



# Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

VOLUME XIII, ISSUE 2 ♦ JANUARY 23, 2015

IN THIS ISSUE:

BRIEFS ..... 1

JIHADISM IN TUNISIA: THE GROWING THREAT  
By Stefano M. Torelli ..... 4

AL-SHABAAB: ON THE BACK FOOT BUT STILL DANGEROUS  
By Muhyadin Ahmed Roble ..... 6

IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN IRAQ AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE:  
STRATEGY, TACTICS AND IMPACT  
By Nima Adelkah ..... 9



**Alireza Moshajari was the first Iranian soldier killed while fighting in Iraq.**

## FRANCE ATTACKS UNDERLINE GROWING JIHADIST PRESENCE IN EUROPE

*James Brandon*

On January 7, two Islamist gunmen launched an attack on the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in central Paris. Having initially gone to the neighboring building, the attackers – armed with assault rifles, a shotgun and a grenade or rocket launcher – entered the office building, shot a maintenance worker and then stormed into the magazine’s weekly editorial meeting (*Le Point*, January 7; *Le Monde*, January 7). Most journalists present were then killed, execution-style, with the attackers prioritizing killing the editor, Stéphane Charbonnier, although several journalists survived, either by hiding or because the attackers chose not to shoot them (*Le Monde*, January 8). Charbonnier’s armed police personal protection officer was also killed in the attack, apparently without having provided any effective resistance (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 7). Exiting the building, the gunmen then shot a further policeman, killing him as he lay wounded in the street, and made their getaway by car (*Le Monde*, January 8). The attackers then hid an industrial estate in Dammartin-en-Goële on the edge of Paris, but were surrounded and then killed by the police on January 9 (*Libération*, January 9).

Concurrently, a third attacker, apparently in coordination with the *Charlie Hebdo* gunmen, launched his own attacks, shooting and critically injuring a jogger in Fontenay-aux-Roses in the Paris suburbs on January 7 (*Le Parisien*, January 10). He then fatally shot a police officer on January 8, before taking 19 people hostage in a kosher deli in the Porte de Vincennes areas on January 9. The attacker killed four hostages – all of them Jewish – before security forces stormed the shop and killed him later in the same day (*Le Figaro*, January 10). Although details of the attackers are still emerging some facts are clear. The *Charlie Hebdo* attack was conducted by two French-born brothers of Algerian origin, Said and Chérif Kouachi, who had a long history of involvement in French jihadist groups, most notably with the “Buttes-Chaumont network,” which

Terrorism Monitor is a publication of The Jamestown Foundation. The Terrorism Monitor is designed to be read by policy-makers and other specialists yet be accessible to the general public. The opinions expressed within are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The Jamestown Foundation.

Unauthorized reproduction or redistribution of this or any Jamestown publication is strictly prohibited by law.



For comments or questions about our publications, please send an email to [pubs@jamestown.org](mailto:pubs@jamestown.org), or contact us at:

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

Copyright ©2015

sent French Muslims to fight against U.S. forces in Iraq in the early and mid-2000s. In 2008, Chérif Kouachi was sentenced to three years for his involvement in the Buttes-Chaumont network, but he was released after 18 months (RTL, January 10; *L'Union*, January 10). Said, meanwhile, was alleged to have received militant training in Yemen in 2010, although this is not confirmed (*Le Journal du Dimanche*, 9 January). Both brothers were known to the security services and were reportedly on the U.S. “no-fly list” (France24, January 8).

The third attacker, who targeted the Jewish supermarket, Amedy Coulibaly, was a French-born Muslim with a long record of both criminal convictions for petty crime and involvement with jihadist groups. In one stint in prison, in 2005, he met Chérif Kouachi. Following this, Coulibaly seems to have turned his back on crime while becoming increasingly radical, leading to his arrest in 2010 in connection with a plot to try to rescue an Algerian jihadist from prison. He was convicted of possessing a large quantity of ammunition and was released in 2014 (*Le Monde*, January 10). A key influence on all three attackers is reported to have been Djamel Beghal, an experienced Algerian jihadist who had been in Afghanistan prior to al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks and who had also been part of Abu Hamza’s Finsbury Park circle in the 1990s and had contact with Abu Qatada, a leading proponent of armed jihad (*The Guardian*, January 11). It is not yet clear what direct connection the attackers had with jihadist organisations in the Middle East.

In the wake of the attacks, the French security services launched a number of crackdowns, both at suspected militants and on those seen as publicly supporting terrorism, most prominently the anti-Semitic “comedian” Dieudonne M’bala M’bala (*Le Monde*, January 14). The attacks also prompted a range of counter-terrorism operations in Europe, likely spurred by a fresh awareness of the threat. Most notably, in Belgium, on January 15, police undertook a series of raids on suspected militants; in one raid, two suspects were killed after they opened fire on the police (France24, January 15). The Spanish government has also reportedly launched investigations into Coulibaly’s visit to Madrid on 1 and 2 January, immediately prior to the Paris attacks (*El País*, January 15). In the UK, some individuals perceived to be at higher risk of being targeted by jihadists, have also been contacted by the police about their security arrangements, suggesting official concerns over a similar attacks there, while the head of MI5 warned that the UK now faced “more complex and ambitious plots” than in previous years (Sky News, January 9). In Germany, on January 15, police arrested a dual German-Tunisian national in the northern town of Wolfsburg on suspicion of travelling to Syria and joining the Islamic State as well as raiding flats in the southern town of

Pforzheim and in the eastern state of Thuringia (DW, January 15; January 19). As the attacks in France and the recent arrests across Europe illustrate, there are significant numbers of jihadist radicals throughout Europe, who are both willing and able to use violence to advance their cause, including individuals who were radicalized in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as individuals motivated by the recent rise of jihadist groups across the Middle East following the Arab Spring revolutions.

## LIBYA CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT UNLIKELY TO LEAD TO PEACE

*James Brandon*

Various Libyan factions began taking part in UN-brokered talks in Geneva on January 14, in an attempt to prevent the country from slipping further into civil war. Almost immediately, however, the talks threatened to flounder after the members of self-declared government based in the capital Tripoli refused to join the negotiations and said that any of its members who did attend spoke only as individuals (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 15). Despite this hurdle, however, on January 18, the internationally-recognized government, which is based in the eastern city of Tobruk, and representatives of the Tripoli-based government declared a ceasefire, in order to allow further negotiations to proceed (al-Jazeera, January 20).

The confusion surrounding the talks underlines the growing political, military and social chaos in Libya. The two principle political actors in the country are the Tripoli-based government, which is backed by the Muslim Brotherhood-influenced, Islamist-leaning “Libya Dawn” militia, and the country’s internationally recognized nationalist-leaning government, which is based in Tobruk, in eastern Libya, and which is backed by the Libyan National Army of Khalifa

Haftar. A third power block is composed of the more hardline militant Islamists based in Benghazi, the most prominent of which is Ansar al-Shari'a. In addition, various tribal-based militias hold sway in assorted smaller towns throughout the country.

The conflict between the two rival governments is fuelled by regional divisions, competing ideological views and also the intervention of rival powers that seek to use Libya as a field to advance their own national interests. For instance, the Tobruk-based government, are supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile the Islamist-leaning Tripoli-based government is backed by Qatar and Turkey and is almost the sole relic of these governments' post-Arab Spring ambitions of creating a new regional order based around Muslim Brotherhood-influenced political groups. This dynamic underpins and explains much of the current violence in the country.

Underlining these complexities, a day after the ceasefire was declared, on January 19, clashes between rival fighters loyal to the Tripoli and Tobruk-based governments broke out in Bin Jawad in central Libya (Anadolu Agency, January 20). Although these were small in scale, the violence nonetheless indicates the difficult of ensuring that any agreements are observed by the rival government's widely dispersed and organizationally-decentralized fighters, particularly from the Libya Dawn militia. Meanwhile, illustrating the political challenges that lie ahead, the Tobruk-based government said that, despite the ceasefire that it would continue to actively pursue "terrorists," which it did not define (Libya Herald, January 18). In addition, the leader of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar, reiterated his own uncompromising views of the army's mission: "My basic task is to cleanse Libya of the Muslim Brotherhood," an aim which is unlikely to be conducive with reaching a lasting agreement with the Brotherhood-backed Tripoli government (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 20).

The national government meanwhile enjoys military superiority in some areas – such as aircraft – and is also relatively economically strong, according to its deputy prime minister, controlling 80 percent of the country's oil production (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 11). In recent weeks, it has sought to leverage these two strengths, for instance, with its aircraft bombing a Greek-operated, Liberian-registered oil tanker on January 6, that was reportedly en route to Islamist-controlled Derna, in an attempt to further limit rebel access to oil and to shore up its own relative advantage (al-Jazeera, January 6). At the same time, however, it lacks the strength at present to either regain the capital or to impose order and subdue jihadists in those areas that it does

control. In this vacuum, hardline militants have been able to thrive, particularly in eastern Libya and especially Benghazi, where fighting continues sporadically; medical staff in Benghazi in early January reportedly said that 600 people had been killed in violence in the city during the previous three months (Reuters, January 19). In addition, on January 12, militants claiming to be affiliated with the Islamic State group in Libya took responsibility for the recent kidnapping of 21 Egyptian Christians (*al-Ahram*, January 12). On January 20, it was reported that the country's representative to OPEC had been kidnapped several days previously in Tripoli, illustrating the high levels of insecurity that affect even senior officials (Zawya, January 20). This underlines that even if the country's two main rival political factions succeed in reaching a comprehensive agreement in Geneva – which itself appears unlikely – the challenge of sticking Libya back together again is likely to remain daunting.

## Jihadism in Tunisia: The Growing Threat

Stefano M. Torelli

At the end of December, the Tunisian Interior Ministry reported that during 2014, 23 security force members (mostly soldiers and members of the National Guard) had been killed during the past year by Islamist militants. The ministry also said that government counter-terrorism operations during the same period had killed at least 30 jihadists and led to the arrest of more than 1,000 other suspects (Marsad, December 30, 2014). As in 2013, most counter-terrorism operations had focused on northwestern Tunisia, particularly in areas bordering Algeria and around the mountains of Jebel Chaambi. The government figures underlines that the Tunisian government is continuing its efforts against Islamist militancy.

However, as this data also shows, Tunisia continues to face a considerable jihadist challenge, both in the form of the approximately 3,000 Tunisian fighters reportedly active in Iraq and Syria and as shown by the government's continuous dismantling of local jihadist cells, some of which also sporadically conducted attacks inside Tunisia (al-Arabiya, December 15, 2014). The overlap between these two trends of growing domestic radicalization and increasing connections between local militants and jihadist groups abroad is underscored by the recent actions of Boubaker al-Hakim, a Tunisian jihadist. In a video posted in December, he claimed responsibility for the 2013 killings of two leading secular politicians, Chokri Belaid and Muhammad Brahmi, and declared himself to be a member of the Islamic State (Tunisie Secret, December 18, 2014). [1] These and related developments have led some local experts to estimate that there are around 400 active terrorist cells in Tunisia linked, ideologically or materially, to the Islamic State (*Echourouk* [Algiers], January 15). Even if such estimates are not entirely accurate, it is nonetheless clear that Tunisia is currently home to a range of terrorist cells, some of which have global links.

### Recent Attacks and Counter-Strategy

Typical of the pattern of counter-terrorist operations and jihadist attacks during the last year are the events of late October and early November. First, the Tunisian Army led a counter-terrorism raid on October 28, near Krib in northern Tunisia, which led to the arrest of eight suspects (Business News, October 28, 2014). The suspected terrorists were found in possession of explosive devices with electronic detonators as well as solar powered charging systems for electronic

devices, such as cell phones and laptops (*Tunisie Numerique*, October 28, 2014). This unusual equipment suggested that these individuals were in contact with jihadist cells operating in isolated areas of Jebel Chaambi, where militants are typically without access to electric power. A few days later on November 5, jihadists attacked a bus carrying a convoy of soldiers with their families near Nebeur in western Tunisia, close to Algeria. Five soldiers were killed in the ambush (African Manager, November 5, 2014). A few days after that, the Tunisian authorities announced the arrest of two Syrian nationals, who the government identified as belonging to the Islamic State, on the border between Algeria and Tunisia (*El Watan*, November 5, 2014). The timing of this apparent infiltration attempt coincided with an announcement by the Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade, a Tunisian jihadist group, that it was now affiliated with the Islamic State. A short period after this, on December 1, 2014, jihadists ambushed a car in Kef; one of its occupants, a National Guard member, was killed and beheaded by the attackers (*Jeune Afrique*, December 1, 2014). These episodes, taking place in the course of just over a month, show that Tunisian jihadist elements are still active in several parts of country, particularly near the Algerian border, and are capable of carrying out a wide variety of attacks.

In response to such developments, between November and December, the Tunisian army conducted several anti-terrorist operations in the Jebel Chaambi and Ouergha areas, which have been the base for various jihadists during the last two years. During these operations, the army deployed about 1,000 soldiers and 2,000 rapid intervention special forces, leading to the identification and killing of at least seven jihadists and the discovered of 13 improvised mines (*Le Temps*, December 31, 2014). These operations have continued through January 2015. In addition, after a policeman was assassinated in Zaghuan, the army launched a large-scale anti-terrorist operation in the Kasserine region (Direct Info, January 4; *Tunisie Numerique*, January 11). Following this, on January 11, Tunisian security services identified a cell in northern Tunisia that was allegedly preparing an attack, prompting the security forces to move promptly against it (Hakaekonline, January 11). In the subsequent raid on the group's hideout, the cell's members were found in possession of military uniforms, which were apparently to be used in an ambush. Five further arrests were made on January 14, in Menzel Bourguiba, a town approximately 40 miles northwest of the capital Tunis, further indicating the wide geographical spread of jihadist cells.

As these successful raids indicate, the Tunisian government has taken several important and effective steps in its fight against terrorism. Most recently, on December 2014, Prime

Minister Mehdi Jomaa inaugurated a new Counter-terrorism and Organized Crime Division and a new counter-terrorism force, following the earlier creation of a joint intelligence, security and defense agency in November in order to produce “a comprehensive vision of the successful fight against terrorism” (Tunis Afrique Presse, December 16, 2014). In the long-run, these institutions – if effectively managed – have the potential to greatly help the Tunisian authorities combat domestic terrorism. However, officials have also said that they remain concerned about external threats too. Jomaa himself said in January that the situation in Libya poses a potential threat to Tunisian stability and security (Medafrica, January 3). To combat such external threats, the Tunisian authorities have stepped up their cooperation not only with Algerian intelligence, but also with France, Italy and the United States (*Le Figaro*, November 11, 2014; AllAfrica, January 19; Magharebia, August 28, 2014).

Further highlighting the government’s growing anti-terrorist capabilities, in recent months policing efforts have also focused on tackling jihadist groups’ financial resources. For instance, a major operation conducted in October led to the arrest of six suspected terrorists in Ben Guerdane in southeastern Tunisia and the seizure of around \$700,000 in cash (*Echourouk* [Algiers], October 18, 2014). The arrested individuals were allegedly dealers in arms and counterfeit goods and, according to official sources, they also recruited fighters to travel to Syria. Taken together, these developments show that Tunisia is developing an increased capacity to tackle terrorism threats both at home and abroad.

At the same time, however, there are indications that the terrorist threat is continuing to develop rapidly. On October 24, two days before the country’s elections, Tunisian security forces identified and raided a terrorist cell in Oued Ellil, a neighborhood of Tunis (Kapitalis, October 24, 2014). During the resulting siege of the apartment where the militants had taken refuge, six suspected jihadists were killed. The episode highlighted two important emerging trends. On the one hand, as outlined above, it showed the Tunisian security forces acting proactively, successfully identifying and destroying the terrorist cell before it became operational and illustrating the government’s capacity to conduct effective intelligence gathering. On the other hand, this raid was the first time that a high percentage of women were found among suspected terrorists; of the six militants who were killed, five were young women who, according to some sources, were radicalized in Tunisia in the previous months (*Tunisie Numerique*, October 24, 2014). This development underlines the fast-mutating nature of the jihadist threat in Tunisia, even as the government ramps up its own capabilities.

## Foreign Links

While it is often difficult to determine the exact nature and origin of terrorist cells operating in Tunisia, or their exact affiliation with jihadists groups abroad, their ongoing ideological alignment with militants operating in Syria and Iraq is growing clearer, as illustrated by some of the above recent declarations of allegiance to foreign organizations. For instance, if al-Hakim’s claimed role in the political assassinations of 2013 were confirmed, it would indicate not only an ideological affiliation to the Islamic State among some jihadists, but also potentially direct contact between the Islamic State and Tunisian jihadist groups, even if some such links postdate the assassinations themselves. This trend would go hand in hand with other developments in North Africa, including the recent proclamation by jihadists in Derna, Libya, of their own allegiance to the Islamic State (*al-Arabiya*, October 6, 2014).

At the same time, however, other developments also suggest that the divisions between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-related groups have also reached North Africa. For instance, in one of his most recent messages, Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, the leader of Ansar al-Shari’a in Tunisia, made an appeal to all jihadists to unite under one banner in an apparent attempt to repair the breach between al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and their respective affiliate groups in the region (*African Manager*, June 14, 2014). Similarly, after the appearance of Islamic State affiliates in Libya, the Algerian group Jund al-Khalifa and the Tunisian group Okba ibn Nafaa, led by the Algerian jihadist Abu Sakhr, publicly declared their affiliation to the Islamic State; such groups had previously gravitated towards al-Qaeda (*al-Akhabar*, October 23, 2014).

## Conclusion

In addition to the above developments, the January 7 jihadist attack in Paris on the offices of the French satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* magazine highlighted both the potential influence of Tunisian radicals abroad. In particular, one of the Paris attackers, Chérif Kouachi, was reportedly in contact with Boubaker al-Hakim via the “Butte-Chaumont network” of French jihadists, which funneled fighters to Iraq in the early and mid-2000s (*Tunisie Numerique*, January 9). Similarly, in the wake of the Paris attacks, the Italian authorities announced that they had expelled nine people suspected to have links with the Islamic State, five of whom were Tunisians, (*La Repubblica*, January 19). These events indicate that the threat from Tunisian jihadists is not only confined to Tunisia and that Tunisian radicals may also pose a danger to third party countries, particularly if operating in conjunction with local al-Qaeda affiliates such as AQIM and

other groups such as the Islamic State.

*Stefano Maria Torelli is a Research Fellow at the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) and a member of the Italian Centre for the Study of Political Islam (CISIP).*

#### Note

1. The video, now removed, was posted on YouTube on December 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kmQem1XlCuY>.

## **Al-Shabaab: On the Back Foot but Still Dangerous**

*Muhyadin Ahmed Roble*

As the Islamic State and Boko Haram expanded rapidly throughout 2014, gaining territory and power in the Middle East and West Africa respectively, al-Qaeda's Somali affiliate al-Shabaab was on the back foot, retreating from its strongholds as a result of two major offensives carried out jointly by the Somali National Army (SNA) and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops. Key to this was the integration of over 4,000 Ethiopian troops into AMISOM ranks in January 2014, bolstering the number of African Union troops, who were initially from Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti and Kenya, to 22,126 (Garowe Online, January 22, 2014). Within a month of the Ethiopian reinforcements arriving, SNA and AMISOM launched their largest major joint offensive, dubbed "Operation Eagle," since they had pushed al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu, the capital, in August 2011 (BBC, January 22, 2014; *Daily Nation* [Kenya], December 1, 2014).

### **Al-Shabaab Knocked Back**

The joint offensives, whose ultimate goal was to oust al-Shabaab militants from their strongholds in urban areas and to bring more territory under the control of the Somali federal government, began in eight regions in south and central Somalia. In the initial weeks, Ethiopian and SNA troops were assigned to secure major towns in the three regions of Bay, Bakool and Gedo, leading to their capture of four significant towns: Rabdhure, Hudur and Wajid in Bakool and Burdhubo in Gedo (Sabahi Online, March 10, 2014). These towns, and in particular Hudur, which is about 260 miles southwest of Mogadishu and about 55 miles from the Ethiopia border, had previously changed hands between the militants and the Somali government and its allies frequently over the past six years. In addition, these towns had served at different times as training centers for both al-Shabaab and its predecessor al-Itihad al-Islamiya (AIAI, the Islamic Union) (Sabahi Online, March 23, 2012). AIAI had set up its first training camp, known as al-Huda, in Hudur in the 1990s (Waagacusub, October 1, 2013). Following the demise of AIAI, al-Shabaab, which was founded by members of AIAI's youth wing, established further training camps for its fighters in the area of the Somalia-Ethiopia border. However, in the face of the 2014 offensives, the group chose not to defend these towns, with the exception of Burdhubo, the second largest town in Gedo which the group had controlled the past six years, and instead retreated as the joint Somali-

AMISOM forces advanced (VOA Somali, March 9, 2014). As a result, by March 2014, al-Shabaab, which was once one of the most powerful al-Qaeda franchises in the world, had lost six main towns in Bay, Bakool and Gedo regions as well as the associated territory and resources (Hiiraan Online, March 9, 2014).

Meanwhile, in the regions bordering Kenya, the Kenya Defense Forces, operating under AMISOM command from July 2012, made a slow advance into some villages in the Lower Juba region, although they failed to capture the area's largest towns, and also carried out airstrikes against al-Shabaab leaders and associated foreign fighters on the outskirts of the southern town of Jilib – a district still under the control of al-Shabaab – twice in May alone (Keydmedia, February 6, 2014; Bloomberg, May 20, 2014). But it was the joint contingent from Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti and Ethiopia that made the most significant advances against al-Shabaab in the Lower and Middle Shabelle regions (under Ugandan and Burundian leadership) during this period, as well as in the Hiiraan and Galgadud regions (under Djiboutian and Ethiopian command) (Sabahi Online, October 30, 2014). As the operation went into its third month in March, the joint forces moved deep into al-Shabaab's strongholds in Lower Shabelle, seizing several key towns and villages including Qoryooley, an important location southwest of Mogadishu that connects coastal and inland areas and is located just 45 miles from the coastal town of Barawe, which was al-Shabaab's major stronghold at that time (VOA Somali, March 22, 2014).

In the Hiiraan region, Djiboutian and SNA troops enjoyed similar success. By March 2014, they were in control of almost all of the districts and towns of the region including Bulobarde, which had been al-Shabaab's largest base in the area (BBC Somali, March 13, 2014). Meanwhile, in the central region of Galgadud, Ethiopian and SNA troops took control of the strategic town of Elbur, about 230 miles north of Mogadishu (Kismaayo Online, March 24, 2014). Following this, the rainy season that began in April slowed operations against al-Shabaab, which were then further delayed for month of Ramadan in July (Radio Muqdisho, March 26, 2014).

Following the end of Ramadan, a second joint offensive, dubbed "Operation Indian Ocean," was launched in late August to end al-Shabaab's control of coastal towns (Radio Muqdisho, August 30, 2014). These towns were some of al-Shabaab's main sources of revenue, raised through port operations and taxes on goods. Accordingly, the group's key port town of Barawe was captured on October 5, 2014; this town had been the group's single most important commercial

asset since its loss of Kismayo in September 2012 (Garowe Online, October 5, 2014). Barawe was particularly vital to al-Shabaab finances as it served as the main hub for a multi-million dollar charcoal trade, which bankrolled a large part of the group's operations. The group also lost Tiyeeglow district, an important logistical hub for al-Shabaab, located approximately 300 miles northwest of Mogadishu in the Bakool region (Hiiraan Online, August, 26, 2014). According to AMISOM, the town also acted as the biggest transit point for al-Shabaab fighters moving between the north and south of the country (Radio Mustaqbal [Mogadishu], August 25, 2014).

### **Al-Shabaab Strikes Back**

However, even if al-Shabaab was being driven back in conventional fighting across much of the country and also increasingly cut off from its financial assets, the group's notorious and highly organized intelligence unit, Amniyat, managed to pull off several breathtaking attacks, showing that the movement still had teeth and ambition. Most notably, the unit carried out deadly and high profile strikes on targets in Mogadishu including the Villa Somalia (the presidential compound, twice), the Parliament building, the National Intelligence headquarters and AMISOM's largest military compound at Halane (Horseedmedia [Bosaso], July 8, 2014; Kulmiye Radio [Mogadishu], May 24, 2014; Hiiraan Online, August 31, 2014; Raxanreeb, December 25, 2014). The attacks underlined that Amniyat is arguably the most effective of al-Shabaab's units; the unit has a particular responsibility for spying, conducting infiltrations against enemy target – especially federal government and AMISOM installations – as well as carrying out targeted assassinations and suicide attacks against government officials, AMISOM forces and their facilities.

In addition, al-Shabaab has conducted significant high-profile strikes against targets outside Somalia, particularly focusing on countries contributing troops to AMISOM. On May 24, 2014, al-Shabaab carried out a suicide attack on Le Chaumière restaurant in Djibouti that killed a Turkish national and injured several Western soldiers (Midnimo, May 24, 2014). In Kenya, it carried out a massacre in a quarry near the border town of Mandera on December 2, killing 36 Kenyan workers (Garowe Online, December 2, 2014). This followed an earlier attack in Kenya, on November 22, against a bus that left 28 people dead on the Mandera-Nairobi road (Hiiraan Online, November 22, 2014). These attacks show that while al-Shabaab has weakened militarily in Somalia as a conventional force and now controls far less territory than at its height in 2008-2011, the group is still capable of inflicting large-scale casualties, especially against soft civilian targets,

including against targets abroad, in a large part thanks to the efficiency of its Amniyat branch.

### Conclusion: Al-Shabaab at the Crossroads

At present, as a result of the successful 2014 offensives against it, al-Shabaab does not control a single district in the four regions of Bakool, Hiiraan, Lower and Middle Shabelle in southern Somalia. In Gedo region on the Somalia-Ethiopia-Kenya border, the group controls only Bardere, the largest and most populated district. In total, therefore, the group is now fully in charge of only eight districts and towns: Diinsoor and Ufurow in Bay; Jamaame and Kamsuma in Lower Juba; Bu'ale, Sakow and Jilib in Middle Juba; Eldher in Galgadud and Harardhere in Mudug. Of these, only Harardhere has much commercial value, serving as a port town, which allows the group to profit from the charcoal trade. [2] In a further blow, al-Shabaab's experienced leader Ahmad Abdi Godane (a.k.a. Mukhtar Abu Zubayr), was killed in a U.S. airstrike in September and the head of Amniyat, Abdishakur Tahlil, was killed in a similar attack in December (*Daily Nation*, September 4, 2014; al-Jazeera, December 30, 2014). In addition, al-Shabaab's previous leader of Amniyat, Zakariye Ismail Hersi, was detained by Somali forces on December 27 (VOA Somali, December 27, 2014). In short, al-Shabaab, which in 2009, controlled about half of the country, including the capital, is a shadow of itself, with its key leaders dead or detained, its territorial control crumbling and its finances under attack. At the same time, however, it is risky to predict the ultimate demise of the group, which has previously suffered serious reverses before recovering; for instance, when the U.S.-backed Ethiopian invasion overran the group's predecessor, the Islamic Courts Union, in 2007.

Indeed, in recent months, the group has shown signs of innovating and of adapting to its new more limited powers. For instance, in most of the districts that the group has lost control of, including Hudur and Buulo Berde in Bakool and Hiiraan regions, its fighters have effectively imposed a blockade, disrupting the supply of food and non-food items, leaving dozens dead from starvation and so far defeating attempts by government and AMISOM troops to secure the roads (Radio Ergo [Nairobi], July 10, 2014). Likewise, although the group has isolated itself from its traditional support base because of its harsh punishment of anyone who disagrees with it and its assassinations of Islamic scholars, doctors, academics and students, it continues to control the minds and hearts of significant numbers of fighters and supporters within the Somali public. This will help to drive continued recruitment, while the group has also sought to create new sources of income, for instance, by imposing

exorbitant informal "taxes" – effectively protection money – on telecommunications, money transfer companies, big businesses and also transport vehicles that operate on the roads that it controls. Much however, will depend on the actions and character of the group's new leader, Ahmad Omar (a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah). If Ahmed Omar turns out to be a Somali version of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the man who helped al-Qaeda in Iraq rebrand and rise from the ashes and to then conquer much of Iraq and Syria, then al-Shabaab too may yet rise again. And that could mark the beginning of a new and very long war.

*Muhyadin Ahmed Roble is an analyst of African Affairs for The Jamestown Foundation who specialises in conflict, security and counter-terrorism.*

### Notes

1. AIAI, a pan-Somali organization that sought to establish an Islamic state in Somalia, was founded in the late 1980s, but had disappeared as a military force by 2000.
2. For all of the above, see AMISOM's Joint Security Operation Update released on October 29, 2014, <http://amisom-au.org/2014/10/joint-security-update-on-operation-indian-ocean-by-somali-government-and-amisom/>.



## Iranian Intervention in Iraq against the Islamic State: Strategy, Tactics and Impact

*Nima Adelhkah*

A deliberately gory June 2014 report on the Shi'a Ahl al-Bayat website, no doubt intended to arouse emotions, shows a photo of the bloodied face of Alireza Moshajari. It describes him as the first of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to have become a "martyr" in defense of the sacred shrine of Karbala against the then Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, now the Islamic State. Karbala, one of the most important Shi'a holy sites, is the battlefield where Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet, fought and died a martyr's death (Ahl al-Bayat, June 16, 2014). The site also shows other photos of Moshajari posing for a camera in a western Iranian province, apparently preparing to depart for Iraq.

A month later, in July 2014, reports of the death of another member of the IRGC, Kamal Shirkhani in Samarra, further indicated an Iranian troop presence deep inside in Iraq (Basijpress, July 8, 2014). More significant, however, was the December 2014 news of the death of Iranian Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi, while he was on an "advisory" mission in Iraq (Mehr News, December 29, 2014; Fars News, December 29, 2014). He was the highest-ranking Iranian officer to be killed in Iraq since the 1980-1988 war. Taqavi had reportedly been assassinated by the Islamic State in Samarra (Fars News, January 5).

While Iran has continuously and publicly denied having a formal troop presence in Iraq, with IRGC officials saying that Iran has no need to have an army in its neighboring country, the evidence suggests a growing trend of Iranian military activities in certain regions of Iraq deemed critical to Tehran and are related to Iran's efforts to contain the Islamic State (Fars News, September 22, 2014). However, this trend, which apparently has been growing since summer 2014, is less about expanding Iran's power and is more a defensive strategic attempt to prevent the Islamic State from undermining two of Iran's two core interests in Iraq: the security of its borders and the protection of Shi'a shrines there. Unlike Iran's strategy in Syria, which is primarily about preserving the Assad regime even at the expense of fostering sectarianism, Tehran is keen to prevent its Shi'a-dominated neighbor from developing a sectarian mindset that could potentially have wider negative implications for Iran in the region.

### Iran's Islamic State Problem

As a militant organization emerging from the Syrian civil war, but whose core originates in the earlier anti-U.S. insurgency in Iraq, the Islamic State has not only forcefully established a military presence in regions of Iraq and Syria, but has done so as an intensely sectarian force. Driven by its view that Shi'as are infidels, the Islamic State's military expansion in Syria, which spilled over into Iraq in summer 2014, has exacerbated tit-for-tat sectarian conflicts in both countries which have increasingly worried the Islamic Republic, the world's largest Shi'a state.

Iran's concern over the Islamic State is fourfold:

1. Firstly, the military onslaught by the forces of the self-declared Sunni caliphate has, at times, posed an immediate threat to Iran's west central provinces bordering Iraq, such as Ilam and Kermanshah. Though Iranian officials publically claim that the Islamic State does not have the capacity to attack Iran, there has been clear concern about the militants' takeover of relatively nearby Iraqi cities such as Hawija and Mosul (Tabnak, July 2, 2014). The Islamic State's further rapid takeover of Khanaqin, eastern Diyala and areas near the Iranian border in early summer 2014 underlined the threat to Iran's borders (Shafaq, October 8, 2014). Such developments have triggered an outbreak of conspiracy theories in Iran. For instance, one cleric argued that the Islamic State originally wanted to attack Iran instead of Syria, as part of a larger Western conspiracy against the Islamic Republic (Sepaheqom, December 31, 2014). Such conspiratorial views echo a belief by many Iranian officials that the Islamic State is a U.S. creation and that its aim is to sow discord and conflict in a region where Iran claims dominance.
2. The second Iranian concern is also connected with border security, this time in the form of Iranian fears of a refugee crisis arising from Islamic State attacks (Khabar Online, June 15, 2014). The refugee wave from Islamic State-affected areas of Iraq, similar to that which Iran saw from Afghanistan in the 1980s, is seen by Iran as posing significant security threat to the region and an economic burden to its economy, which is already struggling under U.S.-led sanctions (al-Arabiya, October 28, 2014).
3. Iran's third concern is over growing sympathies among Iran's Sunni minority for Sunni sectarian groups such as the Islamic State. Fears of Islamic State influence in southeastern regions and northwestern Kurdistan, which have large Sunni populations, continue to pose a major

problem for the Islamic Republic (Terrorism Monitor, December 13, 2013). In particular, there are fears that political-military movements such as Ahle Sunnat-e Iran (a.k.a. Jaysh al-Adl, Army of Justice), an offshoot of the Jundallah (Soldiers of God) militant group, may be inspired by the Islamic State or even that such groups may collaborate with the group to conduct insurgency operations inside Iran (Mehr News, August 15, 2014).

4. The fourth reason for Iran's concern is the religious dimension, perhaps the most significant to many Iranian government and military operatives. Iraq is home to a number of key Shi'a shrines, and Samarra – home to one of the most important such shrines – is on the frontline of the ongoing struggle against the Islamic State. Located 80 miles away from Baghdad and a short distance south of Tikrit, a Sunni Iraqi stronghold where there is some sympathy for the Islamic State, Samarra is where Iranian forces have mostly concentrated, due to the religious importance of the shrine and its vulnerability to Sunni militants. Apparently working under the assumption that United States's objectives against the Islamic State are only to protect the Kurds, a primary mission of Iranian forces is to protect Samarra's al-Askar shrine, whose dome had been previously destroyed by Salafist militants in February 2006.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that most announcements of Iranian deaths in Iraq have related to Samarra and that such announcements also deliberately emphasize the religious angle. For example, public announcements of the death of Mehdi Noruzi, a member of Iran's Basij militia who was apparently nicknamed "Lion of Samarra" and was killed by the Islamic State in that city, highlighted the religious dimension of the conflict in order to arouse religious fervor and, hence, public support (Fars News, January 12; al-Arabiya, January 12). A further example is that all the 29 Iranian deaths reported in December 2014 most likely took place in and around Samarra, as with the death of an Iranian military pilot, Colonel Shoja'at Alamdari Mourjani, who likely died on the ground in the vicinity of the city (al-Jazeera, July 5, 2014). Underlining the importance of Samarra and other shrines to Iran, a June 2014 statement by Qom-based Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi called for jihad against the *takfiri* (apostate) Islamic State in defense of Iraq and Shi'a shrines. This was partly meant as a religious decree intended to swiftly mobilize support for countering the Islamic State onslaught. His *fatwa* can also be seen as a move, most likely backed by Tehran, intended to help the government recruit volunteers to fight in Iraq.

### Military Intervention

While the U.S.-led air-campaign has curtailed the Islamic State's progress since August, Iranian forces on the ground have also played a critical role in limiting its advance into northeast and southcentral Iraq. Iran's support for Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces, as well as for Iraq's army and militia forces, has also played a key role.

As illustrated by the recent death of Brigadier General Hamid Taqavi, the Iranian military mission includes high-ranking members, including General Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's special operations Quds Force. Iranian military activities in Iraq appear to largely concentrate along the Iraq-Iran border and in key Shi'a shrine cities, most importantly Samarra, for the reasons stated above. Meanwhile, ten divisions of Iran's regular army are reportedly stationed along the Iraqi borders, ready for military confrontation (*Gulf News*, June 26, 2014).

In the conflict against the Islamic State, the Quds Force paramilitary operatives play an integral role, notably in training and commanding Iraqi forces, especially Sadrist and other militia groups such as Kataib al-Imam Ali (al-Arabiya, January 9). Typically, this has involved recruiting and training Shi'a Iraqi volunteers in camps in various Iraqi provinces, including Baghdad (ABNA 24, June 16, 2014). Quds officers have also reportedly been directly active in key hubs of the conflict, such as the siege of Amerli in northern Iraq, where Kurdish and Shi'a militia forces eventually defeated the Islamic State, with the input of Soleimani, in September 2014 (al-Jazeera, September 1, 2014; *Gulf News*, October 6, 2014).

The Lebanese Hezbollah group also plays a role in both training volunteers and conducting military operations in key battles against the Islamic State, as in the October 2014 attack on Islamic State positions in Jurf al-Sakhr, southwest of Baghdad, which reportedly involved 7,000 Iraqi troops, including militiamen (Al-Monitor, November 6, 2014; al-Arabiya, November 5, 2014). Meanwhile, the role of established Shi'a Iraqi militias such as the Badr Organization, led by Hadi al-Amiri, appears to be to support Iran's training of volunteers, though the Badr force has also participated directly in joint military operations against the Islamic State (Al-Monitor, November 28, 2014). In an unprecedented way, therefore, Iran is currently uniting Shi'a militias to fight a common, perhaps existential enemy of Shi'as: Sunni radicalism.

Iranian deployment of ground troops, however, has been only one part of its broader military operation in Iraq. Alongside

military operations, Iran has also shared intelligence with Kurdish and Iraqi forces, and allegedly installed intelligence units at various airfields to intercept the Islamic State communications (al-Jazeera, January 3). There are also reports of Iran sending domestically-built Adabil drones to Iraq to help the government against the Islamic State, highlighting Iran's growing unmanned aerial surveillance capability (*Gulf News*, June 26, 2014). Such intelligence sharing and military coordination against the Islamic State is likely to be most significant in eastern Iraq, in areas closest to Iran (al-Jazeera, December 3, 2014; al-Arabiya, January 16). Thanks to agreements signed between Iran and Iraq in late November 2013, the dispatch of weapons to Iraq has likely considerably increased since summer 2014 (al-Jazeera, February 24, 2014; Press TV, June 26, 2014).

### A Strategic Outline: National and Regional Impact

In an October 12 interview, Brigadier Yadollah Javani, the head of the IRGC's political bureau argued that the Islamic State had failed to capture Baghdad because of Iran's military support for the Iraqi government (Iranian Students News Agency, October 12, 2014). This may be true on a tactical level, but in a longer-term strategic sense Tehran's effort in Iraq may yet lead to unintended consequences that could yet threaten its wider interests in the region.

The most significant impact of Iran's interference in Iraq is likely to be sectarian. Iran, of course, is aware of the potentially radicalizing impact of its operations among Sunnis and the main reason it keep its military operations low profile is to avoid inflaming such sectarian tensions (al-Jazeera, July 5, 2014). However, Tehran's efforts have not been entirely effective. Anti-Iranian views in the (Sunni) Arab media are widespread, and these primarily describe Iran's intervention in Iraq as part of a sinister, broader strategy (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 13). Meanwhile, in Iraq itself, despite Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's efforts to bring Sunni Arabs into the government, not only in the provinces but also in Baghdad, the outcome of this process remains to be seen. For the most part, Sunni Arabs still feel marginalized and the potential for them to support the Islamic State remains high (al-Jazeera, January 3). Iran is likely to fear that such Sunni resentment may further encourage Saudi Arabia to involve itself in Iraq as a way to curtail Iran's growing influence there.

Often overlooked, there is also the intra-Shi'a impact of Iran's involvement, which Tehran appears understandably keen to downplay. Various Shi'a groups and figures continue to compete for influence in southern Iraq, with the interests of non-Iranian Shi'as being best represented by Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Sistani, the highest-ranking

cleric in the Shi'a world and weary of repeated Iranian involvement in Iraq since 2003, has distanced himself from Soleimani and Iran's military presence in Iraq. In fact, Sistani's representative has argued that the cleric's important summer 2014 *fatwa* calling for volunteers to resist the Islamic State was meant for Iraqis and not for Iranian Shi'as (Al-Monitor, December 2, 2014). How Sistani will respond to a continued Iranian presence in Iraq and in key shrine cities, especially after the Islamic State threat eventually wanes, remains to be seen. While it is likely that Sistani will continue to encourage some pragmatic cooperation with Tehran against the Islamic State, he will not accept a prolonged Iranian military presence in Iraq. This underlines that while the long-term implications of Iranian intervention in Iraq are unclear, for now at least Iran's military intervention in Iraq has effectively united Shi'as against the Islamic State.

*Nima Adelkhah is an independent analyst based in New York. His current research agenda includes the Middle East, military strategy and technology, and nuclear proliferation among other defense and security issues.*