MALI: IRAN: STRIKING BACK AT ISLAMIC STATE

Alexander Sehmer

A coordinated attack in the Iranian capital of Tehran, supposedly by Islamic State (IS), has prompted a furious response from the Iranian government. Among other things, this attack highlighted the sectarian risks engendered by Tehran's efforts in Syria and elsewhere.

On June 7, gunmen wearing suicide vests attacked the Iranian parliament and the mausoleum of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, killing at least 13 people and wounding more than 50 others (al-Arabiya, June 7). The events were shocking, not least because Tehran has not seen such violence since the attacks by the Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) in the years after the 1979 Revolution, but also because the targeted sites, both highly symbolic, are considered to be well protected.

IS quickly claimed that it was behind the attack. In response, Tehran launched a ballistic missile strike on IS bases in Syria and vowed further retaliation (YJC, June 21). Such future retaliations will likely also take place in Syria and Iraq. Meanwhile, in Iran, the intelligence

services claimed to have rounded up at least 40 people connected to IS (FNA, June 21).

Over the years, Iran has developed a significant and ruthless domestic counter-terrorism operation, in large part a legacy of the MEK's activities in the 1980s. Following the attacks in the capital, Mahmoud Alav, Iran's intelligence minister, was at pains to stress that this has largely been a successful operation, disrupting 25 terror cells in the months prior to the assault on the parliament building (YJC, June 11).

Even so, Iran might have done more to anticipate IS activities within its borders, especially given its role in conflicts abroad, its treatment of minorities at home and IS' avowed anti-Shia ideology. The group appears to have been actively recruiting in Iran since 2014. It also appears to have received backing from Iranian Kurds, who are thought to have been involved in the Tehran attacks (al-Monitor, June 9). Added to this, the Iranian military has reported several instances over the last year in which it has killed supposed IS recruits in Kermanshah, a majority Sunni-Kurdish province in western Iran (al-Arabiya, August 16, 2016).

Unsurprisingly, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) insisted that Saudi Arabia must also be complicit, vowing in a statement that the "spilled blood of the innocent will not remain unavenged" (al-Jazeera, June 7). Some Iranian officials have extended this threat to the United States and Israel (FNA, June 20). Many see the attack in the light of international attempts to curb Iranian regional influence, coming as it does at a time when Saudi Arabia is punishing Qatar, at least in part, over its friendlier relations toward Tehran.

A more measured Iranian response, however, will be one that examines its own policies in the light of regional sectarianism, which is an issue that is much closer to home.

NIGER: TROUBLE FROM THE NEIGHBORS

Alexander Sehmer

Niger has extended a state of emergency in two of the country's western regions over fears of jihadist attacks. The move, which took effect on June 18, means the security forces can continue to employ extra powers, though their ability to tackle the main threat remains limited as it sits across the border in Mali.

The state of emergency in parts of the Tillaberi and Tahoua regions, two areas that have seen repeated cross-border attacks, was imposed in March (Le Figaro, March 3; Africa News, March 4). It followed a series of bloody attacks, one in February on a military patrol in Interzawane, close to the border with Mali, which left at least 15 soldiers dead and prompted Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou to request further military support from France (RFI, February 26).

The attacks have eased up only slightly since then. On March 6, militants killed seven members of the security forces and wounded four others in an attack on a guard post in Wanzarbe, in Tillaberi (Sahel Standard, March 6). In May, gunmen killed six members of the security forces in an attack on a military post in Abala, 200 kilometers from the Mali border (Le Monde, June 1).

Following that attack, Niger's security forces rounded up six suspected members of the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) (Sahel Intelligence, June 2; Koaci, June 2). With the state of emergency extended for another three months, the military will be able to maintain curfews and traffic restrictions. They also have the right to carry out impromptu searches on people's homes. But with militant attacks focused on the security forces themselves, there can be a limited tolerance for such intrusions. Further adding to tensions, anti-government protesters include the presence of foreign military bases in the country— those of the United States, France and Germany — among their complaints.

Without foreign support, however, Niger's overstretched military will struggle to tackle cross-border terror groups. Militants in Mali have consolidated their forces and are becoming increasingly daring. Gunmen apparently from Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, the newly formed al-Qaeda alliance, stormed the high-end Le Campement Kangaba resort in Dougourakoro, east of the Malian

capital of Bamako, on June 18, killing at least two people ([Africa News](#), June 19). The attack had the potential to be much worse, but Malian forces, backed by UN and French troops, responded quickly.

Landlocked Niger's geographical position has bequeathed it some difficult neighbors. With Mali and Burkina Faso to the west both coping with Islamist insurgencies, and Boko Haram infiltrating the country in the southeast, Niger remains largely reliant on the efforts of others in order to bring an end to Islamist attacks on its territory.

Does Islamic State Pose a Threat to India?

Animesh Roul

India first woke up to the emerging threat of Islamic State (IS) on its soil in May 2014, when four engineering students from Kalyan, Maharashtra, joined the group. In the intervening years, the security services have arrested more than 90 IS sympathizers, according to Indian Home Minister Rajnath Singh ([Indian Express](#), June 3). Alongside this, at least six separate recruitment and indoctrination networks have been unearthed ([DNA India](#), October 16).

Nonetheless, IS does not, on the face of it, have a physical presence in India, although at least two attacks can be attributed to Indian affiliates of the group. Should India be more worried about an IS threat?

Attacks at Home and Militants Abroad

On March 7, a blast on a Bhopal-Ujjain train, near Jabri railway station in the Shajapur district of Madhya Pradesh, left at least 10 people injured. The attack, later reported as IS-inspired, triggered a nationwide investigation by the intelligence agencies that centered on the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh ([India Live Today](#), March 8). The security services rounded up several people suspected of being part of a nascent militant network, killing one member of the suspected group, a man identified as Mohammed Saifullah, in a shootout in Lucknow's Thakurganj area. The suspects — including Saifullah and the supposed architect of the plot, a former Indian Air Force (IAF) employee named Mohammad *Ghaus Khan* — were natives of Uttar Pradesh's Kanpur and Aligarh cities and are said to have been influenced by Mufti Abdus Sami, a pro-IS cleric who has been in the custody of India's National Investigations Agency since February 2016 ([Firstpost](#), March 10).

An earlier attack, the Church Street blast in Bengaluru, Karnataka, in December 2014, resulted in the death of one person and was suspected to be masterminded by IS militant Safi Ahmed Armar of Bhatkal ([Indian Express](#), May 15, 2016; [The Hindu](#), June 17). However, IS has made no claims of responsibility for these attacks.

Safi Armar, an Indian militant who goes by the *nom de guerre* Yousuf-al-Hindi, is the chief recruiter for IS in India. He has faked his own death a number of times in the past, but is believed to be alive. Amar was recently listed as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" by the United States, making him the first Indian-origin IS militant to be sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department ([The Hindu](), June 15). [1]

Although there is no official data to show how many Indians have joined IS in Syria, Afghanistan or elsewhere, there are reports of IS militants of Indian origin who have either been killed or injured while fighting abroad.

Between February and April 2017, three IS militants — identified as Bestin Vincent (a.k.a. Yahya), Murshid Muhammed and TK Haeezudin — from the Kasaragod and Palakkad areas of the Indian state of Kerala, were killed in Nangarhar province in Afghanistan ([The Quint](), April 30). Vincent had left Kerala with his wife in May 2016, and he was followed by nearly 20 people to also seeking to join the IS Afghanistan affiliate known as Wilayat Khorasan.

When the U.S. military dropped its Massive Ordnance Air Blast Bomb (MOAB), the country's most powerful non-nuclear bomb, on Wilayat Khorasan positions in eastern Afghanistan in April, nearly 13 Indian-origin IS militants were reported among those killed ([Pajhwok News]() (Kabul), April 18).

Prior to this, several Indian-origin militants had been killed in Syria. One of the earliest IS recruits, Sultan Kadir Armar of Bhatkal, Karnataka, died fighting for the group in Kobani in March 2015. Two other known militants killed in Syria were Aman Tandel, killed in December 2016, and Saheem Tanki, killed in August 2015 ([Indian Express](), March 25, 2015; [Firstpost](), December 30, 2016).

Kerala's Caliphate Conundrum

At home, the southern Indian state of Kerala tops the list for the most residents arrested over IS links. According to figures from the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and other state investigating agencies released in mid-March, Kerala has had 21 arrests of this nature.

The figures from other states — Telangana (16), Karnataka (9), Maharashtra (8), Madhya Pradesh (6), Uttarakhand (4), Uttar Pradesh (3), Tamil Nadu (4) and Ra-

jasthan (2) — speak volumes about the pan-Indian reach of IS' message and ideals ([Press Information Bureau](), March 15). Investigations show IS is appealing to Indian youths through social media channels, messaging platforms and online jihadist discussion forums, encouraging those it engages to travel to Iraq and Syria or places where IS affiliates have a presence, such as Afghanistan.

The epicenters of Kerala's IS-related radicalization and recruitment are the districts of Tirunelveli, Kannur and Kasaragod. These districts have witnessed a substantial growth in Islamist recruitment and indoctrination activities over the last few years.

One Indian militant, Subahani Haja, a native of Thodupuzha, Kerala, is suspected to have fought for IS in Mosul, Iraq before his arrest in India in 2015. He was allegedly part of an IS regiment named Omer-Kathi-Kaliph, commanded by an individual named Abu Sulaimani al-Francisse. He also reportedly claims to have met the November 2015 Paris bombers when he crossed over to Iraqi territory under control of the IS ([New Indian Express](), April 29).

The earlier arrest in October 2016 of at least six men, including one Manseed (Omar al-Hindi) from Kerala, who were part of an IS-inspired group called the "Ansar-ul-Khilafah Kerala," exposed the spread of grassroots Islamism in Kerala through social media platforms like Telegram and Facebook ([India Times](), October 4, 2016).

The reason behind this rise in radicalization in Kerala is blamed mainly on the growth of online preaching activities and easily accessible online propaganda materials, as well as material physically distributed by lay preachers and Islamic centers.

The interactions through close *Dawa* (the proselytizing of Islam) groups active in many of these districts may also attract more young people toward Salafist ideals and to other new ultra-religious ideology and movements like Kerala Nadwat-ul Mujahideen, Tablighi Jamaat or Jamat-e-Islami ([Firstpost](), August 25, 2016). Most of these movements are backed by Saudi Arabia or other rich Islamic countries in the Middle East whose donations also support and maintain mosques, schools, seminaries and libraries.

Some local Sunni groups and Islamic schools are also responsible for this sudden growth of Caliphate-related

interest in Kerala. Several schools run by MM Akbar, a Salafist Islamic preacher, were found to be using non-standard textbooks that taught a distorted version of Islam akin to that employed by IS (News Minute, January 6; Asiannet News TV, January 5)

Akbar runs at least 13 Peace International Schools in Kerala, along with Peace Foundations and Akbar's own propaganda organization called "Niche of Truth." He recently fled to Qatar, fearing arrest (News Minute, January 6).

Similarly, TV evangelist Zakir Naik and members of his Islamic Research Foundation (IRF) have been accused of radicalizing young people to join IS (The Hindu, October 12, 2016).

Propaganda Campaign

IS has focused some of its own propaganda on India. A May 2016 video message titled "The Bilad al-Hind [Land of India] – Between Pain and Hope," featured what was supposedly a Syria-based exclusively Indian fighting unit. [2]

In the film, IS threatens to wage jihad against India and urges all Muslims to take revenge against the injustices meted out to Indian Muslims in Kashmir, for the demolition of Babri Masjid and for the communal riots in Gujarat and Muzaffarnagar.

Most of the militants featured in the video are suspected to be former Indian Mujahideen militants who fled India in recent years. Among them, three are from Kalyan, Maharashtra, having travelled to Syria in 2014 (The Hindu, May 24, 2016).

The IS video — which is in fact a compilation of footage and images taken over a number of years — is comprised of interviews with individuals who joined IS and images of the group pledging allegiance, singing jihadist *tarana* (songs) and eating together at a camp. The film, subtitled in Arabic, is also interesting for its inclusion of historical images depicting Muhammad bin Qasim's marauding Islamic army, Muslims fighting during India's freedom struggle from British colonial rule, the Constitution of India and Muslim leaders who are working with the Indian establishment.

IS propaganda materials concerning India tend to depict the country's Hindu majority as worshippers of cows, trees and the moon and sun. They urge Muslims not to indulge Hindus or maintain social or business relations with them. This kind of agitation along sectarian lines is potentially a real weakness for India. When under interrogation, IS sympathizers have revealed plots against pro-Hindu groups, some of which are themselves guilty of anti-Islamic practices.

Keeping Watch

Although the Indian government is cautiously watching IS-related activities in the country, it is of the view that the IS outreach and recruitment strategies are still in a nascent stage.

Home Minster Singh recently underscored that, despite a sizeable Muslim population, IS has not been able to gain a foothold in India (India Today, June 03). That confidence notwithstanding, IS' violent ideals have clearly managed to entice some Indian youths into its fold.

Alarmingly, the pro-Hindu policies of the present government in India — such as state-level efforts to ban the slaughter of cows — risk providing additional fodder for Islamist propaganda campaigns. These policies are already fueling communal tensions, and Muslim communities have complained of vigilante groups made up of so-called Hindu nationalists.

Any deterioration of Hindu-Muslim relations could trigger widespread discontent that will be exploited by Islamist groups like IS to attract a stream of recruits from India's Muslim community.

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NOTES
[1] "Terrorist Designations of Mohammad Shafi Armar, Oussama Ahmad Atar, and Mohammed Isa YousifSaqar Al Binali," U.S. State Department, Washington, DC, June 15, 2017, https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/06/271921.htm

[2] "The Islamic State: The Land of India - Between Pain and Hope," May 19, 2016, https://videopress.com/v/yu5ABFTb

Haiat Tahrir al-Sham Ascendant in Northwest Syria

Rafid Jaboori

The fall of the opposition-controlled sector of Aleppo in December last year was a major blow to Syrian rebel groups who had always asserted that they would hold their ground. The city's fall, quickly followed by a Russian-Turkish accord and the sponsorship by those countries of a new round of negotiations with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has precipitated changes in the dynamics of intra-opposition relations.

Overall, the rebel movement has become more polarized and prone to infighting, a development that is particularly clear in the country's northwest where the Salafist-jihadist group Liwa al-Aqsa (LAQ) has emerged.

Two large rebel blocs have also grown in prominence — the first a coalition led by the Muslim Brotherhood-rooted Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamia, widely referred to as Ahrar, and the other an alliance formed by the merger of al-Nusra's Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS) and four other groups into a single organization called Haiat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

In an opposition landscape increasingly marred by mistrust and resentment, these two groups have seen their ranks bolstered as clashes between LAQ and other rebels push smaller groups to seek their protection (UltraSawt, February 18).

Liwa al-Aqsa

Following the fall of Aleppo, LAQ was formed from a core group of diehard jihadists left behind after the collapse of Jund al-Aqsa (JAQ), an ally of the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front active in northern Syria in the early days of Syria's civil war.

JAQ had close ties to al-Nusra, with JAQ founder Abdul Aziz al-Qatari accompanying Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the founder of al-Nusra, when he was sent by IS from Iraq to Syria to start the movement. However, while JAQ shared al-Nusra's ideology, it refused to join it in fighting IS when the group separated from al-Nusra in 2013, arguing that there should be no conflict between fellow jihadists.

After the fall of Aleppo, however, JAQ was unable to maintain the position of being distinct from but friendly toward al-Nusra. Instead, it dissolved.

Some former members joined HTS, which had formed in January as the second major step by the al-Nusra Front to demonstrate its disputed claim to have severed ties with al-Qaeda; another contingent, probably due to their ethnic background, joined the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), made up primarily of fighters from Central Asian nations (Arabi 21, February 23). The remainder formed LAQ.

Safe Passage Agreement

Fighters with the newly formed group carried out their first attack in early February on several outposts held by Jaish al-Nasr (JAN) and began menacing other groups.

HTS intervened. A meeting between HTS and LAQ leaders was arranged in an attempt to bridge their differences and make peace. HTS raised its concerns over what were then unconfirmed reports that LAQ had declared allegiance to IS (Raqqa Post, February 19; Shaam, February 12).

There was no agreement, and the talks quickly collapsed. LAQ then struck directly against HTS sites and checkpoints (al-Hayat, February 14). Its most devastating attack was against an HTS court in Idlib on February 13, where HTS says the group carried out the summary execution of 45 HTS members and civilians. It later emerged that LAQ had executed 130 prisoners from other rebel groups that it had captured previously (Shaa, February 13). The mass killings, carried out in the town of Khan Sheikhon in Hama, were a tipping point, and HTS decided to move against LAQ on all fronts.

After four days of fighting, with little movement achieved and 50 fighters reportedly killed on either side, another meeting was arranged between representatives of the two groups. Although neither side appears to have convinced the other of their ideological convictions, they were able to negotiate an end to the violence (SOHR, February 22).

The exact terms of the final deal were disputed, but all LAQ fighters eventually withdrew, leaving behind their heavy weaponry in exchange for the safe passage of 600

people (fighters along with their families) to IS strong-holds in eastern Hama.

HTS was criticized heavily by other rebel factions for allowing LAQ to withdraw, but the group's decision was pragmatic and removed the presence of a group with IS sympathies from its sphere of influence. Even under pressure, IS' better organized and more ruthless fighters have proved to be difficult opponents for other rebel groups. HTS was keen to avoid becoming mired in such a battle, especially as they entertain the hope that LAQ will eventually embrace their brand and join them, rather than ally with IS (al-Moson, February 18).

Shifting Power Dynamics

Although most LAQ attacks were not directed at HTS — instead they targeted other groups, including HTS' main rival Ahrar — HTS has been able to capitalize on the fluid situation among the opposition and, at present, appears to be the only one with both the capabilities and willingness to tackle LAQ.

HTS has emerged as a dominant rebel power, consolidating its hold in large parts of Idlib and Hama provinces. The group has shown a pragmatic streak, successfully emerging from conflict with IS-linked groups and effectively ending the IS threat to smaller rebel groups in the area. It has brought many of those groups together and its bloody encounter with LAQ has bolstered its claim to be separate from al-Nusra.

However, LAQ has not been defeated. Instead, it has shown that even a small, isolated group can put up a tough fight, avoid punishment for abuses such as the mass execution of prisoners and force a negotiated agreement. Their withdrawal to IS territory also practically guarantees the group will now bolster IS' ranks as IS does not allow independent entities to operate within its structure.

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Yemen's Houthi Missiles Keep Saudi Arabia Mired in Conflict

Lucas Winter

Missiles launched at Saudi Arabia by Yemen's Houthi fighters have proved wildly inaccurate as regards their targets but largely effective in terms of their media impact, frustrating Saudi claims to have eroded the fighters' capabilities. Indeed, concerns over Yemen's missile stockpiles have proved a key concern for Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies ever since longtime Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to relinquish political power in November 2011 in exchange for immunity from prosecution.

A key goal of the Yemeni political transitional period was to remove ballistic missile stockpiles from the hands of the Yemeni Republican Guard (YRG), a self-contained elite military force that reported directly to Saleh and fell under the commanded of his son and purported heir, Ahmed. When those efforts failed, the Saudis attempted to destroy the stockpiles militarily, a move that has been only somewhat effective and has contributed significantly to the current conflict.

Yemen's Missile Stockpiles

At the time of Saleh's resignation, most of Yemen's missile systems were stored in fortified compounds belonging to the YRG's 5th and 6th Missile Brigades, located atop Faj Attan, a mountain overlooking the Yemeni capital Sana'a. An additional YRG brigade, the 8th Artillery-Missile Brigade, possessed heavy rocket artillery systems and was based in a neighboring province south of the city.

Open source estimates vary regarding the Yemeni military's ballistic missile capabilities in 2011. Known missile stocks included systems inherited from the stockpiles of North and South Yemen, predating Yemeni unification in 1990. Most important among these were Soviet-era Scud missiles, which the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY), or South Yemen, had begun acquiring in the 1970s. They also included the smaller and more mobile SS-21 Scarabs (OTR-21 Tochka), which both the PDRY and the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), or North Yemen, had purchased in the 1980s.

The former militaries of both North and South Yemen employed some of these missiles during the country's civil war in the summer of 1994. Following the end of the civil war, the Scuds were transferred out of the PDRY's al-Anad missile base near Aden and eventually put under the control of the YRG's 5th and 6th Missile Brigades, headquartered on a hilltop overlooking Sana'a.

A Congressional Research Services report estimated that, in 2004, the unified Yemeni military had 24 SS-21 missiles and 18 SS-1 Scud B missiles, each with fewer than 50 launchers (CRS, March 5, 2004).

During the 2000s, Saleh's government acquired North Korean Scud-type Hwasongs, including 15 missiles that were seized in transit but subsequently released to the Saleh government. According to one estimate, the Saleh government purchased 45 Hwasong-6 (Scud-C variant) missiles in the 2000s. [1] Unconfirmed rumors that it had also acquired Hwasong-10 (BM-25 Musudan) missile systems from North Korea have been repeatedly mentioned in Yemeni media, especially since 2015 (Arabian Gulf Centre for Iranian Studies, November 1, 2016).

The Yemeni military's missile brigades also possessed decrepit and obsolete FROG-7 (9K52 Luna-M) rocket artillery systems, while its air defense units had SA-2 Guideline (S-75 Dvina) air defense systems that could be modified to function as surface-to-surface ballistic missiles with small warheads.

Most systems were reportedly in poor condition. Some of the North Korean missiles obtained in 2002 were non-functional due to defective parts, according to one account, while both the Scuds and the OTR-21s required the constant attention of foreign experts to remain operational (Oryx Blog, March 29, 2015).

All this notwithstanding, the GCC, and Saudi Arabia in particular, considered the missiles a latent threat, but believed that by removing Saleh's relatives from positions of power, particularly within the YRG, it could be largely neutralized.

Taking Control

In February 2012, former Saleh ally and longtime vice-president Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi became president for the GCC-backed two-year transitional period. Shortly thereafter, the interim government began issuing decrees removing Saleh's close relatives from top military and security posts.

In mid-December 2012, it ordered all three of the YRG's missile brigades — the 5th and 6th Missile Brigades and the 8th Artillery-Missile Brigade — to be incorporated into a newly created "Missile Brigades Group." The decree implied that Ahmed Saleh and the YRG would relinquish control of all ballistic missiles.

Although on paper the new missiles brigades responded directly to President Hadi, in reality the president held limited sway over its commanders. [2] Saleh, who while in power had controlled the Yemeni armed forces through a mixture of corruption, intrigue and influence peddling, continued to exert important influence. His more than 30 years of rule had provided military officers with great social and material benefits, and many of them were reluctant to fully break with him and his allies.

Initially, Yemeni media outlets reported that Ahmed Saleh had refused to hand over the missiles, or claimed that loyalists had hidden many of them in the mountains surrounding the capital (Yemen Press, December 10, 2012; Mareb Press, August 14, 2011). By late December 2012, however, he had begun handing over the missiles to purportedly neutral military leaders, with only the 8th Artillery-Missile Brigade, which had no functional missile systems, relinquished directly to Saleh's adversaries. The fate of mobile missile systems was unclear.

In March 2013, the transitional government attempted to transfer missiles from the 5th and 6th Brigades' bases in Faj Attan to the former PDRY missile base in President Hadi's home province of Lahj (al-Wasat, March 28, 2013). These efforts were reportedly blocked by Yemeni military commanders who balked at the idea of ceding the missiles to commanders of former South Yemen.

Operation Decisive Storm

By April 2013, the Hadi government had successfully removed Saleh's relatives from their positions and dissolved the YRG, merging the nearly two-dozen constituent brigades into a smattering of new units, some under the conventional military chain of command and others reporting directly to the president.

This apparently successful restructuring masked a growing power vacuum created by the failed transitional process, which formally ended in early 2014. Over the following months, Yemen's rudderless government teetered toward insolvency and found itself increasingly unable to govern. By the summer of 2014, many former YRG units — including the missile brigades — were in mutinous disarray over unpaid bonuses and salaries (al-Araby al-Jadid, September 9, 2014).

The downward spiral came to a sudden halt in September 2014, when the Houthi takeover of Sanaa injected new life into Yemen's crumbling armed forces.

Having fought government forces intermittently between 2004 and 2010, when Saleh resigned in 2011, the Houthis began pushing outward from their strongholds in Yemen's Saada province.

In the second half of 2013, they allied with Saleh loyalists against GCC-backed groups that were increasingly dominating the transitional government, and in the summer of 2014, Houthi gunmen began setting up checkpoints on roads into the capital. As tensions increased, former YRG forces guarding the city declared themselves neutral. However, by refusing to block the Houthis' entry, these troops signaled their allegiance was not with the interim government.

In September 2014, the Houthis seized Sana'a. The takeover brought the moribund GCC-led transitional period to an abrupt end. According to a high-level defector from the movement, an immediate Houthi priority was to gain control over what remained of Yemen's elite military forces and their armaments, in particular the YRG (al-Tagheer, October 12, 2016).

In mid-December 2014, Yemeni media reported that Houthi fighters had approached the gates of the Faj Attan base, home to Yemen's fixed ballistic missile systems (al-Jazeera, December 11, 2014). Although the government initially denied that there was any reason for concern, by late January 2015, Yemeni media was reporting that the Houthis had possibly taken over the base (al-Bawaba, December 11, 2014; IINA, January 21, 2015).

Saudi Arabia feared it would be the intended target of any captured missiles. As early as November 2014, there were claims that the Houthis had transported mobile missile systems to their northern strongholds along the border and pointed them toward the Kingdom (Yemen Press, November 27, 2014).

In March 2015, GCC states, led by Saudi Arabia, launched an aerial bombing campaign named Decisive Storm, intended to counter the perceived threat of the Houthi "armed buildup including heavy weapons and missiles on the borders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (Embassy of Saudi Arabia, March 26, 2015). Yemen's ballistic missile systems were among the campaign's primary targets.

In March and April 2015, massive amounts of ordnance were dropped on Faj Attan, where missiles were stored in underground depots protected by a thick layer of rock (al-Araby al-Jadid, May 23, 2015). The coalition also claimed to have targeted mobile missile systems.

The bombing campaign ended on April 21, with Saudi Arabia declaring it a success. GCC military leaders estimated that 80 percent of Yemen's armed forces' 300 missiles had been destroyed, an assessment that proved to be highly inaccurate. [3]

Houthi Response

The GCC's aerial and technological superiority meant that Operation Decisive Storm quickly rendered Yemen's fixed ballistic missile systems ineffective. YRG-Houthi forces countered this asymmetry by employing mobile missiles as insurgent weapons, emphasizing mobility at the expense of accuracy and magnifying their importance in the informational realm.

YRG-Houthi forces launched their first Scud missile toward Saudi Arabia on June 6, 2015. Over the next 18 months, they claimed over two dozen launches toward Saudi Arabia and several others targeting GCC and allied forces within Yemeni territory. [4] According to expert analysis, in the 18 months from June 2015, Saudi Arabian air defenses intercepted 24 out of 33 missiles targeting Saudi territory (CSIS, October 13, 2016).

Although YRG-Houthi capabilities may be inflated — Arabic-language media reports often refer to unguided missile and rocket strikes as ballistic missile attacks — YRG-Houthi forces have used short-distance missiles and rockets extensively to strike Saudi facilities along the border.

Most, if not all, of these rockets and missiles are apparently locally assembled but based on Iranian designs (YJC, July 26, 2016). According to the Houthis, their range is from 15-75 kilometers (km), with warheads ranging from 15 kilograms to half of a ton on the largest of them, the Zalzal-3.

Three types of modified missiles have been launched at Saudi Arabia: the Qaher-1, a S-75 surface-to-air (SAM) missile modified for ground rather than air targeting first used in July 2016; the Burkan-1, a modified Scud-type first launched toward the vital area of al-Taif-Mecca-Jeddah in October 2016; and, the Burkan-2, which was "test-fired" in a launch targeting the Saudi capital Riyadh in February 2017. [5]

Following the model established by Iraqi forces during the First Gulf War, YRG-Houthi forces have leveraged Yemen's advantageous terrain to conceal mobile launchers while also employing tactical deception to thwart GCC Transporter Erector Launchers (TEL) hunting efforts.

As with Iraqi forces 25 years before, YRG-Houthi missiles have largely missed their targets, but YRG-Houthi forces still capitalize on media coverage of the launches — the ability to launch missiles amidst sustained GCC military efforts to deprive them of these very capabilities undermines the credibility of GCC claims regarding the conflict.

The media arm of the YRG-Houthi Missile Forces is active in publicizing new systems and distributing videos of claimed launches. The successful modification of S-75 SAMs and Scud-type missiles is meant to convey a magnified image of domestic production capabilities, even though none of these modified missiles appears to have yet struck a target.

Domestically developed rocket artillery systems are often presented as if they were in the same class of weapons as ballistic missiles. Statements accompanying the launches invariably claim that the target was struck "with great precision," putting the burden of proof of interception on the Saudi military coalition. These inaccurate but heavily publicized missiles have forced Saudi Arabia to deploy a large number of expensive missile defense systems, raising the cost to the Kingdom of waging war.

The GCC coalition and its Yemeni allies have proven ineffective in neutralizing the missile threat posed by the YRG-Houthi alliance. Political attempts between 2012 and 2014 to transfer the missiles into friendly hands failed due to an absence of support within the Yemeni military, while military attempts since 2015 to destroy all missile systems have been thwarted by the YRG-Houthi forces.

The Saudi-led campaign in Yemen, which many expected to be brief and decisive, has turned into a war of attrition with no clear end in sight. Nearly two years after declaring that the majority of Yemen's missile systems had been neutralized, Saudi Arabia faces an adversary whose military resilience is regularly demonstrated through its missile launches.

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Notes
[1] See the Nuclear Threat Initiative report on Yemen (updated July, 2016).

[2] The overall missile brigades command was given to Major General Ali Muhsin Muthanna, former commander of a SCUD missile brigade. He was replaced in April 2013 by Mohammed Nasr Ahmed al-Atifi, who was previously commander of the 5th Brigade and who had also commanded a SCUD brigade. In late 2016, al-Atifi was named defense minister in the Huthi-led government based in Sanaa.

[3] The GCC estimate of 300 missiles is significantly higher than pre-2011 estimates of Yemen's missile stockpiles. It is unclear whether this is because it included inoperable systems and short-range rockets, reflected new capabilities acquired after November 2011 or was simply a politically inflated number.

[4] Two strikes using SS-21s within Yemeni territory appear to have caused significant damage to GCC and allied forces - one on 4 September 2015 at a FOB in the desert of Mareb Province, and another on 14 December 2015 near the strategic Bab al-Mandab chokepoint on the Red Sea coast. Following those two successful strikes the GCC deployed Patriot Missiles inside Yemen. According to Mohammed bin Khalid, an influential Saudi military commenter on Twitter, during their first year of deployment in Marib Province the UAE's Patriot batteries had intercepted more than 70 missiles launched by Houthi forces.

[5] The Burkan-1 that was launched toward the vital area of al-Taif-Mecca-Jeddah in October 2016 was likely modeled on the modified SCUDs used by Iraqi forces, which were altered for greater range at the expense of accuracy and payload.