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Aims and Scope

The *CMER Middle East Report* (ISBN 978-1-921492-39-6) is an electronic journal (e-journal) published by the Council of Middle East Relations, designed towards fulfilling one of the principal missions of the Council, namely the dissemination of academic research and other scholarly works. With all its inherent advantages, an e-journal serves as the best vehicle to carry CMER to the forefront of the global Middle East scholarly community.

The *CMER Middle East Report* is a scholarly, multidisciplinary, internationally refereed publication focusing primarily on the Middle East and North Africa. The disciplines of interest encompass politics, history, religion, the environment, ethno-history, cultural heritage, social issues, economic development, war and conflict resolution, prehistory and the arts.

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By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

The West really needs to do two things as soon as possible: back the Trump Administration's Iran policy, and stop its appeasement policies toward the ruling mullahs of Iran who have committed some of the worst crimes against humanity, not only in Iran but abroad.

Most recently, many innocent citizens of Canada, Iran and the EU were killed when an Iranian missile downed Ukrainian passenger flight PS752. The Iranian leaders first attempted to mislead the international community, veil the truth, and deny any involvement in the strike. The Iranian government also rejected cooperating with international investigators.

The killing of 176 innocent people and the attempted cover-up reveals that Iran's theocratic establishment prioritizes military adventurism over human life. After the passenger plane was shot down Iranian leaders praised their "successful" military operation. Former IRGC commander-in-chief Mohsen Rezaei appeared on Iran's Channel 3 and offered his congratulations to the IRGC's missile attack.

After Tehran, however, was faced with overwhelming evidence, including credible intelligence reports from several governments as well as a video showing that the plane was hit over Tehran, the Islamic Republic was forced to admit that it had shot down the passenger plane.

The IRGC's shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger plane has sparked anger and fury inside Iran and abroad. Iranians took to the street protesting the regime and demanding that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei resign. Many of the Iranian people are familiar with the regime's careless or wilful killing of innocent people. According to Amnesty International, hundreds of people were killed two months ago by the regime forces when people demonstrated against a hike in gas prices.

The Iranian government has also been implicated in a series of assassination and terrorist plots across the world, some successful others not, but all have been traced back to Tehran. European officials also foiled a terrorist attack that targeted a large "Free Iran" convention in Paris, attended in June 2018 by many high-level speakers-including former US House of Representatives Speaker Newt Gingrich and former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Iran's attacks were also evident in 2018 in Denmark, where officials accused Tehran of attempting to assassinate one of its citizens. It is worth noting that, the EU did announce a positive step. In light of the revelations concerning Iran's assassinations plots, minor sanctions were imposed on sectors of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, as well as on Saeid Hashemi Moghadan, the deputy intelligence minister.

It is incumbent upon the West to stop softening its tone toward the Islamic Republic, and instead join the Trump administration in imposing maximum pressure on the ruling mullahs of Iran. The more the EU appeases the Iranian government, the more it empowers it to pursue aggressive and terrorist activities.

Mohammed bin Zayed's Dark Vision of the Middle East's Future

By Robert W. Worth

Richard Clarke was in Abu Dhabi one morning in 2013 when his phone lit up. "You busy?" a familiar voice said. It was a rhetorical question. The caller was Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the ruler of the United Arab Emirates and one of the most powerful men on Earth. "I'll send a car," he said, and hung up. Clarke, the former White House counterterrorism czar, was working as a consultant for M.B.Z. (as he's mostly known outside his country) and had gotten used to impromptu calls like this. M.B.Z. rarely explained what he had in mind. Once, he took Clarke for an unexpected helicopter flight deep into the desert of the Empty Quarter and then landed by an artificial pond, scattering a herd of wild gazelles. Not far away, a group of German engineers was standing around, working on an experimental solar-powered water-desalination plant.

This time, Clarke got in the back of the car with no idea where he was heading. As they drove through a remote warehouse district, the thought crossed his mind that he was being kidnapped. Then the driver pulled up outside a building where Clarke heard popping sounds. He went inside and saw a group of young women in military uniforms, firing pistols at targets. Seated not far away was M.B.Z., in his white tunic and ear-protection muffs, alongside his wife and an empty third chair reserved for Clarke. During a lull in the shooting, M.B.Z. introduced the women, who were all his daughters and nieces. "I'm starting a draft," M.B.Z. said. "I want everyone in the country to feel like they're responsible. A lot of them are fat and lazy." To stimulate the draft, he said, he would begin with all the young people in his own family.

M.B.Z.'s draft was part of a grand nation-building effort at home and abroad, one that would require more soldiers and have repercussions for the entire Middle East. Since its founding in 1971, the United Arab Emirates — a federation of oil-rich sheikhdoms on the north Arabian coast — has mostly stayed out of the Arab world's many conflicts. It became the region's economic marvel, a desert Xanadu of gleaming skyscrapers, endless malls and marble-floored airports. But by 2013, M.B.Z. was deeply worried about the future. The Arab Spring uprisings had toppled several autocrats, and political Islamists were rising to fill the vacuum. The Muslim Brotherhood — the region's foremost Islamic party, founded in 1928 — and its affiliates had won elections in Egypt and Tunisia, and jihadist militias were running rampant in Libya. In Syria, the rebellion against Bashar al-Assad was also falling into the hands of Islamist militias. ISIS was on the rise, and in less than a year would sweep across the Iraqi border and seize a territory the size of Britain.

At the same time, M.B.Z. watched in dismay as armies mobilized on the other side of the region's great sectarian divide. Shiite militias loyal to the Iranian spymaster Qassim Suleimani exploited the post-2011 vacuum to spread their theocratic influence over Syria, Iraq and Yemen. It was a recipe for apocalyptic violence, and the regional powers were doing little to stop it. Turkey was vehemently cheering its own favoured Islamists on and backing some of them with weapons. So was Qatar, the U.A.E.'s oil-rich neighbour in the Persian Gulf. The Saudis were ambivalent, hampered by an elderly and ailing monarch. Even the United States — which M.B.Z. had always regarded as his chief ally — seemed to regard the Muslim Brotherhood as an unsavoury but inevitable by-product of democracy in action. M.B.Z. repeatedly warned Barack Obama in phone conversations about the dangers he saw. The American president was sympathetic, former White House officials told me, but seemed intent on getting out of the Middle East, not wading back in.

By the time he invited Clarke to his family's firing range, M.B.Z. had already hatched an immensely ambitious plan to reshape the region's future. He would soon enlist as an ally Mohammed bin Salman, the young Saudi crown prince known as M.B.S., who in many ways is M.B.Z.'s protégé. Together, they helped the Egyptian military depose that country's elected Islamist president in 2013. In Libya in 2015, M.B.Z. stepped into the civil war, defying a United Nations embargo and American diplomats. He fought the Shabab militia in Somalia, leveraging his country's commercial ports to become a power broker in the Horn of Africa. He joined the Saudi war in Yemen to battle the Iran-backed Houthi militia. In 2017, he broke an old tradition by orchestrating an aggressive embargo against his Persian Gulf neighbour Qatar. All of this was aimed at thwarting what he saw as a looming Islamist menace.

M.B.Z. makes little distinction among Islamist groups, insisting that they all share the same goal: some version of a caliphate with the Quran in place of a constitution. He seems to believe that the Middle East's only choices are a more repressive order or a total catastrophe. It is a Hobbesian forecast, and doubtless a self-serving one. But the experience of the past few years has led some veteran observers to respect M.B.Z.'s intuitions about the dangers of political Islam writ large. "I was skeptical at first," says Brett McGurk, a former United States official who spent years working in the Middle East for three administrations and knows M.B.Z. well. "It seemed extreme. But I've come to the conclusion that he was often more right than wrong."

M.B.Z. has put many of his resources into what could be called a counter jihad, and they are formidable. Despite his country's small size (there are fewer than a million Emirati citizens), he oversees more than $1.3 trillion in sovereign wealth funds, and commands a military that is better equipped and trained than any in the region apart from Israel. On the domestic front, he has cracked down hard on the Brotherhood and built a hypermodern surveillance state where everyone is monitored for the slightest whiff of Islamist leanings.

M.B.Z.'s leading role in this ongoing counterrevolution, as a sort of latter-day Metternich, has changed his country's reputation. The Pentagon still regards him as a loyal and capable ally; during one visit to Abu Dhabi last May, I sat in the audience as Jim Mattis, the former secretary of defense, addressed a crowd of Emirati and foreign dignitaries and compared the Emirates to both Athens and Sparta. But some Obama officials came to see him as a dangerous rogue actor. By the time Donald Trump was elected — offering him a more pliant partner — M.B.Z. was drawing criticism from human rights groups and diplomats for his military's role in Yemen and Libya. Even some of M.B.Z.'s admirers in diplomatic circles say that he can be too absolutist and that he has waded too deep into conflicts whose outcomes he cannot control.

Yet M.B.Z. remains a rare figure in the Middle East: a shrewd, secular-leaning leader with a blueprint of sorts for the region's future and the resources to implement it. For all his flaws, the alternatives look increasingly grim. The American drone strike that killed Suleimani and his top Iraqi ally, coming on the heels of a tense standoff at the United States Embassy in Baghdad, has pushed the region closer to war, with Iran's supreme leader issuing dire-sounding threats of retaliation. It is too soon to know how Tehran will react, but M.B.Z. is likely to be a key player in whatever unfolds next. Despite his reputation as an Iran hawk, he has made several quiet diplomatic gestures in recent months and reportedly has a back channel to communicate with Iran's leadership.

These departures from Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign have underscored his new willingness to steer an independent course. The same man who privately criticized Obama for appeasing Iran now appears to be worried that Trump will stumble into war. M.B.Z. may be uniquely well placed to avert a conflict in which his country — which sits just across the Persian Gulf from Iran — could be one of the first targets.

M.B.Z., 58, has been the U.A.E.'s leading figure for over a decade (his older brother Khalifa, who suffered a stroke in 2014, remains the titular president) and has been shaping its policies — in education, finance and culture as well as foreign policy — for even longer. Yet he has made few state visits and has never attended a United Nations assembly. He doesn't do Davos. He rarely gives speeches and doesn't talk to

journalists. He has a lower profile than the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, his subordinate in the Emirati federation. “He doesn’t want to be in the photo,” one of his oldest friends told me.

It took me nearly a year to arrange an interview. During that time, I went through a series of meetings with his surrogates in New York, Washington, London and Abu Dhabi — a sort of vetting process, which I seem to have survived mostly because I had spent years reporting on the gulf region. He had never given an on-record interview to a Western journalist, but the timing was lucky: My efforts coincided with a push by his inner circle to be more open and transparent. Still, even after our conversation, his advisers were extremely cagey about what could be quoted, fearing his words would be twisted and misused by his enemies.

The first time I saw M.B.Z., last May, he was at his evening *majlis,*a central ritual of Emirati social and political life. It was in a vast reception hall in Abu Dhabi, and I was surrounded by hundreds of fasting Muslims. It was over 100 degrees outside, but this palatial room, with its 50-foot ceilings and rows of immense chandeliers, was air-conditioned to a clammy-palms chill, like almost every other building in the U.A.E. It was strange to be surrounded by so many Emiratis, who form a small minority of the country’s population. I’ve been visiting the U.A.E. for many years, and have come to think of rootlessness as one of the country’s defining features. Even when the streets are packed, almost everyone you see in Dubai or Abu Dhabi — a Benetton crowd of faces from everywhere on Earth — comes from somewhere else. When you ask them about their lives, they almost invariably mention how grateful they are to be in the U.A.E., sending cash home to their families in Kerala or Nairobi or Kuala Lumpur.

The *majlis* I attended was the prelude to an *iftar,* the ritual evening breaking of the fast during the holy month of Ramadan. M.B.Z. was deep in conversation with a visiting African dignitary seated to his left. On his right was Mohammed bin Rashid. Later, I watched M.B.Z. get up and work the room like a Chicago pol — greeting new arrivals, making introductions, laughing, hugging old friends. He hosts a separate weekly *majlis* at which any Emirati citizen may apply to appear, often to voice grievances or ask for help. These regular gatherings serve an important purpose, allowing M.B.Z. and his peers to get feedback from businessmen, tribal leaders and other constituencies. Emiratis often tell you, with perfect sincerity, that this is their own indigenous answer to democracy.

As we filed into a huge, high-ceilinged hall piled with food and drink, I stationed myself back near the corner. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder and heard a voice behind me: “Come on, guys, let’s eat.”

M.B.Z.’s advisers had been telling me for months about his love for going off-script. He drives around Abu Dhabi at the wheel of his white Nissan Patrol and shows up unannounced in local restaurants. A fitness enthusiast, he often conducts meetings during long walks, occasionally jotting notes on his hand. He is scrupulously punctual and always well briefed, but he loves to surprise Western diplomats by flouting princely decorum. One former diplomat told me he was waiting for his car in Abu Dhabi on a foggy evening when a helicopter emerged out of the mist and landed nearby. Out of the pilot’s seat stepped M.B.Z., who trained as a flyer in the 1970s. The official complained that it was much too foggy for a safe flight. “Shut up and get in,” M.B.Z. said with a grin. They then flew to Dubai, staying just above the power lines. Another time, M.B.Z. was driving a former United States ambassador through town when the

ambassador noted the absence of any security guards. “Don’t worry,” M.B.Z. said. “Look at the floor beneath your seat.” The ambassador was startled to discover an automatic weapon folded up under the carpet.

M.B.Z. led me to his table and seated me directly to his left, across from several of his brothers and a visiting Asian head of state. At M.B.Z.’s insistence, I dug into the hummus and lamb, and soon he was interviewing me about my old life as a journalist in Lebanon. In person, M.B.Z. speaks deliberately and quietly, lapsing now and then into a crooked grin that conveys a surprising impression of shyness. He has a prominent nose and slightly hooded eyes, partly concealed when I met him by a pair of clunky black-plastic glasses. He speaks fluent English with a faint British accent and an American vocabulary.

He doesn’t bother with small talk; when I met him in June for a formal interview, he had barely said hello when he began telling me about his government’s latest moves in Yemen. We were sitting in the atrium of the Emirates Palace hotel, a marble-floored monument to Persian Gulf excess. True to form, he showed up with only a couple of security men and an adviser. He went on to talk for an hour about his views on Islamism, his upbringing, his political priorities and his father’s legacy. He seemed to enjoy telling stories, but all of them were calculated to make a point. It is no accident that people often said the same things about his father, Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, who founded the U.A.E. 49 years ago.

Here is a story M.B.Z. told me:
Sometime in the 1980s, when he was a young military officer, he went on a holiday trip to the grasslands of Tanzania, and on his return to Abu Dhabi, he went to see his father. The two men sat cross-legged on the floor in the traditional style, with M.B.Z. serving his father coffee. Zayed asked his son for details about everything he’d seen: the wildlife, the Masai people and their customs, the extent of poverty in the country. After hearing it all, he asked M.B.Z. what he had done to help the people he’d encountered. In response, M.B.Z. shrugged and said the people he met were not Muslims. His father’s reaction was sudden and indelible.

“He clutched my arm, and looked into my eyes very harshly,” M.B.Z. told me. “He said, ‘We are all God’s children.’ ”

M.B.Z. says his father’s pluralist instincts are at the root of his own anti-Islamist campaign. Zayed, who died in 2004 at age 86, mixed traditional Bedouin attitudes with a rare liberal-mindedness. Emiratis are deeply religious, but the country’s position on an ancient shipping lane has bred a style of Islam that is relatively cosmopolitan and tolerant. In fact, Zayed’s unusual openness is what elevated him to power and helped set the U.A.E. on a different course from its neighbours. The British installed him as ruler in 1966 — at the request of leading Abu Dhabi families — because they were fed up with his brother Shakhbut, who had been xenophobic and averse to development. The Emirates were desperately poor then, and even the richest families lived in mud-brick huts. There was almost no Western medicine available in the 1960s, and most of the population was illiterate; as many as half of all babies and a third of mothers died in childbirth. Even today, middle-aged people tell stories of how their parents would cut a gash in a camel’s neck and force them to drink the blood to avoid dying of thirst.

Zayed insisted on universal education for women at a time when female illiteracy was almost 100 percent. He allowed Christians to build churches in Abu Dhabi, flouting the

common Muslim belief that no other religion should establish a presence on the Arabian Peninsula. In the late 1950s, a family of American missionaries built a hospital in the city of Al Ain, and it was there that an American woman doctor delivered Zayed's third son, Mohammed.

As M.B.Z. grew up, his country was being catapulted from poverty into unimaginable wealth by the discovery of oil. At the same time, political Islam was becoming his generation's great rallying cry. When M.B.Z. was about 14, his father sent him to school in Morocco. Zayed seems to have intended this to be a toughening experience; he gave his son a passport showing a different last name, so that he wouldn't be treated like royalty. M.B.Z. lived simply in Morocco, and spent several months working as a waiter in a local restaurant. He made his own meals and did his own laundry, and was often lonely. "There'd be a bowl of tabbouleh in the fridge, and I'd keep eating from it day after day until a kind of fungus formed on the top," M.B.Z. told me. He later spent a summer at Gordonstoun, the Scottish boarding school where generations of British royals and other titled elites have sent their children to endure cold showers and hazing rituals. Prince Charles famously hated the place, but M.B.Z. told me he enjoyed his time there. He went on to spend a year at Sandhurst, the British military academy.

Unbeknown to his father, M.B.Z. was under the sway of Islamist thinking throughout these years. Zayed seems to have inadvertently facilitated his son's indoctrination by putting an Egyptian Islamist named Izzedine Ibrahim in charge of his education. Zayed knew about Ibrahim's Brotherhood affiliation, but didn't yet consider the organization a threat.

M.B.Z. turned 18 in 1979, the year the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. As the Afghan mujahedeen began a heroic resistance, young Muslims from around the world streamed to Peshawar to join them. At the same time, popular demonstrations toppled the shah of Iran, and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to his homeland to lead the revolution. For many people, a thrilling idea bound these events: The region's Western-backed puppets had failed, and now Islam would provide the guidebook for a better, more authentic society.

But M.B.Z. was born with another, opposing legacy: clan loyalty. His famous father was the embodiment of the traditional "feudal" dynasties that Brotherhood ideologues used to rail against. His mother, Fatima, was Zayed's third and favorite wife, and her shrewdness and determination helped elevate her six sons over Zayed's other male children. They are intensely loyal to one another and to her. In the late 1960s, when they were children, Fatima told her boys about the al-Nahyan family's long history of internecine violence, which rose to a crescendo in the 1920s with a series of brother-on-brother murders that saw power change hands three times within seven years. She made them all swear a vow never to overthrow or act against one another, a former British intelligence officer told me. M.B.Z. still talks to his mother almost every day.

Only after M.B.Z. returned to Abu Dhabi in the early 1980s did he recognize that the ideas promoted by the Brotherhood were incompatible with his own emerging role as an heir to power. M.B.Z. did not say whether he thought about the corollary of his choice: that for ordinary Emiratis, the Brotherhood's appeal must have been even stronger.

In 1991, as George H.W. Bush assembled a coalition to push Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, the Pentagon was impressed by Zayed's eagerness to take part. Afterward, American military leaders began cultivating M.B.Z., who became a military officer and had begun to emerge as the most ambitious and competent of Zayed's children. "He was a natural, up-and-coming," I was told by Bruce Riedel, a former C.I.A. officer who is now an analyst at the Brookings Institution. "He was going to run the country. The U.S. set on a path of wooing and grooming him."

In 1995, Riedel told me, Secretary of Defense William Perry invited M.B.Z. to the Pentagon. To make the experience more memorable, he also flew him down to Camp Lejeune and arranged for him to attend a military exercise in which Marines landed on the North Carolina shore — a simulation of an amphibious attack in Iran or Iraq. "We used to say in the Pentagon, the objective was to get M.B.Z. addicted to aerospace magazines so he'd buy everything we produced," Riedel said.

The seduction appears to have worked. The U.A.E. has spent billions on American jets and weapons systems, and visitors to M.B.Z.'s office say they still see stacks of military magazines there. In the early 1990s, M.B.Z. told Richard Clarke, then an assistant secretary of state, that he wanted to buy the F-16 fighter jet. Clarke replied that he must mean the F-16A, the model the Pentagon sold to American allies. M.B.Z. said no, he wanted a newer model he'd read about in Aviation Week, with an advanced radar-and-weapons system. Clarke told him that that model didn't exist yet; the military hadn't done the necessary research and development. M.B.Z. said he would pay for the R. & D. himself. The subsequent negotiations went on for years, and though M.B.Z.'s hardball tactics angered some Pentagon brass, "he ended up with a better F-16 than the U.S. Air Force had," Clarke says. In the decades to come, M.B.Z. would make clear that if the United States military refused to accommodate him, he would be perfectly happy to shop elsewhere — even in China, which has sold inexpensive drones to the Emirati military in recent years. Still, the United States remained his most important relationship by far.

On Sept. 11, 2001, M.B.Z. was in northern Scotland, enjoying the last morning of a weeklong rabbit-hunting excursion with his friend King Abdullah II of Jordan. He said his goodbyes and boarded a private plane to London, arriving just after lunch. He hadn't even left the plane when an Egyptian member of his entourage came running out from the terminal and climbed onboard, according to an official who was present. "New York is burning!" the man shouted.

M.B.Z. had heard nothing of the day's events, and when he did he was furious. "What are you saying?" he asked the man. "New York is the center of the world — look how vulnerable we are." M.B.Z. tried to reach his father, but was unable to get through. He did manage to get Clarke, who was then working on counterterrorism in the White House. It was the only call Clarke took that morning from outside the government. "Carte blanche — just tell me what to do," he recalled M.B.Z. telling him.

By the time M.B.Z. arrived back in Abu Dhabi, later that day, he knew that two Emiratis were among the 19 hijackers.

The Sept. 11 attacks were a life-changing moment for M.B.Z., unmasking both the depth of the Islamist menace and the Arab world's state of denial about it. That October, M.B.Z. told me, he listened in amazement as an Arab head of state, meeting with his father on a visit to Abu Dhabi, dismissed the attacks as an inside job involving the C.I.A.

or the Mossad. After the head of state left, Zayed turned to M.B.Z., who had been there for the meeting, and asked what he thought. “Dad,” M.B.Z. recalled telling his father, “we have evidence.” That fall, the Emirati security services arrested about 200 Emiratis and about 1,600 foreigners who were planning to go to Afghanistan and join Al Qaeda, including three or four who were committed to becoming suicide bombers.

That same autumn, M.B.Z. had another conversation with his father that would affect the way he thought about political Islam. The encounter began, M.B.Z. told me, when he entered his father’s office with a momentous piece of news: The Americans were sending troops to Afghanistan. Zayed said he wanted Emirati troops to join them. M.B.Z., who was commanding the armed forces by this time, was not prepared for this. Taking an active role in the American campaign would raise sensitive issues, given that some were calling it a war against Islam.

Sensing his son’s unease at the prospect of committing troops, Zayed said: “Tell me, do you think I’m doing this for Bush?” M.B.Z. said yes. “That’s 5 percent of it,” Zayed said. “Do you think I’m doing this to keep bin Laden away?” M.B.Z. nodded. “That’s another 5 percent.”

M.B.Z., a little baffled, asked his father to explain. “You’ve read the Quran and the Hadith, the sayings of the Prophet,” Zayed said. “And you like them?” Of course, his son replied. Zayed then said: “Mohammed, do you think this guy bin Laden running around Afghanistan is doing what the Prophet wanted us to do?” Not at all, M.B.Z. said. His father then told him emphatically: “You’re right. Our religion is being hijacked.” M.B.Z. didn't have to add that there was another reason to fight Al Qaeda — it was a threat to their own family’s authority.

Soon after the Sept. 11 attacks, M.B.Z. undertook a bottom-up review of all his country’s vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks. “I believe 9/11 made him look internally to re-evaluate key sectors from education to finance,” says Marcelle Wahba, who arrived as the new United States ambassador in October of that year. “They went through it all very systematically.” He formed a team, including his brothers and top advisers, and they worked relentlessly to patch the holes, according to Wahba. They set out to register all the *hawala* shops, the informal money-transfer system that has often been used by terrorists. They put transponders on dhows that plied the gulf. They began looking for ways to better monitor the U.A.E.’s sprawling trade and finance networks. Much of this was aimed at deterring terrorists transiting the Emirates, but the risk of attacks inside the country was also real. In the following years, U.A.E. authorities foiled a string of terrorist plots by jihadi groups, including a 2005 plan for a triple car-bombing attack against a five-star hotel.

At the same time, M.B.Z. mounted a broader assault on Islamist ideology. Many of the U.A.E.’s Islamists belonged to Islah, a group founded in the 1970s that was the local equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood. They included thousands of foreigners, mostly from Egypt, who had been welcomed decades earlier to fill the U.A.E.’s need for educated professionals and bureaucrats. The country’s ruling families had initially given their blessing to Islah, which they saw as a benignly pious group. By the 1990s, Islamists had made the education and judicial ministries into a “state within a state,” according to the Emirati journalist Sultan al Qassemi, deciding how scholarships were handed out and pushing the courts in a more religious direction.

M.B.Z. authorized the firing of Islamist teachers and a sweeping rewrite of the country's textbooks. Most of the Emiratis I know can tell shocking stories about elementary schoolteachers who casually told them about the glories of violent jihad and the depravity of *kuffar,* or infidels. The textbooks, written by Brotherhood members, sprinkled zealotry even into subjects like history and math: "If you kill three Jewish settlers and spare two, what is the sum?"

Emirati high schools now offer ethics courses that are independent of religious study — something that would have been unthinkable not long ago. M.B.Z. has made other quiet efforts to push religion into the private realm. He has given a platform to respected religious scholars who took a quietist approach, including a number of prominent Sufis like Ali al-Jifri, Aref Ali Nayed, Hamza Yusuf and Abdallah bin Bayyah, the renowned Mauritanian Sufi scholar who now chairs an Emirati council that oversees religious rulings. The U.A.E. also began exporting its own brand of Islam via training programs for imams abroad, including thousands of Afghans.

Most Islah members were concentrated in the northern emirates, especially Ras al Khaimah, just over an hour's drive north from Dubai. It is less dense than the wealthier cities to the south, with fewer skyscrapers and malls, and it is a little shabbier. In a sense, Islah was expressing its disapproval of the hyper capitalist culture being spawned in the U.A.E.'s biggest cities. Many of its public statements were protests against the bars and prostitution that served the U.A.E.'s growing foreign population. Its spokesmen eventually began promoting democracy and human rights, though those may have been at least partly a convenient way to draw Western sympathy to their cause.

Arabists and diplomats in the West have mostly taken the view that Islamists of this kind should be tolerated, and that their views are likely to be softened over time by their integration into electoral politics. The Tunisian Ennahda movement is often held up as an example of what may happen when Islamists are given a chance to evolve in a more progressive direction. Ennahda, which emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood, has shared power with a secular party, and its leader has suggested that it is less an Islamist party than an Arab variant on European parties like the Christian Democrats.

M.B.Z. did engage in a dialogue of sorts with the U.A.E.'s Islamists, and he claims the experience proved they could not be trusted. After the Sept. 11 attacks, he began meeting with members of Islah and urging them to return to the fold. Initially, he offered them a deal: Stay away from politics and they could maintain their charitable work. They responded with lists of demands. The attempts at outreach came to an end after a tense meeting in 2003, and M.B.Z.'s attitude appears to have hardened. He told a visiting United States delegation in 2004 that "we are having a culture war with the Muslim Brotherhood in this country," according to a cable made public by WikiLeaks. One of M.B.Z.'s own sons started to fall under the spell of Islamist thinking, he told a group of visiting diplomats in 2009. He responded by employing a tactic his own father had used: sending his son to Ethiopia with the Red Cross to appreciate the moral worthiness of non-Muslims.

Even as he cracked down on the Brotherhood, M.B.Z. was working on a far more ambitious project: building a state that would show up the entire Islamist movement by succeeding where it had failed. Instead of an illiberal democracy — like Turkey's — he would build its opposite, a socially liberal autocracy, much as Lee Kuan Yew did in Singapore in the 1960s and '70s. He began with Abu Dhabi's Civil Service, which was

afflicted with many of the same ills as those of other Arab countries: bloat and inefficiency, with connections and family reputation playing a bigger role in hiring than merit. These features were partly a legacy of the Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser, who built a dysfunctional prototype in the 1950s that was copied everywhere.

M.B.Z. deployed a group of young, talented people and authorized them to smash up the bureaucracy. Over the next few years, they fired tens of thousands of employees and reassigned many others, streamlining the state. Between 2005 and 2008, the Abu Dhabi government went from 64,000 people to just 7,000. At the same time, he began harnessing Abu Dhabi's vast capital reserves to build up a non-oil economy. Using a new sovereign wealth fund called Mubadala, he attracted new industries, creating job opportunities that would help train the local population. He honed his progressive image by including women in his cabinet. Mubadala created an aerospace-and-aviation hub in Al Ain where 86 percent of the workers are women.

At times, he seems to want to change Emiratis themselves, to make his people more disciplined, more rational, more self-reliant. "Ever shake hands with an Emirati?" one former diplomat heard him say. "It's a weak hand — they look away. I'm trying to teach people to look you in the eye and give you a firm hand." He made jujitsu compulsory in schools. In 2014 he established the military draft, forcing young Emiratis — who are granted free housing, education and health care — to endure a year of boot camp and hard work. M.B.Z. made sure they took it seriously. Soon after the draft started, a few hundred eligible young men failed to register. M.B.Z. had them brought to him and "spent an hour excoriating them about what his father did, building the country and so on," I was told by one former diplomat. "They all went to jail for 30 days." (An Emirati spokesman disputed this account.)

When I first started visiting the U.A.E., in 2007, I heard a lot of fretting about the social consequences of the country's sudden vault from poverty to vast wealth: listlessness, depression, isolation and dislocation. On my most recent visit, I heard at least a dozen stories about young couch potatoes who returned from boot camp sober and lean, suddenly willing to do their own laundry and dishes. The draft has also brought together people from different emirates and social classes in a way that rarely happened in the past. The Yemen war has wreaked horrors on that country, but it appears to have had an annealing effect on Emirati society. More than 100 Emiratis have been killed in the fighting, and while that is tiny compared with the appalling toll of Yemeni dead, it is in human terms by far the costliest war the U.A.E. has ever fought. It probably helps that M.B.Z. and most of the rulers of the other six emirates had sons or nephews on the front lines, some of whom were seriously injured. I briefly met Zayed bin Hamdan, M.B.Z.'s nephew and son-in-law, who uses a wheelchair after his spine was damaged in a helicopter crash in Yemen in 2017.

In 2009, M.B.Z. made a decision that would vastly augment his ability to project power beyond his borders. He invited Maj. Gen. Michael Hindmarsh, the retired former head of Australia's Special Operations Command, to help reorganize the Emirati military. Early on, M.B.Z. asked Hindmarsh to help him find an Emirati officer to lead the reboot of the country's elite units. But M.B.Z. seems to have taken a liking to Hindmarsh, a lanky man with a deeply lined face and a relaxed, frank manner, and ended up choosing him for the job.

Putting a non-Arab in charge of the military's crown jewel would be unimaginable in any other Middle Eastern country. But by 2009, M.B.Z. had a firm grip on the state. The

global financial crisis had hurt the other six emirates — especially Dubai — and they had lost some of their autonomy to Abu Dhabi, by far the largest and richest member of the federation. M.B.Z. gave Hindmarsh (who calls him "the Boss") his full backing and all the money he needed. Hindmarsh, who had gotten used to bureaucratic obstacles during his decades in the Australian Army, was delighted. The U.A.E. has kept Hindmarsh's role quiet, in deference to Arab sensitivities, but he remains in the job, and his work has been essential in making the Emirati Special Forces among the best in the world.

M.B.Z. was deeply unnerved by the Bush administration's talk of democracy-promotion and by its consequences, including the creation of sectarian political parties in Iraq and the electoral triumph of Hamas in Gaza. In 2009, M.B.Z. detected a freedom agenda in Obama's landmark Cairo speech, with its call for a "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world." He told a United States diplomat afterward that he feared the speech "raises the bar of expectations in the Arab world."

Then came the Arab Spring. The United States had supported the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, and autocrats like him for decades, and had treated the Brotherhood as dangerous fanatics. Yet when the Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi was elected president of Egypt in 2012, the Obama administration accepted the result. M.B.Z. did not. By early 2013, the U.A.E. was backing Tamarod, the swelling popular movement against Morsi. Vast demonstrations against Morsi took place on June 30, followed by his ouster by the military on July 3, which brought Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the military chief, to power.

The U.A.E. and its gulf allies instantly pledged billions of dollars in support to the new government. Emirati officials have maintained a discreet silence about their role, but all the diplomats I spoke with believe the U.A.E. approached Sisi and outlined the terms of their financial support before Morsi's overthrow. "I think there's every reason to believe he staged a coup," I was told by one former diplomat. "For a tiny country in the Persian Gulf to overthrow the ruler of Egypt and put their guy in, that's a big achievement."

M.B.Z. may have prevented Egypt from becoming an Islamic theocracy — that, at any rate, is how he sees it. But Sisi's own ruthlessness became apparent almost instantly. (It is safe to assume that this doesn't bother M.B.Z. much, if at all.) In mid-August of 2013, the Egyptian military gunned down about a thousand people in two pro-Brotherhood protest encampments in Cairo, according to Human Rights Watch. Around the same time, the government began cracking down on secular dissidents too, and in many ways Sisi has been more autocratic than Mubarak was. The takeover in Egypt raised tensions between the U.A.E. and the United States, which danced clumsily between censuring Sisi as an undemocratic strongman and quietly continuing some cooperation. (Trump would later offer a much more unqualified embrace, joking that Sisi was "my favorite dictator.")

Soon after Sisi took power, in October 2013, M.B.Z. was watching CNN when he learned for the first time that the United States had been secretly negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran. His American friends had told him nothing. "It was a big blow," one of M.B.Z.'s senior advisers told me. It wasn't so much that he opposed the idea of negotiating with Iran (the U.A.E. eventually endorsed the preliminary nuclear deal, which was formalized that November). Instead, M.B.Z. was staggered that Obama had not bothered to consult or even inform a longtime ally about such an important deal — and

one that was being negotiated right next door, in Oman. The U.A.E. had a lot at stake, having forced Dubai traders to give up their lucrative business with Iran to comply with the sanctions. “His Highness felt that the U.A.E. had made sacrifices and then been excluded,” the senior adviser said.

Together, the Egyptian tumult and the Iran talks formed a kind of watershed in M.B.Z.’s relations with the United States. The shift was not immediately apparent; he continued talking to Obama regularly and offered him advice. He warned him that the proposed remedy in Syria — Islamist rebels — could be worse than the disease (Assad’s tyranny). He also urged Obama to talk to the Russians about working together on Syria, a coldly realistic suggestion that might have ended the war faster, albeit by foreclosing the opposition’s hope of victory.

But beneath the veneer of routine consultations, M.B.Z.’s feelings about Obama had changed. The relationship eventually turned toxic, with M.B.Z. trash-talking the administration to visitors, former administration officials told me. Obama also made dismissive comments in a 2016 interview in The Atlantic, describing the gulf’s rulers as “free riders” who “do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own” and expect the United States to rescue them. The final straw came a month after the election of Donald Trump, when M.B.Z. flew to New York to meet the president-elect’s team, cancelling a parting lunch with Obama. Soon afterward, M.B.Z. hosted a Russian middleman at an Emirati-owned resort in the Seychelles with Erik Prince, the Blackwater founder — an encounter that put them in the sights of Robert Mueller’s investigation of the Trump administration’s ties to Russia. The meetings, mentioned briefly in the Mueller report, do not seem to have involved any Trump-related collusion. But even if he wasn’t colluding with Russians, M.B.Z.’s attitude toward his American patrons seems to have changed. He had plans of his own, and would no longer wait for their approval.

The overthrow of Morsi was the first great success of M.B.Z.’s counterrevolutionary campaign, and it seems to have supercharged his confidence about what could be done without American constraints. His attention soon turned to Libya, where jihadists were running rampant. He began providing military support to the renegade former general Khalifa Haftar, an autocrat who shared M.B.Z.’s feelings about Islamists. At a Camp David summit in May, 2015, Obama tacitly scolded M.B.Z. and the emir of Qatar for waging proxy war in support of their rival militias. But by the end of 2016, the U.A.E. had set up a secret air base in eastern Libya, from which drones and aircraft bombed Haftar’s rivals in Benghazi.

All of this was in violation of a U.N. weapons embargo, and it irritated Washington. Thousands have been killed in the Libyan fighting, and Haftar’s effort to capture Tripoli has not succeeded. One former United States diplomat who admires M.B.Z. told me that his handling of the Libya mess underscored the danger of overreach. “They are looking to stage-manage and cleave out the parties they don’t like,” she said of the U.A.E. “They will learn they can’t do that.” She added: “You may stir a pot that boils over because of your meddling.”

As he pulled away from the Obama administration, M.B.Z. was acquiring a powerful ally: Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince. The alliance may seem natural to outsiders — two gulf autocrats with similar initials — but the bond papered over a historic rift. The Saudis, as the slain Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi liked to say, are “the mother and the father of political Islam.” M.B.Z. would agree. The Saudi state is

rooted in an 18th-century pact between its rulers and a hard-line strain of Islam known as Wahhabism. It is a formula for state-sponsored extremism that makes the Muslim Brotherhood look mild.

M.B.Z. grew up in a time when most Emiratis felt threatened by their big desert neighbor; there were armed clashes on the border as recently as the 1950s. In 2005, M.B.Z. told a United States ambassador, James Jeffrey, that his biggest concern was Wahhabism, according to a cable made public by WikiLeaks. He saw the Saudi royal family as feckless, but feared that the alternative in such a deeply conservative society could be an ISIS-style Wahhabi theocracy. “Anybody who replaced the Al Saud would be a nightmare,” Jeffrey remembered him saying. “We have to help them help themselves.”

M.B.Z. soon latched onto his Saudi counterpart — who was eager for big reforms — as the key to loosening Saudi Arabia’s ties to radical Islam. He appears to have been something of a mentor to the younger man, and he encouraged the Obama administration to support him. But he doesn’t seem to have any sort of brake on M.B.S.’s worst impulses. When the Saudis led a military campaign against the Iran-allied Houthi fighters in Yemen in March 2015 — with the U.A.E. as their lead partner — many expected it to last a few months at most. Instead, it has lasted nearly five years, becoming a catastrophe that shocked the conscience of the world. Ancient buildings have been smashed to rubble, thousands of civilians have been killed and Yemen — already the Arab world’s poorest country — has suffered terrible outbreaks of famine and disease. The war’s ostensible goal of uprooting the Iran-backed Houthi government is more distant than ever.

The U.A.E. has a share of responsibility for this immense tragedy, though it did not carry out the bombings that wreaked so much destruction on northern Yemen. M.B.Z. confined his country’s role to the south, where he tried unsuccessfully to broker political deals to end the war, and relied on Hindmarsh’s commando units to train local forces. One former high-ranking American military official told me that 95 to 100 percent of the military success in the war was due to the Emiratis.

When M.B.Z. announced a withdrawal from Yemen in June, he made clear that his new partnership with Saudi Arabia had limits. He also began charting a more diplomatic course with Iran. After a series of attacks on shipping in the Persian Gulf and the downing of an American drone, Trump threatened fire and fury that same month and then abruptly backed down. M.B.Z. appears to have sensed that Tehran was starting to see Trump as a paper tiger — leaving the U.A.E. dangerously exposed to further Iranian aggression. Soon afterward, the U.A.E. issued conciliatory statements and sent a delegation to Iran in late July. That pattern of outreach and dialogue may be essential in the wake of the Suleimani assassination, as Iran’s neighbours struggle to avert a war.

The diplomatic gestures in July were hailed by some of M.B.Z.’s critics as signs of an unexpected flexibility, or even of “retrenchment.” Yet at times M.B.Z. can be as rigid and ideological as his enemies. The embargo of Qatar, begun in June 2017, has grown personal, with the two sides waging nasty campaigns of media vilification, and has even led to proxy skirmishes in Somalia. The rift undermines M.B.Z.’s ostensible goal of maintaining a united front against Iranian subversion in the region. If they do not find a way to resolve it, “someone’s going to drive a tractor-trailer right through that gap,” I was told by a former high-ranking United States military official. At its worst, the feud

with Qatar has cast M.B.Z.'s whole campaign against political Islam in a vengeful light, as if he were keener on humiliating his rivals than anything else.

A large bronze sculpture stands outside M.B.Z.'s main office in Abu Dhabi, spelling out the word "tolerance" in English letters. The U.A.E. goes to enormous lengths to advertise its commitment to pluralism. In 2016, the government created a Ministry of Tolerance, and 2019 was branded the Year of Tolerance, kicked off in February by a much-heralded visit from Pope Francis, the first time a pontiff has set foot on the Arabian Peninsula. But the tolerance does not extend to Islamists or anyone who expresses sympathy for them. The U.A.E. has cracked down much harder on Islamists since 2011, arresting and incarcerating them en masse, on thin pretexts. There is an unmistakable chill in the air, an intolerance for fellow travellers reminiscent of the Cold War. In 2012, the Emirati authorities shuttered the Dubai offices of the United States-based National Democratic Institute and other foreign foundations that supported democratic institutions. In 2014, the government officially designated the Brotherhood a terrorist group. It has prosecuted at least one lawyer who defended Islamists and even, in some cases, secular critics of the government.

Most Emiratis who discussed M.B.Z.'s crackdown on the Brotherhood with me did so only on condition of anonymity and using encrypted apps. Unlike in the West, private cameras in the U.A.E. can be co-opted by the government, giving the authorities extraordinary surveillance over what goes on everywhere in the country. A widely adopted message app introduced in the U.A.E. last year, ToTok, was recently unmasked as a spying tool for Emirati intelligence. Officials in the U.A.E. are quick to defend these tactics; a single terrorist bomb or Iranian missile could send the expats fleeing and do immense harm to the country's role as a safe trade and transport hub. A militant apparently inspired by ISIS stabbed a teacher to death in Abu Dhabi in 2014, underscoring the danger. But the U.A.E. is not just looking for terrorists. It has developed an increasingly aggressive cyber intelligence program called Project Raven, built in part by former American intelligence operatives, that appears to be aimed in part at political rivals. Project Raven's targets have included at least four Western journalists, including three Americans, according to a Reuters investigation published last year.

Messages on social media warn that expressing support for Qatar is a criminal offense punishable with fines or even jail time. "It's a fact of life that today it's very difficult to air criticisms, to talk frankly," I was told by Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a prominent Emirati political scientist who has been detained for voicing criticism of the government. He added that this was true across the Arab world. In the Emirates, much of the censorship is self-imposed, with younger people absorbing a sense that they must be more vigilant against the country's external enemies. One man in his 20s told me he wondered whether the Muslim Brotherhood threat had been exaggerated to help strengthen the state — a suspicion he would never dare to voice in public.

This may be the central enigma of M.B.Z.'s tenure: He is a socially liberal autocrat, and his country looks different depending on where you stand. Weighed against the standards of Western human rights groups, the U.A.E. can easily look like a hyper-capitalist slave colony whose leader wants to crush all dissent. When you compare it with Syria or Egypt, the U.A.E. is almost a model of enlightened liberalism. Arab young people mostly seem to take the latter view. Surveys have shown that most young Arabs would rather live there than anywhere else — including the United States or Canada. In part, this is because mournful nostalgia is almost a way of life in Egypt and

Iraq, while people in the U.A.E. talk far more about the future. That this is a talking point for the U.A.E.'s publicists does not make it any less true.
Foreign diplomats have occasionally confronted M.B.Z. about his country's lack of democracy, and he has responded by saying something along the lines of "This isn't California": Lack of education and the prevalence of backward religious attitudes make autocracy necessary, he insists. But if he succeeds in his mission to educate the populace and eradicate political Islam, the al-Nahyan family may eventually have more trouble justifying its role as a virtual monarchy.

"You cannot import a ready-made process from abroad," I was told by Zaki Nusseibeh, who served as a translator and adviser to M.B.Z.'s father for decades. "But yes, we need to start involving young people more in decision-making." On the two-hour drive from Abu Dhabi to Nusseibeh's home in Al Ain, in the country's conservative heartland, I passed immense, upscale housing blocks built by the state for Emiratis, who tend to seclude themselves from the gleaming towers of the city. It was a vivid reminder of the al-Nahyans' tacit deal with their people: safety and prosperity in exchange for quiescence.

Nusseibeh, a slim, bald man of 73 with alert eyes and a professorial air, is a kind of cultural ambassador for the U.A.E., where he has lived since he arrived five decades ago from the West Bank. His house is a museum of sorts, with books in Arabic, English and French stacked ceiling-high and a whole tower of CDs devoted to the work of Richard Wagner (a framed photograph at the bottom shows Nusseibeh with Katharina Wagner, a descendant of the composer). Paintings and sculptures fill almost every available space, most of them by Arab or Iranian artists.

The important work, Nusseibeh said, is still about building institutions and protecting against external threats, and that requires stable leadership. We were back to the Islamist menace. "The last 50 years were foundational," he said. "The next 50 — how do we move this to a new, global level? The challenge becomes more existential. We have to inoculate people against what is happening."

One morning in June, I got a taxi from my hotel to the Louvre Abu Dhabi, M.B.Z.'s madly ambitious, billion-dollar monument to "art and civilization." It was unbearably hot and humid out, and as we drove past the corniche — a beautifully landscaped mile-long stretch of waterfront — I didn't see a single human being. As we crossed the bridge onto Saadiyat Island, I could see the museum looming in the distance like a vast metallic tortoise. Its steel dome, which is as heavy as the Eiffel Tower, is a weave of strands designed to act like a palm grove, allowing tiny shards of sunlight onto the grounds below. When we arrived, I got out and suffered my unavoidable minute-long exposure to nature, and then returned indoors to the controlled world of M.B.Z.'s visions. It was easy to imagine him striding confidently around the building site a decade earlier, pointing his index finger like a magician: I want walkways here. Let's keep the natural coastline there. Let's put hotels there, with a view of the museum. That, in fact, is more or less what happened, as I learned from the man who ran the project for him.

Inside, I goggled alongside the tourists at classic works of Western art sitting alongside Chinese and Indian and Arab masterpieces. The museum's guiding concept reflects the U.A.E.'s own multicultural ethos, a mash-up of global high culture. It has been derided by some critics, including many in France, as a lavish purchase of a European brand for the benefit of a global leisure class. But M.B.Z.'s main goal for the

museum, one of his advisers told me, was to educate the local population, not attract tourists.

As I strolled past a Roman sculpture, a group of Emirati schoolchildren in green shirts trickled in and sat on the floor around me. After a few minutes of sketching, their teachers led them toward the Universal Religions gallery, the museum's centrepiece. I followed behind and listened as one of the teachers led a Q. and A.

"You all know about the Quran," he said. "But who can tell me what the Christian holy book is?" Several children shouted the answer. "Very good! What about the Jewish holy book? And for Hindus?" More high-pitched answers. At last came the clincher. "Sheikh Zayed wanted this to be a universal museum, and he had the idea to put all the holy books in one place, so people could see what their religions had in common, and perhaps that way they'd be a bit nicer to each other."

As the children got up and filed into the next room, it struck me that the teacher's lecture contained a revealing false note. Sheikh Zayed wasn't the one who conjured up this museum, with its grand ambition to smash Islamic certainties and turn Bedouins into citizens of the world. M.B.Z. was hiding in his father's shadow, absent and omnipotent at the same time.

How Qassem Soleimani Organized Iran's Proxies

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member

The Iranian General who was killed in a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad, along with several Iranian-backed Iraqi militia leaders, was instrumental in expanding Iran's influence and reach beyond its borders through various proxy groups in the region.

Qassem's Soleimani's unique skills crafting Iran's regional policy were rewarded in 1998 by the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, when he appointed him commander of the elite Quds Force, the external arm of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), a terror organization.

Soleimani's new job put him in direct contact with Tehran's proxy forces across the Middle East. In addition to strengthening Iran's alliance with powerful Shi'ite armed forces in the region such as Hezbollah, Soleimani helped forge new alliances in other countries. To that end, the Arab Spring and the subsequent rise of Islamic State in 2014 in Iraq and Syria offered a new opportunity for Iran to push forward with its agenda in the region by forming and managing sectarian armed forces in both countries and beyond.

Networks:
Soleimani relied on formal and informal relations to build his network of pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias that would answer directly to the IRGC.

Hezbollah
The Shi'ite Lebanese militant group is considered the most powerful Iranian proxy in the Middle East. Founded in early 1980s, the group has built a significant armed wing, which has been responsible for many attacks against American and Israeli targets in the region. During the Syrian civil war which started in 2011, Hezbollah played a key role in recapturing major cities and towns from Syrian rebels, including Homs and Aleppo. The group is reportedly in control of many parts of the Syria-Lebanon border.
Under the command of the Quds Force, Hezbollah has managed smaller Iranian-backed militia groups that have been active in Syria.

PMF

As the war on IS intensified, Iran, together with its loyal allies, including Shi'ite religious authorities in Iraq, began to form new Shi'ite militias that eventually came together under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as Hashd Shaabi. While dozens of Shi'ite Iraqi armed groups operate under PMF's command, several have been prominent in their direct links to Tehran.

Lebanese Shi'ite supporters of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah group shout slogans as they march in a southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, Oct. 12, 2016.

Kataeb Hezbollah, a Shi'ite group led by Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis who was killed with Soleimani in the airstrike, has received direct support from Iran and considers Khamenei its spiritual leader. Members of Kataeb Hezbollah were among hundreds of people who attacked the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad in response to airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. State Department designated the group a terrorist organization in 2009.

Asaib Ahl al-Haq

Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AHH) is another Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia that is largely active in Iraq, with some of its units fighting under the IRGC command in Syria. Founded in 2006, the group has waged many attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq. Hours after Soleimani was killed, the State Department listed the AHH as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.

The Badr Organization, founded in 1983, is considered Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq, and perhaps the most powerful Shi'ite armed group in Iraq. Reports say that since 2014, the Badr Organization has recruited more than 7,000 new fighters.

Afghan and Pakistani militias

To further strengthen Iran's grip on the region, some experts charge that the country also had to expand its ties with traditional allies. IRGC through Soleimani established Shi'ite brigades comprised of Afghan refugees and Pakistani Shi'ite to help tilt the ongoing Syrian civil war in favor of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Since 2011, Iran has sent thousands of Shi'ite Afghan refugees to Syria to fight alongside Syrian government forces, as well as other Iranian-backed Shi'ite militias.
The Afghan fighters are part of the Fatemiyoun Brigade, the second-largest group of foreigners fighting for Assad's regime in Syria. At the peak of the war, media reports estimated they numbered between 10,000 and 12,000 fighters.

It is unclear how many Pakistani fighters have joined the group, but experts say the group includes hundreds of Pakistani Shi'ites based in Iran.

Persian Might: How Strong Is Iran's Military?

By Dragan Stavljanin & Pete Baumgartner

Members of the Iranian armed forces march at a National Army Day parade in Tehran on September 22, 2019.

With the possibility of a major conflict brewing with the United States the capabilities of the Iranian military are being sharply scrutinized. So just how strong are the Islamic republic's armed forces?

The answer to that question hinges largely on what strategic goals Iran pursues.

Tehran's main goal is to project its influence and protect its interests throughout the Middle East or to at least prevent adversaries, like Saudi Arabia, from gaining the upper hand.

To accomplish that, Tehran has done everything possible to deter and harass the enormous contingents of U.S. forces deployed in 10 countries throughout the region with the ultimate objective being to push them out.

In pursuing that goal, Iran will likely avoid a full-blown war because its military is no match for the American armed forces and Washington's allies stationed in the Middle East, experts say.

No Nukes, Lots of Proxies

The Iranians have a well-publicized and highly controversial nuclear program, but do not currently have the capability to make a nuclear weapon.

"They have a ballistic-missile program but no long-range missiles that can reach the United States," The Atlantic noted.

It added that Tehran lacks any major friends in the region: "Iran has decent relations with Russia and China but no stalwart, great-power allies."

As arguably one of the world's most-isolated countries, Iran has mainly embarked on a strategy of proxy wars or conducting asymmetrical strikes aimed at exploiting the vulnerabilities of American and U.S.-led forces.

The Iranian military - which is the eighth largest in the world based on active personnel - is suited to pursue a strategy of asymmetrical warfare.

Modest Military Budget

Iran's defence budget in 2018 was more than $13 billion, ranking it 18th in the world in terms of military expenditures, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

But Tehran lagged far behind regional foes such as Saudi Arabia, which spent some $70 billion, and Israel, at $18.5 billion (the United States is without rival at more than $700 billion). In addition, Iranian military expenditures declined by 9.5 percent in 2018 compared to the previous year due to massive economic problems caused by U.S. sanctions, a strategy that Washington refers to as "maximum pressure."

But Iran's military establishment, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), does not depend merely on the state budget for its funding, according to the Washington-based Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD).

"The military establishment controls [one-fifth] of the market value of companies listed on the Tehran Stock Exchange and owns thousands of other companies, all of which generate revenue for the armed forces," the FDD reported. "Additionally, the IRGC controls a significant portion of Iran's underground economy."

Biggest in the Middle East

In terms of overall military strength, the Iranian armed forces rank 14th in the world out of 137 countries that are ranked in 2019 by Global Firepower and Business Insider. With some 523,000 active-duty forces and another 350,000 reserves, Iran has the largest standing military in the Middle East.

The active forces are comprised of 350,000 in the regular army and at least 150,000 in the IRGC, which has the most powerful forces in the Iranian military. In a sign of its importance, IRGC Commander in Chief Hossein Salami reports directly to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

An Army within an Army

The IRGC itself is made up of five subgroups.

One of those groups, the Quds Force, was led for decades by Soleimani until his assassination in a U.S. drone strike on January 3 - the event that put Iran and the United States in their current quandary.

The Quds Force is mostly tasked with overseas operations, predominantly in the Middle East. But Jack Watling, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, told NBC News that it is a "divisional strength military formation" of around 17,000 to 21,000 members.


Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) have roughly 125,000 military personnel including ground, aerospace, and naval forces. This is how they are organized.
Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps
SUPREME LEADER
Ali Khamenei
COMMANDER IN CHIEF
Hossein Salami
AEROSPACE FORCE
Amir Ali Hajizadeh
GROUND FORCES
Mohammad Pakpour
NAVY
Alireza Tangsiri
COUNTERINTELLIGENCE
Mohammad Kazemi
BASIJ
Gholamreza Soleimani
SECURITY
Fathollah Jomeiri
QUDS FORCE
Ismail Qaani
INTELLIGENCE
Hossein Taeb
RadioFreeEurope RadioLiberty
RFE/RL Graphics

Perhaps more importantly, the extraterritorial use of the Quds Force provides for the enlistment of various Shi'ite militias that number, according to *The Guardian*, up to 200,000 fighters. The militias operate in at least five countries in the region.

The English daily adds that these pro-Iranian proxy armies that engage "in a 'grey zone' of conflict that maintains hostilities below the threshold of state-on-state warfare."

Another group within the IRCG structure is the Basij militia, a paramilitary force with 90,000 members mobilized to enforce order, which includes quelling dissent within the country, such as the nationwide anti-government protests in November that ended with hundreds of demonstrators killed and thousands injured.

Like many related institutions in Iran, the Basij was first formed as a volunteer force during the Iran-Iraq War. But it "has since become an entrenched, and feared, part of the state," *The Washington Post* reported.

Also operating under the IRCG umbrella are the 20,000 service personnel in the naval forces, which rely first and foremost on waves of armed patrol boats in the Strait of Hormuz.

An Iranian Navy warship on maneuvers in the Strait of Hormuz in April 2019.

With more than 20 percent of the world's oil trade moving through the strait, it is the world's most-important oil-trade route and the scene of several confrontations between Iranian vessels and foreign-flagged tankers in 2019. Although smaller in number, the IRCG is more powerful than the regular army because of the bifurcated nature of the Iranian state. For that reason, relations between the government and the IRCG have always been strained

Tanking Up

Iran has some 1,634 tanks, ranking 18th out of 137 countries surveyed. That number is buttressed by about 2,345 armoured combat vehicles and 1,900 rocket launchers.

The large tank force is, however, mostly made up of older models and completely outdated tanks. Only the new model Karrar, which was supposed to be delivered to the Iranian military in 2018, can compare with some of the better tanks in the world. Although the Karrar looks much like the well-known Russian T-90, Iran has rejected suggestions there was any collaboration with Russia in its production.

In The Navy

The Iranian Navy is, comparatively, a modest force that has neither an aircraft carrier nor a destroyer.

Tehran's navy does possess six frigates, three corvettes, 34 submarines, and 88 patrol vessels. The submarine's arsenal contains the Russian-made "kilo" class, which are called "black holes" because they are inaudible.

The 'Fast Flyers'

With some 509 aircrafts, the Iranian Air Force lags far behind - both in terms of quantity and quality - regional adversaries Saudi Arabia and Israel, which can boast of having 848 and 595 state-of-the-art airplanes, respectively, in their fleets, *The National Interest* reported.

That doesn't include a healthy stable of U.S. planes throughout the region.

Much of Iran's air force dates from the shah era or is left over from dictator Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Air Force, which moved many of its planes to Iran during the 1991 Persian Gulf War to avoid their destruction by U.S.-led forces.

American-made F-4, F-5, and F-14 fighters built in the 1970s remain the pillar of the Iranian Air Force, which is nicknamed "Tizparvazan" (the Fast Flyers).

Following the 2015 nuclear deal - which lifted tough international sanctions against Iran and boosted its economy - the country had a brief opportunity to upgrade its air force. France's Mirage 2000 was an option, but Tehran ultimately decided against it because it was more familiar with its American- and Russian-made planes. Iran also had a chance to buy as many as 30 sophisticated Su-30 fighters from Russia, but opted not to, The National Interest reported.

"This is probably because the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps paramilitary has never been comfortable with the regular Iranian military becoming too powerful," the U.S. magazine concluded.

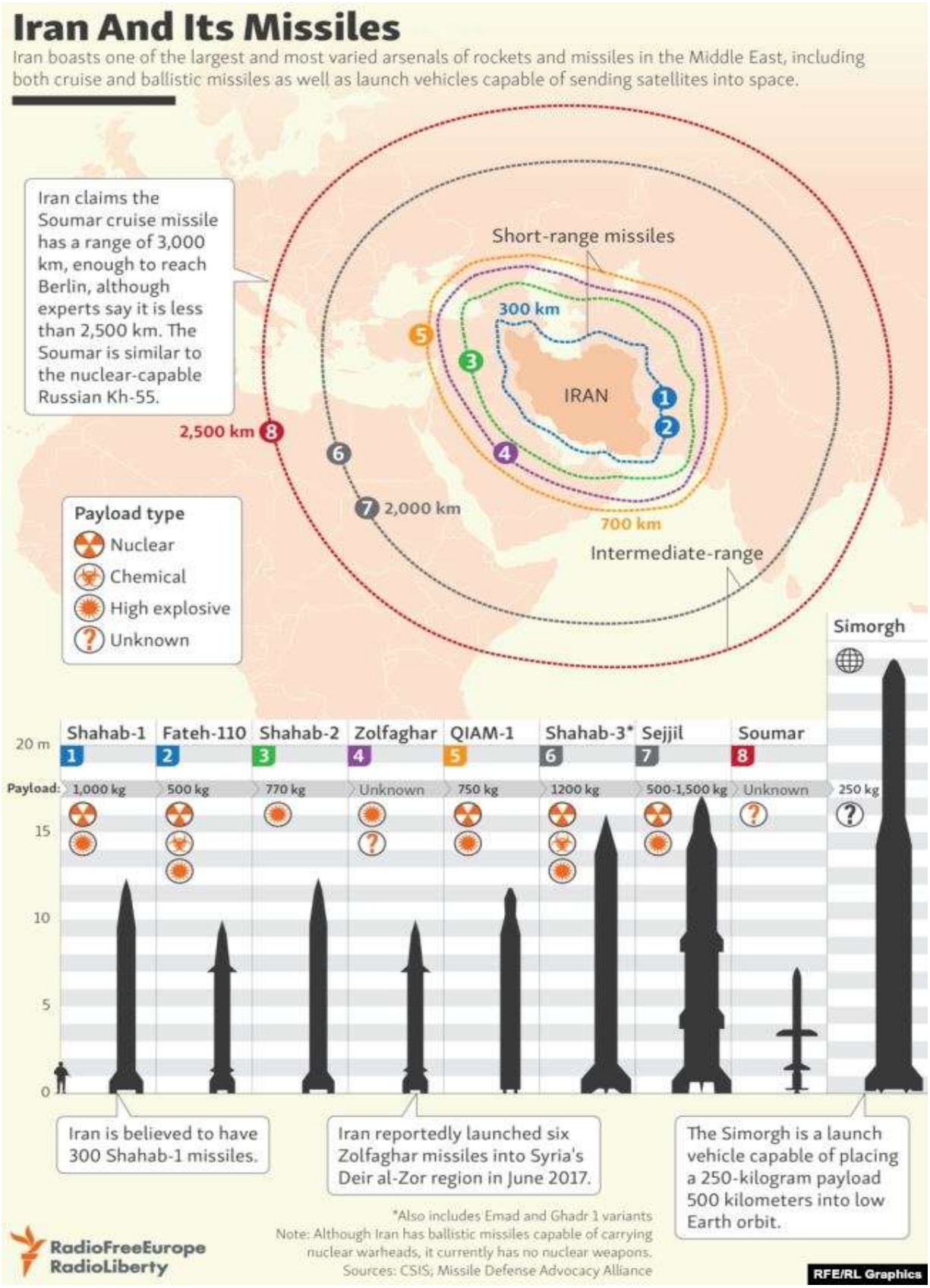
Missile Reliance

Crippled by the U.S.-imposed sanctions that have reduced its oil exports to a trickle, Iran's military equipment imports have dropped significantly in recent years.

Iran's arms imports decreased drastically in 2018 and the country's total imports for its military from 2009 to 2018 were just 3.5 percent of Saudi Arabia's total imports during the same period.

Tehran has had to therefore increasingly depend on the development of domestic technologies for its military needs, including cheaper hardware imports that come mainly from Russia and China.

Iran also relies on the development of missiles in order to overcome the disadvantage of having less military equipment that is often of a lower quality than its regional foes and, certainly, the United States and other Western countries.



Iran is, however, recognized as having the most developed short- and medium-range missile system in the region.

Among other missiles, it has 300-kilometer range Shahab 1 missiles, moving Washington to install a Patriot antiaircraft system in some neighbouring countries to counter possible missile threats from Iran.

Tehran has also worked on the development of intercontinental missiles, although those programs were suspended after Iran agreed to the historic nuclear agreement with six world powers in 2015 that put curbs on its nuclear program.

Following the withdrawal of the United States from the treaty in 2018, Iran began to gradually suspend its adherence to the provisions of the treaty and ultimately announced after Soleimani's killing that it was abandoning all limits in the agreement.

That development leaves open the possibility of Tehran restoring efforts to develop intercontinental missiles.

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a Shahab 3 missile with a range of up to 2,000 kilometres could hit Israel and is widely considered to be Tehran's deterrent of last resort.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies also reports that Iran has 32 batteries of Russia's S-300 air-defence system.

Not to Forget: Cyberwarfare and Drones

Finally, Iran also has a full complement of drones that it has used in operations in both Iraq and against Israel. It is also believed that an Iranian drone was used in September to attack Saudi oil facilities.

The IRGC also boasts a cyber attack unit that is known to have been responsible for several attacks abroad.

After the assassination of Soleimani, many figured Iran could respond with a massive cyber attack against a U.S. entity, a fear that continues, according to *The New York Times.*

Three-Pronged Strategy?

Most analysts have predicted that Iran would not venture into an open conflict with the United States over Soleimani's killing, but would instead use its assets to conduct asymmetrical operations to try and harm U.S. forces or American interests in the Middle East.

Despite having already responded with a missile attack against the two U.S. military bases in Iraq, the threat of lower-level attacks using other strategies remains.

In such a potential confrontation, Tehran would count on "three legs," as *Deutsche Welle* pointed out.

One leg is "defence before the border" - namely the operation of Quds Force units outside Iran to attack U.S. forces.

The other legs of such a strategy are the use of long-range missiles to strike further away U.S. targets or an attempt to shut down the Strait of Hormuz and send global energy markets into a death spiral.

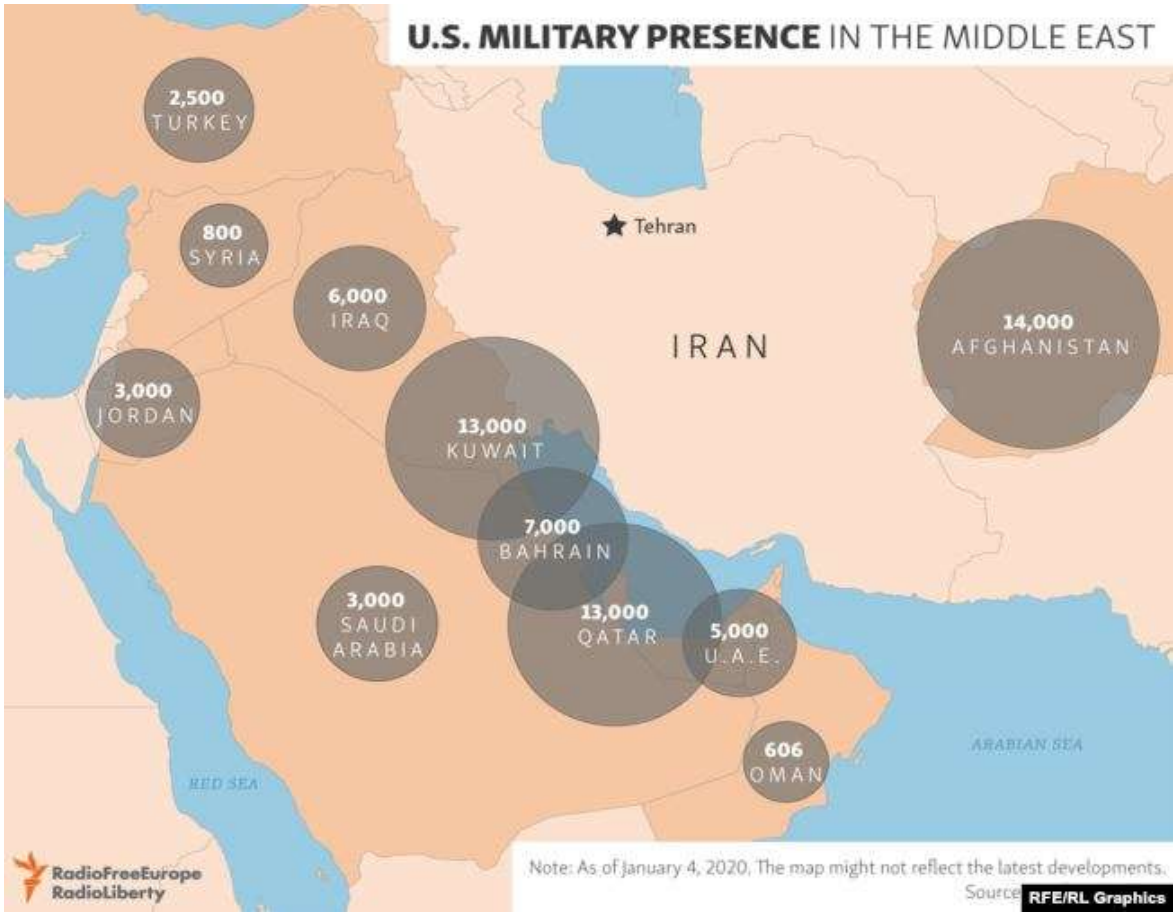
In the event of a conflict involving action in the Strait of Hormuz, Iran can count on the world's fourth-largest oil reserves of more than 150 billion barrels to sustain it during such a blockage.

Tehran's concern of a land invasion of its territory is probably quite low, as according to some Western estimates quoted by *The Guardian*, such an incursion would require "an improbable 1.6 million troops" in order to prevent an Iraq-style counterinsurgency from emerging against U.S. forces.

With U.S. President Donald Trump seemingly de-escalating after Iran's January 8 missile attack caused no American casualties, few people envision Washington entertaining a scenario involving ground troops.

U.S. Troops in the Region

There are estimated to be more than 50,000 U.S. troops deployed in the Middle East, according to numerous sources. Here is a rough breakdown:



'Twilight War'

Another possible option for Iran is the status quo.

Historian David Crist has dubbed the four decades of the shadow battle that the United States and Iran have been locked in since the 1979 Islamic Revolution to be a "twilight war."

As *The Atlantic* noted, Iran has tended to follow a certain blueprint during this time: “compensate for its inferior military capabilities relative to the United States by waging wide-ranging proxy warfare that stops short of direct conflict, allows it to maintain plausible deniability, and is carefully calibrated to advance Iranian interests at a low cost and with minimal risk."

Although the current situation has de-escalated for the moment, it is still fraught with the risk of becoming more serious and disrupting the "twilight war" of strained but controlled relations that have existed between the two countries for so long.

Some of these groups include the Imam al-Baqir Brigade, which mostly operates in central and eastern Syria; Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas, which has been operating in Damascus; and the Syrian Hezbollah, which is primarily made up of Shi'ite Syrians active in northwestern Syria, including Aleppo and Idlib.

Experts say these groups are paid by Iran and managed directly through its Quds Force.

Syrian government forces have relied on these fighters to maintain control over areas recently recaptured from Syrian rebel groups and IS militants.

Houthis in Yemen

Before the civil war in Yemen erupted in 2015, Iran was providing financial and military support to Houthi rebels who have been fighting forces loyal to Yemen President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government.

Iranian support has reportedly helped Houthis capture large territories in Yemen, including the capital, Sanaa. Despite an ongoing Saudi-led military coalition in the war-torn country, Houthis have maintained their control of strategic parts of Yemen.

This is largely due to continued Iranian support.

"The support for Houthis will not be decreased significantly, even though Soleimani had his touch on each specific proxy group," said Matthew Levitt, director on counterterrorism and intelligence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"The network is in place, and certain people are in charge. The point person who provides financial and military (aid) for Houthis is the senior IRGC commander, Reza Shahlai, who (has been) listed recently in Rewards for Justice by the United States government," he told Voice of America.

Iranian Nuclear Deal on Life Support after Tehran decides to ignore Restrictions

By Susan Yao
CMER Board Member

A Shahab-3 surface-to-surface missile, which is said to be capable of delivering a long-range nuclear warhead, is displayed next to a portrait of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at a street exhibition in Tehran earlier this year.

Iran's announcement that it will not abide by the limits put on its nuclear program under a historic 2015 deal with six world powers has put the landmark accord on the verge of collapse.

But many analysts argue that Tehran's decision to virtually exit the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) still provides a chance to salvage the wounded deal, which many argue has been on life support since the United States exited it in May 2018.

Iran's announcement increases the threat posed by the country's nuclear program, says Kelsey Davenport, director for Nonproliferation Policy at the Arms Control Association. But she added there was still a narrow window in which to preserve the deal under which Tehran agreed to curb its controversial nuclear activities in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Iran's announcement - the latest in a series of withdrawals from the agreement in recent months, has also increased tensions with the European signatories to the accord: Germany, France, Britain, and the European Union, which have put great effort into trying to keep the nuclear accord afloat.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stated that Tehran's announcement "could be the first step to the end of this agreement." "What Iran has announced is no longer in

accordance with the agreement, so we will sit down today with France and Britain to decide on that - how we respond to that this week," he added.

Room to Manoeuvre

An official statement by Iran said it will no longer observe limits on the level of enrichment, the amount of stockpiled enriched uranium, or research and development in its nuclear activities.

"From here on, Iran's nuclear program will be developed solely based on its technical needs," the statement said without elaborating. But Iran's pronouncement said Tehran's cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has been monitoring the country's nuclear activities and sites, will continue as before.

Davenport said that, by not stating specifically what steps it will take, Iran has left itself considerable room to manoeuvre. "If Iran wants to quickly cut into the breakout time [the time needed to amass enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear weapon], it could do so by rapidly reinstalling centrifuges and enriching uranium to higher levels," she said. "Alternatively, Iran could gradually chip away at the breakout time by slowly increasing its stockpile of low-enriched uranium."

Ali Vaez, the director of the Iran Project at the International Crisis Group (ICG), told RFE/RL that nuclear inspections are "an absolute redline even for" Russia and China, which are the other two signatories to the 2015 agreement. "Once Iran reduces the IAEA's access [to its nuclear operations], it would signal its preparedness to abandon the JCPOA and even the [Treaty On the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons] altogether," he said.

Dispute Mechanism

If Tehran decides to boost its production of enriched uranium, which could reduce the breakout time, European countries could initiate a dispute mechanism within the deal, which could result in the imposition of UN sanctions within 65 days.

Iran has since May 2019 announced gradual reductions in its compliance with the deal in a move aimed at pressuring EU countries to help it bypass crippling U.S. sanctions, including an oil embargo, that has deprived the country of its main source of income.

Tehran indicates that if the sanctions are lifted - something the Trump administration shows no signs of doing - and Iran benefited from the deal economically, the country is ready to return to its commitment under the nuclear deal.

European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he "deeply" regretted Iran's announcement.

Borrell's spokesman, Peter Stano, told reporters that the EU foreign policy chief was engaged in contacts with all the relevant partners to find a way toward a "de-escalation."

"Escalation is something no one can afford and it is in no one's interest because escalation leads only to more violence, to more tension, and - in the end - to more suffering for the wider region and for the people in this region."

"It is up to the Iranian side to take up the invitation and proceed," he said.

Iran's Deep Involvement in Yemen's War

By Don Gibbons
CMER Board Member

A Houthi rebel fighter fires a weapon into the air during a gathering aimed at mobilizing more fighters for the Houthi movement, in Sanaa, Yemen, Aug. 1, 2019.

The recent U.S. seizure of suspected Iranian guided missile parts headed to rebels in Yemen highlights Iran's continued far-reaching involvement in the war-torn country, experts say.

Iran has not commented on the seizure, but the country has in the past denied sending weapons to Houthi rebels.

Some experts believe the incident shows Iran's escalating efforts to defy international obligations and to destabilize Yemen and the broader region.

"This is one additional piece of evidence that Iran continues to violate multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions in exporting arms, which it's not allowed to do," said James Phillips, a senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington.

A U.N. resolution adopted in 2007 prohibits Iran from supplying and exporting weapons outside the country unless approved by the Security Council. Another U.N. resolution, adopted in 2015, bans the supply of weapons to Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Since the war in Yemen began in 2015, Iran has been backing Houthi rebels who control much of northern Yemen. Houthis have been fighting forces loyal to the internationally recognized government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

The Houthis reportedly have been using parts smuggled from Iran to build their advanced arsenal. Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which was designated a terrorist organization by the Trump administration earlier this year, has been accused of providing weapons and expertise to Houthi rebels.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, right, listens to Mohammed Abdul-Salam, spokesman for the Yemen Houthi rebels, at the Iranian leader's residence, Aug. 13, 2019.

Substantial amount of weapons

Although the size of the recently seized shipment remains unclear, experts charge that over the years, Iran has delivered a substantial amount of weaponry to its Houthi allies in response to what Tehran sees as growing Saudi Arabian influence in the country.

"The weapon cache discovered in that yacht is only a small example of what IRGC Quds Force is sending to Yemen to be used by Houthi rebels," said Babak Taghvaei, a Malta-based military analyst with knowledge of Iran's involvement in regional conflicts, including the one in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia and several Arab countries have been engaged in the Yemeni war since its inception, with the aim of removing Houthi rebels.

While the recent seizure marked the first time such sophisticated components had been taken en route to Yemen, U.S. warships have intercepted and seized Iranian arms likely bound for Houthi fighters many times in recent years.

"The seizure of these weapons will help the U.S. and its allies to find out about technology and material used for production of these weapons, and how to protect their forces from their danger," analyst Taghvaei said.

Additional US forces?

Despite growing tensions between Tehran and Washington, experts rule out the likelihood of any direct confrontation between the two sides in the Persian Gulf region.

However, Nicholas Heras, a Middle East researcher at the Center for a New American Security, told VOA Persian that he thought the U.S. could increase its military presence in the Middle East, for two purposes.

"The first is to reassure nervous partners such as Saudi Arabia that the U.S. is serious in protecting their territory and also their key economic assets, such as oil pipelines," he said.

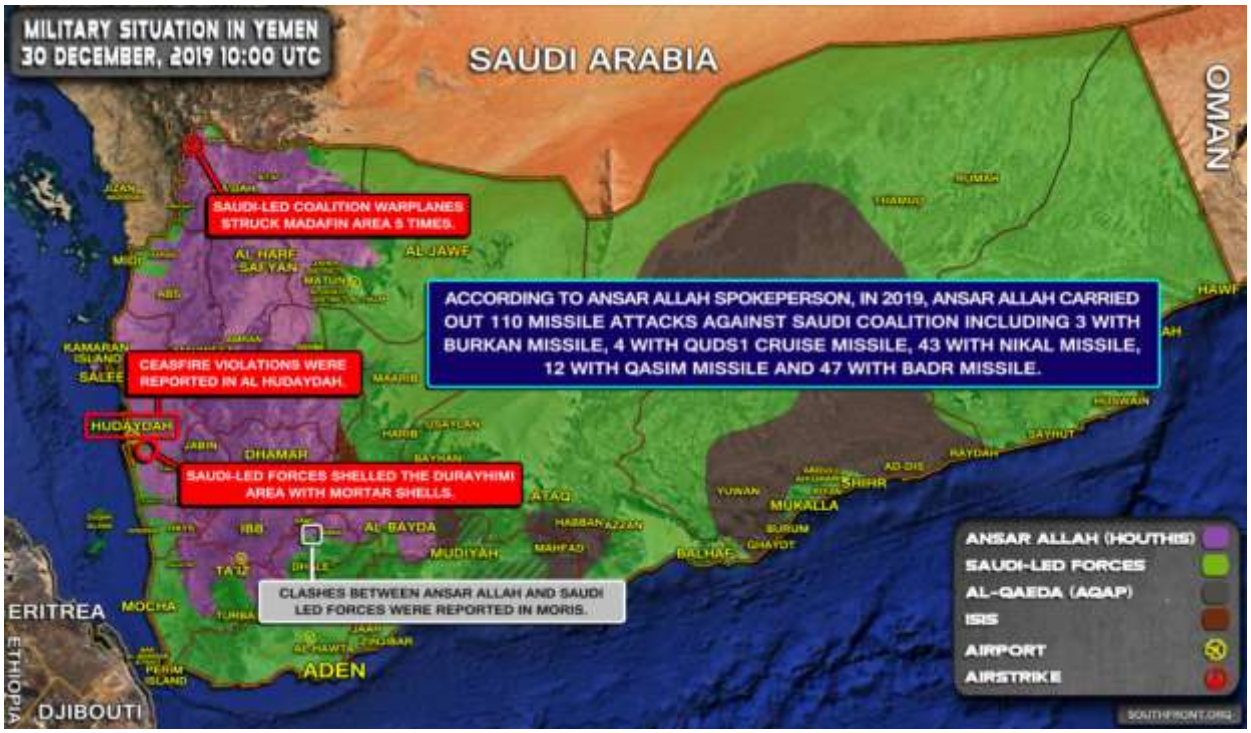
"The second purpose is to send a signal to Iran that if the U.S. decides that it is time to escalate against Iran and [its] malign activities in the broader Middle East, the U.S. has the muscle capable to do it," Heras added.

In recent months, the U.S. has beefed up its military presence in the region, deploying additional troops, ships, aircraft and other military supplies in response to what U.S. officials say is a growing threat from Iran.

'Spoiler' in Yemen

Some experts also say the recent seizure is yet more evidence that Iran acts as a "spoiler" in Yemen, especially since Saudi Arabia reportedly has been engaged in informal talks with the Houthis about a potential cease-fire.

"Riyadh is seeking border security as a part of this process, and the continued Iranian arming of the Houthis — in violation of U.N. Security Council resolutions — is Tehran's way of putting its thumb on the scale," said Jason Brodsky, an Iran expert based in Washington. "In the end, this seized cache is just another reminder of Iran's power projection throughout the region."



Erdogan's Bold Plan for a New Muslim Brotherhood Regime in Libya

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member

Support for Libya's rebel leader General Khalifa Haftar has grown as a result of his claim that one of the key aims of his military campaign is prevent the country from falling into the hands of Islamist militias. Pictured: Haftar (right) meets with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on November 12, 2018.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision to intervene militarily in the Libyan conflict not only raises the prospect of the conflict entering a new and more dangerous phase; it also promises to provide a significant boost for the Islamist militias that are vying to take control of the country and establish a Muslim Brotherhood-style government in Tripoli.

Mr Erdogan's justification for sending Turkish troops to Libya, which has the backing of the Turkish parliament, is to provide support for Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, the head of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).

The GNA is under enormous pressure as a result of the offensive being undertaken by General Khalifa Haftar, the rebel Libyan leader who, with the backing of Russia, France and the United Arab Emirates, has overrun large swathes of the country and is now attempting to seize control of the Libyan capital.

The strength of Gen. Haftar's position was graphically demonstrated earlier this week when Haftar's forces seized control of Libya's vital oil production facilities on the outskirts of Tripoli, a move that has cut output to almost zero.

This move prompted Mr Serraj to warn that Libya faces dire consequences if the blockade is not lifted. After the summit in Berlin called by German Chancellor Angela Merkel with the aim of establishing a ceasefire, Mr Serraj declared: "The situation will be catastrophic should it stay like this."

The summit ended with neither of the warring parties agreeing to a ceasefire, and only giving their lukewarm support to international calls for an arms embargo to prevent any further escalation in the fighting.

Support for Gen Haftar has grown as a result of his claim that one of the key aims of his military campaign is prevent the country from falling into the hands of Islamist militias which have aligned themselves with the GNA.
Many of these groups have links with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist party that briefly - and disastrously - held power in neighbouring Egypt.

Among the Islamist groups backing the GNA is the al-Watan Party headed by Abedelhakim Belhaj, the former head of the self-styled Tripoli Military Council. Belhaj was the emir of the now defunct Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), an Islamist organisation that previously campaigned for the overthrow of former Libyan dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

The LIFG has been linked to the May 2017 Manchester Arena terrorist attack that killed 23 people during a concert given by the American singer Ariana Grande.

Belhaj has also been named on the list of Islamist terrorists drawn up by Saudi Arabia at the start of Riyadh's diplomatic dispute with Qatar in 2017.

The concern now is that Mr Erdogan will use the failure of international mediators to end the fighting to intensify his support for the GNA, thereby strengthening the position of the numerous Islamist militias that are backing the UN-backed body.

Mr Erdogan was an ardent supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood when it held power in Cairo, and there is mounting concern, especially in Europe, that the Turkish leader has now set his sights on establishing a similar regime in Libya.

It can certainly be no surprise that the region's most prominent supporters of the GNA are Turkey and the Gulf state of Qatar, both of which also happen to be committed backers of the Muslim Brotherhood. The only other country that is openly supporting the GNA is Italy, but that is only because its significant oil interests in Libya are located in GNA-controlled territory. France, by contrast, is backing Gen Haftar to prevent Islamist groups based in Tripoli from plotting terror attacks on the French mainland.

Turkey's deepening involvement in the Libyan conflict is, therefore, a development that needs to be viewed with deep concern. In the absence of any serious international initiative to end the fighting, the most likely outcome of Turkey's intervention could be the creation of another extremist Islamist regime on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Erdoğan's 'Make-Turkey-More-Islamic' Campaign Is a Failure

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

Erdoğan and his wife Emine pray during his presidential inauguration ceremony on July 9, 2018 in Ankara, Turkey.

Trust for Islamist politics in both the Middle East and North Africa has plummeted since the beginning of the Arab Spring. A survey for BBC Arabic found that since 2012-13, public trust in Islamist political parties in Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Sudan and Iraq has significantly declined, from nearly 40% to less than 20%. The survey also found a similar decline in trust for religious leaders in the same countries. In the Gaza Strip alone, public trust in Hamas fell from 45% to 24%. In Turkey, Islam does not appear to be appealing to masses as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan apparently hoped it would.

In 2012, Erdoğan described his political mission as "raising devout generations", a remark for which Turkey's main opposition called him "a merchant of religion". In November 2019, Erdoğan repeated his quest for "devout generations" so that "we will not see alcoholics on the streets". He boasts that since he came to power in 2002, the number of imam school students has risen from 60,000 to 1.3 million. No doubt, that is an impressive record for an Islamist strongman. But too premature to cheer about.

A survey, part of OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, has revealed that 54% of imam school students do not feel they belong to their school, compared to 27.5% to 29.1% of students at other types of schools. It seems a greater number of families have forced their children to enroll at imam schools but, at least at the high school level, these students are unhappy.

There are empirical studies that theism is on the rise in Turkey, especially among imam school students. The pollster Optimar found that in 2017, 99% of Turks identified themselves as Muslims, but in 2019, only 89.5% said they were Muslim. An unexpected 4.5% said they were theist, 2.7% agnostic and 1.7% atheist, and 1.6% did not answer.

Another pollster, Konda, who published a survey of 5,800 people, found that Turkish youths were less likely than the wider population to describe themselves as "religious conservative." They were also less likely to say that they fasted or prayed regularly, or (for females) that they covered their hair. Konda's survey found the percentage of atheists at 3% while in the past ten years, the percentage of "devout" Turks had declined from 55% to 51%. Konda's survey also found that those Turks who think a woman must receive her husband's permission to work had dropped from 69% to 55%.

Turkey's Religious Affairs Presidency places the blame on the internet. "There is a lot of misinformation on the Internet. We are often shocked at the queries (the department receives from citizens)... they ask us if one can be a Muslim theist, "said Ekrem Keleş, head of Supreme Board of Religious Affairs.

The AKP's effort to forge a new generation of young religious conservatives has been undermined by the party's own actions, offered İhsan Eliaçık, a left-wing Islamic theologian and a fierce critic of Erdoğan. "People saw that even though they claimed to be Muslims, they committed the worst sins," Eliaçık told *Financial Times*, accusing the ruling party of human rights abuses and corruption.

Erdoğan's government boasts of operating a huge network of state institutions for religious education, including the Education Ministry, Quranic courses and the Religious Affairs General Directorate. The state employs 100,000 imams, 40,000 Quran teachers, 3,000 religious orators and 1,250 muftis. There are 5,000 imam schools (of secondary school and high school level). Apparently this big army of Muslim faith purveyors has failed to impress many Turks. According to a survey by Ipsos, an international pollster, only 12% of Turks trust Islamic clerics, an embarrassing figure - less than half the 26% of Turks who expressed trust in total strangers. The only less-trusted profession in Turkey, according to Ipsos, are politicians (only 11% trust them).

Half the population of Turkey is under the age of 32 - a young population. Many of these young Turks are, it seems, pushing back against Erdoğan's state-imposed Islamization.

The more Erdoğan uses the state's police power to indoctrinate young Turks in favour of devout political Islam, the more they tend to put a distance between themselves and Erdoğan's "devout generations" campaign.

Perhaps Erdoğan's best service to his country is to show young Turks what it actually means to live under an Islamist regime.

Esper Has Sharp Words for Turkey, Warns NATO Allies

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member

U.S. Secretary of Defence Mark Esper during his October trip to Middle East and Europe spoke at the German Marshall Fund event in Brussels, Belgium. He had sharp words for Turkey over its incursion into Syria. A large portion of his speech was also devoted to calling European NATO allies to recognize the security threats from communist China and Russia, urging them to actively participate in countering them.

In Brussels, Esper described threats to rules-based international order in the Middle East. He mentioned the Taliban in Afghanistan that continues to attack innocent civilians, the Islamic regime in Iran that "presents a persistent threat to … partners in the region," and "Turkey's unwarranted incursion into northern Syria … jeopardizes the gains made there in recent years."

He cautioned against "new threats on the horizon that we ignore at our own peril."
These threats have emerged alongside technological advancements. Artificial intelligence, hypersonic weapons, and directed-energy weapons are all used in modern warfare and have "increased the lethality of modern weapon system[s]."

Esper said that the National Defence Strategy of the United States prioritizes China as the first threat and Russia as the second. This due to these two countries policies "to reshape the world to their favor at the expense of others through predatory economics, political subversion, and military force."

As an example, Esper pointed to China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.

"China's One Belt One Road initiative has left several nations with unsustainable debt, forcing them to trade sovereignty for financial relief. Even developed nations fear China's growing leverage which not only impacts their economic and political decision but perhaps worse, leads them to make sub-optimal security choices," Esper said.

Communist China uses debt traps created through OBOR to obtain rights to operate strategic ports and terminals. In 2017, Sri Lanka fell into such a trap. As it could not pay its debt to China, the country was coerced to sign a 99-year lease with a Chinese company for use of its Hambantota Port.

Esper said he would convey a message to NATO allies that "every member must contribute its fair share to ensure our mutual security and uphold the international rules-based order."

He said that currently, only eight members spend 2 percent of their GDP on defence as per the agreement reached by all NATO members in 2014. Half of the members took actions to achieve this goal but a number of members are "falling short," according to Esper.

Esper also advised NATO allies: "If Huawei becomes a provider of choice … it is going to seriously undermine our ability to share intelligence, our ability to interoperate militarily, because we simply cannot trust those networks."

In response to a question about Turkey's recent incursion into Syria, Esper said, "Turkey put us all in a very terrible situation.

"I think the incursion was unwarranted. I think President Erdogan was fixated on making this incursion for one reason or another, and that was not a possibility that we were going to start a war with a NATO ally … who has been a very good ally since joining the Alliance in 1952.

"On any number of issues, we see them [Turkey] spinning closer into Russia's orbit than in the Western orbit." Esper said.

Turkey-Libya maritime deal rattles East Mediterranean

By Susan Yao
CMER Board Member

Turkish drilling vessel Yavuz is escorted by Turkish Navy frigate TCG Gemlik.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan paid a surprise visit to Tunisia during December to discuss cooperation for a possible ceasefire in neighbouring Libya, where Ankara supports the internationally recognised government.

The visit comes after Turkey signed an accord with Libya's internationally recognised government last month that seeks to create an exclusive economic zone from Turkey's southern Mediterranean shore to Libya's northeast coast.

Ankara says the deal aims to protect its rights under international law, and that it is open to signing similar deals with other states on the basis of "fair sharing" of resources.

Greece and Cyprus, which have long had maritime and territorial disputes with Turkey, say the accord is void and violates the international law of the sea. They see it as a cynical resource-grab designed to scupper the development of East Mediterranean gas and destabilize rivals.

Greece has expelled Libya's ambassador to Athens and filed a complaint with the United Nations. Cyprus, where the northern part of the island is held by Turkey, has raised its own objections.

Egypt and Israel, which have invested heavily in energy exploration in the region, are alarmed by the Turkey-Libya move, which may threaten their ability to export gas to Europe. Egypt has called it "illegal and not binding", while Israel has said it could "jeopardize peace and stability in the area".

Following are some questions and answers looking at why Turkey and Libya struck their deal, the impact it could have on the region, and the shadow it casts over East Med gas.

What's The Motivation for Turkey and Libya?

Turkey has had disputes with Greece over islands in the Aegean for decades and with the Republic of Cyprus over the island's maritime waters since 1974, when Turkish troops invaded the north after a brief Greek-Cypriot coup.

In striking the deal with Libya, analysts say Ankara has essentially put both Greece and Cyprus on immediate watch, showing it is prepared to act tough to get its way and/or force new negotiations over their long-standing disputes.

At the same time Turkey has thrown a spanner into the works of efforts by Cyprus, Greece, Israel and Egypt to develop East Mediterranean gas, putting a barrier across a proposed pipeline that would run from Israeli and Greek-Cypriot waters to the Greek island of Crete, on to the Greek mainland and into Europe's gas network via Italy. The $7-9 billion pipeline would have to cross the planned Turkey-Libya economic zone.

Analysts say Turkey has effectively sent a message that it will not be ignored in the East Mediterranean, isn't going to let EU members access what it sees as its maritime waters, and doesn't want energy exporters like Egypt and Israel gaining leverage over Turkey, a net energy importer and transit state.

For Libya, the motivation is mostly security. The accord was reached with Fayez al-Serraj, head of the Tripoli-based government, who is in conflict with a rival military force in eastern Libya under General Khalifa Haftar. Turkey has promised to step up military and other assistance to Serraj. Libya's eastern-based parliament, which is aligned with Haftar, has rejected the maritime accord.

What Does The Move Mean For East Mediterranean Gas?

The East Med basin is estimated to contain natural gas worth $700 billion, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. At one point it was regarded as a boon for the region, one that could deliver massive revenue, help forge a resolution to the Cyprus dispute and build closer ties between Israel and its neighbours.

But the key to unlocking the gas's value is exports and there's no easy way to do that. The proposed pipeline is costly and would run 3,000 metres deep in parts. The Turkey-Libya deal adds another obstacle to making it achievable. While there are precedents for pipelines crossing other countries' exclusive economic zones, Turkey won't make it easy. What's more, Ankara will use the deal to step up its claims to explore for energy in waters off Cyprus, where for months it has sent drilling ships, and in recent days flown exploration drones.

Analysts already had doubts about the viability of East Med gas because of the export difficulties and the price it would ultimately be delivered at, with Europe awash with cheaper gas from Russia and Qatar. The Turkey-Libya move only further complicates that difficult picture.

"In terms of geopolitics and East Mediterranean gas, this is a big deal," said Kadri Tastan, a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "Turkey is making a big move to try to force negotiations on a number of issues. It's going to be very hard to resolve."

What Are The Wider Repercussions?

As well as putting Turkey on a collision course with Greece and Cyprus, it ratchets up tensions between Ankara and the EU, adding to ongoing disputes over migration policy and wider questions over Turkey's role in NATO.

It also raises the stakes with Egypt, which has been at odds with Turkey since the Egyptian military overthrew Islamist President Mohamed Mursi in 2013. Many of Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood backers now make their home in Turkey. In Libya, Egypt is more closely aligned with Haftar, meaning Cairo and Ankara are on opposite sides over the maritime deal.

Israel has been more circumspect over the Turkey-Libya move. One reason, analysts suggest, is that if the Israel-Cyprus-Greece-Italy pipeline becomes unviable, Israel may have to explore ways of exporting gas via Turkey instead. While Israel-Turkey relations have soured in recent years, trade remains strong and they regard each other as strategic partners. Israel will soon send some gas to Egypt to convert into Liquified Natural Gas for re-export, so relies less on Greece and Cyprus.

Russia is another piece in the puzzle. While it and Turkey are at odds over Syria, they coordinate on energy policy, and Moscow is keen for Turkey to transship energy. But the Turkey-Libya deal also puts them on opposite sides in Libya, where Russia leans towards Haftar. Russia and Turkey will discuss Libyan military support at a summit next month.

Libya's Political Instability Makes Room for ISIS to Regroup

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan opened the way on December 26 for direct military intervention in Libya against General Khalifa Haftar

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan opened the way on December 26 for direct military intervention in Libya: he announced a parliamentary vote in early January on sending troops to support the UN-backed Tripoli government against General Khalifa Haftar. Instructors, equipment and Turkish special forces are already operating in Libya alongside pro-government militias. Erdogan said that Turkey would also be willing to send aerial and naval assistance if circumstances require it.

Sending Turkish troops will complicate the situation in an already fragile country, torn by internal dissent since the ouster and killing of the dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

The map of foreign intervention in Libya is important: In the east of the country, forces from Saudi Arabia and Egypt support Gen. Haftar, the separatist who heads the Libyan National Army - not the country's national army. Arrayed against them are Turkey and Qatar, supporting the recognized government headed by Fayez al-Sarraj, but his government is not supported by the legislature. Then there is Russia. It has dispatched militia forces known as the Wagner Group, which have already carried out operations in Syria, are also operating in several African countries - supporting and assisting Haftar's forces. France has joined the group of countries that support the rebel general, while Italy backs Sarraj's recognized government.

As it has done in Syria, the United States has so far refrained from any intervention. Instead, the US has clung to the position of an outside observer, ready to offer advice

and diplomatic assistance to resolve the Libyan crisis. Turkey, which signed a military and economic accord with the Libyan government in November, could deprive Greece and the Greek Cypriots of large swaths of their oil and gas exploration areas and force Egypt and Israel to negotiate with Turkey over the construction of natural gas pipelines to Europe.

Libya is now one of the main axes of future ISIS operations, to compensate for the loss of ground in Syria. ISIS in Libya finances its activities through robbery, kidnapping for ransom, extorting Libyan citizens and cross-border smuggling of artefacts and other commodities.

The Tunisian daily newspaper *Al-Chourouk* cited statements by Ahmad al-Mesmari, a spokesman for East Libya-based forces, claiming that there were "open lines" to provide weapons and fighters from Turkey and Malta to the Tripoli-based government. The Turkish ambassador to Tunisia, Omer Faruk Dogan, has denied the claim.

The impact that the Libyan crisis has had on neighbours is far reaching and significant. Egypt, a major recipient of US military and economic assistance, can ill afford a spillover of insecurity from Libya. In addition, the movement of migrants through Africa to Egypt and Libya and on to Europe is a major concern for countries in the southern Mediterranean. Tunisians make up one of the largest groups of foreign fighters in Iraq and Syria, and insecurity in Libya offers a safe haven for extremists who could seek to foment radicalization in neighbouring Tunisia. The threat posed by extremists in Libya and Tunisia is not one that Europeans can ignore.

Russia Seeks to Build Local Force in Northeast Syria

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member

Russian forces patrol near the city of Qamishli, north Syria October 24, 2019.

Russia has been working to establish a new military force in the Kurdish-majority, northeastern part of Syria with the aim to deploy those troops and hardware to areas along the Syria-Turkey border

The military force reportedly would replace a U.S.-backed, Kurdish-armed group that Turkey claims are terrorists.

"The Russians have already opened recruitment centres in two towns in our region, including Amuda and Tal Tamr," said a Kurdish journalist, requesting anonymity.

Rami Abdulrahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, confirmed to VOA that Russian efforts were under way to build an allied force in the Kurdish region.

Kurdish military officials said they were aware of Russia's plans, noting the new fighters will largely be used for patrol missions, along with Russian troops in the area.

"Those joining the new force are our people," said a senior commander with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). "We want to make sure that we have a close military relationship with Russia," he told VOA on the condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak about the matter to the media.

The SDF official ruled out any potential confrontation between the newly established Russian forces and the U.S.-backed SDF, since "we are essentially involved in the recruiting and vetting process of the new fighters."

The SDF is a Kurdish-led military alliance that has been an effective partner with the United States in its fight against Islamic State in Syria.

SDF officials have stated to VOA they have at least 85,000 fighters who have been trained and equipped by the U.S.-led coalition to defeat IS.

Following a decision in October by U.S. President Donald Trump to withdraw U.S. forces near the Syria-Turkey border, the Turkish military and allied Syrian militias began an offensive in northeast Syria to clear the region from the Syrian Kurdish fighters Turkey views as terrorists.

Ankara says the SDF is an extension of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

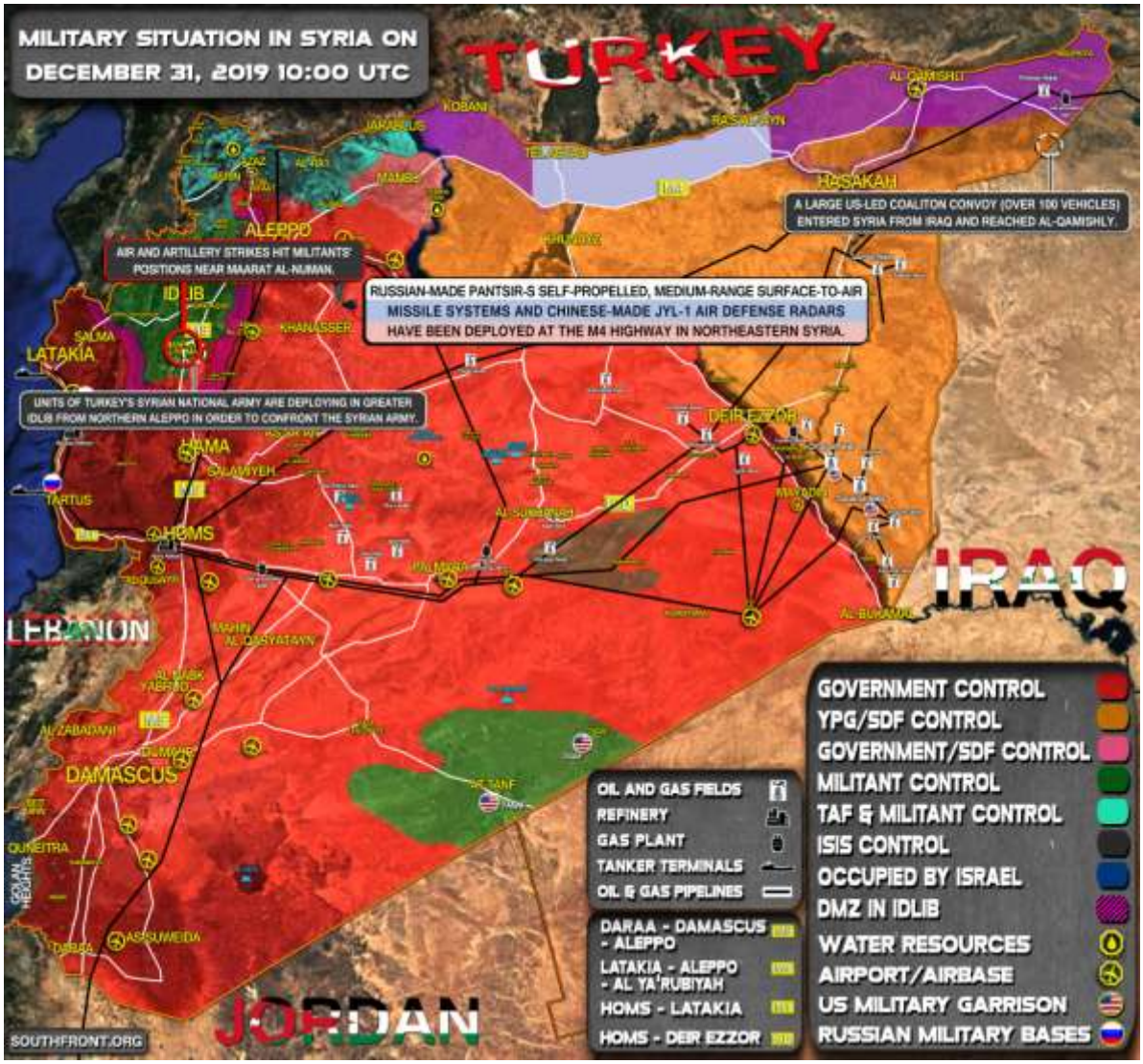
The U.S., however, makes a distinction between the two Kurdish groups.

'Return of regime authority'

In response to the Turkish incursion into Syria's northeast, Syrian Kurds have allowed the Syrian regime and Russian troops to deploy in the area in an attempt to halt the Turkish operation. Since then, Russia has been trying to increase its presence in the region, experts say.

"Russia's goal is the return of regime authority in the east of the Euphrates," said Jonathan Spyer, a research fellow at the Middle East Forum, a U.S.-based think tank.

Syrian Kurdish forces took control of the area in 2012 after Syrian government troops withdrew to focus on fighting rebel groups elsewhere in the war-ravaged country.



Renewal of US-Saudi Alliance a Game-Changer for Middle East

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

U.S. President Donald Trump speaks with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during a family photo session at G20 summit on June 28, 2019 in Osaka, Japan.

President Donald Trump and Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, crown prince Mohammed bin Salman, continues to move from strength to strength—not only based on regional security needs, but on Saudi Arabia's new vision for its own societal, economic, and political development.

Relations between the long-time allies have greatly improved since Trump pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal signed in 2015 by the Obama administration and world powers. But while the deal was a major blow for U.S.-Saudi relations, it was not the first.

Deterioration of US-Saudi Relations

The United States and Saudi Arabia's relationship was built on economic ties and security partnerships. According to the Brookings Institute, the 1980s and 1990s was a period of "unprecedented cooperation" between the United States and Saudi Arabia, but after that, the relationship began to deteriorate.

"It began to go sour in 2000 when President Bill Clinton failed to get both a Syrian-Israeli peace at the Shepherdstown peace conference and a Palestinian-Israel peace at Camp David," according to a 2016 report by Bruce Riedel, senior fellow and director of the Brookings Intelligence Project.

The relationship further deteriorated during President George W. Bush's time, and "9/11 made it all worse." Things declined further during Obama's time with various disagreements over political equations in the Middle East.

King Salman "snubbed Obama once, waged war in Yemen, executed dozens of accused terrorists, and built a broad 34-nation Islamic military alliance against Iran," Riedel added.

According to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), during Obama's time, the two nations differed on core issues.

"Saudi Arabia was dismayed by the lack of U.S. support for ousted Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and that it was not included in initial negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, which were conducted in secret in Oman in 2013. Saudi leadership also chafed at President Obama's vision that the kingdom 'share the neighbourhood' with Iran,'" said the CFR.

Keeping Iran in Check

Manjari Singh, an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies and former fellow at the Middle East Institute in New Delhi, told The Epoch Times that the U.S. withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal greatly repaired trust between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

"Saudi Arabia has long been raising its voice against Iran for sponsoring and financing terrorism in the region in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iraq etc. as well as for using the lifting of sanctions since 2015 for its ballistic missile development, which the Kingdom felt was a threat for the entire region," said Singh. "The withdrawal [from the deal] in that context brought much respite and assured the Kingdom that its voice was being heard."

Joseph A. Kéchichian, Senior Fellow at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, told The Epoch Times that despite concerns expressed by opponents about a cozy relationship growing between Trump and bin Salman, the importance the president places on the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia is not a new thing.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been important to all American presidents for over 80 years, and the Trump Administration is no exception, even if media outlets perceive nonexistent conspiracies between Trump and Riyadh," he said.

"In reality, the Kingdom perceives Iran as an existential threat, and this American president shares that view," he added.

In July, Trump bypassed Congress to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia. The administration released a statement opposing the joint resolution passed by Congress that disapproved the issuance of an export license for the proposed transfer of defence articles, defence services, and related technical data.

"The transfer of Paveway precision-guided capability to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia directly supports the foreign policy and national security objectives of the United States," the statement reads. "It does so by improving the security of a friendly country that continues to be an important force for political and economic stability in the Middle East."

The administration said the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia is important to defend the United States and its allies' interests from Iran and its proxies in the region.

Singh said that in addition to being of financial benefit to the United States, the arms deal also helped build trust between the two countries and helped to check the growing influence of Iran.

Kéchichian, however, said there are no surprises in the arms deal. "Arms sales are always tricky questions, but Saudi Arabia has spent billions of dollars in Washington over the years. Congress was aware of these sales and approved them.

"Periodically, and under Israeli pressure, Congress blocked certain purchases by the Kingdom, but the sales eventually went through. This is a business relationship, and there are alternative sources that can be tapped, so everyone is aware of what is at stake," he said.

Bringing Peace and Stability to the Region

After his appointment as crown prince in 2017, bin Salman launched his Vision 2030 initiative "to create a vibrant society in which all citizens can fulfill their dreams, hopes and ambitions to succeed in a thriving economy," according to the Vision 2030 website.

Singh said bin Salman is seen by many as a visionary young prince who has also called for a "moderate Islam" that's different from "pure Islam," or Wahhabism.

"In May 2018, Saudi women were given a green signal to drive—a major domestic policy change in the country," said Singh. "The Prince's confidence showed through even in the face of domestic resistance and criticism. It was obviously because of U.S. endorsement under President Trump."

She mentioned that Trump "reaffirmed" his promise to support Vision 2030 during the G20 summit in Osaka, Japan, earlier this year.

"Trump said the U.S. under him is 'prepared to offer advice to help the Vision 2030 succeed.' In short, Saudi Vision 2030, the brainchild of MBS [bin Salman] certainly has President Trump's support," said Singh.

Manjari noted that while Trump has wanted to disengage from the Middle East, after the Sept. 16 attacks on Saudi oil facilities he was unable to do so.

Singh said re-engagement in the region became imperative because the attacks on the "world's most strategically significant oil facility" reflected poorly on the United States, as a country under its protection was targeted.

"The most advanced air defines systems—the Patriot and AWAC systems installed jointly by Saudi Arabia and the U.S. to protect the oil production sites—were attacked, thus posing a question mark on the efficacy of the Patriot and AWAC systems," she said.

"Last, the attacks came at a time when the U.S. is looking forward to 'actively engaging' in the Indo-Pacific, and thus going back to the Middle East can be exhaustive," she explained.

Singh said the United States and Saudi Arabia have to come together to upgrade the defence system to "counter the attacks from such drones and missiles as were used on the Saudi facilities."

Florida Attack Raises Concerns over Radicalization in Saudi Military

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member

The deadly shooting by a Saudi national in early December at the Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida has raised questions about radicalization in Saudi Arabia's military ranks.

Mohammed Alshamrani, 21, a lieutenant in the Royal Saudi Air Force, opened fire in a classroom at the naval base, killing three U.S. sailors and wounding eight others before he was killed by police.

Alshamrani had reportedly shown signs of radicalization and embraced extremist ideology as early as 2016.

Vetting process

If reports about Alshamrani's early radicalization are true, "then it raises more questions over what is the vetting process," said Colin Clarke, a senior research fellow at the Soufan Center in New York.

Considered a major U.S. ally, Saudi Arabia has been sending students to the United States for military training for decades.

According to the U.S. State Department, more than 5,500 temporary visas were issued to Saudi military personnel in 2019 alone. As of late December, 852 Saudi nationals were in the U.S. for Pentagon-sponsored training on security cooperation.

In response to the Friday attack, the Pentagon has suspended no classroom training for all Saudi Arabian military students presently in the U.S. Defence officials also have ordered a review of the vetting process for all international students enrolled at U.S. military facilities. Experts charge that moving forward, the vetting process for international military trainees should be more comprehensive to ensure that prospective students aren't radicalized and don't have ties with terror groups.

Anti-Americanism

Saudi Arabia is a major recipient of U.S. military aid and assistance. Riyadh is the top buyer of U.S. weapons. Between 2013 and 2017, Saudi Arabia's purchases accounted for nearly 18% of all U.S. arms sales, or about $9 billion.

But despite this close security cooperation, some experts, such as F. Gregory Gause, a professor of international affairs at Texas A&M University who monitors developments in Saudi Arabia, think there is an anti-American sentiment among many Saudi military personnel.

"I would assume that some amount of anti-Americanism is widespread in the Saudi military, as it is in Saudi public opinion and Arab public opinion generally," he said. "Saudi government has, since the mid-2000s, been very careful to try to stamp it out at home, through a combination of repression and changed rhetoric," he added.

Religiosity, not extremism

While some experts admit that religiosity exists among many Saudi military personnel, they maintain that it is not necessarily linked to extremist ideology.

"There is a level of religiosity in the Saudi military because it is part of the Saudi society, which is already religious," said Abdullah Ghadwi, a journalist at the Okaz newspaper in Riyadh.

Wahhabism

Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Wahhabism, a strict Sunni doctrine credited with inspiring the radical ideology of the Islamic State terror group.

Analyst Clarke said, "Saudi Arabia is the number one exporter of religious extremism and radical ideology across the world, and every now and then it comes back to bite them or another country, in this case it is the United States." He said thousands of Saudi nationals have travelled to conflict zones to become foreign fighters with terrorist groups.

In its 2018 Country Reports on Terrorism, released in November, the State Department said, "Saudi Arabia continued to enact domestic religious sector reforms, including the development of more stringent guidance and approval for Saudi religious personnel traveling overseas to conduct proselytization. "As part of what Saudi Arabia describes as its 'moderate Islam' initiative, Saudi clerics and religious attachés sent abroad were vetted for observance to principles of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. "

Ghadwi, the Okaz newspaper journalist, said the Pensacola attack could be a way to raise the level of security and counterterrorism cooperation between Washington and Riyadh.

"Most likely the Florida shooting incident won't affect the course of security cooperation between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, rather it increases it. Saudi Arabia is affected by this extremist ideology like the United States, and therefore the two parties will continue to eradicate it," Ghadwi added.

Hamas, Thirty-Two Years On

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

Erdogan at an anti-Israel rally, wearing a scarf with the flags of Turkey and the Palestinian Authority, on May 18, 2018 in Istanbul.

The Palestinian Hamas movement during December celebrated its 32nd anniversary by reminding everyone of its main goal: the destruction of Israel. This message is proof that Hamas has not – and will not – change its charter, originally published in 1988. It is also a powerful message to those who may have deluded themselves into believing that Hamas has transformed into a non-violent Palestinian faction.

This charter, also known as the Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement, states that Hamas's "struggle against the Jews is very great and very serious" and calls for replacing Israel with an Islamic state. "There is no solution for the Palestinian issue except through Jihad (holy war)," the charter says. "Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavours. Renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion [of Islam]."

Thirty-two years later, the leaders of Hamas have again shown that they remain more committed than ever to their covenant, particularly regarding the desire to replace Israel with an Islamic state.

In this regard, Hamas deserves credit for being straightforward about its true intention. In statements marking the anniversary of the founding of Hamas, the movement's leaders again demonstrated that they do not mince their words.

Ibrahim Yazouri, one of the founders of Hamas and its military wing, Izz ad-Din al-Qassam, said in an interview with the Hamas-affiliated Palestinian Information Center: "Hamas and its military wing are continuing with their policy until the liberation of Palestine. We are nearing the day of liberation. Within a few years, God willing, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, occupied Jerusalem and all of Palestine will be liberated. Hamas will continue to use all means to liberate Palestine. The big victory is nearing and we need to be more patient."

When Hamas leaders talk about the "liberation of all of Palestine," they are actually repeating their commitment to destroy Israel.

Moreover, when Hamas leaders talk about using "all means to liberate Palestine," they are referring to various forms of terrorism, including suicide bombings and rocket attacks against Israel. These are the only means Hamas believes in as a way of achieving its goal.

Hamas does not – and will never – recognize Israel's right to exist. As the movement states in its charter, "the land of Palestine has been an Islamic Waqf throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection. No one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it."

The statements made this week by several Hamas leaders are identical to the content of their charter. These statements – 32 years after the establishment of Hamas – reaffirm the movement's extremist and dangerous ideology.

Osama al-Mazini, another senior Hamas official in the Gaza Strip, said in a speech marking the movement's anniversary: "Hamas promises to remain faithful to its people and principles. The cowardly enemy understands only the language of force and gunpowder." He also called on Jews "to leave Palestine" and warned that Hamas has prepared thousands of suicide bombers to expel the Jews "from all of Palestine."

Musa Abu Marzouk, deputy chairman of the Hamas "Political Bureau," seized the occasion to describe Israel as a "Zionist project." He emphasized the need for Palestinians to "resist the Zionist project in order to liberate Palestine, all of Palestine."

Again, Abu Marzouk's statements show that he, too, remains fully committed to the Hamas charter. "Hamas is one of the links in the chain of Jihad to confront the Zionist invasion," the charter states.

"Zionist organizations control vast material resources, which enable them to fulfil their mission amidst societies, with a view of implementing Zionist goals and sowing the concepts than can be of use to the enemy. Those organizations operate [in a situation] where Islam is absent and alienated from its people. Therefore, the Muslims must fulfil their duty in confronting the schemes of those saboteurs."

The Hamas anniversary celebrations in the Gaza Strip, which attracted tens of thousands of Palestinians, coincided with efforts made by Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations to reach a long-term ceasefire between Hamas and Israel. The anniversary also came amid increased talk about Hamas's readiness to participate in new elections for the Palestinian Authority presidency and Palestinian parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council.

The large turnout at the pro-Hamas rallies in the Gaza Strip is indicative of the movement's popularity among Palestinians. The tens of thousands of Palestinians who attended the Hamas rallies would seem to share the movement's principles and ideology, particularly regarding the annihilation of Israel. They, too, apparently believe that force and terrorism are the only languages Israel understands. They, too, chanted in favour of the "liberation of all of Palestine" from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.

Now that Hamas has again – clearly – reminded the world that it has not changed and continues to seek the destruction of Israel, the question is: Why are some world leaders, governments and organizations continuing to embrace the leaders of the movement?

During December when Hamas was repeating calling for the elimination of Israel, why is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meeting with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh? What message does such a meeting send to Palestinians and the rest of the Arabs and Muslims?

There is only one message that an encounter between Erdogan and Haniyeh sends: Turkey endorses Hamas and supports its agenda and ideology. It is no wonder that the Hamas leader praised Turkey's "support for the Palestinian people" after the meeting with Erdogan.

A further question that ought to be asked in light of the recent venomous anti-Israel statements by Hamas leaders in the past few days: Why is the United Nations trying to convince Hamas to participate in Palestinian presidential and parliamentary elections?

What is the point of pressuring Hamas to participate in the planned vote as long as Hamas remains committed to Israel's destruction? Instead of urging Hamas to participate in the elections, it would be better if the UN called on Hamas to abandon its charter and stop calling for the destruction of Israel.

The international community already caused damage by allowing Hamas to run unconditionally in the January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary election. Calamitously, the international community failed to demand that Hamas renounce violence, recognize Israel's right to exist and commit to all agreements signed between the Palestinians and Israel as a prerequisite for participating in that election, which resulted in a Hamas victory.

Then, Hamas leaders were clever. They ran in the election under the umbrella of the very same Oslo Accords that they refuse to recognize. Hamas, in other words, used the Oslo Accords which its rejects as a means to take control of the Palestinian parliament.

It now seems that the international community is about to repeat its disastrous decision to permit Hamas to participate in elections. It is really not that hard to understand Hamas's true policies and positions – Hamas makes them crystal clear.

All that is needed is for Erdogan and the rest of the world to listen to the statements of Hamas leaders in the past few days to understand that the movement is more determined than ever to achieve its goals of driving Jews "out of all of Palestine" and replacing Israel with an Islamic state. It has been listening for 32 years. What is it that they do not understand about "Death to Israel"?

Those who are embracing Hamas are only legitimizing its extremist ideology and facilitating its mission of destroying Israel, this time by rising to power through an election backed by the UN, EU and other international parties. It makes one wonder what their real motive is.

Murder of Turkish Women Reaches Epidemic Proportions

By Uzay Bulut

The murder of women by male relatives, particularly spouses or former spouses, has become a dangerous trend in Turkey.

On November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, thousands of Turkish women took part in demonstrations at Istanbul's Taksim Square. The women were protesting the increasing number of murders in the country committed by men against female family members. After reading a statement to the press, the demonstrators were attacked by police with tear gas and plastic bullets.

The murder of women by male relatives - particularly spouses or former spouses - has become a dangerous trend in Turkey. The brutal murder, on August 18, of 38-year-old Emine Bulut by her ex-husband - in front of their 10-year-old daughter - is one particularly noteworthy case. Bulut was stabbed multiple times in the neck at a café in the city of Kirikkale, where she had gone to meet the man from whom she had been divorced for several years. In a video of the attack, which went viral on social media, Bulut is seen covered in blood, shouting, "I don't want to die," as her terrified child screams along with her.

In response to the attack, women across Turkey held demonstrations to condemn the killing and called on the government to guarantee their protection.

Bulut's gruesome murder, however, was only one of many attacks against women in Turkey at the hands of the men in their lives. The following examples, from the month of August alone, illustrate the gravity of the situation:

- On August 22, a woman was stabbed to death by her abusive husband. Four days prior to her murder, she had taken out a restraining order.
- On August 24, a woman who had just given birth was beaten and stabbed by her husband in her hospital bed. The woman had filed for divorce due to domestic violence.
- Also on August 24, a man murdered his wife and daughter.

- On August 25, the body of a woman, who had been shot in the head, was found near her home. Her husband was arrested as a suspect.
- Also on August 25, a woman was shot by her husband after asking him for a divorce.
- On August 27, a woman seeking a divorce was stabbed and severely injured by her husband in front of their 4-year-old daughter.
- Also on August 27, a man strangled his wife to death with her headscarf.

According to the Turkish women's-rights platform, "We Will Stop Femicide," 652 women were killed by men in the year-and-a-half period prior to November 2018 - 36 of whom were murdered in October of that year.

The perpetrators of 37% of the cases in October have not been identified, but the rest were found to be husbands, boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, brothers, fathers or other male relatives. The cause of 50% of the killings was not determined, but 16% of the women were killed because they wanted to make decisions about their lives, such as wanting a divorce, rejecting offers of reconciliation or even for not answering the phone when called by their men. 13% of the women were killed for "economic reasons."

The Central Women's Committee of Turkey's Human Rights Association (HRA) released a statement on August 26, titled "Violence against women is a result of discriminatory policies," which reads, in part:
"Protecting women from male violence can only be realized through state policies focusing on gender equality. One of the reasons why such a large number of women fall victim to violence is the reluctance and even prevention of relevant institutions to implement current laws.

"The provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which Turkey ratified in 1985 and put into effect, are not being implemented. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women significantly states in its 16th paragraph the following: 'Gender-based violence against women, may amount to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in certain circumstances, including in cases of rape, domestic violence or harmful practices, among others.'

"The Istanbul Convention was signed and ratified by Turkey on 11 May 2011 and 14 March 2012 respectively. The purposes of the convention are to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence; contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and promote substantive equality between women and men, including by empowering women; design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection of and assistance to all victims of violence against women and domestic violence; promote international co-operation with a view to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence; provide support and assistance to organizations and law enforcement agencies to effectively co-operate in order to adopt and integrated approach to eliminating violence against women and domestic violence. The incidents, however, reveal the ways in which these provisions are not being implemented, how its articles are not complied with, and how they have not been institutionalized.

"Moreover, if the authorities had even enabled the sufficient implementation of the Constitution and Law No. 6284 violence against women would have been prevented."
The lack of law enforcement, however, is only part of the problem, according to the HRA, which says that the media and the country's chief religious institution both share culpability:

"...Violence is normalized in various programs and shows on TV. 16,000 complaints have been lodged before the Radio and Television Supreme Council's communication center within the last 8 months due to violent content on TV, but not a single one was discussed at the council's meetings, according to İlhan Taşcı, CHP [Republican People's Party] deputy and Radio and Television Supreme Council Member. Deputy Taşcı has expressed the horrifying truth about violence against women by saying, 'There was no finger left unbroken, no women left unbeaten for the last two seasons of a show aired on a pro-government TV channel...'

"The statement by Diyanet [Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs] on violence against women is indeed an explicit expression of the mindset that forms the basis of violence. The president of Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, said: 'In our religion, the life, dignity and rights of women are untouchable and entrusted [to men].' By saying so, he declares that all the rights of women are entrusted to men; he thus objectified women. But we women are not entrusted to men or the government that represents male [supremacy]."

By saying that women's life, dignity and rights are "entrusted to men," Erbaş effectively stated that women do not have the right or ability to make their own life choices, independent of men's approval or permission. He thus appears to see women as "men's objects," implying that it is men who are in charge of the implementation of women's rights, including the right to life. Erbaş - like many other Islamist state authorities in Turkey - fails to understand that women's rights are women's fundamental, natural, inalienable rights and women are entitled to these rights.

The HRA listed a set of demands to rectify the intolerable situation. These include:

- The number of women's shelters should be increased and protected employment opportunities should be offered.
- Effective investigations should be initiated into those engaging in violent acts against women; impunity policies should be dropped; reduced sentences should be handed out, for instance, for good conduct, and those based on judges' personal opinions should be put to an end.
- Agencies based on gender equality should be established and these should not be male-dominant, but based on women.
- The structure of the law enforcement and the judiciary should be revised, focusing on protecting individuals, not the family; officers should be trained within this scope.
- Broadcasts and published material that legitimize violence against women should be discontinued without delay.

Misogynistic statements by some government authorities demonstrating their opposition to gender equality; law enforcement and judiciary officials who fail or refuse to apply laws that would protect women; the extremely violent TV content targeting women; and religious teachings that promote violence against women all appear to lead to widespread murders and abuse of women in Turkey.

For Yazidis, Baghdadi's death 'doesn't feel like justice yet'

By Don Gibbons
CMER Board Member

Daesh leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's death in October will mean nothing to 19-year-old rape victim Jamila unless the Daesh militants who enslaved her are brought to justice.

Jamila, who asked not to be identified by her last name, is one of the thousands of women from the Yazidi minority religion who were kidnapped and raped by Daesh after it mounted an assault on the Yazidi homeland in northern Iraq in August 2014.

"Even if Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is dead, it doesn't mean Daesh is dead," Jamila told *Reuters* outside the tent that is now her temporary home in the Sharya camp for displaced Yazidis in Iraq's Kurdistan Region. She added:

This doesn't feel like justice yet," she said. "I want the men who took me, who raped me, to stand trial. And I want to have my voice heard in court. I want to face them in court … Without proper trials, his death has no meaning.

Baghdadi, who had led Daesh since 2010, detonated a suicide vest after being cornered in a raid by US special forces in northwest Syria. He died a coward begging for his life.

Inspired by his edicts to enslave and slaughter Yazidis, who Daesh regard as infidels, his followers shot, beheaded and kidnapped thousands in a rampage which the United Nations called a genocidal campaign against them.

Along with thousands of other women and children, Jamila said she was enslaved by the militants and kept in captivity for five months in the city of Mosul along with her sister.

She was just 14 when she was seized. But her problems did not end after she and her sister managed to escape when, she said, their guards were high on drugs.

“When I first came back, I had a nervous breakdown and psychological problems for two years, so I couldn’t go to school,” she said.

Now instead of working or catching up on her years of lost schooling, she looks after her mother, with whom she shares her cramped tent at the camp.

“My mother can’t walk and has health problems so I have to stay and take care of her because my older siblings are in Germany,” she said.

The prospect of going home to Sinjar in northern Iraq is not an option for Jamila, and many others. The city still lies in ruin four years after the IS onslaught, and suspicion runs deep in the ethnically mixed area.

Abu Bakr Baghdadi killed himself during a US military operation in Syria

“Sinjar is completely destroyed. Even if we could go back, I wouldn’t want to because we’d be surrounded by the same Arab neighbours who all joined Daesh in the first place, and helped them kill us (Yazidis),” she said.

Thousands of men are being tried in Iraqi courts for their ties to Daesh. Iraq has so far not allowed victims to testify in court, something community leaders and human rights groups say would go a long way in the healing process.

“It is deplorable that not a single victim of Daesh’s horrific abuses including sexual slavery has gotten their day in court,” said Belkis Wille, Iraq Researcher for Human Rights Watch. “Iraq’s justice system is designed to allow the state to exact mass revenge against suspects, not provide real accountability for victims.”

For some of the nearly 17,000 Yazidis at the Sharya camp, Baghdadi’s death was the first step in that direction though they fear the Daesh fighters who are still alive.

Mayan Sinu, 25, can dream of a new life after the camp as she and her three children have been granted asylum by Australia. But she also wants the men who shot her husband in the legs and dragged him off to be brought to justice. He has been missing since the incident five years ago.

In Iran, It Is a Crime to Be a Christian

By Dr. Majid Rafizadeh

The Islamic Republic of Iran is unleashing a sweeping crackdown on Christians, particularly those who have dared to convert from Islam to Christianity

The Islamic Republic of Iran is unleashing a sweeping crackdown on Christians, particularly those who have dared to convert from Islam to Christianity.

Most recently, nine Christians in Iran, possibly converts, have been convicted by the Islamic court, and each sentenced to five years in prison. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) arrested them for attending church services at a private house. According to a report by Article 18, an Iranian NGO which promotes religious freedom: "The arresting officers introduced themselves as agents from the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS).

"They stormed the Christians' homes in a coordinated operation at around 9am, confiscating Bibles, Christian literature, wooden crosses and pictures carrying Christian symbols, along with laptops, phones, all forms of identity cards, bank cards and other personal belongings. "

Christian families are generally dehumanized and humiliated in the community during the agent's raids. As the Article 18 report explained, "The officers are reported to have treated the Christians harshly, even though small children were present during the arrests."

Across Iran, Christians are being arrested and jailed on trumped-up charges, such as "promoting Zionism", "spreading corrupt Christians beliefs", "propagating against the Islamic Republic in favour of Christianity", "orientation toward the land of Christianity," or "endangering national security". Open Doors USA stated that one particular charge - "acting against national security" - is often used by the Iranian authorities "to prosecute Christians for their house church activities."

The claim of Iranian leaders that the peaceful religious practices of a minority group pose a grave a threat to national security is totally unacceptable. Iran's total population is roughly 80 million, with anywhere between 117,000 and 3 million being Christian, according to various estimates. Even though Christians make up an

extremely small part of the population, however, they have always been viewed, under the Islamic law of Iran, as a threat to "national security".

The activities of Christians in the Islamic Republic are closely monitored by the Iranian intelligence service (MOIS) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRCG). They are not permitted to share their faith with others or to conduct church services in Farsi, Iran's national language.

It is important to hold accountable those Iranian individuals and institutions who are responsible for persecuting Christians.

Three of the Islamist judges known to preside over the trials of Christians are Mashallah Ahmadzadeh, Mohammed Moghiseh, and Ahmad Zargar. The international community needs to consider imposing sanctions on them.

The NGO International Christian Concern (ICC) submitted the names of these judges to the US Treasury for consideration of sanctions. ICC stated:

"These three Revolutionary Court judges, and Evin Prison, have a long record of human rights abuses toward Iranian Christians. The judges are responsible for convicting Christians on trumped up charges. They wield Iran's legal system as a systemic tool of repression against religious minorities. Often, when Christians stand firm in their faith, Iran's judges send them to the notorious Evin Prison, located on the outskirts of Tehran. Stories of those who survived Evin Prison are heartbreaking; the wide variety of abuse faced by inmates is chilling."

Converts to Christianity from Islam, according the Iran's Islamic law, can face the death penalty. The Iranian Islamist judges generally resort to verses from the Quran and *Hadith* (Muhammad's sayings and acts) to justify their verdicts. One particular verse in Qur'an states:

"They wish you would disbelieve as they disbelieved so you would be alike. So do not take from among them allies until they emigrate for the cause of Allah. But if they turn away, then seize them and kill them wherever you find them and take not from among them any ally or helper." (Qur'an 4:89)

A hadith attributed to Muhammad says: "Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him".

Even though the international community labels the government of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani as a moderate administration, and even though Rouhani claims that the Islamic Republic treats all religions justly and fairly, Iran is one of the worst places in the world for Christians. According to the World Watch List compiled by Open Doors USA, Iran is currently ranked as the ninth-worst country for faith-based persecution. Iran systematically violates the U.S. International Religious Freedom Act and this is why, since 1999, the U.S. has designated the Islamic Republic as a "Country of Concern."

Under international law, the Iranian government has an obligation to respect freedom of religion. Yet, while Christians are being increasingly persecuted and their rights are violated in Iran at an unprecedented level, the international community still remains silent.