

[A new study on the Middle East takes the wraps off Iran's militia doctrine](#)

Wed, 2021-02-10 21:27

LONDON: As the smoke cleared on another Houthi terrorist attack in Saudi Arabia, this time a drone attack on the Kingdom's Abha airport, new details emerged about the extent of Iran's campaign of violence across the Middle East.

The Houthis claimed to use four drones in Wednesday's attack, which followed days of escalating aggression from the Iran-backed terror outfit. Meanwhile, a new report from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI) has warned that Iran-backed militias throughout the region are growing in size, scale and lethality.

The paper – titled "The View from Tehran: Iran's Militia Doctrine" – exposes the vast network of violent organizations supported by the regime.

With new evidence and a sweeping analysis, it details the militias supported by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the fastest-growing form of Tehran-backed proxy terrorist outfits in the Middle East.

It goes on to argue that militias supported, trained and supplied by the IRGC pose the greatest threat to regional stability.



This fervent ideological and religious affiliation means that Tehran can expect undying dedication to its deadly causes from groups aligned with the

IRGC. (AFP)

One of the report's co-authors, Professor Saeid Golkar, a senior fellow at the TBI and an assistant professor in the department of political science and public service at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, said that the IRGC-backed militias pose a unique danger to the Middle East.

Unlike the relationships between Tehran and its grassroots militias, which tend to be limited to shared tactical and material interests, the IRGC's links with its proxies are rooted in a radicalized shared worldview, with these groups fully adopting Tehran's ideology of Wilayat Al-Faqih, which grants Iran's supreme leader absolute authority over Shiite Muslims.

This fervent ideological and religious affiliation means that Tehran can expect undying dedication to its deadly causes from groups aligned with the IRGC.

To consolidate these links, Tehran uses the IRGC to heavily invest in the radicalization and indoctrination of militants, gathering resources and support from the regime's so-called soft-power institutions in the diplomatic, humanitarian, educational and cultural areas.

In Yemen, where the Iran-backed Houthis are waging war against the internationally recognized government, there is evidence that the IRGC's Quds Force – the branch that deals with unconventional warfare, psychological operations and military intelligence – is training Yemeni Shiite Muslims into adopting its worldview.

In 2014, the Quds Force deployed advisers, mostly from its Lebanese and Iraqi militia groups, to boost the Houthi efforts in consolidating power. Tehran has struggled to bring its authority and teachings over the group, but this has not reduced its efforts.

While the Houthis may not have yet adopted Iran's interpretation of Wilayat Al-Faqih, they are still following the same pipeline that has led to the creation of some of Tehran's most-powerful terrorist assets, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Asaid Al-Haaq in Iraq.

One of the TBI's analysts and a co-author of its new report, Kasra Aarabi, told Arab News that Iran has brought hundreds of Yemeni students from Houthi tribes to study at "soft power" institutions in Tehran like Al-Mustafa International University.



The IRGC's links with its proxies are rooted in a radicalized shared worldview, with these groups fully adopting Tehran's ideology of Wilayat Al-Faqih, which grants Iran's supreme leader absolute authority over Shiite Muslims. (AFP)

According to the report, some of the students have explicitly displayed loyalty to Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader.

Aarabi told Arab News that this worrying trend could signal a growth in the IRGC's influence over Yemen's Shiite Muslims, leading to further terrorist operations in the troubled country.

He warned that "sanctions relief will not be enough to stop IRGC-aligned groups. Their fighters are radicalized, they will fight regardless of access to material reward. We need to counter these groups the same way that we would when facing Sunni Islamist extremists."

Aarabi added that only a "full-scale hearts and minds approach with counterinsurgency strategies" will deal with these militias. Military solutions are not enough, he argued, governments will also need to challenge the ideology behind them.

"You need to adopt this approach to properly constrain them, starting from the root of the problem and pushing back the ideas that drive the violence," he said.

Golkar shared his fellow report author's view, arguing that the dominant Western approach to countering IRGC-supported groups has been insufficient.

"There is a popular joke in Iran," Golkar told Arab News, "that a couple are sleeping at home, they hear a noise in their apartment, the woman asks him to check what is happening, but the husband is scared of dealing with the reality and he says 'inshallah, it is just a cat, go back to sleep' – this has been the dominant approach of Western policymakers dealing with the IRGC."



Report: Militias supported, trained and supplied by the IRGC pose the greatest threat to regional stability. (AFP)

He added: “They are scared of what is happening, so they just say ‘it is a cat’, and that the IRGC is just a conventional military. But they are wrong. We need an approach that deals with the IRGC, the Quds Force and its militias by recognizing the reality of the extent of their reach.”

Golkar said perceptions had to change in the West to understand the extent of the IRGC’s influence. “Understanding the reality is vital, if you deny what is happening you cannot deal with it,” he said. “The second approach is the tactical response. We have to know how these militias are aligned with Tehran and how much they comply with the regime.”

Aarabi said “the militia doctrine has been designed to outlive the regime in Tehran. Even if the Islamic Republic collapsed, the IRGC has built an infrastructure across the region and this militia doctrine can go into a full insurgency mode. It can outlive the Islamic Republic, and this needs to be considered when policymakers design strategies to stem the problem.”

The extent of Iran’s nexus of evil is vast. The TBI identified 194 IRGC operations across 51 countries and five continents since 1979. With the first interactive tracker of the IRGC’s global footprint, analysts can for the first time observe a total depiction of Tehran’s wide-reaching violent operations.

Golkar and Aarabi challenged the view that Tehran is only supporting these groups as a deterrent. Aarabi said: “The argument goes that if relations

improve with the US and if sanctions are lifted, then the regime will feel less threatened and it will reduce its support for these groups.

“But our research totally contradicts this view. Many of these militias have embraced the IRGC’s ideology; they do not even recognize the territorial borders of Iran.”

He added: “These are not conventional forces defending the state of Iran. They are for the division of the world between the land of Muslims and the land of infidels.

“Easing sanctions will not work. Just 13 days after the nuclear deal was signed, Khamenei rejected the idea that any material incentive would cut Iran’s support for regional militias. As sanctions were being eased, we saw a surge in the militias and the manufactured IRGC groups.”



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In secret recording, Iran’s FM says downing of Ukraine flight could have been intentional

Iran producing uranium metal, further violating 2015 deal: IAEA

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2021-02-10 20:09

VIENNA: Iran has started producing uranium metal, the UN nuclear watchdog said Wednesday, in a fresh breach of the limits laid out in Tehran's 2015 deal with world powers.

The latest violation of the deal aimed at preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons comes days after US President Joe Biden made clear he would not lift sanctions against Iran unless it first adheres to agreement's commitments.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a statement seen by AFP that on February 8 it "verified 3.6 grammes of uranium metal at Iran's Fuel Plate Fabrication Plant in Esfahan".

IAEA director general Rafael Grossi informed member states of the new violation, the statement added.

Iran has previously said its research on uranium metal production was aimed at providing advanced fuel for a research reactor in Tehran.

But the topic is sensitive because uranium metal can be used as a component in nuclear weapons.

The deal says that after 10 years Iran would have been allowed to initiate research on producing uranium metal-based fuel "in small agreed quantities" but only if the other parties – the US, China, Russia, Germany, France and Britain – had given approval.

The new violation comes a month after Iran announced it had stepped up its uranium enrichment process to 20 percent purity, far above the 3.67 percent level permitted by the deal, but far below the amount required for an atomic bomb.

In 2018 US President Donald Trump dramatically withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and reimposed crippling economic sanctions on Tehran. The following year Tehran announced it would start breaking the deal's limits on nuclear activity.

Trump's successor Biden is seeking to revive the agreement, but the two sides appear to be in a standoff over who acts first.

"If they want Iran to return to its commitments... the United States must entirely lift the sanctions, in practice and not on paper," supreme Iranian leader Ali Khamenei said Sunday.

When Biden was asked on Sunday whether he would halt sanctions to convince Iran to return to the bargaining table, Biden offered a clear reply: "No."



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A new study on the Middle East takes the wraps off Iran's militia doctrine. In a secret recording, Iran's FM says downing of Ukraine flight could have been intentional.

[Turkey's Syria strategy in doubt after US policy shift](#)

Wed, 2021-02-10 21:47

ANKARA: The US announcement that it will focus on fighting Daesh remnants in Syria rather than guarding oil fields in the region could force Turkey to rethink its strategy in the war-racked country, analysts believe.

In a break from the Trump-era policy, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby on Tuesday said that about 900 US military personnel and contractors had been "disengaged" from Syrian oil fields since last August.

The move follows a deal between a US firm, Delta Crescent Energy, and the US-allied Syrian Kurds to develop and export the vast crude oil reserves in northeast Syria.

US forces in the region "are not authorized to provide assistance to any other private company seeking to develop oil resources in Syria," said Kirby, adding that the responsibility for the protection of civilians justifies the presence of US forces around the oil fields.

With Washington's focus now on defeating Daesh, the main question is whether this policy shift under the Biden administration will push Turkey to redesign its Syria policy.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst from the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Studies, believes the US move will have wide-ranging implications.

"The US is now there to secure the area against Daesh by supporting the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). US support is limited to military backup for the SDF," he told Arab News.

In its latest quarterly report, released on Wednesday, the Pentagon said that clashes between Turkey and the SDF near Ayn Issa have undermined the force's fight against Daesh.

"Coalition forces continued to advise the SDF on its independent operations against Daesh. However, the SDF, which has no air assets, relied on coalition air support, including for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and partnered with coalition forces during most of its operations," it said.

However, Ankara is critical of Washington's cooperation with the SDF, which it considers a terror organization. Turkey also fears that further support may encourage the Syrian Kurds to seek greater autonomy and also inspire their supporters in Turkey.

According to Saban, strengthening the SDF will lead to Turkey's line of control being redrawn, and will eliminate joint patrols between the Russians and Turks in the east.

"There have been a lot of statements from Turkey about their advance into the area because of the terror threat. Now, after the Pentagon statement, it is crystal clear that such an advance will no longer happen," he said.

According to Caroline Rose, senior analyst at the Center for Global Policy in Washington, the switch in US policy away from guarding Syrian oil fields is a sign that the Pentagon is adopting "a new phase of force projection," narrowing its focus on combating Daesh enclaves in the northeast and cooperating with local forces such as the SDF.

"This development is taking place parallel to the US draw-down in Iraq, where the Pentagon has withdrawn from eight bases and reduced its force to 2,500 personnel," she told Arab News.

While increased cooperation between the US and SDF will be viewed unfavorably

in Ankara, Rose believes it is unlikely Turkey will be compelled to launch a military campaign against SDF elements similar to Operation Peace Spring in 2019 or Operation Olive Branch in 2018.

Turkey will likely seek to strengthen its control of the strip of territory it controls in the region – the so-called “peace corridor” – as a counterweight to its rivals in Syria and as a launch point for future influence, Rose added.

Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma, doubts the latest Pentagon announcement will force a change in Turkish policy.

Ankara will be reluctant to make any bold moves against the US in northeastern Syria that could antagonize the new administration until it gets a better feel for Biden’s policy in the region and toward Turkey, he said.

The US goal in northeastern Syria may have shifted away from “protecting Syria’s oil,” but the underlying strategy remains the same, Landis said.

“The US is not about to allow Damascus or Ankara to exploit Syria’s oil reserves in that area.”

He added: “This is an optics operation for the White House, which does not want to be associated with Trump’s crass economic imperialism.”

Landis said that for several years the US presence in the region has been explained as an attempt to gain leverage against and to weaken Assad, Russia and Iran. That effort has not changed.

“The US continues to support Kurdish quasi-independence and supremacy in northeast Syria, which includes the exploitation of the region’s oil riches in cooperation with the US-based company,” he added.



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Daesh ambush kills 26 pro-regime fighters in Syria
US-backed fighters seize major Syrian oil field

[Yemeni Christian priest detained, tortured by Houthis for four years](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-09 22:16

DUBAI: Yemeni Christians, alongside the country's Baha'i adherents and what is left of its Jewish community, face great oppression at the hands of the Houthi militia, with no better example than the fate of Mushir Khalidi.

The 50-year-old priest has been imprisoned by the group's intelligence services for four years, as part of a campaign of arrests launched by the group against the estimated 2,000 Christians in territory it controls.

The presence of Yemen's ancient Jewish community is all but over, with the Houthis' insistence on deporting the last two families left in Sana'a. The militia has also deported the leaders of the Baha'i sect, while continuing to prosecute 19 members, despite its claim last year that it would pardon them after four years of detentions.

Sources in the Sana'a told Asharq Al-Awsat daily that the Houthi militia specifically targeted Yemeni Christians and arrested many of them, including Khalidi, a convert, who was allegedly subjected to torture in prison. Houthi intelligence continues to investigate others whose religious beliefs have not yet been disclosed, especially since most of the Yemeni converts to Christianity have already left the country.

Khalidi's family have avoided talking about his imprisonment for fear of repercussions against him, but one former prisoner, recently released from a Houthi jail, told Asharq Al-Awsat that he met Khalidi and others in detention, and said that the priest was arrested after the militia took control of Sana'a, saying his jailers kept him in solitary confinement for weeks at a time. He added that other Christian prisoners had been forced to recant their religious beliefs under torture.

Two of Khalidi's friends told Asharq Al-Awsat, on condition of anonymity, that he converted to Christianity in the mid-1990s, and that the Yemeni Christian community, having previously performed religious rituals secretly in various locations in Sana'a, Taiz and Ibb, and mostly fled to Lebanon, Cyprus and elsewhere since the outbreak of war.

According to these sources, the Khalidi's wife and his five children currently live in a rented apartment in Sana'a, and they live in fear for their lives because of the Houthi's intolerance of other religions.

The sources say that a Houthi leader called Khaled Al-Madani handles the file of what the group describes as "manifestations of Westernization," and his duties include, in addition to prosecuting followers of other religions, controlling the nature of work women are permitted to carry out, the regulations on wearing clothes, and gender-mixing in universities and institutes.

The Baha'i International Community issued a statement saying Houthi authorities continue to harass the minority in Yemen, terrorizing them, endangering their lives and seizing their property, citing the case of the 19 members of the sect currently on trial.

"What is happening to these 19 people is outrageous, but it has become very familiar to us," said Diane Alaei, the representative of the Baha'i International Community to the UN in Geneva, referring to a previous case of six Yemeni Bahai's imprisoned between 2013 and 2017, who were freed after a UN-backed campaign led to them being released, but then deported and classed as "fugitives."



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Orthodox priest shot in Lyon, suspect held in France's third attack in two weeks
Houthis step up attacks on Marib despite resistance, condemnation

[UN Yemen envoy demands rebels halt Marib attack](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-02-09 21:19

AL-MUKALLA: The UN Yemen envoy on Tuesday demanded Iran-backed Houthis halt their large-scale offensive on the central city of Marib, saying the attack threatened diplomatic efforts to bring peace to the country.

Martin Griffiths tweeted that he was "extremely concerned about the resumption of hostilities in Marib, especially at a time of renewed diplomatic momentum to end the war and resume the political process."

The envoy added that “a negotiated political settlement that meets the aspirations of the Yemeni people is the only sustainable solution to end this conflict.”

Griffiths’ comments came as the Yemeni army announced it had killed or captured dozens of rebels.

The envoy’s criticism of the Houthis follows a two-day visit to Iran where he discussed the Yemen conflict with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and leading officials.

The two men discussed the urgent need for a nationwide cease-fire, the opening of Sanaa airport and the easing of restrictions on Hodeidah ports, Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN chief, said in New York on Monday.

The Yemeni army on Tuesday said it had killed and captured dozens of the Houthis while repelling attacks on Marib.

Houthi rebels have resumed their push to recapture the oil and gas-rich city that hosts thousands of troops and key Arab coalition camps as well as thousands of people who have fled fighting in the country.

“We have pushed back their attacks and incursions in Murad, Al-Makhdara, Helan, Serwah and Al-Mashja’a,” army spokesman Brig. Gen. Abdu Abdullah Majili told Arab News by telephone on Tuesday.

Troops and allied tribesmen, backed by air support from Arab coalition warplanes, halted Houthi advances, and seized weapons and ammunition abandoned by the rebels, he said.

“We managed to thwart their attacks and launch counterattacks thanks to cohesion between the national army and resistance fighters, and military support from the Arab coalition,” Majili said.

Sultan Al-Arada, governor of Marib, vowed to defeat the Houthis, saying the rebels have never taken calls for peace seriously.

In neighboring Jouf, fierce fighting broke out on Monday and Tuesday as the Houthis launched a simultaneous attack on government forces in Dahedha and other contested areas, local officials said.

In Sanaa, Houthi leaders called on supporters to donate funds to support the attacks on Marib, reiterating the rebels’ determination to seize the city despite international calls to halt the offensive.

Mohammed Al-Bukhaiti, a Houthi official, urged followers to head to local banks, post offices and mosques to give money to help the offensive, promising an “imminent victory” that would bring the city of Marib under their control.

Separately, a Houthi-controlled court on Tuesday sentenced 11 pro-government MPs to death and ordered the confiscation of their properties inside and outside Yemen after they took part in a parliamentary session in the city of

Seiyun in April 2019, local media said.

The condemned MPs include oil, banking and telecom businessman Hamed Abdullah Al-Amer, and Insaf Mayo, chairman of the Arab Parliament Economic Commission.

The Houthis previously have convicted hundreds of army generals, security officers, politicians, human rights activists and journalists for supporting the internationally recognized government and the Arab coalition military operations in Yemen.



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Houthis step up attacks on Marib despite resistance, condemnation France condemns Houthi air attacks on Saudi Arabia, demands end to Yemen offensive