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Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi

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"THE WHOLE OF AFRICA WILL GO UP IN FLAMES": THE TALIBAN LOOK AT U.S. DESIGNS ON AFRICAN ENERGY RESOURCES

Afghanistan's Taliban movement turned their attention to the U.S. role in Somalia and elsewhere in Africa in an article published in the latest issue of the Taliban's Arabic-language magazine, *al-Sumud* (Media Center of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan-Taliban, June 27).

The article, entitled "Somalia: Next Target for the Global Tyrant, the United States of America," focused on the alleged neo-colonial ambitions of the United States, especially in respect to the consolidation and exploitation of African energy resources. The author, using the name Anwar, maintains that God provided Muslims ample blessings in the form of natural resources, but Muslim inattentiveness and inability to benefit from these resources has allowed "the cunning enemy" to take advantage of them. "This is indeed an unforgivable crime committed by the Muslims against themselves!"

The author accuses America of seeking to create chaos and insecurity in Africa as the first step in controlling Africa's resources. Somalia is their "first and most important target." Despite its lack of confirmed oil or gas reserves, the author describes Somalia as "a country rich with oil wells." There is some energy exploration ongoing off the coast of northern Somalia's semi-autonomous province of Puntland, but the main player in this effort is Range Resources, an Australian rather than American company.



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Citing unnamed Russian analysts who “stated that the United States has prepared a plan for a long war in Africa,” the author claims American concerns over piracy in Somalia are nothing more than an excuse to justify an eventual military occupation of Somalia, arguing “In fact, the United States is seeking to find a situation that justifies the necessity of deploying its soldiers in Africa. Therefore, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya will submit to the U.S. power, especially since these three Islamic countries are rich in high quantities of natural resources and minerals, as indicated by recent studies.” American support for Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) as led by veteran Islamist Shaykh Sharif Shaykh Ahmad is described as the result of Washington’s “need for a supportive or agent government to facilitate its seizure of natural resources like minerals and [oil] wells.”

The article clearly supports Somalia’s extremist Mujahideen Youth Movement (better known as al-Shabaab) in its efforts to take control of Somalia. In an oblique reference to Western criticism of the amputations, beatings and executions carried out by al-Shabaab’s ad-hoc Islamic courts, the author suggests “the United States sometimes accuses the Shari’a courts of violating human rights and being careless about them” as part of its effort to dominate Somalia.

The Taliban examination of American policies in Africa concludes by predicting a U.S. colonial expansion in Africa that will not be restricted to Somalia alone. “When war breaks out, the whole of Africa will go up in flames, especially Sudan and Libya.”

IRAN CLAIMS CONFESSIONS REVEAL JONDOLLAH’S LEADER IS AN AMERICAN AGENT

As tensions continue to mount between Iran and the United States over Iran’s disputed presidential election, its nuclear program and Vice President Joe Biden’s apparent go-ahead for Israeli strikes on Iran (since refuted by President Obama), authorities in Tehran continue to insist the insurgency and various terrorist attacks in Iran’s Sistan and Balochistan province are inspired and funded by the United States. On June 29, a provincial prosecutor announced that 13 members of the Sunni Muslim and ethnic-Balochi Jondollah insurgent group had confessed that their leader, Abdolmalek Rigi, was an agent of the United States and Israel (Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran Sistan-Balochistan Provincial TV, June 29; *Khorasan*, July 2). Sistan and Balochistan

is Iran’s poorest and most underdeveloped province. Its eastern border divides it from Pakistan’s Balochistan province, similarly underdeveloped and also home to a Balochi insurgency.

Abdolmalek’s brother, Abdolhamid, was extradited from Pakistan during the presidency of Pervez Musharraf and tried by Iranian authorities on charges of terrorism, kidnapping and murder. He was reported to have been executed in the provincial capital of Zahedan on June 6, but Iranian authorities later stated Abdolhamid was alive and there had been some confusion when a condemned man with the same name was hanged on that date (Press TV, June 10). Reza Qalandarzehi, a Jondollah member extradited from Pakistan along with Abdolhamid, was hanged at the same time as the other prisoner after his conviction on terrorism charges (Fars News Agency, June 6).

In an interview with Iranian Press TV, Abdolhamid said his brother Abdolmalek had been in steady contact with U.S. FBI and CIA agents in Karachi and Islamabad. According to Abdolhamid, the Americans had initially been wary of Abdolmalek’s previous connections to al-Qaeda, but the Jondollah leader assured them he had no contact with al-Qaeda since 2002 and needed financial support only to fight Iran. Abdolhamid described a meeting in Islamabad where two female U.S. agents had offered weapons, training and bases in Afghanistan. The agents wanted to know how many recruits the Jondollah leaders could bring in for military training (Press TV, June 9; *Tehran Times*, June 10). A Jondollah statement claimed Abdolhamid’s confessions broadcast on Iran’s Press TV had been extracted through severe torture and prolonged solitary confinement (junbish.blogspot.com, June 8). On July 1, Abdolhamid repeated his allegations of American backing for Jondollah in a Zahedan courtroom.

In the last few years, the Pakistan-based Jondollah organization has claimed responsibility for a string of ambushes on Iranian security forces as well as a series of terrorist bombings, including the May 28 bombing of the Amir al-Mohini mosque in Zahedan that killed 25 people and another two explosions in Zahedan on June 9. A Jondollah spokesman claimed the bombing of the Shi’a mosque had targeted a secret meeting of Revolutionary Guards commanders (al-Arabiya TV, May 29; junbish.blogspot.com, June 10). Pakistan’s ambassador was summoned to the Iranian Foreign Ministry in Tehran two days after the mosque bombing (Xinhua, May 30). Three men arrested before

the bombing on suspicion of terrorism were hanged in public the same day after reportedly admitting to providing explosives for the blast.

The Iranian Interior Minister, Sadeq Mahsuli, laid the blame for the mosque blast on the United States and Israel despite a strong denial of involvement from Washington (*E'temad*, June 5; Fars News Agency, May 30). Jondollah has not been placed on the U.S. list of designated terrorist organizations (*Boston Globe*, May 30).

Jihad Ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi Challenges Jordan's Neo-Zarqawists

By *Murad Batal al-Shishani*

Salafi-Jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi gave his first interview since his release from prison on March 12, 2008 to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood associated *al-Sabeel* weekly newspaper on June 4. Local media reported that security authorities in Jordan had set a condition that he would not give any press interviews after he was released. Al-Maqdisi's interview comes in the shadow of increasing criticism directed at him by the neo-Zarqawists in Jordan (i.e. ideological followers of the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, former leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq), who accuse him of renouncing his jihadi ideology.

Several points were significant in al-Maqdisi's interview. He told interviewer Wa'il al-Battiri he has not maintained that famous Salafi shaykhs such as Abdul Aziz bin Baz, Naser al-Din al-Albani and Muhammad Saleh al-Uthaymin were infidels, explaining that such accusations could be "due to certain strong expressions that I used against them." (*al-Sabeel*, June 4, 2009). Answering al-Battiri's question about the legitimacy of blowing up an entire building just to kill one or two soldiers, al-Maqdisi replied, "One should not be lenient about the sin of shedding the blood of Muslims based on suspicion, jihad, or other things. Indeed, the blood and property of disobedient Muslims cannot be violated, even if they commit iniquities. It is our duty to call them into religion and try to bring them from darkness to light and not to engage with them in battles. I have written on this many times and I dissociated myself from the undisciplined operations that others commit outside the

bounds of Shari'a - operations that result in thousands of victims and in which much blood is shed without any legitimate benefits to jihad or Muslims."

Furthermore, al-Maqdisi deplored the kidnapping of "neutral representatives of relief organizations who assist Muslims in many countries," considering it "a crime that harms Islam and Muslims [and] the reputation of jihad and the mujahideen." Al-Maqdisi denounced the unclaimed October 2003 bombing of the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC] in Baghdad; "I do not care who did it; rather, I care about advising Muslim youths in general, correcting their paths, and giving them the best choices. The ICRC is a neutral humanitarian relief organization. It has nothing to do with fighting Islam and Muslims." Al-Maqdisi praised the ICRC for their support during his imprisonment.

Al-Maqdisi expressed his opposition on the targeting of churches and cinema houses. In response to al-Battiri's question regarding targeting the Shi'a, al-Maqdisi said, "Despite the deviousness and false, deviant beliefs of al-Rawafid [the rejecters, i.e. the Shi'a], there are certain rules for holding them to be infidels, just like any heretics who also pray in the direction of Mecca. They cannot be held to be infidels collectively. One should distinguish between average Shi'is who do not know anything of their beliefs and who do not observe apostate practices, and the elite Shi'is who believe in the well known apostate ideas of their denomination... Therefore, we have deplored the bombing of Shi'i mosques because the mosques are places in which the ordinary man, woman, and child, as well as the elderly, sit and seek refuge. We also deplore targeting Shi'i women, children, and other non-combatants."

Remarkably, al-Maqdisi's answer concerning the Shi'a sparked the greatest criticism from the neo-Zarqawists who have campaigned against him in the last few years, although the criticism did not engage his religious insights. Instead they attacked him personally, describing him as "a brother of Shi'is" (www.almedad.com, June 5).

Apart from the growing rift between the neo-Zarqawists and al-Maqdisi, the latter showed in his answers a calmer tone than in the past (see *Terrorism Focus*, November 19, 2008). Analysts such as Muhammad Abu Rumman, chief editor of Jordan's al-Ghad daily, found these answers closer to the "revisions" conducted in jihadi movements in Egypt that "were the golden key

that extracted Egypt from the wave of mindless violence and incessant security worries” (see *Terrorism Monitor*, December 10, 2007; *Terrorism Focus*, April 30, 2008). Maqdisi’s comments and the Egyptian “revisions” indicate the importance of cultural, intellectual, and legal dialogue as a “preventive solution” in countering “Islamic radicalism” (*al-Ghad*, June 15).

It is important to note that the “calm” or soft tone of al-Maqdisi has dual implications; on the one hand it will play a major role in preventing young people from joining the radical neo-Zarqawist generation. On the other hand it is important to note that al-Maqdisi has not denounced jihadi ideology in general, only certain aspects of it. There is a major difference between what he is presenting and the revisions the Egyptian jihadis issued; the Egyptians laid considerable emphasis on the importance of “peaceful political engagement,” while al-Maqdisi has not approached this idea yet. Despite this, al-Maqdisi’s views will inevitably appear to be “moderate” in comparison with those of Jordan’s neo-Zarqawists.

Such a situation could lead to increasing competition between the two parties over legitimacy and the authentic representation of the Salafi-Jihadi movement. The rift between al-Maqdisi and the younger neo-Zarqawists can be expected to widen.

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Alleged Iranian and Hezbollah Agents on Trial for Targeting Russian-Operated Radar Station in Azerbaijan

By Anar Valiyev

A trial of six people accused of terrorism and other serious crimes began on June 24 in Baku, Azerbaijan. Two Lebanese citizens, Karaki Ali Muhammad and Najmaddin Ali Hussein, were charged with treason, revealing secret information

abroad, espionage, preparation of acts of terrorism, drug trafficking and arms smuggling. Four Azerbaijani citizens, Javid Mamadov, Vidadi Rasulov, Mushfig Amanov and Afgan Balashev all face similar charges. The alleged terrorist cell planned to bomb the Israeli Embassy in Baku as well as blow up the Russian-operated Qabala radar station. According to investigation records, the group was receiving orders from Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Lebanon’s Hezbollah. Both Lebanese “had been trained and sent to Azerbaijan by terrorist organizations Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.” (Trend News [Baku], June 10). The suspects allegedly planned to attract local people to cooperate with them in carrying out terrorist attacks in densely populated areas. After getting their instructions from Hezbollah, the two Lebanese arrived in Iran, where agents of the Revolutionary Guards helped them to cross the border into Azerbaijan. Once there, they are alleged to have established a group consisting of local citizens, convincing them to bomb the Qabala radar station (Dayaz, May 27).

The investigation revealed that members of the group visited the Qabala region in August 2007 and took photos of the radar station. Meanwhile, group leader Karaki Ali Muhammad visited Baku several times since 2007 to collect information about Israel’s embassy. During the trial the leader of the ring admitted that he had represented Hezbollah in Iran since 2003 and his monthly wage from this organization was \$900. He was ordered to collect information on the Jewish Cultural Center in Baku as well investigate a number of Iranians who “help Israel” (Turan Information Agency [Baku], June 19). Karaki Ali Muhammad was born in 1967 in the Lebanese city of Nabatia but lived for a long time in Tehran. Officially, Muhammad did not have a job while in Tehran, but he accompanied tourists to the holy places of Iran. He assembled tourist groups near Tehran’s al-Nabi Mosque and was hired there by an employee of the Iranian Ministry of Security and Intelligence (Vezarat-e Ettela’at va Anmiat-e Keshvar – VEVAK).

Reports about plots to bomb the embassies of Israel, the United States and/or the U.K. frequently appear in the Azeri press. In 2007, law-enforcement agencies neutralized a group of terrorists who tried to bomb the U.S. and U.K. embassies as well as the local offices of oil companies. Local and foreign newspapers reported that the planned bombing was an attempt to avenge the assassination of senior Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh, killed by a car bomb in Damascus in February 2008 (Turan News, June 10; *Haaretz*, May

31; *LA Times*, May 30). Hezbollah believes that Israeli intelligence is behind the murder.

The strangest part of the case presented by local authorities is the allegation that the leader of the terrorist cell was working for both Hezbollah and al-Qaeda. Despite previous suggestions of cooperation between Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, there is no evidence that the two organizations have planned joint operations. Both organizations have different strategies, visions and targets. Sunni-based al-Qaeda is not interested in carrying out terrorist attacks in majority-Shi'a Azerbaijan since the local targets are low-profile and would not bring any dividends (see *Terrorism Monitor*, May 18, 2006). Most of the Western targets in the country are well protected and the chances of implementing a successful attack are very low. There appears to be little validity to the charge that Kareki Ali Muhammad was working for both Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.

Also of interest is the fact that the group supported by Iran was trying to bomb the Qabala radar station, built by the Soviets in 1984. The station belongs to Azerbaijan and is leased to Russia until 2012. The radar facility has a range of up to 6,000 km and was designed to detect missile launches from the region around the Indian Ocean. The station hosts 900 troops of the Russian Space Forces. By attacking the radar station, Hezbollah and Iran would actually be attacking Russian property. The death of Russian servicemen in such an attack would significantly worsen relations between Russia and Iran. It is thus hard to believe that Iran would have pursued such an operation.

There is, however, another possible motive behind terrorist surveillance of the Qabala radar station. In June 2007, Russian president Vladimir Putin made an offer to the United States to use the Qabala facility jointly with Russia instead of deploying the planned U.S. missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. The offer was declined, in part because of U.S. concerns the Soviet-era technology in use at the station was incompatible with U.S. radar technology (RFE/RL, September 18). A Russian offer to update the facility's technology did little to change the U.S. viewpoint.

Nevertheless, the Russian president's gesture worried Iranian authorities who are concerned that an American presence at Qabala would endanger the security of Iran. Most probably the group was asked to collect as much information as possible on that facility for future use. The Baku cell would be unlikely to attack the

installation immediately, either on orders from Tehran or on their own initiative, though it cannot be excluded that such an order could be sent in case American troops and technicians arrived at Qabala. For the moment, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry has indicated that no progress has been achieved regarding joint use of Qabala and none should be expected (*Trend News*, June 22; *Azerbaijan Business Center*, June 22).

Anar Valiyev holds a Ph.D. in Urban and Public Affairs from the University of Louisville in Kentucky. His areas of interest include urban terrorism, public policy of post-Soviet countries, governance and democracy.

Can Afghanistan's New "Guardian" Militia Restore Security in the Provinces?

By Wahidullah Mohammad

As the security situation in Afghanistan worsened, there was an increase in Taliban attacks in south and central Afghanistan, especially in Wardak province, 30 kilometers west of Kabul. The government and international forces decided to distribute arms to local people to defeat the Taliban and other insurgents in their respective villages and districts. The formation of the Afghan Public Protection Force (better known as the "Guardians") is a pilot project operating in the Jalriz district of Wardak province and in Wardak's provincial capital of Maidan Shar. Wardak Province is located in central Afghanistan and has a majority Pashtun population with a significant Hazara (Shi'a) minority.

Recruits to the new militia are chosen by local elders before receiving Kalashnikov AK-47 assault rifles and three weeks of training from the Afghan national police. The militia is not intended to confront the Taliban in combat but is instead meant to serve as a kind of local watch. As such, they are equipped with radios and cell phones to call for assistance from American forces or the Afghan National Army when necessary (NPR, June 3). Most of the Wardak Guardians are loyal to Tor Gol, a former anti-Soviet mujahid.

Shahedullah Shahed, spokesperson for the Wardak governor, says that since the Guardians began operating in Jalriz district and Maidan Shar there has been a significant improvement in security in these places.

[1] According to Shahed, Jalriz was previously one of the worst districts regarding security. Government employees, NGOs and construction companies could not travel on the Kabul-Bamyan highway that goes through Jalriz district as there were always Taliban attacks on the highway. Since the Guardians began operating the district has become a secure and peaceful area. According to Shahed, “Jalriz was one of the most difficult and insecure districts in Wardak province. Those who were working for the provincial government could not go to their homes in Jalriz district because of the Taliban and insurgents, but now there are 243 Guardians ensuring security for local residents. Since they are there the situation is completely changed and everyone can go to the district and walk freely.” According to Shahed, the Guardians are now operating only in Jalriz district and Maidan Shar, but soon the program will be expanded to all districts of Wardak province. “We have registered many people for this program in Behsood and other districts of Wardak.”

Local residents of Jalriz say that the Guardians are good for the region and since their deployment the situation has improved. Shrin Aga, a resident of Jalriz, says the Guardians have launched their checkpoints on the road and are ensuring security. “We are happy with the Guardians; they are good people, they are always on the road and patrolling around villages. During the day there are no Taliban activities, but during the night we do not know because people are not coming out from their house at night.” [2] Another resident of Jalriz, Lul Gul, agreed with Shirin Aga. Previously there were Taliban walking freely in Jalriz district during the day and night, launching attacks on government and international forces convoys, but now the Taliban cannot be seen during the day. “The only things they can do are planting roadside bombs and exploding army vehicles.”

A resident of Jalriz who did not want to be named said that most of the people now working as Guardians in his district used to belong to jihadi groups. According to this individual, those Guardians who have disputes with local people are misusing their new weapons. “Some of the Guardians who have personal problems with some people are going to those people’s houses and arresting them as Taliban.”

A resident of the provincial capital, Mohammad Qasim, says the only villagers who can go and register their names as Guardians are those who live close to the district center, near Afghan National Army and

international forces bases. “In my village, which is far away from the provincial center Maidan Shar, no one is ready to go and work for the Guardians. They are afraid of the Taliban, because if they work for the Guardians the Taliban will come to [a volunteer’s] house during the night and will kill him and make problems for him because there is no government control in my village during the night.” Another resident of Maidan Shar said the Guardians are efficient during the day but during the night they are not able to patrol around the villages.

Political analyst Fazal Rhamn Orya agrees with the concerns of local people regarding the Guardians’ misuse of power. [3] According to Orya, the militias now being formed will be a problem in the future. Orya warns that, while the militias misuse their power against the local people today, tomorrow they will use their guns against the government and in time the government will not be able to control them. “These are not Guardians, they are the former militias. The Interior Ministry changes the name from militias to Guardians, but in fact they are not good for the future of Afghanistan. These Guardians will raise ethical problems; they will use their guns against each other in near future.”

Orya says that the Interior Ministry has no authority to build these kinds of militias and notes that there is no place in the Afghan constitution for creating militias. “These kinds of militias have had no positive result in Afghanistan history.”

But Shahedullah Shahed disagrees with Orya. Shahed claims the Guardian units are not militias; they are protecting public places and their villages in their respective areas and they are aiding the police. According to Shahed these Guardians are not front line forces. “These Guardians are not launching operations against the Taliban and other insurgents, but if they are attacked they are allowed to defend themselves.” Shahed added, “They are very well equipped and trained by Afghanistan’s National Police and they are receiving the same amount of salaries and other privileges as the Afghan National Police are receiving.”

But Orya asks, if the Interior Ministry is able to provide the Guardians with training, salaries, weapons, uniforms and other equipment, why are they not thinking of increasing the number of Afghan national police instead of forming militias? “In my opinion these Guardians are against Afghanistan’s future. They are only able to guard the areas around district centers; they are not able to provide security for the whole district. I am sure

they will be involved in robberies and taking people's goods by force. They will be Guardians during the day and will misuse their guns during the night and will be looting people's houses."

Shahed denies that the Guardians will become involved in such activities. Volunteers are introduced by tribal elders and village heads to ensure they are good people. "They should not be involved in wrong activities; if they are, then according to the law they will be punished." According to the Wardak governor's spokesperson, if the Guardians arrest any Taliban or other criminals they have to hand them over to the national police. They are not in the position to keep such people. Shahed says that the Guardians are completely under Interior Ministry command at the national level; in the provinces they will be led by the local provincial chief of police and in the districts they will work under the district chief of police

A Guardian on the Kabul to Kandahar highway near Maidan Shar who did not wish to be named said that since the Guardians had become active, the Taliban and other insurgents were no longer able to come and launch their attacks. The Guardian also claimed that once daily Taliban attacks had been reduced to one or two attacks per month. [4]

According to Orya, Afghanistan suffered many difficulties in the 1990s when former President Mohammad Najibullah established these kinds of militias in different parts of the country. After a while the militias grew out of the government's control and eventually played a major role in the fall of Najibullah's government.

Mohammad Kabir Ranjbar, former director of the Afghanistan Police Academy and now a member of Afghanistan's national parliament, says the current Guardians are completely different from those militias. [5] According to Ranjbar, those militias were formed from one tribe and were led by their own commander. "This is true that the former militias had a very bad result for that government... When they saw that President Najibullah had agreed to the United Nations peace agreement, they stood against the government and the result was the fall of that government."

Ranjbar says that the Guardians now operating in Wardak are not the kind of militias that existed in the 1990s. The new Guardian forces are a structure of local people protecting their own areas. "These Guardians are very good for protecting public places and their villages.

They are not militias; in fact they are local people ensuring security in their districts and villages. They will be working under the Ministry of the Interior while the former militias were not under any governmental department command." However, Ranjbar warns, "If they are not under Interior Ministry command the result will be the same as it was during Najibullah's regime."

Wahidullah is a freelance journalist in Afghanistan.

Notes:

1. Shahedullah Shahed, spokesperson for the Wardak Governor, was interviewed on June 29.
2. Local people were interviewed on June 30.
3. Political analyst Fazal Rahman Orya was interviewed on July 2.
4. The Guardian was interviewed on June 30.
5. Kabir Ranjbar was interviewed on July 7.