

Iran's terrorist proxies a regional time bomb

The West and Arab world's failure to support their Baghdad allies is producing a government dedicated to imposing Iran's will



BARIA ALAMUDDIN

A federal trial in the US is studying evidence that the Islamic Republic of Iran was responsible for hundreds of bombings that killed and maimed more than 1,000 US troops stationed in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.

The \$10 billion lawsuit could mean the plaintiffs becoming eligible for financial compensation from a fund for victims of state-sponsored terrorism.

Over a billion dollars has already been seized from banks that laundered money for Iran as compensation for Tehran's global role in terrorism. Iran's backing for thousands of attacks by Iraqi Shiite militants is well documented, along with evidence of supplying arms to Sunni extremists. The challenge now is to convince a jury beyond all reasonable doubt that Iran was directly responsible.

As Tehran adopted the strategy of bogging America down in an unwinnable conflict in Iraq, US forces came under attack from increasingly lethal munitions. Explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) were complicated to manufacture and required special training to use, but they easily penetrated tank armor. EFPs deployed by both Sunni and Shiite militants originated in Iran and most had even been forged in the same machine. Iran's Qassem Soleimani established entirely new Iraqi militia forces, such as Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq and the Hezbollah Brigades.

Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq gained notoriety for a 2007 raid against the coalition headquarters in Karbala, during which four US soldiers were kidnapped and then murdered. This raid avenged a coalition operation against a Quds Force convoy in northern Iraq,



Shaikh Qais Al Khazali, the Iraqi secretary-general of the Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq Group, is an Iran-backed militia leader.

during which Soleimani only escaped because Kurdish politicians hid him in a safe house.

In the aftermath of these incidents, leading figures affiliated with Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq — including Hezbollah operative Ali Daquduq and Qais Al-Khazali, who today is a prominent politician and paramilitary leader — were rounded up. In recently published testimonies, Al-Khazali detailed to his captors how Soleimani oversaw the smuggling of weapons and funds to militants. "The ultimate goal of Iran is to destroy the Americans," Al-Khazali told his captors, adding: "Iran is using both the US and the Iraqis to keep each other busy through fighting while Iran pursues their own agenda." America was unwise not to heed these warnings.

These same forces are today threatening renewed attacks against Western assets, while battling to secure a controlling interest in the new Iraqi government, including retaining

control of the Interior Ministry. From 2005, veteran militant and then-Interior Minister Bayan Jabr oversaw the mass recruitment of tens of thousands of former paramilitaries as security personnel. Under militant control, the ministry established a network of secret prisons, in which thousands of arbitrarily detained Iraqis were brutally tortured to the point of death. The wholesale incorporation of militants into the police and armed forces has continued ever since.

Between 2005 and 2008, rogue Interior Ministry death squads murdered thousands of Sunni citizens. Attacks focused on mixed areas of Baghdad, which quickly became almost 100 percent Shiite, also eradicating much of the Christian population. Militants in police uniforms abducted civilians and murdered them with electric drills. Others were burnt alive, decapitated, stoned and tortured to death in orgies of brutality that antici-

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ated and exceeded Daesh. Baghdad's morgues overflowed with corpses.

According to the official UN tally, 34,452 civilians were killed in 2006 alone, while a total of 4.7 million people became displaced. Sunnis in Adhamiyah dug up their football pitch and filled it with the bodies of the dead. Renewed bouts of sectarian bloodletting by these paramil-

itaries followed the post-2014 recapture of cities like Fallujah, Ramadi and Tikrit from Daesh, during which thousands of civilians were executed or abducted and thousands of homes were destroyed.

If Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi hands the Interior Ministry to Falih Al-Fayyadh, he allows Iran-backed militias to continue expanding their stranglehold over the state. Since 2014, Al-Fayyadh has headed the commission overseeing the Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi paramilitary umbrella force. I got into an argument with Al-Fayyadh at the 2017 IISS Manama Dialogue, where he denied well-documented massacres and war crimes by Al-Hashd. He called these militants "national heroes" and claimed they couldn't be sectarian because of token Sunnis and minority personnel within their ranks.

Seven months after parliamentary elections in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran-backed factions have

imposed political paralysis in order to shoehorn their nominees into leading positions. In both states, the deeply flawed system of sectarian distribution of posts was designed to ensure that a sects were properly represented. However, Iran's allies have subverted this process by cramming Sunni and Kurdish allies into the roles of parliamentary speaker and president in Iraq. Hezbollah is trying to pull off the same trick in Lebanon.

These processes are a parody of democracy. Tehran's Iraq allies won a tiny proportion of parliamentary seats, yet are dictating key government posts. The West and Arab world's failure to support their Baghdad allies is producing a government dedicated to imposing Iran's will, while sidelining other components of Iraq's society.

Ongoing US trials into Tehran's role in terrorism should be a salutary reminder of the consequences of allowing Iran to consolidate itself regionally, including in Syria, where Tehran's proxies are expanding in the east, while escalating tensions with Israel in the southwest. One day soon we will wake up to new reminders of why we were so dangerously wrong to allow Iranian proxies to insinuate themselves at all levels of the region's political, military and social systems. With militants skilled in the arts of sectarian cleansing, mass murder and crimes against humanity with striking distance of chokepoint for global maritime trade, like Bab Al-Mandab, Hormuz and the eastern Mediterranean, this is not just a localized threat.

Once Iran believes its regional posture to be impregnable, we will face a much more dangerous reckoning in the near future making the confrontation with Daesh look like a walk in the park.

(Baria Alamuddin is an award-winning journalist and broadcaster in the Middle East and the UK. She is editor of the Media Services Syndicate and has interviewed numerous heads of state)

CIVILIAN'S TRIBUNE

Mrs May, please leave

Theresa May clearly believes that her appalling compromises to the EU reflect the Brexit vote — 52 per cent for Leave, 48 per cent for Remain — and will keep everyone happy.

It hasn't worked. The only folks who are happy with her deal are the EU officials, who now have the British where they wanted.

Many have left her Cabinet and



the country is in shatters. The country is much more divided now than it was a few years or decades ago.

The Prime Minister and her unaccountable officials have presented us with a constitutional crisis. Mrs May is not the person to fix it. She must go — now.

Dr A Donal