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ISIS and the Sunni Separatists Aim
Fire at Iran

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ISIS and the Sunni Separatists Aim Fire at Iran

Abstract:

Iran has a central and controversial role in Middle East politics. It is on the one hand one of the intervening actors in the conflicts of the zone and on the other it suffers from terrorism in its territory, in the Baluchistan and Iranian Kurdistan as well as from ISIS. It is to be foreseen an increase of the terrorist activity of this group in the country once the ISIS is defeated in Syria and Irak.

Keywords:

Iran, terrorism, ISIS, Baluchistan, Kurdistan

* **NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Documents are the responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

The ISIS threat

On March 26, 2017, the ISIS information office in Diyala Province, Iraq, published a 37-minute video in Farsi, with some parts in the Baluchi dialect, titled, "Persia – Between Yesterday and Today." The video accuses Iranian Shi'ites of committing many crimes against Sunnis and oppressing the Sunni population of Iran, "exporting the revolution," spreading Shi'ism, and secretly collaborating with the U.S. and Israel.

The main speakers in the video are Abu Faruq al-Farisi, speaking Farsi, Abu Mujahid al-Baluchi, speaking Baluchi, and Abu Sa'd al-Ahwazi (from the Ahwaz region). The three speakers call on Iranian Sunnis to rise up against the current Iranian regime and "join the path of jihad." The group is comprised of "Persian" fighters belonging to the Salman Al-Farisi Brigade, training in urban combat and firing at targets with images of Khomeini, Khamenei, and other Iranian leaders.¹

Consistent with ISIS practice, the video documents the execution of four members of Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias in Iraq. The video ends with a statement by al-Baluchi: "We tell you, oh Zoroastrian Rafidites: Our hands are not far from you. Just as you tasted our power in Iraq and Syria, thus, Allah willing, we will conquer Persia and restore it as a Sunni country."

Since ISIS took control of Mosul, the second biggest Iraqi city, in June 2014 and stormed most of the Sunni towns in Nineveh and Anbar Provinces, approached Baghdad and threatened to attack the Shi'ite holy sites in Karbala and Najaf, the Iranian military leaders issued numerous declarations and went out of their way to convince their internal audience that Iran's territory is not under threat.²

At the end of June 2014, Commander of the Iranian Border Guards, General Hossein Zolfaqari, said the "ISIL terrorist group which has caused chaos in Northern and Northwestern Iraq in the last two weeks" has not approached Iran's borders in the West. Iranian Interior Ministry Spokesman noted that there is no security lapse along Iran's borders with its neighboring countries, and no notable problem along the border with Iraq. Commander of the Iranian Ground Force, Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari, reiterated

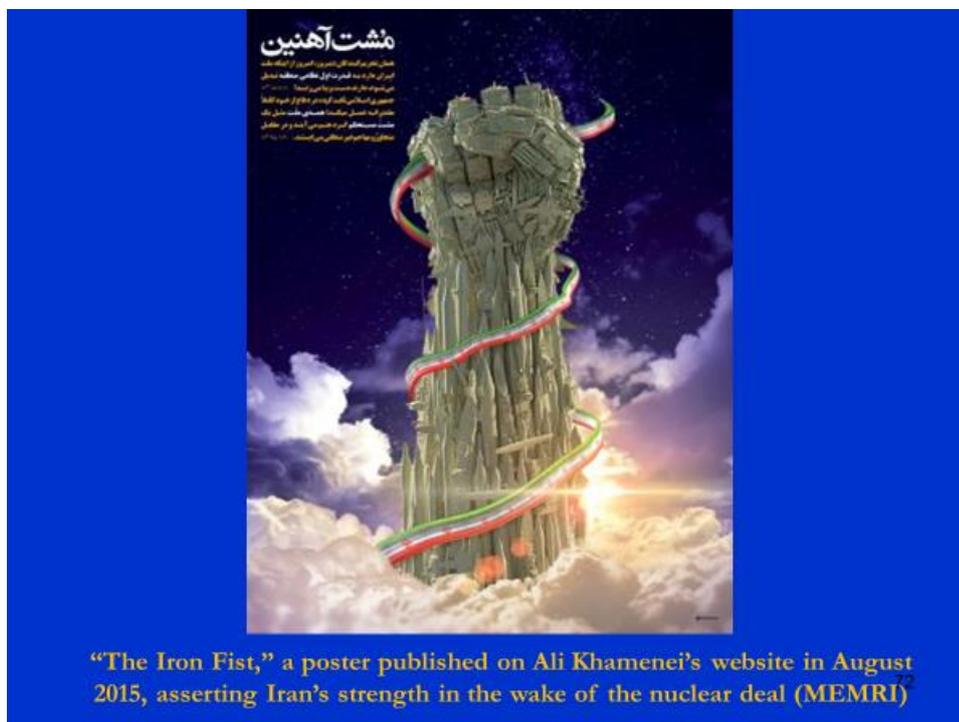
¹ "ISIS Calls on Iranian Sunnis To Rise Up And Carry Out Attacks In Major Cities In The Country," *MEMRI's Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor (JTTM)*; March 27, 2017.

² Ely Karmon, "The Iran Nuclear Deal, The Fight Against ISIL and Iran's Domestic Troubles," ICT website, October 21, 2014.

the regime's full control over the country's borders and said the terrorists active in Iraq do not dare pose a threat to Iran.³

By the beginning of July, Iran's Police Chief, Brigadier General Esmayeel Ahmadi Moqaddam, underlined the preparedness of the country's military, security and intelligence forces "to thwart any destabilizing threat to Iran's borders, particularly in the West". He said some ISIL militants may be arrested at Western borders, but no ISIL command has entered Iran "and there is no concern about terrorism."⁴

Ahmad-Reza Pourdastan, Commander of the Iranian Army ground forces, said in May 2016 that a 40-kilometer zone of deterrence had been designated as close as Iran would permit terrorist groups operating in Iraq to approach the Iranian border. Crossing the 40-kilometer line would prompt a military response from Iran. He said that during 2014 and 2015, ISIS operating in Iraq's Anbar Province had tried to come within 12 kilometers of Iran's western border. In response, five Iranian army ground brigades with helicopter air cover and intelligence support had been put on alert and were ready to initiate a military campaign in the event that ISIS came closer than 40 kilometers to the Iranian border.⁵



³ *Fars News Agency (FNA)*, "Guards Commander: Iran's Western Borders Not Approached by ISIL Terrorists," June 25, 2014.

⁴ *FNA*, "Police Chief Underlines Iranian Forces' Full Control over Western Borders," July 1, 2014.

⁵ *Mehr News Agency*, May 11, 2016

ISIS commandos have succeeded to penetrate Iran's territory and local cells tried to stage terrorist attacks in Tehran.

In May 2015, Iranian Intelligence Minister, Seyed Mahmoud Alavi, announced that the country's security and intelligence forces had arrested members of several terrorist cells affiliated with ISIS and that all of their equipment had been seized. "You see that despite all the assistance that they (the terrorist groups) receive from the enemy (spy) services to create insecurity in part of Iran, they have failed," Alavi said. "There is no single week that an anti-security operation is not discovered and defused in the country," he added.⁶

He referred to the capture of the assassins who killed teachers in southeastern parts of Iran, and to the discovery and foiling of several bombing plots in the cities of Mashhad, Zahedan and Shiraz. He warned that these acts were the product of plots by western states to create insecurity in the country and weaken the Iranian negotiators' position in the nuclear talks with the world powers. His comments came after police forces killed the leader of Ansar al-Forqan, Hesham Azizi, and several other members of the terrorist group in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan in April. Ground forces from The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds force had informed that it had "disbanded a terrorist group affiliated to the foreign spy agencies in Qasr-e Qand and Nikshahr regions in Southeastern Iran, and killed all its members who intended to carry out suicide attacks" in the province.⁷

In November 2015, after the ISIS terrorist attacks in France, IRGC commander, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, claimed that there is little chance of Paris-style terror attack in Iran. Iranian authorities arrested an ISIS-linked terror cell in the Western region of Kermanshah one day before the visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Iran. On November 21, 2015, two other terror cells in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchistan were discovered in possession of 10 bombs and over 150 kilograms of explosives and another cell was discovered in the West Azerbaijan Province.⁸

In February 2016, intelligence forces discovered and dismantled a large bomb-making workshop two days before the parliamentary election and on Election Day, February 26.

⁶ "Intelligence Minister: ISIS-Affiliated Terrorists Arrested in Iran, Intelligence Minister: ISIS-Affiliated Terrorists Arrested in Iran," *Al-Alam News Network*, 29 May 2015.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William Watkinson, "Iranian authorities arrest Isis terrorist cell ahead of Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit tomorrow," *International Business Times*, November 22, 2015.

The country's security forces detained two "Takfiri terrorists" in the Western province of Hamedan "who planned to carry out operations in Tehran in May 2016."⁹

The Commander of Iran's ground forces, Gen. Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, said in April 2016 that ISIS is not a force large enough to threaten Iran. Khalid Azizi, the General Secretary of the rebel Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) agreed: "Daesh sleeper cells are not active inside Iran and they are not a threat to Iran's borders, not necessarily because Iran remains so strong, but because of ISIS' current plans and targets of focusing on Iraq and Syria."¹⁰

Iranian security forces have crushed over 20 terrorist groups that had planned to carry out terrorist attacks across the country over the past year, according to Iran's Intelligence Minister, Mahmoud Alavi. "There is no reason for concern, since there is full intelligence dominance over the Takfiri forces in the region," Brigadier General, Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, claimed.¹¹

In July 2016, Iranian security forces arrested 40 members of a terrorist group in the eastern parts of the country. The terrorists dug a 40-meter-long tunnel at depth of 20 meters under a house to carry out explosions and terrorist attacks.¹²

An article in the *The National Interest* magazine that analyzed the ISIS threat to Iran argued that Tehran is concerned about the rise of Sunni extremism in the entire region, including within Iran, but it also raised an important question: Has Iran taken "meaningful steps to inoculate Iran's own Sunni minority against ISIS dogma"? The authors maintained that Tehran has not recognized the role of its own, often discriminatory, policies against its Sunni minority. The dominant view in Tehran is that the issue of Sunni extremism will be resolved once ISIS is defeated militarily in Iraq and Syria.¹³

The ISIS threat includes activities in the Sunni-majority provinces of Baluchistan and Kurdistan, which border Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iraq, respectively, as well as activities in neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan. Salafi groups with an active presence in the region include Ansar al-Islam, the Kurdistan Islamic Emirate, Kataib Qaed fi Kurdistan and Jaish

⁹ "Intelligence Official: 2 ISIS Terrorists Arrested in Western Iran," *Defence.pk*, May 22, 2016.

¹⁰ Arina Moradi "ISIS is the new world foe but in Iran old enemies don't die," *Rudaw*, 23/5/2016.

¹¹ "Iran Crushed 20 Terrorist Gangs in Past Year: Intelligence Minister," *Alwaght News & Analysis*, 20 May 2016.

¹² "Iran arrests 40 terrorists, interior minister says," *Tehran Times*, July 22, 2016.

¹³ Fatemeh Aman and Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Other ISIS Problem," *The National Interest*, May 5, 2016.

Sahabeh. Pakistani and Afghani militant groups have declared allegiance to ISIS, including some Pakistani Tehreek-i-Taliban commanders, some factions of Jamaat-ul-Ahrar and Jamaat-ud-Dawa. A number of incidents in Afghanistan, including the kidnapping and beheading of ethnic Hazaras (who are Shia) returning from pilgrimage in Iran, has created fears that ISIS is more dangerous than the Afghan Taliban. Fears about a growing ISIS appeal inside Iran's borders seem to be a key justification for Tehran's intervention in Syria and Iraq.¹⁴

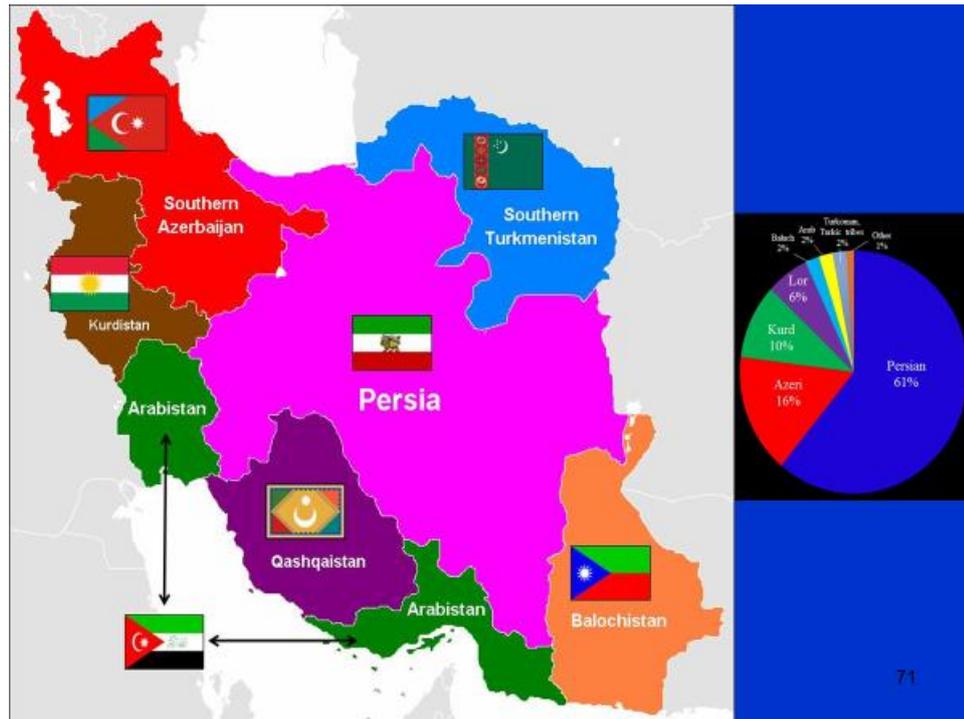
Iran's Domestic Troubles¹⁵

Iran's borders and its stability are threatened not only by external Sunni radical forces like ISIS, but also by internal ethnic and sectarian hazards that could erupt under certain conditions as Iran is sucked more deeply into the Iraqi and Syrian conflict.

Iran is not different from Iraq and can be even compared with Syria. According to the Encyclopedia of Islam (Leiden), Persians represent only 65% of its population (55% according to other sources), Azeris 16%, Kurds 7%, Lurs 6%, Arabs 2%, Baloch 2%, Turkmens 1%, and others less than 1%. Most of Iran's minorities live in the provinces adjacent to its borders, the Kurds and the Arabs next to Iraq and the Baloch on the two sides of the Pakistani border. In contrast to the diversity of its ethnic landscape, Iran is relatively homogenous in terms of religion as 89 percent of the population is Shi'ite. Its Sunni Muslims are largely drawn from Iran's Kurdish, Baloch, and Turkmen populations.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ely Karmon, *The Iran Nuclear Deal, The Fight Against ISIL and Iran's Domestic Troubles*.



The suppression of Iran's ethnic minorities' rights, which have been heavily marginalized by the Persian-dominated Shi'ite theocracy, has resulted in ethnic insurgencies over the years, some of which continue to trouble the Iranian regime. In April 2013, RAND analysts estimated that Iran's quickly declining economy and its increasing international isolation could push ethnic minorities and their Persian brethren to join forces and to pose a serious challenge to the Tehran regime.¹⁶

Arabistan

The Iranian Arab ethnic minority, the Ahwazis, has long endured oppression and discrimination and could be the first to emulate its Sunni brethren in Iraq and Syria. Iranian Arabs suffer from widespread poverty despite the fact that they inhabit a region rich in natural resources. Arab nationalist insurgents led by the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA) were responsible for six attacks against energy infrastructure in the oil rich Khuzestan Province in 2013. Iranian Arabs and many pan-Arab nationalists refer to Khuzestan Province as Arabistan. ASMLA militants staged 20 operations in 2012 and they received financial support and operational training in Dubai.¹⁷

¹⁶ Alireza Nader and Robert Stewart, "Iran's Forgotten Ethnic Minorities," *Foreign Policy*, April 2013. See also Michael Segall, "Ethnic Opposition to Iran's Regime Is on the Rise," *Institute for Contemporary Affairs*, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, July 24, 2016.

¹⁷ Chris Zambelis, "The Struggle for Arabistan: Tensions and Militancy in Iran's Khuzestan Province," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, January 23, 2014.

On December 3, 2016, an international conference on Ahwaz was held in Tunisia in conjunction with ASMLA. At a December 6-7 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting, ASMLA leader Habib Jabr called on the GCC member countries at the meeting to view the Ahwaz issue as the most important link in the chain of Arab resistance to the Persian-Iranian plan. Saudi columnist, 'Abd Al-Mohsen Hilal, wrote in his column in the Saudi daily 'Okaz: "There is a pressing need to recognize the Ahwazi issue, in order to deal with Iran's efforts to eradicate the Arab identity [of the region] by expelling its residents, changing its characteristics, and obscuring its Arab identity. It is home to 12 million Arabs, and is as large as Syria, Jordan, and Palestine combined. Al-Ahwaz deserves all of our support – and this is what the Tunisia conference demanded, with the aim of bringing about the end of the Iranian occupation, which is no less criminal or barbaric than the Israeli occupation of Palestine."¹⁸

In January 2017, ASMLA fighters targeted the main IRGC military base in the Ghizaniya region as senior IRGC officers met there to discuss the security details for the funeral of former President, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, scheduled for the next day. The attack by ASMLA's military wing, the Martyr Mohiyuddin al-Nasser Brigades, came only six days after they carried out an operation that destroyed two major oil pipelines in the region belonging to state-owned oil companies. Habib Esewed, the ASMLA's Vice President, confirmed that the operation was carried out as part of the group's new strategy for 2017.¹⁹

Iranian Kurdistan

The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) is the largest and best organized of the Kurdish opposition groups and seeks autonomy for the Kurds in Iran. A few months after its creation, on January 22, 1946, the PDK established the short-lived independent "Republic of Kurdistan," which was destroyed by the Iranian army in December 1946. After the revolution of 1979, it emerged as a mass-based party and one of the mainstream political forces in Iran. Two of KDPI's General Secretaries, Dr. A.R. Ghassemloo and Dr. S. Sharafkandi, were assassinated in 1989 and 1992, respectively, by Iranian agents in Vienna and Berlin. Today the group is based in Iraqi Kurdistan, but agreed to respect the

¹⁸ "Saudi Writer: Ahwaz Region Deserves Self-Determination; Its Occupation by Iran Is No Less Barbaric Than Palestine's Occupation by Israel," *MEMRI Special Dispatch*, January 19, 2017.

¹⁹ "Ahwazi Resistance Target Iranian Troops in Ahwaz," *Rojhelat.info website*, January 12, 2017.

Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) demand not to carry out armed operations against the Islamic Republic.

According to PDKI's website, during a period of several weeks between August and September 2014, at least 25 members of the IRGC as well as an agent of the intelligence agency, Ettela'at, were killed in different locations in Iranian Kurdistan. It is noteworthy that these operations coincided with the 22nd anniversary of the assassination of Kurdish leader, Dr. Sadeq Sharafkandi.²⁰

The KDPI's fights with the Iranian military in Iran marked the first clashes between the two in years. An Iranian army commander and several Iranian soldiers were killed in clashes in Shino. The KDPI claimed responsibility for the recent battles and announced that it is deploying fighters to Iran for "political activities," apparently in defiance of the KRG's stance. Despite the concerns of the KRG, KDPI senior officials announced that the group will not retreat from Iranian Kurdistan.²¹

The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê - PJAK) is a pan-Kurdish militant nationalist group operating since April 2004 from bases located in mountainous regions of Northern Iraq, striving to establish a semi-autonomous Kurdish regional entity in Iran similar to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The PJAK has about 3,000 armed militiamen, half of them women. The group, an offshoot of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan - PKK), adopted many of the political ideas and military tactics of the PKK.

General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, Iranian Ground Force Commander, announced that his forces killed a number of PJAK militants who were trying to sneak into Iranian Kurdistan region (Rojhelat) carrying packs of explosives in June 2014. He described the operation as a hard blow to PJAK.²²

In May 2016, The Peshmerga of Iranian Kurdistan started an armed campaign against key positions of the IRGC in several villages in the vicinity of the mainly Kurdish city of Sardasht, northwest of the country. Kurdish journalist, Saman Sardashti, said that the fighting between Kurdish rebels and Iranian forces left dozens of dead and wounded in

²⁰ KDPI, "Report: Several members of IRGC and one agent of Ettela'at killed in Kurdistan," September 17, 2014.

²¹ Fuad Haqiqi, "Mixed reaction to Kurdish fight against Iran," *E Kurd.net*, October 2, 2014.

²² "Iranian army kills Kurdish PJAK rebels in eastern Kurdistan: commander," *E Kurd Net*, June 22, 2014.

the ranks of the latter. Kurdish organizations and political parties say that the Iranian authorities are cracking down on the Kurds in Iran and prevent them from practicing their legitimate national rituals and cultural rights.²³

In September 2016, Mustafa Hijri, Secretary-General of the PDKI, claimed in an interview that Peshmerga cells carried out attacks against the IRGC in Iranian Kurdistan and "finished off some well-known security officers." We want to achieve our rights "within the framework of a united Iran, which will be a secular and democratic federal state," he said, adding that they had the support of the Kurdish public. "The Iranian regime...has stated on more than one occasion that it has finished off all the forces of the Iranian opposition, which demands its rights... In light of this and other things, we were forced to return to our armed struggle, by sending squads and cells from our Peshmerga forces into Iranian Kurdistan, to carry out operations against the IRGC," he said.²⁴

In May 2017, after nearly 25 years, the leftist Iranian – Kurdish Komala party resumed its armed struggle against the central government in Tehran and the Iranian military, especially the IRGC, within the context of the recent Kurdish revival in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Komala can trace its roots to the Communist Party of Iran but it has undergone several schisms. Komala is the third Iranian – Kurdish group to resume the armed struggle since 2015. Its troops are currently stationed less than one kilometer from northwestern Iran.²⁵

Komala signed an alliance agreement with the PDKI in 2012, a more active armed party that has engaged in attacks against Iran since 2015. This alliance is well reflected in their armed deployment to the mountains where they are seen together. Despite their political differences, the commander on the ground says that armed cooperation between the two is more solid than political cooperation.²⁶

The revitalization of insurgent operations and the merger of the various Iranian Kurdish armed groups around a shared goal to strike back at Tehran is influenced by several factors, including: the continued denial of political rights and economic opportunities to

²³ Sozbin Celeng, "Eight Iranian forces killed, 60 wounded in Kurdish attack," *ARA News*, May 8, 2016

²⁴ "Iranian Kurdish Leader Mustafa Hijri Calls for Secular, Democratic Federal Iran, Says: We Have Been Forced To Return To Armed Struggle," *MEMRI Clip #5704*, October 11, 2016.

²⁵ "Iranian Kurdish Komala party resumed armed struggle after 25 years," *nsnbc international website*, May 1, 2017.

²⁶ "Leftist Kurdish Komala party resumes armed struggle against Iran," *EKurd Net*, April 30, 2017.

the Kurdish minority; arbitrary arrests and execution of hundreds of Iranian Kurdish activists by the regime in 2015; Iran's expanded role inside Iraq and Syria; and a perceived Kurdish Awakening across the region, from Turkey to Syria, the KRG, and Iran.²⁷

Iranian Baluchistan

Since 2013, there has been a surge of attacks against Iranian military and provincial officials in Iranian Baluchistan by the Sunni extremist group, Jaish ul-Adl, or the Army of Justice, based in Pakistan.

According to the *New York Times*, Sunni insurgents in Pakistan increased attacks on Iranian border posts in the southeast of the country in 2014. In September 2014, insurgents rammed a vehicle laden with more than 1,000 pounds of explosives into one of the outer walls of a central base before launching a surprise attack using a convoy of pickup trucks carrying 70 militants, employing methods similar to those used by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. IRGC said the attackers were repelled only after a long firefight and the arrival of reinforcements.²⁸

In January 2017, Jaish Al-Adl carried out an operation against Iranian forces on the outskirts of the city of Sarbaz in Baluchistan, killing and wounding a large number of regime military personnel, including senior IRGC officers. The operation came three days after Arab fighters in Al Ahwaz blew up two oil pipelines there, warning that more such operations are planned, just as Iran signed 29 major contracts with international oil and gas companies. Jaish Al-Adl's spokesman, Ibrahim Azizi, said that the operation took place "in the context of our mutual struggle founded in co-operation that has grown stronger in recent years, which aims to create a practical and political alliance to end the [Iranian regime's] injustice and oppression against our peoples and to address its terrorism against the people of Iran and against Arabs and Muslims generally."²⁹

Jaish Al-Adl claimed responsibility for an ambush in southeastern Sistan-Baluchistan Province in Iran on April 26, 2017, which killed ten IRGC border guards. A Baluchi activist

²⁷ Franc Milburn, "Iranian Kurdish Militias: Terrorist-Insurgents, Ethno Freedom Fighters, or Knights on the Regional Chessboard?" *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, May 2017, Vol. 10, Issue 5.

²⁸ Thomas Redbrick, "Insurgents in Pakistan Stepping up Iran Strikes," *New York Times*, October 9, 2014.

²⁹ "Following Arab operation against Iranian oil pipeline, Baluchi fighters kill, injure dozens of IRGC in ambush operation," *Ahwazna website*, January 8, 2017.

declared: “We and other ethnic groups in Iran like Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds and Turks must use every means possible to determine our fate. Otherwise, we will continue to be oppressed and denied any rights as Iran’s central doctrine is based on Persian nationalism and Shiism, and thus they’ll never recognize our rights.”³⁰

Conclusion

The dominant view in Tehran is that the issue of Sunni extremism will be resolved once ISIS is defeated militarily in Iraq and Syria.³¹

In this author’s opinion, the threat by ISIS, or what will remain of it as an underground terrorist network, to Iranian territory and interests will grow after ISIS is defeated militarily. The role of Iran and its proxies - Hezbollah and the numerous Shi’ite militias in Syria and Iraq – in fighting the Sunni jihadist and Islamist organizations, and in extending its control over chunks of Syrian and Iraqi territory will only increase the motivation of these elements to challenge Tehran.

ISIS cells and terrorists could also cooperate with or join Sunni separatist movements in Ahwaz, Kurdistan and Baluchistan, and thus increase the efficiency and the lethality of the attacks inside Iran and possibly in Tehran.

In addition, in the Middle East geopolitical pulse, the Sunni Arab states, mainly Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries, could support these movement, including ISIS, politically, financially and possibly militarily these movements.

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³⁰ Rahim Hamid, “Baluchi ‘Army of Justice’ kills ten IRGC troops in ambush,” *Roji Kurd website*, April 27, 2017.

³¹ Fatemeh Aman and Alex Vatanka, *Iran's Other ISIS Problem*.