

Enemy of Convenience: Iran's Fight Against Daesh

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>>> Over the past year, the Middle East has witnessed the burgeoning of a new conflict dyad: the Islamic Republic of Iran versus Daesh¹. Occupying swaths of Arab territory beside its Persian neighbor, Daesh has rapidly expanded both its agenda and the scale of its atrocities. However, by targeting Iran's key state allies – Iraq and Syria – as well as followers of the Shiite branch of Islam, which roughly 90 per cent of Iranians subscribe to, Daesh set itself on a collision course with Iran. While Tehran regards Daesh as a political and religious challenge, strategically, Tehran seeks to erode, not eliminate it. The rise of Daesh offers the Islamic Republic a major opportunity to exploit: securing a dominant position in the Middle East under the auspices of combatting terrorism.

DAESH IN IRAN'S REGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Iran's campaign against Daesh is a means of strengthening its strategic position, in line with Tehran's national security strategy in place since the Arab uprisings. Iran's strategy in the Middle East with respect to the territories controlled by Daesh has been three-fold. Firstly, Iran has focused on preserving the existing state structure, propping-up its allies in positions of political power. Secondly, Iran provides support by way of training, arming, and even providing command and control to Shiite militias and government forces engaged in fighting. Thirdly, Iran seeks to become indispensable to local combat forces so as to retain influence in the short term, and have a rationale for prospective political-military intervention in the long term.

Importantly, for any or all of Iran's strategies to be realized, Daesh does not need to be destroyed.² However for Daesh, adherents of Shiite

HIGHLIGHTS

- Iran's campaign against Daesh is a means of strengthening its strategic position in the Middle East.
- Tehran aims to weaken rather than destroy Daesh because this allows it to defend its allies in government in Syria and Iraq while retaining leverage over them.
- Iran's actions and the limited battlefield successes of its allied-militias pose a major policy conundrum for the international coalition against Daesh.

»»»»» Islam like Iran represent a perversion of its faith, and an impediment to attaining their desired caliphate. Recently, Iranian sources claimed to have overturned a Daesh-linked cell in the Iranian city of Kermanshah near Iraq.³ Yet Iranian officials remain adamant that Daesh has no sympathizers in Iran, even amongst its minority Sunni population.⁴ Iranian military commanders do not see Daesh 'as a threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran'⁵, but rather as a threat to Iran's allies. Thus, actions in support of the liberation of Iraqi and Syrian cities serve a broader purpose than perceived by the international community. Each victory by an Iranian allied militia or force operating under Iranian control represents increased leverage for Iran over its clients. It also furthers an aura of indispensability, locking-in Iran and its allies, not the U.S.-led coalition, as successful arbiters of security in the region.

As self-appointed champion of the oppressed, Iran's strategy in the Middle East has always been two-pronged, seeking to balance its unique Persian and Shiite ethno-sectarian identity to promote its distinct form of Islamism while at the same time presenting itself as a force of resistance to the present order.⁶ However, these two dimensions of Iran's strategy are difficult to reconcile. The longer the conflict against Daesh rages, the more Iran's interventions take on (and will likely continue to take on) a distinctly sectarian nature. Iran's Shiite identity and the terror group's radical interpretation of Sunni Islam represent two competing and irreconcilable visions for an Islamist political order in the Middle East.

Iranian authorities failed to see how the strident sectarianism in their regional policy contributed to the rise of Daesh, which they instead blamed on an American plot to weaken Tehran. In a public address in October 2014, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei proclaimed: 'This takfiri⁷ orientation - the thing that has emerged in Iraq, Syria and some other regional countries today and that confronts all Muslims, not just Shias - is the handiwork of colonialists themselves. They made something called al-Qaida and Daesh in order to confront the Islamic Republic and the movement of

the Islamic Awakening.'⁸ Khamenei's linkage of Daesh to the US and Europe is a view shared by numerous other hardliners. One Iranian parliamentarian likened Daesh to g 'agents of America, England, and Israel's security systems,'⁹ while a member of Iran's Assembly of Experts stated: 'Israel, Daesh, the Taliban, and Wahabism are illegitimate children of American foreign policy and all these groups are born within America.'¹⁰ This conflation of the United States with Daesh is distorted and erroneous, as it not only ignores the fact that America is currently leading an international coalition to combat Daesh, but also denies agency to local Arab actors.¹¹

SHORING UP TEHRAN'S CLIENTS

Iran's position towards Daesh must be seen in the light of its desire to retain its network of strategic clients across the Middle East. In order to defend its allies in government in Syria and Iraq while retaining leverage over them, success for Tehran against Daesh focuses not on destroying the group but weakening it. This limited approach assures that Tehran's allies retain control over the territory they currently hold, but remain reliant on Iran to defend or expand it.

For the international community, Tehran's actions are designed to heighten a stark choice. Either commit to supporting the central government in Iraq and Syria, or risk siding with rebel factions that may include or have relations with Daesh, al-Qaeda, Jabhat al-Nusrah, or other Sunni Arab Jihadists. Leading by example, Iran supports the Ba'athist regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the Shiite-led government of Iraq. Its support, in the form of both financial assistance and diplomatic cover is the main pillar of its strategy to extend and solidify its regional influence.

Financially, open-source estimates of Iranian aid to Syria greatly outweigh those to Iraq.¹² These estimates obviously don't include funding to Shiite militias, for which reporting on assets is scarce. And while recent estimates of Iranian defense spending suggest a figure of \$17 billion, in reality, the off-the-books amount is suspected to be much higher.

Additionally, Iran's ability to tip the balance in regional crises with low-cost systems requiring high-cost countermeasures is well documented.¹³

Diplomatically, Iran operated during the recent talks in Vienna to excise references to Assad's ousting from a statement about Syria's future.¹⁴ Similarly, Ali-Akbar Velayati, an advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, touted that 'No one supported Bashar Assad, the President, up to the extent of the Islamic Republic of Iran.'¹⁵ Iran's willingness to

replace its long-time ally in Iraq, former Prime Minister Maliki,¹⁶ while adamantly refusing to give up Assad in Syria,¹⁷ is unsurprising as it reflects Tehran's ability to retain its inter-

ests in Iraq absent Maliki, but not in Syria absent Assad. Syria also matters to Iran because of its geographical proximity with Israel and the land-bridge into Lebanon it provides.

Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis effectively augments Iranian power

MILITARY ASSISTANCE

In terms of operational assistance, no force has had more experience in both theaters of conflict than the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite foreign operations unit, the Quds-Force (IRGC-QF). Iran's IRGC-QF has led the fight against Daesh, and when re-interpreted through the lens of Iran's strategy, that means deploying forces, orienting and synchronizing assets in support of the Syrian and Iraqi armies, gathering new recruits, as well as enlisting help from proxies like Hezbollah. As a result of this policy the already ailing Iraqi central government becomes even more dependent on Tehran, and Tehran has leverage to provide it with lifelines as it sees fit. Similarly, the US State Department's most recent Country Report on Terrorism noted that, 'Iran increased its assistance to Iraqi Shia militias...in response to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) incursion into Iraq, and has continued to support other militia groups in the region.'¹⁸ Unlike in Syria, where Iran's active

involvement is needed, along with trained battalions of new Arab recruits,¹⁹ in Iraq, Iran has robust and longstanding connections to groups with battlefield experience. Most of these groups cut their teeth during the US occupation of Iraq, and now form the principle defense (along with Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, or Jaish al-Sha'abi) against Daesh. Prominent examples include groups like As-Saib Ahl al-Haq (AAH – The Righteous League), The Badr Brigade, K'taib Hezbollah (KH – The Hezbollah Brigades), and more recently, Harakat al-Nujaba (Movement of the Noble Ones).²⁰ The glue that appears to hold them together is Iranian command and control, best exemplified by one man – IRGC-QF Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani.

Soleimani's presence on the battlefield in some of the major fighting against Daesh in Iraq, such as in Jurf al-Sakher, as well as Amerli (where Iraqi forces were aided by American airpower), further fuels existing rumors about his role as strategic architect of Iran's offensives against Daesh. Soleimani's role on the battlefield is even said to boost the morale of Shiite militiamen and recruits. Operationally, Soleimani has been involved in the selection of members of Iran's IRGC sent to battle. This was clearly the case with Mohammad-Ali Allah-Dadi, an Iranian Brigadier General who had served in the Iran-Iraq War. Soleimani reportedly tapped Allah-Dadi for an assignment in Syria, where he was later 'martyred' by an Israeli helicopter attack near the Golan Heights. Allah-Dadi's location at the time of his death – Quneitra – points to Iran's ability to use the ongoing conflict against Daesh to further entrench its position and advance other regional goals – such as opening a new front against Israel. Back in Iran, Soleimani personally performed funeral rites for the deceased Brigadier General.²¹

Nevertheless, Soleimani's omnipresence in the fight against Daesh, and the full force of the IRGC-QF have been insufficient to turn the tide in Syria. In the fight to save Assad and an Iranian-allied Syria, Iran has established and fielded an all-Afghan Shiite force named the Fattemiyoun. In addition, a Pakistani Shiite contingent, dubbed the Zainabiyoun, is reportedly also fighting.²² Iran's sourcing of Shi-

»»»»» ites from South Asia will lead to challenges when they are set to return.²³ Arabs too, particularly from Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as Iraqi Shiite recruits, are well represented in the Syrian front²⁴ and are likely under the IRGC-QF's command. News from the Syrian front continues to reference Iranian, as well as allied militia deaths – most of which are in ongoing battlefields such as Aleppo. Reportedly in response to these losses, Iran appears to be pulling-out droves of IRGC members from the Syrian theater.²⁵ At the same time, according to Ali Alfoneh, given the increasing battle deaths of IRGC-QF members in Syria, Iran had been sending in other branches of the IRGC, chiefly the IRGC – Ground Forces (IRGC-GF).²⁶ Alfoneh rightly notes that this development 'blurs' the previously circumscribed scope of operations for Guardsmen.²⁷

Given the significant increase in Iranian casualties in Syria, Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis effectively augments Iranian power,²⁸ allowing Iran to continue advising Syrian forces while limiting their own exposure. Despite securing Russian air power, however, a Russian-Iranian alliance is unlikely to survive beyond the conflict, or be feasible elsewhere in the medium-term. Russia will likely pursue its own aims, as evidenced most recently by placement of the S-400's in Syria.²⁹ Historically, Iran played the role of a pawn in Russia's competition with the US, to be sacrificed at the right time for a larger strategic purpose. At the same time, Iran has looked to Russia as a force with the capability to fundamentally alter the dynamics of its game against the West. Given the lack of parity in the relationship, it is Iran that needs Russia, and Russia that can extract a higher price for the partnership. This dynamic will likely prevent the current tactical alliance from developing into the broader relationship Iran's Supreme Leader recently hoped for in his meeting with President Putin.³⁰

IRAN, A WESTERN ALLY AGAINST DAESH?

Iran's actions and limited battlefield successes pose a major policy conundrum for the international coalition against Daesh, and Western strategy

more broadly. Iran's early and active role in combating Daesh was intended to create a certain dependency which would see the world rallying around Tehran's allied regimes in Damascus and Baghdad. So far, Iran has been able to count on egregious crimes committed by Daesh to direct coalition firepower away from the Assad regime and towards Daesh. Iran's intent is to deprive the West of options in the long-run. While the West focuses on fighting Daesh, Iranian allied militias and national government forces are free to go after other (non-jihadist) members of the opposition. In the short-run, this strategy risks making Western airpower a tool to further Iranian objectives on the ground.

Seen in this light, Iran cannot be counted upon as an ally in the war against Daesh. Its superseding policy goals of expanding its regional influence and solidifying its position under the guise of rolling back terrorism make for a poor partner. That is not to say that Tehran will obstruct the West from targeting Daesh; it may even lend tactical support to the coalition, as occurred through its allied Shiite militias in Iraq in 2014. However, enlisting Iran, a Persian-Shiite power, to militarily resolve an affair rooted in the ongoing struggle for Arab-Sunni hearts, minds, and allegiances, will only fan the flames of the ongoing Saudi-Iranian Cold War, which has already cast conflicts in sectarian terms. Under such a scenario, Iranian successes will be seen as Shiite successes, and will be read in Riyadh, Doha and Cairo as a Sunni defeat. And while the West deliberates over the scope of Iran's involvement, be it in diplomatic talks or operations on the ground, Tehran remains both willing and able to exploit the vacuum of decisiveness.

The fallout from Iran's efforts to combat Daesh in the context of its struggle for regional primacy against Saudi Arabia has yielded negative consequences for the Middle East. It has deprived states of their sovereignty and led to an increase in sectarian tensions, and the fragmentation of political and military authority. This fallout can be expected to continue, and may not be lessened even with a (currently unlikely) peaceful solution to the Syrian civil war. In particular, Iran's near

omnipresence in practically every aspect of the funding, recruiting, arming, training and fighting of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, all under the guise of combating Daesh, has afforded it a greater say in the future of the Middle East. This greater say inherently locks in the prospects for continued conflict, and cements Iran's role as one of its key arbiters.

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Endnotes

1. Daesh is the Arabic and Persian acronym for the 'Islamic State (of Iraq and Syria)'.
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