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IRGC Commander Qasem Soleimani after Iranian-backed Shi'a militias broke the siege of Amerli, Iraq by the Islamic State.

GERMANY THWARTS TERRORIST ATTACK, BUT JIHADIST THREAT CONTINUES TO GROW

James Brandon

On April 30, German police in northeastern Hesse state reportedly thwarted a terrorist attack against a bicycle race that was planned in the region on the following day ([Deutsche Welle](#), May 1). The police arrested two suspects, a 35-year-old man of Turkish origin and his wife, and a search of their flat in Oberursel, near Frankfurt, revealed a completed pipe bomb, 100 rounds of 9-milimeter ammunition, three liters of hydrogen peroxide, a training projectile for a rocket-propelled grenade, parts of an assault rifle and assorted chemicals which could be used in bomb-making ([Deutsche Welle](#), May 2). Their computers were also found to contain saved copies of violent Islamist videos. The police said they discovered the plot after the couple used false identities to purchase three liters of hydrogen peroxide from a shop in Frankfurt in March (purchases of over a certain amount of the chemical have to be reported to the police) ([Der Spiegel](#), May 2). The couple are additionally believed to have links with the “Sauerland Group,” a network of Islamist extremists based in western Germany, who were arrested in 2007 and subsequently jailed for plots to attack Frankfurt airport and targets associated with the U.S. military ([Suddeutsche Zeitung](#), May 1).

The arrests underline that although Germany has never suffered a major Islamist terrorist attack, it continues to harbor a highly active hardline Islamist scene, which regularly produces militants. In early March, Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz—BfV), the main organ charged with investigating terrorist organizations and groups which may threaten the democratic order, estimated that around 680 German nationals have travelled to join jihadist groups abroad in recent years, principally in Syria and Iraq ([Deutsche Welle](#), March 4). The BfV said that a third of these are believed to have returned to Germany, while

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around 85 had been killed. The BfV's president, Hans-Georg Maassen, warned that such "departures to war zones show no signs of abating." Unlike security agencies in other Western countries, such as the United States and the UK, where the state sometimes regards Salafists as potential allies against jihadism, the BfV openly regards the growth of hardline Salafism as conducive to the growth of violent jihadism. Maassen accordingly said that "the Islamist scene is growing without a pause," and assessed that, as a result, "the breeding ground for jihadis is consequently getting larger." The BfV also said that it estimated the number of Salafists in Germany as 7,300, a number that has doubled since 2011, a testament to the continuing and growing appeal of hardline Islamism to some German Muslims.

Illustrative of the BfV's concerns over the close relationship between German Salafists and jihadists is Denis Cuspert, a former rapper (a.k.a. "Deso Dogg"), who has since become one of the Islamic State's leading online propagandists under his jihadist name of "Abu Talha al-Almani." Cuspert's trajectory is common to many European jihadists, consisting of youthful involvement in crime, drugs and low-level violence, followed by a conversion to Salafist Islam in 2007 (*Stern*, April 15). Such cases and others, which demonstrate an individual's rapid transformation from convert to Salafist to jihadist, seem likely to reinforce the BfV's view that Salafism in Germany often effectively functions less as an antidote to extremism and more as a gateway drug, providing disenchanted Muslims with an ideological framework to rage against society, which ultimately leads some down the path to violent jihadism and the Islamic State.

TEXAS SHOOTING INCIDENT HIGHLIGHTS 'LONE WOLF' THREAT

James Brandon

The latest lone wolf attack linked to cartoons of Islam's Prophet Muhammad took place in the unassuming location of the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, northeast of Dallas, Texas, on May 3. The attackers, Elton Simpson, a 30-year-old Muslim convert, and Nadir Soofi, his 34-year-old roommate, targeted an event billed as the "First Annual Muhammad Art Exhibit and Contest," which displayed various cartoons of Islam's prophet Muhammad. The event was organized by Pamela Geller, a well-known opponent of "Islamization," and featured Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician on several jihadist hit lists for his criticisms of aspects of Islam. The attack began when the gunmen, who both lived in Phoenix, drove up to the venue, exited their vehicle in front of a stationary police

car and opened fire with automatic assault rifles. Within around 15 seconds, however, their assault was over, with both men shot dead by a private security guard hired by the event organizers (*CNN*, May 6). The only other casualty was a security officer shot in the ankle. The attackers failed to enter the venue, and none of the high-profile guests were at any time in danger.

Although information on the plot's genesis is still emerging, the basic sequence of events is clear. Simpson, the Muslim convert who is presumed to be the leader of the attack, had been drawn to jihadism for some years; in 2009, he apparently attempted to travel to Somalia for fight for al-Shabaab. His online communications over this planned trip led to his arrest by the FBI, although the agency was unable to prove in court that he intended to join the group (*Washington Post*, May 4). Soofi meanwhile, despite spending time in Pakistan as a child, appears to have drifted towards extremism more recently, beginning by wearing traditional Islamic clothes and becoming more overtly devout; his father, however, said he did not detect any signs of radicalization. Neither attacker appears to have trained abroad or had any substantive contacts with foreign jihadist groups, and the attack appears to have been mainly inspired online. The attack, therefore, fit into the pattern of other such recent "lone wolf" attacks, such as the fatal attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris in January.

The May 3 Texas attack seems to have been prompted by Islamist online agitation over the planned event, which, even before the attack, had attracted considerable publicity. For instance, on April 23, a Twitter user called "Mujahid Miski," who is believed to be Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, a U.S. jihadist in Somalia with al-Shabaab, tweeted that "the brothers from the *Charlie Hebdo* attack did their part. It's time for brothers in the #US to do their part," before providing an online link to coverage of the upcoming event by Breitbart (*Foreign Policy*, April 27). For the aspiring jihadists in Phoenix in search of a target, the event in Dallas must have seemed the ideal opportunity for just such as a *Charlie Hebdo*-style attack, containing an intoxicating mixture of Muhammad cartoons and high-profile "anti-Muslim" targets, such as Geller and Wilders. Shortly before carrying out their attack, the attackers, under the name "Shariah is Light," tweeted: "The bro with me and myself have given *bay-ah* [allegiance] to Amirul Mu'mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make *dua* [prayers]". This was accompanied by the hashtag #texasattack, a deft move to ensure that their statement was picked up in the wake of the attack, which it duly was. The reference to Amirul Mu'mineen, the leader of the believers, is likely a reference to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State and its self-declared caliph.

These events underline well-known tropes of modern jihadism: the role of social media in inspiring attacks, the threat posed by self-radicalizing lone-wolves who self-align with foreign militant groups, the relatively rapid radicalization of individuals (such as Soofi) and jihadists' preoccupation with avenging perceived insults to Islam, particularly relating to cartoons of Muhammad. However, the events also show that lone wolves face severe operational limitations. For instance, while lone wolf gunmen can achieve occasional results against lightly-defended targets, such as the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists (who were protected by a single lightly-armed policeman), the Texas gunmen's rapid demise in a hail of gunfire outside the event venue in Garland without penetrating the venue or threatening their primary targets (despite the attackers wearing body armor) underlines that lone wolves rarely achieve their stated aims against any well-prepared target. Indeed, barring occasional successes such as the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, the lone wolf threat is often more theoretical than real. This is borne out by the similar failure of the February lone wolf attack on a cartoon-related event in the Danish capital Copenhagen; the attacker failed in his attack on his primary target, the cartoonist Lars Vilks, and instead carried out a secondary attack on a synagogue, killing a security guard, before being shot dead ([The Local](#) [Denmark], February 16). On the other hand, an advantage of lone wolf operations is that these are harder to prevent since they typically involve relatively minimal amounts of organization and online communication, which gives law enforcement agencies fewer opportunities to identify plotters in advance, even when individuals (as with Simpson) have clearly featured on the security services' radar. In addition, lone wolf attacks, even if unsuccessful, have an important psychological and propagandistic role. For instance, the latest attack shows that the groups like al-Shabaab and the Islamic State, even if not capable of directly conducting attacks against the U.S. homeland, remain capable of inspiring others to do so on their behalf.

Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State

Ebi Spahiu

In recent years, several hundred foreign fighters from the Balkans are believed to have joined the ranks of the Islamic State group ([Institute for the Centre for Study of Radicalization and Political Violence](#), December 17, 2013). Although a large number of Balkan militants fighting in Syria and Iraq are believed to be from Bosnia, with Bosnian police estimates reaching to over 180 fighters, growing numbers of ethnic Albanians, most notably from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia, have also joined jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria ([RFE/RL](#), February 11). This article aims to explore trends of rising Albanian militancy and to put this in the context of current religious trends and the influences that have penetrated numerous Islamic orders in Albania and among Albanian-speakers in Kosovo and Macedonia in the past few years.

Foreign Fighters

According to recent estimates, there are over 150 Albanian citizens and over 500 ethnic Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia who have joined terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq ([American Center for Democracy](#), March 25). In Albania, official police sources claim that 90 Albanian citizens have travelled between 2012-2014 to join groups in the region, initially Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's official franchise, and then later the Islamic State, its more hardline rival. However, religious leaders and journalists that have followed the issue believe the numbers are a lot higher. [1] Many radicals are thought to have travelled with their families to Iraq and Syria, although there are several cases of children being taken away without their mothers' knowledge. Such was the case of Shkëlzen Dumani, a 40-year-old man from Laprakë, in the Albanian capital Tirana, who reportedly died in Syria in 2014; he allegedly tricked his wife into signing a legal agreement that gave him permission to travel abroad with his two children, who are six- and nine-years-old ([Reporter](#) [Tirana], December 16, 2014).

Most recruits to Syria and Iraqi radical groups seem to have come from central Albania, including rural areas near Tirana, Elbasan, Librazhd and Pogradec; however, even smaller numbers of individuals from other towns are also present in the demographics. Interestingly, a number of men that have joined the Islamic State were not uneducated youth; some were educated and had been exposed to Western lifestyles, but had few opportunities offered at home. [2] Due to the EU

economic crisis and Albania's long history of immigration, the country has experienced a surge of immigrants returning home, most notably from Italy and Greece, although there are few employment opportunities for those who return. For these individuals, radical ideologies can offer an apparent solution. Such was the case of Verdi Morava, a 48-year-old currently being tried in Albania for facilitating the travel of jihadists and for financing terrorism. Morava had, for many years, lived in Italy and had graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering. [3] Similar examples are seen throughout the demographics of many young men, some of whom speak several languages, but joined due to ideological beliefs. [4] However, many have since returned, regretful of having participated in a war that was not based on the religious principles that they have imagined. Some of them have even spoken against the war in their communities.

Analysis of the significant numbers of foreign fighters from Kosovo show a generally similar picture. For instance, a recent publication by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS), based in Pristina, explored in detail the lives and religious motivations of the over 230 fighters from Kosovo, including veterans of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), assorted youths and also religious leaders who had promoted jihad in local mosques. Some of these volunteers, such as Hetem Dema, a former KLA soldier from Kacanik who was killed in Syria in January 2014, are known to have died in the conflict, while others have since returned. [5] Indeed, the involvement of former KLA fighters is a persistent trend, dating to 2012 when, at the outset of the war in Syria, Kosovo government officials joined the international community in condemning Assad's atrocities and established "diplomatic contacts" with the rebel Free Syrian Army, with former KLA fighters, in particular, sharing their experiences in dealing with oppressive Serb rule.

Domestic Arrests

Albania is a highly pro-Western nation, with aspirations to join the European Union. It also maintains a strong relationship with the United States, and it has supported the War on Terror since 2001 ([E-International Relations](#), March 4). Partly as a result, it has cracked down strongly on foreign fighters and those believed to be encouraging them. For instance, in March 2014, 13 people were arrested at two mosques based in the outskirts of Albania's capital, for allegedly recruiting over 70 foreign fighters to join Jabhat al-Nusra, and later the Islamic State, and for having encouraged religious divisions. Nine of the arrested are currently being tried by Tirana's court over their links to organized crime. Almost unanimously, the indicted men did not deny their accusations, but publicly took pride in their activities. For

instance, Bujar Hysa, one of the imams accused, formerly a preacher at the mosque of Unaza e Re, pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State, when questioned in court over his activities. [6]

Similarly, in Kosovo, which also retains strong links with Western powers, since August 2014, more than 100 individuals have been arrested or questioned by the security services, including a number of leading religious and political figures tied to the Islamic Union of Kosovo, an officially recognized religious institution. However, even though these August operations gained tremendous praise from Western leaders, many of those detained have since been released, including the imam of Prishtina's Grand Mosque, Shefqet Krasniqi, due to insufficient evidence of their direct involvement in terrorist activities ([Gazeta Express](#) [Prishtina], January 22). However, in early March, seven of these suspects were indicted for "inciting others to commit or participate in terrorist activities, and for securing funds and other material resources," according to a statement by Kosovo's prosecutor's office ([Balkan Insight](#), March 3).

Background to Radicalization

Following the collapse of Enver Hoxha's communist regime in Albania and the Balkan wars that followed Yugoslavia's dissolution, external religious influences played a key role in facilitating the recruitment of hundreds of ethnic Albanians into Middle Eastern jihadist groups in recent years. For instance, after the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Albania's Muslim clergy, particularly through the Muslim Community of Albania (MCA) organization, received significant funding from Salafist and Wahhabist groups in the Middle East, which was primarily aimed at changing how the country's majority Muslim population practiced Islam. [7] This import of Wahhabism was at odds with the country's Hanafi-influenced Sufi traditions that emphasized both the separation of church and state and also religious coexistence. In addition, although the MCA, and other organizations, have now distanced themselves from conservative and Islamist interpretations of Islam, there are also now numerous mosques that promote a radical "takfiri" vision of Islam. [8]

The Balkan wars of the 1990s served as an additional means for hardline groups to establish a footprint in the region. In particular, the war in Bosnia led to several hundred individuals from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Algeria and elsewhere, including veterans of the Afghan jihad, volunteering for what they regarded as a holy war against Christian Serbs. Although most of these fighters left after the war, their ideological influence persisted in some areas.

In addition, the 1999 war in Kosovo was viewed by Islamist radicals as a jihad on behalf of Kosovo's mainly Muslim, ethnic-Albanian population. Although, the main armed group, the KLA, followed a largely nationalist agenda and discouraged foreign radicals, the recent appearance of significant numbers of ex-KLA fighters in the ranks of the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra reflects that the Kosovo war may have been given a religious dimension that is only now becoming apparent. Shefqet Krasniqi, for instance, one of Kosovo's most influential and controversial religious figures, recently posted a video to his official Facebook page that described his role as a war veteran (the first time he confirmed his participation in the war), characterized the 1999 war as conducted "in the name of Allah" and said that God and homeland are tied together (Facebook, April 10).

Implications

Despite the moderate traditions of Islam practiced among most Muslim communities in the Balkans, a number of factors, including the legacy of the Balkan wars, the influx of Wahhabi influence after the collapse of communism and Europe's recent economic problems, have combined to lead hundreds of ethnic Albanians from across the region to join radical groups in Iraq and Syria. As elsewhere, radical Islamist influence is also multiplied by skillful jihadist use of social media, YouTube and Twitter-based propaganda to target Albanian-speaking audiences, particularly those questioning the legitimacy of "traditional" Balkan Islam and also those rejecting democracy. These developments, as well as boosting the combat power of radical groups in Iraq and Syria, present an additional challenge to the long-term stability of the Balkan region, where various unresolved grievances between ethnic groups and memories of historic conflicts remain close to the surface. The volatility of the region and the potential for fresh interethnic conflict was lately underlined in Macedonia where clashes on May 9-10 left 22 people dead, including fighters who had reportedly crossed the border from Kosovo, and caused severe destruction in neighborhoods populated by mainly ethnic Albanians in Kumanovo (*Reporter* [Tirana], May 11). The Macedonian prime minister, Nikolla Gruevski, called the alleged perpetrators "terrorists" who sought to "destabilize the country" (*Illyria Press*, May 10). In response to the attack, many ethnic Albanians living in Macedonia called for restraint and peace between ethnic groups on social media; others, however, were quick to call for war to get rid of "kuffars" and to create a Greater Albania. These differing reactions symbolize the different trends that are becoming increasingly evident in Albanian society throughout the region.

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Notes

1. Author's field interviews with state officials, journalists and religious leaders in Albania.
2. Author's field interviews with local religious leaders in the above-mentioned areas.
3. Author's interview with Verdi Morava's father, Dielli Morava, March 2015.
4. Author's field interviews.
5. "Report inquiring into the causes and consequences of Kosovo citizens' involvement as foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq," Kosovar Center for Security Studies, April 14, 2015, <http://www.qkss.org/en/Occasional-Papers/Report-inquiring-into-the-causes-and-consequences-of-Kosovo-citizens-involvement-as-foreign-fighters-in-Syria-and-Iraq-408>.
6. Author regularly observes on-going trials at Tirana's Court of Organized Crimes.
7. Author's several interviews with local imams and with leaders of the Muslim Community of Albania.
8. Author interview with Aleksandra Bogdani (BIRN Journalist), March 23, 2015, Tirana, Albania.

Kurdish-Shi'a Tensions in Iraq Amid the Struggle Against the Islamic State

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

As part of their ongoing offensive against the Islamic State, Iraq's coalition of mainly Shi'a militias, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), in cooperation with the Iraqi armed forces have recently pushed north, coming close to Kurdish positions. From 2008 to 2014, there were minor altercations in territories disputed between the Kurds and Baghdad in Kirkuk, Diyala and Mosul provinces between the mainly-Shi'a Iraqi Army and Kurdish forces. [1] Since summer 2014, however, the presence of the Islamic State has largely acted as a buffer between the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi government and PMF forces. Meanwhile, the Kurds have used the presence of the Islamic State to secure most former Iraqi Army positions in disputed territories, such as in oil-rich Kirkuk ([Rudaw](#), June 12, 2014). However, as a result of the Shi'a militias' recent push northward, there has been speculation over the potential for renewed conflict between Shi'a and Kurdish forces.

In the context of these tensions, the key Kurdish players are Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two main Kurdish political parties, which enjoys good relations with Iran and with Iraq Shi'a political factions. The other main Kurdish party, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), however, enjoys less warm relations with Iran. The dynamics between these Kurdish groups and with Iranian and Iraqi Shi'a groups will determine the potential for Shi'a-Kurdish conflict, and with it, the potential for this rivalry to distract both parties from the conflict against the Islamic State.

PUK-Shi'a Relations

The PUK's territory borders Iran, and the PUK's Peshmerga fighters control most of the Kurdish territory that is near the positions of Iraq's Shi'a militias. In addition, both the PUK governor of Kirkuk and Shi'a parties in the city think that it is better for Kirkuk to be an independent province, instead of being annexed into the official Kurdistan region. Part of the reason for this is that the PUK fears it could lose influence in Kirkuk, if Kirkuk is annexed and run from the capital of the Kurdistan region, Erbil, which is controlled by the KDP. This situation has generally helped to prevent friction between the PUK and Shi'a militias, particularly due to the links between the PUK and Iran. "We have no problem with them; all the time we have meetings with them [Peshmerga

leaders]," Abu Tahir al-Bashiri, a leader of a Shi'a militia in Kirkuk, told Jamestown. [2] "Barzani does not represent all Kurds, there are other parties like the PUK," he said.

Similarly, a prominent PUK Peshmerga commander has praised the role of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ([NRT](#), March 9). Further cementing such ties with Iran and Shi'a militias, the PUK's Peshmerga forces have been actively fighting the Islamic State since June in some of the disputed territories around Diyala and Kirkuk to secure the Baghdad-Kirkuk road, often with coordination with Shi'a militias and the Iraqi government ([Kurdistan Tribune](#), April 24). In addition, on February 18, a co-commander of a Shi'a militia visited PUK Peshmerga frontlines in Kirkuk in Maktab Khalid and Mullah Abdullah. [3] Also, in April, the veteran Peshmerga leader Haji Mahmoud visited the Shi'a militias in Kirkuk province. [4] More recently, the underlining these links, the Peshmerga in PUK-controlled zones and Shi'a militias in April coordinated during offensives against the Islamic State on the outskirts of Kirkuk ([Independent](#), April 20). These developments illustrate that relations between the PUK, Shi'a groups and Iran are generally cordial. Nevertheless, there were tensions recently in the town of Tuz Khurmato and in the town of Jawlala, which Shi'a militias left after being threatened by a Peshmerga leader ([IraqOilReport.com](#), May 9; [Xendan](#), May 8).

PDK-Shi'a Relations

However, while there is some coordination on the frontlines between the PUK and the Shi'a militias, there is generally no such cooperation between the Shi'a and the KDP Peshmerga. Tensions between the KDP and Iran-backed Shi'a militias have been building for some time. From 2012 to 2013, Barzani, the Kurdistan region's president and head of the KDP, angered Iranian-backed Shi'a political factions in Iraq by supporting the Sunni protests that erupted against the government in December 2012 ([Today's Zaman](#), May 12, 2013). As a result, when Mosul fell in June 2014 and Kurdish forces secured positions of the Iraqi army, Qais al-Khazali, the leader of the influential Asaib Ahl al-Haq Shi'a militia, accused Barzani of working together with the Islamic State and with former Sunni Baathist leader Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri to destroy Iraq ([Shafaq](#), June 15, 2014).

Since then, tensions have been increased further. For instance, in July 2014, KDP-linked Peshmerga fighters secured two oil fields in Kirkuk, and Barzani also hosted Arab Sunni leaders who held a "revolutionary" conference against Baghdad in Erbil ([Kurdistan Regional Government](#), July 11, 2014; [Al-Monitor](#), July 28, 2014). In addition, as a further ongoing irritation to Shi'a militias, the controversial

Sunni leader Ali Hathem, who has spoken out against Shi'a militias, lives in KDP-controlled Erbil. For his part, when Mosul fell, Barzani rejected Iranian pressure to actively support Baghdad in retaking Sunni Arab areas, in what he feared would potentially become a sectarian Shi'a-Sunni war. Moreover, irritating Baghdad further, in July 2014, he said the Kurds were planning a referendum for an independent Kurdish state and also a referendum to annex disputed areas, including Kirkuk. These dynamics changed to some extent after the Islamic State attacked the Kurdistan region in August, following which the Iranians played a key role in saving Erbil, leading to Barzani publicly thanking Iran (*Reuters*, November 12, 2014; *Press TV*, August 11, 2014). More recently, the prime minister of Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani, met with Iranian security officials, including General Qasem Rezai, the head of Iran's border guard force, which is potentially suggestive of attempts to improve relations (*KRG Cabinet*, April 23).

Potential for Escalation

The potential for Shi'a-Kurdish tensions to escalate was illustrated from late 2014 when, after the Islamic State's advances in August, Iraq's Shi'a militias and PUK Peshmerga cooperated in September 2014 to break the Islamic State siege on the Shi'a Turkmen town of Amerli and to capture the town of Jawlala on November 23, 2014 (*al-Jazeera*, September 1, 2014; *al-Jazeera*, November 24, 2014). This success, however, led to small incidents and tensions between Kurds and Shi'a fighters in the provinces of Diyala and Kirkuk. In particular, on February 7, Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Corps Shi'a militia visited Amerli and promised to send Shi'a militia reinforcements to Kirkuk (*Burathanews.com*, February 8). The visit and al-Ameri's statement notably angered the KDP, which feared Shi'a militias could threaten Kurdish control of Kirkuk, although al-Ameri had also met the PUK's governor of Kirkuk, who wants Kirkuk to be more independent from KDP-controlled Erbil (*Al-Monitor*, February 12, 2014). In response, the Kurdish president Barzani himself visited Kirkuk just a few days later, on February 17 (Rudaw, February 18). In the wake of Barzani's visit, a Peshmerga spokesperson announced that forces from outside Kirkuk could only enter in the future with permission from the Kirkuk authorities and Peshmerga forces (*Kirkuknow*, February 18). Despite this, a Shi'a militia presence—mostly recruited from the local Shi'a Turkmen community in the Taza district, which had been the victim of Islamic State attacks—has remained in Kirkuk province, especially around Tuz Khurmato (*AP*, February 17; *IB Times*, June 18, 2014). “They are fighting together... They are not even one meter away from each other in some places,” said a Shi'a Turkmen politician of PUK and Shi'a Turkmen forces in Taza, Daquq, Tuz Khurmato and Amerli.

[5] Tensions in the Kirkuk area have persisted since then, with Baghdad recently reportedly trying to recruit 10,000 fighters in former KDP zones of control (*Basnews*, April 14). Underlining KDP sensitivity, however, Haydar Shesho, who created his own Yazidi militia in the Sinjar region, was arrested by the KDP in April for creating an illegal Shi'a militia (*NRT*, April 7).

Conclusion

Although the conflict in Iraq is often portrayed as a conflict between Shi'as, Kurds and Sunnis, the above developments and dynamics show that there are many other internal political and tribal divisions and tensions, including among the Kurds themselves. However, despite some recent tensions and speculation over the potential for conflict between the Kurds and Shi'a militias, there has been a considerable amount of military cooperation against the Islamic State. Moreover, Kurdish and Shi'a forces cannot afford to fight each other as long as the fight against the Islamic State continues. Thus, without a major crisis—for instance, caused by Kurdish President Barzani attempting to unilaterally annex the disputed territories without approval from Baghdad (as he threatened to do in July)—it seems unlikely that Kurdish control over these areas will actively be challenged by Shi'a militias, and, therefore, the status quo will continue. However, tensions could still erupt if there are fresh disputes between Baghdad and Erbil, for instance, over budgetary issues, as happened prior to the rise of the Islamic State, and/or if there are fresh attempts by Baghdad to forcibly challenge or limit Kurdish control of Kirkuk. Another potential source of tensions is if Baghdad attempts to recruit fighters in KDP zones of control, particularly on and around the frontlines around Sinjar and Mosul where Kurdish and Shi'a cooperation will be most critical to the defeat of the Islamic State.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a political analyst specializing in issues concerning Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey with a particular focus on Kurdish politics.

Notes

1. See “Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line,” International Crisis Group, July 2009, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/088-iraq-and-the-kurds-trouble-along-the-trigger-line.aspx>.
2. Author's interview with Abu Tahir al-Bashiri, a leading member of a Shi'a militia operating in the Kirkuk province. He was interviewed in a Shi'a militia building inside Kirkuk, February 11, 2015.

3. Author's interview with a Peshmerga commander in Daquq, May 7, 2015.
4. A Shi'a militia Facebook page from the area: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%A9/1471023529853563?fref=photo>.
5. Author's interview with Fawzi Haydar Hassan, vice-head of the al-Hakim bureau in Kirkuk, February 11, 2015.

Iran's Changing Regional Strategy and Its Implications for the Region

Nima Adelhkiah

In a typical gesture of defiance, which has signified allegiance to Iran's revolutionary credentials since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, General Abdullah Araqi, the lieutenant commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), stated the following at a public event in early May: "Today, the world arrogance [the United States] is present in the region, has deployed its warships in the Persian Gulf and has military bases in the regional states, but we are not afraid of this presence and its so-called options on the table" (*Fars News*, May 7). While this show of defiance may have Iranians as the main target audience, Araqi's statement also says something central about how Iran perceives its core national interest: standing firm against a U.S. military presence in the region, which it views as an existential threat to the Islamic Republic. Beyond ideology, Iran's regional policy is driven by fears of a U.S. invasion or a U.S.-orchestrated military attack by a regional power, with Iran's nuclear sites as the main target. In an attempt to diminish the prospects of a military attack, Tehran has, in recent years, adopted several regional strategies that are intended to contain this perceived threat.

Tehran has undeniably struggled to define a clear strategy, with Iranian officials attempting in various ways over time to establish a coherent defensive posture to prevent a perceived U.S. attack, while also responding to the fallout from various issues, such as the Syrian conflict. At the same time, Iran's regional strategy has been contingent on shifting geopolitical situations, which has, at times, allowed Iran to expand its sphere of influence and others to undermine Iran's position in the region. In response to the latest developments in the greater Middle East, and particularly to the rise of the Islamic State as a major sectarian and military threat to the Islamic Republic in 2013, Iran has adopted a new strategy. The latest move is one among the four historical phases in Iran's regional strategy since the end of Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), which are as follows.

Four Strategic Phases

The first phase began with Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), continued during the reformist period under Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and ended with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. During this period, Iran's regional strategy included efforts to rebuild relations with Arabian states, in particular Saudi Arabia, while reaching

out to new Muslim-majority states that were formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. In addition, after the September 11 attacks, Iran sought to build new cooperative ties with the United States, as shown by Iran's tacit support for the U.S. removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan, a development which Tehran viewed as being to its advantage.

The second phase, which ran from 2003 to 2009, was defined by the U.S.-led toppling of the Baathist regime in Iraq and the subsequent rise of Shi'a political parties to power in Baghdad in 2004, causing a sharp divergence between U.S. and Iranian interests in the region. With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's electoral victory in 2005 and the hardliners' monopoly over the government, in particular its foreign policy, Iran took advantage of the changing situation in the region, particularly the civil war in Iraq, by establishing new alliances and reaffirming older networks that stretched from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq. In addition, the 2006 Lebanon war (a.k.a. the "July War"), which ended with Hezbollah surviving massive Israeli attacks, created new cross-sectarian support in the region for Iran, with Ahmadinejad gaining popularity in the streets of Cairo and Istanbul for his anti-Israel rhetoric. Iran's controversial but increasingly developed nuclear program only enhanced its leverage as the government continued to use the nuclear issue to bolster its domestic support. This phase marked the Islamic Republic's highest level of influence in the region.

The disputed 2009 elections heralded the third phase of Iranian foreign policy when the Islamic Republic faced a domestic and foreign crisis of legitimacy and growing political dissent at home. In post-2009 election period, support for the nuclear program eroded due to internal politicking over the impact of sanctions imposed because of the nuclear program and Ahmadinejad's mismanagement of the nuclear talks and economy. Arab neighbors, wary of Iran's nuclear program, continued to view Iran as a regional hegemonic force; this view spread from the palaces to the streets with the start of the Syrian civil war that followed the 2011 uprisings.

Syrian Conflict and Fresh Realignment

The start of the Syrian conflict, beginning in early spring 2011 with armed conflict between the military of President Bashar al-Assad and rebel forces, forced Iran to undertake a forth phase of foreign policy, based around a program of extensive and expensive economic and military support for Damascus. The immediate consequence of the new Iranian regional strategy to support al-Assad's regime led to a sectarian backlash, the extent of which, Tehran may not have

originally anticipated. Iranian assistance for pro-government militias and Damascus' increasing military dependence on Iran, together with the presence of the Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria, revived sectarian tensions across the region, in particular in the Levant, Egypt and Gulf countries.

While the 2006-2007 Iraq Civil War was primarily limited to Iraq and had limited regional repercussions, the Shi'a-Sunni violence in Syria became a full-blown regional sectarian conflict as well as spawning militant organizations, such as the Islamic State. As a result, by early 2011, Iran had largely lost Sunni popular support, with Tehran-backed al-Assad widely viewed as the most hated Arab figure in the Sunni world, particularly in Persian Gulf states, such as Qatar, where most financial support for anti-Assad groups originated.

The Islamic State's shocking capture of the key Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014 and the group's (partial) takeover of Iraq's al-Anbar province forced a fresh shift in Iran's strategy, introducing a new phase. This time, however, the focus was not to expand Iran's sphere of influence, but to focus more on targeted interventions to rebuild Shi'a alliances in Iraq, notably to defend Baghdad, and alliances with Iraq's Kurds to defend the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil. The conflict in Iraq also became a proxy war between Iran and wealthy Sunni states and individuals based in the Gulf, possibly including the Saudis. The additional case of Yemen is unique in the context of Iran's new Shi'a-focused alliance building strategy. This is largely due to the geographical distance and difficulty in stationing military officers so close to Saudi Arabia. While there are earlier reports of secret meetings between the Shi'a Houthis rebels and IRGC and Hezbollah figures along the Yemen-Saudi border, stationing IRGC personnel in Yemen would be replete with challenges ([al-Arabiya](#), December 13, 2009). Iran's military intervention in the form of support for the Houthis, therefore, has therefore primarily focused on the Quds Forces smuggling weapons to the rebels through arms-carrying vessels, although there are reports of Hezbollah operatives actively assisting the Houthis in Sana'a ([al-Jazeera](#), March 26; [al-Sharq al-Awsat](#), September 27, 2014). While General Qasem Soleimani of the IRGC has emerged as the key Iranian figure in charge of military and policy decisions over Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, Iran's military operational involvement has included other IRGC officers as military advisors, largely in Iraq and Syria ([Terrorism Monitor](#), July 10, 2014).

The most significant feature of the latest strategy is the rapprochement with the West and other regional powers, a process that began, openly and surely, with the electoral victory of relatively moderate President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. Rouhani and his new administration have not only

sought to rebuild relations with Iran's neighbors, but also to agree on a nuclear deal with the aim of doing away with the sanctions and fixing Iran's ailing economy. With the hardliners marginalized in Iranian politics, Iran's regional strategy continues to foster détente and yet bolster "the sphere of national interest" (*howzeh manafe-ye meli*) by protecting the country from its external enemies, particularly Sunni militancy.

The Impact of the New Strategy on the Region

The main strategic objective of the Islamic Republic remains to formulate a defensive position to thwart military attacks from the United States or Israel. Tehran is aware that, in order to create and foster such defensive posture, it has to support its Shi'a and Sunni allies, such as the Kurds, which entails engaging in multiple hot or cold conflicts. At the same time, complicating Iran's strategy, is that distrust is common among pro-government factions in Iran, as well as confusion (not confined to Iran) over the United States' own regional strategy.

According to Hussein Amiri, a conservative analyst writing for *Gerdab*, a hardliner website associated with the IRGC's defense headquarters, the U.S. strategy in the Middle East has shifted towards Arab monarchies since 2011's popular uprisings (*Gerdab*, April 29, 2013). Amiri viewed the new U.S. strategy as an attempt to preemptively tackle the threat of monarchies collapsing throughout the region, and has focused in particular on the survival of Saudi Arabia, using the monarchy as its "military muscle" to advance its economic and military interests in the region. In this view, U.S. support for the Saudis also assures the balance of power in a region where Iranian influence is steadily increasing. Alleged U.S. attempts to topple the al-Assad regime, Tehran's key regional ally, as a way to limit Iran's influence in the region, also play an integral role in hardline views of the U.S. strategy in the Middle East (*Jahan News*, January 14, 2014). Writing for the *Hamshahrionline*, Gholam-reza Karimi, a political scientist based in Iran, meanwhile argues that the United States is determined to maintain the sanction regime imposed on Iran for its nuclear program (*Hamshahrionline*, May 12). According to this view, Iran should remain vigilant as the United States cannot be trusted since it ultimately seeks regime change.

Iran's new strategy still reflects an existing mistrust of the United States. What is different, however, about the latest strategic change is that Iran's military operations threaten to enhance sectarian sentiments not only in the region, but also beyond, among the Sunni diaspora in Europe, Australia and North America. There is also the risk of an

increase in proxy wars between Iran and its Sunni Arab regional rivals, especially Saudi Arabia. The new Saudi Arabian monarchy with its hardline regional policy against Iran, as demonstrated by its military operations against the Houthis since early spring, underline the threat posed by growing proxy conflicts. Iran's allegedly continuous cargo shipment to Yemen, for example, could potentially lead to the outbreak of military conflict either in the Persian Gulf or the Gulf of Aden, in particular near the rebel-held Yemeni port of Hodeidah (*al-Jazeera*, April 29; *al-Jazeera*, May 12; *Ya Libnan*, May 10). In light of the ongoing and unpredictable nuclear talks, Iran's new strategy, which is partly driven by defensive objectives in response to wider changes in the region, signals an insecure future for the Middle East.

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