

Terrorism Monitor

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Tajikistan Maintains Cool Ties with the Taliban

Jacob Zenn

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, several Central Asian states have accepted the reality on the ground and engaged the Taliban. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, began initiating dialogue with the Taliban in October 2021 (gandhara.rferl.org, October 1). Tajikistan, in contrast, continues to resist dialogue with the Taliban and portrays itself a protector of Afghan Tajiks, alleging that the Taliban favors Pashtuns at the expense of Tajiks.

The Tajik Foreign Minister, Sirojiddin Muhriddin reasserted on February 3 that Tajikistan would not change its position until the Taliban formed a "truly inclusive

government" and engaged with opposition political and ethnic leaders. Building off this, the Tajik President, Emomali Rahmon, has suggested that the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) establish a security belt around Afghanistan to maintain pressure on the Taliban (aamajnews.com, February 3).

Tajikistan will also place diplomatic pressure on the Taliban by continuing to meet with the Afghan opposition to the Taliban. Former Afghan Vice-President, Amrullah Saleh, and Ahmad Massoud both received asylum and remain welcome in Tajikistan following the fall of Kabul (trtworld.com, January 26). Even though the Taliban maintains that it will not pose a threat or attack any countries outside Afghanistan, it could place pressure on Tajikistan as well by positioning its fighters along the border (interfax.ru, February 14).

Notwithstanding these tensions, Tajikistan still signed an agreement with the Taliban in December 2021 to continue importing electricity into Afghanistan (wionews.com, December 28). This has been justified by Tajikistan as a form of humanitarian assistance, rather than an indication of friendly ties with the Taliban itself. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran also agreed to continue supplying electricity to Afghanistan, and Tajikistan did not seek to stray from regional consensus on this issue.

The Taliban also have a list of grievances against Tajikistan. The Tajik government, for example, still possesses aircraft abandoned by pilots from the now deposed Afghan air force, who fled to Tajikistan when the Taliban took Kabul (republicworld.com, January 19). The Taliban's Acting Defense Minister, Mawlawi Mohammad Yaqoob, highlighted this fact while speaking at a ceremony in Kabul on January 11, calling on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to return Afghan aircraft. The U.S. has even taken sides on the issue, saying that the aircraft will not be returned to the Taliban and will instead eventually be returned to the U.S. (defense.gov, January 18).

Rather than lead to conflict between Tajikistan and the Taliban, the two sides' current tensions, in fact, may ease. While they still are not on friendly terms, they are negotiating over issues that border nations typically deal with, including refugees, electricity, and military and security affairs. Notwithstanding Tajikistan's continued openness towards anti-Taliban Afghan opposition figures and refusal to recognize or dialogue with the Taliban, the two countries will find ways to cooperate over matters of mutual urgency and regional initiatives.

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Islamic State in Flux After Caliph Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi's Death

Jacob Zenn

Within days of Islamic State (IS) caliph Abubakar al-Baghdadi's death in October 2019, multiple IS provinces in the Middle East and as far as West Africa and Southeast Asia pledged loyalty to his successor, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi (africatimes.com, November 9, 2019). It is this ensured continuity and legitimacy in IS's most important institution, the caliph, that is essential for the global IS caliphate to be viable, at least ideologically. And yet, when al-Quraishi was reportedly killed by U.S. forces in Idlib, Syria on February 3, no provinces followed with pledges of loyalty to any successor (aawsat.com, February 3). IS, moreover, has not confirmed al-Quraishi's death, which means that, as of now, reports of his death rely primarily on U.S. claims.

Reason exists to trust the U.S. reports on al-Quraishi's death. According to the U.S., al-Quraishi was in Idlib Province, which is where al-Baghdadi and his spokesman were both killed in succession (crisisgroup.org, February 4). This indicates that both al-Baghdadi and al-Quraishi identified Idlib as the most ideal safe haven because it is not directly under any foreign power's control, such as Turkey, Russia, or the U.S., or under the control of the Syrian government or Kurdish forces. Rather, Idlib is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was allied with al-Qaeda, but now distances itself from, and even cracks down upon, hardline al-Qaeda elements in its territory (aljazeera.com, July 29, 2016). Al-Baghdadi and al-Quraishi were evidently less concerned about HTS than state actors and may even have benefited from cooperation from IS-sympathetic al-Qaeda elements in Idlib.

Consistency is also found in the way al-Baghdadi and al-Quraishi were killed.

According to the U.S., both reportedly detonated suicide bombs to ensure they would not be captured by U.S. forces, with al-Quraishi allegedly killing 11 people, including children, surrounding himself (kurdpress.com, February 3). Al-Baghdadi also killed his son in collateral damage in his own suicide bombing before U.S. Special Forces would have captured him.

Assuming the U.S. claims about al-Quraishi's death are true, IS's lack of any acknowledgement of his death can be attributed to the morale loss IS would suffer in Iraq, Syria and its provinces abroad from the news. If he is dead, al-Quraishi would have been named caliph, received pledges of allegiance from IS provinces around the world, and died without ever having shown his face publicly, making him literally a 'ghost caliph.' This sequence of events might lead IS fighters to question how powerful the caliphate actually is if the best al-Quraishi could do was live a life on the run.

Beyond al-Quraishi never revealing his face, his name was likewise never known, or at least never confirmed by IS. Most reports suggest he was Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi, an ethnic Arab from Tal Afar, Iraq, whose family had become Turkmenized (timesofisrael.com, January 20, 2020). Therefore, he spoke Turkmen and was considered by peers to be a Turkman, but he was actually ancestrally Arab and of the prophetic lineage that entitled him to become a caliph.

Any new replacement for al-Quraishi will need to have the same prophetic lineage. Similar to al-Quraishi, the new caliph will have to live underground and be on the run in order to avoid another U.S. Special Forces raid targeting him. IS does have the luxury of pretending al-Quraishi is not dead and may substitute al-Mawli al-Salbi for another caliph since IS has not acknowledged al-Quraishi is deceased in the first place.

All in all, IS is facing a persistent leadership dilemma. The group only controls slivers of remote territory in parts of Afghanistan, northeastern Nigeria, and other rural areas of Mozambique and Congo. In the Middle East, they can barely manage night operations in Iraq and Syria to demonstrate control. The world sees a caliphate straining itself to prove it still has territorial control, while its caliphs consistently remain anonymous to the public, including IS fighters themselves. Unless IS miraculously conquers territory like it did under al-Baghdadi in the heartland of the Middle East, the group's caliphs will lack the aura of al-Baghdadi, ultimately undermining the institution of the IS caliph.

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Iranian Proxies Increase Operational Tempo in Syria and Iraq

Andrew Devereux

In early January 2022, a series of attacks targeting U.S. assets and allies in Iraq and Syria were conducted by Iranian-backed militias. On January 5, for example, two weaponized drones were fired towards the Ain al-Asad airbase in Anbar Governorate, west of Baghdad, which hosts U.S. military and logistic convoys. The drones were intercepted by U.S. defenses, however, and caused no damage.

One day later, five Katushya rockets were fired towards the same airbase, landing two kilometers away and causing no damage or casualties. U.S.-led coalition forces also responded to indirect fire towards the "Green Village" in the Euphrates valley in Syria on January 5 (al-Mashareq, January 5). Two days prior, two drones were also downed when approaching a base hosting U.S. forces

close to Baghdad International Airport ([Anadolu Agency](#), January 3).

In the aftermath of the attacks, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby stated the incidents were demonstrative of the continued threat towards U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria from Iranian-backed forces ([Iran International](#), January 6). The attack on the Ain al-Asad airbase, for instance, was claimed by a shadowy organization known as Qasim al-Jabbarin ([al-Mayadeen](#), January 5). Its actions were typical of the modus operandi undertaken by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

Profiling Qasim al-Jabbarin and Other “Splintering Militias”

Qasim al-Jabbarin is widely considered to be directed by Kataib Hezbollah, which is a Shia paramilitary group and part of the wider Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in Iraq. The PMF themselves have material and tactical ties to Iran. Qasim al-Jabbarin traditionally favors attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDS), so the rocket strike on the Ain al-Asad airbase was the first instance of a munitions-based attack by the group ([New Arab](#), June 14, 2021). Qasim al-Jabbarin is just one of numerous others which have claimed attacks against Western interests in Iraq and Syria since late 2021, and is one of many façade organizations under the control of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force.

Groups which have claimed similar attacks in Iraq include Usbat al-Thaereen, Saraya al Muntaqim, and Thar Muhandis, among others ([al-Mashareq](#), July 5 2021). These organizations only came into prominence after the killing of IRGC Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, and little is known about their hierarchy or territorial presence. Their primary responsibility is to obfuscate the involvement of larger organizations, such as Kataib Hezbollah, in tactical operations. In Iraq, in particular, this allows larger organizations like Kataib Hezbollah to continue in their roles as ‘legitimate’ actors

within the PMF while making it harder to hold any larger militias, individuals, or even governments to account. When groups such as Qasim al-Jabbarin claim responsibility for attacks, it creates another layer of separation between Kataib Hezbollah, the Quds Force, and, ultimately, Tehran.

This tactic of splintering militias to obscure involvement is not only reserved for attacks targeting U.S. interests. In January 2022, a little-known Iranian-backed group in Iraq called Awliyat al-waad al-Haq claimed responsibility for a drone attack targeting facilities in Abu Dhabi, reportedly as retaliation for the United Arab Emirates’ policies in Iraq and Yemen ([Jordan News](#), February 7). The group is widely regarded as being under the direction of the Quds Force and has been praised on Kataib Hezbollah’s social media channels.

Weaponized Drones

The usage of weaponized drones in Qasim al-Jabbarin attacks is notable, as these are increasingly becoming the primary attack method for Iranian-backed proxies. The drones utilized by Iran are relatively unsophisticated, with some created using commercially-available materials, but they retain the ability to hit close to an intended target from a distance. Among the Iranian-backed militias, drones are easy to modify and weaponize, while remaining inexpensive and easy to distribute. Both the IRGC aerospace commander, Amir Ali Hajizadeh, and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have outwardly praised Iran’s efforts to increase its drone arsenal ([Middle East Eye](#), September 2 2021).

Despite an increase in the frequency and operational tempo of Iranian-backed drone strikes in early 2022, there has been no uptick in casualties of U.S. service personnel, nor significant damage to military infrastructure, installations, or equipment. This could, however, be part of Tehran’s broader strategy. Iran has to strike a balance between pursuing its long-

standing agenda of applying pressure on the U.S. in the Middle East while avoiding any sort of major military retaliation. It is possible that the primary intention for these drone attacks is not to cause fatalities or significant material damage, but to further Tehran's campaign of regional intimidation.

The two-year anniversary of the assassination of the commander of the Quds Force head, Qassem Soleimani, is certainly a catalyst for the increased operational tempo of Iranian-backed militias in eastern Syria and Iraq. Soleimani was regarded as the second most powerful figure in Iran, and on January 6 the current Quds Force commander, Esmail Qaani, reiterated Iran's desire to stage revenge on the U.S. for Soleimani's assassination ([al-Monitor](#), 5 January). Drone Attacks, which pose only a minimal risk to U.S. military personnel in the Middle East, are still a fundamental part of this narrative.

A further motivation is the change to the U.S. mission in Iraq. The number of U.S. forces in Iraq has declined from 150,000 at its peak to 2,500 presently, with these remaining troops acting in a training and advisory capacity to Iraqi forces ([al-Arabiya](#), December 9, 2021). In the eyes of Tehran, this is still 2,500 too many, and the U.S. presence is an impediment to Iran consolidating regional power. It is possible that Tehran has been emboldened by the rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and believes a similar withdrawal from Iraq could be facilitated if attacks threatening U.S. service personnel continue unabated.

Conclusion

The question remains open as to how much control Tehran, and particularly the Quds Force, retains over the numerous militias operating in Iraq and Syria. Following Iraqi elections in October 2021, in which political forces supported by Iran, particularly the Fatah coalition, performed poorly, Esmail

Qaani travelled to Baghdad and pledged to help bring political stability to Iraq ([Tehran Times](#), November 13, 2021). The assassination attempt on Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, in November 2021 was blamed on Shia militias, but both Tehran and Qaani instantly distanced themselves from the thwarted attempt on al-Kadhimi's life. Qaani does not hold the same influence over Iranian proxies as his predecessor, Soleimani, because he lacks Soleimani's cult of personality and is constrained by a lack of operational experience in Iraq and Syria. Based on this, it is credible to believe groups are conducting attacks without direction from the Quds Force at all. At the very least, increasing attacks in Iraq does not aid the political stability Qaani has pledged to engender.

In reality, the motivations for the uptick in proxy-militia attacks in Iraq and Syria are myriad and underpinned by the long-standing ideological goals of increasing Iran's strategic regional influence. Since the death of Soleimani, the Iranian government has endured domestic setbacks, such as a severe economic contraction, labor strikes, and continued U.S. sanctions. Attacks against the U.S. are a welcome distraction from these domestic issues.

With Iranian-backed parties in the Iraqi parliament marginalized, Iran is unlikely to pursue more aggressive military activities outside of targeting U.S. assets. They do not want to risk losing further domestic political support in Iraq. Advancing foreign policy interests in Iraq nevertheless remains a key pillar of Tehran's agenda. Therefore, the continued use of its proxy apparatus to project influence in Iraq and Syria will remain a cornerstone of that pursuit.

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Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh's Unchecked Online Recruitment Campaign

Animesh Roul

In late December 2021, Bangladeshi counter-terrorism agencies warned about the possible resurgence of Ansar al-Islam Bangladesh (AIB), which also functions as an official wing of al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) and staunchly supports the Afghan Taliban's Islamic Emirate. According to these agencies, AIB has been recruiting and training in the hinterlands of Bangladesh. Despite relentless counter-terrorism operations targeting AIB's hideouts and the detention of its cadres for the past several years, the group has remained resilient ([Dhaka Tribune](#), March 7, 2017; [Daily Star](#), November 15, 2021). Bangladeshi police estimate that nearly 40 militants affiliated with AIB have been arrested during 58 anti-terror operations across the country in 2021 alone ([Daily Star](#) (Bengali), December 24, 2021).

AIB has also been secretly recruiting from among Rohingya refugees and women, who support activities such as gathering intelligence and couriering. Bangladeshi intelligence agencies also have claimed that the group devised a plan to attack "soft targets" that include anti-Islamic and secular writers, as well as intellectuals. Their plan includes "hard targets" comprising foreign embassies, in addition to entities and individuals promoting Hindutva ideology in the country ([Weekly Blitz](#), December 26, 2021). Given that AIB is now scaling up its online recruitment

campaign, security agencies will inevitably be examining these tactics as well.

AIB's Historical Targeting of Progressives

AIB was previously known as Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) and was outlawed in March 2017 for its widespread violence against writers, intellectuals, atheists, secularists, and gay rights activists from 2014-2016 ([bdnews.net](#), April 26, 2016). Shortly after this period, both AQIS and AIB began claiming responsibility or being implicated in almost all attacks against progressive and secular individuals in Bangladesh. While at least 15 such individuals were murdered or injured in 2015 and 2016, others on the AQIS/AIB hit list either went into hiding or fled the country ([Dhaka Tribune](#), November 10, 2015). AIB was last blamed for the killing of the secular writer and publisher, Shahjahan Bachchu, on June 11, 2018 ([Daily Star](#), August 17, 2021).

As early as August 2015, AQIS/AIB had threatened to kill anyone who criticized or insulted the Prophet Muhammad, distorted Islam, or, most importantly, voiced opposition against the establishment of sharia law in the country ([Dhaka Tribune](#), November 1, 2015). AQIS/AIB's spokesperson for Bangladesh, Abdullah Ashraf, was in step with this reasoning when he claimed the death of blogger Niloy Neel in 2015 "as vengeance for the honor of the messenger of Allah" and declared war "against the enemies of Allah" ([BDNews24.com](#), August 7, 2015). In February 2015, these attacks on freedom of expression finally garnered international attention when Bangladeshi-born U.S. citizen and secularist author, Avijit Roy, was killed and his wife, Rafida Bonya Ahmed, was seriously wounded by AIB in Dhaka ([BDNews.com](#), May 04, 2015).

Six years later, in 2021, a counter-terrorism court sentenced five AIB militants to death and another militant to life imprisonment. The U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice Program

also announced a \$5 million reward for any other information about the fugitive members involved in the attack on Roy and his wife ([State Department](#), December 20, 2021).

AIB's New Terrorism Tactics

AIB is reviving its strategy of targeted killings to stifle freedom of expression and anti-Islam or secular ideals, but in new ways. For example, the first ever arrest of a woman AIB operative occurred last August, which suggests AIB has a female online recruitment campaign. Investigators additionally traced two Facebook accounts, one ChirpWire account, and several Telegram accounts and channels with nearly 25,000 followers ([Daily Star](#), August 29, 2021). The arrest of AIB's main recruiter, Azzam Al Galib, in November 2021 revealed the group's grassroots campaign of online recruitment. It was also found that group members used email and file-sharing services, such as 'Tutanota' and Jabber.net, to evade cyber detection ([Daily Star](#), March 7, 2021).

In December 2021, the counter-terrorism police chief downplayed reports of AIB and AQIS's revival in the country. According to him, the group has no organizational strength to perpetrate violence, although he admitted the group had a considerable online influence and presence. Through its dedicated YouTube channel 'Umma Network', AIB's spiritual head and hardcore AQIS member Tamim-al Adnani releases continue propaganda material. In one video, he also suggested the shift and relative success in the revival strategy. This revival was also inspired by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. Adnani, in his audio-visual speeches in the Bengali language, hailed the Taliban victory over U.S. and NATO forces as a victory of Islam. He urged fellow Muslims to fight urgently in the path of God to establish Islamic rule in South Asia and act against democratic governments ([YouTube](#), August 28, 2021; [YouTube](#), September 2, 2021).

AIB's core objective to take control of the Indian subcontinent through the Ghazwat-ul- Hind (Battle of India) is in tandem with al-Qaeda's worldview. With increasing anti-Hindu and anti-West rants on social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Telegram and ChirpWire, the propaganda materials published in pro-AQIS portals remain focused on calling for violence against Hindu communities in India and Bangladesh. Such pro-Islamist portals and web forums regularly highlight and exploit sporadic anti-Muslim events in the subcontinent; they also highlight selectively anti-Muslim speeches and violence. The pro-AQIS and pro-AIB Bengali language portals vehemently accuse the Indian and Bangladeshi governments, security agencies, media, and courts of strategic collusion against Muslims and blame them for silence on the mob attacks on Muslims by fringe groups and individuals in India ([al Firdaws](#), February 3).

Conclusion

With around 700 to 800 active members, most recruitment campaigns for AIB remain focused on marginalized and impoverished communities in village settings, such as Dinajpur, Netrakona, Jamalpur, Madhupur and Tangail, and recently on women as well ([Daily Star](#), March 7, 2021). Meanwhile, the group's footprints in Dhaka and Chittagong are proving to be a concern for Bangladeshi security agencies. Along with the elite Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Centre (CTTC), the government is devising a hybrid strategy of both hard and soft approaches to prevent recruitment and promote deradicalization among youths. However, the government may be falling short in the face of uninterrupted and unchecked AIB messaging over the internet.

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Husseini'yon: A Profile of the Iranian-backed Militia Threatening Azerbaijan

Rami Jameel

The Iranian-backed Shia Islamist militia, Husseini'yon, has emerged in recent years as an insurgency in what has been a low intensity conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan. [1] Although the vast majority of people in both countries are Shia Muslims, bilateral relations have been uneasy throughout their modern history. [2] Tensions have also risen recently as Azerbaijan has significantly enhanced its military cooperation with Iran's regional rivals: Turkey, Pakistan, and Israel. Husseini'yon has accordingly become more vocal in its opposition to the foreign and domestic policies of the secular government under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev (hafryat.com, October 4, 2021).

Over the last few decades, the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) has supported and mobilized Shiite militias in multiple countries across the Middle East. Those militias, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthis, and Iraq's Shiite militias, have become an essential part of Iran's regional and global strategy. Each militia has its own story and circumstances. Husseini'yon, however, is the least known of these militias, despite the fact that it may play a key role in Iran's disputes with Azerbaijan in the future.

Husseini'yon's Formation and Leadership

In early 2016, Tawheed Ibrahim Begli, a little-known Azerbaijani Shia cleric, founded Husseini'yon in the Iranian city of Qom, which is a holy city for Shia Muslims, including senior clerics. Upon its formation, the militia was comprised of only 14 Shia students from Qom's Shia theology seminaries. They all received brief basic military training and deployed to Syria as part of Iran's war effort to support the Syrian Arab Army under the government of President Bashar al-Assad (mena-monitor.org, October 4, 2021).

Begli claimed his militia would fight the Islamic State (IS) in Syria but did not deny that Husseini'yon would also pursue targets closer to Iran, such as Azerbaijan. This no doubt because Begli had long been a critic of President Aliyev's government (alarabiya.net, October 3, 2021).

Subsequently, in late 2021, Iran complained about a trilateral military exercise conducted by the Azerbaijani army in Azerbaijan with Turkish and Pakistani troops, who were collectively dubbed "the three brothers." Iran responded by organizing military exercises near its border with Azerbaijan and by renewing its claim that there was also an Israeli military presence in Azerbaijan that it would not tolerate (alkhanadeq.com, October 3, 2021). Husseini'yon gained prominence at this time as observers started to realize its potential as a role-player in the disputes between Iran and Azerbaijan and, more specifically, Azerbaijani Sunni jihadists and Shia militiamen. Such Azerbaijani fighters, who fought on different sides in the Syrian civil war, were returning from Syria and arrested in Azerbaijan (remonews.com, October 3, 2021).

Tawheed Ibrahim Begli's Background

Begli comes from a family that has its roots in the Azerbaijani community in Iran, but moved to Azerbaijan. He was not known as

an influential cleric, which has nonetheless been the case with many leaders of Iranian-backed militias. Regardless of his origins, Begli was still supported and endorsed by Qassim Soleimani, who is seen in pictures with Begli during an occasion where the former IRGC commander encouraged Azerbaijanis to fight against [Iran's] enemies. Soleimani is believed to have given the group its full name, "Husseini'yon: Islamic Resistance in Azerbaijan," to mimic Lebanese Hezbollah (iraninsider.net, October 3, 2021). Husseini'yon refers to Imam Hussein, who was the prophet Muhammad's grandson. He remains a major symbol of martyrdom for Muslims in general and Shias in particular.

Yet, while Hezbollah's claim of resistance was originally declared against the Israeli occupation of parts of Lebanon, and Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah's claim was against the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Azerbaijan is not under any form of occupation. It is clear, therefore, that Soleimani's promotion of Husseini'yon was related to his opinion that foreign forces allied with Azerbaijan were an occupation force. Such occupation forces include Israeli, Turkish or any other forces that Iran might consider a threat.

In 2017, Begli attended the annual Islamic Awakening meeting that Iran organizes for allied and friendly Islamist groups and organizations. He met with Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei himself. During that meeting, Begli spoke against the policies of the Aliyev government in Azerbaijan and accused it of imprisoning Muslims, including his own group members, and alluded to other Islamists in prison in Azerbaijan. Such language implied that the Aliyev government was "less Muslim" than those prisoners, bringing Husseini'yon closer to actually declaring the Azerbaijani government as non-Muslim. In the future, this which could mean entering into a more severe conflict and potentially declaring jihad against it (centerlrc.com, October 4, 2021).

Husseini'yon Members from Syria to Azerbaijan

Husseini'yon only had a minimal presence and impact in Syria, especially compared to Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and other Iranian-backed militias comprised of Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters. Husseini'yon, however, quickly became active on Azerbaijani soil by 2018. Azerbaijani authorities, for example, accused Husseini'yon of being involved in a number of plots and confrontations against the Azerbaijani government inside Azerbaijan.

One such plot occurred on July 3, 2018. It targeted Elmar Veliyev, the mayor of Ganja, Azerbaijan's second largest city. He narrowly survived the assassination attempt outside his office. The authorities accused Islamist militants of plotting the attack on Veliyev, arresting Yunis Safarov – the main suspect – in July 2018. The authorities described him as an extremist who spent time in Qom and fought in Syria. Although Azerbaijan has faced threats from members of its minority Sunni population who fought in and returned from Syria, the reference to spending time in Qom was a clear sign that in this case the authorities were dealing with the threat of Iranian-backed Shia militia like Husseini'yon (almarjie-paris.com, October 14, 2021).

Nevertheless, the arrest of Safarov was followed by a public backlash. For example, two policemen were stabbed to death and a third was wounded when angry protesters attacked the police after the arrest. This type of incident was virtually unprecedented in Azerbaijan, which is ruled by the strict Aliyev government. A crackdown on the opposition, therefore, ensued and dozens of suspects were arrested, despite the fact that many locals were skeptical of the official claim that Shia Islamist militants were behind the assassination attempt. Indeed, most believed the assassination attempt reflected ordinary people's resentment (oc-media.org, July 12, 2018).

Israel and Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has been one of the few Muslim majority countries to enjoy strong relations with Israel. Israeli military cooperation and arms sales to Azerbaijan, for example, played a key role in enhancing Azerbaijani military capabilities ahead of and during the 2020 war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh (sipri.org, April 30, 2021; jpost.com, March 31, 2021). Iran has frequently criticized the growing ties between Azerbaijan and Israel and considers their relationship to be a threat to its own security.

Iranian criticism of Azerbaijani-Israeli ties has corresponded with attacks against Israel's embassy in Baku. For example, Azerbaijani security foiled a plot to attack the Israeli embassy in 2013 -- the main suspect was an Iranian citizen (youm7.com, November 13, 2013). Four years earlier, in 2009, six people were also arrested in Baku for conspiring to attack the Israeli embassy. Two of them were Lebanese and the plot was reportedly linked to Hezbollah and the IRGC. More recently, threats to the Israeli embassy have explicitly been linked to Hussein'yon (maannews.net, September 11, 2009). Hussein'yon launched protests against the Israeli embassy and Begli himself was arrested during a protest outside it. Following his arrest, he was sentenced to seven days in custody in October 2021 (iraninsider.net, October 3, 2021). The militia had even been suspected of planning to attack the embassy as early as 2018 (alarabiya.net, October 3, 2021).

Following a pattern set by other Iranian-backed Shia militias in the Middle East, Hussein'yon, therefore, has been pursuing a political agenda alongside its military and armed activities. Indeed, even in the predominantly secular Azerbaijani society, Hussein'yon relies on inciting anti-Israel resentment. Adding to this, the group also exploits religious frustration. In 2017, for instance, Begli attended a gathering in the Iranian city of Zanjan to commemorate victims of a 2015 crackdown by Azerbaijan

police on Shia worshipers on the Arbeyeen, a prominent day and festival on the Shia religious calendar (vaaju.com, October 3, 2021).

Hussein'yon's Capabilities

Begli has established his group as part of the broader Iranian-backed militia movements. In 2020, he appeared in officially sponsored propaganda along with other Shia militia figures from other parts of the world who eulogized Soleimani. When the new Iranian president, Ibrahim Raisi, assumed office in 2021, Iranian official media quoted his well wishes for the new president and government (nournews.ir, June 20, 2021).

The relatively small size of Hussein'yon currently does not mean it is irrelevant. In fact, rarely has such a small militia become so widely recognized by the Islamic Republic. In terms of military capabilities, Begli's followers have acquired field experience from fighting in Syria. Members of Hussein'yon also received military training from Hezbollah on guerrilla warfare and other non-conventional militant tactics. Further, as the Syrian conflict began waning and the forces of President Assad became less desperate for Iranian-backed militias' support, a number of Hussein'yon's Syrian war veterans started to return home to Iran, where they continued training (broadcastnews.com, February 4).

The Azerbaijani government has accordingly been concerned about Hussein'yon fighters who returned from Syria, many of whom were arrested upon their return from the Middle East, including Almir Zahidov. Zahidov was sentenced to prison in Azerbaijan in 2021. Another Hussein'yon member, Faik Waliyov, was arrested in Russia and handed over to his native Azerbaijan, where he was convicted for joining a "criminal organization" and receiving military training outside the country. These arrests do not necessarily mean that Hussein'yon is crippled. In contrast, its leadership is still intact and

most of its members are believed to be free (alkalimaonline.com, February 1).

Conclusion

In its current situation, Husseini'yon is still a small militia, but so were several of the now large Iranian-backed militias during the first years of their existence. The structure and number of personnel of Husseini'yon is not publicly known, but it is believed to have around 20 members. Nevertheless, Husseini'yon has managed to already have an impact inside Azerbaijan with the potential of becoming even more active if the disputes between Iran and Azerbaijan escalates further.

The animosity and ongoing low intensity conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan is unlikely to cool down in the near future, although it is also not expected to escalate into a war, which would provide fertile ground for proxy militia groups to operate. Azerbaijan already hosts separatist elements who want to split the provinces that are populated by an ethnic Azerbaijani majority in northwestern Iran and make them part of Azerbaijan. On the Iranian side, meanwhile, the demands for annexing Azerbaijan were renewed when tensions rose recently. While most of those demands came from outspoken politicians, Husseini'yon represents a more sophisticated opportunity because it is an IRGC-sponsored project to diversify Iran's tools and options in the conflict with Azerbaijan.

Lastly, Azerbaijan's economy has grown significantly since the fall of the Soviet Union, especially with regards to its oil and gas exports. However, that growth has created disparities, and poverty and unemployment are pressing issues in Azerbaijan today. The protest after the assassination attempt on the mayor of Ganja revealed that the resentment of the poor could explode into popular protest. Husseini'yon, with its Shia Islamist ideology and links to Iran, might not be so appealing to the Azerbaijani secular and

nationalist middle class. However, certain sectors of the population in Azerbaijan, including individuals from the disadvantaged and poorer classes, would provide a potential pool of recruitment for the group if it continues to develop its leadership sophistication and communications methods.

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[1] The Azerbaijanis are a Turkic people. Their land is currently divided into two parts including the Republic of Azerbaijan, which was a Soviet republic, and the northwestern provinces of Iran. Nationalists on both sides have occasionally raised claims of sovereignty in each other's territory. Unlike most of Iran's non-Persian communities, Iranian Azerbaijanis are well represented in the Iranian state, including the top echelons of government and armed forces.

[2] Since Iran lost the last of the Russo-Persian wars in the 19th century, the Azerbaijani land north of the Aras River came under Russian and subsequently Soviet control. Those areas currently include the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Armenia.