



Iran's Revolutionary Guards Fighting ISIS in Iraq

Two battalions of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are reported to be operating in Iraq to combat the offensive campaign being waged by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) against the Iraqi government. In late June, a spokesman for ISIS announced that it was shortening its name to the Islamic State and would rule its territory as a Sunni Muslim caliphate overseen by its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Islamic State, an al-Qaeda offshoot, has seized much of northern Iraq since June.



An August 3 report from Reuters quoted from Basij Press, a news site affiliated with the Basij militia that is overseen by the Revolutionary Guards, about the death of IRGC Colonel Kamal Shirkhani, who was killed in a mortar attack by Islamic State militants "while carrying out his mission to defend" a revered Shiite shrine in the city of Samarra, Iraq.

"When the Islamic State reached Shi'ite areas in Iraq, the Revolutionary Guards had forces there who fought them," Mohsen Sazegara, identified as a founding member of the Revolutionary Guards now living in the United States, was quoted as saying by Reuters. "A number of them were killed," he said.

Reuters observed that Shirkhani's death in Iraq was an indication that Iran has committed "boots on the ground" to defend Iraqi territory from being overrun by Islamic State militants. The report also noted that Iraqi security forces have "largely dissolved" as fighters for the Islamic State advance on Baghdad, indicating that the government is barely capable of defending Iraq.

The Reuters report also cited a high-level Iraqi security official, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak to the media, as saying that Iran has now mobilized up to 20,000 Iraqi militiamen from groups it funded and trained. Those same militiamen had attacked U.S. troops during our nation's long occupation of Iraq following the removal of Saddam Hussein.

We reported back on June 11 that during the battle to capture Mosul, despite the fact that Iraqi security forces outnumbered ISIS fighters by more than 15 to one, the government troops suffered what a BBC reporter described as "a dramatic collapse of morale."

This apparent military meltdown prompted a harsh statement by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on June 11, when he said, "The commanders who retreated and wavered must be punished."

After the ISIS seized control of Mosul, it was reported that 150,000 people immediately fled the city. ISIS then issued an edict expelling the remaining Christians who, fearing for their safety, failed to attend a meeting to discuss their future status. ISIS authorities have destroyed Christian and Jewish religious artifacts such as the cross from St. Ephrem's Cathedral, the tombs of Jonah and Seth, and a statue of the Mary, the mother of Jesus.

David Curry, president/CEO of Open Doors USA, recently condemned the Islamic State's anti-Christian actions.



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"The persecution and treatment of Christians in Mosul is unprecedented in modern times," said Curry. "This latest forced exodus of Christians further shows why Western governments and the people in the West need to cry out in support for religious freedom in the Middle East and elsewhere. If this does not move us concerning the near extinction of Christianity in the Middle East, it's likely nothing else can."

According to Open Doors, the Islamic State gave Christians an ultimatum over the weekend of July 19-20: 1) Stay and convert to Islam; 2) Pay Islamic tax (which is too much for most families to pay); 3) Leave Mosul taking nothing but their clothes. Christians who stayed would be executed.

An earlier Reuters report on July 14 noted that as the Iraqi army became decimated by desertions in June during battles that including the fall of Mosul, al-Maliki's Shiite-led government has relied heavily on Shiite militias and volunteers who, in some areas, equal the numbers of regular soldiers.

The media frequently cast the fighting in Iraq as a rivalry between Shiites and Sunnis, with ISIS being made up of militant Sunnis and the Iraqi government — an ally of Shiite ruled Iran — being dominated by Shiites. However, such religious-based descriptions are an oversimplification. There have been Sunni rulers in the Middle East who have been moderate and anything but fanatical when it came to religion, such as Saddam Hussein, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and Egypt's Anwar El Sadat. All of these rulers were tolerant toward Christians and other religious minorities living in their countries. In contrast, the strongly anti-Western revolutionaries who took control of Iran in 1979 established an official Shia Islamic government that tolerated little religious nonconformity.

There are several ironies apparent in the current battle raging in Iraq. Among them is that the United States, after repeatedly condemning Iran for years because of the nation's nuclear fuel enrichment program that much of the West alleges is part of a nuclear weapons program, now finds itself on the same side as Iran in the fight against the ISIS militants. A report from *Iraqi News* back on January 19 quoted a White House statement that Vice President Joe Biden had phoned Premier al-Maliki, during which "Biden and Maliki discussed the U.S. support for Iraq in its battle against the ISIL terrorists."

Another irony is that the ISIS militants are allied with the rebel coalition fighting against the Assad regime in Syria — a coalition that has received U.S. support. President Obama expressed hope in a news conference to "mobilize the international community to support" installing a new regime in Syria.

Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who was obviously aware of the connection between the anti-Assad rebels and the al-Qaeda-linked ISIS, made a statement on May 21, 2013, directed at his colleagues, nearly all of whom voted to send arms to Syrian rebels: "This is an important moment. You will be funding, today, the allies of al-Qaeda."

About the only thing that is certain about U.S. policy in the Middle East, particularly with regard to Iraq, is that it has been consistently *inconsistent*, and has rarely served U.S. interests.

Photo of Iranian Revolutionary Guard soldiers marching in a parade: AP Images

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