

Iran vs. the Islamic State: The Enemy of My Enemy is also My Enemy

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According to the official annual publication of the US State Department, Iran has been defined since 1984 as the country most involved in terrorism around the world. Yet it too has faced terrorist attacks carried out by its various enemies and opponents.

Iran is a country of minorities. Indeed, half of the country's residents are not ethnic Persians, and some of these minorities exhibit a readiness to engage in terrorist activity against government targets. In the past, political groups opposed to the regime perpetrated terrorist acts as well. The scope and magnitude of such attacks in Iran since the stabilization of its Islamic regime has been limited, however. Most have been solely of tactical significance, and in any case, their numbers have waned over the years.

The threat posed by the Islamic State is of a different scale. It is multi-dimensional, affects Iran's most important regional interests, and jeopardizes its status and allies among particular groups in the three countries most important to it: the Shiites in Iraq, the Assad regime in Syria, and Hezbollah and the Shiite community in Lebanon.

As a Sunni entity, Iran regards the Islamic State as a Sunni threat to the Shiites, particularly as the Islamic State possesses immense sources of power: large territories that it has seized in Iraq and Syria; preliminary infiltration of other countries (Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, and even the Caucasus and Southeast Asia); military and terrorist capabilities; major financial assets; and an ability to attract young people to expand its manpower. The Islamic State vision of a large Islamic caliphate runs counter to the interests of Iran, which seeks to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, and certainly that of its own country.

The Islamic State, along with other organizations headed by Jabhat al-Nusra, poses a concrete threat to the Assad regime in Syria. For Iran, the meaning of this threat is clear. Syria, under the leadership of Assads Sr. and Jr., has been Iran's oldest ally. The alliance between them is based on important common interests, and has proven solid over the years. Syria also serves as a bridge between Iran and Lebanon and thus Hezbollah, and enables Iran to maintain an essential frontline against Israel. As such, the Assad regime is irreplaceable; its fall would not only be a severe blow to Iran, but also a victory for the United States, the Sunni Arab countries, Turkey, and the Islamic State. It would thus weaken Iran's regional status.

The Islamic State's current control of one quarter of Iraq, including some of its key cities, poses a threat to Iran. For the last decade, Iran has been the most important and influential external player in Iraq. Its standing has rested primarily on its close ties with Shiite organizations, leaders, and armed militias, and is reflected in its transfer of money and arms and its more limited ties with the Kurds. The Islamic State's rapid penetration of Iraq poses a critical threat to the Iraqi government, which has ties with Iran, and to the Shiite militias in the country. Like Iraqi security forces, these militias have already proven their inability to cope with the invasion.

In certain respects, Iran regards the Islamic State's threat to Iraq as even greater than its threat to Syria. Iraq borders Iran, and the Shiites constitute about 60 percent of the Iraqi population, albeit substantial numbers of them oppose Iran's growing influence. Two of the most holy Shiite cities, Najaf and Karbala, lie in Iraq. Iran's links with Iraq, including economic ties, are currently more extensive than its ties with Syria. The Assad regime is tottering, and its fate is unclear. The importance of Iraq to Iran is clearly reflected in the words of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who, after the Islamic State's penetration of Iraq, stated that "Iran regards the security of Iraq as its own."¹

The Islamic State now constitutes – and likely never will – no direct threat to Iranian territory, thanks to Iran's military power, the stability of its regime, and the absence of a governmental vacuum in the country. In addition, Iran is a Shiite country with no real basis of popular support for the Islamic State. Indeed, in June 2014 Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian declared that the Islamic State does not pose a threat to Iran's geographic borders.² However, Iran worries primarily about the lack of stability in Iraq, which might spill over to its own territory. Iranian sources

warn that the splintering of Iraq would affect minorities in Iran, especially the Kurds, and encourage these groups to raise their demands to realize their national aspirations and break away. The Iranian press has also argued that the Islamic State is a creation of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, aimed at dividing Iraq and weakening Iran.³ Against this backdrop, Iran is taking steps to prevent Islamic State forces in Iraq from nearing its territory, in part by stationing Iranian forces along the border with Iraq.

The deteriorating situation in Iraq and Syria has led Iran to grant substantial aid to both these countries in their struggle against the Islamic State – aid that actually began before the organization appeared on the scene. In November 2013, Iran and Iraq signed an arms agreement, which supplied artillery, mortar, and light arms to Iraq. Given the sanctions imposed on Iran, which banned it from selling arms, it is unclear whether all the ammunition included in the transaction was actually shipped. Yet after the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State in June 2014, Iran openly supplied the Iraqi government with Iranian-made rockets, UAVs, and other military equipment. In early July 2014, Iran also gave Iraq SU-25 warplanes, which had been smuggled to Iran by Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War in 1991. However, once it became clear that these munitions were not enough to stop the Islamic State, due to the weakness and lack of resolve on the part of the Iraqi army, Iran increased its military aid to Iraq.

The key figure in Iran's military aid to Iraq is General Qassem Suleimani, Commander of the Revolutionary Guard's al-Quds Force, Iran's chief agency for dealing with clandestine security activity abroad. Suleimani has traveled to Iraq frequently; since June 2014, his visits there have been public, accompanied by a public relations campaign that portrays him as the country's savior. Suleimani handled the training of the Shiite militias in Iraq, helped establish volunteer militias to fight alongside the weak local army, and presided over the establishment of joint operational centers, the transmission of intelligence, and the provision of military and organizational advice to the Iraqi government and security forces. He also granted military aid to the Kurdish militia while helping it defend Erbil and push Islamic State forces away from the city. In addition, he played a key role in breaking the Islamic State siege of the Shiite Turkoman city of Amirli in September 2014.⁴

Suleimani's appearance in Iraq is also associated with a shift in the nature of Iranian military involvement in the country. Like the US, Iran has tried to avoid sending ground troops into Iraq, and in case such a move

proved necessary, to restrict it to a minimum. The goal was to assist the Iraqi government and the Shiite militias, but avoid open and direct military confrontations and thereby avoid entanglement and losses that might lead to internal criticism of its own regime. Thus initially, in June 2014, officials in Tehran denied the presence of any Iranian forces in Iraq. At the time, Iranian President Rouhani asserted that the country had never sent any forces to Iraq, and would most probably never do so in the future. When, however, it became evident that no party in the field was capable of stopping the Islamic State and forcing it to withdraw, and on the contrary, the Islamic State was moving toward the Iranian border, Iran grew more inclined to become involved in the actual fighting. Iran, for example, reportedly aided the Kurdish counterattack in northern Iraq by sending in military units, including tanks.⁵

The full extent of Iranian ground force involvement in Iraq is unclear. Presumably Suleimani brought Revolutionary Guard troops with him; some of its members may have taken part, albeit in a limited way, in military campaigns. In any case, in late November 2014, another form of Iranian involvement became evident when Iran officially confirmed that it began launching air strikes against Islamic State targets in eastern Iraq in order to help the Iraqi government.⁶

A similar picture of Iran's involvement emerges in Syria. Its military involvement there, likewise led by Suleimani, began in the second half of 2012 at a critical moment for the Assad regime and two years before the Islamic State entered the scene. Until that point, Iranian aid to Syria had been limited to military and communications-jamming equipment, and operational and organizational military advice. In the summer and fall of 2012, however, Iran sent Syria several hundred troops from the Revolutionary Guard and the al-Quds Force, allegedly for "non-military" purposes, or so it claimed after several of these soldiers were captured by the Syrian opposition. Hezbollah units, Shiite militiamen from Iraq, and Shiite fighters who had arrived from Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2013 at Iran's initiative, also took part in the fighting.

Little if any doubt exists that the Revolutionary Guard ground troops and al-Quds forces are involved in combat in Syria, though the extent of their involvement remains unclear. Funeral notices of Iranian, Afghan, and Pakistani Shiite soldiers killed in Syria between early 2013 and mid-2015 indicate the deaths of 113 troops from the al-Quds and Revolutionary

Guard ground forces, 121 Afghans, and 20 Pakistanis;⁷ the actual numbers are likely higher. Whatever the case, it is difficult to believe that over 110 Iranian fighters not involved in the fighting, or at least not present in the combat zone, were killed. This pattern appears to have continued after the entrance of the Islamic State on the Syrian stage.

Iran's role in the military campaign against the Islamic State invites speculation about Iran's cooperation with other countries, particularly the United States. This possibility was raised in mid-2014, shortly after the Islamic State appeared on the scene, for two reasons: first, because the United States and Iran were the only two countries with the military capability to check the expansion of the Islamic State; and second, because most of the governments involved in the struggle realized that Iran was playing an important and influential role in the struggle against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the nuclear talks between the major powers and Iran were creating a channel for direct dialogue between the United States and Iran at a relatively high administrative level and thus granting Iran some degree of legitimacy as an international actor. At the same time, however, Iran's wish to limit the talks to the question of nuclear power in order to avoid other problematic issues made it difficult to hold a significant discussion on regional problems, such as that of the Islamic State.

Since the US administration was seeking allies to help it stop the Islamic State, it did not rule out the possibility of cooperation even with Iran, on condition that the country took a "constructive approach." Such cooperation in any case would not include direct military cooperation. Iran's public stance on cooperation with the United States in Iraq was vague, possibly due to internal disagreements over the matter. Nonetheless, Iran did not rule out military cooperation in Iraq.

American and Iranian officials did hold incidental discussions on the question of aid to Iraq during the nuclear talks. These were not concrete, however, and did not go beyond general statements. In September 2014, when the US administration refrained from including Iran in the coalition it had formed against the Islamic State, Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei claimed that American officials had asked his country to discuss coordinated action against the Islamic State, but added that though several Iranian leaders had not opposed the proposal, he himself rejected it. In practice, limited coordination between the US and Iranian air forces, aimed at avoiding clashes during air raids in northern Iraq, has been conducted through the

mediation of the Iraqi government since late 2014. Both sides, however, are intent on emphasizing that such precautionary measures do not constitute military cooperation.

The negative attitude of both the United States and Iran toward cooperation on Iraq despite their common interest in stopping the Islamic State is not merely a direct result of the usual suspicion that guides their relations; it also reflects their realization that their respective strategic goals in Iraq and Syria conflict. The United States is trying to shape the Iraqi regime into a moderate one, free of Iranian influence, with ties to the West. It believes that the stability of the Iraqi regime will require granting genuine representation to Sunnis and Kurds, and restricting the role of the armed militias. Iran, on the other hand, seeks to enhance its influence in Iraq, while relying on the power of the Shiite militias to make sure that the Shiites continue to dominate the country's leadership.

In Syria, the United States seeks the overthrow of the Assad regime, while Iran wishes to ensure its survival. Above all, the United States wishes to rein in Iran's growing influence in the Middle East, while Iran desires to reduce and eliminate the US military presence and influence in the region. As long as both sides cling to these objectives, any real cooperation between them, beyond ad hoc occasions, is unlikely to develop despite their common interests.

In addition, although Iran is highly concerned about the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, it may also profit from it in the future. The Iraqi government recognizes Iran's contribution to its own critical struggle against the Islamic State. Iran, in fact, was the first country to offer aid to both the Iraqi government and the Kurds while the United States was still hesitant to do so, even as Baghdad lay in jeopardy.⁸ Iran also has a clear advantage over the United States in terms of their respective status and influence in the country. Despite all its efforts since 2003 to foster ties with Iraq, the United States is having trouble competing with Iran among Iraq's Shiites – even those who object to the Iranian regime. Iran also has the advantage of geographic proximity. For all these reasons, if the Islamic State is eventually defeated, the main beneficiary will presumably be Iran, which can then expand its influence in Iraq and help the Assad regime survive in Syria.

Thus although the United States and its allies in the West and the Middle East who are fighting the Islamic State are willing to weigh cooperation with the Iranian regime, they should consider the degree to which their actions

will eventually play into Iran's hands. Defeating the Islamic State in Iraq means strengthening the Shiite militias linked to Iran, while defeating the Islamic State in Syria means strengthening the Assad regime, which the US and other nations deem illegitimate and which is also linked to Iran.

Notes

- 1 *IRNA*, August 24, 2014.
- 2 Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy," *International Affairs* 91, no. 1(2015): 1-15.
- 3 "Iranian Daily Hints at U.S. Plan to Divide Iran By Collapsing Iraq," *MEMRI*, special dispatch 5767, June 12, 2014, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8024.htm>.
- 4 "Iran's General Qassem Suleimani Masterminds Iraq Ground War," *al-Arabiya News*, November 5, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2014/11/05/Iran-s-General-Qassem-Suleimani-masterminds-Iraq-ground-war.html>; Esfandiary and Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy."
- 5 Esfandiary and Tabatabai, "Iran's ISIS Policy."
- 6 "Iran Air Strikes against ISIS Requested by Iraqi Government, says Tehran," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/05/iran-conducts-air-strikes-against-isis-exremists-iraq>.
- 7 Ali Alfoneh, "Shiite Combat Casualties Show the Depth of Iran's Involvement in Syria," *PolicyWatch* 2458, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 3, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shiite-combat-casualties-show-the-depth-of-irans-involvement-in-syria>.
- 8 Tim Arango and Thomas Erdbrink, "U.S. and Iran Both Attack ISIS, But Try Not to Look Like Allies," *New York Times*, December 3, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/world/middleeast/iran-airstrikes-hit-islamic-state-in-iraq.html>.