

In Arab-Populated Khuzestan Province, A Targeted Killing Should Make Tehran Anxious

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Abdolhossein Mojaddami, a commander of the Basij forces in Khuzestan, and an associate of the late Qassem Soleimani, was killed on January 21 in a drive-by shooting in front of his house; his killers, wearing ski masks and thus unidentifiable, escaped on their motorcycle. The story is [here](#).

Khuzestan is the province of Iran located at the head of the Persian Gulf, right next to Iraq, where almost all of Iran's oil is located. Arabs, not Persians, predominate, and Arab separatist movements have intermittently made trouble for the authorities in Iran ever since the 1920s. Some of these Arab groups have wanted greater autonomy for Khuzestan, which would remain part of Iran; other Arabs have wanted to press for independence from Iran and possible incorporation into Arab

Iraq.

Masked gunmen on Wednesday ambushed and killed the local commander of a paramilitary security force in southwestern Iran, an associate of Iran's top general recently killed in an American drone strike in Baghdad, the official IRNA news agency reported.

The slain commander, Abdolhossein Mojaddami, headed the Basij forces, a paramilitary wing of the Revolutionary Guard used for internal security and other tasks, in the town of Darkhoein. He was gunned down in front of his home in the town in the country's oil rich Khuzestan province.

Two gunmen on a motorcycle, armed with an assault rifle and a hunting rifle, ambushed Mojaddami, IRNA reported. Other Iranian media said the gunmen's faces were covered with masks and that four shots were fired.

The case is under investigation and a motive was not immediately clear, but Basij units had been involved in violent clashes with demonstrators in the area in November in which many protesters were injured and killed. Amnesty International has reported that more than 300 people were killed in the unrest across the country, though Iran has not announced a death toll.

"The motive was not immediately clear"? Of course it was, even if the Iranian government understandably prefers not to discuss it. It is part of the effort by Arabs of Khuzestan to obtain some degree of autonomy from Tehran; some Khuzestan Arabs want to go further, and gain independence from Iran; that can only be achieved by war, for Iran will never agree to grant independence to the very region where so much of its oil wealth is concentrated. It is possible that Arab separatists would aim not for an independent state but, rather, for leaving Iran and having Khuzestan become a province of Arab Iraq. But about that possibility – which could only come about

through war between Iran and a coalition of Arab states – more later.

In killing the local Basij commander right in front of his presumably well-guarded house, and then escaping, Khuzestani Arabs showed their effectiveness at targeted killing.

Mojaddami's killing is seen as another blow to the Revolutionary Guard, following the death of top general Qassem Soleimani earlier this month in a U.S. drone strike in Iraq. Mojaddami was described by IRNA as an associated of Soleimani, who was the head of the Quds forces, the foreign wing of the Guard.

The killing of Mojaddami in Arab-populated Khuzestan is most disturbing to the regime. It cannot afford to lose control of the oil of Khuzestan; those oil revenues keep the Islamic Republic afloat. Tehran will do whatever it takes to hold onto Khuzestan. Mojaddami was an important military figure in the province as the head of the local Basij forces; these are the fighters within the Revolutionary Guards used to suppress internal dissent, including that by both human rights campaigners, and by members of the separatist movements of Arabs, Kurds, Balochis, and Azeris. Yet his assassins managed to gun him down in front of his house – where was the security for such a high-ranking commander? – and what's more, they managed, wearing ski-masks, to successfully escape. The incompetence of the authorities in this affair, as in that of the downed Ukrainian passenger jet, will not have gone unnoticed by Iranians.

Iran has been an increasing threat to many of its Arab neighbors, acting through proxies, in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, and directly in Syria. In Iraq, its support for Shi'a militias – now more powerful than the national army – contributes to the instability of the government in Baghdad. The Shi'a Arabs in Iraq constitute 60% of the population; the

Sunni Arabs are only 20% (the rest are Kurds, Christians, Turcomans). The Sunnis have not reconciled themselves to their loss of political power, while the Shi'a have no intention of relinquishing the power that, in a democracy, given their overwhelming numbers, naturally devolves to them. And the Revolutionary Guards' support for those militias in Iraq has made them even stronger. But not just Sunni Arabs and Kurds – even many Shi'a in Iraq – are alarmed at the Iranians' blatant interference in the country, including the attempt by Tehran to turn Iraq into a loyal ally of the Islamic Republic. In Lebanon, Iran has since the early 1980s poured billions of dollars into the pockets of Hezbollah, a wholly-owned subsidiary of the Islamic Republic. The terror group, which has defended the corrupt government in Beirut, and helped to physically suppress the Lebanese protesting in the streets against that very government, has thereby lost support even among some Shi'a. Iranian financial support for Hezbollah salaries has decreased recently, but so far Tehran continues to keep the terror group well-supplied with weaponry, even beyond the 140,000 missiles transferred to Hezbollah for future use against Israel. Vast sums have been spent by Iran on its Lebanese proxy. In Yemen, Iranian aid, financial and military, to the Shi'a Houthi rebels has kept their rebellion going in the face of the national government's attempt, with help from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to crush it. After years of war by proxy in Yemen, the Saudis have been angling for talks with the Iran-backed Houthis, a recognition by Riyadh that they are locked in an endless stalemate, and they would prefer to exit, following negotiations, with an agreement that prevents the Houthis, and behind it Iran, from obtaining a winner-take-all result. Finally, there is Syria, where Iran has intervened directly to prop up the Alawite despot Bashar al-Assad, and helped him to emerge victorious, enraging the Sunni Arab states that support the Sunni opposition.

These examples of Iranian interference in four Arab states suggest that an Arab offense against Iran itself is merited.

And the killing of Abolhossein Mojamaddi reminds us of the Arab separatists in Khuzestan and the possibilities they present for weakening Iran. Iran's Arabs in Khuzestan share a long unsecured border with Iraq, and could without much difficulty receive money and, especially, weapons from fellow Arabs in Iraq, and from the deep-pocketed Arab states – especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE – of the Gulf that could transfer such weapons via Iraq. Why might the Arab states help the Arabs in Khuzestan? First, and most obviously, out of ethnic solidarity – their fellow Arabs in Khuzestan would no longer have to endure Persian overlords. Second, were Khuzestan to become the 19th province of Iraq, that would bring with it a great deal of new oil wealth to Arab Iraq. Third, were a transfer of sovereignty over Khuzestan from Iran to Iraq to be achieved, that would so weaken Iran financially that neither it, nor the proxies it has been funding, would any longer be a serious threat to its Arab neighbors. A war over Khuzestan would pit Iran not merely against Iraq, but also against a half-dozen Arab states that could send money, men, and weapons to defeat the Islamic Republic. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and Kuwait could send endless amounts of money and weapons, while Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria could send large numbers of fighters – all to be paid for by the Gulf Arabs – to swell the ranks of the Khuzestani Arab Liberation Front. Even Pakistani mercenaries, who have been hired by the Saudis before, might also join.

Faced with such a well-financed and well-armed enemy, Iran still has no choice but to fight. It cannot subsist without the oil of Khuzestan. Such a conflict could go on for a very long time, likely as least as long as the Iran-Iraq War that dragged on for eight years (1980-1988). It will use up men, money, and materiel on both sides. Meanwhile, the Iranians will have to stop sending money and weapons to proxies abroad; they will need to conserve both for their own military. The biggest immediate effect will be on Hezbollah; even now the terror group has had to cut the salaries of its fighters. The

world's Unbelievers should look on such a contest over Khuzestan with interest and relief. For in such a titanic struggle between Arab and Persian Muslims, it is we who will be the only winners.

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