



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

## THE IRAN DEAL'S IMPACT ON NEO-JIHADISM



By Max Quigley

### Abstract

Following the P5+1 Iran nuclear deal, the likelihood of an exponential increase in violence across the region seems like a foregone conclusion. Apart from bolstering the Shia forces with the financial means to carry on their counter-Sunni war, Sunni militias themselves may well see an opportunity present itself as world powers descend on the region for their own political and financial interests.

## Introduction

The recently drafted Iran deal has seen a slew of opinion articles on its pros and cons. Analysts and politicians have been debating the potential future long-term and short-term implications. While the long-term implications hope to see an Iranian nuclear programme held in check and bring a greater degree of stability to the region, the short-term implications are almost unanimously considered inevitable; conflict.

Even the Obama administration predicts conflict, as seen by the hefty consolatory arms deals being offered to the US's Middle East allies to help counter Shia hegemony in the region once Iran becomes flush with \$150bn in sanctions relief. When confronted with the likely reality of Iran bolstering their proxy militias across the region, Obama replied, "is that more important than preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon? No."<sup>1</sup>

So, with the threat of drastically richer and better equipped Iran-backed militants in the region, Gulf states have essentially been backed into an unavoidable reactionary position of pre-emptive strikes to prevent Iranian influence from destabilising and undermining their respective influence in the region.

But what does this mean for jihadist groups across the region?

## AQAP

Saudi Arabia's intended response to the Iran deal was made clear as far back as June when the pro-government Al Jazeera daily wrote, "an Iran without sanctions will pump billions of dollars to its proxies, which are destabilizing Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Saudi Arabia will not allow Iran to take advantage of this deal."<sup>2</sup>

Mustafa Alani, a security and defence expert, told the Christian Science Monitor, "Yemen is the red line for Saudi Arabia. We will see military escalations in Yemen in the coming days in order to prevent what Saudi sees as an Iranian foothold in the Gulf."<sup>3</sup>

The Saudi-led coalition then, true to expert predictions, upped the ante by sending in ground troops and has since managed to push Shiite Houthi rebels as far back as Sanaa in a matter of weeks.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>5</sup> What was conspicuously lacking in the coalition campaign in Yemen was any apparent strategy at undermining Salafi jihadist forces like al-Qaeda in the

Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the increasing presence of the Islamic State.

Following the killing of 45 UAE soldiers in early September by Houthi forces, Emirati Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan reinforced his country's commitment to restore stability to Yemen. He said, "the UAE will remain committed to the Arab Coalition alongside Saudi Arabia to defend Yemen and the region until security, stability

*"Even the Obama administration predicts conflict, as seen by the hefty consolatory arms deals being offered to the US's Middle East allies"*

and peace are restored to sisterly Yemen."<sup>6</sup>

His comment gave a telling insight into Gulf policy. Gulf involvement in Yemen has been predominantly focused on repressing Shia forces who, according to virtually all western and Gulf security intelligence, represent nothing less than an Iranian proxy force.

Little doubt remains that this is the case, especially considering the discovery of IRGC commanders on the ground in Yemen.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Iran was swift to set up the first Iran – Yemen direct flight service, dropping medical and humanitarian equipment into the Houthi held capital Sanaa.<sup>8</sup>

However, the rapidity of the coalition response in Yemen since the outline of the Iran deal has been overwhelming, shattering Houthi positions that had been successfully held for months.

The battle has since turned northwards, away from Aden to Taiz, Marib and towards the capital Sanaa. Meanwhile, as Aden lays unattended following the Houthi expulsion, al-Qaeda have wandered in to take up key positions in the city, blow up the intelligence headquarters and raise their flags in considerable portions of the region.<sup>9</sup> In fact, al-Qaeda's influence in the area and in the Hadramawt region whose capital Mukalla they control, is so strong that they have begun implementing strict sharia with public floggings for crimes such as blasphemy and alcohol consumption.<sup>10</sup> All this to the apparent indifference of the coalition forces. This by no means indicates the Gulf states are somehow in cahoots with the Islamist forces, rather they would simply prefer to see a consolidation of

Sunni jihadist influence than that of Shiite, at least for the time being.

### *Hezbollah*

Meanwhile, US and Israeli authorities are irked by Russian military advances in Syria.<sup>11</sup> The Assad regime, strongly tied to Iran, has been steadily disintegrating over the past few years. With the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army all engaged in the carving up of his regime, Assad's forces received a necessary boon from the Iran deal.

Even before the particulars of the deal were decided upon, Russia and Iran had agreed to a vital arms deal, the sale of Russian S-300 defensive missile systems. With the deal now virtually in place, the multi-billion dollar deal will no doubt soon go through.<sup>12</sup> A weak Shia-affiliated government in Syria is financially undesirable for Russia. Much better for Russia would be to help Iranian proxy forces get a leg up in the region. Hence the sudden appearance of advanced Russian military equipment and massive cargo planes roving the Syrian countryside and airspace.<sup>13</sup> The US are 'disturbed' by these developments, but they shouldn't be considered anything but a natural development of the deal.

Meanwhile, this spells disaster for Israel. Months ago Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah himself admitted that the fall of Assad's regime would virtually spell the end for Hezbollah in Syria.<sup>14</sup> With Iranian billions and Russian troops, the Assad regime's demise doesn't seem like a likely outcome anymore.

The Iran deal will not only give Iran the finances necessary to wage its regional wars for dominance, but will also give western powers and Russia a reason to support them.<sup>15</sup> Israel can, therefore, probably say goodbye to a weakened Hezbollah, and with Russian S-300 missiles systems, an Israeli attack on Iranian military installations to prevent the transport of advanced missiles to Lebanon has become less possible than ever.<sup>16</sup> Instead, what Israel may have to deal with is a Hezbollah force replete with unprecedented advanced military equipment. As the Israeli authorities themselves conceded, the next war with Hezbollah will be costlier in terms of money and human lives than any before.

## **IS**

At the end of July, Federica Mogherini made a throwaway comment in an article published in the Guardian to the effect that the Iran deal presented a veritable disaster to IS. She said she had been tasked by Europe's foreign ministers with exploring “ways in which the EU could actively promote a more cooperative regional framework” in the wake of the Vienna deal. She said that this cooperation amounted to the most worrisome thing for IS who, above all else did not want their illusion of a clash of civilizations to be shattered.<sup>17</sup>

Up to date, IS can by no means be said to be losing. Perhaps Mogherini's statements were a last EU attempt at grasping for straws in response to a military effort that has until now been a patent

failure. Until now, IS has seen a lethality in its terrorism in terms of the number of people killed per incident that is virtually unrivalled by any other terrorist group in history. IS's *Wilayat* provinces and influence have spread from the Levant to South Asia, West and North Africa, Arabian Peninsula, Caucasus, Palestinian Territories and even the US and Europe and their recruitment capabilities have seemingly only increased over time.<sup>18</sup>

A poll taken at the Senior Conference at the US Military Academy showed that out of all attendants made up of top military commanders, senior government officials, scholars, aid workers and journalists, 97% believed the US were losing the war against IS.<sup>19</sup>

But, as if the coalitions problems against IS weren't grave enough, the Iran deal has given Russia a new lease of life in intervening in Syria. Russia's military advances in the region are becoming more worrying to coalition forces by the day as Russia by all appearances seems not to be bombing only IS positions but more so, those of rebel forces. Bombing these positions is surely intended to strengthen the Assad regime for purposes of Russian economic and political expediency. But just like Saudi intervention in Yemen against the Houthis, it may very well have the simultaneous effect of strengthening IS and other the neo-jihadist factions.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, IS may very well be additionally aided by the message the deal sends to the Sunni

*“Israel may have to deal with is a Hezbollah force replete with unprecedented advanced military equipment”*

communities in Iraq and Syria; essentially one of harmonisation between Shia expansionism and the US. As Hassan Hassan of Chatham House said, "ISIS will benefit a lot from this deal; segments of the Sunni community in the region will see Iran as having won and brought in from the dark." According to Christopher Harmer, ISIS is using the deal to convince local Sunnis that Iran's Shia Crescent is already being established in the region.<sup>21</sup>

Whether Iran will or will not ever develop nuclear weapons remains to be seen, but with a deal that has

dragged the financial and ideological interests of much bigger players than just neo-jihadist and rebel forces into the fray, the Iran deal looks like it might have the unintended consequence of bolstering those very militias the coalition forces have poured so much money into undermining. And as they all seemingly have a lot to lose and gain after the deal is ratified, it appears likely that the world will see how much powder really is in the proverbial keg.

## **ABOUT THE PROGRAMME:**

### ***Scope & Rationale:***

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Although Jihadism is ‘lethal’, it does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging.

In retrospect; the death of Osama bin Laden, the onslaught of global war on terror, the Arab revolution and post Arab-revolution crises etc. have seriously impacted on Jihadists landscape which is constantly changing. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national i.e. Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists’ landscape changes; the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’.

*“Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions”.*

### ***Methodology & Research areas/questions:***

This programme aims to conduct fact-based analyses of actual and potential uses of militancy and Jihadism as a tactic and belief and the changing concept of ‘war’ in the Muslim world; so that we may provide policy guidance to government officials and private sector decision-makers with alternative policy analyses. The key research questions are:

- How has Neo-Jihadism developed?
- Is Neo-Jihadism a new concept of war or culture?
- How Jihadism is perceived within the Islamic world and does it still carry meanings of a ‘just war’?
- How do its adherents maintain and facilitate it to transcend borders?
- Why have neo jihadi leaders been struggling to advance a coherent and effective response to the events of the Arab Spring and what trends are emerging

- Why, despite strong rhetoric of militancy, have we witnessed little action on the part of Neo-Jihadi groups that have emerged in countries that underwent regime change as a result of the Arab Spring?

***Programme Deliverables:***

1. Mapping the interplay between militant groups, the states and other external actors
2. A conflict and forecast analysis on current and emerging threats that might change the Jihadist landscape
3. In depth situation analyses on above issues, regional positioning and global powers interests etc.
4. Alternative policy analyses that may serve in policy making on regional and global governance levels
5. Strategic foresight for business and stakeholders that might be involved in the crisis affected regions

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)**

**IISA** is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic-world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

**Website:** [www.iisa.org.uk](http://www.iisa.org.uk)

**Blog:** <http://iisablog.org/>

**Twitter:** [https://twitter.com/IISA\\_org](https://twitter.com/IISA_org)

**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/pages/IISA-Institute-for-Islamic-Strategic-Affairs/118608928247992?ref=hl>

## References

---

- 1 <http://www.npr.org/2015/07/15/423263308/obama-says-deal-is-best-means-for-preventing-iranian-nuclear-weapons>
- 2 <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20150717/1024763906.html>
- 3 <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0717/Nuclear-deal-Saudis-signal-they-ll-act-before-Iran-gets-the-money>
- 4 <http://www.npr.org/2015/07/28/427178363/saudi-led-coalition-pushes-houthi-rebels-out-of-aden-yemen>
- 5 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/anti-houthi-forces-edge-closer-sanaa-fighting-continues-831967402>
- 6 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/yemen/11845899/United-Arab-Emirates-loses-45-soldiers-in-Yemen-fighting.html>
- 7 <https://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2015/04/13/irgc-supporting-houthi-militia-in-yemen/>
- 8 <http://www.voanews.com/content/first-iranian-direct-flight-lands-in-shiite-held-yemen-capital/2663788.html>
- 9 <https://www.rt.com/news/313136-yemen-aden-al-qaeda-saudi/>
- 10 <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/al-qaeda-in-yemen-imposes-strict-shariah-law-on-residents>
- 11 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/us-and-israel-issue-warning-to-russia-over-military-buildup-in-syria>
- 12 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/18/us-russia-iran-arms-idUSKCN0QN11B20150818>
- 13 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/aid-flights-syria-carry-military-equipment-150910110117672.html>
- 14 <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Nasrallah-Downfall-of-Assad-would-mean-fall-of-Hezbollah-402130>
- 15 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-geopolitics-and-economics-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal/5463741>
- 16

---

16 <http://uk.businessinsider.com/why-russian-s-300-sale-to-iran-is-a-big-deal-2015-6?r=US&IR=T>

17

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/28/iran-agreement-isis-vienna-eu>

18

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/isil-is-winning-213136>

19

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/isil-is-winning-213136>

20

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-launches-first-airstrikes-in-syria-us-says-as-non-isis-rebels-claim-they-are-being-targeted-a6673621.html>

21

<http://uk.businessinsider.com/isis-will-benefit-from-the-iran-nuclear-deal-2015-7?r=US&IR=T>