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EGYPT’S DOMESTIC SECURITY THREAT: AJNAD MISR AND THE “RETRIBUTION FOR LIFE” CAMPAIGN

Andrew McGregor

A Cairo-based extremist group using the name Afnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) has intensified its bombing campaign in the Egyptian capital with a surprising attack on the Ittihadiya Palace in Heliopolis, the home of Egyptian president Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi. The bombing was part of the movement’s “Retribution for Life” campaign, apparently mounted in support of pro-Muhammad Mursi/Muslim Brotherhood demonstrations in the capital met with ruthless responses by Egyptian security forces that left hundreds dead. Afnad Misr refers to Egypt’s police as “criminals” who carry out “massacres” and has made them the main target of their bombing campaign so far (Ahram Online [Cairo], April 3).

The movement announced itself via Twitter on January 23, following the announcement the next day with the release of its “Retribution for Life” manifesto. [1] The manifesto deployed the usual references to the Salafists’ preferred religious authority, Ibn Taymiyah (1263-1328), but also spoke in sympathy with the Brotherhood, suggesting it was only their failure to eradicate corruption that allowed the old military regime to “re-emerge in an even uglier and more criminal form” (Al-Monitor, July 3). [2]

The movement professes a reluctance to incur civilian casualties in its bombing campaign, claiming it had canceled many operations out of fears “shrapnel” could inflict damage on civilian bystanders (al-Arabiya, April 2). In its manifesto, the group appeared to have reached a conclusion in the ongoing jihadi debate over the legitimacy of killing innocent Muslims in pursuit of an Islamic state, declaring that those fighting the Egyptian regime “must remain extremely vigilant and careful not to inflict damage upon the innocents among us, even if they oppose us” (Al-Monitor, July 3). [3]

Ajnad Misr issued a video in April that claimed responsibility for eight bombing attacks in Egypt, including a series of bombings on April 2 that killed a senior police officer and wounded five policemen outside Cairo University (Ahram Online [Cairo], April 17). Within days of the video's release, Ajnad Misr deployed a car bomb to kill police Brigadier General Ahmad Zaki outside his home in Sixth October City, later issuing a statement saying the time and place of the blast had been carefully chosen to avoid civilian casualties (Ahram Online [Cairo], April 24).

In the April 2 attack, two bombs were detonated in quick succession on the Giza campus of Cairo University, killing police Brigadier General Tariq al-Margawi and wounding several other officers. A third blast of a smaller device occurred as police responded to the earlier blasts, wounding the Giza deputy chief of police, Major General Abd al-Raouf al-Sirafy (al-Arabiya, April 2; Youm 7 [Cairo], April 2). In its statement of claim, Ajnad Misr said the last explosion was delayed to avoid harming civilians, though it may also have been intended to strike first responders (Ahram Online [Cairo], April 3). Police had been deployed on the campus that day in anticipation of a demonstration by pro-Mursi students.

The movement was declared a terrorist organization by Egypt's Court for Urgent Matters in May as the death toll from extremist attacks since the anti-Mursi coup approached 500 people (Ahram Online [Cairo], May 22). Most alarming were the bombs detonated in several stations of Cairo's busy underground metro system on June 25 (al-Arabiya, June 25; Daily News Egypt, July 3). The bombs were fortunately small in size and inflicted a limited number of casualties, but served as a warning that mass casualty terrorist attacks could lie in Cairo's future. The attacks were not claimed by Ajnad Misr and may be the work of one of several other terrorist cells that appear to be mobilizing against the new government.

Another bomb planted outside a court in Heliopolis the same day as the metro bombings killed two policemen (including a senior officer) and wounded Major General Ala' Abd al-Zaher, the head of Cairo's bomb disposal unit. Al-Zaher was attempting to defuse the bomb after Ajnad Misr tweeted their location in an apparent change of heart regarding their detonation (al-Arabiya, June 25; Egypt State Information Service, July 1). [4]

Ajnad Misr stepped up its campaign significantly with a dramatic June 30 bombing attack on the presidential palace in Heliopolis (an integrated suburb of Cairo). Two policemen were killed and 13 others wounded as they struggled to defuse the two bombs planted just outside the palace. Most disturbing

from a security point of view was the fact that the movement had issued a warning via social media on June 27 indicating it was about to plant explosives on the palace grounds, yet security services were unable to secure the area and prevent the blasts (Daily News Egypt, July 1).

Ajnad Misr's membership, leadership and exact connections to the Muslim Brotherhood remain largely unknown, though it is possible the group has been created to enable the imprisoned Brotherhood leadership to apply pressure on President al-Sisi's government, which appears set on the physical extermination of the Brothers and their ability to challenge the state. The group's focus on police targets and stated reluctance to inflict civilian casualties is obviously designed to enable the group to attract wider public support, something the casual destructiveness of most jihadi groups has prevented in the past. Whether this approach will have resonance with the large number of Egyptians unhappy with the manner of the replacement of Mursi's Islamist government by yet another pseudo-military regime is worth watching.

Note

1. The movement's Twitter account can be found at: https://twitter.com/ajnad_misr.
2. https://twitter.com/ajnad_misr_am/status/457501373458694144/photo/1.
3. https://twitter.com/ajnad_misr_am/status/457501373458694144/photo/1.
4. EuroNews, "Twin Blasts Kill Policemen in Egypt," June 30, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_KIAOfKygs.

EX-MILITANTS USE OIL AS A POLITICAL WEAPON IN THE NIGER DELTA

Andrew McGregor

Former Niger Delta militants have threatened to cut off Nigerian oil production in the event beleaguered Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan is prevented from seeking reelection in 2015. Jonathan has been under intense criticism from northern politicians who cite incompetence in dealing with Boko Haram and other issues in their demands that the president decline to run for a second term. The declaration came out of a meeting in Akwa Ibom State of some 600 former militants who had accepted amnesty under the federal government's Leadership, Peace and Cultural Development Initiative (LPCDI) in 2009 as part of a national effort to bring an end to militant activities in the Niger Delta region that were preventing full exploitation of the region's abundant energy reserves.

The leader of the ex-militants, Reuben Wilson, described a wide campaign in Muslim north Nigeria to discredit and distract the president, who is of southern and Christian origin:

You will agree with me that the Niger Delta people are sustaining the economy at great inconveniences and pains to its people and the environment. It is the only time that the region has had the privilege of producing a president for the country. It is unthinkable that the North will be plotting against our son, intimidating him with bomb blasts here and there and causing the untimely death of scores of innocent Nigerians, all because they want to take back power. We have always seen the need for us to live together as one indivisible country and this is what Mr. President believes in. However, with the way things are going, we have been pushed to the wall and we cannot but react. Accordingly, the former freedom fighters have agreed that all the routes through which the north has been benefiting from crude oil finds coming from the Niger Delta will be cut off, if they insist on forcing Mr. President out of office (*This Day* [Lagos], July 1).

The declaration was reinforced by a pledge from the Niger Delta Youth Movement (NDYM) to organize a "million-man march" of Niger Delta youth in Abuja to condemn the "distraction" of President Jonathan from his development program by the terrorist activities of Boko Haram. NDYM leader Felix Ogbona insisted the movement would stop oil flows from the Delta if Jonathan is prevented from running for president in 2015 (*Daily Independent* [Lagos], June 29).

According to the former militants, it was Jonathan (as vice-president) who visited the militants in the creeks of the Delta and convinced them to sign on to the amnesty in exchange for promises of development (Information Nigeria, May 2, 2013). The ex-militants see Jonathan's efforts to develop the Delta being diverted by Boko Haram activities in the north and are certain such efforts will be dropped if a new president is elected from the northern Muslim communities in 2015.

Elsewhere, former Niger Delta militants belonging to the Ijaw people of the Delta demanded Jonathan (an Ijaw) declare his intent to run in 2015, saying in a statement: "We, therefore, call on you to contest the seat of the President. And if for any reason you fail to contest come 2015, you should not come back home but remain in Abuja forever" (*Vanguard* [Lagos], June 29).

While attacks in the Niger Delta and elsewhere continue to be claimed by "MEND spokesmen," those militant leaders who accepted amnesty insist MEND ceased to exist in 2009: "Nobody should hide under the guise of a so-called MEND to sabotage the nation's economy... We restate that the amnesty program of the Federal Government is working and those of us that are beneficiaries are happy that we were given the privilege to come out of the creeks to contribute to the peace and development of the country" (*Vanguard* [Lagos], October 24, 2013).

The amnesty has been granted to roughly 30,000 people since it began, promising each of them at least \$410 per month to keep the peace in a program that costs upwards of \$500 million per year (BBC, May 2). While lower-level militants have been offered job-training as they collect often-sporadic payments, there is abundant evidence that some former militant leaders have used access to major oil industry-related contracts to build enormous personal wealth that is typically flaunted through the construction of rambling mansions (*Leadership* [Abuja], June 30). The militant leaders who once targeted the Delta's pipelines for oil theft or destruction now seek lucrative government contracts to provide security for these same pipelines (Information Nigeria, May 2, 2013).

Residents of the Niger Delta have complained for years that they see little benefit from the massive revenues generated by oil production in their region while enduring industrial pollution, poor infrastructure and a shortage of employment opportunities.

The Caliphate in South Asia: A Profile of Hizb-ut Tahrir in Pakistan

Farhan Zahid

Unlike other radical Islamist organizations in Pakistan, the Hizb-ut Tahrir (HT – Party of Freedom) takes a covert approach to disseminating its Islamist ideology and agendas. The organization is so secretive that most Pakistanis are not even aware of its existence. HT defines its target audience as senior military officers, civil bureaucrats and professionals, including doctors, engineers, accountants, managers in multi-national corporations and other categories of highly-educated youth.

Founded in Palestine in 1953 by Taqi al-Din Nabhani, a jurist and Islamist cleric who was a former member of Muslim Brotherhood, the HT adheres to the Salafi brand of Islam with the goal of restoring the Islamic Caliphate. The organization could not manage to hold ground in the Middle East and instead took root in Central Asia and the UK, where it became popular amongst British youth of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origins.

According to HT defectors, the organization aims to re-establish the Caliphate (abolished in 1924) in one of the Muslim-majority countries, to be followed by the imposition of Shari'a and the unification of all Muslim-majority countries by virtue of conquest, thus reclaiming lost lands and glory. The final stage would be the declaration of war on the Western world. [1] The ideology and strategic plan of HT resemble al-Qaeda but the *modus operandi* of the two entities is different. HT believes neither in democracy nor in revolutionary take-over.

Pakistan is considered a special case by HT. The organization's plan for Pakistan is as follows:

- Recruitment of high-ranking military and civil officers
- Indoctrination of the youth of premier universities (both private and public) with HT ideologies
- The overthrow of the government in a bloodless military coup
- Imposition of Islamic Shari'a and the end of the *kufri* (infidel) system of democracy
- Declaring Pakistan the new Islamic Caliphate
- Spreading the borders of the Caliphate by means of offensive and aggressive jihad
- Reclaiming the lost lands, that is from Spain to Russia and China

- Invading and conquering the “infidel lands.” [2]

A nuclear-armed yet poverty-ridden country, with a low literacy rate and history of military coups, Pakistan's situation has led HT to prioritize its efforts in that country.

Bringing military officers into its fold is an important part of HT's strategy. The movement's preference for a military coup as a means of taking power is based on the following factors:

- Pakistan is a nuclear-armed nation with a fast-growing nuclear arsenal
- Pakistan has a history of military coups (four so far)
- The influence of the armed forces in Pakistan is second to none
- Bureaucracies, both military and civil, are pivotal in controlling and managing the affairs of the country; therefore both have to be cajoled

HT presented its mission statement for Pakistan in a 2011 monograph, *Return of the Khilafah: A Vision of Pakistan under the Khilafah and how an Islamic Constitution will give rise to Policies of Revival*. [3] The 64-page document outlines the problems of Pakistan, including issues related to revenue collection, electricity generation, inflation, military doctrine, education, ethnic violence in Karachi and a separatist insurgency in Balochistan. *Return of the Khilafah* provides guiding principles for the caliph in the realm of foreign policy, calling for an end to all types of relations with India, the United States and the Western world before framing a policy based upon military brinkmanship. Diplomatic relations with neutral non-Muslim countries would only be established in order to propagate the message of Islam by capitalizing on the prevailing liberal and secular environment in those countries.

The overall focus of HT constitution remains military-centric. Several articles of the constitution emphasize the need for a strong “Islamic Army” capable of spreading the boundaries of the Caliphate from Pakistan into India and Central Asia. The caliph would be the supreme commander of the armed forces.

The military regime of General Pervez Musharraf banned the organization not because it was involved in terrorist or sabotage activities, but rather because it was trying to influence senior military officers (*The News* [Islamabad], February 28, 2013). Unlike the United Kingdom, where HT operates openly, in Pakistan the movement consists of a network of secretive cells, making an understanding of its hierarchy difficult.

The foundations of HT Pakistan were laid in 1999 by Imtiaz Malik, Taimur Butt, Imran Yousafzai, Shahzad Shaikh, Muhammad Irfan, Naveed Butt and Maajid Nawaz. All were Western-educated and had U.S. or UK citizenship. [4] Naveed Butt is currently the HT spokesman for Pakistan. A business graduate of the University of Illinois, Butt works for mobile phone company Motorola in Lahore. Butt came to light in January 2011 when he issued a videotaped “open letter” to officers of the Pakistan Army. [5] In the provocative letter, Butt explicitly asked Pakistani military officers to rebel against the state: “Oh officers of Pakistan’s armed forces! You are leading the largest and the most capable Muslim armed forces in the world... you must move now to uproot Pakistan’s traitor rulers.” Butt was later picked up by military intelligence.

HT’s focus from the beginning has been on recruiting senior military officers and highly educated youth for the purpose of taking over the reins of state in a *coup d’état*. It is estimated that in the last ten years, HT has attempted three times to penetrate the Pakistan Army (*Dawn* [Karachi], October 2012). In 2003, HT recruited 13 officers of Pakistan’s Special Services Group (SSG), an elite Special Forces unit. All were subsequently court-martialed. In 2009, Lieutenant Colonel Shahid Bashir was court-martialed on the same charges. Bashir was recruited along with Brigadier Ali Khan, whose identity Bashir managed to protect until Khan’s arrest by military police in 2012.

Before his arrest, Khan was successful in recruiting and radicalizing fellow officers and had been able to establish a cell of HT-inspired officers in the army. With his arrest, a complete network of HT-tied officers was broken. Others found involved in the network were Major Sohail Akbar, Major Jawad Baseer, Major Inayar Aziz and Major Iftikhar. All were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from 18 months to five years (*Dawn* [Karachi], October 29, 2012).

As part of its media campaign, HT Pakistan has been instrumental in organizing workshops and seminars for youth at public and private universities. Several tactics have been adopted to influence the target audience, including:

- Free distribution of books such as Taqi al-Din Nabhani’s *The Concept*, which provides HT’s Islamic Constitution for the Islamic State
- Disseminating the concept of Caliphate through two-page pamphlets, usually distributed outside mosques after Friday prayers
- Free distribution of booklets, CDs and open letters about the evils of democracy
- Letters and video messages to military chiefs with calls

to intervene on behalf of the Muslim world [6]

- Social media activities, including the creation of a Facebook open forum attracting more than 1,500 members. The forum is laden with news feeds, videos, articles and HT publications.

Hizb-ut Tahrir and al-Qaeda espouse the same brand of Islam. By creed, both organizations are Salafist. The differences are of tactics, *modi operandi* and, most importantly, the profiles of its members. The people who tend to join HT usually have similar ideological leanings towards radical Islamism, but because of their educational background and urban sensibilities, they remain reluctant to become involved in active violence. HT’s constitution remains silent about the activities of radical Islamists and al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan, almost as if they did not exist. HT members in Pakistan do have pent-up violent tendencies, but being aware of the consequences, their focus remains on seizing the reins of power in a military coup, an activity not very unusual in a Pakistani context.

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Notes

1. For details about HT ideology and its global agenda see, Ed Hussain: *The Islamist: Why I Became an Islamic Fundamentalist, What I Saw Inside, and Why I Left*, Penguin Books, 2009 and Maajid Nawaz, *Radical: My Journey Out of Islamist Extremism*, Lyons Press, 2013.
2. Author’s interview with a HT member in Islamabad, June 16, 2014.
3. *Return of the Khilafah: A Vision of Pakistan under the Khilafah and how an Islamic Constitution will give rise to Policies of Revival*, Hizb ut Tahrir Wilayah Pakistan, 2011, http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/EN/en_books_pdf/PK_Return_of_the_Khilafah_English_OK_rev.pdf.
4. Amir Rana, *HT in Pakistan: Discourse and Impact*, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, Islamabad, 2010.
5. “Open Letter to Pakistan Armed Forces,” March 6, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MjU_S31NoO8.
6. One such video was “Declaration to the People of Power: Uproot the Agent Rulers and Establish the Khilafah,” May 10, 2010, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS_-t5i3CXY.

Oil Fuels the Kurdistan-ISIS Conflict

Maksut Kosker

The realities of today's politics depend heavily on earlier historical decisions, specifically in the Middle East. Therefore, we cannot understand today's Iraq unless we go back to the disintegration of the Ottoman empire in the days following World War I. Iraq is the center of conflict in the Middle East because of decisions taken at that time by Western powers such as Great Britain, France and Italy.

Basically, there is no single Iraqi nation that has a common sense of the future. Furthermore, there are two different religious sects of Islam, which do not have a history of good relations, namely the Sunnis and Shiites. In addition to the sectarian and ethnic divisions, there stands the reality of Kurds, who have been fighting for an independent state in northern Iraq.

The post-war decisions made by the big powers of the day had a negative impact on the future of Iraq as it separated Kurdistan into four pieces in neighboring states with significant Kurdish populations, namely Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Thus, as many other nations in the Middle East, today the Kurds are trying to shape their future and overcome the consequences of the historical decisions of Western powers since World War I. According to Duran Kalkan, an executive committee member of the Partiya Karkên Kurdistan (PKK – Kurdistan Workers' Party), the most recent challenge to the Kurdish nation has come from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS – now known simply as the “Islamic State”), which is not only a threat to Kurds but also to the unity of Iraq and neighboring states (Kurdish Question, June 30).

Soon after the ISIS offensive in Iraq began, the idea of Caliphate became an actual fact in the region, though the weaknesses of such a regime in Iraq are easily seen (*The Telegraph*, July 3). Arab and Kurdish populations in Iraq consist of many tribal groups and none of the tribes want to be ruled by other tribal leaders, which makes ethnicity more important than religion in the region. Thus, neither Kurdistan nor the southern Iraqi Shiites could be part of this project as both groups have significant ethnic and sectarian differences within themselves.

As we see now, Iraq has never been an actual unified state and now looks like it will never have the chance to last long enough to become one. U.S. hesitancy to launch military

operations against ISIS might reflect a new understanding of this reality and the perception that the Islamic State project is in fact a Sunni Arab uprising against Shi'a dominance and the government of Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki (*Rudaw English*, June 20).

Although ethnicity and religion are two major political factors underpinning the conflict between ISIS and the Kurds, control of northern Iraq's oil industry also provides a significant economic reason for the conflict. Clashes between ISIS and Kurdish forces thus focus on two major oil-rich cities-Mosul and Kirkuk.

In the week following ISIS' victory in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, the movement declared it would not fight against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as the Kurdish forces were experienced and well-organized (*Rudaw English*, June 11). When Iraqi government forces stripped off their uniforms and evacuated disputed Kurdish lands in early June, the Kurdish *peshmerga* militias moved in and declared their intention to protect these lands from incursions by Sunni militants (Al-Monitor, June 11).

Thus, ISIS is aware of the fact that the Kurds have been successful in their hundred year's war of freedom, which made the occupation of another important city of oil, Kirkuk problematic for them. ISIS is aware of the Kurds' determination to manage their own affairs and the importance they place on Kirkuk. For now, it would not seem appropriate for ISIS to divert its energies in fighting with Kurdish forces while still engaged in a struggle with the central government. Furthermore, ISIS already has fought the Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG – People's Protection Units) in Rojava (northern Syria) without success for almost a year while the PKK has declared that its Kurdish guerrillas were ready to protect all parts of Kurdistan against ISIS (*Basnews Kurdish*, June 12). These strong stands from Kurds have influenced ISIS' decision not take any steps to fight the Kurds of Iraq.

Despite these significant challenges to its program, ISIS cannot be considered likely to give up the ideal of occupying the disputed Kurdish lands in Iraq, especially Kirkuk Governorate. In the meantime, president of the KRG Massoud Barzani delivered a speech declaring that Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution has been finally implemented thanks to the *peshmerga's* full control of the disputed lands (*Basnews English*, June 26; *Aswat al-Iraq*, June 27). The much-delayed Article 140 calls for a referendum to determine whether the disputed territories in the governorates of Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din and Ninawa should come under the administration of Baghdad or Erbil.

Thus, the ISIS offensive became an opportunity for the KRG to hold the referendum in Kirkuk in the absence of a powerful central Iraqi government.

Though Baghdad maintains that only the Iraqi Oil Marketing Company has the right to sell Iraqi crude, including oil from Kurdistan, KRG President Massoud Barzani has insisted oil revenues from Kirkuk will benefit all the local communities:

Kirkuk oil was exported to Turkey via a pipeline that passed south of Mosul. Now the terrorists control this pipeline and prior to that it had been blown up. If this crude oil is not exported via the pipeline in Kurdistan, it has no other way of being exported. The income from export of this oil will go to all whose budgets were not paid by Baghdad – Kirkuk dwellers, all Kurdish people, even the people of Mosul. This oil is not only for the Kurds. It is for all including the Arabs and Turkmens of Kirkuk. The sale of this oil is our right and the right of all people of this region. Without any type of discrimination, the income from this oil will be distributed between Kurds, Arabs, Turkmens, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and others (VOA, July 2).

Indeed, the oil city of Kirkuk will be a valuable economic contributor for a possible independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq. Kurds know that if they give up Kirkuk, they will also lose their strong hand for an independent state. The Kirkuk oil is of high quality and is relatively easy to extract. Kirkuk oil also constitutes approximately half of all Iraqi total oil revenues. According to Dr. Najm al-Din Karim, the governor of Kirkuk: “The oil and gas companies are safe because they are being protected by the *peshmerga* and the police” (Iraqi News, June 13). As we see in this political and economic context, whoever controls the oil cities of Kirkuk and Mosul will have a strong position and become more legitimate in the international community.

ISIS now has a 1,050 kilometer border with the KRG in Iraq and at least half of that with Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan) (*Rudaw English*, July 3, 2014). Both ISIS and the Kurds are powerful and need oil to preserve their legitimacy and recognition, which makes it probable that a conflict between them will last for decades if the “Islamic State” survives.

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Iran’s Revolutionary Guards and Iraq’s Security Breakdown

Nima Adelhah

As the assault of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in northern Iraq increasingly enhances the prospect of Iraq’s disintegration, Iran has responded aggressively by adopting a policy of direct engagement with its neighbor (Press TV [Tehran], June 12; Fars News [Tehran], June 12). For Iranians, the breakdown of security caused by “Takfiri terrorists,” or those who have rejected the true religion of Islam, is more than an occasion to reach for power over a neighboring state they were once at war with, but also a way to prevent a spill-over of sectarianism and separatism resulting from the possible partitioning of Iraq. The risk for Iran is the breakup of Iraq into provinces that would not only destabilize regional security, but also weaken Iran’s influence in the absence of a Shi’a-dominated centralized government.

The unfolding crisis in Iraq is also perceived by Iran as a sectarian threat. The deputy commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Brigadier General Hossein Salami, has argued that the activities of ISIS Iraq “are the fallout from the interference of hegemonic powers and their allies in the region” (Press TV [Tehran], June 13). The aim of the enemy, he explains, is to widen the gap between Sunni and Shi’a Muslims in Iraq to start “a world war among Islamic sects” (Fars News [Tehran], June 25). While the West sees the security threat in Iraq as a setback for democracy, largely a result of the Shi’a-dominated administration of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, Iran sees the ISIS menace as an existential threat to Shi’a identity and an extension of a proxy war launched by the Sunni Gulf states, a conflict which continues with the civil war in Syria.

At center stage in the conflict is the IRGC and its presence in Iraq. Given the weakness of the Iraqi army, the Iranian paramilitary force is likely to play an integral role in countering ISIS while actively distancing itself from the public perception that it is acting independently of Baghdad to bring security to Iraq. What lies at stake for Iran is to maintain stability in Iraq while making sure the IRGC is not seen as an occupying force in a country undergoing sectarian strife. Yet any military intervention carries certain risks and the IRGC’s greatest challenge in Iraq will be to support the Iraqi army to fight Sunni militia without undermining its independence.

IRGC in Iraq

Since the end of Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the IRGC has become not only a powerful military organization, but also a political force in Iran and the region (see *Terrorism Monitor*, May 28, 2009). As the custodian of the Islamic revolution that established the Islamic Republic in 1979, the IRGC has built a vast network of economic, political and security operatives, the most important of which control Iran's controversial nuclear program.

Since its inception, a number of internal and regional changes have bolstered the role of the paramilitary IRGC as a military-political actor. While the Iran-Iraq War provided the IRGC with military experience, the training of a new Shi'a militia force, Hezbollah, in reaction to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 enabled the IRGC to operate beyond Iranian borders. A special unit, the Quds (Jerusalem) Force, emerged to play an important role in the IRGC's regional operations in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Bosnia, with a recent active presence in Syria in support of the Assad regime.

The security crisis in Iraq after the fall of the Ba'athist regime gave considerable leverage to the IRGC with its economic and military capital. The 2006 bombing of the Askari mosque in Samara, one of the holiest places in Shi'a Islam, was a watershed moment. It gave Iran the ability to claim protector-status to Iraq's holy shrines while Iran's investment in rebuilding shrines offered a way to expand soft power in Shi'a Iraq. Post-Ba'athist intra-Shi'a conflict also gave Iran leverage to intervene as a broker with the aim of playing matchmaker between key players, in particular the Sadrist, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the elected prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki. The role of the IRGC in this process has been essentially one of intelligence gathering, management of logistical conflicts and training of Shi'a militia into a more organized military force, similar to what Iran was able to help build in Lebanon.

Iran has relied on various proxies to extend its influence in Iraq since 2003. These proxies include economic and religious actors with the aim of investing heavily in southern Iraq, especially the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, as a way to create a civic network favorable to Iranian interests. But these proxies have also involved various militia groups, who maintain loose but effective relations with the Iranian paramilitary and the latest conflict has brought the IRGC closer to the Shi'a Iraqi militias.

The IRGC and ISIS

In light of Iraq's strategic and religious importance for

Iran, the IRGC's involvement in the ongoing security crisis caused by the ISIS conquest of northern Iraq, the biggest security threat since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, would seem obvious. It is no surprise that IRGC brigadier general Massoud Jazayeri describes Iran's reaction to the ISIS threat as "certain and serious" (al-Alam TV [Tehran], June 29; Press TV [Tehran], June 29). Iran, Jazayeri explains, has informed Iraqi officials "it is ready to provide them with our successful experiments in popular all-around defense, the same winning strategy used in Syria to put the terrorists on the defensive... This same strategy is now taking shape in Iraq – mobilizing masses of all ethnic groups" (al-Alam TV [Tehran], June 29). Iran's Syrian strategy has revolved around "popular defense and intelligence," with popular defense referring primarily to the bolstering of militia groups to push back ISIS (al-Jazeera, June 29).

However, while Iran continues to provide intelligence, military training and logistical support to the Syrian government, the precise degree of IRGC influence in Iraq remains unknown. For Tehran, any information about Iranian military operations will be kept secret for logistical or intelligence purposes. There is also the fear that Iran's military involvement, if perceived as being closely connected with the Iraqi government, could stir sectarian resentment among Iraq's Sunni neighbors, in particular the Gulf states, which are wary of Iran's reach for power (Fars News [Tehran], June 13).

Reports indicate that the IRGC has deployed divisions of the Quds forces to help the Iraqi Army capture Tikrit and also guard Baghdad and the holy cities (Arsh News [Tehran], June 15). In response, the Iranian deputy foreign minister, Hussein Amir Abdollahian, has rejected reports that the IRGC has deployed troops in Iraq, emphasizing that Iran has not been involved in armed conflict in Iraq (Fars News [Tehran], June 13; Serat News [Tehran], June 13). Abdollahian's claim may be true since Iran, like the United States, is wary of committing ground forces. Strategically speaking, Tehran would prefer to engage in combat through the Shi'a Iraqi militants, who are less costly to organize and deploy against the Sunni militias than Iranian combat units.

Led by Quds Force commander Qasim Sulaymani, the IRGC commands the military operations from Baghdad, but its operational reach most likely includes southern and central Iraq (Entekhab [Tehran], June 18). The Guard's involvement possibly includes the deployment of military specialists such as the Quds elite forces and especially those IRGC units that specialize in the military training of militias for urban warfare. The strategy is primarily aimed at training Shi'a volunteer forces who can participate as building blocks of an

unofficial military force supported and trained by Iran.

With the extremist Sunni threat as a rallying call, Iran will most likely seek to mobilize the Shi'a "Mahdi Army" militia and splinter groups like the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (League of the Righteous) to protect the holy cities and Shi'a interests in the country. Also helpful has been the ruling by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the highest and most revered cleric in Iraq, who has endorsed the formation of volunteer forces to fight against ISIS (al-Jazeera, June 13). The Mahdi Army in particular, under the leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr who has been residing in Iran since 2007 for religious training at the *hawza* (seminary) in Qom, may serve as Iran's greatest asset as Iraq's formidable Shi'a militia, with support among the impoverished Shi'a in Baghdad and southern Iraq (Fararu News [Tehran], June 29). With the Syrian conflict now overshadowed by the ISIS advance, numerous other Shi'a militant groups like the Abu al-Fadhal al-Abbas Brigade and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (Battalion of Sayyid's Martyrs), now returning home from Syria, may be also work closely with the IRGC to defend the holy shrines in Iraq.

However, the task of protecting Iraq by pushing back ISIS in western Iraq will lie with the Iraqi Army. Reports that Iran has decided to return a handful of Su-25 fighter jets (useful for air support of ground operations) from the stock of Iraqi aircraft sent to Iran for safe-keeping in 1991 (but never returned) is an example of Tehran's desire to strengthen the state army in Iraq (BBC, July 2; Military.com, July 3). Tehran has denied the transfer, but if the Russian-made jets have been returned to Iraq, it is likely that they are flown by Iranian pilots as Iraqi pilots have not flown the type in over two decades (Tehran Times, June 25; Arsh News [Tehran], June 15). An Iranian pilot named Alireza Moshajarai was declared to be the first IRGC casualty in Iraq in mid-June, though other Iranian sources claim Moshajarai was killed in a service accident in western Iran (Khabarfarsi.com, June 15; Dana.ir, June 15; RFE/RL, June 16; al-Jazeera, July 5).

In many ways, the IRGC and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei favor a centralized government led by a Shi'a-dominated government since the army provides a sense of national unity for stability. The militias are therefore only intended for emergency situations that threaten Iranian national interests in Iraq or the region.

What Lies Ahead

Iran is in a peculiar position. By July 20, Tehran and the P5+1 Group aim to conclude negotiations over the country's controversial nuclear program (Islamic Republic News Agency, July 1). [1] While Iran seeks to arrive at an

agreement that would ensure its prestige as a nuclear power in the region, it will also try to project military power amidst the security breakdown in neighboring countries. A show of military strength can also help bolster support amongst that part of Iran's population who favor Iranian involvement in Iraq despite the economic problems the country faces one year after the election of Hassan Rouhani to the presidency (Tehran Bureau, June 27).

In the case of the ongoing conflict in Iraq, Iran can now show its military strength not just through Shi'a proxies, but also through IRGC ground operations. Senior Revolutionary Guard commanders are aware of the risks involved in deploying combat troops on the ground and this has led them to rely on the elite Quds forces and intelligence operatives to lead military operations by the Iraqi Army. The Iranian government is also aware of the risks involved in deploying IRGC commanders in Baghdad, especially Sulaymani, who is despised by Sunni Arabs for his involvement in Syria), leading Iranian officials to deny reports of his presence in Iraq (Jame Jam News [Tehran], June 25). To have Iranian commanders in Baghdad could be counter-productive for Iran's efforts to support an independent central government in Baghdad. In many ways, this can be described as a strategy of leading from behind, maintaining a low profile on the battlefield.

In the months ahead, Iraq faces major internal and external challenges. The ongoing conflict within the Iraqi parliament reveals the perils of weak governance. Meanwhile, the lack of a centralized state and the subsequent breakdown of security continue to suck in regional powers, anxious to influence a country divided by ethnic and sectarian divisions. While regional actors, especially Iran, will do their best to expand their influence in Iraq, Baghdad will have to confront its greatest security threat – the absence of an organized army. This is precisely what ISIS has realized is Iraq's greatest weakness as they forge ahead in the months to come, possibly with support from some of the Gulf states.

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Note

1. P5+1 refers to a group of six nations that have been involved in diplomatic efforts on the Iranian nuclear file. The nations include five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the "P5," Russian, China, France, the UK and the United States) and Germany (the "+1").