



Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME X, ISSUE 1 ♦ JANUARY 12, 2012

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STRUGGLE BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH SUDAN INCREASINGLY TIED TO PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT

In late December, South Sudan president Salva Kiir made a state visit to Israel, meeting with President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. The visit alarmed many in the traditional Khartoum power structure, including former prime minister Sadiq al-Mahdi, who described the visit as “devilish” and part of an Israeli effort to find new allies after alienating Turkey and losing the cooperation of the Mubarak regime in Egypt (Sudan Vision, December 26, 2011).

A spokesman for the Sudanese Foreign Ministry said the government was studying the national security implications of Kiir’s visit to Israel, citing Israel’s leading role in an international campaign to “foment” the conflict in Darfur (Sudan Tribune, December 22, 2011; see also *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, June 2, 2011).

Also on the agenda was the fate of an estimated 15,000 Sudanese refugees in Israel, many of them Muslims from Darfur and Christians from the South Sudan that the Israeli government would like to return in order to preserve the Jewish character of Israel. Prime Minister Netanyahu likened the arrival of these refugees to “a nationwide plague – in the economy, society, homeland security. There is no obligation to take in illegal infiltrators. This is no longer a matter of making a decision – it’s a necessity, an imperative... Israel’s future as a Jewish and democratic state must be secured” (YNet News, December 27, 2011).

After Kiir's visit, Israel announced it would send a delegation to South Sudan to investigate means of assisting the new nation. Kiir is reported to have asked for greater cooperation in the fields of technology, agriculture and water development (DPA/Reuters, December 20).

Israel's interaction with South Sudan goes back to the Anyanya rebellion of the 1960s, when it provided covert training and arms supplies to Southern guerrillas in an effort to open a new front against Khartoum and prevent the deployment of Sudanese troops along the Suez Canal as part of the Arab alliance against Israel. German mercenary Rolf Steiner, fresh from exploits in the Congo and Biafra, attempted to join the Anyanya forces, but was forced to join another separatist faction after what he believed were Israeli objections to his service with Anyanya based on his experience as a teenaged *Jungvolk* commander in Nazi Germany in 1943-44. [1]

Right on the heels of the South Sudan president's visit to Jerusalem came the first official visit to Sudan by the Hamas prime minister of Gaza, Ismail Haniya. After arriving in Khartoum on December 27, the Hamas leader predicted the "Arab Spring" would eventually bring victory to the Palestinian resistance and thanked the Sudanese people for their support (Sudan Vision, December 31, 2011).

Haniya was joined in Khartoum by Khalid Mesha'al, the exiled Hamas leader, and Hamas co-founder Mahmoud Zahar as the delegation sought financial support for its reconstruction following the 2008 Israeli attack on the territory as well as political support for recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state (AFP, December 29). Mesha'al was reported as warning the Sudanese president that Israeli authorities were trying to ethnically cleanse Jerusalem by "Judaizing" the city (Elnashra [Beirut], December 29, 2011; *Jerusalem Post*, December 30, 2011).

Meanwhile, both the Sudanese and Israeli press have been full of unverified stories alleging Israeli military incursions and airstrikes in the Red Sea coast region of Sudan. In an attack said to have occurred in November, Israeli aircraft were reported to have struck two vehicles in the Wadi al-Allaqi area of northern Sudan near the disputed Hala'ib Triangle region along the Sudanese-Egyptian border (*Haaretz*, December 25, 2011; December 27, 2011). A second incursion was reported by Sudanese media to have taken place on December 15, involving Israeli Apache attack helicopters landing near a Sudanese radar installation and even Israeli

submarines operating off the Sudanese Red Sea coast (YNet News, December 26, 2011). Sudanese officials denied reports that Israeli aircraft had carried out strikes on targets in eastern Sudan on December 18 and 22 (al-Bawaba, December 25, 2011). A pro-government daily reported that the men killed in a convoy of six Toyota Land Cruisers attacked by Israeli aircraft on December 18 were "gold prospectors" (Alintibaha [Khartoum], December 24, 2011).

Most of the reports display some confusion over the actual dates and some apparently different reports may refer to the same incident. Colonel Sawarmi Khalid Sa'ad, a spokesman for the Sudanese Army, was adamant that no trace of an aerial incursion had been detected by Sudanese radar and air defense systems (*Haaretz*, December 25)

Israeli claims that Iran was shipping arms through Sudan and overland through Egypt to Gaza emerged in 2009 just prior to an earlier series of mysterious airstrikes in Sudan's Red Sea coast region (*Jerusalem Post*, March 3, 2009; see also *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, March 26, 2009; *Terrorism Monitor*, April 3, 2009).

Note:

1. Scopas S. Poggo: "Politics of Liberation in the Southern Sudan, 1967-1972: The Role of Israel, African Heads of State, and Foreign Mercenaries," *The Uganda Journal*, Vol. 47, November 2001, pp. 34-48; Rolf Steiner: *The Last Adventurer*, Boston, 1978, pp. 178-210; Edgar O'Ballance: *The Secret War in the Sudan 1955-1972*, London, 1977, pp. 126-130.

TALIBAN CONDEMNS PRESIDENT KARZAI ON U.S. RUN PRISON AND CONTINUED NIGHT-RAIDS

A recent statement issued by the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) has criticized Afghan president Hamid Karzai for his dependence on a small number of warlords to maintain power and his subsequent inability to combat corruption or assert Afghanistan’s sovereignty. [1]

[Karzai] speaks of national sovereignty and of the welfare of people but practically, we see that there are thousands of Afghan detainees who have been suffering in the Bagram Air Base and other American bases now for years, and without a trial. But this does not prick his conscience to feel the need of a national sovereignty!

On the same day as the Taliban statement was released, President Karzai announced the creation of an investigative commission to look in to the Bagram issue while issuing a demand that control of the U.S.-run prison be turned over to the Afghan government within 30 days (al-Jazeera, January 5). However, one Afghan daily suggested that national authorities are incapable at this time of taking control of Bagram Prison or similar facilities based on their record in recent years:

Mass escape of prisoners- most of them Taliban prisoners - from Kandahar prison, escape of a number of dangerous prisoners from Pol-e Charkhi prison, strikes and riots in different prisons of the country including in Pol-e Charkhi prison, increase of prisoner numbers in the country, lack of sufficient environment for keeping inmates, [lack of] legal professional capabilities of prison guards in Afghanistan, the overwhelming problems in regards to handling of prisoners cases, all these reveal the capabilities of the Afghan government in maintaining and controlling prisoners (*Daily Afghanistan* [Kabul], January 7).

Bagram is the largest U.S. run detention center in Afghanistan, with over 1,000 prisoners, though only a minority of these have been charged. Though both Karzai and the Taliban have identified U.S. control of

the facility as a national sovereignty issue, there are fears that mass breakouts of Taliban prisoners might follow an exchange of control (Tolo TV [Kabul], January 9).

Karzai was also condemned in the Taliban statement for failing to prevent the night raids “conducted by the invaders, noting that even members of the administration and family members had been killed or harmed during night raids. Karzai actually began to demand an end to night-raids by NATO forces in December, 2011, but received a negative response from U.S. and NATO officials, who described the night-raids as an efficient, low casualty method of rounding up suspected militants (Khaama Press [Kabul], January 8; AP, December 19, 2011).

The Taliban used the statement to describe the Kabul government as one where corruption “is at its climax. It is apt to say that bribery and drug trafficking have become part and parcel of the daily life of the venal officials of the government. Obviously, this is the result of the Karzai mismanagement of governance...”

According to the Taliban, Karzai’s willingness to do the bidding of warlords and other corrupt individuals is preventing his administration from playing an independent or constructive role in providing a solution to the occupation of Afghanistan: “Though he has tried to deceive the people by pleasant and emotional assertions... the people have now come to know his anti-Islamic and anti-national intentions...” With increasing indications that the United States is now prepared to negotiate directly with the Taliban, it seems likely that Karzai’s demands are part of an effort to reassert his influence and prevent his exclusion from peace talks.

Note:

1. “Karzai’s Anti-National and Pro-Warlord Demeanor,” Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, January 5, 2012.

The American Military Presence and Terrorist Safe Havens in the Southern Philippines

Justin Hempson-Jones

One of the smaller deployments of U.S. troops under the banner of the “global war on terrorism” was that of U.S. Special Forces to parts of the southern Philippines in 2002. This deployment was limited to advising the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) in their effort to defeat terrorist groups and to prevent the establishment of terrorist safe havens. [1] These aims were met with some success: militant networks were ejected from mainland Mindanao, whilst the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) was largely destroyed in its island strongholds. However, in weakening the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) – the dominant insurgent group in Mindanao – the success of the deployment has the potential to also be its undoing.

Initially, it was unclear which of the Philippines’ many groups of armed, anti-state and potentially violent men were to be labeled “terrorists.” However, when the administration of former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo successfully lobbied the U.S. government to leave the approximately 10,000 strong MILF off a terrorist watch-list, an attempt to clearly delineate “insurgents” from “terrorists” followed – a necessary condition, perhaps, for moving forward a struggling peace process between the MILF and the government of the Republic of the Philippines.

At least as far as it can be considered a unified entity, the MILF has long ceased to shelter members of the Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiya networks in its camps. American counterterrorism efforts appear to have been instrumental in bringing about this development. Apart from a brief return to violence in 2008, the MILF has remained committed to its ceasefire and continued dialogue with the government. The head of the MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities, Rashid Ladiasan, stated that “as long as we provide a space for dialogue, the U.S. appreciates [the MILF position]”. [2] While the MILF appear to be reassured that they are not the direct target of the American military presence, they remain wary of it. Ladiasan continues: “In Maguindanao [province] there were spy planes [i.e. drones] that we captured. The fear

was that the U.S. was targeting us...We are sure they are looking at us.”

While the capture of American drone aircraft has not been independently verified, the MILF remains highly sensitive to the American presence and policy priorities, a significant factor in ensuring a continued commitment from the movement to observe the ceasefire and continue its dialogue with the government. Indeed, MILF representatives have attempted to turn fear of a powerful external military capability into a public welcome of U.S. political involvement. For instance, Professor Abhoud Lingga, a MILF peace panel representative, states: “We believe the U.S. created the problem, so it should help solve the problem,” an apparent reference to the former U.S. colonial role in the Philippines. [3] MILF lawyer Michael Mastura meanwhile makes further appeals to U.S. sensibilities: “[The conflict in Mindanao] renders possible a universal appeal to the basic principle of American ‘fairness and sense of justice’ to use U.S. good offices to rectify [it].” [4]

The current administration of Benigno Aquino III came to office intending to prioritize resolution of the conflict in Mindanao by aiming for an inclusive settlement that includes non-MILF Christian and Muslim groups. A major difficulty thrown up by this strategy, however, is determining at which stage the MILF are brought on board with power-sharing agreements in the current and future Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). While the U.S.-enabled inhibition of MILF militancy holds, the Manila government may be tempted to clean up the ARMM first with an interim government before working out how to bring in the MILF.

However, the longer settlement with the MILF is postponed, the greater the danger that the group will fracture as supporters and fighters become disillusioned with negotiations. A portent of this trend has been seen with the splitting off of Ameril Kato’s Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a development that MILF Vice Chairman Ghadzali Jhafaar says occurred because peace talks were “going nowhere.” (Daily Tribune [Manila], August 20, 2011; Philippine Inquirer [Manila], August 20, 2011; see also *Terrorism Monitor*, September 9, 2011). [5] Some policy makers in the Philippines and beyond celebrate such a trend as it represents the diminishment of an enemy split into increasingly smaller and apparently less threatening units.

For the United States, this kind of thinking overlooks a more dangerous reality: the growing trend to factionalism in the MILF may add substantially to the chaos of Mindanao's political space. In an ungovernable environment in which factions fear one another as much as they fear outside parties such as the Manila government or U.S. forces, the temptation to offer sanctuary to foreign militants offering money and expertise may increase. The American military presence has the potential to create a paradoxical effect - while raising the cost of belligerence to the MILF; it also increases the likelihood of the movement's disintegration. Such a development may help, rather than hinder, Islamist militants in finding shelter in the southern Philippines.

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Notes:

1. See U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines (JSOTF-P) website, http://jsotf-p.blogspot.com/2011/09/type-your-summary-here_20.html
2. Author's interview with Rashid Ladiasan, Cotabato City, October 6, 2010.
3. Author's interview with Abhoud Lingga, Cotabato City, October 4, 2010.
4. Michael O. Mastura, quoted in "About Us" section of the MILF website:
http://www.luwaran.com/home/index.php?option=com_content&view=section&layout=blog&id=15&Itemid=544

Is al-Qaeda Infiltrating Syria through Lebanon's Beka'a Valley?

Nicholas A. Heras

Disputes over the possible presence of al-Qaeda in Lebanon's Beka'a Valley are beginning to destabilize Syrian-Lebanese relations. Attention on the Beka'a region has intensified following the December 23, 2011 and January 6, 2012 suicide bombing attacks in Damascus, which left a combined 60 dead and 229 wounded. On December 21, two days before the attacks in Damascus, Lebanese Defense Minister Fayez Ghosn told a meeting of Lebanese Army officers that the region of Arsal, in the northeastern Beka'a Valley, was being used for the smuggling of weapons and al-Qaeda members masquerading as Syrian dissidents into Lebanon (*Al-Liwaa*, December 21, 2011).

The Syrian government blamed members of al-Qaeda for the bombings, alleging some were seeking refuge and a base of operations in Lebanon by using the traditional human trafficking routes of the Beka'a Valley as a transit point from Syria into Lebanon. An already simmering dispute between Lebanon and Syria over the policing of contested areas of the Beka'a Valley, particularly in the northeastern frontier of Lebanon near the village of Arsal, has taken on new importance in determining the course of relations between the two countries since the Damascus bombings. Syria has mined its side of the border and conducts regular military helicopter patrols of the roads leading from Syria into Lebanon. Since May 2011, at least one resident of the Arsal municipal area has been killed and tens wounded by Syrian army operations on the Lebanese side of the border in the Arsal region. These operations have included armor and mounted infantry patrols (*Daily Star* [Beirut], January 4). The political conflict between the two countries over the Arsal region is severe enough that UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon is expected to address the topic in depth on his January 13 visit to Lebanon (AFP, January 5).

Arsal, like its sister villages in the Arsal municipality, is located within a strip of disputed territory between Lebanon and Syria. Although the area is considered internationally part of Lebanon, the Syrian government still contests this claim. Arsal municipality is located in a region of semi-arid steppe land that depends largely upon animal husbandry, stone quarrying, and eco-tourism as its primary sources of revenue. Smuggling,

most commonly in people, weapons, narcotics, and stolen goods, is part of the underground economy in the Arsal region, as it is throughout the Beka'a Valley. Located between the Beka'a Valley cities of Baalbek and Hermel, the area is approximately 20 miles from the Syrian border. Arsal has a population of almost 40,000 people, the majority of whom are Sunni Muslim and supporters of the Future Bloc (a member party of the anti-Syrian March 14 coalition), setting it apart politically from the rest of the Baalbek-Hermel region. Predominately Shi'a and associated with political parties that support the pro-Syrian March 8 coalition (including Hezbollah, AMAL, and the Lebanese Ba'ath Party), the area of Baalbek-Hermel is thought to be a stronghold of support for the Syrian regime. Ahmad Qanso, the most prominent political figure of the Lebanese Ba'ath Party has gone as far as to suggest that 20 al-Qaeda cells operate in Lebanon, and that public buildings in Arsal, including a mosque and a health clinic, are used by al-Qaeda to move fighters into Syria (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 2).

Arsal's reputation has not been improved by recent events. On November 21, 2011 the Lebanese Army briefly entered Arsal in order to follow-up on reports that a person tied to international terrorist groups might be present in the village, although no arrests were made in connection with the operation (*Daily Star*, December 29, 2011). The village is viewed by some as being a node in a smuggling network of weapons, drugs, and jihadists that includes the Beka'a village of Majdal Anjar, the Akkar district of northern Lebanon, and the purportedly militant Salafist neighborhoods in Tripoli. Majdal Anjar is another predominately Sunni Muslim, March 14 coalition-supporting village in the eastern Beka'a near the Lebanese-Syrian border. The link to Majdal Anjar is considered incriminating by some in Lebanon because the village is already notorious for having been a staging point and safe haven for militant Salafist fighters from Lebanon, especially from around Tripoli and the Akkar district, through Syria and into Iraq to confront the U.S. military there. Since the defeat of Fatah al-Islam fighters in Nahr al-Barid in 2007, Majdal Anjar is viewed as a likely place for confrontation between the Lebanese Army and militant Salafist fighters. Weapons smuggled in the region of Majdal Anjar are suspected of being used by Salafist fighters in "front-line" areas of Lebanon, such as the Tarek al-Jdeideh neighborhood in Beirut and between the Sunni Muslim Bab al-Tabbaneh and Alawite Jebel Mohsen neighborhoods in Tripoli. The village is also thought to be a source of Salafist fighters for these front-line districts, though not on the scale of

the Tripoli neighborhoods of Qibbeh, Abu Samra, and Bab al-Tabbaneh and the village of Dinneyeh north of Tripoli. A Lebanese Army intelligence officer told the author that: "Majdal Anjar is the next Nahr al-Barid. It isn't getting better there, it is worse." [1]

Defense Minister Ghosn's comments have led to a furious political debate in Lebanon, divided along the fault line that separates the pro-Syrian March 8 and anti-Syrian March 14 coalitions. Minister Ghosn is himself a member of the March 8 bloc (*Daily Star*, January 3, 2012). Representatives of the municipality of Arsal, including the mayor of the village, have categorically denied their involvement with al-Qaeda and demanded that the Lebanese Army increase its presence in their region (Central News Agency-Lebanon, December 27, 2011). Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Miqati, who is considered an ally of the March 8 coalition, stated that there was no clear evidence of al-Qaeda using Lebanon as a base to attack Syria (*An-Nahar*, December 28, 2011). Prompted by Ghosn's statements to address the issue, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman insisted that the Lebanese people would not support al-Qaeda or any of the militant movements it has inspired, citing the popular support that the Lebanese Army received in 2007 as it confronted Fatah al-Islam militants in the Nahr al-Barid refugee camp north of Tripoli (*Daily Star*, December 28, 2011). In response to Ghosn's comments, Lebanon's Interior Minister Marwan Charbel stated that al-Qaeda does not have a military presence in Lebanon, only some ideological supporters (NBN TV, December 28, 2011). Members of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Bloc went even further in denouncing Ghosn; in a public statement the party referred to Ghosn's comments as "dangerous and suspicious," implying that the Defense Minister could be working to support the al-Assad government (*Daily Star*, December 28, 2011). The largely Christian Lebanese Forces, also part of the March 14 coalition, have sent a delegation to Arsal to display solidarity with its people (Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International, January 2). March 8 coalition member Suleiman Franjeh, a prominent pro-Syrian Maronite Catholic politician and leader of the Marada Movement, inflamed the debate by stating that the presence of al-Qaeda in Lebanon was being covered up by the Lebanese government (*Daily Star*, January 3).

In the context of ongoing Syrian military excursions into Lebanese territory around Arsal, and the Damascus bombings, Defense Minister Ghosn's remarks have sparked a huge debate amongst Lebanese politicians

and government officials on whether or not Lebanon, and this corner in the Beka'a Valley in particular, is being used as a staging ground for attacks into Syria. Minister Ghosn's affiliation with the March 8 bloc has severely politicized the debate on the likelihood of al-Qaeda using Lebanon to attack Syria, reflecting the political divisions in Lebanese society and not the existential security threat that an al-Qaeda presence in Lebanon would pose both to the Lebanese state and to the Syrian government. Though harsh political rhetoric over the issue between the March 14 and March 8 Blocs in Lebanon is now the norm, there is no compelling evidence at present that al-Qaeda is using Aarsal as an area of refuge or a staging point for attacks on the Syrian government.

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Note:

1. The preceding section is based on informal interviews by the author of members of the Lebanese Army who were or are currently on duty in the Beka'a Valley. They were conducted by the author in Beirut, Lebanon from May 2011-August 2011 on the condition that the interviewees remained anonymous because they are still on active duty.

Rivalry between Iran's Conservative Factions May Be the Biggest Threat to the Strait of Hormuz

Babak Rahimi

Velayat-e 90, the 11-day Iranian naval exercise that began on December 24, 2011 in the strategically critical Strait of Hormuz, has brought Iran and the United States close to a military conflict. While Tehran originally maintained that the war games were merely for defensive purposes, a number of Iranian politicians and senior military officers described the exercises explicitly as a warning to the West that the Iranian navy is capable of closing the Strait and obstructing the transportation of oil in response to U.S. sanctions on the country's central bank and oil exports (Press TV, December 28, 2011; IRNA, December 28, 2011; *Tehran Emrooz* December 31, 2011). In the words of the commander of the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN), Rear Admiral Habibullah Sayyari: "Closing the Strait of Hormuz for Iran's armed forces is really easy, or, as Iranians say, it will be easier than drinking a glass of water" (Press TV, December 28, 2011).

While Iran could easily close or disrupt the Strait, it is obvious that an American military response would squash its naval forces in a short period of time, which leaves the question as to whether Iran really has the will to make such a risky move at a time when it is experiencing severe domestic economic problems.

The Tactical Element of Iran's Naval Exercises

Several military issues should be considered here. From the outset, the Velayat-e 90 war games could be described as one of the most grandiose naval exercises Iran has conducted (Fars News, January 6). The war games comprised four operational phases, each phase leading to a dramatic display of Iranian naval power, with the most important phases beginning on December 30 (IRNA, December 23, 2011; *Tehran Emrooz* December 31, 2011). In terms of military operations, the drills involved the use of fighter jets in special airborne operations and the deployment of mines, warships, various missiles (most importantly the Iranian-built "Qader" surface-to-sea missiles), and even, according to Iranian navy claims, new sonar-evading submarines (IRNA, December 31, 2011; IRNA December 30, 2011; Fars News, December 30, 2011). These submarines are

most likely the three “Ghadir” class midget submarines designed for littoral defense work that were delivered to the Iranian Navy last November. Velayat-e 90 also highlighted an expansion in the use of various classes of recently built speed boats known as “Shahab,” “Rad” and “Azarkhesh” in the eastern part of the Strait, indicating Iran’s strong willingness to engage in asymmetrical warfare in the event of a military conflict (IRNA, December 31, 2011; Fars News January 6, 2011). The tactical focus on the eastern part of the Strait may be a sign that the Iranian navy plans to hinder shipping away from the Bahrain-based U.S. Fifth Fleet and al-Udayd Air Force base in Qatar by conducting waves of asymmetrical attacks designed to cause the greatest damage possible to oil tankers prior to a decisive U.S. naval response. In light of this tactical move, with its obvious military risks, the ultimate strategic objective is to cause major chaos in the oil markets and the global economy on which the United States relies heavily for its own survival (Fars News, January 6).

Iran’s naval exercises have also underlined the significance of missile operations for the Iranian navy in any attempt to disrupt transportation through Hormuz. A combination of attack capabilities was displayed, namely, ranging from the use of surface-to-surface missiles to torpedoes (Press TV, December 24, 2011). The use of these weapons appears to be most important, as the Navy plans to target oil tankers and U.S. warships from the Iranian territories in the northeastern region of the Strait of Hormuz (*Tehran Emrooz*, December 31, 2011). There is also an emphasis on Special Forces units of military combatants whose mission would be to attack enemy forces with speed-boats or scuba diving operations (*Tehran Emrooz*, December 31, 2011). With such combined military tactics, the Iranian navy seems to be focusing heavily on the element of surprise provided by a combination of asymmetrical and conventional warfare.

However, even if Iran succeeds in reproducing what Ali Fadavi, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGC-N) has described as the “nightmare” caused by Iran’s maritime domination over U.S. naval forces in 1987, would Iran really engage in such military adventurism? (*Tehran Emrooz*, December 31, 2011; Fars News January 6). [1] It is important here to place the Iranian naval war games in their proper political, domestic and geo-political context. At the core of the tension lies the broader and ongoing U.S.-Iran conflict. Since 1979, the United States and Iran have engaged in a series of low-intensity conflicts, with the

American entry into the Persian Gulf “Tanker War” in 1987 representing the most serious military conflict between the two states. However, beyond the legacy of over thirty years of conflict and confrontation, the most recent naval adventure in the Persian Gulf has opened a new phase in the contentious relations between Iran and the United States.

Reacting to Sanctions

Largely in response to an alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s latest report on Iranian nuclear activity, President Obama brought into force new sanctions against the Iranian Central Bank on December 31 (Press TV, January 2). Tehran views the move as a direct threat against its most crucial economic life-line; the export of oil. The U.S.-led sanctions come at a critical time; the Iranian economy is suffering from serious problems due to mismanagement, corruption and, more importantly, the loss of revenue caused by the last round of sanctions, which targeted Iran’s banking sector in the United Arab Emirates and key countries in Asia. With the EU joining the next round of sanctions, Iran could lose major buyers for its oil. For a rentier state that is gradually phasing out subsidies in place of distributing money to the poorest segment of the population, cash is in short supply. The Iranian *rial* has been seriously devalued in recent weeks and inflation is surging on a daily basis (Aftab News Agency, January 2; Mehr News, January 2). With a long history of social uprisings, the Islamic Republic is vulnerable to political unrest.

There is also the military aspect to consider. With the departure of U.S. troops from Iraq, Iran may seem to have more space to expand its influence, but in reality its military activities remain focused on the protection of key infrastructure (including its nuclear sites) and remain limited largely to the Persian Gulf. In every direction except its western neighbor of Iraq, Iran is surrounded by American forces. The establishment of a U.S. missile defense shield based in Malatya, eastern Turkey, marks the latest military effort to contain Tehran (Aftab News Agency, December 26, 2011; IRNA, December 30, 2011). The geo-strategic context explains why Iranian military strategy may become more erratic as Iran focuses on the Strait of Hormuz to seriously hurt the oil market by not only disrupting the flow of oil by neighboring countries but also, according to former senior IRGC officer and current Iranian Petroleum Minister Rustam Ghasemi, but also by preventing the

export of Iranian oil that would be impossible to replace with Saudi Arabian crude (*Roozghar*, January 2).

Iranian Divisions over the Strait Strategy

In reality, however, there is a major security risk in the Iranian Hormuz strategy. With the Strait representing Iran's best chance to confront overwhelming U.S. military power, the narrow passage serves as both the first and the last bullet to fight off American threats against its nuclear program and economic life-line. This emphasis on a single region for military operations could increase the risk of military conflict as both Iran and the United States enhance their military capability in the region to overcome threats by the either side. Warnings from hardline Iranian politicians that the Strait may be closed have caused more moderate politicians to criticize such a risky policy. As Emad Hussein (a senior figure in the Energy Commission of the Iranian Majlis) explained, rhetoric threatening to close off the Strait does not help Iran gain a better position over its nuclear options, nor does it help the country's economic situation (*Roozghar* [Tehran], January 2).

Yet it is in terms of internal Iranian politics that a potential naval conflict around the Strait of Hormuz may become a reality. Iranian domestic politics has seen a considerable rise in factionalism since spring 2011, mostly revolving around intra-conservative rivalries. The most important conflict occurred between the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. While tensions between the two have subsided since summer 2011, conservative factions continue to vie for power ahead of the 2012 parliamentary and 2013 presidential elections. The alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to Washington underscores the possibility that an anti-Ahmadinejad faction has used the military-intelligence forces to diminish the influence of the president, who has recently shown subtle signs of a rapprochement with the United States. [2] The IRGC is the most vulnerable group in these circumstances. If such factionalism has already impacted the IRGC, then it is highly likely that the initiation of major covert and overt military operations could also reflect the factional strife created as competing elements within the IRGC vie for control. In this sense, last November's takeover of the British Embassy by the Basiji forces (a volunteer force within the IRGC), might not have had the full support of the IRGC, since key commanders remained silent about the incident while the foreign ministry, under the control of Ahmadinejad's administration,

issued a public statement of apology.

Conclusion

What the plot against the Saudi ambassador and the siege of the British Embassy ultimately reveal is the unstable nature of Iran's faction-ridden politics and the degree to which such a volatile environment could have an unpredictable impact on Iranian decision-making, possibly leading to a military conflict in the Strait of Hormuz. To many in Washington, Iran's latest military posturing may seem mere bluster, but in light of increasing economic and political problems within Iran there is a strong potential for the threats to accidentally or intentionally evolve into a full blown military encounter that could push the risk to the region's security to historic levels. The key is to understand that behind any Iranian military action there is a political heartbeat, and at the moment the Iranian power structure, feeling threatened by domestic problems and U.S. military activities in the region, is getting ready for war.

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Note:

1. The IRGC-N operates in parallel to the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy, but tends to restrict itself to much smaller craft focused on coastal defense.
2. See also Mahdi Khalaji, "The Domestic Logic of Iran's Foreign Plots," Project Syndicate, November 1, 2011, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/khalaji8/English>.