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HEZBOLLAH PLAYS POLITICS IN THE PERSIAN GULF

In recent weeks, there have been clear signs that the longstanding ideological "cold war" between regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia was beginning to thaw amid new diplomatic contacts on the part of the two countries. But a recent move by the Islamic Republic's main terrorist proxy could call the emerging ties into question. Earlier this month, Lebanon's Hezbollah militia convened a conference of Saudi opposition figures in Beirut. The gathering, held in commemoration of the birthday of Saudi Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who was executed by Riyadh in 2016 for his outspoken criticism of the government, was a clear broadside aimed at the Kingdom, which Hezbollah has accused of "bullying" and "interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs." Members of Yemen's Houthi rebels, which are supported by the Iranian regime, are also said to have been in attendance. And while the event was ostensibly a commemoration of al-Nimr, its true purpose was clear, according to participants: "To bring down the Saudi regime." (Associated Press, January 12, 2022)

IRAN'S IDEOLOGICAL DIVIDE

The ideological disconnect between Iran's ruling clerical class and the country's population continues to deepen. Tehran's official Friday prayer leader, Kazem Sedeghi, recently drew outrage when he branded family planning and dog walking as tantamount to "fighting Allah." "Loosening the foundations of family leads to indecent behavior and debauchery, the examples of which are not observing the Islamic hijab, walking dogs, and avoiding having children," he preached. The comments reflect concerns among Iran's ruling class over the country's declining birth rates and "Westoxification" brought about by exposure to Western values and media. However, the sentiments appear to be increasingly disconnected from the views and values of ordinary Iranians, with a growing number of activists taking to social media to protest the country's compulsory *hijab* ordinance and other social strictures under the hashtag #LetUsTalk. (*Iran International*, January 2, 2022)

IRAQ REPATRIATES ISIS REFUGEES

Since the collapse of the ISIS "caliphate" in Syria nearly three years ago, the Al-Hol refugee camp in the northeast of that country has emerged as a significant humanitarian hotspot, as well as a vexing security challenge for counterterrorism officials concerned with the facility's role as an incubator of future Islamic extremism. (See *Global Islamism Monitor* nos. 72, 86, and 94.) Regional governments have slowly begun to address the problem, however. Iraq, for example, recently repatriated 111 ISIS-linked families from Syria, many of whom had previously been detained at Al-Hol - bringing to 339 the number of families that have returned. But those individuals aren't simply being allowed to reenter Iraqi society. Rather, they are now being housed at a different refugee camp: Al-Jadaa, located south of Mosul in Iraq's Nineveh province. (*Arab News*, January 11, 2022)

A RESHUFFLED DECK IN AFGHANISTAN...

The Biden administration's abrupt withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan back in August allowed the country's militant Taliban movement to surge back into power in that country. Since then, concerns have been growing among U.S. officials that Afghanistan could soon once again revert to being a safe haven for terrorists. Back in September, Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Mark Milley told Congress that "[i]t's a real possibility in the not too distant future, six, 12, 18, 24, 36 months, that kind of time frame, for [the] reconstitution of al Qaeda or ISIS." That prediction is coming to pass. "I believe al Qaeda and ISIS are recruiting both internally, and I think in fact, internationally," General Frank McKenzie, the head of CENTCOM, told the *Washington Examiner* in a December interview.

The development is a vexing one for U.S. planners because, while the Islamic State's regional franchise, known as ISIS-K, is a clear enemy of the Taliban, al-Qaeda is not. "ISIS has certainly attacked the Taliban pretty violently across the entire country. So I think ISIS will be easy for the Taliban to respond to. I think al Qaeda is a far more difficult matter for them to resolve," noted McKenzie. The United States, meanwhile, is banking on the Taliban to confront ISIS-K, and to refrain from making common cause with its one-time political partner, al-Qaeda. (*Washington Examiner*, January 7, 2022)

...AND THE TALIBAN'S OPEN DOOR POLICY

ISIS-K and al-Qaeda are not the only militant groups incubating in today's Afghanistan, however. The return of Taliban rule has also reportedly given freer rein to the Pakistani Taliban, known as the TTP. The Associated Press, citing a 2021 UN study, reports that the Pakistani Taliban "are regrouping and reorganizing, with their leadership headquartered in neighboring Afghanistan."

They are doing so with the assistance of Afghanistan's new government. So, too, are a host of other extremist factions. "Multiple militant groups found safe haven in Afghanistan during more than four decades of war, and some of them, like the TTP, are former battlefield allies of the Afghan Taliban," the AP explains. "So far, the Taliban have appeared unwilling or unable to root them out. The sole exception is the ISIS affiliate, which is the Taliban's enemy and has waged a campaign of violence against them and for years against Afghanistan's minority Shia Muslims." (Associated Press, January 6, 2022)