

# Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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p.1

*Brian Perkins*

**BRIEFS**

p.4

*Waliullah Rahmani*

**How Islamic State-Khurasan is Driving Afghanistan Toward a Sectarian Conflict**

p.6

*Sunguta West*

**Increased Attacks Suggest al-Shabaab Resurgence**

p.8

*Ebi Spahiu*

**MEK in Albania— Potential Implications and Security Concerns for Albania**

## PRO-ISLAMIC STATE GROUPS THREATEN AUSTRALIA

*Brian Perkins*

Australian authorities have largely managed to mitigate the threat of terrorism within the country over the past several years, foiling more than a dozen plots since 2015. During this same time, however, Islamic State (IS)-inspired individuals and sympathizers have successfully carried out small-scale lone-wolf style attacks, primarily stabbings ([ABC](#), May 9; [News.com.au](#), July 31, 2017). Recent threats published by pro-IS groups and media foundations have raised concerns regarding terrorist attacks in the country. These threats are an unlikely indication of any specific plots, rather they ref further attempts to help inspire lone-wolf attacks using tactics that have already proven effective, such as stabbings, and are capitalizing on recent public panic to inspire the use of tactics yet to be seen on a notable scale.

The pro-IS online group Muharir al-Ansar published a threat on their Telegram channel on September 21. The message on the poster stated, “we will make you check everything and anything you eat out of fear, horror and terror,” with images of strawberries, a vial of poison and

the Sydney Opera House in the background. The poster was seemingly claiming responsibility for the reports of contaminated strawberries that had been found across the country with needles concealed inside. The so-called “strawberry scare” gained international media attention and caused panic in Australia. The group followed their initial statement with two more online posters, one of which stated, “in your food you will find special flavors that we have prepared for you, so wait and behold.”

Shortly after Muharir al-Ansar’s threats, al-Abd al-Faqir Media Foundation published a series of posters calling for knife attacks, depicting an individual with a knife and a victim falling from the Sydney Harbor Bridge. The text on the poster stated “Australia, harvest time has come in your homes,” a likely reference to the food tampering.

The Queensland Strawberry Growers Association has stated they believe a disgruntled employee is behind the initial contamination and Australian authorities have arrested a teenager who subsequently copied the tactic ([ABC](#), September 12; [ABC](#), September 18). The incident, however, has raised concerns over food supply-chain security and the likelihood individuals inspired by IS and other international terrorist organizations could

begin implementing similar tactics. Pro-IS groups have previously called for supporters to poison food, but past threats had not centered around an actual high-profile incident involving contaminated food ([Newsweek](#), September 7, 2017).

Neither of the groups that published the threats are particularly well known, nor have they solely focused on inspiring attacks specifically in Australia. Instead, both have routinely made claims of responsibility for various attacks or incidents on behalf of Islamic State. Similarly, they have called upon supporters to conduct lone-wolf style attacks in tourist areas of Spain, the World Cup in Russia, and other events and cities. [1] Neither group has been credibly connected to a specific incident, but as their propaganda output increases and they capitalize on public fear they will become more likely to reach a willing audience.

#### Notes

1. See poster threatening World Cup in Russia.

<https://twitter.com/MalwareInt/status/1008772546735628289>

## **BANGLADESH: JAMAAT UL-MUJAHIDEEN CALLS FOR ATTACKS ON NATIONAL ELECTIONS**

*Brian Perkins*

Bangladesh's homegrown terrorist organization, Jamaat ul-Mujahideen (JM), is seemingly looking to revive its operations in Bangladesh and expand its footprint in the Indian Subcontinent. The group, formerly known as Jamaat ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, rebranded to remove Bangladesh from its name in July in a likely attempt to appeal more to those outside of the country. This move is particularly aimed toward India, where an official Jamaat ul-Mujahideen India wing has developed ([Terrorism Monitor](#), June 29). The group's operations in Bangladesh have slowed significantly in the past two years as Bangladeshi forces have increased the scale of counterterrorism operations, particularly in Dhaka. Counterterrorism operations increased significantly following the devastating attack on the Holey Artisan Bakery in Dhaka that left 20 dead in July 2016. However, recent calls for attacks and incidents during counterterrorism raids suggest the group remains operational in Bangladesh and is still very active in recruiting new members.

JM released a document on the group's official Telegram channel on September 23 to reiterate its claim of responsibility for the murder of Shajahan Bachchu, a prominent secular blogger. The document also called for Muslims to join the jihad while vowing to continue the fight against the "cruel" Bangladeshi government. A Ministry of Home Affairs intelligence report released in September revealed that the group is planning to conduct attacks during national elections in December ([DNA India](#), September 17). According to the report, the group has been undertaking a significant drive to recruit and train new members in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the establishment and growth of the group's wing in India raises concerns that members trained and equipped in India could return to help conduct attacks during the elections ([OneIndia](#), February 11).

Although the group has not conducted any significant attacks in the past year, recent counterterrorism raids have indicated that the group is still operational and possesses the equipment to conduct suicide attacks and small-arms attacks. Recently, on October 5, two JM members detonated explosive devices when Bangladesh's counter-terror force, the Rapid Action Battalion

(RAB), attempted to raid their house in the Southeastern Chittagong district. The RAB stated they seized several explosive devices, AK-47s, and other small arms. The militants had tried to use these materials to attack a local court, according to the counterterror force. A third suspect managed to escape and is still on the loose ([Dhaka Tribune](#), October 5). Similar raids have also made it evident that JM has seemingly regrouped in Bangladesh over the past few years and remain relatively well-supplied.

These recent developments regarding JM in Bangladesh indicate that the country has yet to truly reduce the terrorism threat level, despite the lull in substantial attacks in the past two years. Instead, it appears that Bangladeshi forces have pushed JM, and other terrorist groups, underground and into neighboring countries. The development and growth of the group's Indian wing could allow the group to escape Bangladeshi forces, broaden recruitment and financing, and gain access to weapons before returning to conduct attacks in Bangladesh.

## How Islamic State-Khurasan is Driving Afghanistan Toward Sectarian Conflict

*Waliullah Rahmani*

President Ashraf Ghani condemned Hazara and Shia killings in Afghanistan on September 19 during his visit to India. The president asked for an international investigation of the complex suicide attacks that have targeted the groups ([tolonews](#), September 19). The stance was followed by another address to a gathering of hundreds of Shia Hazara citizens, elders and government officials in the presidential palace. During the address, President Ghani for the first time described the targeted mass killings of Hazaras as a national security threat to Afghanistan ([Khabarnama](#), September 19). This message comes only two weeks after the last suicide attack and vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) attack that targeted a wrestling club and the subsequent gathering of civilians and journalists at the site. The two attacks left more than 30 dead and over 70 wounded ([khabarnama](#), September 5).

Afghanistan's Hazaras, who are mainly a Shia-dominated ethnicity, and other Shia communities have been the target of complex suicide attacks over the last three years. Islamic State-Khurasan (IS-K) has taken responsibility for nearly all of these attacks. At least 25 complex attacks have been carried out against Hazaras and Shias of Afghanistan in the last three years ([Khabarnama](#), September 6). IS-K tactics in these brutal killings included kidnappings and beheadings, VBIED attacks, and complex assaults on Hazara/Shia mosques, educational centers, sporting clubs, libraries, and public or political gatherings. In claims of responsibility, IS-K has noted that it has targeted this particular community for following Shiite religious practices.

While targeted attacks against Shia citizens have been ongoing for years, it was the latest attack that alarmed the National Unity Government leadership, particularly those in its security establishment. This prompted them to speak loudly about targeted killings of the Hazaras of Afghanistan. The young, newly appointed Afghan National Security Advisor (NSA) Hamdullah Moheb for the first time called the attacks "targeted killings of Hazaras"—whereby Afghan ethnic and religious minority

groups have long been the victim of atrocities in Afghanistan ([khabarnama](#), September 8).

This change in Afghan senior leaders' language and the fear of another national security threat emerging in Afghanistan is a sign of the danger posed against the Shia community by IS-K. Some experts in Afghanistan call the current IS-K strategy against Shiites the Iraqization/ Syriazation of Afghanistan, a reference to the rampant sectarian violence in both countries.

### **Western Kabul: A Ghost City**

Dasht-e-Barchi, a populated Hazara community in western Kabul, is a vibrant area previously famous for its stability and high level of tolerance. Being poor with unpaved roads, the area where district 13, 18 and 6 is located has changed to a ghost city, even during the Ashura mourning.

Making up a third of the Afghan capital, Dasht-e-Barchi has been hit by dozens of suicide attacks. At least 14 of the 25 major attacks on the Hazara Shiites have taken place in this western part of Kabul ([Khabarnama](#), August 16). This trend of mass killings of civilians has pushed people to take up arms to defend their mosques and watch over their neighborhoods. Locals have reported that people have taken up arms with approval from the Ministry of Interior and that they routinely fear they will not return from their time patrolling the streets. Armed civilians were particularly prevalent during Muharram ([Afghanpaper](#), September 17).

Many armed Hazara Shiites in the capital of Afghanistan are young and educated, but the feeling of being vulnerable to a new force has motivated the community members to take arms and start their own protection groups across the western parts of the capital. Currently, this once vibrant community is living in fear. The cafes, restaurants, sporting clubs, educational institutions and even wedding halls can no longer operate due to the risk of being hit by a suicide bomber. As such, there are more armed people seen in the streets and roads of this part of the capital while the area has become a ghost city for civilians.

### **Another Hasht al-Shaabi or Fatemiyoun?**

The Shiite Ulema Council of Afghanistan issued a statement in April 2018 asking the people (Hazaras and other

Shiite communities) not to participate in voter registration processes until the people's security is fully granted. The statement read:

We ask all our Muslim people of Afghanistan especially those supporting the religious democracy that considering the upsurge in violence across the country, not to participate in taking ID Cards or voter registration until people's security is granted. Because safety is more important beyond other issues ([Khabarnama](#), April 26).

The statement was issued three days after the bloodiest suicide blast against the group, which targeted a voter registration station and killed 69 and wounded over 120 civilians ([middleeastpress](#), April 23). This blast created anti-government sentiment within the Hazara community, which blames the Afghan security establishment for not taking serious measures to protect the population. The most noticeable action taken was by the Shiite Ulema Council, a body that is created by Afghanistan's senior Shiite clergies and is led by a prominent Shiite Ayatollah Mohseni.

It was after the attack and the council's statement that people lost the courage to participate in voter registration in the western part of capital. Previously, the area had some of the highest turnouts in previous elections, but locals have talked of no Hazara turn-out in the upcoming parliamentary elections ([Khabarnama](#), April 26).

With the current Hazara/Shia Fatemiyoun Brigade fighting in Syria as a proxy force for Iran and looking at the impact of an Ulema's statement on people's attitude in the Afghan traditional Shia community, the risk of Fatwas being issued from grand Hazara/Shiite Ayatollahs in Najaf and Qom cities is increasing. In turn, this will darken the future dynamics of the Shiite community in Afghanistan. Knowing the experience of how Hasht al-Shaabi was created in Iraq in 2014, many believe that a Fatwa from a grand Shiite Ayatollah could mobilize people to take arms in masses. Such an event would create the groundwork for a strong Shiite militia presence across Afghanistan; an issue that would change the strategic calculus of war and impact the current fragile situation of the country.

### **Risk of a Sectarian War**

Increasing violence against Shiite communities across Afghanistan has brought up an emerging discourse that

the risk of sectarian war is increasing. This issue has prompted many stakeholders, including the government, to push for more security measures to protect Shia communities across the country.

The measures, however, do not address how to manage the trend of Hazaras arming themselves across Afghanistan. A militia comprised of around 1,000 armed Hazaras in Maidan Wardak province coupled with armed Hazara groups in Ghazni and other Hazara-dominated areas is increasingly supporting the idea that a nationwide Hazara armed protection forces is forming ([Khabarnama](#), October 2, 2016). Looking to the current trend of the insurgency, it is highly unlikely the government of Afghanistan can stop or prevent further arming of the community. That is a strategy suggested by some Hazara leaders to manage the population-centric mobilized armed groups under the umbrella of the security establishment of Afghanistan. This grand format and strategy could include organizing the current armed Hazara/Shiite groups in various formats including anti-IS-K units and community protection groups ([Khabarnama](#), August 16).

Afghanistan is seemingly on the verge of repeating the tragedies of Iraq and Syria. This trend needs to be stopped in order to prevent a sectarian war in Afghanistan. IS-K's targeting and strategies suggest the prospect of peace is largely unachievable in the near future.

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## Increased Attacks Suggest al-Shabaab Resurgence

*Sunguta West*

Al-Shabaab's recent attacks in Somalia underline the threat the militant group continues to pose in the country and beyond. Since 2007, African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops backed by international partners have waged a military campaign against the terror group, forcing it out of strategic towns, seaports and territories. The AMISOM troops—drawn from Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, Uganda and Sierra Leone—have also disrupted the militant group's main sources of revenue, recruitment and arms supply routes. Several of the group's top leaders have also been killed in U.S. drone and airstrikes ([Standard Digital](#), January 4). The military campaign, however, has not succeeded in completely defeating and dismantling the terror group. Neither has it significantly diminished its ability to strike.

Instead, al-Shabaab—considered the deadliest terrorist organization in Africa—has adopted asymmetrical tactics, increasingly employing the use of Improved Explosive Devices (IEDs) and Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) ([The Star](#), April 23; [Intelligence Briefs](#), May 24). A series of high-profile attacks since late 2017 and AMISOM's plan to gradually withdraw troops from the war-torn country has only made the threat the group poses more pronounced ([Standard Digital](#), May 19).

### Recent Surge in Attacks

Al-Shabaab has recently staged successful surprise attacks against both AMISOM and the Somali army, a tactic the group has employed with devastating effect over the past several years. The most significant of which took place in 2016, when the group ambushed a Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) camp in the town of El Adde in Somalia. The official death toll was never confirmed, but local reports indicated it was one of the deadliest attacks against the KDF, with around 100 soldiers killed during the attack ([Citizen Digital](#), January 15).

More recently, on September 21, al-Shabaab fighters demonstrated their operational capabilities when they

attacked U.S. forces and their partners in the Juba area of Southern Somalia. Somali forces killed two militants during the attack and a subsequent U.S. airstrike killed an additional 18 al-Shabaab fighters ([Capital News](#), September 24). No Somali or U.S. troops were killed during the attack, but one U.S. soldier was killed and four others wounded in a similar style ambush in June.

The militant group detonated a VBIED at the headquarters of Howlwadag District in Mogadishu on September 2, killing at least six people and injuring 10 others. The targeted building is reportedly three kilometers from Villa Somalia, the country's state house. In a brief statement, the militants later said its Mujahideen had carried out the attack of the building in Hodon area of the city ([The East African](#), September 10). In a similar style attack on April 2, the group attacked a Ugandan African Union military camp in Bulomer District, about 150 kilometers outside Mogadishu. The militants used a minibus loaded with explosives to gain access to the fortified camp. Although the number of casualties is unclear, some news reports indicated that nearly 59 soldiers and 30 militants had been killed ([The Observer](#), April 3).

In October 2017, more than 500 people were killed in a twin truck bomb blast outside a busy hotel at the K5 intersection in Mogadishu, a busy street with government offices and popular restaurants. Although the group never officially took responsibility, it was blamed for the attack. This attack is considered the deadliest by al-Shabaab since the launch of its insurgency in 2006 ([The Star](#), February 24).

These attacks have underscored al-Shabaab's continued ability to operate across a range of territories, including within Mogadishu. Further, the group has demonstrated a shift toward increasingly utilizing IEDs and VBIEDs as well as an ability to attack AMISOM and its partners. Al-Shabaab's resilience sheds further doubts on AMISOM's plan to reduce its troop presence and the implications such a withdrawal would have on the security environment ([Pambazuka News](#), November 23, 2017).

### **Shifting Tactics and Operations**

Al-Shabaab's primary target is the government, which the militant group is fighting to overthrow and replace with their own government ruled by Sharia (Islamic law). This overarching goal explains why the group attacks the military, government offices and officials. The recent

series of attacks has underscored their increasing and effective use of VBIEDs. Meanwhile, al-Shabaab has shifted its tactics to strike and inflict damage on public places and installations, with the intention of swaying public opinion in its favor ([Daily Nation](#), September 28, 2013).

At the moment, the insurgents control large swathes of territory in Southern Somalia, where its leaders implement a harsh version of Sharia. Recently, the group has seemingly thrived during times of hardship like recent droughts and floods as they have presented the group with a chance to build a better relationship with local communities. Al-Shabaab has provided services such as canals and waterways and distributed food relief in areas hit by drought.

It has moved to other regions of Somalia, launching attacks in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland. Although the government refuted the claims, the group said it had killed 61 soldiers in an attack on a military base in June 2017 ([Tefanews](#), June 8, 2017). Beyond Somalia, al-Shabaab maintains a presence in other countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and more recently Mozambique. Reports suggest that it has been forming partnerships with other militant groups in these countries to expand its activities ([Daily Nation](#), September 21).

In Kenya, al-Shabaab is believed to have established bases in Boni Forest in the coastal region of Lamu. Its presence is the subject of a security operation known as Operation Linda Boni. In Mozambique, it is believed to have links with Ansar al-Sunna, a new militant group that recently launched attacks in the northern province of Cabo Delgado (see [Militant Leadership Monitor](#), October 4; [Defence Web](#), June 14).

### **AMISOM Withdrawal**

Despite the increasing attacks, AMISOM troops are set to gradually withdraw from the war-torn country under a UN and African Union-backed process. In July this year, the UN Security Council authorized AMISOM's further stay in Somalia until May 2019.

Initially, the force was supposed to start downsizing by October this year, but the council delayed the process. At the same time, the UN body declared that the start of the downsizing would not be further delayed past Feb-

ruary next year. With the departure, Somali security institutions are expected to fully take over from the AMISOM troops by 2021 ([The East African](#), July 30).

President Abdullahi Mohammed “Farmojo” has exuded confidence, saying that his forces are able to defeat al-Shabaab. The president has promised to use the same tactics that forced the group out of Mogadishu, including military force as well as negotiations with those who have accepted his amnesty offer ([AMISOM News](#), April 13, 2017; [African News](#), March 3).

The looming withdrawal, however, is causing some apprehension within security circles in Somalia and the neighboring countries. Experts and analysts fear the Somali security institutions are ill-prepared to take over from AMISOM troops as they depart. With no significant challenge, al-Shabaab would seize the opportunity to rebuild its operational capabilities and take control of more territory ([African News](#), May 7).

The group’s recent spate of successful attacks despite the presence of AMISOM troops has lent credence to this view. They have also exposed the feebleness of the government security institution, which remains weak despite years of investment by the international community. Despite benefitting from actors like the European Union, United States and Turkey, the military still lacks the proper training, coordination, discipline, ownership and equipment.

## **Conclusion**

Although AMISOM has succeeded in disrupting al-Shabaab activities in many of the areas it previously controlled, the group remains a lethal force with the ability to stage surprise attacks. Recently, it has displayed this ability by launching attacks against the AMISOM troops, Somali military and public places. The group’s recent successes have proved contrary to recent opinions that it was seriously weakened and on the verge of defeat.

As AMISOM troops prepare to depart from the country, it is evident that a new strategy is needed to contain the group when forces eventually depart. Without a new and effective strategy, there is a risk of al-Shabaab re-taking control of the country. Given the current state of the Somalia security institutions, this cannot be achieved without the presence of AMISOM.

# MEK in Albania—Potential Implications and Security Concerns for Albania

*Ebi Spahiu*

Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Mujahedeen El-Khalq (MEK) was the subject of frequent attacks from Iranian-backed proxies, which overwhelmed their members residing in camps Ashraf and Liberty in Iraq. Before this, MEK, an Iranian dissident group, began living in Iraq in the early 1980s under the protection of Saddam Hussein. As a group in exile, MEK sought refuge in Iraq under the protection of Hussein, who utilized their military capacities and ties to Iran to undermine the Iranian regime. Until 2012, the MEK was identified as a terrorist organization due to its activities inside Iran and against other regional and international powers, including attacks against U.S. diplomatic personnel and businesses operating in Iran in the 1970s. [1]

Following a series of lobbying efforts by MEK leadership and supporters, the group pledged to give up their weapons and violent tactics as a means to be delisted as a designated terrorist organization. [2] As a consequence, in 2013, the U.S. government pleaded to a number of governments to provide refuge to the MEK members, including Romania, which was the preferred destination at the time. Albania—grateful to the United States for its support during the war in Kosovo and advocating for its bid to join NATO and the EU—was the only country that responded positively to the request. Albania initially admitted some 200 members between 2013 and 2014. The United States and Albanian governments have extended the agreement since 2013, increasing the number of asylum seekers to somewhere in the range of 500-2,000 MEK members. During the summer of 2016, Tirana received the largest contingent of about 1,900 people, an operation managed by the UNHCR ([Shekulli](#), March 12, 2016). Part of the agreement with Washington was the development of deradicalization and rehabilitation programs to be offered to members of the group.

Now, the group is residing in the outskirts of Tirana's capital in a highly fortified camp located in Manëz. From this camp, the group is allegedly intensifying its political activities aimed at bringing down the Iranian regime

([Exit.al](#), March 14). With emerging threats coming from radicalization and violent extremism, due to the rise of the Islamic State and other political Islamist groups in the region, the Albanian government may not be prepared or equipped to respond to the potential implications the group's presence in Albania may bring.

## MEK Activities and Support in Albania

There are a number of opportunities MEK is exploiting in order to restart its political activities against the Iranian regime now that they are residing in Albania. Recent propaganda efforts by the group's leader, Maryam Rajavi, the widow of the founder of MEK, Massoud Rajavi, suggest that she sees herself as a key actor in fostering the opposition in Iran and subsequently bringing down the Khomeini regime ([Exit.al](#), March 14). Much of the group's propaganda material available online is translated in Albanian and seeks to also reach out to a local audience in their host country ([Iran-interlink.org](#)).

Moreover, the group has gathered significant support from important U.S. leaders who do not shy away from expressing their support for MEK's potential rise as Iran's future "democratic government" ([Exit.al](#), June 26). This sentiment is frequently expressed on a number of occasions when important figures of the U.S. political landscape have personally visited Albania and spoken at rallies organized by MEK in Tirana ([KlanTV](#), March 21). The most recent gatherings saw figures such as John Bolton (now U.S. National Security Advisor), Rudy Giuliani, one of President Trump's most trusted advisors and personal lawyer, and late U.S. Senator John McCain, among others. The three seemingly demonstrated their support for MEK to be at the center of regime change in Iran ([Exit.al](#), June 26).

The reasons why the Trump administration is supporting the group's political objectives are unclear. It is also unclear the level of support MEK still has among the population in Iran, but it is becoming increasingly obvious that MEK is also making some powerful friends in Tirana as well. Over the years, key leaders from the Albanian government and civil society organizations have similarly provided their support during rallies and conferences organized by MEK in Paris as well as in Albania, where its new headquarters are located. In May 2015, Albania's former Prime Minister during the war in Kosovo and current Minister of Diaspora, Pandeli Majko attended the National Council of Resistance of Iran rally in Paris with a

large delegation of parliament representatives, journalists, lawyers and some civil society representatives, reiterating Albania's support for Iran's resistance and promising his personal support for regime change. [3]

In an impassioned speech over a cheering crowd, Majko said "whether you want it or not, you have involved us in your story, in your drama, in your tragedies and we understand you very well...some years ago, an American President was in Berlin and from Berlin, this politician, this great man declared 'Ich bin a Berliner'. And in the name of my friends and in Albania, I've come here to say 'Men mujahed astam'. I have a dream to come soon to Tehran. Invited by you." [4] At the time, Majko's attendance in the Paris rally was not covered by local media.

Despite the group's increasing political support, recent media reports and several incidents between MEK members and local communities in Albania expose their continuing secretive activities and ongoing struggles to receive legitimacy as a democratic organization. Over the years, several media agencies have been interested in documenting the lives of MEK members in Albania and their political struggles in Iran. Channel 4, a well-known British news agency, recently traveled to Albania to do the same. The film crew was met by hostile private security who were guarding the highly fortified Manëz camp. Camp members physically attacked Channel 4's camera crew ([Shqiptarja.com](http://Shqiptarja.com), August 19). This was an unprecedented event that raised several questions over the camp's activities ([Lapsi.al](http://Lapsi.al), August 19). The event was widely reported by local media, which was also able to obtain a threat assessment on the group by Albania's Intelligence Agency. According to the report initially made available to Channel 4 and then to other Iranian and local media, the group remains "deeply indoctrinated" and some of their activities, including murders of their members, are similar to the ones in Iraq ([The Iranian](http://The Iranian), August 2018).

Testimonies from dissidents who left the group in recent months speak of similar military trainings, indoctrination and pressure to follow the group's ideology ([Top Channel](http://Top Channel), February 13). Although in the early years some of their members who relocated to Albania sought opportunities to travel abroad and join family members in the West, some 200 members have fled the group and continue to live in Albania ([Top Channel](http://Top Channel), February 13). There is no clarity of their legal status or the employ-

ment opportunities available in a country suffering from high unemployment rates. However, some advocacy initiatives—often seemingly pro-Russian and pro-Iranian—are already fostering opposition against the group. Some of this opposition is often portrayed by the MEK leadership as an operation conducted by Iran's security agencies ([Lapsi.al](http://Lapsi.al), August 19; [Media e Lire](http://Media e Lire), April 17; [Nejat NGO](http://Nejat NGO), September 29) Moreover, integrating the rest of the members still in Manëz into Albania's society does not seem to be in the immediate interest for the MEK.

## Implications

The MEK's presence and activities may have serious repercussions for Albania and Albanian policy-makers. Leaders in Tirana may not foresee the long-term consequences of expanding their role on foreign policy issues beyond the small Balkan nation's traditional reach. The group remains an existential threat to the Iranian regime. Over the years, Tehran has supported significant raids via Hezbollah and other proxy organizations in Iraq to destroy the group and kill key MEK leaders. As a result, Albanian authorities should expect more involvement from Iran in its internal and regional affairs. At the moment, there are no clear signs that Iran's presence is significant in the region. Authorities in both Kosovo and Macedonia, however, have raised alarm bells over Iranian-linked NGOs having ties to terrorism-related activities in the past ([Balkan Insight](http://Balkan Insight), June 25, 2015). If no effective responses are undertaken, MEK's presence and Iran's attention towards the Western Balkans may inflame sectarian divides in smaller communities and amplify regional rifts. Sectarian division is a latent phenomenon among Albanian Muslims, but they also remain under the pressure of other forms of Islamist radicalization. This is due to the emergence of Islamic State and Turkey's instrumentalization of political Islam, among others.

Albania continues to struggle with endemic corruption and organized crime and the emergence of religious radicalization as a regional security threat and potential sectarian rifts may add to the list of challenges facing Albania's political landscape. As a result, the country may not be prepared to inherit a long-standing struggle between a major regional Middle Eastern power and a former terrorist organization. Especially since both may utilize Albania's internal vulnerabilities for their own political gains.

## Notes

1. See U.S. State Department Press Release ([US State Department](#), September 28, 2012).

2. Ibid.

3. Pandeli Majko's speech in Paris, May 10, 2015:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIR97EP\\_phE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIR97EP_phE)

4. Ibid.

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