



THE IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL, THE FIGHT AGAINST ISIL AND IRAN'S DOMESTIC TROUBLES

Dr. Ely Karmon, Senior Fellow at ICT
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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of Iran's external and internal woes the United States and its allies should not compromise in the vital nuclear negotiations or accept Tehran's proposals to help in the fight against ISIL.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).



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According to a Reuters report, Iran is ready to work with the United States and its allies to stop the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL or ISIS), but would like more flexibility on Iran's uranium enrichment program in exchange. "Iran is a very influential country in the region and can help in the fight against the ISIL [Islamic State – IS] terrorists ... but it is a two-way street. You give something, you take something," said a senior Iranian official. "ISIL is a threat to world security, not our (nuclear) program, which is a peaceful program," the official added. Another Iranian official echoed the remarks. Both officials said they would like the United States and its Western allies to show flexibility on the number of atomic centrifuges Tehran could keep under any long-term deal that would lift sanctions.

According to this report, Iran has sent mixed signals about its willingness to cooperate on defeating ISIL. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said recently that he vetoed a U.S. overture to the Islamic Republic to work together on this matter, while U.S. officials said there was no such offer. In public, both Washington and Tehran have ruled out cooperating militarily but in private, Iranian officials have voiced a willingness to work with the U.S., though not necessarily on the battlefield.¹

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said on September 19 that Iran has a role to play in defeating Islamic State, indicating the U.S. position may also be shifting. Despite not

¹ Parisa Hafezi and Louis Charbonneau, "Exclusive: Iran seeks give and take on Islamic State militants, nuclear program," *Reuters*, September 21, 2014.

being invited to join the U.S.-led military coalition, Iran - Kerry said - could help “take out” IS.²

In a recent article analyzing Iran’s nuclear negotiating strategy toward a deal before the November 24 deadline, Suzanne Maloney, a former U.S. State Department policy advisor and Iran expert, argues that the Iranian approach “also relies on [Iranian President Rouhani’s] calculation that after more than a decade of frustrating talks and amidst a context of regional chaos, international resolve on the protracted, intractable nuclear crisis may be waning” against the backdrop of the emergence of the arguably more compelling threat from ISIL. She notes that both Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif focused their public remarks while at the UN General Assembly in New York in September “on the proposition that an expeditious nuclear bargain could be instrumental in securing Iranian assistance in the U.S.-led campaign to degrade ISIL.”³

Maloney notes that this attitude has influenced some audiences, among them former British foreign secretary Jack Straw, who recently published an article claiming PM “[David] Cameron should risk doing a deal with Iran” and his colleagues in the “P5 +1” (US, Britain, France, Russia, China and Germany) should be careful “not to make the best the enemy of the good.”⁴

Actually, it is Iran that needs the West against ISIL, as it could soon become the priority target in the evolving Sunni-Shiite sectarian terrorist war.

The ISIL threat to Iran

A recent document attributed to Abdullah Ahmed al-Meshedani, said to be a member of ISIL’s “war cabinet,” which Western security officials have deemed authentic, proposes

² BBC, “Islamic State crisis: Kerry says Iran can help defeat IS,” September 19, 2014.

³ Suzanne Maloney, “Reading Between the Red Lines: An Anatomy of Iran’s Eleventh-Hour Nuclear Negotiating Strategy,” *Iran at Brookings*, The Brookings Institution, October 16, 2014.

⁴ Jack Straw, “Cameron should risk doing a deal with Iran,” *gulfnews.com*, September 24, 2014, at <http://gulfnews.com/opinions/columnists/cameron-should-risk-doing-a-deal-with-iran-1.1389621>

an unlikely [wishful thinking] alliance with Russia against Tehran and Damascus in exchange for “Iran and its nuclear program” which would include *inter alia* Moscow access to an ISIL-held gas field in Iraq and backing the Sunni Gulf states against Shiite Iran and Alawite Syria. ISIL’s ultimate goal was to strip Iran of “all its power,” killing Iranian teachers, diplomats and businessmen and even destroying the Iranian caviar industry and “exterminating” its carpet industry.⁵

Since ISIL took control of Mosul, the second biggest Iraqi city, the Iraqi army crumbled like a house of cards, ISIL stormed most of the Sunni towns in the Nineveh and Anbar provinces at the beginning of June 2014, approached Baghdad and threatened to attack the Shiite holy sites in Karbala and Najaf, the Iranian military leaders issued numerous, quite hysterical, declarations and went out of their way to convince their audience that Iran’s territory is not under threat.

At the end of June 2014, Iranian border guards commander General Hossein Zolfaqari said the “ISIL terrorist group which has caused chaos in Northern and Northwestern Iraq in the last two weeks” has not approached Iran's borders in the West. He said Iran was boosting border checkpoints and plans to improve equipment of border units. Iranian Interior Ministry Spokesman Hossein Ali Amiri noted that there is no security lapse along Iran's borders with the neighboring countries, and no notable problem along the border with Iraq. “However, the necessary measures have been adopted by the Interior Ministry and border police,” he added.

At the same time, Deputy Chief Liaison of the Iranian Army's Ground Force troops General Ali Arasteh said divisions in the South and Southeast have gone on alert due to the unrests in Iraq. Lieutenant Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Force Brigadier General Abdollah Araqi also stressed that the country's borders are fully secure, adding that Iranian borders have been reinforced in terms of

⁵ *Times of Israel*, “Islamic State said to eye Iran’s nuclear secrets,” October 5, 2014.

manpower and military equipment. Lieutenant Commander of the Iranian Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari reiterated full control over the country's borders, and said the terrorists active in Iraq don't dare to pose a threat to Iran. Heidari claimed that what is happening in the regional states "is a part of the plots hatched by the arrogant powers and the Zionist regime."⁶

Deputy Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces for Cultural Affairs and Defense Publicity Brigadier General Massoud Jazayeri warned that Iran will give a crushing response to terrorists "and even their supporters" (hinting to U.S. and its regional allies) in case they dare to approach its borders.⁷

By the beginning of July, Iran's Police Chief Brigadier General Esmayeel Ahmadi Moqaddam underlined preparedness of the country's military, security and intelligence forces "to thwart any destabilizing threat to Iran's borders, particularly in the West". He said some ISIL militants may be arrested at Western borders, but no ISIL command has entered Iran "and there is no concern about terrorism."⁸

While Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari underscored the country's special and influential role in the region and the world he also mentioned the necessity for increasing security levels in Iran's coastal areas.⁹

The Commander of Iran's Basij (volunteer) Force Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Naqdi claimed that "the US has created and supported the terrorist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to sow discord among Muslims" and as a means to cause division in the Middle East region.¹⁰

⁶ *Fars News Agency (FNA)*, "Guards Commander: Iran's Western Borders Not Approached by ISIL Terrorists," June 25, 2014.

⁷ *FNA*, "Iran Vows to Give Crushing Response to Any Terrorist Aggression," June 28, 2014.

⁸ *FNA*, "Police Chief Underlines Iranian Forces' Full Control over Western Borders," July 1, 2014.

⁹ *FNA*, "Navy Commander Stresses Iran's Special, Influential Role in World," July 6, 2014.

¹⁰ *FNA*, "Commander Describes ISIL as US Tool to Create Rift among Muslims," June 23, 2014.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani underlined Tehran's preparedness to help Iraq in fighting terrorism, but dismissed any military assistance to Iraq or deployment of any Iranian troops there. However he claimed “that the great Iranian nation will spare no efforts to protect their holy sites.”¹¹

However, several days later, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian expressed concern about the situation in Iraq and said Tehran “is ready to dispatch weapons to Iraq within the framework of fighting terrorism” if asked by the Iraqi government. Abdollahian accused the U.S. of “trying to create a chaotic atmosphere in the Arab country similar to what it did in Ukraine.”¹²

By mid-October, Iranian television published a picture of Quds Force Major General Qassem Suleimani on an Iraqi battlefield surrounded by Kurdish peshmerga fighters. His “transformation from a man in the shadows as chief of covert foreign operations for the Revolutionary Guards into a public hero” is central to Iran's message to the world: If you want to beat Sunni militants, you need the help of the Shiite nation and its top military commander. "He is sending a message to the U.S. about their influence," said Antony Cordesman, a senior analyst at the Washington *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. "And there is a message to the Arabs that they too have to deal with Iran."¹³

Iranian General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said on state television in August that ISIL would have seized the Iraqi Kurdish capital of Erbil had it not been for Suleimani and 70 of his men intervening to defend the city.

Although Iran fell short of declaring an official armed intervention, the IRGC did send to Iraq Quds Force personnel, ground attack aircraft, and drones to protect key Iraqi Shiite communities and holy sites from ISIL takeover. Quds Force teams are located at

¹¹ FNA, “Iranian Deputy FM: Iraqis' Unity to Defeat Terrorists,” June 19, 2014.

¹² FNA, “Deputy FM: Tehran, Moscow Share Common Views on Fighting Terrorism in Iraq,” July 1, 2014.

¹³ Kambiz Foroohar, “Iran's message to world: You need us to fight Islamic State,” *Bloomberg News*, October 14, 2014.

Samarra, Baghdad, Karbala, and near Tikrit. These units have also been central to Iran's plan for organizing local Shiite militias that work with Iraqi government forces but are aligned with Tehran, on the model of popular militia units in Syria. Iran also reportedly deployed to Iraq up to seven ground attack Su-25 jets.¹⁴

Initially these steps were taken to protect the then close ally Iraqi PM Nouri al-Maliki, but Iran is prepared to offer substantial military support to any agreed successor in order to keep its influence in Baghdad and secure its own borders and stability.

Iran's Domestic Troubles

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

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

Western analysts and policymakers pay little attention to the plight of Iran's ethnic minorities, which have been heavily marginalized by the Persian-dominated Shiite

¹⁴ Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq," *PolicyWatch* 2312, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 8, 2014.

theocracy. The suppression of minority rights has resulted in ethnic insurgencies over the years, some of which continue to trouble the Iranian regime. RAND analysts evaluated in April 2013 that Iran's quickly declining economy and its increasing international isolation could push ethnic minorities and their Persian brethren to join forces and to pose a serious challenge to the Tehran regime.¹⁵

Arabistan

The Iranian Arab ethnic minority, the Ahwazis, has long endured oppression and discrimination and could be the first to emulate its Sunni brethren in Iraq and Syria. Iranian Arabs suffer from widespread poverty despite the fact that they inhabit a region rich in natural resources. Arab nationalist insurgents led by the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz (ASMLA) were responsible for six attacks against energy infrastructure in the oil rich Khuzestan Province in 2013. Iranian Arabs and many pan-Arab nationalists refer to Khuzestan Province as Arabistan. According to the Iranian media ASMLA militants staged 20 operations in 2012 and they had received financial support and operational training in Dubai. A group of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) named itself “the al-Ahwaz Battalion” in a sign of solidarity with the Iranian Arab cause and to single out Iran’s support for the Alawite regime.¹⁶

Iranian Kurdistan

The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) is the largest and best organized of the Kurdish opposition groups and seeks autonomy for the Kurds in Iran. It was established in 1945 in Mahabad in Iran. A few months after its creation, on January 22,

¹⁵ Alireza Nader and Robert Stewart, Iran's Forgotten Ethnic Minorities, *Foreign Policy*, April , 2013.

¹⁶ Chris Zambelis, “The Struggle for Arabistan: Tensions and Militancy in Iran’s Khuzestan Province,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 2, January 23, 2014.

1946, the PDK established the short-lived independent “Republic of Kurdistan,” destroyed by the Iranian army on December 17, 1946. After the revolution of 1979 it emerged as a mass-based party and one of the mainstream political forces in Iran. Two of KDPI's general secretaries, Dr. A.R. Ghassemloo and Dr S. Sharafkandi were assassinated by the Iranian agents in Vienna and Berlin. Today the group is based in Iraqi Kurdistan, but agreed to respect the Kurdistan Regional Government’s (KRG) demand not to carry out armed operations against the Islamic Republic.

According to PDKI’s website, during a couple of weeks between August and September 2014 at least 25 members of the Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as well as an agent of the intelligence agency Ettela’at were killed in different locations in Iranian Kurdistan. It is noteworthy that these operations have coincided with the 22 anniversary of the assassination of Kurdish leader Dr. Sadeq Sharafkandi.¹⁷

The KDPI’s fights with the Iranian military in Iran marked the first clashes between the two in years. An Iranian army commander and several Iranian soldiers were killed in clashes in Shino. The KDPI has claimed responsibility for the recent battles and announced that they are deploying their fighters to Iran for “political activities,” apparently in defiance of the KRG’s stance. Despite the concerns of the KRG, KDPI senior officials announced the group will not retreat from the Iranian Kurdistan.¹⁸

Khalid Azizi, the secretary-general of KDPI claimed that the September clashes happened when Iranian troops set ambushes to his forces, prompting a response from the Kurdish guerrillas. The Iranian Kurdish leader said he was committed to resolving issues with Tehran peacefully. Azizi denied he came under pressure from the KRG in Iraq to halt the fighting, but acknowledged: “We cannot use Kurdish lands [in Iraq] to launch attacks against Iran.” Azizi could not explain why these Iranian provocations happened

¹⁷ KDPI, “Report: Several members of IRGC and one agent of Ettela’at killed in Kurdistan,” September 17, 2014.

¹⁸ Fuad Haqiqi, “Mixed reaction to Kurdish fight against Iran,” *Ekurd.net*, October 2, 2014.

“while the region is on fire and Iran is involved in one way or another in the wars in Syria and Iraq?”¹⁹

Other Iranian Kurdish opposition groups are split on the KDPI’s new armed campaign against Iran. The Kurdistan Tailors’ Movement, said his group “will support any Kurdish political parties that fight the Islamic Republic,” as time is right for armed struggle. He said he expects the fighters could suffer losses in the early stages but will gradually gain experience. The Kurdistan Struggle Agency also supports armed activities against Iran and if they “have a good opportunity will resume armed struggle.”²⁰

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

General Ahmad Reza Pourdastan, Iranian Ground Force Commander Brigadier, announced that his forces have killed a number of PJAK militants who were trying to sneak into Iranian Kurdistan region (Rojhelat) carrying packs of explosives in June 2014. He termed the operation as a hard blow to PJAK.²¹

Iranian Baluchistan

A Sunni extremist group, Jaish ul-Adl, or the Army of Justice, based in Pakistan, has been carrying out a program of harassment, train derailments, assassinations and bombings since mid-2013. There has been a surge of attacks against Iranian military and

¹⁹ Vager Saadullah, “Iranian Kurdish KDPI chief: Iran set ambushes for us,” *EKurd.net*, October 15, 2014.

²⁰ <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/irankurd1155.htm>

²¹ *EKurd Net*, “Iranian army kills Kurdish PJAK rebels in eastern Kurdistan: commander,” June 22, 2014.

provincial officials in Iranian Baluchistan in autumn 2013. On October 25, 2013, Jaish-ul-Adl killed 14 Iranian border guards and wounded six others in the border region near the city of Saravan in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Iranian Sunni Islamists claimed responsibility for the killing of an Iranian prosecutor in Sistan Baluchistan province in November 2013 as revenge for the hanging of 16 prisoners carried in Iranian jails after the attack by the Jaish ul-Adl group in which Iranian 14 border guards were killed.²²

Five Iranian border guards were kidnapped by Jaish-ul-Adl on February 6, 2014 in southeastern Iran and taken into Pakistan. Jaish-ul-Adl killed one of the abductees. Iran has declared that it holds the Pakistani government responsible for the lives of the Iranian hostages.²³

However, in April Jaish Al-Adl released four of the five Iranian border guards who were kidnapped in February. After the fifth guard was executed Jaish ul-Adl threatened to kill another captive in 10 days but the insurgents “suspended the threat because it was in talks with Iranian authorities.”²⁴

According to the *New York Times*, Sunni insurgents in Pakistan increased attacks on Iranian border posts in the southeast of the country at the beginning of October, employing methods similar to those used by Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq. A car bomber struck a fortified base near the city of Saravan, killing a senior officer; three police officers were killed in an ambush after responding to a distress call. In September, insurgents rammed a vehicle laden with more than 1,000 pounds of explosives into one of the outer walls of a central base before launching a surprise attack with a convoy of

²² Marcus George, “Iranian deputy industry minister shot dead in Tehran,” Reuters, November 10, 2013.

²³ *PRESS TV*, “Jaish-ul-Adl terrorists kill one of captive Iranian border guards,” March 24, 2014.

²⁴ Scott Lucas, “Iran Daily, April 5: Sunni Insurgents Release 4 Kidnapped Border Guards” *EA WorldView*, April 5, 2014.

pickup trucks carrying 70 militants. Brig. Gen. Mohammad Pakpur of the IRGC said the attackers had been repelled only after a long firefight and the arrival of reinforcements.²⁵

On October 11, 2014 an Iranian police aircraft crashed in southeastern Iran killing all seven people on board. The victims included three senior police officers and a police employee travelling to the area to investigate the killing of four Iranian police border guards by gunmen near the Iran-Pakistan border. No group has claimed the attack, but Jaish ul-Adl is suspected to be responsible for the crash.²⁶

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of Iran's external and internal woes why the United States and its allies should be impressed by Tehran's proposals to help in the fight against ISIL and Sunni jihadists? More importantly, why should the West compromise on the vital nuclear issue when it is clear the Islamic Republic regime itself is a destabilizing force in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and the Middle East at large?

²⁵ Thomas Erdbrink, "Insurgents in Pakistan Stepping up Iran Strikes," *New York Times*, October 9, 2014.

²⁶ Scott Lucas, "Iran Daily, Oct 12: Did Insurgents Down Police Plane in Southeast, Killing Senior Officers?" *EA WorldView*, October 12, 2014.

Ethnic division of Iran*



*Source: *Historian Forum* at <http://historum.com/middle-eastern-african-history/46075-ethnic-division-iran.html>