

Afganistan – Pakistan and Central Asia

by Yossef Bodansky¹

With the US-led West getting about to withdraw from Afghanistan - the real upsurge for the crucial region historically known as the Between and Betwixt of Empires is about to begin in earnest. This will be a confluence - a perfect storm - of the revival and resurrection of historic mega-trends under contemporary conditions. Most important are the revival of the original Russian-Chinese “Great Game”. For almost three centuries, Central Asia was the preeminent zone of confrontation between China’s Manchu Dynasty (1644-1912) and Russia’s Romanov Dynasty (1613-1917). Now, the Heart of Asia has once again become the zone Between and Betwixt Empires in more than mere geopolitical terms. However, what makes the current situation uniquely explosive and dangerous is the surge of the Jihadist movement - emboldened by its enduring of the US/ISAF war in Afghanistan and Pakistan - as a most vibrant and violent force that is setting the Heart of Asia aflame. The Jihadist movement is facilitating the Chinese ascent as a global hegemon in return for a Chinese umbrella against US and Western retaliation. This confluence of historic and grand strategic mega-trends constitutes not only a threat to the quintessential vital interests of Russia - but to the well-being of the entire industrialized North.

*

¹ **Yossef Bodansky** has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books - including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York Times No.1 Bestseller & Washington Post No.1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (New York Times Bestseller & Foreign Affairs Magazine Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* - and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.

The struggle for the Heart of Asia through the exploitation of localized conflicts and crises has long been a prime objective of the Jihadist movement. The Jihadists have always looked at a predominantly-Sunni domain stretching from the Caucasus through Central Asia (including Xinjiang) and Southern Russia to the Afghanistan-Pakistan-Kashmir bloc. The Jihadist movement considers the entire region east of the Caspian Sea a single geo-political entity that goes by the name “Khorasan”. This region - Khorasan - is considered to be the between and betwixt of Empires - between Russia in the north and, in the south, the Chinese-Persian bloc that dominated the Silk Road as created in the aftermath of the Mongol Invasion.

During most of the 20th Century, this struggle was largely muted due to the Russian and Soviet hold onto much of the Heart of Asia. However, at the dawn of the post-Cold War era both China and Persia - now the People’s Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Iran respectively - sought to capitalize on the resurrection of the Jihadist trend in order to further their own strategic aspirations - namely, the consolidation of a Trans-Asian Axis from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. The predominantly Sunni Jihadists were eager participants and loyal partners from the very beginning. Already in the early-1990's, the Jihadist movement articulated a surge in which the Jihadist trend will advance from two springboard-bases - *al-Qaeda* in Arabic - one in the Caucasus and one in Afghanistan-Pakistan-Kashmir, converge at the heart of Central Asia, and proceed northwards into the heart of Russia and Europe.

Back in September 1996, in one of the very first conferences I attended in Moscow, I addressed this early phase of the quest for the Heart of Asia.² I started my paper with the following assertion:

The Heart of Asia is aflame - dotted with a myriad of armed confrontations. Starting from the east and moving westwards along the Silk Road these are the Islamist resurgence in Xinjiang, the host of armed conflicts in between - from Kashmir and Afghanistan to Tajikistan and Azerbaijan - and, perhaps most significant, the transformation of the war in Chechnya into an Islamist Jihad. All these seemingly isolated conflicts, even though each of them has indigenous root causes and legacies, constitute components of a cohesive development - the surge of militant Islam and ethnic chauvinism into the Heart of Asia.

The territory of Afghanistan, particularly as an instrument of the grand strategic designs of regional powers, has been imperative to making this violent upsurge possible. Like during the wars in Afghanistan in the 1980's, and, for that matter the Great Game of the 19th Century, the peoples and territory of Afghanistan are merely pawns in, and means to, strategic maneuvers of dominant powers. Because of its strategic location and unique geography, Afghanistan has always been crucial to any regional dynamics and conflagration. However, the ultimate objectives that brought war into and out of Afghanistan have always lied elsewhere. Hence, both the spread of Islamist terrorism out of Chechnya and the escalation in the fighting in Kabul are but discrete though integral components of a wider and more profound historic evolution - the Islamist assault on the Heart of Asia.

² Yossef Bodansky, THE LEGACY OF AFGHANISTAN: REGIONAL SECURITY ASPECTS AND STRATEGIC CHALLENGES. Presented at the ‘Civil War in Afghanistan: Preliminary Results and Perspectives’ conference: The Second Session of the Russian-Swiss Seminar on Afghanistan, Moscow, 25-29 September 1996

I concluded by observing that

The Trans-Asian Axis, being consolidated from the barrel of the Islamists' guns, creates a new strategic posture of global significance and ramifications. The ensuing completion of the Pan-Asia Continental Oil Bridge will alter the economic posture of Asia and have a dire effect on the economies of the industrialized North. And it is the spread and escalation of state-sponsored Islamist terrorism and subversion that expedites this trend. Hence, peace and stability will continue to elude the Heart of Asia.

Indeed, in the late-1990's, the Jihadist quest for the Heart of Asia became a tangible threat with grand strategic ramifications for the industrialized North. Actual implementation of the Jihad for Khorasan started with the establishment on February 15, 1998, of the "World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders" - the real operational arm of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri - and the launch of an uncompromising war against the United States. The Front indicated the maturing and evolution of the Jihadist trend into a global movement with coherent strategic world view and tangible global aspirations.

Contingency plans for the escalation and sustenance of Jihad throughout the entire Central Asia started in earnest around the turn of the 21st Century. In May 2001, Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar and Osama bin Laden established a new international organization known as LIVO in order to expedite the liberation of Central Asia. Sheraly Akbotoyev (a senior commander captured in mid-2002) defined the goal of LIVO as "the creation of an Islamic State in all of Central Asia, which would engulf all of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and China's Xinjiang province." Juma Namangani - the founder of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan [IMU] and a close confidant of bin Laden - was appointed as LIVO Chief. Underneath Namangani was a Supreme Council comprised of Mullah Omar, Osama bin Laden, Tahir Yuldashev (another IMU leader now in Waziristan, Pakistan), Hassan Makhdoom (a senior Uyghur leader responsible for operations in eastern Kazakhstan and China's Xinjiang), and two Taliban commanders known only as Ubaidullo and Aimani. Their role was to facilitate the organization, training and combat deployment of the Central Asian and non-Pushtun Afghan mujahedin earmarked for LIVO. Initially, mujahedin from Uzbekistan made up the core of LIVO members. However, they were soon joined by fighters from all other Central Asian nationalities and ethnic groups, as well as a cadre of Arab and Chechen 'Afghans'.

After US and allied forces invaded Afghanistan in fall 2001, one of the immediate tasks of LIVO was to establish clandestine lanes of communications in order to smuggle key commanders and mujahedin - mostly Arab and West European 'Afghans' - across Central Asia to Chechnya - their new safe-haven and springboard for future operations. According to the LIVO contingency plans set by bin Laden and Namangani, the majority of the Chechen mujahedin who survived the fighting in northern Afghanistan were to escort several Arab senior commanders across Central Asia to Chechnya. By then, the safe-houses and means of communications were already in place in accordance with long-standing agreements and arrangements previously made with Khattab and his deputies. The first group of Chechen and Central Asian mujahedin left Pakistan in mid-November in order to personally survey the proposed routes to the Caucasus, as well as activate the support system and safe houses along the road. The first group of mujahedin that included prominent Arab commanders left for Chechnya in late November, and by late December all the Arab and West European 'Afghan' commanders were already safe in Chechnya - ready to resume operations. By the time of Akbotoyev's capture in summer 2002, LIVO had already established a wide network of

underground cells “in different parts of Central Asia.” (A separate exfiltration operation for Arab combat commanders to Iran and Iraq operated separately - facilitating the arrival of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi and the ensuing Jihadist escalation in Iraq.)

Meanwhile, the Islamist-Jihadist supreme leadership - including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri - started articulating the doctrine of the forthcoming post-9/11 Jihad. On December 2, 2001, the Saudi-owned London-based newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, one of the most authoritative Arab newspapers, started the publication of an 11-part series serializing Zawahiri’s new book *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*. The series’ editor called the book “the last will” of Zawahiri, and Zawahiri himself explained that he took trouble writing the book in order “to fulfill the duty entrusted to me towards our generation and future generations. Perhaps I will not be able to write afterwards in the midst of these worrying circumstances and changing conditions.” Much of Zawahiri’s book was devoted to the articulation of the strategy and logic of the forthcoming stages in the global Jihad.

Zawahiri’s main thesis is that the US-led War on Terrorism, then in a formative phase, was not a mere reaction to the spectacular strikes of September 11, 2001, but rather the inevitable clash of two mega-trends defined during the formative years of the 1990's - the Jihadist trend and the US lust for energy resources. Zawahiri emphasized the enduring singular importance of the Caucasus and Afghanistan in this global correlation of forces. “In the 1990's the United States confronted a new phenomenon that represented a fierce challenge to its dominance and arrogance, namely, the emergence of two Islamic states that liberated their territory under the slogan of Jihad in the cause of Allah against the infidel occupiers of Muslim lands. Those two countries were Afghanistan and Chechnya. The matter did not stop there, for these two emerging countries became the safe haven and destination of emigrants and mujahidin from various parts of the world or what the United States describes as Arab Afghans, fundamentalists, terrorists, and so on.” It is because of this dynamics, Zawahiri explained, that the US-led West is pursuing the War on Terrorism. Hence, Zawahiri predicted, the struggle ahead will be over the control of the energy-rich Heart of Asia and the transportation routes connecting it with the rest of the world.

Zawahiri analyzed in great detail and specificity the strategic significance and ramifications of the success of the Chechens’ Jihad for the whole Caucasus, and then the rest of the world. He anticipated a Jihadist tidal wave of global-historic significance originating from Chechnya.

“The liberation of the Caucasus would constitute a hotbed of Jihad (or fundamentalism as the United States describes it) and that region would become the shelter of thousands of Muslim mujahedin from various parts of the Islamic world, particularly Arab parts. This poses a direct threat to the United States represented by the growing support for the Jihadist movement everywhere in the Islamic world. If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahedin reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahedin movements in Kashmir. The belt will be linked to the south with Iran and Turkey that are sympathetic to the Muslims of Central Asia. This will break the cordon that is struck around the Muslim Caucasus and allow it to communicate with the Islamic world in general, but particularly with the mujahedin movement.”

Zawahiri did not neglect the intrinsic interest of the Chechen Jihad - namely, the eradication of Russian presence in the Caucasus and the spread of anti-Russian Jihad. He explained that “the liberation of the Muslim Caucasus will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation and will help escalate the Jihad movements that already exist in the republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose governments get Russian backing against those Jihadist movements.” This development, however, will also further the interests of the anti-US Jihad. “The fragmentation of the Russian Federation on the rock of the fundamentalist movement and at the hands of the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asia will topple a basic ally of the United States in its battle against the Islamic Jihadist reawakening,” Zawahiri argued. Washington was not oblivious to these grand strategic realities. “For this reason the United States chose to begin by crushing the Chechens by providing Western financing for the Russian Army so that when this brutal campaign against the Chechen mujahedin is completed, the campaign can move southwards to Afghanistan either by the action of former Soviet republics [of Central Asia] that are US agents or with the participation of US troops under the guise of combating terrorism, drug trafficking, and the claims about liberating that region’s women,” Zawahiri elaborated. “In this way the United States will have destroyed the two last remaining hotbeds of resistance to it in the Islamic world.”

In the conclusion of *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, Zawahiri stressed that already in late-2001 this strategic posture was crucial for the global Jihad against the US-led War on Terrorism. “In the face of this [US-led] alliance, a fundamentalist coalition is taking shape. It is made up of the Jihad movements in the various lands of Islam as well as the two countries that have been liberated in the name of Jihad for the sake of Allah (Afghanistan and Chechnya). If this coalition is still at an early stage, its growth is increasingly and steadily accelerating,” Zawahiri predicted. He stressed that the emerging Jihadist trend “represents a growing power that is rallying under the banner of Jihad for the sake of Allah and operating outside the scope of the new world order. It is free of the servitude for the dominating western empire. It promises destruction and ruin for the new Crusades against the lands of Islam. It is ready for revenge against the heads of the world’s gathering of infidels, the United States, Russia, and Israel. It is anxious to seek retribution for the blood of the martyrs, the grief of the mothers, the deprivation of the orphans, the suffering of the detainees, and the sores of the tortured people throughout the land of Islam, from Eastern Turkestan to Andalusia [the Islamic state in Spain].” Zawahiri added that these Jihadist movements also had crucial role to play in the Islamicization of society and in laying down the foundation for the rise of Islamist-Jihadist societies and peoples. “A single look at the history of the mujahedin in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Chechnya will show that the Jihad movement has moved to the center of the leadership of the nation when it adopted the slogan of liberating the nation from its external enemies and when it portrayed it as a battle of Islam against infidelity and infidels.” And herein lied the solid foundations and singular significance of the Jihadist movements in Chechnya and Afghanistan.

Therefore, Zawahiri concluded, both springboard-poles - Chechnya and Afghanistan - would continue to remain the pillars of the Jihadist movements world-wide and the foundations for the Islamist-Jihadist hold onto the entire Hub of Islam - beyond the Heart of Asia between them. “Backing and supporting Afghanistan and Chechnya and defending them with the heart, the hand, and the word represent a current duty, for these are the assets of Islam in this age. The Jewish-Crusade campaign is united to crush them. Therefore, we must not be content with safeguarding them only. We must seek to move the battlefield to the heart of the Islamic world, which represents the true arena of the battle and the theater of the major battles in defense of Islam,” Zawahiri appealed to his readers.

Confident as Zawahiri was in winter 2001/2, it actually took the Jihadist movement a few years to recover from the global onslaught and ensuing loss of major commanders and intellectuals. It was only in the year between fall 2004 and the early winter of 2005 that the Islamist-Jihadist movement finally underwent the most profound evolution of its onslaught with the Muslim world as well as against the West. This evolution is the most important development since Osama bin Laden's original articulation back in 1998-9 of the logic of uncompromising Jihad for the establishment of an Islamist Caliphate and the imperative to strike out at the heart of the West in order to expedite the ascent of this Caliphate. That spectacular strike would take place only in fall 2001 - more than two years after its imperative had been articulated. Thus, during 2004-5, the Islamist-Jihadist movement and their sponsoring states embarked on a global and irreversible offensive. It is a total war in which, as far as Islamdom is concerned, there can be no coexistence, or even compromise, with their hated foes.

This crucial phase of this Global Jihad was launched in late fall 2004 by an Islamist-Jihadist leadership emboldened by their resurrection of a supreme leadership - Osama bin Laden's Shurah - in Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran, the attainment of a strategic triumph in Iraq, as well as the conclusion of the "Shield Fatwa" debate in favor of bin Laden's interest in using WMD (especially nuclear weapons) in spectacular strikes at the heart of the United States. Evicting the US and key allies from the Caliphate region, destroying Israel, and toppling Arab and Muslim regimes are merely necessary means to attaining these higher objectives. The long-term world view of bin Laden's Shurah and the shape of things to come were clearly articulated in the "Working Strategy Lasting Until 2020" which was completed in winter 2004/5. The Strategy was developed and written under the guidance of Muhammad Ibrahim al-Makkawi, the Tehran-based Egyptian who goes by the name of Saif al-Adel, and largely endorsed the strategy of consolidating the Jihad first in the Hub of Islam which had long been favored by Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Significantly, Muhammad Ibrahim al-Makkawi rose to prominence during the 1990's as the on-site commander of the ISI-sponsored jihadist operations and networks in Central Asia. A US-trained former Colonel in the Egyptian Army, al-Makkawi arrived in Pakistan in 1989 and began running a humanitarian organization in Peshawar as a cover for his involvement in Islamist terrorism. He was quickly recruited by the jihadist leadership for sensitive joint operations with the ISI. In 1992-93, al-Makkawi visited all the Central Asian states as well as Indian Kashmir to personally study the conditions in these important theaters of the jihad, as well as inspect and oversee the operations of his people. In summer 1993, al-Makkawi insisted that he and some 10-12 Egyptian jihadists under his command stayed in Pakistan only for advanced training, and that the actual fighting of the jihad must be carried out from and on hostile territory. In early 1995, al-Makkawi took over command of the Central Asian theater - replacing "Ibn-al-Khattab" (Samir bin Salakh al-Suwailim) who was then based in the Fergana Valley and would soon take over jihadist operations in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. Al-Makkawi rejoined the bin Laden Shurah in mid-2000 - having been replaced by Juma Namangani.

One of the most important aspects of the 2020 Strategy was the reiteration of the preeminence of Tehran for the Islamist-Jihadist trend. At the time of the Strategy's formulation there existed a tendency to ignore Iran's crucial role because of the high profile of the Sunni Jihadism of Osama bin Laden and the anti-Shiite character of some of his neo-Salafite devotees. Now, a pragmatic Islamist-Jihadist leadership based its strategic working plan on a broad Jihad front spanning the areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq and on to the Mediterranean through Syria and Lebanon north to the Caucasus via eastern Turkey and back

eastward across Central Asia. Dubbed “the Jihad Triangle of Horror” - this region would serve as a springboard for a global surge against the West. In formulating the “Working Strategy Lasting Until 2020”, the Islamist-Jihadist leadership was cognizant that its own grand-strategic objectives correlated closely with these of the Mullahs in Tehran - and therein the key to the close cooperation in its implementation.

The ultimate grand-strategic objective of the “Working Strategy Lasting Until 2020” is for an Islamist-Jihadist Caliphate to replace the United States as the world’s sole preeminent hyper-power. By spring 2005, the Islamist-Jihadist camp committed to the implementation of the trend’s long-term strategy to achieve victory over the West and establish a Caliphate by the year 2020. Based on tenets articulated by Ayman al-Zawahiri and Muhammad Makkawi, the grand-strategic objective of the 2020 Strategy was for an Islamist-Jihadist Caliphate to replace the United States as the world’s sole preeminent hyper-power. In military terms, the ultimate defeat of the US-led West, in which Russia is a key power, will be achieved as the aggregate impact of two types of war: (1) the attrition of the US and its allies by ensnaring them in a myriad of endless debilitating quagmires - particularly in Iraq, Afghanistan-Pakistan, the Caucasus, and Israel; and (2) the demonstration to all of the inherent weakness of the US and the West to be achieved by a series of spectacular strikes at the heart of the US and the West, including Russia.

In mid-June 2005, bin Laden’s Shurah distributed among key commanders and religious leaders throughout the world a “letter to the Muslim Ummah” announcing that Osama bin Laden was preparing for the next round of escalatory Jihad and instructing the various Islamist-Jihadist leaders about their anticipated roles. “First of all, let us make it clear that Sheikh Osama bin Laden is safe and sound along with his colleagues at a secure place. He is preparing for the next round of Jihad,” the letter started. The letter emphasized the regional character of the main Jihadist fronts. It instructed the local leaders that it was imperative to recruit would-be mujahedin in, and expand the Islamist Jihad to, neighboring and adjacent areas. “O beloved Ummah, we are fully prepared to face the infidels. For this purpose, we should make war preparations so that Jihad should continue. We want to make it clear that at present, Jihad is obligatory on all Muslims who are living around Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. Then, it becomes the responsibility of the entire Ummah to wage Jihad,” the letter explained - reiterating the unique importance of Afghanistan and Chechnya as key polls of the worldwide Jihad.

Starting late August 2005, the Islamist-Jihadist movement became increasingly consumed by great anticipation for a dramatic breakout - a Great Ramadan Offensive to be led by Osama bin Laden and Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi in person from Iraq. This offensive, several Islamist-Jihadist leaders and commanders were convinced, would overshadow the dramatic impact of the 9/11 spectacular strikes. The Great Ramadan Offensive would amount to a “fateful confrontation” with the US and Israeli forces in the Middle East, as well as a series of unprecedented spectacular strikes in Western Europe, Russia, and, perhaps, even the United States. Throughout the Muslim World, the widespread anticipation for the Great Ramadan Offensive was reinforced by a series of virtually simultaneous communiqués starting around August 24. Ultimately, however, these designs subsided due to practical considerations - first among them Tehran’s reluctance to get involved when it was not ready and in the midst of power struggles led by Mahmud Ahmadi-Nejad.

With the face-off with the US-led West over Iran’s nuclear program escalating, Tehran sought to develop a contingency plan that could at the least be launched by terrorist-proxies and which would be sufficient to deter a massive Western response. Hence, Tehran formulated an

oil war strategy aimed to quickly set aflame the energy infrastructure and installations of the Caspian Sea Basin, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf in case the US and/or Israel attacked Iran. In early August 2005, Expediency Council Chairman Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Iran's most influential strategist, articulated the importance of the oil war strategy. He noted that "maintaining energy security in the world is not possible without Iran." Because of Iran's ability to influence the global energy economy, Hashemi-Rafsanjani explained, "the world is dependent on us and Iran can no longer be ignored in international calculations." To-date, Iran "has graciously avoided taking any adventurous approach and has remained committed to international and regional security," he added, but this approach might not last forever.

Meanwhile, Iran reached out to the numerous Iran-sponsored Jihadist movements and began preparing them for specific operations in case of a war with the West. These training included the supply of advanced bombs some of which were quickly used against US and allied forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, since early 2006, the Islamist-Jihadist trend, particularly the Iran-sponsored elements, was awash with anticipation for a 'Big Bang' that would drastically alter the strategic posture in the greater Middle East and the global confrontation with the US-led West. In early March, the Iranian strategy was formally endorsed by Ayman al-Zawahiri in an audio message that defined the four Jihadist fronts/objectives that constitute the key to the Islamist-Jihadist triumph. The first and most important is the oil war. "The First Front is that we must continue to cause maximum economic damage to the cross worshipers using strikes that make the enemy bleed for decades. We have seen the effect of the attacks on New York, Washington D.C., Madrid, and London. We must deprive the cross worshipers from our oil and we must practice a full economic boycott against ... all countries which participated or helped in the fight against Islam," Zawahiri instructed.

By now, Tehran committed to a bold challenge to the West in the form of an all-out oil war starting the summer of 2006. Indeed, there were concrete indications that Iran and its allies, most notably the Jihadist terrorist elite, were aiming higher than just spectacular strikes. Tehran was looking at a grand strategic gambit that would have a dire and lingering effect on Western society - not just the strategic posture in the Middle East and the Heart of Asia. A concentrated assault on the West's oil economy would have this kind of an impact.

The specific date for launching this gambit - August 22, 2006 - was selected on the basis of the Mahdist beliefs of Ahmadi-Nejad and his closest aides. The Mahdists believe that the long awaited return of the Mahdi - the Hidden Imam - will take place in the context of a cataclysmic apocalyptic war that will end in the final victory of the forces of good over evil. The only way mortals can expedite the return of the Mahdi is by launching such a war in the hope of Allah completing the job. August 22 was the date Muslims commemorate the night flight of the prophet Muhammad on the winged horse Buraq first to al-Aqsa Mosque and then to heaven and back. In the Mahdist belief, this is the divine date for the apocalyptic ending of Israel and the rest of the Western world. However, Tehran's best plans were thwarted by the lackluster performance of the HizbAllah against Israel in the opening phase of the conflict, and hence by Syria's refusal to join the war - thus giving Iran the legal excuse to join the fighting and start the regional eruption. However, Tehran failure to implement its war on oil strategy in summer 2006 did not mean a complete abandonment of the strategy.

For its part, the Jihadist trend continued improving capabilities to launch the fateful Jihad for the liberation of Khorasan out of the two springboard-bases in the Caucasus and Afghanistan-Pakistan. The key changes would come starting mid-2007.

In the western pole, on October 31, 2007, Dokka Umarov, the self-declared President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, announced the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus as an integral part of the global Jihadist movement, and identified himself as the Amir of the newly established Emirate. Umarov's document completely changes the theological quintessence of the Jihad in the Caucasus - pointing to the Emirate's growing role in the spread of Islamist-Jihadist terrorism in Russia and worldwide. Umarov defined the goal of Jihad in the Caucasus as being "to restore the Shariah of Allah in our land." He stressed that "our condition can only be changed with a weapon in hand," and ridiculed the possibility of reaching a negotiated settlement with Moscow. He reiterated that in the pursuit of an Islamist state, "we the Mujahedin, reject any laws, rules and establishments that do not come from Allah."

Umarov stressed that the objectives of the Jihad waged by the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus go well beyond the Caucasus. Although located in the Caucasus, he explained, the Emirate is at the forefront of the global Jihad waged under a supreme leadership. Umarov asserted that the peoples of the Caucasus "are an inseparable part of the Islamic Ummah." Therefore, the Jihad in the Caucasus is nothing but one front in a global confrontation with the West. "Today in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Palestine our brothers are fighting. Those who attack Muslims are our common enemies wherever they are. Our enemy is not Russia only, but also America, England, Israel and anyone who wages war against Islam and Muslims. They are our enemies because they are enemies of Allah," Umarov decreed.

Umarov's timing was not accidental. The training infrastructure in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area was restored in fall 2007 to the point that prolonged and sophisticated courses can now take place without interruption. The main courses are provided to would be commanders, expert-trainers and organizers from the West. These include a growing number of Western converts (West Europeans, Americans and Russians) who retain their original identity papers and looks for easy travel in the West. This effort is under the personal command of Ilyas Kashmiri - the top Pakistani-Punjabi commander whose 313 Brigade - also known as the Lashkar al-Zil or Army of the Shadows - is the primary strike force of the Jihadist movement. The actual training, handling and control of all foreign fighters is in the hands of a small group of veteran Arab commanders all of whom are reported to have operated in Europe for many years. The three key commanders involved in anti-Russia operations are Abu-Hanifah who commands the Turkish Kurds, Bosnians and Chechens (a generic name for all mujahedin from the Caucasus), Abu-Akash who commands the Uzbeks, Tajiks and other Central Asians, and Abu-Nasir who commands the Uyghurs and Pakistanis. Most of the Jihadists in these groups arrive from or via Turkey. The Jihadists maintain their identity clearing facilities within the large Chechen and Uzbek communities. Since mid-2009, a growing number of mujahedin have been able to travel via Iran.

Concurrently, the upper-most Jihadist leadership - bin Laden's Shurah - has been emphasizing the global importance of the Emirate of the Caucasus. The Jihadist leadership was now confident in the possibility to capitalize on the Jihadist struggles throughout the North Caucasus as the rallying point and spring-board for a broader strategic Jihad against Russia and the states of Central Asia. The Jihadist master-plan envisages anew a pincer offensive launched from the Caucasus and Afghanistan-Pakistan-Kashmir, converging at the heart of Central Asia and then surging northwards into the heart of Russia. The declared objective of this master-plan is the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Khorasan which encompasses the Central Asian republics, the northern parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and Iran. Moreover, the Shurah is now convinced that victory in the Caucasus and Khorasan would create conducive conditions for Islam's triumph in the "end-of-time battles" in the Middle

East. With the US-led West disengaging and withdrawing from Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East, the upper-most Jihadist leadership is convinced time is most opportune for launching this grand strategic surge. Hence the escalation of Jihadist operations throughout the Heart of Asia and Russia.

Starting summer 2009, a growing number of networks and support facilities originally associated with LIVO returned to full operability. Moreover, local Jihadists now demonstrate theological authority and on-site quick reaction capabilities. A good demonstration of these capabilities took place in late April 2010 in the aftermath of the latest coup in Kyrgyzstan. In the Osh and Jalalabad provinces, a coalition of Jihadists and pro-Bakiev groups started distributing pamphlets and CDs calling for the establishment of a separate South Kyrgyzstan Democratic Republic under ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev. Hundreds of the CDs were also distributed in Mosques in Kara-Suu and Alay. The Jihadists and drug runners have a vested interest in the dismemberment of Kyrgyzstan. A separate entity in the south encompassing the Ferganah Valley will significantly expedite the LIVO operations.

*

Ultimately, the viability and significance of the Jihad for the Caucasus and Khorasan must be assessed in global terms - that is, in the context of the Sino-Russian "Great Game" over the Heart of Asia - the Between and Betwixt of Empires.

Starting the early 1990's, Beijing has committed to a westward surge - a pincer move via Central Asia and the Indian Ocean (to the coast of Africa) - in order satisfy the insatiable thirst for hydro-carbons and minerals of China's economic growth. For the PRC, the growing US military presence in Afghanistan and off the coasts of Pakistan, as well as the US cajoling of Pakistan (China's closest ally), in the aftermath of 9/11 constitute a major strategic-economic threat. Little wonder that Beijing remains convinced that the only logical reason for the sudden US commitment to an "Afghanistan" is to use its territory, and Pakistan's, in order to transport Central Asia's energy resources to the West via the Indian Ocean at the expense of China's own growing needs. Beijing could not, and would not, believe that the Bush Administration genuinely wanted to bring democracy to Afghanistan. For Beijing, such a major grand strategic development merits proper response.

Hence, as US and NATO forces sank deeper and deeper into the quagmire called bringing statehood and democracy to a mortified and violent tribal population - the PRC launched a strategic surge aimed to prevent the US from consolidating its presence in the region. The quintessence of the Chinese surge has been the revival and consolidation of the historic Sino-Persian alliance both along the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean's littoral. Indeed, in late March 2010, PLA Navy combatants visited the Persian Gulf the first time in more than six hundred years. By now, Beijing is determined to expedite the shipment eastward of Central Asia's hydro-carbons via the Indian Ocean so that the PRC requires control over the same pipeline routes southward via Afghanistan and Pakistan it was accusing the US of conspiring to obtain.

Cognizant that its surge westward was profoundly altering the geo-strategic and geo-economic posture in Central Asia, China elected to gradually revive the "Great Game" in order to contain and deter Russia from challenging its surge. The PRC resolved to undermine the inherently pro-Russia political order in Central Asia, using the spread of Pakistan-sponsored Jihadism northward from Afghanistan and Pakistan as its primary instrument. With

Russia on the defensive, there grows the local need for Chinese support and, consequently, consent to the diversion of hydro-carbons away from the West.

This pincer surge comes on top of four-decades of Chinese efforts to strategically encircle and stifle India. As an ascending hegemon deriving its legitimacy and aspiration from five millennia of distinct civilizational heritage, China is cognizant that India, also being a five-millennia-old civilization, will neither be cajoled by, nor will succumb to, Chinese hegemony. Indeed, since the early 1990's, China has embarked on numerous steps in this campaign - ranging from expanding the transportation infrastructure north of India, strengthening Myanmar and preparing to block the Strait of Malacca, rebuilding Sri-Lanka's maritime infrastructure, helping modernize Iran's technological and military prowess, to bolstering the military potential of China's closest ally - Pakistan - and to developing the economic potential of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

And so we find ourselves on the threshold of a new-old era - when the US-led efforts to alter the strategic posture of the Heart of Asia in response to the jihadist audacious spectacular strike at the heart of America and in complete disregard of the prevailing conditions at the Heart of Asia is coming to naught. Rhetoric about the US enduring commitment to Afghanistan and Pakistan notwithstanding, the US and NATO are leaving the region and abandoning their erstwhile allies to their fate. The historic dynamics and trends that have governed the Heart of Asia for millennia are returning with vengeance - as if determined to catch-up on lost time and opportunity wrought by the US intrusion. Both the regional powers and the region's sub-national entities are resuming their quests for a combination of historic aspirations and contemporary interests. Among these, an emboldened jihadist movement - shielded by the ascending China - is accelerating the surge for Khorasan and onward into Russia and ultimately Europe.

And once again, Russia is bearing the brunt of containing and blocking the surge of strife and terrorism from the south - shielding and protecting the rest of Europe. "Russia had done that sort of fighting, in her own southern deserts, ... bearing the brunt of the strife against Asia, long before the great invasion of the thirteenth century," noted Antoine Leroy-Beaulieu in his 1881 book *The Empire of the Tsars and the Russians*. The cognizance of this historic mission of Russia and the high cost entailed has endured the trials and tribulations of the 20th Century. Saving the civilized world from a reincarnated Tatar onslaught remained part of Russia's historical obligation even at the height of the Soviet era. S.L. Tikhvinskiy lamented in a mid-1984 article in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* that the West "rejects the historical role which the peoples of our country played in saving European culture from the Tatar-Mongol invasion, and does not appreciate the extent of Russian commitment and sacrifice." Tikhvinskiy stressed the heavy price Russia had to pay and the benefits Europe reaped because Russia "had taken upon itself the brunt of attack by the Mongol aggressors, protecting Western Europe. The subsequent development of European civilization was paid for by the heavy sacrifice of the Russian people. Under favorable conditions, Europe went forward to the Renaissance, the Reformation, and so on, without expending its efforts on fighting the Tatar-Mongol hordes, as Russia had to do."

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

This paper has been presented at the International Conference “Central Asia and Afghanistan: Problems and Solutions” organised by the Valdai Discussion Club and the German Council on Foreign Relations in Potsdam and Berlin on June 6 – 7, 2010.



Yossef Bodansky