AL-SHABAAB ATTACK KEEPS PRESSURE ON KENYAN MILITARY AND GOVERNMENT

James Brandon

On January 15, the Somali militant group al-Shabaab carried out one of its most significant attacks on the forces of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), when it attacked a remote Kenyan military forward operating base in El-Edde, located about 50 miles north of the Somali capital Mogadishu. Al-Shabaab later said that its fighters, from the group's Saleh an-Nabhani battalion, had overrun the base and killed "over 100" Kenyan soldiers and captured others. The Kenyan military has not yet released any casualty figures for the attack, although 30 survivors and the bodies of some of the slain have since been repatriated (*The Star* [Kenya], January 19). One survivor of the attack said that al-Shabaab had used a suicide car-bomber against the base's gates, after which the militants swarmed inside (*The Star*, January 19). Somali media sources reported afterwards that in the wake of the attack, the Kenyan military had carried out a number of airstrikes against suspected militants, inflicting civilian casualties in the process (Mareeg, January 20).

Although the extent of the attack is still unclear, it is seemingly one of the largest attacks against African Union (AU) or Kenyan forces in the country for at least a year. The attack underlines several themes. Firstly, it shows that although al-Shabaab has largely ceded the country's cities to the Somali government and its international supporters, it remains able to deploy significant forces in some rural areas, notably in some areas around Mogadishu and in southern parts of the country, particularly in Jubaland. At the same time, al-Shabaab's retreat to rural areas has allowed the group to choose its targets and to fight at a time and place of its choosing. Conversely, however, it is a sign of AMISOM's success that its deployments into such remote parts of Somalia are forcing al-Shabaab to fight in these locations, while allowing the Somali government to strengthen its presence in the country's cities.

At the same time, recent weeks have revealed fresh evidence that al-Shabaab is continuing to plan significant attacks inside Kenya itself. On

January 20, Kenyan police shot and killed four suspected al-Shabaab supporters in the coastal resort of Malindi, as they were believed to be planning an attack (Geeskaafrika, January 20). The police recovered five grenades and one pistol from the individuals, who were shot after resisting arrest. Two weeks earlier, in another operation, Kenyan police had arrested one individual in Majengo, a slum in the capital Nairobi, and discovered an assault rifle and chemicals used in making explosives (Daily Nation [Kenya], January 1). These developments underline that a key part of al-Shabaab's strategy, as well as keeping pressure on Kenyan forces in Somalia, is to also pressure the government through carrying out attacks on civilian targets at home.

Kenyan soldiers serving with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) inspect a destroyed vehicle belonging to al-Qaeda-affliated extremist group al-Shabaab at Kismayo Airport in southern Somalia (source: Wikimedia).

Following the al-Shabaab attack in Somalia, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said the assault would not deter Kenya from continuing to operate in Somalia, asserting that "our soldiers' blood will not be shed in vain" (Horseed Media, January 15). While this may the case, if such attacks continue, they will increase pressure on the Kenyan government to show that its long and costly intervention in Somalia has produced ostensible and positive results. In the absence of this, further attacks - especially if carried out in conjunction with more attacks inside Kenya - may eventually lead Kenyans to conclude that their military's intervention in Somalia has done more harm than good and should be discontinued.

ISLAMIC STATE PLOT IN MALAYSIA UNDERLINES GROWING THREAT

James Brandon

On January 15, the Malaysian police arrested a 28-year old man in the capital of Kuala Lumpur on suspicion of planning to carry out a suicide bomb attack in the city. The head of the country's police force, Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Khalid Abu Bakar, said that the individual had "received order from an IS leader in Syria to target Malaysia", referring to the Iraq- and Syria-based Islamic State (IS) militant group (Malay Mail Online, January 16). The man had a knife and Islamic State-related documents on him when he was arrested at a metro station. There was no official statement on the intended target, although local media cited anonymous security sources as saying that he may have planned to target a pub or karaoke bar. The individual is also believed to have been responsible for putting up Islamic State flags in various locations in Peninsula Malaysia, including in Johor Perak Selangor and Terengganu states (Malay Mail Online, January 16; Asia-One, January 17).

While the incident is one of the clearest indications so far that the Islamic State is seeking to inspire or organize attacks in Malaysia, it also showcases the group's significant support among Malaysian radicals. Just a few days before the arrest, two Malaysian fighter with the Islamic State were reported to have recently carried out suicide bombings. In the first incident, on January 3, 31-year old Syazwan Mohd Salim was one of seven suicide bombers who attempted to attack a police training centre in Iraq at Speicher military base, located north of the capital Baghdad. Reports suggested that the Malaysian shot before he could detonate himself (New Straits Times, January 11). In the second incident, 26-year old Mohammed Amirul Ahmad Rahim carried out a suicide car-bombing at Ain Issa near the Islamic State capital of Raqqa on December 29 during a simultaneous Islamic State attack on the 44th Syrian Democratic Forces coalition. As a result, 17

Malaysians are now believed to have died in the last 18 months while actively fighting for the Islamic State, local media reported (*Straits Times*, January 12). The government is also reported to have arrested 100 radicals seeking to travel to join the Islamic State, and it has also estimated the group has around 50,000 sympathizers in the country. Adding to the complexity, there are also reports that whole Malaysian families have moved to the Islamic State's territories, and Malaysian police have also reported that they believe that eight Malaysian children are being groomed to become fighters for the group (*Straits Times*, January 12; *Straits Times*, January 13).

Malaysian government fears have been further heightened by the recent Islamic State-inspired attack in neighboring Indonesia. This attack, which took place on January 14, involved four attackers launching a coordinated gun and bomb attack in the center of the capital, Jakarta. Although the attack only killed four, underlining the limitations of self-radicalized or self-starter militant cells, the incident highlighted the potential for Islamic State actions in the Middle East to nonetheless inspire attacks in Southeast Asia. Although the security services appear to be relatively able to disrupt plots and identify radicals - as demonstrated by the latest arrest - the country appears less able to challenge the Islamic State's viral ideology. For example, in one recent interview, Datuk Othman Mustapha, the director-general of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jakim), which is responsible for the regulation and promotion of Islam in Malaysia, said that the organization was finding it challenging to counter the Islamic State's message, particularly online (*Malay Mail*, January 15). Such challenges may increase as the organization, which has annual budget of around $300 million, faces sharp funding cuts in the coming year, partly as a result of the state's falling oil revenues (*Malaysian Insider*, January 15). This, combined with the Islamic State's success in carrying out attacks abroad - as demonstrated by the recent Jakarta and Istanbul attacks - means that Malaysia may see an increase in domestic plots during the coming year.

The Maldives: Losing a Tourist Paradise to Terrorism

Sudha Ramachandran

Renowned for pristine beaches and crystal blue waters, the Maldives is rapidly gaining prominence as a haven for jihadist recruitment. Maldivian men - reportedly 200 of them – have been streaming to Iraq and Syria to join the ranks of the Islamic State (IS) militant group, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra organization, as well as other radical organizations. This is a large number considering the Indian Ocean archipelago of around 1,200 islands has a population of roughly 359,000 people (*Indian Express*, April 15, 2015). Not only does the Maldives thus have the world's largest number of jihadists per capita active in Iraq and Syria, but it also accounts for the biggest number of jihadists from any South Asian country fighting in these countries. Several jihadists have taken their wives and children to the Middle East battle zones with them (Haveeru Online, February 5, 2015; Maldives Independent, Sept 21, 2015 and Dhivehi Sitee, December 2, 2015).

Rising Radicalism

Sunni Islam is the official state religion of the Maldives and adherence to the doctrine is essential for citizenship. However, while religion is an important part of the lives of many Maldivians, the Islam they traditionally practice is not particularly rigid. It has been suffused with local cultural traditions; worship of Allah tends to coexist with belief in spirits and djinns. It is only in the last couple of decades with Maldivian clerics and students returning home after studying in universities and madrassas in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan that hardline Wahhabi and Salafi beliefs entered the archipelago, providing Maldivian Islam a puritanical spark. This injected religious intolerance and conservatism into a society that was once moderate in its religious observances and relatively liberal (Asia Times, November 11, 2009).

As a result, religious radicals are threatening the traditional Maldivian way of life. Women who did not wear headscarves have been violently attacked, alongside Sunni moderates, Sufis, atheists, agnostics and followers of other religions who speak up against intolerance. Radicals are also pressing for a strict enforcement of sharia laws (Minivan News, September 6, 2014). Anything deemed un-Islamic is under fire. For instance, in 2012, a mob stormed the National Museum in the capital Malé and destroyed Buddhist statues. The attack was aimed at wiping out Maldives' pre-Islamic, Buddhist history (Minivan News, February 9, 2012).

In 2007, the Maldives witnessed its first ever Islamist terrorist attack when a bomb targeting Chinese, Japanese and British tourists went off in Malé's Sultan Park. A police raid on the Dar-ul-Khair mosque on Himandhoo Atoll a few weeks later laid bare the serious threat that Islamists posed to the Maldives; police had to fight off dozens of radicals holed up in the mosque. The Salafist preacher, Ibrahim Fareed, was then found to be running a "shari'a-governed mini-state" from the mosque (*The Hindu* [India], November 24, 2007).

Over the past decade, Maldivian Islamists have increasingly heeded the call to global jihad. In 2002, for example, a cleric named Ibrahim Fauzee was arrested in an al-Qaeda safe house in Karachi, Pakistan. He was subsequently held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp until his release and repatriation to the Maldives in March of 2005 (*The Hindu*, November 24, 2007). Al-Qaeda in the Maldives reinforced its presence through a 2009 suicide attack on the Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency headquarters in Lahore, carried out by a Maldivian al-Qaeda member and two accomplices. Around the same time, nine Maldivians were arrested in Pakistan's Waziristan region, which borders Afghanistan, during an attempt to travel to jihadist training camps (*The Hindu*, February 21, 2012).

Following this trend, a number of Maldivian jihadists headed to Pakistan initially. One reason is that following the deadly 2004 tsunami, several Pakistani-based Islamist organizations came to the archipelago for relief and rehabilitation work. Some like the Idara Khidmat-e-Khalq, the charity front of the Pakistan-based terrorist organization, Lashkar-e-Taiba, reportedly recruited scores of Maldivian boys to study at madrassas in Pakistan (*Times of India*, February 13, 2012). From there, it was a short road to violent jihad. In more recent years, however, the spectacular rise of the Islamic State seems to have influenced the travel plans of Maldivian jihadists, prompting them to head to Syria and Iraq instead.

Flirting with Fundamentalism

Although religious extremism was brought to the Maldives by South Asian and Middle Eastern groups, it gained traction in the Maldives' largely tolerant society under the autocratic rule of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Maumoon Abdul Gayoom
(source: Wikimedia)

Gayoom espoused a moderate strain of Islam in stark contrast to the one he harshly imposed. President Gayoom used religion as a political tool to legitimize his dictatorial rule; he wooed religious conservatives by projecting himself as the "guardian of Islam". In 1994, for instance, his government enacted the Protection of Religious Unity Act, which imposed Sunni Islam on Maldivians by restricting their freedom to practice other religions (Himal Southasian, June 20, 2012).

Gayoom continued to pursue policies that contributed to the rise of Wahhabi and Salafi Islam in the Maldives. He set up the first Arabic-medium schools in the archipelago. Text books that had imparted a liberal interpretation of Islam were replaced by books from Saudi Arabia that fostered a puritanical outlook. Maldivians were given scholarships to study in Islamic universities and madrassas in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. When they returned home, they preached a puritanical version of Islam that was previously alien to the Maldivian people. Gayoom quashed public articulation of any extremist ideologies, but this only pushed the problem underground (Asia Times. November 11, 2009).

It was during democratic rule that religious radicalism exploded into the open. President Mohamed Nasheed, a great votary of democratic rights, allowed unrestricted freedom of speech. Religious extremists therefore came to enjoy "absolute freedom of expression" and thereby the free availability of extremist literature in bookshops and airing of radical ideologies in mosques and public rallies, as well as the more far-reaching radio and Internet (Divehi Sitee, October 9, 2012). Only exacerbating the spread of radical ideology, the ruling Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) entered into a politically expedient alliance with the Adhaalath Party, which embodied an Islamist platform. Placed in charge of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Adhaalath Party enjoyed the rein and clout to implement its agenda. In the process, Nasheed appeased Islamists, including radical ones (Asia Times, November 23, 2011). His government, for instance, offered clemency to 16 Islamists who were serving jail terms for their role in the 2007 Dar-ul-Khair mosque standoff (Minivan News, February 10, 2010). It sent a signal to extremists that they could carry out violent activities without repercussion.

In the years since Nasheed's ouster in 2012, successive governments have denied or downplayed the problem of religious extremism, facilitating the Maldives' emergence as a breeding ground for jihadists. In May 2014, President Abdulla Yameen claimed he was unaware of Maldivians traveling to Syria or Iraq to take part in combat. Later that year, in December, Home Minister Umar Naseer finally acknowledged the problem but minimized it by insisting that a mere seven Maldivians were fighting overseas. A month later, however, Commissioner of Police Hussein Waheed put the figure at 50, though still a smaller number than that claimed by Indian and Western intelligence agencies (Maldives Independent, September 6, 2015).

Fighting or Fueling Religious Extremism?

In recent months, the Yameen government has announced measures ostensibly to address the threat of terrorism. In October 2014, it enacted anti-terrorism legislation. A little over a month later, it announced that the Maldives would join a Saudi-led Islamic military coalition to combat "all terrorist organizations in the Islamic world" (Maldives Independent, December 15). Neither of these measures are likely to make a dent in the security dilemma that the Maldives faces.

Critics argue the anti-terrorism law is more an "instrument" to intimidate the public and suppress the regime's critics and political rivals, as opposed to a means of countering violent extremism. The legislation's "definition of terrorism does not explicitly include *violent extremism*, or *religious extremism* – the most prevalent type of terrorism today" (italics in original) (Divehi Sitee, November 11, 2015). It also does not focus on terrorism-related concerns that are endemic to the Maldives, such as recruitment of Maldivians for wars abroad, the spread of extremist ideologies and terrorism financing (Maldives Independent, July14, 2015; Maldives Independent, October 27, 2015).

As for the Saudi-led coalition, it is widely viewed as "unlikely to succeed" in eliminating terrorism (Asia Times, December 21, 2015). This is especially the case with the Maldives, where the Saudis have contributed substantially to bankrolling the spread of Wahhabi Islam in the archipelago, which has in turn fuelled religious extremism (Vivekananda International Foundation, March 31,

2015). Saudi-Maldivian bilateral ties in other realms have similarly surged in recent months; in August, the Saudis set up their first diplomatic mission in Malé. Cooperation in Islamic affairs dominates the relationship, seen in Riyadh's building of mosques in the Maldives. Islamic NGOs are pouring money into education and training of Maldivian imams and providing scholarships for Maldivians to study in the kingdom. In November, the Saudis reached an agreement with the Maldives to establish "religious unity" between the two countries. The agreement confirms the Saudis encouragement of the Maldives to publish books on Islam in English, as well as speed up the completion of mosque-related projects such as the training of imams ([Maldives Independent,](#) November 19, 2015). This agreement does not bode well for addressing the Maldives' problems with religious extremism and violence.

Conclusion

So far, religious extremists have posed a threat to Maldivian atheists, Sufis and secular Muslim moderates, in addition to the broader Maldivian culture and way of life. While extremists based in the Maldives have not yet organized themselves in an effort to overthrow the state, radicalized Maldivian youth are traveling abroad to join various jihadist groups and have the potential to return home. This threat, however, has not inspired the government to take significant action. This may change with the return of battle-hardened jihadists to their home country, particularly if they turn their guns against the state.

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Turkey's Dance with the Islamic State

Nihat Ali Ozcan

Turkey's relationship with terrorism is entrenched with history. The country fell victim to the actions of different terrorist groups with different motivations. The most popular terrorist organization in Turkey's history is the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been active for almost 40 years. Another notable terrorist organization is the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front, an outcome of the Cold War legacy. Turkey has also been faced with the presence of radical Islamist Kurdish Hezbollah, which was active during the 1990s.

While the Turkish government and its security forces were fighting against the PKK in the southeastern part of the country earlier this month, another terrorist attack was carried out by suicide bomb in Istanbul's most popular touristic and historical district, Sultanahmet. The bomber detonated himself next to a tourist group on January 12, killing 10 Germans and wounding another 15.

Shortly after the attack, police made a statement claiming, "The suicide bomber was an ISIL member and a Syrian citizen" ([Reuters,](#) January 13). The suicide bomber had crossed the Turkish border as a refugee few days before the attack, similar to 2,750,000 other refugees over the past four years. The identity, target and the methods of the terrorist indicated a new wave of terrorism for Turkey.

Turkey has become a target of Islamic State activity, as its geopolitical position, motility of its ethnic and sectarian fault lines, its cosmopolitan demographics, its annual influx of 35 million tourists, and the presence of many western companies on its soil have all come into play. On the other hand, the politicians, public and security institutions do not appear prepared to face a terrorist group with such brutal, multinational and religious foundations and practices. The reason for the Islamic

State targeting Turkey puts on display the organization's changing attitude towards the country. Recent developments depict that the Islamic State has the potential as well as the motivation to pose a security threat to Turkey.

The Islamic State and Turkey

From the very first days of the insurgency in Syria against Assad, the Turkish government predicted that the end of his regime was soon to come. However, Assad disappointed these expectations and, as a result, the insurgency became prolonged. Turkey and its allies wanted to accelerate the process through their support of anti-Assad opposition forces. Turkey sent arms and ammunition to the opposition and made it easier for foreign fighters to enter Syria to join the cause. In this respect, border controls between Turkey and Syria loosened and Turkey started following an "open door policy" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, May 27, 2013). With the persistence of the regime came the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition forces. Gradually, the groups that utilized brutality and had developed radical discourse became the most effective and influential opposition groups operating in Syria.

Turkey's "two-way open-door policy" caused large scale logistical and demographical changes, including those impacting militant mobility. Not only did Turkey become the crossing route for foreign fighters, but many Turkish citizens joined groups fighting in Syria, as well (*Hurriyet Daily News*, February 4, 2015; Milyet.com, July 18, 2014). Some of these people fought, some encouraged others to fight, and some went back to Turkey in order to spread their ideas and establish "sleeper cells."

In this context, a number of Turkish citizens who traveled to fight in Syria were Kurds who joined the Democratic Union Party, PKK's Syria wing, while some other Islamist Kurds joined the Islamic State. These Islamists included many of those who had broken away from the Kurdish Hezbollah, established by the post-1979 Iranian intelligence in conflict with the Marxist PKK during the 1980s and

1990s. Meanwhile, local radical Islamists traveled to Syria as jihadists, some of whom were Turkish and Caucasian. In due course, these jihadists transferred to different radical groups, largely the Islamic State. Within that period, some humanitarian aid organizations that maintained close ties with the Turkish government constructed a web of strong and deep aid routes within Syria and helped transfer Turkish and foreign fighters deep into Syrian territory. Some Alawite citizens of Turkey also joined the conflict, fighting for the Democratic Union Party or the Assad regime.

In the second year of the insurgency, the situation in Syria grew even more complicated. The radical religious statements and actions of the Sunni groups fighting against Assad caused increased tensions and distrust between Turkey and its allies. The Islamic State capitalized on this tension and conflict and began to more actively establish its presence in 2014. However, the Turkish public became more generally aware of the Islamic State when three of its members were captured during a gunfight that occurred on their way to Istanbul.

The Islamic State, positioned far from the Turkish border and from most of Assad's forces, prioritized the elimination of other radical groups feeding from resources it relied upon. The flourishing organization further captured headlines with its occupation of Mosul, Iraq, on June 6, 2014. Following the occupation, the Islamic State took 28 Turkish truck drivers and 49 Turkish Foreign Ministry staff working at the consulate in Mosul as hostages. The hostage crisis ended on September 20, 2014, after the Islamic State had proven itself as a significant new security problem for Turkey (*Hurriyet Daily News*, September 20, 2014).

In the following days, the Islamic State attacked Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. Barzani and the PKK managed to stop the advance with the help of the U.S. Air Force. In response, the Islamic State shifted its attacks to Syria, targeting the Syrian-majority Kurdish town of Kobane on the Turkish border on September 13, 2014; the group managing to enter the city on October 5, 2014. The PKK and

Democratic Union Party, the defenders of the city, initiated a new propaganda campaign to gain membership as well as support from the broader population. This campaign triggered conflict between Kurdish groups with different ideologies living in cities in southeastern Turkey. During the conflict in Kobane, many government buildings were damaged and 49 Islamist Kurds supporting the Islamic State were killed by the PKK and its sympathizers between October 6 and 7 of 2014. In February 2015, with help from United States airstrikes, the Islamic State was forced by the Kurds to retreat from the Kobane region, suffering heavy losses.

Coalition airstrike on ISIL position in Kobane on October 22, 2014 (source: YouTube).

The Islamic State's Turkey Strategy

The Islamic State's perspective on Turkey has been changing. Geopolitical necessities and relations between Turkey and local actors contribute heavily to this shift in opinion as well as strategy. The Islamic State is cognizant of the importance of Turkey, due to the group's dependency on the country's foreign fighters and logistics flowing over the border with Syria.

It is possible to categorize Turkey-Islamic State relations through the lens of different stages. The first stage was the period of "still and low-profile relationship." The second, described as the "two sub-state group conflict," saw the Islamic State target PKK-affiliated individuals on Turkish soil, following the terrorists' defeat by the PKK at Kobane. The third stage, the start of which is marked by the

Sultanahmet bombings and is ongoing, will continue to see attacks on Western targets in Turkey, and follows a Turkish crackdown on domestic Islamic State supporters. In the fourth, still-to-come stage, the Islamic State will likely attack Turkish state and political institutions.

The January 12 attacks on foreign tourists in Istanbul is a strong indication that the Islamic State is changing its strategy. By carefully avoiding the targeting of Turkish citizens in the attack, the Islamic State may be able to gain sympathy and support from less-radical Islamist groups in Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey's restrictions on its pre-existing two-way open-door policy, the U.S. Air Force strikes from Incirlik Air Base, and the Democratic Union Party closing the border have limited the Islamic State's maneuverability in the region. The military's training of Kurds and Sunni Arabs in Iraq by Turkish soldiers and Turkey's shooting down of a Russian military jet have similarly factored in the Islamic State's changing strategy. Since the Istanbul attack, the Turkish government has intensified its operations against the group, notably using intense cross border artillery fire to force Islamic State militants in Syria to retreat from the Turkish border, in conjunction with Turkish efforts to give the remaining territories to "moderate" Sunni Arab opposition forces. These developments indicate that the Islamic State has the potential, as well as the motivation, to pose a more potent security threat to Turkey. The threat stems not only from Syrian refugees and foreign fighters, but also from radicalized citizens within Turkey's own borders.

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Unwanted Ally: Hezbollah's War against the Islamic State

Andrew McGregor

"There is no future for ISIS. Not in war and not in peace." These words were spoken not by Barack Obama or Vladimir Putin, but rather by Hezbollah leader Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, whose Lebanese Shia supporters are engaged in a growing battle against the Sunni militants inside Syria (Press TV [Tehran], November 14, 2015). Despite this, few analysts have considered how Hezbollah's commitment to defeating Sunni extremists in Syria would fit into a larger Western and/or Russian-directed military intervention to destroy the Islamic State organization, especially when the Hezbollah movement is itself considered a terrorist organization by many Western states.

Nasrallah insists his movement is conducting preemptive military operations designed at preventing Sunni extremists from entering Lebanon, but many Lebanese (including some Shia) accuse Hezbollah of drawing the Islamic State's attention to Lebanese targets by acting at the command of the movement's Iranian sponsors (Reuters, September 6, 2013; *Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2013) .

Hezbollah ("the Party of God") addresses these accusations in two ways: by stating that the Syrian intervention is intended to defend all Lebanese, and by describing both al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State as tools Israel uses to destroy regional opposition, thus bringing the intervention within the larger anti-Israel "Resistance" agenda that has formed the movement's core ethos since its formation (Reuters, August 15, 2014).

Hezbollah is correct in one sense; Lebanon and its delicate ethnic and religious balance will indeed be in the Islamic State's gunsights if it succeeds in establishing a secure base in neighboring Syria. Nonetheless, since joining the war in 2013,

Hezbollah has lost lives, resources, and most of the moral authority it once commanded in Sunni communities in the Middle East after repelling a 2006 Israeli incursion into southern Lebanon.

Initially, there was relatively little confrontation between Hezbollah and the Islamic State organizations. Hezbollah tended to operate mainly in western Syria, while the Islamic State's resided in the more lightly populated east. This all changed when the Islamic State took the war to Hezbollah on November 12, 2014, by deploying a pair of suicide bombers against the Burj al-Barajneh district of southern Beirut, a mixed but largely Shia neighborhood where Hezbollah has a strong presence. The attack killed and wounded scores of civilians. Eager to punish Hezbollah for its Syrian intervention, the Islamic State promised "the Party of Satan" much more of the same (al-Manar TV, November 12, 2015).

On December 3, 2015, United States Secretary of State John Kerry admitted that the Islamic State cannot be defeated without ground forces, but suggested these should be "Syrian and Arab" rather than Western in origin (Reuters, December 23, 2015). Washington's efforts so far to assemble and train a politically and religiously "moderate" rebel army have been "a devastating failure," according to Nasrallah, who insists that air strikes alone will not eliminate the Islamic State (AP, September 25, 2015).

Who, then, should these ground fighters be? They will certainly not be British Prime Minister David Cameron's mythical 70,000 "moderate" rebels (*Independent*, December 1, 2015). Saudi Arabia and the Gulf nations regard U.S.-led efforts to restore order in Syria as ineffective, and are therefore unlikely partners in a Western-led military initiative; besides, their own resources are currently committed to the ongoing military struggle for Yemen. Syria's Kurdish militias are capable, but have displayed little interest in campaigning outside their own traditional territories. This leaves regime forces and their allies as the only local

groups currently capable of tackling the Islamic State in the field.

Saudi Arabia's clumsy attempt to spearhead an anti-terrorist military alliance of 34 Islamic nations – mainly by announcing its existence to the surprise of many nations the Kingdom claimed were members – further escalated tensions between Shiite and Sunni communities; it was quickly observed that majority-Shia nations like Iraq and Iran were absent from the list.

Though Lebanon's Sunni prime minister, Tammam Salam, declared Lebanon was part of the alliance, membership was immediately rejected by Hezbollah and most Lebanese Christian parties, the latter correctly pointing out that Lebanon has no status as an "Islamic nation." A Hezbollah statement claimed the Saudis were unsuitable as leaders of an anti-terrorist coalition, as they were involved in state terrorism in Yemen and supported terrorist organizations there as well as in Syria and Iraq. The statement went on to question whether the new alliance would confront "Israeli terrorism" or instead target "the Resistance" (Hezbollah, Iran and Syria) (Al-Manar, December 17, 2015; AP, December 17, 2015). Salam claims to have since received assurances from the Kingdom that the Islamic State and not Hezbollah will be targeted. However, vital questions remain concerning how the Sunni alliance would interact with Hezbollah and other Shiite forces on the Syrian battlefield (*Daily Star* [Beirut], December 16, 2015). Exacerbating this, Saudi Arabia's recent decision to execute Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr, a leading domestic Shiite opposition leader, has only embittered the struggle between Shiites and Sunnis in Syria – Nasrallah described the execution as "an appalling event" (Reuters, January 3, 2016).

With growing calls for greater Western military intervention in Syria and even to set aside the anti-Assad rebellion to allow the Syrian Army to focus on the elimination of the Islamic State, it must be understood that at this point of the war, there is no functioning Syrian Army that can be separated and deployed independently of Hezbollah and the Iranian military advisers now running Syrian Army operations.

With few exceptions, Syria's war does not unfold in a series of set-piece battles, but rather in small actions - "a battle of ambushes, of surprise attacks" as one rebel colonel described it (Reuters, October 30, 2015). The daily war of attrition and a rash of desertions have greatly reduced the size and effectiveness of the Syrian national army. As a result, most operations are planned by Iranian and Hezbollah advisors using well-trained Hezbollah fighters to stiffen Syrian units in the field.

Hezbollah now has an estimated 6,000 fighters in Syria, mostly experienced light infantry well-suited to the war's pattern of small-level clashes punctuated by the occasional major battle. While losses have been heavy at times, the deployment has provided Hezbollah with valuable battlefield experience in operating on unfamiliar terrain and in cooperation with the regular forces of other nations, such as Syria, Iran and Russia.

Hezbollah's war aims are both declared – protecting Shia shrines in Syria – and undeclared, the latter including keeping supply lines from Iran open, preserving the friendly Assad regime and keeping Sunni extremists (al-Nusra Front, the Islamic State, etc.) from entering Lebanon. To mollify those who claim the Syrian adventure has little to do with the anti-Israel "Resistance" agenda, Nasrallah claims Zionists and Sunni extremists have the same goal in "destroying our peoples and our societies" (AFP, October 18, 2015). The Hezbollah leader also insists that any political solution in Syria "begins and ends" with President Bashar al-Assad (AFP, June 6, 2014).

Though Hezbollah has a polarizing effect on Lebanese politics and a record of terrorist attacks, the movement is unlike the Islamic State; it is no wild-eyed band of religious fanatics ready to slaughter anyone that does not share their religious preferences. As a political party with a strong social-welfare arm, Hezbollah's leaders have deftly created a political alliance with Ma-

ronite Christian factions, secular Druze and even Shia of the Amal Movement, with whom Hezbollah waged a bitter war in the 1980s. Lebanese sources indicate that Hezbollah began recruiting Christians, Druze and Sunnis for the fight against the Islamic State in late 2014 (*Daily Star* [Beirut], November 12, 2014). Nonetheless, opposition to Hezbollah within Lebanon cannot be understated.

To counter the political "normalization" of the movement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has proclaimed Hezbollah a global threat that has established, with Iran, a terrorist network spanning 30 countries on five continents (AFP, July 28, 2015). Nasrallah, in turn, has emphasized the "ISIS monster's" threat to Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, some of them important sources for private donations to the Islamic State and other Sunni extremist groups. According to Nasrallah: "This danger does not recognize Shiites, Sunnis, Muslims, Christians or Druze or Yazidis or Arabs or Kurds" (Reuters, August 15, 2015). Jews are notably absent from the Hezbollah leader's list of ethnicities under threat, as Hezbollah considers Israel's Jews to be in league with Islamic State terrorists.

Last month, President Netanyahu abandoned Israel's traditional policy of refusing to confirm or deny involvement in foreign airstrikes, acknowledging that Israel was targeting Hezbollah arms shipments to prevent the transfer of "game-changing" weapons from Syria to Lebanon. When Israel believes it has missed a weapons transfer, it attacks Syrian arms stocks, inhibiting the Syrian Army's ability to combat Islamic State and other rebel groups (DefenceNews, November 18, 2015). Israeli airstrikes have not targeted Islamic State forces or installations in Syria; like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State appears reluctant to attack Israel directly, insisting that America must first be weakened and a legitimate Islamic state established before Israel can be addressed (Arutz Sheva 7, October 7, 2014).

This reluctance by the Islamic State to strike Israel only reinforces Hezbollah's belief that there is co-

operation between Israel and the Sunni extremists (Tasnim News Agency [Tehran], December 10, 2015). Bashar Assad himself has joked that no one can say al-Qaeda doesn't have an air force when they have the Israeli Air Force to attack regime and Hezbollah positions (*Foreign Affairs*, January 25, 2015).

Last summer, Hezbollah and Syrian government forces succeeded in driving rebel forces from their last positions in the Qalamun region alongside the border with Lebanon after nearly two years of fighting. Islamic State and al-Nusra fighters had used the region for attacks within Lebanon. Since then, Hezbollah has intensified its war against the Islamic State and Assad's other enemies in coordination with Russian airstrikes. Though initially criticized for focusing on Syrian Turkmen communities and U.S.-supported units of the Free Syrian Army, Russia has since expanded its target list to include the Islamic State, the Nusra Front and the Jaysh al-Islam militia.

So far, Russia appears to be tolerating Israeli strikes on Hezbollah targets, but has also been accused by Israeli military sources of supplying anti-ship cruise missiles to Hezbollah, whether directly or indirectly through Syrian middlemen (al-Manar TV [Beirut], January 15; *Jerusalem Post*, January 14). Moscow's deployment of powerful S-400 ground-to-air missiles in Syria means Russian objections to specific air operations over Syria will have to be taken seriously. Russia and Israel have made extraordinary efforts to avoid running in to each other in Syrian airspace; the consequences of an accidental clash could be significant, as a Russian military alliance with the "Resistance Axis" of Hezbollah, Syria and Iran would change the strategic situation of the Middle East. Russia has indicated it considers Hezbollah to be a "legitimate socio-political force" rather than a terrorist group, suggesting it is prepared to work with the group in Syria (Reuters, November 15, 2015).

Regardless of the number of "moderate" rebels in Syria, Hezbollah remains better trained, better armed and better led. The moderates cannot op-

erate effectively against the Islamic State until they can disengage from their conflict with the Syrian Army and the rest of the "Resistance Axis." The West's contradictory war aims in Syria have been noted by former UK Chief of the Defense Staff, General Sir David Richards, who suggests that the anti-Assad rebellion needs to be set aside in order to allow the Syrian Army, Hezbollah and their Iranian backers to focus on the elimination of the Islamic State (*Guardian*, November 18, 2015). However, this plan would require somehow persuading anti-Assad factions to abandon or postpone their struggle, as well as cooperation with anti-Assad Kurdish forces and a degree of political flexibility among Western allies that does not exist at present.

So what are the West's options? Hezbollah might be persuaded to leave Syria if it was guaranteed that capable military forces (preferably not Western in Hezbollah's view) would replace them in the defense of the Assad regime. There is little political appetite for this proposition in the West at the moment, despite an increasing number of voices suggesting that the Islamic State rather than Assad might be the most pressing problem in Syria.

An alternative is to try to find a means of combating the Islamic State on the ground without recognizing or coordinating with Assad/Hezbollah forces engaged in the same battle, a tricky bit of military maneuvering that is likely to end badly.

A third option would be to confront Assad regime/Hezbollah/Iranian forces simultaneously with attacks on the Islamic State to create a "New Syria," a move that would run a high risk of confrontation with Russia and Iran, incite international opposition and the expansion of the conflict well beyond Syria's borders. The resulting power vacuum in the ruins of Syria would be worse than that experienced in Libya, and would in the end pose a direct security threat to both the West and the Middle East.

To resolve the Syrian crisis, it is essential either to come to terms with Hezbollah or to confront it, knowing in the latter case that the bulk of the movement and its leadership will remain in Lebanon with the means to strike back at its international antagonists. Ignoring its existence or its role in confronting anti-Shia Sunni extremist groups will not be an option in any ground-based effort to crush the Islamic State.

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