

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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IS-CAP ATTACK CLAIMS IN DRC INCREASE, BUT CAPABILITIES LARGELY REMAIN THE SAME

Brian Perkins

The number of attacks Islamic State Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) has claimed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has increased significantly since the beginning of 2020. This continues an escalation of violence that has left more than 600 dead since the Congolese military launched large-scale operations in North Kivu province's Beni region. IS-CAP's initial proclamation of its presence in DRC was looked upon with skepticism due to the murky details surrounding its local connections. The current escalation of claims raises important questions as to what exactly is fueling the increased tempo of claimed attacks.

Since IS-CAP first announced its presence in the DRC in April 2019, evidence suggested that it had made inroads into the country through more jihadist-leaning factions of the ADF. The overlapping area of operations and attacks IS-CAP has claimed over the past year has only provided further evidence of this connection. IS-

CAP has claimed at least 25 attacks in the past four months alone—nearing its total for all of 2019—including the June 22 attack in the Makisabo area of Beni that claimed the life of an Indonesian peacekeeper from the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) ([Twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen](https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen), June 23).

The extent to which the increased tempo of IS-CAP claims can be attributed to an increase in external support or improved capabilities, however, is up for debate. Outside of an increase in the number and quality of video releases, some of which have attempted to exploit the COVID-19 crisis, there is little evidence to suggest significant material or tactical improvements. The majority of attacks have employed the same ambush tactics and antiquated or rudimentary weaponry used by the ADF for decades.

One likely explanation for the rising number of IS-CAP claims is that the faction first responsible for the Islamic State (IS) connection has expanded its ranks by convincing other fighters to engage with the IS narrative, thus expanding the reach of IS-CAP and broadening the number of attacks it can viably claim.

At the same time, multiple crises are unfolding around the country, which are hindering the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (FARDC) ability to combat the violence in Beni region. In addition to the ADF and IS-CAP violence in North Kivu, communal violence in Tanganyika province and incursions into Ituri province by elements of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces have also drawn resources and attention. On July 9, President Tshisekedi convened an emergency meeting with the FARDC chain of command to warn of a rebellion brewing in the Fizi and Mwenga territories of South Kivu ([The Africa Report](#), June 10). Outside of these traditional security threats, the country has also been preoccupied with stopping the spread of COVID-19.

The IS-CAP expansion in DRC should not be taken lightly, but the increased tempo of claims has coincided with an overall surge in attacks in North Kivu. IS-CAP claims only account for a small percentage of the total attacks. The coming months will likely see a steady rate of IS-CAP claims as the country grapples with multiple unfolding crises. For now, IS-CAP in DRC has not seen the same level of tactical and operational improvements that the branch's counterpart in Mozambique has seen.

Brian Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

SOUTHEAST ASIA REMAINS DESTINATION AND TRANSIT POINT FOR TERRORIST GROUPS

Brian Perkins

While Islamic State's (IS) growth in the Sahel and East Africa and its creeping resurgence in Iraq dominate the headlines, the group's activities and durability in Southeast Asia remain overlooked. The island nations of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines in particular have all experienced a surge in terrorist activity over the past three years and have increasingly faced a threat not only from the return of citizens who fought alongside IS abroad, but also from foreigners seeking to join IS-affiliated groups in the region as an alternative to the organization's other areas of operation. Given the history of fighters transiting between the three countries, their individual counterterrorism strategies are only as strong as the weakest link between the three.

The U.S. State Department's recently released Country Report on Terrorism underscored the unique vulnerabilities that Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines face. [1] Most notably, the challenges of tightening border security and preventing militants from not only taking root within each country but also using them as transit points to neighboring countries and those much further afield. Disparities between these countries' terrorism legislation, travel/visa restrictions, and stance toward the repatriation of foreign fighters only deepen these vulnerabilities, which will likely increasingly be exploited by current and aspiring IS fighters as traveling to other fronts becomes more difficult.

The three countries have all enacted more stringent counterterrorism measures, but significant differences remain in their approaches to the repatriation of fighters and their families. While the Philippines has been reluctant to repatriate any of its citizens, Malaysia has actively repatriated fighters and their families, often arresting and charging the male fighters and placing women and children in rehabilitation programs. Indonesia initially took a similar, but more lax approach, which was eventually reverted back to denying repatriation after one repatriated couple made their way to the Philippines. Once there they helped conduct a suicide bombing that killed 22 people at a Cathedral in Jolo ([Bangkok Post](#), July 24, 2019).

Similarly, disparities also exist regarding visa requirements. Malaysia does not require visas for travelers from

Syria, Iraq, or Turkey—three of the more likely exit points for returning fighters. The Philippines does not require visas for travelers from Turkey, and Indonesia grants visas upon arrival.

The Philippines has been the hardest hit of the three countries, with Abu Sayyaf, The Maute Group, and Ansar al-Khalifa being responsible for a large percentage of attacks within the country. Among these groups have been a growing number of not only Malaysian and Indonesian fighters, but also fighters from Europe and across the Middle East ([Benar News](#), September 4, 2019). The Philippines is likely to remain the region's premier terrorist front, and deficiencies in Malaysia and Indonesia's border security and visa programs will continue to see them used as transit points for local and foreign fighters to take well-established sea routes to the Philippines.

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Notes

[1] See <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/>

How Will Khadimi Confront Kata'ib Hezbollah?

Jacob Lees Weiss

On June 26, Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) raided the Baghdad headquarters of Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), an Iranian-backed militia of the security umbrella organization, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) ([al-Jazeera](#), June 26). The CTS arrested 14 KH militants and confiscated various rockets and other weaponry after it had received intelligence about an imminent attack on the International Zone and Baghdad International Airport. Several hours later, dozens of armed KH members entered the Green Zone to pressure the CTS to release the arrested militants. The CTS released all but one of the detainees by June 30 ([Iraqi Prime Minister's Media Office](#), June 30).

Amid a severe economic downturn, one of the most pertinent questions facing Baghdad is how Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Khadimi will balance his economic reform plans with confronting the various pro-Iran militia groups embedded in the state.

Khadimi's Strategy Towards the PMU

The raid on the KH headquarters is the latest attempt by Khadimi to curb the influence of pro-Iran militia groups. Since his inauguration in May, Khadimi consolidated control over the CTS and the National Intelligence Service, ordered the closure of the Thar Allah al-Islami militia headquarters, and arrested an influential member of another pro-Iran militia group ([Al-Monitor](#), May 12).

Khadimi has made it clear he wishes to remodel the state's relationship with the PMU, where many of the more powerful pro-Iran militias are embedded. While the PMU is officially an Iraqi state institution, several of its factions receive funding and coordination from Iran. Khadimi has attempted to isolate these factions by emphasizing the Iraqi identity of the PMU, designating it a purely Iraqi institution and stating that it must subsequently answer only to the Iraqi state ([Iraqi Prime Minister's Media Office](#), May 16).

To this end, Khadimi has sought to exploit an inter-Shia rift in the PMU. Of the 67 Shia factions present in the PMU, loyalties are divided between factions that follow

the Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and those that follow the Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ([Rudaw](#), June 10). Long-standing disagreements over the imbalance in control over resources and decision-making in the organization came to a head in February, after the Khamenei factions unilaterally installed the replacement for former leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Since Khadimi's inauguration, he has thrown his support behind Sistani, offered more support to the pro-Sistani factions and even encouraged them to leave the PMU and transfer to direct state control.

Khadimi's strategy has not yet had the desired effect. Following the raid, rocket attacks targeting U.S. diplomatic and military assets have continued, and multiple pro-Iran factions galvanized in support of KH ([Middle East Eye](#), July 2). Iranian-backed members of the PMU are even suspected of being behind the recent assassination of influential analyst Hisham al-Hashimi, reportedly close to Khadimi, on July 6 ([al-Hurra](#), July 8).

A Dangerous Precedent

While Khadimi may feel that now is the right time to reign in Iranian-aligned militias, particularly as funding from Iran has dropped over the past months, the June 26 raid set a dangerous precedent ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), July 3). Khadimi will now have to ensure that the CTS continues to act if KH plans further attacks. If not, Khadimi will not only lose credibility, but also embolden KH militants to launch more daring attacks.

Close links between KH and other pro-Iran factions such as Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Movement mean that further confrontations could lead to a large mobilization against the state. This would have severe repercussions for the security environment, as the Iraqi state forces would struggle to contain the pro-Iran factions without mobilizing state-aligned PMU factions. The semi-civil war conditions that this would likely create are a significant deterrent for Khadimi's government.

Pro-Iran factions also wield considerable political influence and could bring down Khadimi's government without resorting to violence. Many of these groups are linked to the Fatah alliance, currently the largest in parliament. While the establishment of the new coalition 'Iraqiyoon' has bolstered support for Khadimi, the coalition is still smaller than that of Fatah ([Rudaw](#), July 1). If the Fatah alliance were to request a vote of no confi-

dence, there is no guarantee that Khadimi's government has enough parliamentary support to survive.

An Important Ally and a Difficult Task

With the second round of strategic talks between Iraq and the United States looming, Khadimi cannot afford to be seen as weak on Iranian militias. U.S. assistance has become even more vital after Iraq's economy significantly worsened over recent months due to COVID-19 and falling oil prices. Trump's presidency has often attached conditions to its support, and if Khadimi wants to ensure further engagement with Washington, then he will need to continue to show willingness in combatting the militias.

Khadimi faces a difficult task. He cannot push the pro-Iran factions too hard as he risks a confrontation that could destabilize the security and political environment. Likewise, if Khadimi eases up on the Iranian-backed militias he could alienate a major ally at the same time as setting a precedent of impunity for powerful pro-Iran groups.

Conclusion

If Khadimi can strike a balance between avoiding direct conflict and showing enough strength for domestic and foreign audiences, he will have the space to focus on economic reform plans vital to strengthening the Iraqi state. By solving Iraq's economic downturn, Khadimi can build up domestic political capital, thereby undermining the dominant Iranian-aligned Fatah block. A richer state would also be able to increase funding to state-aligned members of the PMU, thereby tipping the balance of power in its favor.

Militia groups wielding considerable influence autonomously from the state will continue to pose significant difficulties to Khadimi. Iran's influence in Iraq has been built up over decades and will not be removed in months. While continuing to pursue pro-Iran groups will win Khadimi credibility in Washington in the short term, only an Iraqi state driven by a functioning economy will put Khadimi in a position capable to successfully confront Iranian proxies in the long term.

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Libyan War Upsets Fragile Tunisian Government

Brian M. Perkins

The increasingly intractable war in Libya is remaking the political landscape in Tunisia as powerful international players vie for influence across the region. The shifting political realities in Tunis are not just a byproduct of international actors' involvement in backing opposing parties to the war in Libya, but also a result of these actors directly meddling in Tunisian affairs.

Tunisia, widely seen as the Arab Spring's only success story, has struggled to keep its fledgling democracy from tearing apart at the seams for years. The recent 2019 elections marked an important milestone, as it resulted in a widespread rejection of both the consensus model of government that emerged in 2014, and the lingering social and economic status quo left behind by the former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. With that rejection, however, came the marginalization of the once powerful Islamist party, Ennahda, and the Nida Tounes party. The elections increased political fragmentation within parliament as a result of new parties, such as Qalb Tounes, emerging out of fractures within established parties. Currently, no party holds the 109 seats needed to form a strong coherent government, though Ennahda remains the largest with 54 seats. President Kais Saied may have won the presidential election in a landslide victory, but he lacks the experience and political party affiliation needed to effectively marshal the government. What emerged from the 2019 elections was an exceptionally fragile and politically and ideologically diverse government vulnerable to economic or political shocks.

In addition to Tunisia's own challenging party politics, the war in Libya has also weighed heavily on the country's political landscape. The increased involvement of international actors such as the UAE, Russia, and Turkey, in particular, has ruffled feathers as politicians and citizens alike are divided on what should be Tunis' official stance toward the various parties to the war in Libya. President Saied has attempted to maintain that the official government stance is one of neutrality and non-interference, pushing back against Turkish interference. This stance, however, has caused turmoil within the government as prominent political figures have pushed

for a more definitive position. Most notably, Tunisian Parliament Speaker and Ennahda Party head Rached Ghannouchi rallied for a stance of support toward the alliance between Turkey and the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) ([Arab Weekly](#), May 8).

Alongside the obvious international involvement in Libya, an insidious competition between Turkey and the UAE has also been playing out to directly influence or undermine the Tunisian political process. Rached Ghannouchi has increasingly been at the center of this campaign for influence, the tangible results of which are seemingly drawing near as he could face a vote of no confidence in parliament at the same time Ennahda is attempting to oust Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh ([The National](#), July 13).

As the Parliament Speaker and head of the Ennahda Party, which is commonly accused of harboring ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, Ghannouchi has found himself caught between Turkey's attempts to sway Tunisia toward the GNA and the UAE's attempts to discredit him and the party. Ghannouchi's support toward Turkey's involvement in Libya is evidenced not only by his public statements, but also by his January meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), January 16). This meeting led the Tunisian parliament to organize a session to question him about his trip and motives, during which he noted that parliament did not pay for the cost of his "personal and pre-scheduled" trip to Turkey. Ghannouchi was also condemned for holding interviews with Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Turkey's Anatolia News Agency, where he responded to criticism against him and his impending questioning in parliament. During the interviews, Ghannouchi also mentioned foreign actors engaging in a campaign against him, hinting at alleged Emirati information operations.

The UAE has long sought to undermine the Ennahda party, which has drifted closer to Turkey and Qatar, in favor of financing and supporting political elites connected to the former regime of President Ben Ali. The fragmented parliament, the independence of President Saied, and the selection of the less politically influential and anti-Ben Ali Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh left the UAE with few political leaders sympathetic to the Gulf nation. As such, information operations, which have been ongoing for years, have seemingly become the method of choice, with UAE-owned media outlets regularly targeting Ennahda as a whole and Ghannouchi

himself, accusing him of corruption and harboring hidden wealth worth \$8 billion ([Arabi21](#), May 19; [Middle East Eye](#), May 22). Turkey, for its part, has simultaneously used its own state media outlets to defend Ghannouchi while accusing the UAE of attempting to orchestrate a "counter-revolution" in Tunisia to cover up the country's failures in Libya ([Anadolu Agency](#), May 24).

To what degree the UAE and Turkey have managed to directly influence the shifting political scene in Tunisia is unclear. What is clear, however, is that Tunisia's already fragile government is being tested by the war in Libya and the toxic competition between rising international powers. As President Saied attempts to handle calls for the removal of Fakhfakh, which he has rejected, and Ghannouchi, Tunisia's political parties will increasingly find it necessary to reorganize and will look to broaden parliamentary blocs through the formation of new party alliances. President Saied's lack of a firm connection to any one political party is likely to stymie his ability to prevent destabilizing political games from playing out in parliament.

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Gateway to Yemen: The Battle for the Tihama

Michael Horton

Yemen's Tihama region runs the length of the country's Red Sea coast, from the port of al-Mocha to the Saudi border. It encompasses some of Yemen's most productive agricultural lands and is home to the important port city, al-Hodeidah. As Yemen's gateway to the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, control of the Tihama is critical to controlling and supplying northwest Yemen.

Due to its proximity to Africa and exposure to ancient trade routes, the Tihama is Yemen's most ethnically diverse region. It is home to Yemenis who trace their descent from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Most now think of themselves as Tihami, an identity that embraces longstanding ties to the Horn of Africa. The region is also home to thousands of recent migrants as well as communities of people who move between the Tihama and the countries that make up the Horn of Africa.

The Tihama and its people have also long been politically and economically marginalized by successive Yemeni governments. In the lead up to the Arab Spring, this marginalization fed a resurgence in support for the distinct Tihami identity. Following the outbreak of war in 2015, armed groups that claim to want greater autonomy or even independence for the Tihama tapped into this resurgence to build powerbases and recruit fighters to battle the Houthis.

At the same time, the Tihama's strategic position along the Red Sea and its ports mean that the region has long been the focus of outside powers. Since the start of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser degree, Qatar, have been the countries most active in the Tihama. However, as the UAE scales back its involvement in Yemen, other countries like Turkey and Russia are looking to establish their influence in the region ([Middle East Monitor](#), June 28, 2019; [The Arab Weekly](#), April 12).

Autonomy in the Tihama?

The Tihama historically included what is now the Saudi province of Jizan. In the early 1900s, during the second Ottoman occupation of Yemen, the Ottoman Turks faced a revolt in the Tihama led by Muhammad al-Idrisi.

Al-Idrisi was the scion of a Sayyid (descendants of the Prophet) family that was widely respected in the Tihama. Al-Idrisi, with some British support, defied the Ottomans and established the short-lived Idrisid Emirate of Asir. The emirate eventually extended as far south as the Yemeni port city of Hodeidah. However, Hodeidah was lost to Imam Yahya in 1925 and became part of the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen (North Yemen). A revolt led by the Tihama-based Zarniq tribe persisted until 1927 when it was brutally suppressed by forces loyal to Imam Yahya. The northern reaches of the emirate were annexed by Saudi Arabia as part of the 1934 Treaty of Taif.

For many of those now fighting for the Tihama Resistance Forces, the Idrisid Emirate serves as a potent reminder of Tihami resistance to outside rule and self-governance. The Tihama Movement and the Tihama Resistance Council, the political arm of the Tihama Resistance Forces, draw on the Tihama's history of self-rule as well as its distinct culture to justify their aims. These span the spectrum from full autonomy and the creation of an independent Tihama to more modest aims that seek redress of decades of political and economic marginalization.

While the Tihama Movement dates to the 2011-12 uprising against then-Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the armed Tihama Resistance Forces formed in response to the 2014 Houthi takeover of Hodeidah. For most of 2014 and 2015, the Tihama Resistance Forces were little more than local militias that struggled to coordinate their efforts. However, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia's deepening involvement in the war in Yemen, the militias began to receive arms, money, and some basic training from both countries ([The National](#), June 16, 2018). Due to its focus on southern Yemen, the UAE developed the closest ties to the Tihama Resistance Forces and provided the bulk of the funding and arms for its militias.

The Tihama Resistance Forces and their political arm are not as well organized or cohesive as other armed groups in Yemen, such as the Southern Transitional Council (STC) or the Houthis. The leadership of the Tihama-based militias and political organizations is diffuse and has not yet articulated any consistent objectives or aims beyond evicting the Houthis from the Tihama. The leadership of the various militias that operate under the umbrella of the Tihama Resistance Forces do not all support an autonomous Tihama. Furthermore, there is a growing divide between those allied with the STC and

those who back the internationally recognized government of Yemen.

Patchwork Alliances

The lack of a defined organizational structure and the absence of clear political objectives means that the Tihama based militias exist and operate within a patchwork of alliances. These are alliances that are most often in a state of flux. The Tihama Resistance Forces have worked closely, and to some degree been incorporated into, the National Resistance Forces (NRF). The NRF is led by Tariq Saleh, former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's nephew. Tariq Saleh was a brigadier general within the Yemeni Army and commanded the Presidential Guard. After the Houthis assassinated Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017, Tariq Saleh fled Sana'a and eventually made his way to south Yemen. Tariq Saleh rallied many former soldiers and officers from the Republican Guard. With support from the UAE, he helped form the NRF and began fighting the Houthis, largely in the Tihama (see [MLM](#), June 2).

As the best led and funded armed group in the Tihama, the NRF is the dominant force. The Tihama Resistance Forces have largely functioned as ancillary militias for the NRF. By 2018, the NRF leadership was predominant and largely responsible for marshaling and tasking the militias fighting under the Tihama Resistance Force umbrella. However, this relationship was, and remains, dependent on the NRF's ability to dole out funds and materiel to those militias that fight alongside it. With the UAE and Saudi Arabia curtailing their direct and indirect involvement in the war in Yemen, the NRF's ability to continue to pay and supply these militias is questionable. Notably, Tariq Saleh and the NRF is now backing the STC rather than the internationally recognized government of Yemen (IRG) ([Inside Arabia](#), June 9).

Tensions between the Tihama Resistance Forces and the NRF will likely increase as these armed groups compete for funds, materiel, and influence. While Tariq Saleh is respected as a competent commander, he is still a member of the Saleh family and, as such, many in the Tihama Movement regard him with suspicion. Apart from the port city of Hodeidah, development of the Tihama, like southern Yemen, was never a priority for Ali Abdullah Saleh's government. The Saleh government also targeted dissidents who brought attention to the political and economic marginalization of parts of Yemen like the south and the Tihama.

Outlook

Growing divisions within what was an already fragile collection of alliances in the Tihama will make parts of the region more vulnerable to Houthi-led offensives. Despite UN-brokered agreements, the Houthis maintain *de facto* control of large parts of Hodeidah. They also enjoy operational control of the mountains that overlook most of the Tihama. These mountains, which are some of the most rugged in the country, allow the Houthis to launch hit and run attacks on the NRF and other Tihama-based militias. The NRF and the Tihama Resistance Forces only exercise consistent control of a narrow band of coastal plain. Outside of these areas, their forces are subject to attack by small, highly mobile units of Houthi-allied fighters (see [Hot Issue](#), June 29).

As the UAE, whose economy has been severely impacted by response to COVID-19, and Saudi Arabia reduce their expenditures in Yemen, ample opportunities will arise for other outside powers to step up their involvement in the Tihama and elsewhere in Yemen. Turkey and Qatar, which are allied with one another, are battling Saudi Arabia and the UAE for influence in the Horn of Africa and the Gulf.

Turkey's assertive, yet realist, foreign policy has seen it set itself up as the most influential outside power in Somalia, something that it could potentially replicate in parts of Yemen. Turkey and Qatar, who briefly participated in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, could check UAE and Saudi influence in the country by cultivating relationships with armed groups who find themselves in need of funding and support. The Tihama, with its valuable Red Sea real estate, will undoubtedly be viewed as ripe for influence operations and investment by Turkey, Qatar, and even Russia.

Russia and Turkey have longstanding ties to the Tihama. The Ottoman Turks occupied parts of Yemen twice and the Soviet Union invested in the port of Hodeidah in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Soviet interest in the port, where it maintained a naval base, was fueled by its desire to establish a durable naval presence in the Red Sea. [1]

Competition between outside powers for influence in and access to the Tihama will further complicate efforts to facilitate a negotiated peace in Yemen. However, unlike the amateurish and costly Saudi and UAE-led intervention in Yemen, Turkish, Qatari, and Russian initiatives

in the country, if they materialize, will be more nuanced, enduring, and less overt.

Over the short and medium-term, the Tihama's strategic location and its role as a gateway to Yemen ensure that fighting—at least at a low level—will continue for the foreseeable future. There is no one armed group that can control the Tihama or even the port city of Hodeidah. The Tihama, with more realistic and internationally-backed initiatives, could become an important test-case for Yemen-wide de-escalation. Such initiatives would go a long way to blocking or minimizing the involvement of additional outside powers in Yemen.

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Notes

[1] See Sergei Georgievich Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Naval Institute Press, 1979).