



# Terrorism Monitor

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**al-Gama'a al-Islamiya  
spokesman  
Assem Abd al-Maged**

## FORMER MILITANTS OF EGYPT’S AL-GAMA’A AL-ISLAMIYA STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL SUCCESS

For decades one of Egypt’s most violent extremist groups, al-Gama’a al-Islamiya (GI) has been engaged in a struggle to establish itself as an Islamist political party in post-revolutionary Egypt. Though traditionally a Salafist-Jihadi movement, GI has not established close relations with al-Nur, the largest of Egypt’s Salafist political parties. Nor is it close to the Muslim Brotherhood, which recently ignored the movement in the distribution of senior government posts.

On September 17, a GI spokesman announced that the movement had formed “al-Ansar,” a new movement drawing on young people of various Islamist trends to protect the reputation of the Prophet Muhammad by producing films about Christianity and Judaism and starting a publishing house and satellite channel to support this effort (al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], September 17).

While the movement continues to work on its conversion to a political party, it appears not to have abandoned its commitment to jihad, at least beyond Egypt’s borders. GI spokesman Assem Abd al-Maged has stated that GI members were travelling to Syria to join the anti-Assad revolt and that three Egyptians affiliated to the movement were recently killed in battle in Syria. A spokesman for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) confirmed the participation of Egyptians in the armed opposition but noted that these fighters had not revealed their political affiliations (Anadolu Ajansi [Ankara], September 8; al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], August 26; September 9). The GI has also attempted to insert itself into the security crisis in the Sinai by sending a delegation to meet with tribal and religious leaders in the region in early September (Al-Ahram Weekly, August 30 – September 5).

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1111 16th St. NW, Suite #320  
Washington, DC • 20036  
Tel: (202) 483-8888  
Fax: (202) 483-8337

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The GI is taking a hard stand on Egyptian-American relations, having urged Egyptian president Muhammad Mursi to cancel his September 23 visit to the United States to address the United Nations. Suggesting that the anti-Islamic film *The Innocence of Muslims* was made under “American auspices,” GI spokesman Assem Abd al-Maged argued that Egypt did not need to worry about U.S. cuts in aid to Egypt as such cuts were “not in [the United States’] interest, as they know we are the superpower in the region” (al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], September 16).

According to an official with the GI’s political wing, the Building and Development Party, the movement is prepared to sever its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party following President Mursi’s failure to include GI members as presidential advisors, regional governors or members of the National Human Rights Council. The group was especially disturbed by its omission from the latter body, noting that the GI was “the faction persecuted most by the former regime, with 30,000 members having been arrested and 20 of them having died in prison due to torture and diseases” (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 9; al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], September 9). There has been some speculation in Egypt that the recent protests at the U.S. Embassy had less to do with anger over the anti-Muslim film than with an opportunity to embarrass the Mursi government after it failed to include the GI in the new government.

Though the Brothers may not be offering much in the way of political appointments, some veteran members of the GI are enjoying a bit of revisionary justice under the new regime. President Mursi pardoned 26 members of GI and its Islamic Jihad offshoot in July. Four members of GI who were sentenced to death in 1999 during Mubarak’s rule were released on September 5 pending a ruling in early November on their case. The four were among 43 Egyptians returned to Egypt through the CIA’s “extraordinary rendition” program after being sentenced to death in absentia in the “Albanian Returnees” case of 1999 (Ahrum Online, September 5; al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], September 7). The GI members had been charged with attempting to overthrow the government, killing civilians and targeting Christians and the tourism industry.

One of those released, Ahmad Refa’i Taha (indicted in the United States for his role in the 1999 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa) has demanded an immediate pardon rather than wait for the November ruling, describing the case as “a huge insult to the revolution and revolutionaries...We are considered the first to fight the former regime, which nobody revolted against like us... We would like people to have shown some appreciation for those who opposed Mubarak and his

regime” (al-Hayat, September 7).

Demands by the GI and other Islamist groups in Egypt and Libya for the release of former GI leader Shaykh Omar Abd al-Rahman from an American prison (where he is serving a life-term for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing) have been supported by President Mursi, who has asked for the Shaykh’s release on humanitarian grounds.

In the coming parliamentary elections, GI may seek to capitalize on growing rifts within al-Nur, the largest of the Salafist political parties (Ahrum Online, September 25). According to GI leader Aboud al-Zomor, the movement will seek to form new alliances prior to the elections and is determined to increase the handful of seats won in last year’s contest (al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], August 30). Aboud and his brother Tarek, both prominent GI leaders, were released from prison in March, 2011 after having been convicted in 1984 for their admitted roles in planning the assassination of former Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat. Aboud has since apologized, not for killing Sadat, but for creating the conditions that led to Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian 30-year rule.

## **INTELLIGENCE CHIEF ABDULLAH AL-SENUSSI EXTRADITED TO LIBYA TO REVEAL SECRETS**

Libya’s most-wanted man, former intelligence chief Abdullah al-Senussi, was extradited to Libya on September 5, where he is expected to undergo intense and thorough interrogation by Libyan authorities and possibly security officials of some of the other nations in which al-Senussi is wanted for various major crimes such as terrorism, murder and kidnapping (Agence Mauritanienne d’Information, September 5).

After several months of unconfirmed reports of arrests and escapes, al-Senussi was arrested in Nouakchott in March and eventually charged with illegal entry to Mauritania and the use of forged documents (AFP, September 5). Mauritanian authorities were initially reluctant to return al-Senussi, saying he would have to face the minor charges facing him in Mauritania first. Al-Senussi is now being held in the small maximum security Hudba al-Gassi prison in Tripoli, where many former members of the Qaddafi regime are being held. The current roster of prisoners in the facility includes three former Prime Ministers and former military intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kharroubi.

Before leaving Mauritania, Lebanese authorities succeeded in obtaining permission to interrogate as-Senussi regarding

the disappearance in Tripoli of Lebanese Shiite leaders and Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya (AMAL) founder Imam Musa al-Sadr and two companions after a heated meeting with Mu'ammarr al-Qaddafi in 1978 (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, September 22, 2011; July 26, 2012). Lebanese sources described the session as "insufficient despite its importance" (al-Nahar [Beirut], September 1; September 4).

Al-Senussi, who faces the death penalty if convicted, is rumored to have been tortured on his arrival in Tripoli and to have attempted suicide while in Hudba al-Gassi, but these allegations were denied by the man responsible for keeping him behind bars, Khalid al-Sharif, a former member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and now the head of Libya's National Guard (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 20). Al-Senussi's jailer maintains that his prisoner is kept in comfortable conditions and provided with appropriate food, but does admit al-Senussi had complained of "humiliations" such as having his trademark bushy hair shorn. Like his former LIFG colleague, Abd al-Hakim Belhadj, al-Sharif is reported to be a candidate for the post of Libyan Interior Minister, an appointment that would mark an utter reversal of the political status quo that existed in Libya for decades.

Al-Senussi was charged by the International Criminal Court with crimes against humanity in June 2011, but is expected to face similar charges in Libya rather than be extradited to The Hague. One issue of concern to Libyan authorities is determining the location of funds Qaddafi stored abroad before they are otherwise accessed or transferred. Al-Senussi is described as the primary defendant in the case surrounding the massacre of over 1,200 Libyan Islamists in Abu Salim prison in 1996 (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, July 29, 2008). The trial of Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi (currently held by the Zintan militia) has been postponed until further evidence is gleaned from al-Senussi's interrogation (Tripoli Post, September 7).

According to Libyan prosecutors, al-Senussi has already confessed to the 1993 murder of a leading member of the Libyan opposition, Mansur Rashid al-Kikhia (MENA [Cairo], September 11). A former Foreign Minister and UN Ambassador in the Qaddafi regime, al-Kikhia was not seen again after being kidnapped in Cairo where he was seeking political asylum. Based on al-Senussi's information, a corpse was disinterred in the yard of a Tripoli villa and is currently undergoing DNA testing. Al-Sharif described the leak of al-Senussi's confession as being deliberate and made for "humanitarian reasons."

As the man who best knows the secrets of the Libyan regime and who was responsible for carrying out the late Libyan

dictator's darkest plans, al-Senussi is wanted by a variety of nations, including France, where he was convicted in absentia for his role in the 1989 bombing of a French passenger plane that killed 170 people, and by Saudi Arabia, which suspects him of organizing a 2003 plot to assassinate Crown Prince Abdullah.

The United States and a number of international human rights organizations have urged that al-Senussi be given a fair trial, though it is unlikely that any of the possible outcomes of such proceedings could offer anything more than a grim or even short future for the former intelligence chief. Libya is now seeking the extradition of a number of former regime officials from Egypt and has sent a list of wanted individuals to the Egyptian public prosecutor (MENA [Cairo], September 23).

## Sectarian Violence in Burma Attracting the Attention of International Jihadist Groups

*Dan G. Cox*

Burma has undergone significant changes in recent years, as increasing pressure from the United States and other Western powers to democratize and respect human rights has mounted. The work of political dissident Aung San Suu Kyi's, which won her a Nobel Peace prize and inspired at least some rudimentary efforts toward Burmese democratization, is emblematic of the loosening of the military dictatorship's hold on the reins of power. However, democracy and respect for human rights are not guaranteed. In fact, one group, the Rohingya of Burma's Arakan State (a.k.a. Rakhine State), have experienced historical hatred, violence, and terrorism, a pattern that has re-emerged recently. This is an important issue in Burma's democratization efforts and has the potential to draw outside Islamic fundamentalist and terrorism groups to the region. Even Suu Kyi is suffering some personal embarrassment from the Rohingya situation as she has chosen to stay silent on the human rights abuses perpetrated against this Muslim ethnic group in order (as some have speculated) to shore up her political chances in the 2015 election (Asia News, August 16).

The Rohingya ethnic group traces its roots back to Muslim merchants who traded with and settled in the Bangladesh/Burma region in the late seventh century. Between one and one and a half million Rohingya currently live in Arakan State with several hundred thousand living in adjacent lands in Bangladesh. Smaller numbers of the group have migrated



to India, Thailand, Malaysia, China, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia (Pakistan Observer, September 5).

Relations between the Buddhist Rhakine (the majority in Arakan State), the Burmese government, and the Rohingya have always been rocky, but reached a head after British colonization was abruptly interrupted in 1942 when Japan invaded Burma. The British had been working on a plan to create an autonomous region for the Rohingya people. After the Japanese were expelled, the Rohingya attempted to force the British to make good on their promise. This failed and in 1948 the Rohingya approached Pakistan to incorporate the Arakan region into the area then controlled by East Pakistan, which would later become Bangladesh. These moves toward autonomy angered the Burmese government and the Buddhist Rhakine living in the area, causing the first wave of violence against the Rohingya.

These events also served as the foundation for a new Rohingya narrative. Though it was clear that the Rohingya had lived in Burma for centuries, the government began to argue that the Rohingya were nothing more than refugees from Bangladesh who needed to be repatriated. This came to a head in 1982 when the military junta government amended the Burmese constitution to define Rohingya as non-Burmese citizens (Pakistan Observer, September 5). This had several negative ramifications for the Rohingya, including loss of educational and voting rights, loss of due process rights and the loss of civil service jobs they had enjoyed under British control. The Rohingya were now more impoverished and susceptible to human rights abuses than ever before.

The latest round of violence was sparked by an incident in which a Rakhine Buddhist woman was allegedly raped and killed by three Muslim men in May (Asia News, August 2). In reaction to an inflammatory version of this event carried in a pamphlet, 300 Buddhists attacked a bus in Toungop killing ten Muslim men (Bangkok Post, September 4). Human Rights Watch reports that government security forces and local police stood by and in some cases may even have colluded in the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya. [1] This incident was followed by reports that police and paramilitary forces opened fire on a group of Muslims in August (Bangkok Post, August 1).

Domestic terrorism targeting the Rohingya is jeopardizing the democratic transition of President U Thein Sein's government. U.S. President Barack Obama and his administration have been working with President Sein on the democratization process. On August 29, the Obama administration waived visa restrictions for President Sein and some of the members of his administration in order to facilitate a meeting in Washington. The restrictions had been in place due to a 2008 law that bars visas for Burmese leaders alleged to be involved in human rights abuses (Myanmar Times, September 3). President Sein has publicly stated that forced deportation of Rohingya to any country that

would take them would be the final solution to the sectarian violence (Bangkok Post, July 12).

Not only do human rights abuses threaten to derail Western support for the development of democracy in Burma, but they also threaten to invite Islamic extremism and terrorism. There is little doubt that the Rhakine campaign against the Rohingya is condoned, if not actually supported, by the current Burmese government. This sectarian violence is feeding into a national strategy of ethnocide aimed at removing the Rohingya from Burmese territory.

The imprisoned Indonesian spiritual leader of the al-Qaeda-associated Jemaah Islamiya movement, Abu Bakr Bashir, threatened to wage a holy war against Burma in retaliation for the sectarian violence (al-Arabiya, August 3). Bashir was able to incite a protest by his loyal supporters outside the Burmese embassy in Jakarta that demanded the Indonesian government cease all aid and support for the Burmese government (Bangkok Post, August 9). Bashir was jailed in June, 2011 for funding a violent terrorist cell in Aceh, Indonesia, but his call to jihad could serve as an invitation for larger terrorist groups like Jemaah Islamiya to intervene in Burma on behalf of the Rohingya. (Bangkok Post, August 3).

The Rohingya crisis has also incited Pakistan's Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to threaten terrorist attacks for the first time outside of the Afghanistan/Pakistan region. The TTP recently stated it would present itself as the defender of the Rohingya people and "take revenge for your blood" (Bangkok Post, July 27). The ability of the TTP to commit these attacks is questionable but intelligence sources in the United States believe that the TTP was responsible for the planning of the failed bomb attack in New York's Times Square in 2010 (Bangkok Post, July 27).

The sectarian violence in Burma has also attracted the attention of the Afghan Taliban, who issued an official statement in response:

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, besides considering this crime [i.e. the forced expulsion of the Rohingya] a black scar on the history of mankind, calls on the government of Burma to immediately put a stop to this savagery and barbarism and halt such heart rending historical violations against humans and humanity. They should realize that this is not only a crime against the Muslims of Burma but against all humankind and especially an unforgivable crime against the entire Muslim world. [2]

The claim to the land and rightful citizenship of the Rohingya people is rooted in historical fact. The history of sectarian animosity has fed into the current violence and terrorism in Arakan. The current localized violence against the Rohingya, supported by the military government, has far-reaching ramifications for both the democratization of Burma and the

potential for outside terrorist organizations to infiltrate the region.

Dan G. Cox is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the United States Army School of Advanced Military Studies, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

#### Note

1. “‘The Government Could Have Stopped This,’ Sectarian Violence and Ensuing Abuses in Burma’s Arakan State,” Human Rights Watch, August 2012, p.20, [http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0812webwcover\\_0.pdf](http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/burma0812webwcover_0.pdf).

2. “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding the bloody tragedy of the Muslims of Burma,” Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, July 20, 2012.

## Egypt’s Sinai: The Collapsing Buffer Zone between Egypt and Israel

*Adrian Shahbaz*

The recent escalation of jihadi activity in the Sinai Peninsula has added a new dimension to the geostrategic uncertainties of the post-Mubarak era. Like the fallen regime, the Sinai served as a buffer in the cold peace between the Egyptian and Israeli populations. With the Egyptian military in the Sinai suffering its greatest personnel losses since the 1970s, public anger has been channeled into loud calls to renegotiate the 1978 Camp David Accords to restore full Egyptian sovereignty over the peninsula. However, senior Egyptian officials have remained quiet about the issue, focusing their efforts instead on rooting out Salafi militants and addressing the root causes of instability in Sinai and, to an extent, the Gaza Strip as well.

Sixteen Egyptian soldiers were killed on August 5 by Salafi militants en route to the Kerem Shalom border crossing into Israel. The assailants were met with resistance from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) Bedouin Reconnaissance Battalion before their stolen armored personnel carrier was destroyed by an Israeli Air Force (IAF) strike inside Israeli territory. Another pick-up truck ridden with explosives was blown up at the border. Eight militants were killed in the attack, while

an estimated 27 retreated into Egypt (Jerusalem Post, August 6; Daily News Egypt, August 7).

In response, President Muhammad Mursi launched “Operation Sinai,” calling on security forces to “implement entire control” over the peninsula and the northern towns of al-Arish, Rafah, and Shaykh Zuwayid. This was the second major operation in the area since the revolution; an attack on the al-Arish police station in August 2011 prompted the deployment of two Special Forces brigades and 1,000 soldiers in a campaign dubbed “Operation Eagle” (Bikya Masr [Cairo], August 16, 2011). Egypt’s State Security Emergency Court issued 14 death sentences to members of Tawhid wa’l-Jihad in connection with the Arish incident on September 24 (Ahram Online, September 24).

After one month, the military completed “phase one” of operation, killing 32 militants, arresting 58 suspects and closing 31 smuggling tunnels linking Sinai to Gaza. Security forces also seized caches of automatic weapons, mortars, anti-tank mines and anti-aircraft guns from Palestinian and Bedouin jihadis (Al-Shorouk [Cairo], September 9). [1]

Peace discussions between a presidential delegation and tribal leaders were dropped after militants killed an Egyptian soldier in a new attack on the northern Sinai security headquarters in al-Arish on September 16, using rocket propelled grenades and automatic weapons in the assault. Fighting also occurred in Rafah and Shaykh Zuwayid, where the army targeted militants with helicopters and dozens of APCs. Earlier that day, security forces in the village of Mahdia also detained four militants connected with the August 5 attacks (Ma’an News Agency, September 16).

A Sinai-based militant group using the name Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of the Holy Place, i.e. Jerusalem) claimed responsibility for an attack on the Israeli border that killed an IDF soldier on September 21, saying it was a response to the Innocence of Muslims film made by “the doomed pigs of the (Coptic) diaspora.” [2] The same group has claimed responsibility for earlier cross-border rocket attacks and an attack on the pipeline carrying natural gas from Egypt to Israel.

Egyptian officials have consistently played down fears of an Islamist insurgency in the Sinai. As late as July a security advisor dismissed the jihadist threat, claiming that “Israel, like many parties, has vested interests in making up dangers in Sinai” (Egypt Independent, July 4). Egyptian Intelligence Chief Murad Mowafi came under heavy criticism for his unpreparedness, especially given that Israeli officials

publically warned of an increased threat in a travel alert issued to its citizens. Mowafi admitted he had “detailed information about the attack, but we never imagined that a Muslim would kill a Muslim on the hour of breaking the fast in Ramadan” (Bikya Masr, August 7). Commenting in the aftermath of the unprecedented attack, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak expressed his condolences and hoped the incident would serve as a “wake-up call for the Egyptians to take matters into their own hands” (Ha’aretz, August 6, 2012).

President Mursi exploited public anger to sack Mowafi and a dozen senior military leaders, including Defense Minister and Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) Chairman Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, Armed Forces Chief-of-Staff Sami Enan and the heads of the navy, air force and air defense (Ahram Online, August 14). The moves prompted fears in Israel that a reshuffled SCAF hierarchy under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood would not be as cooperative with Israel (Times of Israel, August 12). However, Mursi has continuously stressed his intention to respect all international agreements (Bikya Masr, August 7). In addition, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak has confirmed that the two countries continue to consult with each other regarding additional troop placements in the Sinai under the “Agreed Activities Mechanism” overseen by the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) (Arutz Sheva, September 9; for Egyptian-Israeli tensions and the MFO, see Terrorism Monitor, May 18). Reacting to persistent calls from Egypt to amend the treaty, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman stated: “There is no chance Israel will agree to any kind of change” (Times of Israel, September 23).

In the long term, Egyptian officials are keen to stamp out the root causes of the lawlessness and instability in the Sinai. Prime Minister Hisham Qandil has pledged to provide \$ 270 million to support development projects in the area, an unfulfilled promise of former presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. In an attempt to draw the Bedouin away from smuggling and other illicit activities the government will also review proposals for free trade zones in Rafah, al-Arish, and Nuweiba (Egypt State Information Service, September 4).

The current troubles in the Sinai are largely a spillover of insecurity, desperation, and economic deprivation in the Gaza Strip. To stifle the dangerous flow of arms, extremist ideology and Palestinian militants into Sinai, all parties (including Egypt, Fatah, Hamas, and Israel) will need to work to address the ongoing economic blockade of Gaza and the Palestinian Authority’s political crisis. Using its contacts with Hamas, Egypt will use the opening of Rafah

border as a bargaining chip to push for further Palestinian reconciliation in the run-up to future Palestinian Authority elections. However, Egypt will be careful not to provoke Israel into permanently closing the Kerem Shalom border crossing between Gaza and Israel, which would essentially transfer full responsibility over Gaza to Egypt.

The August 5 attacks highlighted the neglect of Egyptian security forces towards the threat of Salafi militancy in the Sinai Peninsula. Efforts to re-establish control over the buffer zone resurrected traditional grievances in all parties to the conflict. As “Operation Sinai” enters its second phase, more efforts to alleviate some of the deep grievances of the Bedouin population will be needed, as well as long-term steps to address the unsustainable situation in Gaza. Politicians from all sides will look to secure a breakthrough that could ease popular Egyptian pressure to renegotiate the Camp David Accords, particularly since the Military Annex to the Accords already provides the necessary mechanisms to address the current crisis through mutual consultations. In the absence of an Egyptian political and military apparatus to guarantee peace, both sides would benefit from Sinai’s return as a strategic and symbolic buffer zone.

Notes:

1. For detailed information on the composition and causes of Salafist militancy in the Sinai, see Andrew McGregor, “Has al-Qaeda Opened a New Chapter in the Sinai Peninsula?” Jamestown Foundation Hot Issues, August 17, 2011.
2. Jama’at Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, “Adopting the Friday Attack on the Jews (Ghazwa of chastisement of who offended the beloved Prophet),” Ansar1.info, September 22, 2012.

*Adrian Shahbaz is a freelance Middle East analyst and contributing writer at Fair Observer, an international affairs website.*

## After the Strike: Tactics and Strategies of the Iranian Retaliation

*Andrew McGregor*

Let’s begin with the assumption that Israel can overcome the logistical and political hurdles involved in mounting an attack on Iran’s nuclear development facilities, either unilaterally or in cooperation with the United States. Unlike earlier strikes on Syrian and Iraqi nuclear facilities, Iran will

certainly retaliate for any attack on its soil. Given that both Israel and the United States, individually or in combination, could easily subdue the armed forces available to the Islamic Republic, what forms could Iranian retaliation take?

Rather than play the victim in its dispute with Israel, Iran has taken an aggressive tone in its response to threats of a military strike. On September 19 Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi suggested that Israel was trying to cover up domestic problems by pursuing the rhetoric of war, adding that Iran is “able to wipe the [Israeli] regime off the scene” with its defensive capabilities (IRNA September 19; Fars News Agency, September 20). Vahidi and other Iranian leaders have been taking advantage of the annual “Week of Sacred Defense” commemoration of the Islamic Republic’s war with Iraq in the 1980s to remind interested parties of Iran’s successful eight year defense against the U.S. supported Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein (Trend.az, September 22). However, such rhetoric is common from Iranian sources; the question remains as to whether Iran can back up its threats of massive retaliation.

### **The Missile Response**

With a direct land-based retaliatory attack on Israel rendered impossible by geography and military considerations, Iran’s best chance for a direct blow to Israel lies in the possibility of Iranian long-range ballistic missiles penetrating Israel’s Arrow anti-ballistic-missile system and the much-heralded Iron Dome missile defense system. While the latter system has proved effective, its main weakness is its expense and inability to bring down more than a percentage of a mass missile barrage. Bringing down a cheap homemade rocket from Gaza can cost far more than the potential damage the rocket could inflict. Potential opponents of Israel such as Hezbollah now possess enhanced missile capabilities that make strikes on Tel Aviv and other urban centers in Israel a genuine possibility. A barrage of cheaper or smaller rockets from several directions at once might sufficiently tax Israel’s air defense systems to allow an Iranian ballistic missile with a conventional or non-conventional warhead to penetrate Israeli defense systems. Besides the surface-to-surface Sejil missiles and medium-range Shahab-3 ballistic missile with a range of up to 2,000 km, Iran has recently deployed upgraded versions of its twenty-year-old Zelzal rockets, which have a range of 300 km. To prepare for possible missile attacks on Israel a joint U.S.-Israeli missile defense exercise is expected to be held later this fall after the operation was delayed earlier this year (Financial Times, September 17). Militants based in Hamas-ruled Gaza, Israel’s weakest opponent, continue to fire missiles across the Israeli border despite scores of air raids, assassinations and even a 2009 deterrent raid that

killed upwards of 1300 people.

According to Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Major-General Muhammad-Ali Aziz Jaafari, the U.S. military presence in the region will actually work against them as it brings U.S. military targets within range of Iranian counter-strikes (Tehran Times, September 16). General Jaafari has revealed that Iran does not believe Israel will succeed in persuading the United States to join in an attack on Iran but will nevertheless hold the United States responsible for any strike on its nuclear or military facilities (al-Sharq al-Awsat, September 21). Jaafari also remains confident of Iran’s ability to carry out effective missile strikes on Israel: “I think nothing will remain of Israel (should it attack Iran). Given Israel’s small land area and its vulnerability to a massive volume of Iran’s missiles, I don’t think any spot in Israel will remain safe” (Fars News Agency, September 16).

### **Iranian Air Defense**

Iran’s ancient assembly of obsolete Soviet and American-built warplanes would be quick work for modern Israeli or American aircraft and would therefore be unlikely to be deployed in a conflict with these nations. However, if Israel were to conduct a unilateral attack, their aircraft would experience moments of vulnerability during the mid-air refueling required to get their aircraft to Iranian targets and back. Israel has conducted air exercises designed to counter such threats.

After the recent “successful testing” of Iran’s Ra’d air defense system, IRGC Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said the system “has been manufactured with the aim of confronting [hostile] U.S. aircraft and can hit targets at a distance of 50 kilometers and at an altitude of 75,000 feet (22,860 meters)” (Tehran Times, September 24). The Iranian-built Ra’d system has not been used in a combat situation and will be subject to countermeasures available to Israeli or American aircraft, but unlike Qaddafi, Iran’s military and political leaders are not likely to hesitate to give the order to fire on foreign aircraft in Iranian airspace.

### **Asymmetric Responses**

Attacks on Israeli facilities, institutions or individuals around the world by the IRGC, Iranian sympathizers or even other elements taking advantage of the situation to press their own political agendas would threaten to spread a potential conflict far beyond the Middle East. A covert war between Israel and Iran is already underway and can be easily intensified in the event of open conflict. This represents an open-ended threat



that cannot be dealt with simply through the application of overwhelming airpower or incursions by land forces.

In the event of an attack on Iran, Iranian sympathizers and government agents will agitate public opinion in Muslim capitals around the world, fuelling international condemnation of Iran's attackers through violent demonstrations and attacks on Israeli and American institutions. Should such attacks turn bloody through the efforts of security agencies to restore order these disturbances could take on a life of their own, creating security issues and diplomatic crises that would sap public will to pursue a war or create internal political dissent. Recent anti-American demonstrations in the Middle East have demonstrated that regional governments may lack the will or the ability to restrain an anti-Western backlash.

### The Naval Response

Most of the Iranian naval response would be in the hands of the smaller missile-equipped boats of the highly-trained and motivated Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Navy (IRGCN) rather than the conventional and often outdated ships of the regular Iranian Navy.

Iran's oft-stated intention of closing the Strait of Hormuz to commercial traffic, primarily oil shipments, is no secret. According to General Jaafari: "If a war breaks out where one side is Iran and the other side is the West and the U.S., it's natural that a problem should occur in the Strait of Hormuz. Export of energy will be harmed. It's natural that this will happen" (Fars News Agency, September 16).

Though it is frequently pointed out that Iran would itself suffer greatly by closing the Strait, it is likely that the Iranian command has recognized that in the event of a war Iranian oil could only be shipped with U.S. sufferance. With the United States unlikely to be so generous, the Iranian command may have come to the conclusion it has nothing to lose by closing the Strait, which would at least bring international pressure to bear on finding a quick resolution to the conflict. Domestic support for a U.S. role in the conflict could falter as rapidly rising petroleum prices drive a fragile economy into recession. Of course closing the Strait is not without risk and could incite the entry of the most affected countries (Kuwait, Iraq, Oman and Qatar) into a larger Sunni Arab – Shiite Iranian conflict.

Speedboat attacks could cause a certain amount of mayhem in the narrow confines of the Straits, but are unlikely threaten U.S. naval ships in any significant way. Analogies to the 2000 USS Cole attack are meaningless; if the Cole had been on

security alert or felt endangered by the skiff approaching its side the smaller craft would have been quickly blown out of the water. With air surveillance support, American warships have ample short-range defenses to deal with aggressive craft should they succeed in coming within attacking range. Rather than attack warships, Iran's fleet of small missile boats would be better employed in attacking civilian shipping in the Gulf. Attacks on oil tankers in particular would cause economic havoc in the international markets.

In the last few months the United States has doubled the number of minesweepers it maintains in the Gulf, sent a second aircraft carrier to the region two months ahead of schedule and deployed the USS Ponce, an amphibious transport dock that can be used as a staging base for Special Forces operations or as a carrier for MH-53 helicopters in a minesweeping role (Financial Times, September 17).

A large-scale de-mining exercise, the September 16-27 International Mine Countermeasures Exercise (IMCMEX), involving ships from the United States, Britain, Japan, France, Jordan, Yemen and other nations was designed to test a variety of anti-mine techniques to address the Iranian threat to close the vital Strait of Hormuz with fixed or floating mines (Hurriyet, September 17). General Jaafari downplayed the significance of the exercise (at least in public), describing it as "defensive" in nature: "We don't perceive any threats from it" (Reuters, September 17).

### Soft Warfare

Iran's response will not be limited to military activities. An important part of its strategic planning is dedicated to Iran's "Soft War" concept, which describes an alternative form of warfare that, in the hands of Iran's enemies, is dedicated to eroding the legitimacy of the Islamic republic by changing the cultural and Islamic identity of Iranian society. To handle Iran's response to such attacks, a special "Unit of the Soft War" (Setad-e Jang-e Narm) was created in 2011 as a branch of the Basiji militia. Iranian Soft War counter-measures include propaganda, education, media manipulation and the management of electronic information access (for a full description of the "Soft War" concept, see Terrorism Monitor, June 12, 2010). General Jaafari remarked in early September that soft warfare was more dangerous than conventional warfare and urged university and seminary students and faculty to prepare to deal with the soft warfare strategy employed by Iran's enemies (Tehran Times, September 2).

Social Networking may provide a unique and innovative way of organizing hundreds or even thousands of points of simultaneous resistance to an attack on Iran in a variety of



forms ranging from public demonstrations to civil resistance to armed activities or terrorist attacks. The drawn-out nature of the dispute over Iran's nuclear capabilities and intent has allowed Iran's global intelligence network to prepare a broad "soft warfare" response to any attack.

### Border Defense

In the event of land-based incursions into Iran, the Deputy Commander of the Iranian Army, Brigadier General Abdolrahim Mousavi, has promised Iran's borders will be defended by a combination of the regular Iranian Army, the IRGC and the Basiji Force (a lightly-armed but highly motivated militia) (Press TV, September 23).

Iran enhanced its border defenses in March with the introduction of the Shaparak (Butterfly) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), though the drone has an operational radius of only 31 miles and a flight time of three and a half hours. Since then Iran has added the Shaed-129, which can remain in the air for 24 hours and deliver strikes with its Sadid missiles (Fars News Agency, September 16). The most important drone in the Iranian arsenal is the Karrar (Striker), a turbojet-powered drone capable of long-range reconnaissance and attack missions with a flight range of 1,000 km at low or high altitudes. The four-meter long drone can be deployed on the back of a truck to a ground-launch position where it can be fired with the aid of a jet-fuelled take-off system (see Terrorism Monitor Brief, November 25, 2010; Ressalat [Tehran], August 23, 2010; Vatan-e Emrooz [Tehran], August 23, 2010).

### Possible Foreign Support for Iran

In observing the current North American coverage of the approaching crisis it is easy to assume that the whole world, or most of it, is resolutely opposed to Iran. This, however, is not the case, as shown by the 120 nations that attended the Non-Aligned Movement conference held in early September in Tehran despite calls from Western nations for a boycott. Iran is aware of the political value even a defeat could have for the Islamic Republic in the international arena. As suggested in a feature carried by Iran's state-owned Press TV: "In the impossible event that all goes well for Israel on the battlefield, the suffering of the people of Iran would probably shame the world into turning against Zionism even more sharply than the world turned against apartheid in the 1980s" (Press TV, September 21).

In the state of heightened tension and trepidation that would follow an Israeli attack, incidents that might otherwise be

dealt with at an appropriate level could easily precipitate a chain of events leading to the entry of other nations or militant groups into a wider war. Following a series of international incidents, Turkey's ruling AKP government has gone from shifted from being Israel's military ally to an increasingly hostile neighbor. Ankara is seriously disturbed by Iran's role in Syria and demonstrated its dissatisfaction by recently keeping Iran's national security chief cooling his heels for half an hour prior to a meeting in the office of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Nevertheless, in the unpredictable environment that would emerge from an Israeli attack on Iran it is entirely possible that some incident could drag Turkey into a larger war, whether as a result of a government decision, national security concerns or popular pressure. While Israel displays little respect for the militaries of Iran or the Arab world, Turkey's powerful, well-trained, well-armed and battle-experienced armed forces are another matter. Certainly, as a NATO member, an entry into the conflict by Turkey could immeasurably complicate the entire situation.

With a large Palestinian population and a growing Islamist movement, Jordan represents another Israeli neighbor that might find itself hard-pressed to resist popular pressure to retaliate in some form if Israel attacks Iran, possibly by annulling its peace treaty with Israel. Jordan is pursuing its own nuclear power program, which is much needed as a dependable replacement for unreliable natural gas supplies from Egypt and to fuel desalinization plants required to provide the arid nation with water. Jordan's King Abdullah II recently complained that: "strong opposition to Jordan's nuclear energy program is coming from Israel... When we started going down the road of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, we approached some highly responsible countries to work with us. And pretty soon we realized that Israel was putting pressure on those countries to disrupt any cooperation with us" (AFP, September 12).

So long as the volatility in Syria and the Sinai continues, there is ample opportunity for unintentional clashes or planned provocations to light the charge for a wider conflict. Under Egypt's new Muslim Brotherhood government there is daily discussion of revising or even abandoning Egypt's three-decade-old peace treaty with Israel. If Israel became entangled in battling Gaza militants or dealing with a new Palestinian intifada in the West Bank there would be enormous pressure both on the street and in the halls of government for Egypt to provide a military response. Hezbollah's success in the 2006 summer war changed attitudes in the Middle East. The once-common perception of an invincible Israel with unlimited military and logistical support from the world's largest superpower has not existed since Israel's failed effort

to destroy Hezbollah, which not only repulsed the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), but did so without even having to call up its reserves. While Israel has worked hard to revise its battlefield tactics and took advantage of its 2009 incursion into Gaza to field-test them in what amounted to a massive live-fire exercise considering the lack of resistance encountered, the IDF has lost much of its ability to intimidate the Arab opposition. The ascendance of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt has also been a game-changer; no longer can Israel expect the silence of a corrupt and self-indulgent regime fattening itself on American aid. Today there is a growing assumption in Egypt that billions of dollars in American military aid will not last much longer, paired with a recognition that Egypt must develop its own arms industry if it is to pursue an independent foreign policy.

Disaffected Shiite populations in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, while not necessarily following directives from Tehran, could still take advantage of a collapsing security situation to press their demands for economic and political reforms. Such instability in Bahrain would not prevent operations by the U.S. Sixth Fleet based there, but would prove politically embarrassing at an extremely sensitive time. If violence can sweep the Muslim world because of the actions of Florida Quran burners and Californian immigrant filmmakers, imagine the violence that would follow a carefully manufactured false-flag operation or other provocation designed to draw various countries or populations into a new Middle East conflict.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the Middle East's vast energy resources, reserves are declining in some areas and have nearly expired in others. Some major nations, like Egypt and Iraq, are largely or partially reliant on hydro-electric power that is threatened by huge new dams being built further upstream in Ethiopia and Turkey respectively. With even oil-rich Saudi Arabia intent on expanding its nuclear power capabilities before the oil runs out, it is clear that the future of the Middle East is nuclear. In these circumstances it would be impossible for Israel to continue a policy of pre-emptive strikes on potentially hostile neighbors to prevent the possibility of nuclear weapons development. Without the emergence of alternative energy supplies, even the deterrent effect of a successful Israeli strike on Iran will be short-lived in the region.

Iran has consistently exaggerated its military capability and the effectiveness of its weapons, so much of its rhetoric concerning its ability to retaliate to an Israeli or American attack must be taken with a grain of salt. In addition, much

of the conventional response outlined above is subject to the operational survival of Iranian weapons systems to a unilateral or joint Israeli/U.S. strike, which would target Iranian missile silos and electrical systems nation-wide. Cyber-attacks could also be expected to destroy Iran's ability to respond with sophisticated hardware or weapons. With these considerations it becomes clear that Iran's most effective response will lie in the areas of asymmetric warfare and economic disruption. In the complicated world of the Middle East, Iran could still organize a broad retaliatory response that would effectively prevent an Iranian military defeat from translating into an Israeli victory.

*Andrew McGregor is the Editor of The Jamestown Foundation's Terrorism Monitor and Director of Aberfoyle International Security, a Toronto-based agency specializing in security issues related to the Islamic world.*