

The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq

By Michael Knights

FOLLOWING IRAN'S APPARENT role in kick-starting the long-delayed formation of a government in Baghdad, Tehran is seen by many as the most influential external power in Iraq.¹ While this may or may not be true, it is clear that Iran has a proven ability to commission violence inside Iraq.² Yet while the covert programs run by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force is a source of influence in Iraq, paramilitary operations come at a cost. The militarization of Iranian influence is often counterproductive in Iraq, reinforcing Iraqis' generally negative attitudes toward Iran.³ Tehran's concern about negative Iraqi perceptions of its paramilitary proxies has influenced the evolution of Iranian support to the so-called "Special Groups" of militant Shi'a diehards in Iraq.

Iranian Support to "Special Groups"

As the unclassified Iraqi government Harmony records collated by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point illustrate, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been in the business of sponsoring Iraqi paramilitary proxies for 30 years, practically the government's entire existence.⁴ In some cases, the same Iraqi individuals run like a thread throughout the entire story, from Islamic terrorists, to exiled anti-Saddam guerrillas, to anti-American Special Group fighters in post-Ba'athist Iraq.⁵ Many of the historical patterns of Iranian support to Iraqi proxies hold true today.

1 A sober analysis of the situation is Martin Chulov, "Iran Brokers Behind-the-Scenes Deal for Pro-Tehran Government in Iraq," *Guardian*, October 17, 2010.

2 Probably the best primer on this issue is Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and Other Means* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).

3 Good polling data is available to support the strong anecdotal and media evidence available on this issue to Iraq watchers. See David Pollock and Ahmed Ali, "Iran Gets Negative Reviews in Iraq, Even from Shiites," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 4, 2010.

4 See Annex B of Felter and Fishman, which contains Ba'ath-era intelligence documents.

5 "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," U.S. Treasury Department, July 2, 2009.

Although paramilitary action is just one strand of Iranian influence-building in Iraq, it plays a particularly important role in Iran's pursuit of security-related objectives. Seeking to replicate the model used by Lebanon's Hizb Allah, the Special Groups are considered a vanguard that will leverage its record of resistance against the United States after major U.S. forces depart Iraq in December 2011. As well as seeking to hasten the U.S. withdrawal, the Special Groups demonstrate Iran's ability to destabilize Iraq and may be used to pressure a future government into reducing the long-term presence of U.S. forces in the country. More broadly, the Special Groups represent a flexible tool that might be used to aid Iran's effort to prevent nationalist and former Ba'athists from rising to the top of Iraqi politics and to maintain leverage over a new Shi'a-led government.

According to pre-2003 Iraqi government reporting on Iranian proxy operations, the IRGC Qods Force had already anticipated the need to split its support between groups that would "work openly" and others that would "work secretly" in a post-invasion Iraq.⁶ Ba'athist reporting appears to have been well-sourced and accurate in many respects: they correctly anticipated Iran's ability to support public organizations such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the paramilitary Badr Organization, while also backing covert Special Groups. A consistent feature of Iran's patronage has been careful efforts to spread Tehran's bets across many different horses.

The Politics of Special Group Operations

The armed factions that make up the Special Groups have passed through significant changes in the last two years, and they continue to evolve. The government security offensives of spring 2008 caused considerable damage to Iranian-backed networks, and many Special Group operators fled to sanctuaries in Iran. Since the summer of 2009, these groups have been allowed breathing space to recover and begin to reestablish their presence in Iraq.

6 "Study About the Disloyal Badr Corps 9," Iraqi General Security Office, January 2002, translated as part of the Harmony records, reference number ISGQ-2005-00038283, p. 71. Available in Felter and Fishman, p. 324.

There are many reasons why recovery has been possible. In June 2009, the U.S.-Iraq security agreement ended the ability of U.S. forces to operate unilaterally in Iraq's cities, where much of the fight against the Special Groups has been conducted. The U.S. military thereafter required an Iraqi warrant and Iraqi military cooperation to undertake raids against the Special Groups. In the extended lead-up to Iraq's March 2010 elections, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki sought to win favor with other Shi'a factions by using his direct operational control of Iraq's Counterterrorism Command to place a virtual embargo on such raids. Lacking the judicial evidence to hold Special Group detainees transferred to the Iraqi government, and facing pressure from Shi'a groups, the government began to release Special Group prisoners as soon as they were transferred to Iraqi custody by the United States.⁷

The military cells supported by Iran are spread across the legal spectrum, from completely covert organizations to political parties with deniable connections to the IRGC Qods Force. They include:

Kataib Hizb Allah

Kataib Hizb Allah (KH) was formed in early 2007 as a vehicle through which the IRGC Qods Force could deploy its most experienced operators and its most sensitive equipment.⁸ Much can be gleaned from the positioning of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (whose real name is Jamal al-Ibrahimi) as the leader of KH. Born in Basra, al-Muhandis is an adviser to IRGC Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani. The life history of al-Muhandis describes the arc of Iranian support for Iraqi Shi'a proxies, with al-Muhandis starting as an exiled member of the outlawed Da'wa Party, working with the IRGC Qods Force to undertake

7 Personal interview, U.S. intelligence analyst, Washington, D.C., August 4, 2010. In private conversations, U.S. intelligence personnel are candid about the limitations that now face any U.S.-initiated actions against Special Group operators.

8 KH has been closely associated with the fielding of the RPG-29 and with sensitive communications security equipment. KH was credited with having accessed an encrypted datalink feed from a U.S. Predator unmanned aerial vehicle. For details, see Michael Hoffman, John Reed and Joe Gould, "Army: Working to Encrypt UAV Video Feeds," *Army Times*, December 21, 2009.

terrorist operations against the Kuwaiti royal family and the U.S. and French embassies in Kuwait in the early 1980s.⁹ Al-Muhandis then joined the Badr movement while living in Iran in 1985, rising to become one of the Iraqi deputy commanders of Badr by 2001.¹⁰ He is a strategist with extensive experience dealing directly with the most senior Iraqi politicians; indeed, al-Muhandis was, until the March 2010 elections, an elected member of parliament, albeit spending most of his time in Iran.¹¹ Under al-Muhandis, KH has developed as a compact movement of less than 400 personnel that is firmly under IRGC Qods Force control and maintains relatively good operational security.¹²

Asaib Ahl al-Haq

Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) emerged between 2006 and 2008 as part of an effort by the IRGC Qods Force to create a popular organization similar to Lebanese Hizb Allah that would be easier to shape than Moqtada al-Sadr's uncontrollable Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) movement.¹³ AAH was built around one of al-Sadr's key rivals, a protégé of al-Sadr's father called Qais al-Khazali who had consistently opposed al-Sadr's cease-fire agreements with the U.S. and Iraqi militaries. After AAH undertook the kidnap and murder of five U.S. soldiers on January 20, 2007, al-Khazali was captured by coalition forces alongside his brother Laith Khazali and Lebanese Hizb Allah operative Ali Musa

Daquq in Basra on March 20, 2007.¹⁴ In time, al-Khazali was transferred to Iraqi custody and then released in exchange for kidnapped Briton Peter Moore on January 5, 2010.¹⁵ Although far less senior in the IRGC Qods Force hierarchy than al-Muhandis and 20 years his junior, Qais al-Khazali could become a significant political force in mainstream politics and is being courted by both al-Maliki and al-Sadr precisely because he has the capability to draw away a portion of Moqtada's supporters if he so chooses.

During al-Khazali's absence in prison, AAH played a delicate game, balancing the need to negotiate for the release of detainees against the desire of many AAH members to continue attacking U.S. forces. Like its predecessor, Jaysh al-Mahdi, AAH is becoming a catch-all for a wide range of militants who seek to engage in violence for a host of ideological, sectarian or purely commercial motives.¹⁶ Notorious Special Group commanders such as Sadrism breakaway Abu Mustapha al-Sheibani (whose real name is Hamid Thajeel al-Sheibani) and infamous Shi'a warlord Abu Deraa (whose real name is Ismail al-Lami) are reported to be returning from Iran to join AAH.¹⁷

Promised Day Brigades

The Promised Day Brigades (PDB) are the least understood of the major Iranian-influenced Shi'a militant groups. In theory, PDB is a Shi'a nationalist militia that provides Moqtada al-Sadr's militant followers a way to justify staying within his organization while reserving the theoretical right to fight U.S. forces. In practice, many purported members of PDB appear to collaborate with KH and AAH organizers to participate in small numbers of attacks on U.S. forces.¹⁸

14 U.S. Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, "Press Briefing, July 2," Multinational Force-Iraq, July 2, 2007.

15 Ned Parker and Saad Fakhrideen, "Iraq Frees Shiite Militant in Exchange for Briton, Followers Say," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 2010.

16 Personal interview, U.S. intelligence analyst, Baghdad, July 3, 2010.

17 Ma'ad Fayad, "Iraq: Notorious Shiite Warlord Returns to Baghdad," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, August 18, 2010; "Iraq: Return of Sheibani's Killer Squads," United Press International, September 30, 2010.

18 Personal interview, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency analyst, Washington, D.C., February 2010; Bill Roggio, "Iranian-Backed Shia Terror Group Remains a Threat

Badr Organization

Although the Badr Organization is a major political organization with seats in the new parliament, it also arguably plays a significant role in facilitating Special Group operations in Iraq. When it was formed in the early 1980s, the Badr movement was, in effect, the first Special Group.¹⁹ A proportion of senior Special Group commanders such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis are Badr personnel, with long-standing ties to current Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri. After 2003, Badr became the part of the IRGC Qods Force that was selected to "work openly" within the new Iraq. Badr inserted hundreds of its Iranian-trained operatives into the state security organs (notably the Ministry of Interior intelligence structure and key special forces and Iraqi Army units). As a result, the Special Groups have regularly received tip-offs and targeting guidance from their "fellow travelers" in the Badr movement.²⁰

Iran's Changed Approach

The period since 2003 has witnessed a balance of Iranian successes and failures in its proxy operations in Iraq. On the one hand, Iran has kept up military pressure on U.S. forces in Iraq and has demonstrated its ability to destabilize key areas. On the other hand, Iranian paramilitary involvement in Iraq is widely resented by Iraqis and has contributed to the downturn in the political fortunes of pro-Iranian parties such as the ISCI, driving other Shi'a blocs (such as al-Maliki's Da'wa Party) to distance themselves from Iran.

This trend was most clear in the early months of 2007 when Iran's political allies in Iraq issued a demarche to the IRGC Qods Force to scale back its support of Iraqi militias. After Lebanese Hizb Allah's successful "summer war" against Israel in July 2006, the IRGC Qods Force sought to replicate this victory in Iraq, opening the floodgates to provide advanced Explosively-Formed Projectile (EFP) munitions and other weapons to a wide range of Shi'a Islamist factions. The

in Iraq: General Odierno," *The Long War Journal*, July 13, 2010.

19 "Study about the Disloyal Badr Corps 9," pp. 255-330.

20 Since 2003, the author has seen literally dozens of U.S. and British intelligence documents highlighting the Badr role in paramilitary operations in Iraq.

9 "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq"; "Study about the Disloyal Badr Corps 9," p. 71.

10 Ibid.

11 See the brief article recounting a meeting with al-Muhandis by Thomas Strouse, "Kata'ib Hezbollah and the Intricate Web of Iranian Military Involvement in Iraq," *Terrorism Monitor* 8:9 (2010).

12 Personal interview, U.S. intelligence analyst, Baghdad, July 3, 2010. Also see "ISF Campaigns Against Kata'ib Hezbollah Weapons Smuggling, Rocket-Attack Network Along Iraq-Iran Border," press release, United States Forces - Iraq, February 12, 2010.

13 For a good early study on AAH, see Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, "Asaib Ahl al Haq and the Special Groups," Institute for the Study of War, January 13, 2009. Jaysh al-Mahdi was uncontrollable—to both Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran—because it grew so rapidly and under such chaotic conditions in post-Saddam Iraq. Unlike the Badr Corps, an organization designed by the IRGC Qods Force over a period of years, JAM quickly incorporated criminal elements and untrained civilians into a sprawling and loosely-structured movement in a number of months.

result was internecine assassinations of two provincial governors and two provincial police chiefs in the latter half of 2006, all Shi`a-on-Shi`a political killings using EFPs. The IRGC resolved to narrow its support for groups to more trusted entities after rival Shi`a groups began fighting in the shrine city of Karbala in late August 2007, which was the final straw for Iraq's Shi`a political and religious leaders.²¹

The re-think of Iranian support to Iraqi militants has had far-reaching effects. The development of alternatives to the out-of-control Jaysh al-Mahdi is one reason why new formations such as KH and AAH were developed. The need to place Iraqis in leadership roles is another factor, reflecting arrests of IRGC personnel in Iraq in 2005-2007, which showed that it was too risky to deploy significant numbers of Iranian IRGC personnel or even Lebanese Hizb Allah operatives to Iraq.²² According to U.S. and Iraqi security force interviewees, the IRGC Qods Force centralized its resupply operations to KH and AAH cells, adding a system of accounting for Iranian-supplied weapons. This meant moving from the "pull" system—where Iraqis came to ask a cell leader for weapons—to a more secure and selective "push" system, where the cell leader would allocate weapons to well-paid and experienced fighters who were known to be reliable. Each major arms cache now has a "hide custodian" who signs out weapons such as EFPs and is responsible for their proper use against U.S. forces and the minimization of Iraqi casualties. Money continues to be provided in significant volumes, allowing cells to be paid between \$4,000 and \$13,000 per rocket or roadside bomb attack, depending on the circumstances.²³ Communications

21 Greg Hoadley, "Sadrist Fume After Karbala Clashes: At Least 50 Dead in Fighting; Millions of Pilgrims Flee," Iraq Slogger, August 28, 2008. The added detail on Iraqi-Iranian discussions is based on personal interviews. See personal interview, U.S. Central Intelligence Agency analyst, Washington, D.C., February 2010.

22 The most notable instance was the detention of five Iranian intelligence personnel in Arbil. See James Glanz, "GI's in Iraq Raid Iranians' Offices," *New York Times*, January 12, 2007.

23 This section reflects interview material gathered by the author from a range of Iraqi security force intelligence and operational personnel in Iraq during visits in 2008, 2009 and 2010. Also see personal interview, U.S.

security and operational security are aided by the compact size of cells.

A constant feature of Iran's policy for more than 20 years has been the importance of uninterrupted cross-border resupply for Iran's proxies in Iraq. The broad outlines of cross-border movement have not changed greatly from the early 1990s in many places. The general principle is that personnel and equipment move through official points of entry (POE) whenever

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possible. For personnel, this is almost always possible due to the primitiveness of Iraq's customs and immigration services and due to the combined effects of corruption and professionally-forged documentation. Until the introduction of U.S.-provided vehicle scanning equipment, the Special Groups could bring weapons and explosives into Iraq through the POE on flatbed trucks, concealed beneath herds of sheep or bags of cement.²⁴ Even now, corruption and the slow degradation of the equipment make it possible to use border crossings to bring specialized equipment such as the milled copper cones for EFP munitions into the country.

Central Intelligence Agency analyst, Washington, D.C., February 2010.

24 Personal interview, U.S. intelligence analyst, date and location withheld. The author also has unclassified documentary analyses of smuggling tactics produced by coalition intelligence officers.

The use of professional smugglers is an age-old Iranian practice, involving cross-border tribes and corrupt border guards. Smuggling boats make daylight transits of the Hawr al-Howeiza, marshes in Maysan Province, with rockets and other equipment concealed under tarpaulins covered with fishing gear and fresh fish.²⁵ On land, the key routes continue to be the Badra area of Wasit Province, the northern Maysan border at multiple points, and eastern Basra (south of Majnoon and north of Shalamchah).²⁶ Iran's armed forces support border crossings with a number of means, including use of its own unmanned aerial vehicles, helicopters, long-range optics, signals intelligence and intimidation firing to discourage Iraqi border guard patrolling.²⁷

Operations and Tactics

Iran's support to Special Groups appears to be largely focused on anti-U.S. resistance operations as opposed to other types of sectarian and factional violence. The most visible symbol of Iran's support is the 20-30 rocket attacks launched against U.S. bases each month in Iraq, almost all of which involve entire rocket/mortar systems or components (such as fuel packs) identified as Iranian-produced by U.S. weapons intelligence specialists.²⁸ The IRGC has been supporting such attacks since the early 1980s, when Badr was supplied with rockets to use in Iraq during and after the Iran-Iraq War. Although local sourcing of rockets is undertaken whenever possible, most rocket artillery rounds in Iraq are too degraded to function properly. This has led Iran to smuggle large numbers of

25 Ibid. The author also has numerous photographic and map references developed by U.S. and Iraqi security forces that show exact crossing routes and identify cache sites and "hide custodians."

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 The Iranian government does not appear to be unduly concerned about plausible deniability, deploying new Iranian-produced "signature" weapons across Iraq. The U.S. government has released many photographic slideshows of newly-produced weapons systems in Iraq that are known to be manufactured by Iran. See the previously referenced briefing slides from Brig. Gen. Kevin Bergner for one example. The author has many weapons intelligence images that have not been released, including images from caches that were kept under surveillance after having been observed entering Iraq from Iran via boat.

107mm Hesab and 122mm Grad rockets into Iraq, as well as some larger 240mm Fajr rockets.²⁹ Although the mechanical reliability of firing switches (usually mechanical timers) is low—with up to half of each planned salvo often failing to fire—reduced U.S. air cover plus less effective Iraqi ground patrolling are allowing greater numbers of indirect fire attacks on U.S. bases.³⁰

The sophistication of indirect fire attacks is also increasing. In Baghdad and other cities, Special Groups tend to make greater use of 60mm and 81mm mortars to precisely target small U.S. Joint Security Stations.³¹ Banks of Improvised Rocket-Assisted Mortars (IRAM) have been used to great effect against urban U.S. bases in Baghdad and Amara.³² Efforts have also been made to increase the effectiveness of rocket attacks by launching horizontally at close range from within parked vehicles, launching at shallow angles to reduce warning and prevent interception by close-in weapons systems, or by overwhelming defenses with salvos of 16-20 truck-launched rockets.³³ Although indirect fire attacks are largely a harassment weapon, they have caused five fatalities to U.S. personnel and contractors in the last year.³⁴

The other visible sign of Special Group activity are roadside bombs. At present, these are almost entirely targeted on U.S. military vehicles plus the distinctive personal security detail vehicles that service U.S. reconstruction officials (which carry electronic countermeasures not seen on other vehicles). As a signature weapon

for Iranian-backed groups, EFPs are employed carefully to reduce Iraqi casualties. Due to this restriction plus the reduced number of U.S. targets on Iraq's roads, the incidence of EFP use has dropped from around 60 per month at the height of the "surge" in 2007 to an average of 17 per month in the first nine months of 2010.³⁵ To access U.S. targets, EFP cells have activated in areas where they were previously rarely encountered such as in Abu Ghurayb, Khalis and Muqadaiyya (in Diyala Province), and Kirkuk.³⁶

Per incident lethality has declined significantly since 2008 due to U.S. countermeasures and less effective weapons assembly and emplacement capabilities. Sporadic shortfalls in EFP components are apparent in the varying sophistication and composition of devices. Iranian-made C4, identifiable through chemical analysis, is less frequently used in EFPs today; more often the main charge is composed of five to 40 pounds of unidentified bulk explosive.³⁷ The EFP "liners" (the metal cone used to form the penetrator) come in up to a dozen sizes, with diameters between 2.75 inches and 16 inches.³⁸ The liners are largely better-quality copper cones, although some steel liners are used and some multiple-array devices have included a mix of copper and steel liners.³⁹

Despite the downscaling of EFP operations, the "engineer" cells capable of assembling EFPs and mounting such attacks continue to show signs of adaptation. Cells in Basra, Baghdad and along the main Supply Route Tampa South (between Baghdad and the Kuwaiti border) switch attack sites to match the movement patterns of U.S. units. The cells attempt to overcome U.S. countermeasures by offsetting the aiming points for devices (to take into account the "rhino" booms on U.S. vehicles), angling devices upwards to strike windows, and elevating devices

up lampposts and within T-walls or abandoned checkpoints to avoid the booms.⁴⁰ Cells also show adaptability in their combination of EFP elements (such as passive infrared firing switches) with claymore-style direction fragmentation charges.⁴¹ Large-caliber "daisy-chained" artillery shells (122mm to 155mm) are also periodically used to target U.S. vehicles. The highest quality Special Group bomb-maker cells active in Iraq appear to be based in northern Baghdad, Basra and in the Suq ash Shuyukh area, a marshland market town east of Nasiriyya that was a Badr stronghold throughout the Saddam era and a notorious den of thieves for hundreds of years before then.⁴²

A final and even murkier aspect of the Special Groups is their involvement with the deliberate killings of Iraqis. In the past, this aspect of Special Group activity has brought significant criticism onto Iran and its proxies. Although some Iraqis are killed in Special Group operations (as unintended civilian deaths in rocket or roadside bombing attacks or Iraqi Army deaths when joint U.S.-Iraqi patrols are bombed), deliberate targeting of Iraqis appears to be rare and selective. Evidence from arms caches suggests that Iranian-backed groups that stockpile EFP components and other Iranian signature weapons (240mm rockets, for instance) also maintain stocks of silenced pistols and under-vehicle magnetic IEDs ("sticky bombs").⁴³ These assassination tools suggest that some "direct action" is still undertaken against Iraqis to serve the political agenda of Iranian proxies or Iran's direct interests, or that such action could be undertaken again in the future.

29 This data is drawn from Olive Group intelligence reports gathered between 2006-2010.

30 This data is drawn from Olive Group Iraq Monthly Intelligence Report June 2010 and Olive Group Iraq Monthly Intelligence Report August 2010.

31 This data is drawn from Olive Group intelligence reports gathered between 2006-2010.

32 IRAMs usually consist of 8-14 propane cylinders filled with C4 explosive, propelled by 107mm rocket motors. Although often inaccurate, they can be lethal. On April 28, 2008, a barrage of 14 IRAMs killed two U.S. personnel and injured 16 in Baghdad. For details, see Ernesto Londono, "U.S. Troops in Iraq Face a Powerful New Weapon," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2008.

33 This data is drawn from Olive Group intelligence reports gathered between 2006-2010.

34 Personal interview, Olive Group analyst, October 10, 2010.

35 This data is drawn from Olive Group intelligence reports gathered between 2006-2010.

36 This data is drawn from Olive Group intelligence reports gathered in 2010.

37 Personal interviews, U.S. intelligence analysts and weapons intelligence specialists, dates and locations withheld.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 See the August 1, 2010 cache that was found in Zubayr, near Basra. As well as 76 rockets, 15 tons of TNT and significant amounts of bomb-making materiel, the cache included 41 magnets for making under-vehicle IEDs and silenced weapons. This information is based on Olive Group Basra Daily Intelligence Report, August 1, 2010.

Outlook for the Special Groups

The political situation in Iraq will have a significant effect on the further evolution of Special Groups. If, as seems likely, Moqtada al-Sadr joins key Iranian-backed parties such as Badr in the new government, many elements of PDB, AAH and KH will probably be drawn into the security forces as Badr personnel were in the post-2003 period. Some types of violence (such as rocketing of the government center in Baghdad) may decline, while targeted attacks on U.S. forces would persist or even intensify due to the new latitude enjoyed by such groups. Kidnap of Western contractors or military personnel has been the subject of government warnings during 2010 and could become a significant risk if U.S.-Iran tensions increase in coming years. Sectarian utilization of the Special Groups to target Sunni nationalist oppositionists could become a problem once again. If Iraqi government policy crosses any "red lines" (such as long-term U.S. military presence in Iraq, rapid rearmament or anti-Iranian oil policy), the Special Groups could be turned against the Iraqi state in service of Iranian interests, showering the government center with rockets or assassinating key individuals.

As has been shown throughout the Islamic Republic of Iran's 30-year engagement in Iraq, however, other Iraqi militant groups will continue to chart their own course and will make and break cease-fires according to their own interests.

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Fragmentation in the North Caucasus Insurgency

By Christopher Swift

THE OCTOBER 19, 2010 attack on the parliament building in Grozny, Chechnya's capital city, underscores the ferocity and tenacity of the North Caucasus insurgency. Timed to correspond with a visit by Russian Interior Minister Nurgaliev, the assault killed four and injured 17. The perpetrators took no hostages, issued no statements, and made no demands. Each died by his own hand, detonating explosive vests during the initial attack and following the ensuing firefight with Interior Ministry (MDV) forces.¹

This short-lived siege followed a series of similar attacks across the Russian Federation. On March 29, two Dagestani *shahidki* attacked the Lubyanka and Park Kultury metro stations in Moscow, killing 40 commuters and wounding more than 100.² On March 31, a double suicide bombing in the Dagestani city of Kizlyar killed 12 and injured 23.³ On May 26, a suicide attack on a concert hall in Stavropol killed seven and injured another 40.⁴ Finally, on September 9, a suicide attack by Ingush militants on a market in Vladikavkaz killed 16 and injured 140.⁵

The frequency and intensity of these attacks illuminate a persistent, low-level insurrection. According to Russian Interior Minister Nurgaliev, insurgent attacks in Dagestan have killed 89 police officers and wounded 264 in the last year alone.⁶ Similar trends are evident in Ingushetia, where more than 400 police officers and 3,000 civilians were

killed during the last five years.⁷ Even Kabardino-Balkaria has succumbed to insurgent violence, with a May 1 bombing in the capital Nalchik killing one victim and wounding another 29.⁸

Until recently, Chechnya was the exception to this rule. Backed by the Kremlin, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov ruthlessly yet effectively suppressed the secessionist insurgency through a mixture of aggressive counterterrorism tactics and repressive state surveillance. Amnesties and patronage reinforced Kadyrov's authority, with some rebels abandoning the insurrection and others joining pro-Kremlin militias. As recently as February 2009, the 34-year-old Chechen strongman appealed to exiled militants to return home.⁹ Kadyrov even appropriated religion, implementing a state-sponsored Islamization campaign in an effort to undermine Islamist and Salafist activism. From prohibiting alcohol and promoting polygamy, to mandating Islamic attire and religious education in Chechen schools, the result has been an uncertain mixture of superficial Shari'a and secular autocracy.

The Chechen parliament siege raises serious questions about Kadyrov's stabilization strategy. Despite Chechnya's relative autonomy and substantial federal support, secessionist impulses still persist. It also reveals important new developments within the insurgency itself. Coming just two months after the August 29 assault on Tsentoroi, Kadyrov's home village, the attack on Chechnya's parliament marks a shift from the diffuse bombing and ambushes witnessed in recent years to a more focused strategy targeting the Chechen regime. That focus, in turn, reflects ethnic and operational fragmentation within the Caucasian Front. With prominent field commanders challenging separatist leader Doku Umarov's authority, the North

1 "Terrorist Attack on Chechen Parliament in Grozny," RIA Novosti, October 19, 2010.

2 "Moscow Metro Bombing Masterminds 'Will Be Destroyed,'" BBC, March 29, 2010.

3 "12 killed, 23 Hospitalized in Dagestan Blasts," RIA Novosti, March 31, 2010.

4 "Death Toll from South Russia Terrorist Attack Reaches 6," RIA Novosti, May 27, 2010.

5 "Chislo postradavshikh vo vremya terakta vo Vladikavkaze previisipo 160 chelovek," Interfax, September 10, 2010.

6 James Broder, "Gunmen Attach Chechen Parliament, 6 Reported Dead," Voice of America, October 19, 2010.

7 "Ingushetia Militants Announce Moratorium on Killing Police," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 6, 2010.

8 "Nalchik Bombing Classed as Terrorist Attack," RIA Novosti, May 1, 2010.

9 Muslim Ibragimov, "President of Chechnya Calls Former Militants Back Home from Europe," Caucasian Knot, February 6, 2009.