardian, February 28; NPR, March 1*

February 28, 2011 (YEMEN): Suspected al-Qa`ida gunmen shot to death two Yemeni soldiers in separate shootings in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan Province. – *AFP, February 28*