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Geopolitics and Jihadism in A Post-Soleimani Era

The high-profile assassination of General Qassim Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (QF), on January 3 in Baghdad marked the lowest point in US-Iran relations in recent times. It triggered a new spell of geopolitical tensions in the Middle East with far-reaching consequences for South and Southeast Asia. Soleimani's killing coincided with the potential rejuvenation of the global militant group, the Islamic State (IS), and ongoing anti-government protests in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon.

Soleimani's killing was bound to have reverberations beyond the Middle East, particularly in the Muslim-majority states of South and Southeast Asia, where both Saudi Arabia and Iran have engaged in sectarian proxy wars by funding and influencing the Sunni and Shia segments of the population. While states in both regions have condemned Soleimani's killing, they have stayed largely neutral to avoid getting sucked into rising geopolitical tensions.

Against this backdrop, the March issue of the Counter Terrorists Trends and Analyses (CTTA) features three articles that explore different dimensions of Soleimani's death and their geopolitical implications. In the first article, **James Dorsey** argues that as US-Iran tensions have eased in recent months, Soleimani's killing might ultimately prove more of a symbolic blow for Iran, rather than a strategic one. Iranian hardliners, emboldened by a sweeping mandate earned in recent domestic elections, remain committed to a well-honed strategy of escalating asymmetric warfare. According to the author, this raises the prospects for a full-scale war, with the United States also still pursuing a maximum pressure campaign on Iran that, after two years, has yet to produce tangible results.

In the second article, **Raffaello Pantucci** reasons that despite a general consensus that the US-Iran rupture will ease pressure on transnational jihadist groups in the Middle East theatre, it remains unclear how Soleimani's killing will shape their future behaviour. On the one hand, Iran-backed Shia militias are likely to step up their operations, which will exacerbate sectarian fault-lines in the region and feed into IS' self-portrayal as the saviours of Sunnis. Conversely, a continuation of the pragmatism adopted by both Tehran and Sunni jihadist groups such as Islamic State and Al Qaeda, who appear happy to cooperate with the other (a perceived adversary) to ensure broader strategic goals, is also likely, as Iran seeks an edge in its increasingly aggressive confrontation with the US.

Next, **Bilveer Singh** examines the implications of

Soleimani's assassination for South and Southeast Asia where both Iran and Saudi Arabia enjoy ideological influence among the Muslim-majority states. On the one hand, Sunni Malaysia and Indonesia have reservations about Tehran, but domestic political pressures are likely to endear Iran to them more than the US. The impact in South Asia could be more varied mostly affecting Afghanistan and Pakistan. Iran through its Shia militant proxies can undermine US interests in Afghanistan. The QF has recruited significant Shia militias in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively for operations in Syria. This becomes all the more important with the appointment of Soleimani's successor, Esmael Qaani, who oversaw operations in eastern Iran that also covered Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. Similarly, Pakistan has to walk a tight rope as Iran has an inside track to its significant Shia population.

Besides cross and intra-regional assessments of Soleimani's assassination within the broader US-Iran fissures, the threat landscapes in Indonesia and West Africa, both long-time hotbeds for terrorist activity in their respective regions, are also examined in this issue. Firstly, **Noor Huda Ismail** takes a closer look at pro-IS terrorist networks in Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, which has also grappled with Islamic terrorism of various forms since its struggle for independence began more than seven decades ago. By examining the background, tactics and modus operandi of local terrorist groups, both online and offline, and comparing their legacy with those of previous militant Islamist movements, the author believes important learning lessons can be drawn to help mitigate future security threats both for Indonesia and the near region.

Finally, **Atta Barkindo** analyses the threat of global jihadism in the Sahel region where a landscape conducive to terrorist activities provides the fertile ground for IS and Al-Qaeda to grow by linking up with local militant networks. The tactical sophistication exhibited in terrorist attacks by Sahelian jihadist groups, particularly in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, testifies to a growing footprint of global jihadism. Sahel provides an arterial life-line through the region by facilitating the movement of goods and people between the Mediterranean and West Africa which in turn is enormously beneficial to terrorist groups involved in organised criminal enterprises. Moreover, jihadists have also exploited the weak state system and ungoverned spaces in the region. Additionally, militant groups from the Middle East and South Asia have manipulated Islam and its texts to penetrate the region. Lastly, desertification and environmental degradation have also created a conducive environment for criminal activities and terrorism.

Since the writing of this issue, the global coronavirus pandemic has also revived concerns of the threat of bioterrorism. Both Islamist and far-right extremists are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to pursue their extremist objectives and spread hate. Groups on either side have called on their operatives to target adversaries, by spreading the virus in “enemy-populated areas.” As the COVID-19 outbreak has demonstrated, a potential biological event can have catastrophic consequences, and will require evidence-based countermeasures on a global scale.

In conclusion, the editorial team would also like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the late Ms Viji Menon to the CTTA over the last three years. We are sincerely grateful.

To all our readers, take care wherever you are.

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Killing of Iranian General: US Reaps More Than It Wished For

James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Tensions in the Gulf may have been dialed back months after the United States' (US) killing of Iranian General Qassim Soleimani brought the region to the brink of war. However, the building blocks for a renewed crisis not only remain in place but have been reinforced. Iran, with hardliners emerging strengthened from parliamentary elections, is committed to a strategy that sees escalating asymmetric warfare as the straw that will break the camel's back and force the parties back to the negotiating table. It is a risky gamble, with the US bent on continuing a maximum pressure campaign, and could easily spin out of control.

Writing on the Wall

The writing was on the wall. Convinced it had deterred Iran with the killing of General Qassim Soleimani, its most powerful military commander, in the first days of January 2020, the Trump administration misread the smoke signals emerging from Tehran.

Rather than backing off, Iran has stuck to its pattern throughout 2019 of allowing proxies to attack US and Saudi targets, as part of its strategy of gradually escalating tensions in a bid to force a return to negotiations based on the 2015 international agreement that curbed the Islamic republic's nuclear program.

Targets in February 2020 included the US embassy in Baghdad as well as the Saudi capital Riyadh. The choice of targets was significant. Missiles fired at the embassy were the 19th attack since last October on either the

diplomatic facility or the approximately 5,200 US troops currently stationed in Iraq. It was a December 2019 siege of the embassy by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias that prompted US President Donald Trump to assassinate Soleimani, the architect of Iran's use of a regional proxy network in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen as part of its defense strategy.¹

As US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February paid his first visit to Saudi Arabia since the Soleimani killing,² the kingdom's air defense forces said they had shot down ballistic missiles launched by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. The air force said the missiles had targeted civilian neighbourhoods in Riyadh.³

The suggestion that Iran had upgraded its support for the Houthis by giving them ballistic missiles and with the rebels targeting Riyadh, Iran hoped to kill two birds with one stone: force the US to choose between retaliating or appear unwilling to come to the defence of its allies in the Gulf and persuade Saudi Arabia that its interests would be best served by talking directly to Tehran.

More fundamentally, the attacks in the first two months of 2020 indicate that Iran was neither deterred by the killing of Soleimani, nor did it believe that the assassination had brought the US and Iran close enough to a war to persuade Washington that it needed to negotiate or wage all-out war, something both countries are determined to avoid.

The Iranian game is one of high-stakes poker that risks getting out of the control of either protagonist given that Iran has influence but

¹ James M. Dorsey, "Iran plays chess, the US plays backgammon," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, January 9, 2020,

<https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2020/01/iran-plays-chess-us-plays-backgammon.html>.

² "Pompeo meets US troops on Saudi visit following talks with MBS," *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/pompeo-meets-troops-saudi-visit-talks-mbs-200220190020158.html>.

³ "Saudi air defense forces intercept Houthi ballistic missiles," *Arab News*, February 21, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1631026/saudi-arabia>.

no absolute grip on its proxies and the danger of black swans as was evident in Iran's accidental downing of a Ukrainian airliner that killed 176 people.⁴

From Strategic Patience to Gradual Escalation

If the first two months of this year are anything to go by, Iran and the Trump Administration have reverted to the pattern of the months that preceded an attack in December 2019 on a US facility in Iraq that killed an American contractor, the embassy siege and the US response with the killing of Soleimani.

In those months, President Trump exercised in military terms the kind of strategic patience that Iran adopted in the first 18 months after the US withdrew in 2018 from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program and imposed its economic sanctions. In mid-2019, Iran switched its posture of strategic patience to one of calibrated escalation after Europe, Russia and China proved either unwilling or incapable of salvaging the nuclear accord in a way that Iran would be at least partially compensated for the severe domestic impact of the economic sanctions.

Trump had refrained from responding militarily to numerous attacks, including last year's Iranian downing of a US drone, attacks on tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, and two key Saudi oil facilities. Those attacks grabbed the most international attention but were, according to US officials, only the tip of the iceberg. The officials said there had been some 90 attacks on US targets in Iraq since May 2019 carried out by Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, including Kataib Hezbollah, whose leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was killed alongside Soleimani.⁵

The attacks were intended not only to force the US to escalate tensions by provoking a

military response in the hope that it would lead to a return to the negotiating table, but also to facilitate an environment conducive to a withdrawal of US forces from Iraq at the behest of the Iraqi government and growing public pressure. Notes Michael Eisenstadt, an expert on military and strategy at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP): "The nearly eight months in which the US did not respond forcefully to a series of military provocations and attacks almost certainly contributed to the increasingly assertive and audacious actions by Iran and its proxies."⁶

The danger of a reversal to a pattern of Iranian provocations and US restraint is multi-fold. It not only reinforces perceptions that the US is no longer a fully reliable ally that will come to the defense of its partners no matter what. It also suggests that the US could walk into an Iranian response with an unexpected response that would amount to an overreaction as was the case with the killing of Soleimani.

Iran may not have expected the Trump administration to target a key government official, but was likely deterred by the Soleimani killing at best for a matter of weeks partly because it wanted to see if it created an opening for negotiations. It had also been waylaid by the aftermath of the downing of the Ukrainian airliner. Iran clearly believes that one round of getting to the brink of all-out war failed to do the trick and it has, for all practical matters, put the downing behind it.

Mushrooming Risks

The potential for escalation, Trump's strategic patience notwithstanding, is embedded not only in Iran's strategy but also the US administration's declared policy of seeking to contain and confront Iran even if that is primarily anchored in its maximum sanctions-driven pressure campaign.⁷ The risk of

⁴ Bethan McKernan, "Iran admits unintentionally shooting down Ukrainian airliner," *The Guardian*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/11/iran-admits-shooting-down-ukrainian-airliner-unintentionally>.

⁵ "Iran Plays Chess, the US Backgammon," *The Globalist*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.theglobalist.com/iran-united-states-iraq-middle-east-donald-trump-qassem-soleimani/>.

⁶ Michael Eisenstadt, "Operating in the Gray Zone: Countering Iran's Asymmetric Way of War," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus162-Eisenstadt.pdf>.

⁷ Susan Jones, "Pompeo: Obama Chose to 'Underwrite and Appease'"; "We Have Chosen to Confront and Contain," *CNSNews.com*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.cnsnews.com/article/international/susan>.

escalated Iranian asymmetric warfare that increases pressure on the Trump administration to respond was boosted by the February 2020 Iranian parliamentary election, the first since the US launched its maximum pressure campaign, that gave conservative hardliners a majority.⁸

Much of the current assessment of the risk of a renewed escalation of US-Iranian tension focuses on Iraq and the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. It largely overlooks Iranian opportunities to strike in other theatres, prominent among which is Afghanistan, a war-torn nation with a significant US military presence on the Islamic republic's border that Iran has long seen as threatening.⁹

In a twist of irony, the removal of Soleimani as commander of the Al Quds force, the foreign operations branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, brought to the forefront a successor, General Esmail Qaani, whose main focus has for three decades been Afghanistan, where he built close ties to various factions of the Taliban, and members of the Afghan political elite and created battalions of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites that fought in Syria.¹⁰ His elevation raises the prospect of Afghanistan becoming an additional staging post for the Al Quds' future operations.

Iran's ability to enhance its military capabilities despite the US sanctions, boosts the risk of escalation in the event of a US response. In

[jones/pompeo-obama-chose-underwrite-and-appease-we-have-chosen-confront](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/iranians-head-polls-pick-parliament-uncertainty-200220234003272.html).

⁸ Arwa Ibrahim, "Iranians vote to elect new parliament amid uncertainty," *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/02/iranians-head-polls-pick-parliament-uncertainty-200220234003272.html>.

⁹ Javid Ahmad and Husain Haqqani, "What does Soleimani's death mean for Afghanistan?" *The Hill*, February 6, 2020,

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/481884-what-does-soleimanis-death-mean-for-afghanistan>.

¹⁰ "Esmail Qaani: The new man leading Iran's elite Quds Force," *BBC News*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51008996>.

¹¹ John Ismay and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "New Iranian Missiles Pose Threat to US Aircraft in Yemen, Pentagon Says," *The New York Times*, 20 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/19/us/iran-missiles-yemen.html>.

February, the US Navy discovered that Iran had developed a new anti-aircraft missile capable of downing American military helicopters, including the tilt-rotor MV-22 Osprey. The missiles were found on two vessels ferrying arms, reportedly to the Houthis, that were intercepted by the Navy.¹¹

To Destabilize Or Not?

Complicating risk calculations is the fact that the US and Saudi Arabia have waxed hot and cold on covert operations to support militants in and outside of Iran that seek either a toppling of the regime in Iran; greater autonomy for an ethnic minority like Iranian Arabs, Kurds or Azeris; or in some cases secession.

The kingdom and the US, already prior to the launch of the maximum pressure campaign, toyed with various militant groups, including the Albania-based Mujahedeen-e-Khalq¹² as well as the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahvaz (ASMLA)¹³ and Baloch nationalists and religious groups¹⁴ that have claimed responsibility for various attacks on Iranian targets in recent years.

Suspected US and Saudi encouragement of militant attacks in Iran appears to have waned in recent months but could well bounce back despite a breakdown in indirect contacts between the kingdom and Iran in the wake of the Soleimani killing.¹⁵

¹² Ali Harb, "How Iranian MEK went from US terror list to halls of Congress," *Middle East Eye*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/iranian-mek-us-terror-list-halls-congress-PMOI-Iran>.

¹³ James M. Dorsey, "Saudi Arabia and Iran: When it comes to exiles, the pot calls the kettle black," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, November 1, 2018, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2018/11/saudi-arabia-and-iran-when-it-comes-to.html>.

¹⁴ James M. Dorsey, "Pakistan caught in the middle as China's OBOR becomes Saudi-Iranian-Indian battleground," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, May 5, 2017, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2017/05/pakistan-caught-in-middle-as-chinas.html>.

¹⁵ Banafsheh Keynoush, "Why mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran keeps failing," *Atlantic Council*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/why-mediation-between-saudi-arabia-and-iran-keeps-failing/>.

Soleimani was killed immediately after arriving at Baghdad airport carrying an Iranian response to a Saudi message that had been conveyed by the Iraqi government as a mediator.¹⁶ Despite the breakdown, Iran sees its strategy of gradual escalation as having produced results by driving wedges into the US-Saudi-UAE front against the Islamic republic.

The driver underlying the initial Saudi-Iranian contacts remains: a sense of vulnerability as a result of last year's Iranian-inspired attacks on tankers off the coast of the Emirates and on key Saudi oil facilities, coupled with nagging doubts about US reliability.¹⁷ As a result, the UAE, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has already cautiously found some common ground with Iran, sending a coast guard delegation to Tehran to discuss maritime security.¹⁸

If that sense of vulnerability can be maintained, for example through attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis, the likelihood is that a proposal put forward by Russia for embedding the unilateral US defense umbrella into a more multilateral regional security arrangement that would involve some sort of non-aggression understanding, will gain traction.¹⁹

A Multilateral Regional Security Arrangement?

Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, that over the past decade have sought to rollback or co-opt popular revolts that have swept the Middle East and North Africa, are certain to buy into the sub-text of the Russian security proposal.

"Russia is seeking stability which includes preventing colour revolutions," said Maxim

Grigoryev, director of the Moscow-based Foundation for the Study of Democracy, using the term employed to describe popular revolts in countries that once were part of the Soviet Union. Echoing Kremlin policy, Grigoryev said Syria was "a model of stabilising a regime and countering terrorism."²⁰

The subtext is important even if Gulf states long opposed Russian intervention in Syria that enabled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to gain the upper hand in a nine-year-old brutal civil war. Said Middle East scholar and commentator Mark N. Katz: "While Russia is a reliable ally, the US is not. Many in the Middle East may not approve of Moscow supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime, but they respect Vladimir Putin for sticking by Russia's beleaguered ally in Syria."²¹

Like Russia, China sees a broadening of security arrangements that would embed, rather than replace, the US defense umbrella as a way to reduce regional tensions. China also believes that a multilateral arrangement would allow it to continue steering clear of being sucked into conflicts and disputes in the Middle East, particularly the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

A multilateral arrangement in which the US would remain the key military player would therefore fit the pattern of China's gradual projection beyond its borders of its growing military power. The "sequence of events shows that, thus far, the Iranian strategy of calculated counter-escalation is working... By escalating on its own, Iran forced a number of key players to change their cost-benefit calculus," said Eldar Mamedov, an advisor to

¹⁶ Kim Sengupta, "The reason Qassem Soleimani was in Baghdad shows how complex the Iran crisis is," *The Independent*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/qassem-soleimani-death-iran-baghdad-middle-east-iraq-saudi-arabia-a9272901.html>.

¹⁷ Factbox: Attacks, incidents heightening Gulf tensions since May," *Reuters*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-tanker-factbox/factbox-attacks-incidents-heightening-gulf-tensions-since-may-idUSKBN1WQ0JL>.

¹⁸ David Hearst, "EXCLUSIVE: UAE's secret mission to Iran," *Middle East Eye*, October 13, 2019,

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-uaes-secret-mission-iran>.

¹⁹ James M. Dorsey, "Soleimani's death opens a door to alternative security arrangements in the Gulf," *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, January 7, 2020,

<https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2020/01/soleimani-death-opens-door-to.html>.

²⁰ Interview conducted by the author, 30 October 2019

²¹ Mark N. Katz, "Trump's Kurdish Fumble: What's In It For Putin?" *LobeLog*, October 11, 2019, <https://lobelog.com/trumps-kurdish-fumble-whats-in-it-for-putin/>.

the social-democrats in the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.²²

Misreading the Tea Leaves

A US misreading of the tea leaves contributed to Iranian successes as well as the hardline victory in the February 2020 parliamentary election. The election result spotlighted the US' repeated shooting of an own goal by adopting policies that undermine its own long-standing aim of persuading Iran to moderate its policies and tone down its revolutionary rhetoric.

Rather than provide incentives, like with the 2015 nuclear accord, US policy has more often than not reinforced perceptions in Tehran that the US' real goal was regime change. Trump's former national security advisor John Bolton reinforced those perceptions in response to Soleimani's killing, when he tweeted: "Hope this is the first step to regime change in Tehran."²³

US policy over the decades has prompted Iran to adopt a defense and security policy that compensated for the Islamic republic's intrinsic weakness by emphasizing the very things the US has long wanted to see changed. These include Iran's successful use of proxies across the Middle East and its development of a ballistic missile and small speedboat capability in the absence of either an air force or a navy worth mentioning.

Ultimately, the strengthening of Iranian hardliners not only undermines US policy goals but also risks putting the US in difficult, if not impossible, and at times humiliating positions, and sucking it into a conflict for which it is ill-equipped, in terms of fighting an opponent who relies on non-conventional warfare. Said political anthropologist Negar Razavi: "The US foreign policy establishment has collectively created a culture of expert impunity when it comes to Iran, which has contributed in no small part to the unstable and dangerous policy conditions we see under Trump today."²⁴

²² Eldar Mamedov, "Why Iran's Strategy Of Reversible Escalation Is Working," *LobeLog*, September 5, 2019, <https://lobelog.com/why-irans-strategy-of-reversible-escalation-is-working/>

²³ John Bolton, Twitter, January 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbJohnBolton/status/1213044218689720321>.

Conclusion

The spectre of violence, if not all-out war, looms large in the Gulf even if the US and Iran had backed away from military confrontation in early January 2020. If anything, the battle lines have hardened with hardliners having emerged victorious in Iran's parliamentary election and the Trump administration pursuing its sanctions-driven maximum pressure campaign that aims to contain and confront the Islamic republic. Continued Iranian provocations designed to bring the parties to the brink with negotiations as the only alternative to war amount to a risky strategy that could produce situations that spin out of control. As a result, Iran and the US are playing a high-stakes poker game to see who blinks first. The gamble is magnified by the fact that neither party believes that the political price of compromise is lower than the devastating price of war.

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²⁴ Negar Razavi, "The Systemic Problem Of "Iran Expertise" In Washington," *LobeLog*, September 15, 2019, <https://lobelog.com/the-systemic-problem-of-iran-expertise-in-washington/>.

Soleimani's Assassination: Could Jihadist Groups Benefit?

Raffaello Pantucci

Synopsis

While the geopolitical implications of General Qassim Soleimani's killing have been well discussed, an understudied aspect is its impact on the jihadist terrorist milieu. The general assumption is that the act is either tangential to or undermines the fight against the Islamic State (IS), given Iran's role in anti-IS operations on the ground in the Levant. However, it is not clear that either of these assumptions are true, or in what ways Soleimani's death and its consequences might shape the future behaviour of jihadists.

The Current Milieu

On the surface, the global jihadist landscape remains dominated by two core factions – those aligned with al Qaeda (AQ) and those closer to IS. However, some jihadist factions continue to hedge against outwardly joining either side, and groups elsewhere around the world have pledged allegiance to IS, but with little evidence of a direct link or connection. At the ground level, it is sometimes not clear that individual adherents see the distinction in the same way that leadership cadres might, with arrests showing caches of radical material drawing from both pools. Similarly, in West Africa, there is growing evidence of

cooperation between IS and AQ, though it is not clear if this is centrally mandated or coordinated.¹

The growing importance of Africa in both groups' global footprint is a more noticeable trend. For IS, that is represented through the growing influence and presence of IS-linked or inspired groups eager to brandish their connections – for example, there has been an increase in violence in the Sahel,² Nigeria³ and Mozambique⁴ linked to groups that have been releasing videos through IS channels. AQ also continues to be represented on the battlefield through their own affiliates, though they appear less vocal. The growing reported alignment between AQ and IS-linked groups in the Sahel is an interesting regional development – unique globally according to senior US military officials serving in the region⁵ – whose larger significance is not yet clear.

Coherent Messaging

The exception in some ways for AQ is al Shabaab in East Africa, which has managed to demonstrate a constant capability and willingness to attempt ambitious attacks, while also maintaining a persistent public deference to AQ central.⁶ IS has recently also taken to

¹ Eric Schmitt, "Terrorism Threat in West Africa Soars as US Weighs Troop Cuts," *New York Times*, February 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/africa/terrorism-west-africa.html>.

² Jason Burke, "Sahel faces surge in violence from terror attacks," *Guardian*, January 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/22/sahel-faces-surge-in-violence-from-terror-attacks>.

³ "Islamic State in Nigeria 'beheads Christian hostages'," *BBC News*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50924266>.

⁴ Peter Fabricius, "Is Islamic State taking charge of Mozambique's jihadist insurgency," *Institute for Security Studies Today*, January 10, 2020, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/is-islamic-state-taking-charge-of-mozambiques-jihadist-insurgency>.

⁵ Adrian Blomfield and Will Brown, "British troops back on front line against jihadists as war on terror

spreads to Africa," *Telegraph*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/01/british-troops-back-front-line-against-jihadists-war-terror/>.

⁶ The attack on the Dusit hotel in Nairobi in January 2019 (James Kahongeh, "How Dusit terror attack unfolded," *Daily Nation*, January 15, 2020, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/How-Dusit-terror-attack-unfolded/1056-5418518-bp715yz/index.html>) and the attack on US and Italian forces in September 2019 (Caleb Weiss, "Sahabaab strikes American, Italian forces in Somalia," *Long War Journal*, September 30, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/09/shabaab-strikes-american-italian-forces-in-somalia.php>) show ambition, while their praise of AQAP's Pensacola attack claim and the reference in the Dusit attack to being Zawahiri's soldiers shows deference: "Blessing and Salutations for the Military Operation at the US navy base in Pensacola,

pushing a pan-regional narrative in direct competition to al Shabaab.⁷ The link to AQ core is something that is reflected across the range of AQ affiliated groups who have in recent months shown a considerable degree of coherent messaging.⁸

IS in contrast continues to push to inspire wherever it can, with messages in support of its affiliates. While there is an equal degree of coherence in terms of style of messaging with AQ linked groups, it does not necessarily seem to fulfil the same role of seeking to bolster the centre and show higher levels of organisational coherence. In the wake of Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's death, there appeared to be a rush from around the world of groups pledging allegiance to the new IS leader, with little clarity about how this affects the various groups or cells themselves.⁹ Given the continued questions around IS' new leader – with some in the security community even doubting his existence – IS certainly appears to be less concerned about global organisational coherence than AQ.¹⁰

Focus on Local Conflicts

At the same time, neither group appears at the moment in a position to launch a strategically significant strike against the West or out of their immediate areas of operation. It is possible such plots are being disrupted, but, regardless, the net result is a loss in visible effectiveness. In some parts of the world, local

authority weakness, societal fissures or external tensions have created a context where the group, or a cell pledging loyalty to them, might launch a strike.¹¹ But evidence of centrally directed plots successfully launched by either group over the past year is lacking.

Rather, the groups appear to be focused on local conflicts in which they sometimes use the rhetoric of an international attack as a garb to shroud their attacks with greater meaning. For example, Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula's (AQAP) most recent claim of responsibility of the Pensacola terrorist attack in Florida, showed little evidence of a connection beyond the group claiming the assailant as one of its own given his nationality as a Saudi.¹²

Iranian Manipulation

Contrary to popular consensus that it is the sworn enemy of Sunni jihadists, Iran has shown itself to be a pragmatic actor in dealing with violent Sunni groups. This partly stems from a well-spring of early support from across the Muslim divide for the Iranian revolution. In the early days of the revolution in 1979, the overthrow of the Shah was treated as an event in the same light as the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan or the Siege of Mecca – whereby dedicated believers, armed only with guns, the Koran and the zeal of their beliefs, were able to overthrow (or hurt) long-standing apostate regimes. The focus was on Islam

Florida," Al Kataib Media, February 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Magdashi3/status/1224968922329505792>.

⁷ "Islamic State video seeks recruits in East Africa," *BBC Monitoring*, February 28, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201hy23> - it is also notable how al Shabaab is being reported as broadening its recruitment base, Nicholas Komu, "Al-Shabaab changes tack, targets jobless youths in Nyeri slums," *Daily Nation*, March 1, 2020, <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Al-Shabaab-targets-youth-in-Nyeri-slums/1056-5474832-xagos9z/index.html>.

⁸ This can be seen in some of the aforementioned incidents, but also see Caleb Weiss, "Al Qaeda's general command praises recent Shabaab attacks," *Long War Journal*, October 17, 2019, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/10/al-qaeda-praises-recent-shabaab-attacks.php>.

⁹ "Regional affiliates start pledging loyalty to new IS leader," November 2, 2019, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c2017fwf>; Mina al-Lami, "Analysis: Decoding Islamic State's

allegiance videos," *BBC Monitoring*, October 7, 2019, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c20150sr>

¹⁰ Mina al-Lami, "Analysis: Ongoing uncertainties about identity of new Islamic State leader," *BBC Monitoring*, January 24, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201eoqr> and Martin Chulov and Mohammed Rasool, ISIS founding member confirmed by spies as group's new leader," *Guardian*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/20/isis-leader-confirmed-amir-mohammed-abdul-rahman-al-mawli-al-salbi>; there appears to be a debate about his identity which even a report in the Guardian reportedly sourced from numerous intelligence sources has not cleared up. IS' recent statement referred to the new leader again, without showing him.

¹¹ The Easter 2019 attack in Sri Lanka is arguably an archetypal example of this.

¹² Thomas Joscelyn, "AQAP claims 'full responsibility' for shooting at Naval Air Station Pensacola," *Long War Journal*, February 2, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/02/aq-ap-claims-full-responsibility-for-shooting-at-naval-air-station-pensacola.php>.

and anti-imperialism rather than Sunni-Shia divides.¹³

Support of Violent Extremists

While Iran has continued to maintain its rhetoric of permanent revolution – something alluded to within its constitution¹⁴ – providing a logic that connected it with anti-imperialist movements around the world, for the most part, its links to violent groups have been highly pragmatic. For example, Iran has historically been supportive of Turkish Hezbollah, a Sunni group that has targeted Kurdish groups as well as Turkish authorities.¹⁵ From an Iranian perspective, supporting such a group is partly motivated by a desire to control Iran's own Kurdish separatist regions as well as providing them a card to play against Turkey.

Since the early days of the revolution, Iran has also supported Hamas against Israel.¹⁶ Further, looking to Iran's complicated border region with Pakistan, the long-standing Baluchi insurgency on both sides of the border has generated repeated accusations by Pakistan that Tehran is providing support to some Baluchi elements, specifically the Baloch Raji Aajoi Saangar (BRAS),¹⁷ a Sunni group that has targeted Pakistani security officials. Iran's support appears tit-for-tat, but

also an expression of concern against growing Saudi influence in Pakistan and particular investments in Baluchistan.

Iran's relationship with the Taliban and AQ is also complicated. For years post-9/11, Iran hosted a number of senior AQ figures, alternatively jailing them and letting them run around under fairly loose supervision. This included senior figures like Saif al Adl and a number of Osama bin Laden's close family. Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the subsequent founder of al Qaeda in Iraq (the precursor to IS) was allowed to pass through Iran as he fled Afghanistan for northern Iraq.¹⁸ Iran appears to have held these individuals hostage as negotiating leverage as well as to protect themselves against future attacks by AQ. Nonetheless, relations between AQ and Iran have remained consistently antagonistic, something evidenced by comments within Osama bin Laden's correspondence found in Abbottabad.¹⁹

In 1998, when the Taliban overran Mazar-e-Sharif, they reportedly massacred a group of 11 Iranians (including 9 diplomats), pushing the two sides to the brink of war.²⁰ This soured relations such that following the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, Tehran actively reached out to the US offering detailed maps of Taliban positions to aid in its

¹³ Emmanuel Sivan, "Sunni radicalism in the Middle East and the Iranian Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.21, no.1, February 1989, pp.1-30.

¹⁴ "Chapter One: Tehran's Strategic Intent," *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, (IISS Strategic Dossier: London), November 2019, pp.11-38, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>.

¹⁵ Fatih Altayli, "Is Iran Supporting Turkish Hezbollah?," *Al Monitor*, April 16, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/04/turkey-iran-hezbollah-support.html>; there is a live debate about the degree to which Iran is involved with the group. People close to the group deny ("Huda-Pars emergence," *The Economist*, November 23, 2013) while Turkish sources tend to highlight links (Mustafa Cosar Unal and Tuncay Unal, "Recruitment or enlistment? Individual integration into the Turkish Hezbollah," *Turkish Studies*, vol. 19, No.3, 2018, pp.327-362)

¹⁶ Adnan Abu Amer, "The Hamas-Iran alliance remains and expands," *Middle East Monitor*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190114-the-hamas-iran-alliance-remains-and-expands/>; "Chapter

One: Tehran's Strategic Intent," *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, (IISS Strategic Dossier: London), November 2019, pp.11-38, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier/iran-19-03-ch-1-tehrans-strategic-intent>.

¹⁷ Shahabuddin Shahab, "Pakistan asks Iran to act on militants behind Baluchistan killings," *Reuters*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-iran/pakistan-asks-iran-to-act-on-militants-behind-baluchistan-killings-idUSKCN1RW0EQ>.

¹⁸ Adrian Levy and Catherine Scott-Clark, *The Exile: The Flight of Osama bin Laden* (UK: Bloomsbury), August 2017.

¹⁹ Nelly Lahoud, "Al-Qa'ida's Contested Relationship with Iran: The View from Abbottabad," *New America Foundation*, September 2018, https://s3.amazonaws.com/newamericadotorg/documents/Al-Qaidas_Contested_Relationship_with_Iran_2018-08-20_151707.pdf.

²⁰ Douglas Jehl, "Iran holds Taliban responsible for 9 diplomats' deaths," *New York Times*, September 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/11/world/iran-holds-taliban-responsible-for-9-diplomats-deaths.html>.

attack plans.²¹ However, as the American-Iranian relationship soured, the relationship between the Taliban and Tehran flourished. To the point that there was a Taliban Mashhad Shura formed, as well as Iranian support for Taliban groups in the north and west of Afghanistan.²² Iran's calculations here appear to be driven by a desire to keep its hand in play in Afghanistan as well as formulate another way to frustrate the US.

Pragmatic Relations

The key takeaway from all of this interaction with the Sunni jihadist world is that Tehran is highly pragmatic in its relations with them. While there are clear moments of conflict, Iran is seemingly willing to overlook them in order to advance broader strategic goals. This perspective will unlikely change following the removal of Soleimani. Unlike a terrorist group, where the leader is a figure around whom great mystique, ideology and personal linkages flow, Soleimani was simply (albeit very charismatic) the leader of an army – an organisation with a fixed hierarchy and goals, promotion and division of labour. The overall approach may be massaged by a leader, but ultimately the institution will have political perspectives that are dictated elsewhere. This will not change with the removal of a general.

Jihadists' View of Iran

While Iran may have a highly pragmatic and agnostic view of Sunni jihadist groups, it is equally clear that the groups themselves have fairly firm views on Iran. The clearest expression of this is in the numerous postings that appeared on extremist social media channels in the wake of Soleimani's death. While AQ did not make a formal statement, its

affiliate on the ground in Syria, Hurras al Din, celebrated his demise.²³

In contrast, IS was more open in its gloating, with a message in late January from its new spokesman, Abu Hamza al Qarashi, celebrating Soleimani's death, describing him as a 'Safavid apostate' and calling on God to curse him and all who supported him.²⁴ The message followed an earlier one in IS' newsletter al Naba, which hailed Soleimani's death as a victory for the jihadist group.²⁵ There was also substantial condemnation amongst the jihadist community for Hamas' stance on Soleimani's death.²⁶

This does not mean jihadists would be averse to once again strike pragmatic deals with Iran if they advance broader strategic goals. They may shout anti-Iran rhetoric, and IS has in the past sought to accelerate its conflict with Iran with its June 2017 attack on the Parliament and Mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini, which followed its first ever Persian-language video.²⁷ But outside this attack, the group has done little in advance of its animosity towards the Islamic Republic (though Iran has claimed numerous foiled attacks).

Moreover, while both IS and AQ might see Shi'ite apostates as enemies, it is not clear how much they are dependent on this narrative to generate supporters and recruits. It is notable, for example, that in IS' messages claiming the 2017 attack in Tehran, they sought to emphasise the ethnicities of the various attackers – highlighting their Baluchi and Ahvazi heritage; two minorities within Iran with strained relations with Tehran.²⁸ This suggests a narrative around the attack that attempts to manipulate local politics and tensions rather than rely solely on the simplistic Sunni-Shia divide.

²¹ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander," *New Yorker*, September 23, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>.

²² Javid Ahmad and Husain Haqqani, "What does Soleimani's death mean for Afghanistan?," *The Hill*, February 6, 2020, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/481884-what-does-soleimanis-death-mean-for-afghanistan>.

²³ "Syria-based jihadist group reportedly welcomes Soleimani's death," *BBC Monitoring*, January 12, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201dr8l>.

²⁴ "Text of IS spokesman's message announcing new phase in jihad," *BBC Monitoring*, January 27, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201f2pb>.

²⁵ "IS gloats at death of Soleimani in first comment on US-Iran crisis," January 9, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201dfp7>.

²⁶ "Jihadist supporters condemn Hamas for mourning Soleimani," *BBC Monitoring*, January 7, 2020, <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201d54j>.

²⁷ Chris Zambelis, "Terror in Tehran: The Islamic State Goes to War with the Islamic Republic," *CTC Sentinel*, vol.10, no.6, June/July 2017, <https://ctc.usma.edu/terror-in-tehran-the-islamic-state-goes-to-war-with-the-islamic-republic/>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Broader Geopolitics

While Iran is seen as the heart of an alliance of apostates that is oppressing Sunni Muslims in the Middle East, the jihadist community still seems fixated on its enemies in the West and the regimes they are supporting around the world. The Shia may also be seen as adversaries, but arguably, they are not a principal focus of the jihadist community. Soleimani's death is unlikely to change the calculations for both sides (Tehran and the jihadist community) a vast amount.

Continued Operations Across Middle East

This is not to say that in key theatres where AQ and IS operate, including in Iraq and Syria, Soleimani's death will not have some effect. While physically decimated, IS is still estimated to carry out 60 attacks a month in Iraq alone targeting security forces and local rivals, as it seeks to regroup around an estimated 20,000 hardcore fighters across the Iraq-Syria theatre.²⁹ While concerned about IS' regrowth in Syria, Iran will likely continue to focus their efforts through either their forces on the ground or Iraqi or Syrian proxies. The removal of Soleimani is not going to change this approach.

Rather, the greater impact will be on the broader US-Iran clash, where the escalation marked by the removal of Soleimani will give Iran and its proxies a greater sense of latitude in their operations. This will concern Saudi Arabia, Iran's principle adversary in the Gulf, who has been noticeably careful in official statements to downplay any gloating over Soleimani's death.³⁰

²⁹ Loveday Morris and Louisa Loveluck, "Killing of ISIS leader has not hurt group's operations, says Iraqi Kurdish prime minister," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/killing-of-isis-leader-has-not-hurt-groups-operations-says-iraqi-kurdish-leader/2020/02/15/d3e7303a-4ff8-11ea-a4ab-9f389ce8ad30_story.html

³⁰ Yasmine Farouk, "What does the US killing of Soleimani mean for Saudi Arabia?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Commentary*, January 7, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/07/what-does-u.s.-killing-of-soleimani-mean-for-saudi-arabia-pub-80722>

³¹ Martin Williams, "Factcheck Q&A: Is Saudi Arabia funding ISIS?," *Channel 4 News*, June 7, 2017,

This perspective provides an interesting resonance to the broader question of the longer-term consequence of the strike for Sunni jihadist groups. For the US, this strike was part of a maximum pressure campaign against Iran that appears to be intended to topple the Tehran regime. It also came as the US continued to agitate to withdraw its troops from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. If US President Donald Trump is successful in his desire to pull US forces out of these Middle Eastern theatres, the resultant vacuum is one that will likely be filled by instability or Iran-Saudi tensions.

Filling the Security Vacuum

These tensions might express themselves through proxies like Sunni jihadist groups, but it is likely that these groups' actions will be a combination of manipulation and individual agency. While IS and AQ (or other Sunni jihadist groups like the Taliban or those in Syria) might take advantage of the security vacuum that follows a US withdrawal to grow once again, their adversaries (including Iran) will likely retaliate. This will give Iran's foes an opportunity to provide support to their enemies' enemy. So, as IS advances and the Iraqi and Syrian sides push back against them with Iranian support, it would be unsurprising if some support flows towards IS from Gulf backers.³¹

Similarly, in Afghanistan in the peace deal that was signed, the Taliban seemed to appear willing to sever their links with AQ.³² While there has been much scepticism around this declaration and earlier intent by the Taliban to sever such links,³³ the new agreement might

<https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-ga-is-saudi-arabia-funding-isis>

³² "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America," February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>

³³ This skepticism was well articulated by Thomas Joscelyn and Bill Roggio, "Trump's Bad Deal with the Taliban," *Politico*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/18/donald-trump-afghanistan-zalmay-khalilzad-225815> and was particularly illustrated in the death of Asim Umar in Afghanistan in September 2019, "Asim Umar: Al-Qaeda's South Asia chief 'killed in

provide a context in which Tehran could once again seek to play its cards with AQ to maintain some leverage against Taliban – a group with which they have deep historical enmity which may have only temporarily been put to one side. It might also be useful leverage in Iran's broader conflict with the US – who by virtue of the latest agreement are (theoretically at least) now allied with the Taliban against AQ and IS.

Conclusion

The Sunni jihadist milieu is one that paints itself as ideologically pure. Yet it can be as brutally pragmatic as its state-based adversaries. In Tehran, the leadership also appears happy to cooperate with its perceived adversaries to ensure broader strategic goals. The death of General Soleimani will not alter such calculations, and rather may herald a period of greater confrontation between Iran and the world which will have the corollary effect of both weakening some of the alliances fighting against Sunni jihadist groups (for example in Iraq and Syria) while also increasing the willingness for Iran to use or manipulate proxies to launch attacks around the world.

Given the disruption or success of historical plots by Iranian linked networks in places as diverse as Thailand, India, Georgia, Cyprus, Argentina, Nigeria, Bulgaria, and the US, amongst others, the conflict against its enemies (Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia) from Tehran's perspective has no borders. While a permanent alignment between Tehran and IS or AQ is unlikely, there is not likely to be much of a focused effort in eradicating either group by Tehran. In fact, it is possible and likely that Tehran will see IS, AQ and their various affiliates as useful potential assets to manipulate (if they are able) in their increasingly aggressive confrontation with the US.

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Afghanistan',” *BBC News*, October 8, 2019
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-49970353>.

Implications of Soleimani's Killing for South and Southeast Asia

Bilveer Singh

Synopsis

The Soleimani killing came as a shock as it was the first major targeted killing of a senior Iranian official by the United States at a time of tense US-Iran relations. Soleimani was a key official involved in Iran's defence and foreign policy and played a critical role in the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) as well as propping up the Bashar al-Assad government in Syria during the civil war. As such, the killing was bound to have regional and global reverberations in the Middle East. Given Southeast Asia and South Asia's linkages with the Middle East, how the Soleimani killing has affected both regions will be analysed in this article.

Introduction

Qassim Soleimani, assassinated in a US drone attack near the Baghdad International Airport, was a Major General in the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps' Quds Force (QF), a specialist unit responsible for overseas military and clandestine operations.¹ Soleimani was close to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini. With charismatic personality and exceptional strategic skills, he played a key role in Iran's rising influence in the Middle East and West Asia, including the defeat of the global militant group IS and in propping up the Bashar Al-Assad regime in the Syrian civil war since 2011.² The US President Donald Trump's authorisation of Soleimani's killing was bound to have serious

ramifications, both in the Middle East and beyond.

Given Southeast Asia and South Asia's multiple nexuses with the Middle East and to some extent, Iran, how both regions have been affected by the Soleimani killing will be examined in this article. From public response and statements of political leaders in both Southeast Asia and South Asia, it is clear that the escalating US-Iran tensions will impact both regions despite the initial low-key response from Iran to Soleimani's killing. At the same time, it is also clear that the impact is far deeper and more wide-ranging in South Asia compared to Southeast Asia.

Why was Soleimani Killed?

Different US administrations before President Trump desisted from killing Soleimani, fearing that it would endanger the lives of American soldiers and civilian contractors in the Middle East along with destabilising the region.³ Yet, in the early hours of January 3, 2020, Soleimani was assassinated in an American drone attack near the Baghdad International Airport along with 10 other people, including the deputy Chairman of Kataeb Hezbollah Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a pro-Iranian Shia militia. Israel is believed to have assisted the Americans in Soleimani's elimination by providing information of the Damascus-Baghdad flight.⁴ Trump justified Soleimani's killing on grounds that he was planning to attack "four US embassies" and developing plans to attack American soldiers and citizens

¹ Hesam Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Evolution and Roles of the Revolutionary Guard*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

² Philip Kowalski, "Soleimani and the United States worked together to beat ISIS," *Ozy*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/not-so-long-ago-soleimani-and-the-u-s-worked-together-to-beat-isis/262477/>.

³ Ryan Pickerel, "The Trump administration is struggling to explain why the US killed top Iranian general Soleimani – here's all the shifting

explanations," *Business Insider US*, January 13, 2020.

⁴ Toi Staff, "Israeli intel helped US carry out strike that killed Iran's Soleimani – report," *The Times of Israel*, January 12, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-intel-helped-us-carry-out-strike-that-killed-irans-soleimani-report/>; "IRGC Man says Iran was Looking for Excuse to Flatten Tel Aviv' after Soleimani Killing," *Radio Farda*, February 9, 2020.

in the Middle East.⁵ Subsequently, Trump said that regardless of whether Soleimani was involved in planning attacks against the US or not, "it does not really matter because of his horrible past".⁶

General Implications of Soleimani's Killing

Understanding the global impact of Soleimani's killing, including for South and Southeast Asia, is important. In the context of historically poor relations since the fall of Reza Shah Pahlavi and rise of the Shiite cleric regime under Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, Soleimani's killing was bound to complicate already strained US-Iran relations.⁷

In retaliation, Iran attacked US military bases in Iraq with missiles; there were no American casualties. The Iranian threats to attack the US interests in the Middle East raised political temperatures and insecurity in the region. Even within the US, there appears to be no clear consensus that the Soleimani killing was necessary and that his death would benefit the US. Almost all the Democratic Party presidential candidates jockeying to contest upcoming elections, questioned the value of Soleimani's assassination.⁸

Soleimani's killing created a new anti-American atmosphere in Iraq. Soon after this development, the Iraqi parliament on January 5 voted to expel the US troops from the country for violating its sovereignty.⁹ However, with potential IS rejuvenation in Iraq, any departure of American soldiers

would weaken the anti-IS coalition and create an Afghanistan-like situation similar in the late-1980s that led to the return of the Taliban as the US withdrew following the defeat of the former Soviet Union.¹⁰

Soleimani's killing has allowed Iran to direct public anger in Iraq and Lebanon against their respective governments.¹¹ Moreover, his killing would possibly undermine the peace efforts in the Gulf, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia, including efforts to end the war in Yemen.¹² If one of the American objectives of the killing was to demonstrate to the Gulf states that Washington is in a position to protect their interests, in reality, the outcome may just be the opposite. Not only has it worsened regional tensions in the Middle East, it has also persuaded Iran to play a more aggressive role in the region through its proxies.

Implications for South and Southeast Asia

For both South and Southeast Asia, there have been immediate short-term consequences as oil prices soared immediately by 3-4 percent even though original prices were restored once bilateral American-Iranian tensions were kept at an even keel.¹³ Still, both regions do expect an Iranian retaliation of some kind, probably through its proxies. At the same time, how Iran exercises its threat to acquire the nuclear option and what regional and extra-regional implications that will have remain to be seen.

⁵ Ryan Pickrell, "The Trump administration is struggling to explain why the US killed top Iranian general Soleimani – here's all the shifting explanations," *Business Insider*, January 13, 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Zehra Nur Duz, "After Soleimani killing, Iran-US tensions shift to new level," *AA.COM*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/after-soleimani-killing-iran-us-tension-shifts-to-new-level/1718766>; Benny Marty, "US and Iran have a long, troubled history," *The Conversation*, January 17, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/us-and-iran-have-a-long-troubled-history-129844>.

⁸ Ramzy Baroud and Romana Rubeo, "The Great Game is Afoot: Killing Soleimani Reflects US Desperation in the Middle East," *IslamiCity*, January 8, 2020; Susan Page, "Exclusive: Americans say Soleimani's killing made US less safe, Trump reckless on Iran," *USA Today*, January 9, 2020.

⁹ Isabel Coles and Catherine Lucey, "Trump threatens sanctions after vote to expel US troops," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 6, 2020.

¹⁰ Vivienne Walt, "Why Iraqis Are Worried About an Islamic State Resurgence After Soleimani's Death," *Time*, January 8, 2020.

¹¹ "Amid popular anger, Lebanon's Hezbollah uses Soleimani's killing to shore up shaken legitimacy," *The New Arab*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/1/13/hezbollah-uses-soleimani-killing-to-shore-up-shaken-legitimacy>; Jane Ferguson, "Anger in Beirut as Hezbollah supporters mourn Soleimani," January 5, 2020, *PBS News Hour*, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/anger-in-beirut-as-hezbollah-supporters-mourn-suleimani>.

¹² Jason Ditz, "Soleimani Was in Baghdad on Mission for Saudi Peace," *Anti.War.com*, January 5, 2020, <https://news.antiwar.com/2020/01/05/soleimani-was-in-baghdad-on-mission-for-saudi-peace/>.

¹³ "Oil prices jump after top Iranian general killed by US," *BBC News*, January 3, 2020.

Countries in South and Southeast Asia have little influence on Middle East politics. Instead, they are dependent on the region for their energy security; any crisis involving Iran or other states in the region can impact on their economies.¹⁴ The reactions from both regions on US-Iran tensions following Soleimani's killing stem in part from their vulnerability to geopolitical tensions in Middle East.

While both South and Southeast Asia are silent-observers in the US-Iran conflict, states in both regions were concerned that the escalating conflict would have implications beyond the Middle East. For then Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Muhammad, Soleimani's killing was "immoral, unlawful and comparable to the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi."¹⁵ Trump's unilateralism has been concerning, including his withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and eventually his decision to authorise Soleimani's killing. This has led Mahathir to claim that due to Trump's action, no one was safe anymore: "We are no longer safe now. If anybody insults or says something that somebody does not like, it is alright for that person from another country to send a drone and perhaps have a shot at me."¹⁶

Iran-Saudi Tensions: A Tough Balancing Act for Malaysia and Indonesia

The Soleimani killing is likely to test the rising Iranian ties with both Indonesia and Malaysia.¹⁷ While both Sunni majority states have reservations about Shi'ite Teheran, domestic political pressures are likely to endear Iran to them more than the US, with which both states have good ties. Iran, Indonesia and Malaysia are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) where the Saudis are also influential due to their hosting of Islam's holy sites in Mecca and Medina, and the power of petro-dollars. From the religious perspective, there is not much

sympathy for Shia Islam in both Indonesia and Malaysia but politically, Iran's influence has been rising in both states. Both Malaysia and Indonesia host thousands of Iranians, including Soleimani's daughter who lived in Malaysia in 2013.¹⁸

While both countries maintain a balance between the Saudis and Iranians, both Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta are also mindful of the Saudi control over haj quotas as well as Saudi funding of religious education, especially in Indonesia. As far as Malaysia is concerned, there has been a cooling off in Malaysia-Saudi ties since the fall of former Malaysian PM Najib Abduk Razak in 2018 and the return of Mahathir as the Malaysian Premier, who resigned recently. Mahathir's cool attitude towards the Saudis was evident when he organised a Global Islam Forum in December 2019 in which Indonesian, Pakistani, Turkish, Iranian and Qatari leaders were invited as keynote speakers, riling Riyadh in the process as this was seen as a challenge to the Saudi position as leader of the Muslim world. Following Soleimani's killing, Mahathir has argued that it was perhaps timely for Muslim countries to unite in the face of American aggression.

Impact on the US Image

While most states in South and Southeast Asia have close ties with the US, at the same time, Washington's high-risk policies have troubled them. The more immediate impact of Soleimani's killing would put pressures on both regions' relations towards Iran and Saudi Arabia. While both regions have a majority Sunni population, Iran's influence has been rising, especially in the face of questionable Saudi policies in the Yemeni civil war, the Khashoggi murder and Saudi's past bankrolling of radical-oriented mosques and educational institutions in these regions. In this regard, within limits, Iran is increasingly

¹⁴ "FACTBOX-Asia is region most dependent on Middle East crude oil, LNG supplies," *CNBC*, January 8, 2020,

<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/01/08/reuters-america-factbox-asia-is-region-most-dependent-on-middle-east-crude-oil-lng-supplies.html>.

¹⁵ "Dr Mahathir: Soleimani assassination is unlawful, as bad as Khashoggi murder," *The Straits Times*, January 7, 2020.

¹⁶ "Muslims should unite after Iran commander's killing: Mahathir," January 7, 2020, *Today* (Singapore),

<https://www.todayonline.com/world/muslims-should-unite-after-iran-commanders-killing-mahathir>.

¹⁷ James Chin, "Soleimani killing tests Iran's ties with Malaysia and Indonesia," *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 7, 2020.

¹⁸ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander; Qaseem Suleimani is the Iranian operative who has been reshaping the Middle East. Now he is directing Assad's war in Syria," *The New Yorker*, September 23, 2013.

seen in some quarters in these regions as probably the only Muslim nation willing to stand up to the US' perceived bullying of Muslim countries. From this angle, killing Soleimani may represent a short-term tactical victory for the US and its allies but it is bound to have long-term negative strategic consequences.¹⁹

Many in the region also found Trump's explanation that Soleimani was planning 'imminent attacks' on US interests as lacking credibility. Rather, in view of the 'maximum pressure' policy on Iran since Trump assumed office, many in the region saw the killing as being driven by US' domestic politics agenda than any genuine threat posed by Soleimani.²⁰

Varied Impact in South Asia

Using Barry Buzan's concept of South Asia as a regional security complex, Soleimani's killing can have varied impact especially in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.²¹ The biggest area of direct impact is likely to be Afghanistan. General David Petraeus, the former Central Command commander and former Director of the CIA, is on record stating that Soleimani sent him a message saying that he was in control of Iran's policy with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan.²² This becomes all the more important as Soleimani's successor, Esmael Qaani, who was the Deputy Commander of QF since 1997, was responsible for operations in eastern Iran that also covered Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. In view of the potential deterioration of American-Iranian relations, Afghanistan, where many of Iran's proxies operate, can complicate the security situation. Similarly,

¹⁹ Nirmal Ghosh, "Soleimani's killing a tactical win, but a strategic error," *The Straits Times*, January 12, 2020.

²⁰ Saman Indrajith, "Sri Lanka condemns assassination of Iranian General," *The Island*, January 2020.

²¹ Barry Buzan, "The South Asian Security Complex in a Decentering World Order: Reconsidered Regions and Powers Ten Years On," *International Studies*, Vol. 48, Issue 1, (January 2011), pp.1-19.

²² Martin Chulov, "Qassem Suleimani: the Iranian general 'secretly running Iraq,'" *The Guardian*, July 28, 2011.

²³ "Pakistan won't take sides in Iran-US confrontation," *The Straits Times*, January 6, 2020.

Pakistan has to walk a tight rope as Iran has an inside track to the significant Shia population in Pakistan (15-20 percent of its total population).²³ The QF was known to have recruited significant Shia militias in Afghanistan and Pakistan respectively for operations in Syria, the so-called *Liwa Fatemiyoun* and *Liwa Zainabiyoun*. These militias can be easily turned against the authorities in Kabul and Islamabad if they were to side with Washington against Tehran. Clearly, Iran is in a position to carry out reprisal strikes against the 12,000 American troops in Afghanistan. Iran has also been supporting the Afghan Taliban in Afghanistan due to their common anti-American policies in Afghanistan.²⁴ While Iran may not want to dissuade the Americans from changing their mind about a military withdrawal from Afghanistan, it is unlikely to cease its policy of weakening IS' presence and raising the cost of American presence in Afghanistan.²⁵

Unlike Afghanistan and Pakistan that share land borders with Iran, India's position is more tenuous as it is a distant neighbour with many intertwined interests. While India has wide-ranging economic interests in Iran, in terms of geo-political competition they are more complex. Any instability in the Middle East could affect the oil flows from the Middle East upon which India is highly dependent. At the same time, through close ties with Iran, especially in terms of cooperation in the Chabahar port project, India has direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia by bypassing Pakistan. This is something India would like to maintain to promote its economic and strategic interests. Stability in the Middle East is additionally important for India as its 9 million expatriate workers are an important source of foreign remittances.²⁶ Due to these

²⁴ Umer Karim, "Death of Qassem Soleimani: What to Expect in Afghanistan and Pakistan," *RUSI Commentary*, January 24, 2020.

²⁵ Arian M. Tabatabai, "Iran's cooperation with the Taliban could affect talks on U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan," *The Washington Post*, August 9, 2019; Belguis Ahmadi, Barmak Pazhwak and Michael Phelan, "Willing Rising US-Iran Tensions Sparks Afghan Proxy War?" *The United States Institute of Peace*, February 10, 2020.

²⁶ Rukmini Shrinivasan, "India was the top recipient of remittances worldwide in 2018," *The Economic Times*, July 20, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/forex-and-remittance/india-was-the-top-recipient-of-remittances-worldwide-in-2018/articleshow/70310386.cms?from=mdr>.

considerations, India is likely to adopt politically neutral postures, when it comes to the American-Iranian conflict as well as the Sunni and Shia majority states' divide in the Middle East.²⁷

Following the US Example?

At the same time, in view of the precedent set by Trump, one cannot rule out governments in South and Southeast Asia 'doing a Soleimani-like termination' in both regions. South and Southeast Asia are conflict-prone regions, be they terror-oriented or separatist in nature. India has already undertaken a number of 'surgical strikes' against targets in Pakistan and even in Myanmar. Following the Soleimani killing, one can expect lesser restraint from India in terms of these types of strikes against what it deems as Pakistan-supported non-state threats. At the same time, India's threat to recapture Azad Kashmir by force also falls within this purview.²⁸ Likewise, whether Indonesia would adopt a similar approach with regard to Papuan terrorists operating in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere remains to be seen.

Conclusion

As Iran is not in a position to challenge the US in an open conventional war, its advantages are in covert, asymmetrical warfare which the QF that Soleimani led is highly adept in. These proxy operations are likely to take place in the Middle East but their extension to South and Southeast Asia cannot be ruled out. Though militarily Iran is weak in Southeast Asia, in South Asia it has links with various militias capable of hurting American interests, especially as the US has entered into a year of presidential elections. Clearly, Soleimani's killing will have a greater impact in South Asia rather than in Southeast Asia. The 'Great Game' between the US and Iran is unlikely to end with the assassination of Soleimani. Such targeted killings in the past have not helped the perpetrating state from achieving its goals and the same is likely to be true for the US. One can also expect the backlash from the killing to be worse than expected due to Iran's

adeptness in non-asymmetric warfare. Hence, due to Trump's immediate interests, the overall impact is likely to be greater instability and uncertainty in the Middle East with possibly dire consequences for all, including South and Southeast Asia.

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²⁷ Ronak D. Desai, "What The U.S. Strike On Suleimani Means For India," *Forbes*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ronakdesai/>

²⁸ Ashraf Javed, "Indian army will be crushed if attacks Azad Kashmir: Masood," *The Nation*, January 13, 2020, [https://nation.com.pk/13-Jan-](https://nation.com.pk/13-Jan-2020/indian-army-will-be-crushed-if-attacks-azad-kashmir-masood)

[2020/indian-army-will-be-crushed-if-attacks-azad-kashmir-masood.](https://nation.com.pk/13-Jan-2020/indian-army-will-be-crushed-if-attacks-azad-kashmir-masood)

The Unique Legacy of the 'Islamic State' in Indonesia

Noor Huda Ismail

Synopsis

Despite territorial losses and military defeat, the Islamic State (IS) terrorist group continues to pose a potent threat with its violent ideology and global network of affiliates. To mitigate the future threats coming from pro-IS militants in Southeast Asia, it is necessary to examine the background of these terrorists and their unique legacy compared to previous networks linked to the militant Islamist movement Darul Islam (DI) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

Introduction

The loss of territory and other significant setbacks have not diminished the IS threat. A January 2020 United Nations report states that IS has begun reasserting itself in Syria and Iraq, mounting increasingly bold insurgent attacks.¹ Like many countries, Indonesia has suffered from IS-related terror attacks in which Indonesians in Syria were directly involved in directing or instigating strikes. However, many attacks in Indonesia have also involved individuals who were inspired by IS' extremist propaganda. They would pledge their allegiance to IS online, and IS would opportunistically claim credit for their attacks.²

To mitigate against future threats, it is necessary to understand who these terrorists are and what their unique legacy is in the Indonesian context, compared to previous local jihadist networks, especially those linked to DI and JI.³

Current Militant Landscape

Presently, IS networks in Indonesia generally come under the umbrella of the Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD),⁴ an IS affiliated network led by top ideologue Aman Abdurrahman who is in police custody. There are other groups, however, such as Jamaah Anshorul Khilafah (JAK) led by a former JI operative, Abu Husna, who disagrees with the excessive interpretation of *takfiri* teachings (excommunicating Muslims from Islam and considering them liable to be killed) by Aman's followers.⁵

Notwithstanding this difference, both JAD and JAK have sent recruits to Syria and Marawi, in the Southern Philippines to implement their core doctrines of *iman* (belief in God), *hijrah* (migration) and *jihad* (fighting against the enemies of Islam). For example, Anggara Supriyogi was a member of a pro-IS group called Al Hawariyun in Jakarta that has a strong affiliation to JAK. After unsuccessfully attempting to travel to Syria, Anggara then

¹ "Eighth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat," *United Nations Security Council*, January 20, 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/N1901937_EN.pdf.

² Sidney Jones, "How ISIS has Changed Terrorism In Indonesia," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/opinion/isis-terrorism-indonesia-women.html>.

³ *Darul Islam* was a radical movement that emerged during the country's independence struggle in the 1940s, that called for the establishment of an Islamic

state in Indonesia. *Jemaah Islamiyah*, a militant Islamist group currently active in the country, has its roots in this movement.

⁴ Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, "Indonesian Cleric Aman Abdurrahman Sentenced to Death for Inciting Terror Attacks," *The Straits Times*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-cleric-aman-abdurrahman-sentenced-to-death-for-inciting-terror-attacks>.

⁵ Nava Nuraniyah, "Jakarta Rally Exposes Division Among Islamic State Loyalists", *The Lowy Institute*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/jakarta-rally-exposes-division-among-islamic-state-loyalists>.

proceeded to Marawi with the help of a pro-IS Malaysian militant, Dr Mahmud Ahmed, with whom he communicated through Telegram.⁶

Following a series of arrests in recent years of pro-IS individuals involved in domestic terrorism, the anti-terrorism unit Detachment 88 observed that these pro-IS arrestees have “very shallow” knowledge of Islam. Most had not been through the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) education system or undergone formal religious classes; their learning was restricted to IS propaganda and the teachings of Aman Abdurrahman. These translations (of Arabic publications) contain many misinterpretations of Islam but are eagerly accepted.⁷

Diversification of Gender Roles by New Pro-IS Indonesia Cells

The emergence of IS has also brought a fundamental change in how extremists view the role of women in their cause. The new pro-IS cells in Indonesia are now more open to active participation by women in their terror operations, two of whom took their own lives in the Sibolga case in March 2019 to avoid capture.⁸ In the past, JI had restricted women to support roles as wives, mothers and teachers, even though they were expected to be as devout and committed as the men. They continue to be used as marriage partners to bind the men in prison to the group.⁹

Pro-IS women actively participate in IS religious gatherings. The IS networks in Surabaya, for example, had organised home-based religious gatherings for married couples.¹⁰ One of the key teachings at such sessions was that “the wife must be obedient to the husband.” This is not unusual in the patriarchal culture of Indonesian Muslims, but

perhaps has acquired a new and exaggerated meaning within pro-IS circles.

Using female suicide bombers by self-radicalised cells like the Sibolga group was not only a tactical move to evade detection, but also a pragmatic one because such groups are so small that they have few people to carry out their ambitious goals.¹¹ One can also surmise that being “independent,” the Sibolga cell was also less constrained by the “usual norms” of women playing only a supportive role.

IS Targets and Tactics

The Indonesian police remains the prime target for pro-IS militants, for ideological and operational reasons. IS militants target police because they hunt and kill militants in defence of an allegedly tyrannical regime (the *thagut*). Police stations are attacked, especially by those seeking to steal weapons, because they are perceived to be softer targets than military installations.

Following an IS terror tutorial published in the second edition of IS' magazine, *Rumiyah*, pro-IS cells in Indonesia also attacked and burnt the police station at Dramasraya, Padang in November 2017. The magazine's section, “Just Terror Tactics” mirrored similar articles in AQ's *Inspire* magazine that provided several ideas for knife stabbings, vehicle attacks or the use of explosives.

So far, the tactical prowess of pro-IS networks has been at polar ends: some have attacked police stations with swords and bows and arrows, while others have plotted to use home-made high explosives. This disparity between low-end and high-end tactics is due to the respective reasons: (a) the lack of trainers with actual military experience

⁶ Richard C. Paddock, “He Aimed To Fight in Syria. ISIS Had a Broader Plan: Southeast Asia,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/03/world/asia/isis-fighters-philippines-indonesia.html>.

⁷ Author's interview with Detachment 88 in Jakarta on February 12, 2020.

⁸ Telly Nathalia, “Wife of Terror Suspect Blows Herself Up and Her Children in Sibolga,” *Jakarta Globe*, March 14, 2019, <https://jakartaglobe.id/context/wife-of-terror-suspect-blows-herself-up-and-her-children-in-sibolga/>.

⁹ Noor Huda Ismail, “The Role of Kinship in Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiya,” *The Jamestown*

Foundation, June 2, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-role-of-kinship-in-indonesias-jemaah-islamiya/>.

¹⁰ Anna Kelsey-Sugg, “The Role Women Played in Indonesia's First Whole-Family Suicide Bombings, And What to Do Next,” *ABC Radio National*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-30/women-terrorists-in-indonesia/9811152>.

¹¹ Ulta Levenia and Alban Sciascia, “Wife, Mother and Suicide Bomber,” *The Jakarta Post*, March 22, 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2019/03/22/wife-mother-and-suicide-bomber.html>.

(because those who went to Syria to fight or were trained in Afghanistan or Mindanao in the 1980s and 1990s know they are under police surveillance); and (b) the ready availability of bomb-making manuals and the legacy of Bahrun Naim, the Indonesian mastermind of several terror plots in the region, who was killed in a US airstrike in Syria in June 2018.¹²

Bombing churches also feature prominently in the jihadist target list.¹³ Ivan Ahmadi Hasiguan, the perpetrator of the 2016 St Joseph's Church attack in Medan, said in an interview: "I wanted to emulate IS attacks here in Indonesia. I learned the technique from the Internet."¹⁴ A month before his attack, two IS operatives stabbed a priest to death in a church in France. While claiming responsibility for the attack, IS said its "soldiers" had attacked a church "in response to the call to target Crusader coalition states." Hasiguan had learned to make his bomb from a manual created by Bahrun Naim.

Continuing Radicalisation

Real world radicalisation continues to take place in prisons, home-based *pengajian* (religious classes) and during the month-long *i'tikaf* in mosques. A time of solitude and prayer while disconnected from day-to-day worldly affairs, *i'tikaf* is generally done during Ramadan in tandem with fasting inside a mosque. In Sumatra, jihadi recruiters use *i'tikaf* to spread their propaganda.¹⁵

In prisons, IS sympathisers disseminate the ideology among inmates as well as recruit visitors to distribute the propaganda outside prisons.¹⁶ After completing their prison terms, the pro-IS prisoners return home to do full-time recruitment and mobilisation. Home-based *pengajian* are also increasingly taking

over the role once played by *pesantrens*. Consisting of groups of 10-15 people, they are considered a safer way to form cells and mobilise since most *pesantren* are monitored closely by the authorities; invitations are issued via restricted chat groups on Telegram.¹⁷

Jihadi sub-culture in Cyberspace

Since most of these groups are connected largely in cyberspace, the possibility of other members going into hibernation to avoid capture while looking for opportunities to attack cannot be dismissed.¹⁸ The pro-IS network is akin to a subculture but it is increasingly connected largely in cyberspace. Unlike JI members who tend to be more territorial due to the group's original *mantiqi* organisational structure, pro-IS networks do not appear to be constrained by geography. They experience an "imagined solidarity" with other Islamist fighters in Indonesia and elsewhere, a solidarity that is grounded in the mainstream Islamic concept of "*ukhuwah Islamiyah*" or Islamic brotherhood, and subscribed to by all jihadists including JI.

Pro-IS activists have, however, distorted the concept of Islamic brotherhood to create a subculture where jihadists in Indonesia, who were unable to travel to Marawi in 2017 to fight with their 'brothers', conducted retaliation on the latter's behalf. In their statements to the police, some jihadists have rationalised attacks on Indonesian police officers as retaliation against the Indonesian government for sending troops to Marawi to fight against their Philippines brethren.

Conclusion

With the largest Muslim population in the world (over 230 million), Indonesia has been

¹² Edo Karensa, "Who Is Jakarta Attack Mastermind Bahrun Naim?" *Jakarta Globe*, January 18, 2016, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/jakarta-attack-mastermind-bahrun-naim/>.

¹³ Apriadi Gunawan, "Medan Church Attack Suspect's IS Links Investigated," *The Jakarta Post*, September 8, 2016, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/09/08/medan-church-attack-suspects-is-links-investigated.html>.

¹⁴ Author's interview in Jakarta on November 24, 2019.

¹⁵ "Learning from Extremists In West Sumatra," *IPAC Report* No. 62, 28 February 2020.

¹⁶ Francis Chan, "Indonesian Jails Are Breeding Ground for Terrorists: Study," *The Straits Times*, December 15, 2016, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-jails-are-breeding-ground-for-terrorists-study>.

¹⁷ "We do not welcome calls for violence': Telegram commits to removing IS, terror-related content," *Jakarta Post*, November 15, 2019.

¹⁸ Nava Nuraniyah, "The Evolution of Online Violent Extremism in Indonesia and The Philippines," *RUSI-IPAC Paper* No.5, July 11, 2019, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190711_grntt_pa_per_5.pdf.

grappling with Islamists seeking to establish an Islamic state in one form or another via violent and non-violent means since the 1940s. To meet this challenge in the near term, it is necessary to intensify deradicalisation efforts to stem the recruitment of vulnerable youths, women and children. To lure potential recruits, pro-IS networks have grounded their beliefs in religious narratives, giving questionable new meanings and interpretations of selected Islamic texts and traditions that support their violent agenda. Counter measures must, therefore, include more effective dissemination of counter-ideological arguments via social media and religious classes. Disenchanted former pro-IS members could also be enlisted to challenge the radical narratives of Islamist groups which have misled their recruits with false promises and distorted interpretations of sacred texts.

In the medium and longer term, however, much more needs to be done. Political, religious and community leaders, thinkers and strategists need to ask some hard questions about the future of the Muslim community in Indonesia in a modern, globally connected and technologically advanced world. Back in the 1940s during the struggle for independence, it was perhaps understandable for various political forces representing the Islamists, nationalists, army and communists, to contend and struggle to achieve their vision of what an independent state of Indonesia should be after 130 years of Dutch rule.

Seventy years after independence, a firm political consensus on how society should be organised and governed and the direction ahead should be well established. The DI struggle was neutralised in the 1960s but its splinters and off-shoots have remained active, with the radical wings morphing into the JI since the 1990s and pro-IS networks since 2014. A clear road map is necessary to work towards achieving a community of excellence with national narratives that promote inter-religious harmony, educational advancement, and economic well-being.

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The Sahel: A New Theatre for Global Jihadist Groups?

Atta Barkindo

Synopsis

For more than a decade now, the Nigerian government has deployed military offensives against Boko Haram. Yet, the militant group has become more sophisticated, daring and vicious, because the Sahel provides a fertile ground for global jihadist groups to establish networks. It is necessary for relevant governments to address the socio-economic conditions of the Sahel to deal with the growing jihadist threats in the region.

Introduction

For some time now, many scholars such as Kyari and Thurston, have refuted the links between Boko Haram and any foreign militant group.¹ They argue that Boko Haram attacks are orchestrated by a rag-tag group of naïve Islamic activists, motivated by local issues of economic deprivation, poor governance, stunting squalor and destitution.² Perouse de Montclos in particular states that Boko Haram does not need any foreign partnership to espouse moral revulsion against the Nigerian government. Boko Haram's possible links to groups such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) are the product of speculations in the field of security studies, rather than evidence-based research.³

However, in years preceding Boko Haram's rise, foreign jihadist groups have already shown interest in Africa. On February 12, 2007, jihadi forums, circulated an article titled "al-Qaeda Organization and the African Continent: Past, Present and Future."⁴ The article highlights Africa's importance to Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s view of global jihadism and outlines the group's strategy for expanding in Africa. Similarly, in November 2015, the Islamic State (IS) dedicated the 8th issue of its monthly English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, to Africa, titled "Sharia alone will rule Africa."⁵ Contemporary narratives indicate that among other factors, the rise of AQ and IS is linked to Western intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq. Even though Africa is not part of Europe or America, it remains a territory of interest to both jihadist groups.

The sophistication in attacks exhibited by jihadist groups across the Sahel, particularly in Nigeria and the Lake Chad region, demonstrates the possible links between them and AQ as well as IS. Additionally, the tactical professionalism and operational strategies deployed in handling weapons, intelligence gathering and dissemination of ideological propaganda underscore that these attacks are not just conducted by local and naïve Islamic activists, but by trained militants with focused goals and vision.⁶

¹ Kyari Muhammad, "The Message and Methods of Boko Haram," in *Islamism, Politics, Security and the State in Nigeria*, March-Antoine Perouse De Montclose, (ed.), (Ibadan: French Institute for Research in Africa, 2014).

² Manasseh Igyuh, "Concept Note for Achieving Sustainable Peace in Northern Nigeria," Unpublished Document, p. 1.

³ March-Antoine Perouse, "A Sectarian Jihad in Nigeria: The Case of Boko Haram," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 5 (September 2016), pp.878-895.

⁴"Middle East Forum for vital intelligence on Islamic terrorist organisations," *Jihadi Forums*, October 4,

2018, <http://jihadintel.meforum.org/identifiers/25/jihadist-media-forums>.

⁵"Sharia Alone will Rule Africa," *Dabiq* Issue 8, March 31, 2015, pp. 14-16, <http://counterjihadreport.com/2015/03/31/islamic-states-dabiq-8-focuses-on-unifying-ummah-criticizing-islamists/>.

⁶ Jacob Zenn, Atta Barkindo & Nicholas A Heras, "The Ideological Evolution of Boko Haram in Nigeria," *The Rusi Journal*, Vol. 158, Issue, 4, (August 2013), pp.46-53.

This article explores the historical relationship between Boko Haram and the global militant groups as one of the reasons for the former's expanding reach within the region. This article has three sections. In the first section, the article provides the context of the Sahel and nature of jihadist violence therein. Then, it analyses the historical relationship between Boko Haram and groups like IS and AQ. Finally, the study highlights the emerging security threats in the Sahel and future prospects of jihadist groups in the region.

Context and Nature of Islamist Violence in the Sahel

For many years now, violent extremism has been spreading in Africa, including the Sahel region: a massive, semi-arid geographical region, difficult to define. It is perceived as a bridge that divides the Arab Maghreb from black Sub-Saharan Africa. A common religion (Islam), Arabic language and colonial heritage (French or Britain) also unite the people of the region.⁷ Moreover, human deprivation and insecurity are pervasive coupled with a lack of political and economic rights, encouraging local communities in the Sahel to turn to crime, political violence and terrorism.⁸

Recently, terrorist activities in the Sahel are further reinforced by the expanding influence of AQ and IS. The two rival global militant groups have co-opted local jihadist groups to control territories, and propagate their violent extremist ideologies. Several terrorist groups currently operate in the Sahel, and principal among them is AQIM and IS. AQIM emerged in the 1990s, operating then as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, a faction of the Algerian-based Groupe Islamique Armé.

⁷ "Sahel: \$1.6 Billion Appeal to Address Widespread Humanitarian Crisis," *United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs*, June 24, 2013.

⁸ Cline Lawrence, "Nomads, Islamists and Soldiers: The Struggle for Northern Mali," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, No. 8, (June 2013), pp.617-634.

⁹ Arieff Alexis, "Algeria: Current Issues, Congressional Research Services," *Washington DC: Congressional Research Services*, November 18, 2013, <https://fas.org/sqp/crs/row/RS21532.pdf>.

¹⁰ Nossiter Adam, "Gunman Kills Five in Restaurant in Mali," *New York Times*. March 4, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/world/africa/5-killed-at-a-nightclub-attack-in-mali-capital.html>

¹¹ "Crisis Information on Borno and Yobe States," *Médecins Sans Frontières*, October 29, 2019,

In 2006, AQIM embraced the AQ brand.⁹ IS also operates in the Sahel through its affiliate, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). It operates in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.¹⁰

In Nigeria, Médecins Sans Frontières estimates that since 2009, Boko Haram, later, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), an affiliate of IS, is said to have killed about 35,000 people and displaced around 1.8 million. About 230,000 people have fled to neighbouring Niger, Chad and Cameroon.¹¹ The group has used more than 200 female suicide bombers, killing over 1,000 people across Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.¹² Niger faces increasing Boko Haram infiltrations and attacks, particularly in the southern Diffa region, which borders northeast Nigeria. As Niger attempts to deal with Boko Haram fighters, it is also tackling AQIM penetration in the north and west of the country. This means that Niger is facing an onslaught from two jihadist groups. In Mali, Tuareg nomads, having fought for Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, returned in November 2011 with sophisticated weaponry to demand for the state of Azawad.¹³ The rebellion was initially led by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). In 2012, MNLA aligned with AQ, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa and Ansar Dine to demand for Islamic governance.¹⁴

History of the Relationship between Boko Haram and Jihadist Groups

Boko Haram's evolution to one of the most brutal terrorist organisations is linked to its relationship both with AQ and IS in the Sahel. Evidence for this includes a series of communication from 2009 to 2011 between AQIM and Boko Haram leaders, and

<https://www.msf.org/crisis-info-borno-and-yobe-states-august-2019>

¹² Elizabeth Pearson, "Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber," in *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency, Issue: Special Report*, Jacob Zen (ed.), Combating Terrorism Centre, (May 2018), pp. 33-52, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines_Chapter-2.pdf.

¹³ Cline Lawrence, "Nomads, Islamists and Soldiers: The Struggle for Northern Mali."

¹⁴ Nivedita Ray, "The Rise of Islamic Terrorism in Mali," *Indian Council on Foreign Relations*, January 6, 2016.

correspondence from 2014 to date between IS, Boko Haram and later ISWAP.¹⁵

Boko Haram which started in the early 1990s, began its confrontation against the Nigerian state in 2009 when its erstwhile leader, Muhammad Yusuf, was killed by Nigerian security.¹⁶

Boko Haram had initially established a relationship with AQ.¹⁷ However, by 2014, its leader Abubakar Shekau pledged allegiance to IS and declared a self-styled Islamic state in an area around the size of Belgium.¹⁸ Shekau's declaration of a so-called caliphate might have damaged Boko Haram's relationship with AQ, because it went against the latter's central principle of declaring a particular territory as an Islamic state. Such a declaration was likely to attract media attention, as well as increased counter-insurgency operations against the group.¹⁹

As such, Boko Haram turned its attention to cultivating a new relationship with IS. In early 2014, Tunisian IS radical Abu Malik Shayba al-Hamad had forged links between Boko Haram and IS. Abu Malik was a former member of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia who defected to IS and subsequently administered

the Africa Media outlet that published Boko Haram's Daily Communiques from November 2014, to February 2015.²⁰ In February 2015, a Boko Haram Consultative Council meeting was held where a pledge of allegiance to IS was agreed,²¹ and in March 2015 Shekau pledged allegiance to the IS. IS then rebranded Boko Haram as ISWAP.²²

Under Shekau's successor Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi,²³ the ties between IS and ISWAP flourished.²⁴ The International Crisis Group reported in May 2019 that an unspecified number of Nigerian and West African militants who fought abroad for IS have reportedly returned to join ISWAP.²⁵ Additionally, money flows from the Middle East to ISWAP (which stopped at some point in 2017 as IS came under severe pressure) have resumed. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that IS has contributed to the operational evolution that military experts have observed in ISWAP, from the use of improvised explosives to new infantry tactics and quartermaster techniques.²⁶ Thus, this budding relationship and the displacement of IS from most parts of Iraq and Syria have combined to facilitate the

¹⁵ "Letter from Abdallah Abu Zayd Abd-al-Hamid to Abu Mus'ab Abd-al-Wadud," *Bin Laden's Bookshelf, Office of the Directorate of National Intelligence*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl2017/english/Letter%20from%20Abdallah%20Abu%20Zayd%20Abd-al-Hamid%20to%20Abu%20Mus%20ab%20Abd-al-Wadud.pdf>

¹⁶ Jacob Zenn, "Leadership Analysis of Boko Haram and Ansaru in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel*, Issue 7, No. 2, (February 2014), pp.23-25, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/02/CTCSentinel-Vol7Iss2.pdf>

¹⁷ Shaykh Abu Al-Hasan Rashid, "Documents of Advice and Sharia Instruction to the Fighters in Nigeria," April 2017, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/shaykh-abucc84-al-hcca3asan-rashicc84d-22sharicc84ah-advice-and-guidance-for-the-mujacc84hidicc84n-of-nigeria22.pdf>

¹⁸ Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Conquest for the Caliphate: How Al Qaeda Helped Islamic State Acquire Territory," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 43, Issue 2, (2020), p. 1.

¹⁹ Fulan Nasrallah, "Nigeria SITREP (Boko Haram)," *Fulan's SITREP*, September 3, 2014, <https://fulansitrep.wordpress.com/2014/09/03/3rd-september-2014-nigeria-sitrep-boko-haram/>

²⁰ Jacob Zenn, "Wilayat West Africa Reboots for the Caliphate," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.8, Issue 8, (August

2015), pp. 10-16, <https://ctc.usma.edu/wilayat-west-africa-reboots-for-the-caliphate/>.

²¹ "Boko Haram Communiques with African Media," *The Boko Haram Reader*, February 2015, pp. 351-352, https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/jamc481-at-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-da_wah-wa-l-jihc481d-e2809cpast-messages-from-jamc481_at-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-da_wah-wa-l-jihc481d-to-the-muslims22.pdf.

²² "Baya' to the Caliph of Muslims," *Jihad Ideology*, March 7, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/03/07/al-urwah-al-wuthqa-foundation-presents-a-new-audio-message-from-jamaat-ahl-al-sunnah-li-l-dawah-wa-l-jihads-boko-haram-abu-bakr-shekau-bayah-jama>

²³ "Al-Naba interview with Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi," *al-Naba* Issue 41.

²⁴ Abdulbasit Kassim, "Boko Haram's Internal Civil War: Stealth Takfir and Jihad as Recipes for Schism," *Combating Terrorism Centre*, May 2018, p. 20, https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/05/Boko-Haram-Beyond-the-Headlines_Chapter-1.pdf

²⁵ "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in ISWAP," *International Crisis Group*, Report N°273, May 16, 2019, p. 9, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/273-facing-challenge-islamic-state-west-africa-province>

²⁶ "Facing the Challenge of the Islamic State in ISWAP," p. 10.

expansion of terror groups in the Sahel, particularly in Nigeria and Burkina Faso.²⁷

Emerging Threats of Insecurity in the Sahel and the Underlying Factors

With the expanding influence of AQ and IS, the level of violence in the Sahel, especially in Burkina Faso and Nigeria, has substantially increased in the last two years. For instance, in April 2018, ISGS fighters murdered Hamidou Koundaba, the mayor of the Burkinabe Koutougou commune, in front of his home, for collaborating with the Burkina Faso army and western forces.²⁸ This was later followed by the abduction and execution of Hamada Ag Mohamed, a local leader in the Malian town Tin Habou, in May 2018.²⁹ The incident followed two other executions of two Malian army leaders and GATIA forces in the previous month.³⁰ In Nigeria, ISWAP has grown into a powerful, well organised and equipped militant force. From its 'proto-state' base along Lake Chad, it exerts influence across Northern and Central Borno and down through the Eastern part of Yobe State. In areas under its control and/or influence, it reportedly facilitates trade and levies taxes, provides security for herders, collects taxes and patrols the roads.³¹

ISWAP presents Shekau, who heads a rival faction, to local inhabitants as untrustworthy, dictatorial and obsessed with the property of innocent civilians, the spoils of war including money, and captive women.³² ISWAP's closer relationship with IS has made the group more brutal, leading to secretive killings of disloyal members, gruesome beheadings and public executions of hostages, using the videos for propaganda. For example, in January 2020,

ISWAP kidnapped and executed Pastor Lawan Andimi, the Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Michika Local Government Area, northern Adamawa state. This public execution was followed by the abduction and execution of another Christian student, Ropyil Daciya Dalep, by an 8-year old ISWAP minor.³³

Several factors make Sahel attractive for terrorist groups. First, what drives the Sahel is trade. A caravan trade route, an artery pumping life through the region, has long facilitated the movement of goods and people between the Mediterranean and West Africa.³⁴ Today, technological advances - GPS, satellite phones, and four-wheel drive vehicles - facilitate desert travel like never before, as it has become possible to drive from Kidal in Mali to Tamanrasset in Algeria in about a day.³⁵ Such a change has been enormously beneficial to terrorist groups who are mostly involved in organised criminal enterprises.

Second, they also exploit the weak state system, the vastness of the Sahara, the ungoverned spaces and the fact it is humanly difficult to man such vast territory physically. For example, in the Lake Chad region, the militant groups exploit these gaps to increase their criminal activities, earn money and sustain their jihadist agenda.³⁶ Because, where there is environmental degradation, or acute scarcity of vital resources, war may follow.³⁷ According to Brisard, the key to AQIM's recent transformation in the Sahel is its commitment to criminal activities, such as cigarette smuggling, human trafficking, kidnapping, and the narcotics trade. In the past five years alone, it has been estimated

²⁷ Djallil Lounnas, "The Transmutation of Jihad Organisations in the Sahel and Regional Security Architecture," *Future Notes*, No. 10, April 2018.

²⁸ "By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists," *Human Rights Watch*, May 21, 2018.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Attacks claimed by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)," *Menastream*, June 23, 2018.

³¹ "Terrorist Financing in West and Central Africa," *FATF-GIABA-GABAC*, October 2013, www.fatf-gafi.org/publications/methodsandtrends/documents/terrorist-financing-west-central-africa.html, p. 10.

³² "Nigeria: Women and the Boko Haram Insurgency," *International Crisis Group*, Report N°242, December 5, 2016.

³³ "Nigeria: Child Terrorist Executes a Christian Student," *Independent Catholic News*, January 23, 2020.

³⁴ Lydon Ghislaine, "On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-cultural Exchange," in *Nineteenth-century Western Africa*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³⁵ Boas Morten, "Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery," *African Security*, Vol. 8, Issue 4, (December 2015), pp. 299-319.

³⁶ Arthur E. Neiland and I. Verinumbe, "Fisheries Development and Resource-usage Conflict: A Case Study of Deforestation Associated with the Lake Chad Fishery in Nigeria," *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, (Summer 1991), pp.185-199.

³⁷ Lodgaard Sverre, "Environmental Security, World Order, and Environmental Conflict Resolution," *Conversion and the Environment*, November 24-27, 1991, p. 115-136.

that AQIM has raked in millions of dollars from its kidnapping for ransom operations.³⁸ One explanation for the allure of this type of criminal activity stems from the fact that parts of Mali, Niger, Mauritania, and Algeria are relatively secure areas to hold kidnapped individuals because of their vastness, and the influence of terrorist groups.³⁹ Additionally, cigarette smuggling has become lucrative.⁴⁰ Approximately 60 billion of the 400 billion cigarettes that Africans smoke annually are bought on the black market. The illicit trade in cigarettes is worth approximately \$1 billion annually, a large sum for an impoverished region.⁴¹ Latin American drug cartels are also alleged to use West Africa as a transit point to export cocaine to Europe and the United States. The key transit countries for this illicit trade are Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Senegal, and Mali.⁴²

Third is the manipulation of Islam and its religious texts. Islam, the main religion in the region, was adopted centuries ago and adapted to Sahelian cultural practices over time. In the last few decades, jihadist groups from the Middle East and South Asia have also penetrated the region, providing healthcare, education, and food.⁴³ In return, these groups proselytise.⁴⁴ The infusion of a Middle East/South Asian Islam has facilitated the emergence of two distinct identities: secularists and Islamists. The Islamists seek implementation of a strict Islamic theocracy, even though this would be alien to the region.⁴⁵ The utter failure of government and the absence of any meaningful infrastructure in the Sahel has not only turned the area into

a graveyard of dry bones and hopelessness, but has also forced many young people to turn to this emerging brand of Islamism and be supportive of jihadist activities.⁴⁶

Finally, the activities of terror groups in the Sahel have been made worse by the consequences of aggressive desertification and environmental degradation. This has heightened contestation between herders and farmers in the region, creating an environment conducive to criminal activities and terrorism.⁴⁷ Environmental degradation and substantial loss of land-use resources have combined to escalate the conflict. Herdsmen and terrorists have coalesced to perpetrate atrocities in the name of Islam. Today, leaders of terrorist organisations across Africa, have nomadic backgrounds. For instance, Iyad Ag Ghaly, the so-called “Lion of the Desert” and chief of Ansaru al-Dine, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the one-eyed former AQIM commander, are all former nomads.⁴⁸ Again, herdsmen make up a substantial number of the fighters belonging to Islamic groups in Mali, Niger, Chad and other parts of Africa. This is reinforced by the migration of other herdsmen from across the Sahelian region as well as the contemporary rise in the activities of terrorist organisations.

Conclusion

With recent activities of Islamist groups in the Sahel, and the worsening humanitarian, environmental and security situation, these jihadist groups are likely to grow and expand. There is likely to be closer collaboration

³⁸ Brisard Jean Charles, “Terrorism Financing in North Africa,” *American Center for Democracy*, May 2, 2016, <http://acdemocracy.org/terrorism-financing-in-north-africa/>

³⁹ Moore Jack, “The Lawless Hotbed of Jihadism in Tunisia’s Western Mountain,” *Newsweek*, March 20, 2016, <http://europe.newsweek.com/hive-extremism-tunisia-lawless-terror-mountains-315550>

⁴⁰ Boas Morten, “Crime, Coping, and Resistance in the Mali-Sahel Periphery.”

⁴¹ Doward Jamie, “How Cigarette Smuggling Fuels Africa’s Islamist Violence,” *Guardian*, January 27, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/27/cigarette-smuggling-mokhtar-belmokhtar-terrorism>

⁴² “The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime,” *Global Initiative*, May 11, 2015, <https://globalinitiative.net/libya-criminal-economies-and-terrorist-financing-in-the-trans-sahara/>

⁴³ Laremont Ricardo and Hrach Gregorian, “Political Islam in West Africa and the Sahel,” *Military Review*,

Vol. 86, Issue 1, (Jan-Feb 2006), pp.27–36, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=461433>.

⁴⁴ Laremont Ricardo and Hrach Gregorian, “Political Islam in West Africa and the Sahel.”

⁴⁵ Kirwin Matt, “The Political & Economic Effects of Nigerian Shari’a on Southern Niger,” *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol.32, No. 4, (June-September 2005), pp. 407–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4007083?seq=1>.

⁴⁶ Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah, “Homily at the Funeral Mass of Seminarian Michael Nnadi at Good Shepherd Seminary,” *Independent Catholic News*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news/38936>.

⁴⁷ Boyd Jean and Shagari Shehu, “The life and legacy of Shehu Uthman Dan Fodiyo,” (Oxford: Macmillan Publishers, 2003), pp. 1-13.

⁴⁸ Jubber Nicholas, “Mali’s Nomads: Bulwark against Jihad,” *World Policy*, April 2, 2016, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/fall2014/mali-nomads-against-jihad>

between and among terrorist groups in the Sahel. Furthermore, the partnership between terrorist groups and criminal organisations may intensify that will and further consolidate the activities of the terrorist groups, giving them the leeway for recruitment, mobilisation and community engagement to win the hearts and minds of local inhabitants. As such, there is a need for greater collaboration regionally to combat these terrorist organisations. The governments of Sahel and the Lake Chad border region should design a comprehensive security approach to tackle the activities of the terrorists. This should be accompanied by counterinsurgency and counter terrorism measures that dwell on the non-kinetic approach. The countries involved should develop a common strategy on prevention and countering violent extremism taking into consideration the perspectives of local communities and aligning with international best practices.

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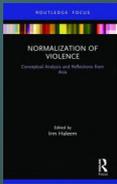
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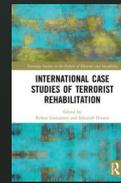
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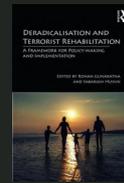
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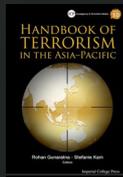
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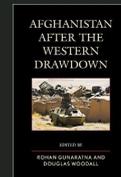
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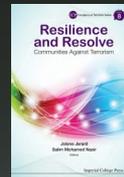
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