

# OEWATCH

Issue 5  
2024



*FOREIGN NEWS & PERSPECTIVES OF THE OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT*

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### ON THE COVER:

“Shahid Sayyad Shirazi (FS313-03),” Khabar Online (Iranian news website affiliated with reformist political faction), 21 January 2024.

Source: <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1874777>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

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## China Rehearsing Possible Taiwan Decapitation Operation

By Cindy Hurst  
OE Watch Commentary

China is expanding its capability to train for a decapitation operation against Taiwan. On 26 March, Joseph Wen, a Taiwanese defense analyst, posted satellite images of a People's Liberation Army (PLA) training ground in southwest Inner Mongolia. The images appear to show a mockup of the Bo'ai Special Zone, a restricted area that houses key government buildings, including the Presidential Office Building in Taipei. The first excerpted article, taken from the popular Taiwan English news source *Taiwan News*, highlights some of the concerns and speculation resulting from the images. For example, it explains that while this is not the first time the PLA has created a replica of Taiwan's Presidential Office Building, this mockup is different in that it "covered much of the Bo'ai Special Zone and appears to be an aerial bombing and gunnery training range," which indicates where China

is likely to be focused. Lu Te-yun, a satellite imagery expert, explains that "visually speaking, the degree of realism in comparison with the actual location is quite high." However, some experts, such as a former Kuomintang legislator cited in the article, believe the PLA would be unable to swiftly launch a decapitation strike. Instead, he believes, the exercise is more likely part of psychological and cognitive warfare effort to pressure Taiwan into believing that it must negotiate.<sup>1</sup>

As seen in the second excerpted article, taken from an editorial published in Taiwan's English-language newspaper *Taipei Times*, the PLA has repeatedly held other military exercises at its Zhurihe Training Base,<sup>2</sup> also located in Inner Mongolia, during which they used a scale replica of the Presidential Office Building to simulate a decapitation strike. Published one month after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the article explains that the media had been predicting a

***"In the past, the PLA had created a Presidential Office Building replica in another location. However, he said this mockup covered much of the Bo'ai Special Zone and appears to be an aerial bombing and gunnery training range."***

potential "decapitation strike" from Moscow. The author, Yao Chung-yuan, former deputy director of the Taiwan Ministry of National defense strategic planning department goes on to stress the importance of Taiwan preparing for such an event. Today, as the Russia-Ukraine conflict drags on with no victory in sight for Moscow, China could be placing more urgency into honing its own capabilities to prevent a protracted conflict should it one day invade Taiwan.

**Source:** Keoni Everington, "China Creates Taipei Mockup to Train for Invasion," *Taiwan News* (popular online English-language news source in Taiwan), 28 March 2024. <https://www.taiwannews.com.tw/news/5131830>

*Joseph Wen ...posted satellite images of a mockup of the Bo'ai Special Zone (博愛特區), which is a restricted zone in Taipei's Zhongzheng District where the Presidential Office Building and other key government buildings are situated. The training ground is located in the Alxa Left Banner administrative division of Alxa League in the*

*southwest of China's Inner Mongolia.*

*Wen said in the past, the PLA had created a Presidential Office Building replica in another location. However, he said this mockup covered much of the Bo'ai Special Zone and appears to be an aerial bombing and gunnery training range.*

*continue on 5*

*Lu Te-yun (盧德允), a satellite imagery expert who once served as an inspector for the Ministry of National Defense (MND) told UDN that the proportions of the training grounds need to be measured. However, Lu said that “visually speaking, the degree of realism in comparison with the actual location is quite high.”*

*On the TVBS program “Situation Room” on*

*Wednesday, former Kuomintang (KMT) Legislator Lin Yu-fang (林郁方) said that given Taiwan’s extensive air defenses, it is unlikely that the PLA could swiftly launch a decapitation strike on Taipei. Lin said, “This is psychological and cognitive warfare. China will not relax and will continue to put pressure on Taiwan, telling Taiwan that it can negotiate or fight, simultaneously employing a dual strategy of negotiation and confrontation.”*

**Source:** Yao Chung-yuan, “Prepare for ‘Decapitation’ Attempts,” *Taipei Times* (Taiwan’s English-language daily newspaper), 28 March 2022. <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2022/03/28/2003775565>

*At the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the media predicted a potential “decapitation strike” from Moscow. An in-depth discussion of the issue seems necessary in Taiwan.*

*There are many ways of launching a decapitation strike, which seeks to assassinate a national leader...*

*Despite Russia’s failure to kill Zelenskiy, Ukraine must remain extremely vigilant.*

*“Decapitation” is a military term for the use of ballistic and precision-guided missiles to assassinate a national leader or destroy a presidential office, to demoralize and severely weaken an enemy.*

*The Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has repeatedly held military exercises at its Zhurihe Training Base in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, during which it used a scale replica of the*

*Presidential Office Building in Taipei to simulate a decapitation strike...*

*The purpose of Russia’s supposed decapitation attempts was to hijack Zelenskiy, not assassinate him, but as tension mounts during a continued war, whether Russia attempts other decapitation methods is a possibility.*

*In Taiwan’s 2020 Han Kuang exercises, the military simulated strikes against PLA and Chinese secret agents targeting the Presidential Office Building and other central government agencies in Taipei’s Boai Special Zone (博愛特區), while training for countermeasures against the CCP’s hijacking of the Taiwanese president. From the situation in the Russia-Ukraine war, the scenario set in the Han Kuang military drill is not impossible.*

#### Notes

- 1 For more on this, see: Cindy Hurst, Chinese Cognitive Operations Might Impact Taiwan’s Will to Resist, *OE Watch*, 09-2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/chinese-cognitive-operations-might-impact-taiwans-will-to-resist/>
- 2 Zhurihe is the PLA’s largest military training base. For more information, see: Chen Zhuo, 8 Things to Know About China’s Biggest Army Training Base, *South China Morning Post* and reposted to *China Military*, 13 May 2019. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/Features\\_209191/9501757.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Features_209191/9501757.html)

## China Reveals Its Carrier-Based J-15D Electronic Warfare Fighter

By Kevin Kusumoto  
OE Watch Commentary

The introduction of the J-15D signals a pivotal moment for Chinese aircraft carrier formations, enabling them to execute strikes against adversaries with sophisticated air defense systems according to the first article published by government-censored Chinese internet and gaming provider *NetEase*. The Chinese **J-15D** electronic warfare aircraft made its first public appearance on CCTV in late March 2024.<sup>1</sup> Equipped with electronic countermeasures, reconnaissance capabilities, and the capacity to disrupt enemy radar and missile systems, the J-15D substantially enhances the combat power of Chinese aircraft carriers.<sup>2</sup> The article highlights three key aspects of the J-15D. First, its strategic value in anti-ship warfare is underscored by its comprehensive suite of electronic warfare, anti-radiation warfare, and air combat capabilities. Second, the J-15D signifies China's comparable strength to the U.S. in the field of electronic warfare. Third, its ability to provide situational awareness is crucial, particularly in scenarios involving the deployment of hypersonic missiles by Chinese aircraft carrier formations. The J-15D confers an asymmetric advantage with its capacity to target adversaries at long distances and provide targeting guidance for hypersonic missiles. Overall, the J-15D signifies a “a



The J-15D, featured in a CCTV-7 Military News episode, displaying two electronic warfare pods on the wing tips and two larger electronic warfare pods on the inside of the wings.

Source: <https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=17129917562037813254>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

new level in terms of comprehensive combat capabilities” for the Chinese aircraft carrier fleet.

The second excerpt, published on highly regulated Chinese internet platform *Tencent*, suggests that the introduction of the J-15D also marks a significant shift in the combat strategy of China's aircraft carriers. The excerpt states that in the past, the People's Liberation Army Navy followed the Soviet Navy's model, relying on carrier-based fighter jets for air defense while utilizing escort ships for long-range anti-ship attacks. With advancements in the performance of the J-15D, Chinese aircraft carriers are now capable of conducting long-range anti-ship and ground operations coupled with defensive and offensive electronic warfare.<sup>3</sup> The J-15D, with its offensive capabilities, can engage in long-range sea or ground attacks

alongside other carrier-based fighters, leveraging electronic warfare systems to dominate the battle space.<sup>4</sup> This poses an “unprecedented” threat to U.S. aircraft carrier strike groups.

**“Chinese aircraft carrier formations have reached a new level of comprehensive combat capabilities, and have entered the era of offensive operations, breaking the monopoly advantage of the U.S. military. This is something we are very happy about.”**

**Source:** Fu Qianshao, “‘央视曝光’电战鲨’, 歼-15D推动航母编队进入攻势作战时代 (CCTV Reveals ‘Electric War Shark’, the J-15D Propels Aircraft Carrier Formations into an Era of Offensive Operations),” *Netease* (one of China’s largest internet companies, subject to regulatory oversight and censorship by the national internet regulator, China’s Cyberspace Administration), 02 April 2024. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/IUPAKE5T0535T18G.html>

*CCTV’s ‘Military Report’ recently aired footage showcasing the J-15D fighter jet as it commenced a naval training program, signaling a significant advancement for China’s aircraft carrier capabilities. Notably, the J-15D fills a crucial gap that its predecessor, the J-16D, couldn’t address, as it lacked compatibility for deployment on aircraft carriers.*

*The introduction of the J-15D into Chinese naval aviation signifies a pivotal advancement, enabling Chinese aircraft carrier formations to conduct air strikes against adversaries equipped with sophisticated air defense systems. Reflecting on the Gulf War, the US Air Force frequently coordinated air strikes against ground targets with electronic warfare aircraft to neutralize ground defense systems. This underscores the critical role of electronic warfare aircraft in suppressing air defenses, a capability that the J-15D helps address.*

*Compared with the US EA-18G, is the J15-D superior or inferior? 1. The J-15D offers enhanced strategic value particularly in anti-ship warfare. The J-15 is equipped with electronic warfare capabilities, anti-ship warfare and anti-radiation warfare, and has a relatively complete air combat capability.*

*Compared to the J15-D, the EA-18G has excellent electronic warfare capabilities, limited anti-radiation and air combat capabilities, and almost no anti-ship combat capabilities. 2. The J-15D holds the advantage of possessing more modern electronic warfare technology, benefitting from China’s robust capabilities in the electronic industry. In the competition between China and the US in electronic warfare, China stands equal to the United States in terms of industry strength. 3. The tactical awareness offered by the J15-D holds significant value in scenarios where Chinese aircraft carriers possess hypersonic missiles. The J15-D’s ability to lock onto opponents’ carrier formations at longer distances and provide target indications for hypersonic missiles presents an asymmetric advantage. While the U.S. EA-18G possesses similar capabilities, its missile speed and range are insufficient to pose a threat to Chinese carrier formations.*

*Overall, the J-15D entry into service signifies that Chinese aircraft carrier formations reached a new level in terms of comprehensive combat capabilities, and entered the era of offensive operations, breaking the monopoly advantage of the US military. This is something we are very happy about.*

**Source:** Kongtian Daliang, “‘央视官宣’, 歼15D ‘咆哮鲨’ 喷涂海军灰, 中国航母任务出现转变 (CCTV Reveals, J-15D “Roaring Shark” Sprayed Navy Grey, Marks Changes for Chinese Aircraft Missions),” *Tencent* (China’s largest multinational technology conglomerate, operating within a tightly regulated environment), 26 March 2024. <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240326A0442K00>

*Recent footage from the CCTV Military Channel showcased the J-15D carrier-based electronic warfare aircraft. The aircraft, painted in navy gray, suggests that it is either nearing or has already entered service.*

*The presence of the J-15D fighter indicates a shift in focus for Chinese aircraft carriers from air defense to offense.*

*continue on 8*

*The CCTV footage reveals that the J-15D electronic warfare aircraft is equipped with two electronic warfare pods mounted under its wings, like the PLAAF J-16D electronic warfare aircraft. The primary function of this electronic warfare equipment is to analyze enemy radar frequencies, identify, jam, position, and target enemy radars. A notable distinction between the J-15D and other J-15 fighters is the absence of the airspeed tube, indicating comprehensive upgrades to the aircraft's electronic equipment such as radar and sensors, facilitating comprehensive control of electromagnetic signals in combat airspace.*

*The introduction of the J-15D signifies a significant transformation in China's aircraft carrier combat missions. Previously, Chinese aircraft carriers faced a distinct disadvantage compared to American super aircraft carriers. Consequently, the Soviet Navy model was adopted, utilizing carrier jets for air defense cover while escort ships launch long-range anti-ship missiles to conduct attacks. With the increasing maturity of the J-15, it is now equipped with air-launched anti-ship missiles, bolstering Chinese aircraft carriers' offensive air capabilities.*

*The primary objective of the J-15D is to employ high-power electronic warfare equipment to suppress and disrupt the opponent's electronic systems, while employing various methods to degrade the opponent's radar detection capabilities. Alongside other carrier-based fighters, the J-15D can execute long-range sea and ground attacks, utilizing its electronic warfare capabilities to neutralize the opponent's air defense systems. For US aircraft carrier strike groups, the threat posed by the J-15D is unprecedented.*

*As for Japan's 'Izumo' class light aircraft carriers, they are equipped with the F-35B stealth fighters, which have a generational advantage over the J-15 series. However, the number of F-35B aircraft is limited and may have limited warning aircraft to provide airspace intelligence and early warning. This greatly reduces the situational awareness capability of the F-35B. In addition, the J-15D retains most of the J-15's air combat capabilities, and electronic warfare aircraft can be regarded as the nemesis of stealth fighter jets. Therefore, Chinese aircraft carriers employing J-15D aircraft are enough to cause Japanese light aircraft carriers to suffer significant losses.*

#### Notes

- 1 To watch the full CCTV-7 video of the J15-D, see CCTV's C-Bit Series Baidu post, *Baidu*, 24 March 2024. <https://haokan.baidu.com/v?pd=wisenatural&vid=17129917562037813254>
- 2 Mu Feng Lun Dao, 5u8bHr|k-15Deg^ÿ.YÆ%oock\_~[£[ÿ-NýV\*,Ík0,}:ggTübbVhQÑQPÿ (Electronic Warfare Version of J15-D is Coming, CCTV Formally Announces, Completing the Final Piece for China's Carrier-Borne Aircraft), *Netease*, 26 March 2024. <https://www.163.com/dy/article/IU70SP910552YXLH.html>
- 3 A Taiwanese news channel invites a Chinese military expert to discuss the strengths and advantages of the J-15D fighter plane, *CTI News Channel*, 02 April. 2024. <https://youtu.be/srdhxxwV-CQ?t=304>
- 4 A Taiwanese news channel invites a Chinese military expert to discuss the combat application of the J15-D, *CTI News Channel*, 30 March 2024. <https://youtu.be/s6o1H0ffZXU?t=101>



## China Employs AI Enabled Water Cannon To Enforce South China Sea Territorial Claims



Chinese Coast Guard use water cannons to harass Philippine fishermen.

Source: <https://www.jamesokeefe.org/2023/12/naval-politics-by-other-means/>; Attribution: CCA 4.0 INT

By Dodge Billingsley  
OE Watch Commentary

China has managed to avoid open conflict while continually advancing its claims in the South China Sea in part because China employs a variety of non-lethal weapons and tactics. In the following excerpted article published by Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post*, the author notes that water cannons have been a critical non-lethal weapon regularly used by the People's Liberation Army Navy and Chinese Coast Guard against the navies and personnel of other countries in the area, especially in its territorial disputes with the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> The article describes a recent case when a Chinese ship fired a traditional water cannon into a Philippine ship shattering the cockpit windscreen, injuring several personnel, and forcing the Philippine ship to cede. However, according to the article, current water

cannon technology is less effective in rough seas. The article claims that a new artificial intelligence (AI) water cannon has been developed by a Chinese firm that could have an outsized influence on China's ability to maintain its maritime territorial claims. The newly developed AI water cannon is "equipped with motion sensors that collect the swing state of the ship to alter the ballistic parameters allowing it to stay on target under a variety of conditions," enabling China to continually target adversaries "with an error of only two meters in rough

conditions." The development of a more accurate AI driven water cannon should be considered part of China's full spectrum warfare. Non-lethal in nature, it would allow China to take offensive action while minimizing the threat of a traditionally lethally armed confrontation. This places the onus on China's competitors to come up with their own non-lethal weapons and counter-tactics, respond with violent action that could plunge the South China Sea into armed conflict, or ultimately cede the territory.

***"The Philippines' entire naval force owns only two frigates capable of launching missiles. Recognizing this imbalance, the Chinese government has ramped up investment in water cannon technology... Beijing increasingly sees the weapons as vital to bolstering its hold over the disputed waters while also lowering the odds of armed clashes."***

**Source:** Stephen Chen, “‘Subdue the enemy without fighting’: How China’s powerful water cannon will change the game in South China Sea,” *SCMP*. 13 April 2024. [https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3258772/subdue-enemy-without-fighting-how-chinas-powerful-water-cannon-will-change-game-south-china-sea?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=cm&utm\\_campaign=enlz-today\\_international&utm\\_content=20240413&tpcc=enlz-today\\_international&UUID=200d3857-7b09-402a-bc24-cdd797d79a18&next\\_article\\_id=3258875&article\\_id\\_list=3258875,3258822,3258887,3258877,3258884,3258908,3258904&tc=4](https://www.scmp.com/news/china/science/article/3258772/subdue-enemy-without-fighting-how-chinas-powerful-water-cannon-will-change-game-south-china-sea?utm_medium=email&utm_source=cm&utm_campaign=enlz-today_international&utm_content=20240413&tpcc=enlz-today_international&UUID=200d3857-7b09-402a-bc24-cdd797d79a18&next_article_id=3258875&article_id_list=3258772,3258875,3258822,3258887,3258877,3258884,3258908,3258904&tc=4)

*The world’s first “smart” water cannon, controlled by artificial intelligence (AI), has been developed by researchers in central China – and it could take the non-lethal weapon to new heights..*

*The water cannon is also equipped with motion sensors that collect the swing state of the ship to alter the ballistic parameters.*

*Conditions at sea create complex environmental wind and fluid patterns and mechanical transmission errors, so it can be challenging to lock onto and hit a precise spot on a ship in the distance, such as a smokestack, with a water jet on a swaying coastguard vessel....*

*China has been vigorously developing its maritime forces in recent decades, including electromagnetic catapult aircraft carriers, hypersonic anti-ship missiles, ultra-high-power electronic warfare systems and other cutting-edge equipment.*

*They are formidable weapons, aimed squarely at the US military, but they are too much for territorial disputes against smaller Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea.*

*The vast disparity in military strength renders China’s hi-tech arsenal impractical against these neighbours. For instance, the Philippines’ entire naval force owns only two frigates capable of launching missiles. Recognizing this imbalance, the Chinese government has ramped up investment in water cannon technology, developing a range of increasingly automated and powerful products.*

Notes

- 1 South Korea, Taiwan and Japan are also equipped with, and have used, water cannons in naval disputes with competitor nations over maritime territories or fisheries, while the Philippines is lacking in comparison.

*The technology has also been aided from an unlikely quarter – China’s infrastructure projects. With large-scale land reclamation and other infrastructure projects under way, China has some of the world’s most powerful dredging vessels that suck seabed sediment to redistribute it to designated areas. The water pump technology involved in that process is perfectly suited to driving high-performance water cannons...*

*Zhang Yuqiang, a researcher with the People’s Armed Police Maritime Police Academy Command Department, said that shipboard non-lethal weapons including water cannons “will play an increasingly important role in future maritime conflicts”.*

*“In recent years, competition and struggles around marine interests and power have become increasingly fierce, and maritime disputes have become a common challenge faced by most maritime countries in the world,”*

*Because all sides are “fighting for every inch of land and refusing to cede an inch”, the team said, using traditional lethal weapons in small-scale skirmishes could cause them escalate into large-scale armed conflicts. It is a situation that neither China nor other countries around the South China Sea wish to see.*

*Other major maritime countries are now stepping up research and deployment of other types of non-lethal weapons, including blinding lasers and microwaves that can cause skin-burning sensations, they said.*

## China Uses Non-Lethal Tactics To Harass Philippines Personnel

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

China often asserts its maritime territorial claims in the South China Sea by employing non-lethal tactics that are sufficient to prevent an adversary's ships from approaching or landing on disputed features. Referred to as "salami slicing," these tactics avoid provoking direct confrontation with naval adversaries, such as the Philippines, and their stronger allies, such as the United States, while allowing China to dictate when clashes occur and to incrementally control disputed shoals and reefs.<sup>1</sup> On 26 March, the Chinese-language website *wenxucity.com* published the

excerpted article detailing specific tactics the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) employs against Philippine vessels and personnel near the Tiexian Reef in the South China Sea. The Philippines occupy the Tiexian Reef, which lies in shallow water preventing larger ships from approaching, by dispatching smaller vessels to it from nearby Thitu Islands. Only several dozen Philippine personnel can land on the reef at any one time. The CCG have utilized the non-lethal tactic of flying a helicopter at low altitude over the reef to blow enormous amounts of sand and rock into Philippine vessels and personnel. The article claims that the deafening

noise from the helicopter's three turboshaft engines can cause dizziness and affect the internal organs of Philippine soldiers or researchers. As a result, the Philippines has been unable to station forces on the reef to enforce Philippine sovereignty. The article concludes that these methods are sufficient to evict Philippine personnel from disputed areas without causing fatalities, reducing the risk of escalation or retaliation from the Philippines or its allies, while allowing China to still assert its territorial claims.

***"The People's Liberation Army claims that compared with face-to-face conflict, this aerial sand-blowing tactic will not cause fatal harm to [Philippine] personnel and can prevent them from 'causing chaos'."***

China claims a maximal amount of maritime territory in the South China Sea, which leads to disputes with all of its neighbors over reefs, shoals, islands, and other features.

Source: Voice of America, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South\\_China\\_Sea\\_claims\\_map.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:South_China_Sea_claims_map.jpg); Attribution: CCA 2.0



**Source:** “菲律宾再登铁线礁 中国用直升机掀“飞沙走石”驱离 (The Philippines once again lands on Tiexian Reef, but China uses helicopters to send ‘flying sand and rocks’ to force them out),” *wenxuecity.com* (Chinese-language website tailored towards educated Chinese outside mainland China), 26 March 2024. <https://www.wenxuecity.com/news/2024/03/26/125489186.html>

*After the Philippines landed on Tiexian Reef, a disputed reef in the South China Sea, for the second time, it was immediately forced away by the Chinese Navy’s Z-8J helicopter at a very low altitude. Under the effects of the powerful airflow from the helicopter, there was nowhere to hide on the coast as sand and rocks were blown everywhere. The Philippine “scientific research team” who landed on the reef was escaping.... When operating at full strength, the noise is unbearable. If one is too close to the helicopter, it can even disturb a human’s internal organs.*

*The People’s Liberation Army claims that compared with face-to-face conflict, this aerial sand-blowing method will not cause fatal harm to personnel and may prevent them from “stirring chaos”, so it is more suitable for evicting Filipinos who land on the reef.*

*The shallow water is not suitable for interception by large ships, and besides that Thitu Island has comprehensive facilities that can provide effective logistical support. For example, large aircraft can take off and land to pull people over, and then directly transfer to ships to ascend the reef.*

#### Notes

- 1 Salami slicing refers to the taking of territory in a slow and gradual manner and is a strategy that involves divide and conquer process of threats and alliances to overcome opposition and acquire new territories. China has employed this strategy in the South China Sea and in the Himalayan region. Prabhaskar K Dutta, What is China’s salami slicing tactic that Army chief Bipin Rawat talked about?, *India Today*, 7 September 2017. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/doklam-china-salami-slicing-army-chief-general-bipin-rawat-1039864-2017-09-07>

## Chinese Officials Seek Engagement With All Middle East Regional Players



Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas's political bureau, at a meeting in Moscow (2020).

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:03-03-2020\\_Ismail\\_Haniyeh\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:03-03-2020_Ismail_Haniyeh_(cropped).jpg);  
Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

By Lucas Winter  
OE Watch Commentary

China has embarked on a policy characterized by diplomatic engagement with all regional parties alongside rhetorical alignment with the pro-Palestinian views that are dominant in the Muslim world and “Global South.”<sup>1</sup> In mid-March, a Chinese delegation met in Doha with the Qatar-based head of Hamas’s

political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh. It was the first publicly acknowledged meeting between Chinese and Hamas officials since 7 October.<sup>2</sup> The first accompanying excerpt from the Palestinian news agency *Safa*, reported noteworthy statements by China’s ambassador in Qatar describing Chinese interest in preserving ties with Hamas and describing the group as “part of the Palestinian national fabric.” The meeting should not be considered an expression of Chinese support for Hamas at the expense of other parties, given that it came at the end of a trip that also included visits with officials from Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Qatar.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the meeting is noteworthy in that it confirms that China is less wary of Islamic activism than in recent years.

**“The Hamas movement is part of the Palestinian national fabric.”**

As noted in the second excerpted article, from Qatar’s *Al-Jazeera*, China views Hamas and other mobilized Sunni groups with suspicion due to concerns over Uyghur Muslim activism in its western Xinjiang province. Uyghur-related concerns have previously put Beijing at odds with Sunni groups such as Hamas and their backers, including the Qatari government.<sup>4</sup> More recently, though, these disagreements have subsided amidst a broader regional détente. This trend has not been affected by events since 7 October. This approach may lead to a greater Chinese alignment with Qatar, which has positioned itself as the most effective intermediary between interested governments and mobilized Sunni groups such as Hamas and the Taliban. China’s multi-partner approach to the Middle East is similar to Qatar’s, and one may expect these governments to fully put aside past disagreements regarding Muslim activism as they seek to position themselves as key brokers in a new regional order.

### Source:

السفير الصيني: حماس جزء من النسيج الفلسطيني ونحرص على العلاقة معها`

“Chinese Ambassador: Hamas is part of the Palestinian fabric and we are keen on our relationship with it,” *Safa* (Palestinian Press Agency), 17 March 2024. <https://safa.ps/post/367879>

*The Chinese Ambassador to the State of Qatar, Cao Xiaolin, stated on Sunday that the Hamas movement is*

*part of the Palestinian national fabric and that China is keen on having relations with the group.*

**Source:**

“China recognizes “ Hamas” with little shame!” *al-Jazeera Mubashir* (Qatari news agency), 24 March 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/24/>

*The meeting did not appear in international newspapers, and some news sites covered it hastily, quoting an official statement issued by “ Hamas.” We did not find an echo of it in the Chinese media, except for one sentence, which was reported by the “Xinhua” agency and the websites of the Chinese embassy in Egypt and Qatar...*

*Beijing includes “ Hamas” on the list of extremist Islamic groups, like the ones it is pursuing in northwest China on charges of “terrorism” and inciting Muslim Uyghurs, Kazaks, and Uzbeks to secede. It does not classify Hamas as a terrorist group, as the United States and its allies do, to avoid being drawn in by the West into problems that it does not need, in a region that is witnessing constant*

*political and security fluctuations, which it will not be able to resolve....*

*China’s fears of “ Hamas” come against the backdrop of strong ideological hostility from the ruling Communist Party, which rejects citizens’ adoption of any religious or political belief other than what the party adopts, under the pretext of protecting the nation-state...*

*[Chinese diplomat] Wang Kejian lived through the Arab Spring revolutions and knows a lot about the Islamic and tribal movements in the region. He exchanged books with us and talked a lot about them. He has a good understanding of “ Hamas” as a national liberation movement.*

Notes

- 1 See: China’s Game in Gaza, *Foreign Affairs*, 8 January 2024. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-game-gaza>
- 2 China’s ambassador to Qatar met with Haniyeh in late February 2024, in a meeting reported by Hamas but never officially confirmed by the Chinese government. See: Hamas Leader Ismail Haniyeh Meets With Chinese Ambassador To Qatar, *MEMRI (The Middle East Media Research Institute)*, 29 February 2024. <https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-leader-ismail-haniyeh-meets-chinese-ambassador-qatar>
- 3 For more details see: Chinese envoy meets Hamas chief Haniyeh after first visit to Israel since Gaza war began, *CNN*, 19 March 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/19/china/chinese-envoy-hamas-meeting-israel-intl-hnk/index.html> China’s Middle East diplomat meets Hamas’ Haniyeh in Qatar, *al-Monitor*, 19 March 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/chinas-middle-east-diplomat-meets-hamas-haniyeh-qatar> Three reasons behind rare China-Hamas meeting in Qatar, *al-Monitor*, 22 March 2024. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/03/three-reasons-behind-rare-china-hamas-meeting-qatar>
- 4 Alongside Hamas, the Qatari government was among the few Arab critics of China’s Xinjiang policies. Beginning in 2022, however, Qatar ceased to publicly oppose these policies. See: Activists hail Qatar withdrawal from pro-China text over Uighurs, *al-Jazeera*, 21 August 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/21/activists-hail-qatar-withdrawal-from-pro-china-text-over-uighurs> U.N. body rejects debate on China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in blow to West, *Reuters*, 6 October 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/un-body-rejects-historic-debate-chinas-human-rights-record-2022-10-06/> U.N. body rejects debate on China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims in blow to West, *Chinese Embassy in Qatar*, 25 December 2022. [http://qa.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zkgx/202212/t20221225\\_10994873.htm](http://qa.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zkgx/202212/t20221225_10994873.htm)

## Sanctions Drive Russia's Shift to Domestic Weapons Production

By Dodge Billingsley  
OE Watch Commentary

Despite Western efforts to dismantle or limit its defense industry, Russia continues to find ways to produce the weapons it needs to fight its war in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> As discussed in the excerpted article from the Azeri based *Caliber* news outlet, on 16 April, the Russian Ministry of Defense released a video unveiling an updated version of the **BM-27 Uragan** self-propelled multiple rocket launcher (MRL), supported by a new **BAZ-69092** three axle chassis, at work in Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> According to the *Caliber* article, the modifications are a reflection of not only the need to modernize Russia's rocket and artillery systems, but also "align with Russian strategic [necessity] for local production." The article notes that Russia has lost at least 83 BM-27 systems in Ukraine since it invaded in Feb 2022. Replacement of these and other systems is critical to Russia's war effort. The article points out the original Uragan chassis were built in other parts of the former Soviet empire, including Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The new BAZ-96092 is a multi-platform chassis wholly built in Russia. Russia continues to rearm its military despite sanctions and



Still-frame from video of BM-27 Uragan MLRS supposedly moving into position to fire on Ukrainian targets near Belgorod, 16 April 2024.

Source: Russian Ministry of Defence, [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/37664](https://t.me/mod_russia/37664); Attribution: Public Domain

**“The Russian transition to the BAZ-69092 chassis seems to be motivated by several factors... but also aligns with Russian strategic preferences [necessity] for local production.”**

restrictions imposed by the West to reduce Russia's ability to fight the war in Ukraine.

**Source:** “Russian Army deploys new version of BM-27 Uragan MLRS Rocket Launcher in Ukraine,” *Caliber* (Azeri based news source with good regional coverage from neighboring perspective), 18 April 2024. <https://caliber.az/en/post/234544/>

*On April 16, 2024, the Russian Ministry of Defense released a video showing a night-time operation involving the BM-27 Uragan 220mm multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) near the Belgorod region. Notably, the video unveiled an updated version of the BM-27 Uragan launcher mounted on a new platform, identified as the BAZ-69092 three-axle chassis, marking a significant departure from its traditional ZIL-135LM 8x8 truck chassis.*

*The transition to the BAZ-69092 chassis is part of an*

*ongoing modernization effort within the Russian Army to upgrade existing military equipment and improve its artillery capabilities. This strategy includes plans to replace the aging BM-27 Uragan MLRS with the more advanced **Tornado-S** system....*

*The Russian transition to the BAZ-69092 chassis seems to be motivated by several factors. Firstly, the Russian Army lost at least 83 units in Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict. As of 2023, the Russian Army had only 150 of these vehicles in service,*

*continue on 16*

indicating a critical need for the modernization and replacement of this valuable system. Secondly, Russian engineers could face difficulties in modernizing older vehicles such as the ZIL-135LM, whose production ceased in 1995. Thirdly, these difficulties need to be compared with the advantages offered by new platforms for improving combat efficiency. The adoption of the newer BAZ-69092 6x6 chassis offers several advantages, including its capacity to accommodate weapons systems weighing up to 13 tons, but also aligns with Russian strategic preferences for local production.

*It is interesting to note that the BAZ-69092 chassis*

*was specifically developed to standardize and facilitate the use of various military and special vehicles within the Russian army. This initiative began in the early 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which affected the supply of special chassis as key manufacturers were outside Russia (for instance MKZT in Belarus and KrAZ in Ukraine). The Bryansk Automobile Plant (BAZ) was tasked with developing the BAZ-69092 under the project code “Voshchina-1” to substitute for foreign-made chassis. The model is part of a family of vehicles designed for diverse functions, including combat and support roles, tailored to meet specific requirements of the military.*

#### Notes

- 1 For recent media reporting on Russia’s resurgent domestic arms industry, see: Russia ramps up weapons production, using mass quantity to outgun Ukraine, *The Washington Post*, 19 April 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/19/russia-weapons-production-ukraine-war/>; Russia has also received Chinese and Iranian weapons assistance. For recent news coverage regarding Chinese assistance, see: China Has Helped Russia Boost Arms Production, U.S. Says, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 April 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/china-russia-arms-production-help-c098c08b> and US intelligence finding shows China surging equipment sales to Russia to help war effort in Ukraine, *The Associated Press*, 19 April 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-china-russia-ukraine-war-265df843be030b7183c95b6f3afca8ec>
- 2 Fielding of the new and improved Russian BM-27 had been anticipated for months. See: Російські БМ-27 “Ураган” отримали нове шасі БАЗ-69092 (Russia Modernizes BM-27 Uragan Rocket Launchers with BAZ-69092 Chassis Upgrade), *Militarnyi* (Ukraine media outlet focused on the military and defense industry), 22 December 2023. <https://mil.in.ua/uk/news/rosijski-bm-27-uragan-otrymaly-nove-shasi-baz-69092/>
- 3 The above sourced *Caliber* article noted that Ukraine is also modernizing its BM-27 MLRS, fitting the Uragan launcher on a Tatra “3815-7”33RC1 chassis, resulting in the creation of the Bureviy system. Revealed in 2020 and developed by the Shepetiv Repair Plant, the Bureviy successfully completed fire tests in November 2020. Ukraine also developed the Bastion-03, which combines a KrAZ-6322 chassis with a 9K57 Uragan MLRS launcher. This latter project is part of a Ukrainian initiative to standardize rocket artillery chassis using the KrAZ platform, following the earlier Bastion-01 and Bastion-02 models.



## Russian-Finnish Tensions Rise Amidst Border Closures and “Hybrid” Tactics

By Lionel Beehner  
OE Watch Commentary

In December 2023, Finland closed its 800-mile border with Russia, which included three maritime crossings for smaller boats, in the wake of Finland formally joining NATO. These closures have heightened tensions between Russia and Finland.

According to the first article from the Norway-based *The Barents Observer*, the closure includes three maritime border crossings for smaller boats, which will impact leisure boating in the Barents Sea. As per a second article, also from *The Barents Observer*, Finland had been overwhelmed with over a thousand migrants and asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa. According to the article, Moscow has orchestrated the influx of migrants in a deliberate “hybrid” tactic by the Russian government – so-called “instrumentalized immigration” – to overwhelm the country and its border police as a punishment for closing the border to Russians. Authorities in Moscow have organized flows of asylum seekers on Finland’s eastern border since last fall, the Finnish prime minister has argued. A representative for the Finnish border guard said that the maritime border was important to close because reaching Finland by sea is “life threatening,” given the Baltic Sea’s much harsher conditions than the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup>



Russian border crossing at Paljakka, Kuusamo, Finland. In light of rising tensions, Finland shut down its border with Russia.

Source: Fanny Schertzer, ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Finland-Russia\\_border#/media/File:Finnish-Russian\\_border,\\_Paljakka-2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Finland-Russia_border#/media/File:Finnish-Russian_border,_Paljakka-2.jpg)); Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0

In response, the European Union has voiced its support for Finland. The president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, paid a visit to the Finnish-Russian border in April to say that “Europe stands by your side” as it seeks to secure its border

**“There are hundreds and possibly thousands of people close to Finland’s border on the Russian side that could be instrumentalized against Finland.”**

against such “hybrid attacks.”<sup>2</sup> With the weather warming up, officials there expect an even larger influx of migrants and asylum seekers in the weeks and months ahead.

For the latter half of the 20th century, following a war between the Soviet Union and Finland in 1939, relations between the two neighbors were relatively peaceful. The recent rise in tensions and border closures have drawn concerns that Russia, beyond staging hybrid operations like “instrumentalized immigration,” could stage a false-flag border intervention to test NATO resolve and its Article Five protections.

**Source:** “Finland’s eastern border to remain shut indefinitely (Восточная граница Финляндии останется закрытой на неопределенный срок),” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 8 April 2024. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/ru/granicy/2024/04/vostochnaya-granica-finlyandii-ostanetsya-zakrytoy-na-neopredelennyy-srok>

*In the past, the closure has been reconsidered every couple of months, but this time the decision is open-ended...*

*With warmer weather on the way, this time the decision also covers border crossing points at three small-boat harbours: Haapasaari, an island off the southeastern city of Kotka, Santio, an island in Virolahti, Finland’s southeasternmost municipality, and Nuijamaa lake harbour in Lappeenranta on the Russian border. They will be closed to pleasure boat traffic from mid-April. “By closing border crossing points for maritime traffic to leisure boating, the Government is preparing for the possibility that instrumentalised migration could expand to maritime traffic as spring progresses,” the Interior Ministry said in a statement.*

*“This would be dangerous to people seeking to enter Finland and would burden maritime search and*

*rescue,” it went on to say.*

*The frontier has been closed since December, when Finnish authorities accused Russia of orchestrating the flow of third-country asylum seekers across the border as a means of hybrid influence.*

*Nearly two months ago, the government led by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo (NCP) extended the closure until 14 April. Another extension was widely expected, with officials predicting that favourable spring weather conditions would spur more arrivals across the border.*

*The cabinet also plans to ask Parliament soon to approve a more stringent border law that would allow migrants deemed to have no grounds for seeking asylum to be immediately sent back to Russia. That bill, which was still being finalised on Thursday, has come under criticism for violating international border treaties.’*

**Source:** Atle Staalesen, “As Helsinki prepares new measures against Russian hybrid operations, President Stubb makes visit to the border,” *The Barents Observer* (independent Norwegian news site in Russian and English currently blocked in Russia), 27 March 2024. <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/borders/2024/03/helsinki-prepares-new-measures-against-russian-hybrid-operations-president-stubb>

*Together with his wife, President Alexander Stubb on Wednesday arrived at Niirala checkpoint where he met with representatives of the Finnish Border Guard. Captain of the border guard station Mikko Sorasalmi gave the president an introduction to equipment applied by the border patrols. On site were also representatives of the EU border agency Frontex and the discussion took place in Finnish, English and German, Yle reports.*

*The Niirala border-crossing point used to be site buzzing with travellers, but since mid-December the border between Finland and Russia has been closed and travellers forced to use checkpoints in the Baltic states or northern Norway. The closure came after several thousands of migrants flocked from Russia and into the Schengen zone through the Finnish border-crossing points. Finnish authorities are confident that the migrant flows were orchestrated by Moscow as*

*continue on 19*

*part of a hybrid influence operation.*

*This week's visit of Alexander Stubb comes as Finland is preparing new measures to counter Russian hybrid influence on the country. Last week, the government completed a draft law that is aimed at preventing asylum seekers from entering the country. The bill aims at preventing asylum seekers from entering the country. The acceptance of asylum applications would be significantly limited. The bill*

*is balancing between national security concerns and international human rights consideration, representatives of the government admit ...*

*It is aimed at influencing Finland's national security and public order, the government leader underlines. "We have to prepare for the fact that the situation may get more difficult when spring arrives," he said in last Friday's press conference. "The authorities need tools to manage the terrain border."*

#### Notes

- 1 Mariia Yemets, Finland closes sea checkpoints near border with Russia until mid-April, *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 April 2024. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2024/04/5/7449951/>
- 2 Doug Cunningham, Ursula von der Leyen visits border to stand by Finland against Russian 'hybrid attacks', *UPI*, 19 April 2024. [https://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2024/04/19/Finland-EU-Russian-hybrid-attacks/1921713541719/](https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2024/04/19/Finland-EU-Russian-hybrid-attacks/1921713541719/)

## Belarussian Military Undertakes Mass Training Mobilization

By Paris Gordon  
OE Watch Commentary

Belarus has mobilized 5,000 reserve troops to conduct extensive military training along two NATO borders, according to the first excerpted article from the state-run news agency *Belarus Today*. The first site is located along the border of Lithuania, seven miles from the Lithuanian capital city Vilnius, near the Belarussian village Grodzie. The second training site sits along the Polish-Belarussian border in Brest. Additionally, the Belarussian Ministry of Defense reports that its 19th Mechanized Brigade and the 120th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade are fully combat-ready. *Belarus Today* also reports that Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin stressed that Belarus cannot react calmly to the growing threats and militant rhetoric of its neighbors and that Belarus must learn from its history and apply the lessons learned to the modern day. The minister further emphasized that although

Belarus is monitoring the situation, the defense ministry will not hesitate to act in defense of its homeland. The *Belarus Today* article reports that Defense Minister Khrenin noted that the function of these combat readiness checks is to “train military personnel, improve issues of combat and mobilization preparedness, and to improve skills operating on unfamiliar terrain.”<sup>1</sup> Among the delivered supplies, the Belarussian Ministry of Defense showcased **T-72B** tanks and **BMP-2** armored vehicles.

**“A situation has been created where there is not yet a war today, but the enemy prepares for one. Our actions demonstrate our determination to protect our country. We are prepared to protect our homeland.”**

The second excerpted article from the prominent Polish public news service *Polskie Radio 24* describes these training movements as “disturbing” with soldiers simulating realistic combat situations with large quantities of heavy military equipment being stationed on the frontier with NATO. The exercises were noted to be in response to NATO exercises in nearby nations, according to Deputy Minister of Defense General Viktor Gulevich.

Belarus’s recent military activities suggest the nation may be actively preparing for a wartime footing to engage in armed conflict by training and improving military readiness, or that the nation is utilizing its military to posture, understanding the close watch the NATO border states of Lithuania and Poland maintain. While the exact intentions of these exercises are unclear, in either scenario, these movements bear monitoring.

103rd Mobile Brigade of Belarus, BTR-ZD tank with an installed ZU-23-2. Belarus has recently mobilized parts of its military along Lithuanian and Polish borders.

Author: Serge Serebro; Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armed\\_Forces\\_of\\_Belarus#/media/File:Btr-d\\_Belarus.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Armed_Forces_of_Belarus#/media/File:Btr-d_Belarus.jpg); Attribution: CC BY-SA 3.0



**Source:** “Хренини: Вооруженные Силы Беларуси повышают уровень проверок боеготовности (Khrenin: The Armed Forces of Belarus increase the level of combat readiness checks),” *Belarus Today* (Belarusian state-run media outlet), 26 March 2024. <https://www.sb.by/articles/khrenin-vooruzhennyye-sily-belarusi-povyshayut-uroven-proverok-boegotovnosti.html>

*There are increasing challenges and threats, and we are increasing the level of checks. According to the scale carried out, this check is one of the largest. The 19th Mechanized Brigade and the 120th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade are on full combat readiness. Nearly 5,000 reserve soldiers are taking part in these events (combat readiness checks).*

*“Today we are seeing many challenges and threats growing. It is the militant rhetoric which is heard from our neighbors. We cannot, of course, treat this calmly because we have learned our lessons from the history of our time,” stressed Viktor Khrenin.*

*Concerning combat readiness checks, (they are being) held in order to train military personnel, improve issues of combat and mobilization*

*preparedness, and to improve skills operating on unfamiliar terrain.*

*“Therefore, units did not go to the training ground, but to real places, real routes, and real borders. The tasks (these places) fulfill are educational. For them a situation has been created where there is not yet a war today, but the enemy prepares for one. Our actions demonstrate our determination to protect our country. We are prepared to protect our homeland,” stressed the minister (Viktor Khrenin).*

*“We must watch and track the situation. If needed, (we are) determined to act. We will not stand on ceremony if we experience provocation. This is our main task,” added Viktor Khrenin.*

**Source:** “Niepokojące ruchy białoruskich wojsk. Ćwiczzenia tuż przy granicy z Polską (Disturbing movements of Belarusian troops. Exercises right next to the border with Poland),” *Polskie Radio 24* (Polish national public-service radio broadcasting network), 21 March 2024. <https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3353184,niepokojace-ruchy-bialoruskich-wojsk-cwiczenia-tuz-przy-granicy-z-polska>

*The squadron of the 115th Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment of the Belarussian Army is conducting tactical exercises at the “Brest” training ground, informed the Ministry of Defense of Belarus. The “Brest” training ground is located near the border with Poland.*

*Soldiers shoot at training targets, operating in a situation as close to combat conditions as possible. The Ministry of Defense emphasized that the units take into account the experience of the Russian army in the war in Ukraine.*

*The exercises are part of the control of the combat*

*readiness of the Belarusian armed forces, which has been carried out for 10 days, mainly in the western part of the country. Deputy Minister of Defense and Chief of the General Staff, General Viktor Gulevich, stated at the beginning of this operation that it was being carried out as a reaction to military exercises of NATO countries near the borders of Belarus.*

*...Railway transports carrying elements of the 19th mechanized Brigade of the Belarusian Armed Forces arrived in Ashmyany in the Grodno Oblast, Belarus. A total of 50 wagons with soldiers and military equipment.*

*continue on 22*

*The amount of equipment delivered corresponds to an incomplete mechanized Battalion reinforced by a tank company. These are four passenger cars with staff, three covered wagons with equipment and ammunition and 39 platform wagons...*

*Ashmyany is located just over 50 km from the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius. The arrival of the transport at*

*the station there was confirmed by the Belarussian Ministry of defense. The resort even published photos, among others T-72B tanks and BMP-2 to armored vehicles. After unloading, the equipment will go to the position scheduled for inspection. The field camp where the Belarussian soldiers with equipment will stay is to be located near the village of Grodzie, 12 kilometers from the border with Lithuania.*

#### Notes

- 1 Belarussian opposition website *Belarussian Hajun Project*, which reports on the movements of the Belarussian military within Belarus, noted 50 rail cars-worth of soldiers and equipment arrived at the Lithuanian-Belarussian border for inspection and combat readiness checks. For more, see: Large-scale combat readiness inspection, drills with the territorial defense, and rearmament of the army: review of the main military events in Belarus in March, *Belarussian Hajun Project*, 14 April 2024. <https://hajun.info/analytics/large-scale-combat-readiness-inspection-drills-with-the-territorial-defense-and-rearmament-of-the-army-review-of-the-main-military-events-in-belarus-in-march/>

## Iranian Warships Conduct Joint Naval Drills With China and Russia



By Holly Dagues  
OE Watch Commentary

In March, China, Iran, and Russia held joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea, known as the 2024 Maritime Security Belt.<sup>1</sup> As part of the fourth group exercise since 2019, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Navy (IRGC-N) deployed two new warships, the ***Shahid Hassan Bagheri*** and *Shahid (Ali) Sayyad Shirazi*. As noted in the excerpted article from the Iran-based *Mehr News Agency*, both warships are heavily armed, guided-missile catamarans of the Shahid Soleimani class launched in 2022.<sup>2</sup> Shahid Soleimani class warships are believed to be the most advanced IRGC-N ships to date and have an operational reach of 5,600 miles.<sup>3</sup>

According to the second excerpted article from IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency*, both ships are named after martyrs of the Iran-Iraq War. The article also provides tech-specs noting, that the warships are powered by four engines, are 67 meters long, travel 45 knots, and carry an array of defense and offensive missiles, and an armed combat helicopter. According to *Tasnim*, the warships are reportedly capable of traveling 5,500 nautical miles—a slight discrepancy to the 5,600-mile range reported for Shahid Soleimani class ships by *Mehr News Agency*.

In January 2024, another Shahid Soleimani class warship was revealed: the *Shahid Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis*. The ship is named after the commander

◀ “Shahid Sayyad Shirazi (FS313-03),” *Khabar Online* (Iranian news website affiliated with reformist political faction), 21 January 2024.

Source: <https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1874777>;  
Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

of the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella group of Shia militias, whose commander was assassinated along with Soleimani in Iraq. While the Shahid Soleimani class warships are no match for U.S. capabilities, they should not be underestimated. The new additions are part of Iran’s plans to expand its presence in the Persian Gulf and extend its reach from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

**“The new ships added to the IRGC Navy are participating in this joint exercise for the first time and are conducting operations.”**

**Source:**

(The presence of new IRGC ships in the joint exercise with China and Russia in the Indian Ocean),” *Mehr News Agency* (semi-official news agency owned by Iranian government’s Islamic Development Organization), 13 March 2024. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6054031/>

حضور ناوهای جدید سپاه در رزمایش مشترک با چین و روسیه در اقیانوس هند

According to *Mehr News*, the 2024 (Maritime Security Belt) exercise was conducted with the

participation of the countries China, Russia, and Iran with shooting at the designated surface targets.

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*In this exercise, the Shahid Mahmoudi, Shahid Haj Qasem Soleimani, Shahid Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis warships, Tondar-class Shahid Tavassoli frigate, as well as IRGC maritime helicopters and the heroic*

*soldiers of the Islamic Republic are present.*

*The new ships added to the IRGC Navy are participating in this joint exercise for the first time and are conducting operations.*

**Source:**

الحاق ۲ ناو رزمی شهید صیاد شیرازی و شهید حسن باقری به نیروی دریایی سپاه  
(Addition of two warships Shahid (Ali) Sayyad Shirazi and Shahid Hassan Bagheri to the IRGC Navy),”  
Tasnim News Agency (IRGC-affiliated outlet), 21 January 2024. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/11/30/3041554/>

*According to Tasnim News Agency’s defense correspondent, this morning in Bandar Abbas (a port city), the combat patrol vessels the Shahid (Ali) Sayyad Shirazi and Shahid Hassan Bagheri were joined by the IRGC Naval Combat Organization in the presence of chief of staff of the armed forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri.*

*These two stealth vessels are of the Shahid (Qasem) Soleimani class, and recently the Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis vessel of this class was unveiled and joined the IRGC-Navy. These ocean-going vessels are catamaran-type with a speed of 45 knots and many offensive and defensive missiles.*

*These vessels are equipped with a Navab vertical launch missile defense system and a Sayyad cruise missile with a range of 700 kilometers. They are capable of carrying three light missile launchers and an armed combat helicopter. These two IRGC naval vessels are 67 meters long, 20 meters wide, weigh 600 tons, and have four engines. Shahid Bagheri’s vessel was built at the IRGC-N’s specialized vessel center in Bushehr.*

*The Shahid (Ali) Sayyad Shirazi vessel is equipped with Sayyad long-range defense missiles and Navab defense missiles. These vessels are capable of sailing 5,500 nautical miles.*

Notes

- 1 According to Iranian Rear Adm. Amrollah Nozari, the exercises cover 6,500 square miles of sea in an area of strategic importance to the whole world. See: Brad Lendon, China, Russia and Iran put on show of force with Mideast naval drills, *CNN*, 14 March 2024. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/13/middleeast/china-russia-iran-navy-drills-intl-hnk/index.html>
- 2 The Shahid Soleimani class warships are named in honor of assassinated Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who was killed via a U.S. drone strike in Iraq in 2020. For a review of the U.S. strike on Soleimani, See: Michael Crowley, Falih Hassan and Eric Schmitt, U.S. Strike in Iraq Kills Qasem Suleimani, Commander of Iranian Forces, *The New York Times*, 2 January 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>
- 3 Eric Wertheim, Iran’s first VLS missile catamaran, U.S. Naval Institute, December 2023. <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2023/december/irans-first-vls-missile-catamaran>; Farzin Nadimi, New Iranian Warship Signals Longer Maritime Reach, More Aggressive Strategy, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 16 September 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-iranian-warship-signals-longer-maritime-reach-more-aggressive-strategy>



## Iran Highlights Recent Missile Achievements

By Michael Rubin  
OE Watch Commentary

In the wake of simulated test fires and direct strikes on Israel, the semi-official Iranian news outlet *Mehr News Agency* highlighted the previous year’s missile developments. *The Mehr News Agency* article states some of Iran’s missiles are short-range, deployable on helicopters, and designed for use both on land and at sea. This reflects Iran’s growing military capability in the Persian Gulf and over the rough terrain of the Makran Coast, once a relatively lawless backwater whose strategic importance has grown as Iran seeks to develop a greater footprint in the northern Indian Ocean.

The article suggests that Iran is focused on the development of smart weapons capable of identifying new targets while *en route* rather than simply being point-and-shoot. Such



The Shafagh missile on display. The sign at the bottom reads “Death to Israel” in both Persian and Arabic.

Source: <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2024/02/03/3/4842101.jpg?ts=1706943630686>; Attribution: Mehr News Agency

claims likely reflect actual progress, as the Iranian military has succeeded in developing all-weather GPS guided drones. The article also describes the Khorramshahr-4 missile in greater detail than others in its arsenal, a possible indication that Iranian reports regarding the Khorramshahr-4’s ongoing development may be accurate. Given its touted range and the explosive power of its warhead, deployment of the Khorramshahr-4

in large numbers could significantly change the operational environment across the region. The Persian Gulf, northern Indian Ocean, Red Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean, are within range and could be targeted although it is unclear if it would be successful against Israeli missile defense. The article reflects Iran’s aspirations to build the weapons necessary to alter the region’s decades-long status quo.

**“Iran is among the four countries with hypersonic technology.”**

### Source:

(Eight Missile Achievements in Year 2023-24),” *Mehr News Agency* (semi-official news agency owned by Iranian government’s Islamic Development Organization), 21 March 2024. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/6057908>

دستاورد موشکی در سال ۱۴۰۲ هـ

*In Persian year 1402 [20 March 2023 – 19 March 2024], developments in the missile field experienced a glorious period. In this year, we revealed several strategic and precision missiles, such as the hypersonic “Fatah,” the “Paveh,” and the ballistic Khorramshahr-4.*

*Below we briefly examine the capabilities of some of the most important indigenous missiles unveiled*

*during the Persian year:*

- **Shafagh Missile:** On 4 January 2024, Maj. Gen. Sayyed Abdolrahim Mousavi, commander-in-chief of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, presided over a ceremony unveiling the upgraded Shafaq missile. The Shafaq missile is accurate up to a range of 12 miles.<sup>1</sup>

*continue on 26*

- **Qadr-29:** On the same day, the Qadr-29 missile system with a range of 100 miles, equipped with four-kilogram warheads, was also unveiled. It is used in suicide and reconnaissance operations. This missile system can also be installed on all types of [Bell] 206 helicopters....
- **Haider Cruise Missile:** The commander-in-chief of the army also unveiled the Haider long-range cruise missile. This missile system can also be installed on most helicopters equipped with heat-seeking warhead with a range of 120 miles.... Thus system is able to target all land and sea targets in difficult mountainous terrain, sea coasts, and sandy and desert areas with minimum time and with maximum surprise....
- **Talaiyeh and Nasir Cruise Missiles:** The Talaiyeh missile system was added to the regular navy this past year. This missile has a range of more than 600 miles and is smart, with the ability to autonomously detect and adjust to new targets during its flight.... The Nasir Maritime Cruise Missile was deployed to the third maritime zone this year. It is a smart missile with a range of 60 miles, and it has very high destructive capability....
- **Paveh Cruise Missile:** On 22 September 2023, the long-range Paveh ground cruise missile was unveiled during an armed forces' parade near the Holy Shrine of Imam Khomeini.
- **Hypersonic Fattah Missile:** On 6 June 2023, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Aerospace Force was unveiled at its headquarters in the presence of President Ebrahim Raisi, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander-in-Chief Maj.-Gen. Hossein Salami and

Revolutionary Guard Aerospace Force Commander General Amir Ali Hajizadeh. With the unveiling of this missile, Iran became one of the four countries with this technology.... Hajizadeh stated at the ceremony of the unveiling of the hypersonic Fattah missile, stated, "The missile that was unveiled today is a missile that is unique in the world, so that with the launch of this missile Iran is among the four countries with hypersonic technology...."

- **Khorramshahr-4 Long-Range Strategic Missile:** The Khorramshahr-4 long-range strategic missile was another missile unveiled in 2023-24. On 25 May 2023, on the anniversary of the liberation of Khorramshahr [during the Iran-Iraq War], the Khorramshahr-4 long-range strategic missile was unveiled in the presence of Minister of Defense Mohammad-Reza Gharaei Ashtiani. The Khorramshahr missile is one of the most advanced missiles designed by experts of the Aerospace Organization of the Ministry of Defense. It has a range of 1,200 miles and is equipped with a severe blast type combat head weighing 3,300 pounds. The rocket is equipped with one of the most advanced liquid fuel engines to create tactical capabilities and is designed in such a way that the engine is placed in a fuel tank, which reduces the length of the rocket to about 40 feet
- **Fattah-2 Hypersonic Missile:** On 19 November 2023, His Excellency Ayatollah Khamenei, the commander-in-chief, visited Ashura University of Aerospace Sciences and Technologies for an hour and a half to see the latest achievements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In this exhibition, which included missile, drone, defense

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*and space products, young scientists from the Aerospace Force displayed their achievements under the slogan, “From Idea to All-Iranian Product.” ... [Here,] the Fattah-2 hypersonic*

*cruise missile, classified as a hypersonic glide vehicle was unveiled.*

#### Notes

- 1 For previous discussion of the Shafagh, see: Michael Rubin, Iran Installs New Precision Missiles On Army Helicopters, *OE Watch*, 05 2023. <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/iran-installs-new-precision-missiles-on-army-helicopters/>

## Iranian Senior Advisor Believes Resistance Axis Already Defeated Israel

By Holly Dages  
OE Watch Commentary

On 1 April 2024, around six months into the Israel-Hamas war, Israel killed several senior members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in an air strike at the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus, Syria.<sup>1</sup> Speaking to IRGC members and the families of those killed, assistant and senior adviser to the commander-in-chief of the armed forces (referring to the Supreme Leader), Major General Rahim Safavi said that the Resistance Axis—Iran’s proxies in the Middle East such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad—have defeated Israel already. GEN Safavi’s remarks, which were published by the Iranian state broadcaster IRIB on 14 April, are noteworthy because they showed that he believes the international community and public opinion have turned against Israel. GEN Safavi argues that the fight against Israel will prevail because “occupiers... don’t have the durability and survivability.” Despite the high death toll and Israel’s continued push to eradicate Hamas in Gaza, he notes that the demise of the militant group was not possible since it is a deeply embedded ideology in the psyche of Palestinians as part of their “culture of resistance.”<sup>2</sup>

Using history as a reference, GEN Safavi pointed out how the Soviet Union was unable to defeat the Mujahideen in Afghanistan



Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi speaking at ceremony honoring Syria martyrs in Esfahan. He recently articulated that he believes that the Resistance Axis cannot be defeated.

Source: Iranian Students’ News Agency (semi-official news agency), 12 April 2024. <https://www.isna.ir/photo/1403012412626/>; Attribution: CCA-SA 4.0 Intl.

***“The Soviet Union... invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 1979 [and] finally ran away... American occupiers from 2001 to 2021 occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, but you saw how they ran away.”***

during the Soviet-Afghan war. This view, which is shared by many in the upper echelons of the Iranian clerical establishment, suggests that the Resistance Axis, despite taking heavy hits by Israel in Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza, will not be vanquished. In GEN Safavi’s view, the Resistance Axis is winning the battle of hearts and minds, given how the interna-

tional community and international public opinion have turned against Israel. Thus, regardless of the war’s outcome, GEN Safavi believes that “America and [Israel] have been defeated... and the Resistance Axis has been victorious.”

This thinking is what incentivizes Iran to continue materially and financially supporting its proxies in the region because, inevitably, it believes Israel will no longer exist as a country and will be replaced by Palestine.

**Source:**

“محور مقاومت تعیین کننده سرنوشت آینده منطقه خواهد بود” (The Resistance Axis will determine the future fate of the region),” *Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting* (state broadcaster), 7 April 2024. <https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/4199860/>

*Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, assistant and senior adviser to the commander in chief of the armed forces (referring to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), said on April 14 in a ceremony honoring and celebrating the efforts and sacrifices of the terrorized martyrs of Damascus (referring to the high-ranking IRGC Quds Force members killed by Israel on April 1, 2024)...*

*Addressing the martyrs’ families and the IRGC, he referenced three concepts that change events, trends, and strategies and said: The blood of your oppressed martyrs, the blood of the defenders of the shrine (IRGC-linked personnel dispatched overseas separate from Quds Force), the resistance (axis), and the oppressed Palestine—at least 100,000 martyrs and injured in Gaza—will make a big change in events, trends, and strategies of the region and our country will determine the future fate of the region under the leadership of Iran.*

*He clarified: The events that are happening now and in the future in the West Asian region (Middle East) or in the international environment and the Islamic World are different during the past four decades in terms of politics, culture, economy, and security...*

*In the last six months, the Zionist regime (Israel) has committed all kinds of crimes and war crimes, genocide, rape, and famine against two million, which is considered to be the summary of the 75-year record of this regime. These criminal actions change the face of the security, international, media, and culture*

*systems of the world.*

*Major General Rahim Safavi added: Of course, all the crimes that are currently happening in occupied Palestine are being done with the backing/support of America, some Western countries, and the treacherous silence of some Arab and non-Arab countries (Turkey) in the region...*

*Contrary to what the criminal [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu announced that (Israel) wants to destroy Hamas’ movement and free its prisoners (hostages), we must say that Hamas’ movement is an ideology, a culture of resistance, and a cause of liberation for Palestinians to freely return to their land, the holy Jerusalem’s Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque as the first qibla of Muslims...*

*Pointing out that no occupying force has been able to remain in any land forever during the past 100 years, he states: by studying history, we see that, for example, the Soviet Union, which at the beginning of the victory of the revolution, invaded and occupied Afghanistan in 1979, finally ran away... American occupiers from 2001 to 2021 occupied Afghanistan and Iraq, but you saw how they ran away...*

*The powerful occupiers in Islamic and even non-Islamic lands don’t have the durability and survivability because nations fight for the freedom of their lands, and defend their rights, land, and this is a rational and divine tradition...*

*In this very Gaza war, until today, the Palestinian*

*continue on 30*

*fighters have maintained most of their strength and are resisting and carrying out offensive operations. Whatever happens after the Gaza war indicates that thanks to the blood of the Gaza martyrs, defenders of the holy shrine, Yemen, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq,*

*and Syria, America and the Zionists (Israel) have been defeated in this six-month war, and the Resistance Axis has been victorious. With God's grace, the new Islamic Middle East will be formed, centered on the resistance and Islamic Iran.*

#### Notes

- 1 Susannah George and Mohamad El Chamaa, Israeli strike on Iranian Consulate in Damascus kills key commander, Iran says, *The Washington Post*, 1 April 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/01/syria-iran-embassy-strike-israel/>
- 2 Aaron Boxerman What We Know About the Death Toll in Israel From the Hamas-Led Attacks, *The New York Times*, 12 November 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/12/world/middleeast/israel-death-toll-hamas-attack.html>

## Iran's Supreme Leader Says Western Civilization is the Enemy

By Michael Rubin  
OE Watch Commentary

For Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the conflict between Iran and the West is ideological. Khamenei, in an address to the Participants of the Second Congress for the Commemoration of the 24,000 Martyrs of Khuzestan Province, used his speech to lionize their sacrifice as representing the best of Iranian solidarity and piety. He suggested the fighting in Khuzestan during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war gave birth to "a widespread cultural movement" that helped define Iran.<sup>1</sup> Khamenei further argued that the United States has sought to undermine Iran's development for ideological reasons.<sup>2</sup>

Khamenei assured his audience, however, that Iran's revolutionary vision was winning. He conflated the progressive turn against Israel with an acceptance of Islam. He stated "Many young people in Western countries, in America and Europe, have started reading the Quran in order to see what... has inspired the people who believe in it to be able to demonstrate this kind of resistance." In his mind, Gaza is a symbol of a dispute not over sovereignty, but rather ground zero in a clash between civilizations. Khamenei doubles down on this concept and argues that while the United States views itself as the main pillar of liberalism and democracy, "They are neither liberal nor democratic.

They are liars," he explains. "Western civilization and its misguided values" cannot prevail, he argues, for they are inimically opposed to "culture based on truth and the correct reasoning of Islam" that Iran represents. Khamenei's antagonism to Western civilization and liberalism suggests he envisions Iran to be in perpetual war and as such, will continue to invest in the weaponry necessary to fight this ideological war without end.

***"Western civilization has revealed its true nature. Despite their preaching about humanity and human rights, Western civilization has shown itself to be deceitful, hypocritical, and filled with lies."***



Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei speaks at the Imam Khomeini Hussainiyah on 24 February 2024.

Source: [https://idc0-cdn0.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/55340/C/14021205\\_6455340.jpg](https://idc0-cdn0.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/55340/C/14021205_6455340.jpg); Attribution: Khamenei.ir

**Source:**

دیدار دست‌اندرکاران دومین کنگره ۲۴ هزار شهید استان خوزستان با رهبر انقلاب

(The Participants of the Second Congress for the Commemoration of the 24,000 Martyrs of Khuzestan Province Met with the Leader of the Revolution),” *Khamenei.ir* (Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s personal website), 24 February 2024. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=55338>

*Western civilization has revealed its true nature. Despite their preaching about humanity and human rights, Western civilization has shown itself to be deceitful, hypocritical, and filled with lies. They oppose the execution of a criminal. For instance, when a murderer who has killed several people is to face retribution and has been given the death penalty, they start raising a commotion against his execution and saying that execution is bad. However, when 30,000 people have been executed by the Zionist regime over the course of three or four months, they close their eyes as if nothing has happened. Some of them, not even all of them, raise the question, “Why is Israel doing these things and slaughtering people.” They say this verbally, but in practice, they continue to support [the Zionist regime], providing them with weapons and necessary goods.*

*The United States shamelessly vetoes the resolution for a ceasefire for stopping the bombing of the people for the umpteenth time. Western civilization has*

*shown itself here. This is the true nature of Western civilization. Western culture, Western civilization, and these well-dressed Western politicians, this is their true nature. On the outside, they appear with a smile on their faces, but on the inside, they are like a rabid dog and a bloodthirsty wolf. This is the true nature of Western civilization. This is the liberal democracy of the West. They are neither liberal nor democratic. They are liars. They do what they want with their hypocrisy.*

*We hope that, God willing, people around the world will gain a better understanding of the facts in these various events and learn more about Islam and the West. And we are certain, we are sure, that this Western civilization and its misguided values will not prevail. It will not continue, and, God willing, the culture based on truth and the correct reasoning of Islam will ultimately triumph over all of these. That day will come soon, by the will of God.*

Notes

- 1 Khomeini outlined religious arguments for clerical rule in a series of lectures delivered in 1970 in Najaf, Iraq. These were later compiled and published as *Hukumat-e Islami (Islamic Government)*. His exegesis, however, did not detail how Guardianship of the Jurists would work in a practical sense.
- 2 Khomeini's position is historically inaccurate, or at least subject to debate. The 1979 hostage crisis occurred nine months after Khomeini's Islamic Revolution succeeded in part because the Carter administration maintained the U.S. embassy in Tehran in order to negotiate rapprochement with the new regime. See, Michael Rubin, *Dancing with the Devil: The Perils of Engaging Rogue Regimes*. New York: Encounter, 2014.



## Venezuela's Maduro Targets Previous Allies Under Anti-Corruption Campaign



◀ El Aissami campaigns for governor of the state of Aragua. President Maduro recently had him arrested under the auspices of a national anti-corruption campaign.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tareckpsuv/8139341461/>;  
Attribution: CC BY-NC 2.0 DEED.

***“The Venezuelan Prosecutor’s Office has announced the arrest of former minister Tareck El Aissami, a politician who until a year and a half ago belonged to Nicolás Maduro’s circle of trust.”***

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

The Maduro government in Venezuela has launched an anti-corruption probe into politically motivated transnational criminal elements within its regime.<sup>1</sup> According to the first excerpted article in the Spanish daily *El País*, top targets of the probe include Tareck El Aissami, a former vice president and oil minister, as well as his business partners Samark Lopez, former finance minister Simon Zerpa, and others yet to be identified. El Aissami and his associates stand accused of stealing billions via a cryp-

tocurrency payment scheme at the state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*. Maduro blames El Aissami and his associates for Venezuela’s moribund economy.

Meanwhile, according to the second excerpted article from the Spanish-language outlet *CNN en Español*, Maduro organized the extraterritorial assassination of a dissident member of the Venezuelan armed forces, Ronald Ojeda, who was living in Chile. The *CNN* story quotes the prosecutor in the case, who rules out any other cause of death.

Given that Maduro faces a difficult scenario this year, discarding erstwhile allies now considered disloyal, such as El Aissami, appears to be crucial for him to consolidate and maintain his regime’s hold on power in an election year. Formerly, El Aissami was considered one of Maduro’s top allies.<sup>2</sup> However, as the extraterritorial assassination of Ronald Ojeda shows, the Maduro regime’s criminal links remain strong and capable of operating transnationally within Latin America in service of his regime’s consolidation.

**Source:** “Venezuela detiene al exministro del Petróleo Tareck El Aissami, hasta hace poco un político íntimo de Maduro (Venezuela detains former Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami, until recently an intimate politician of Maduro),” *El País* (a Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage), 9 April 2024. <https://elpais.com/america/2024-04-09/venezuela-detiene-al-exministro-del-petroleo-tareck-el-aissami-hasta-hace-poco-un-politico-intimo-de-maduro.html>

*The Venezuelan Prosecutor’s Office has announced the arrest of former minister Tareck El Aissami, a politician who until a year and a half ago belonged to Nicolás Maduro’s circle of trust. El Aissami was*

*in legal limbo since a mega corruption scheme was uncovered that affected PDVSA, the state oil company that he managed as minister. There is talk of embezzlement in the realm of 21 billion dollars.*

**Source:** “Caso Ronald Ojeda: fiscal de Chile dice que el crimen se ‘organizó y se solicitó’ desde Venezuela (Ronald Ojeda case: Chilean prosecutor says the crime was ‘organized and requested’ from Venezuela),” *CNN en Español* (the Spanish-language version of the Atlanta-based outlet), 12 April 2024. <https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/2024/04/12/caso-ronald-ojeda-chile-venezuela-orix/>

*Héctor Barros, prosecutor in charge of the case investigating the murder of former Venezuelan military officer Ronald Ojeda in Chile, stated in an interview with Chilevisión broadcast...that, according to the investigations, the crime “was organized and*

*requested from Venezuela.” Asked by the Chilevisión journalist about the possibility that the motive for the crime was political, Barros said that he has “no precedents that point us in the other direction.”*

#### Notes

- 1 For more information on the criminal nature of the Maduro regime, see: Moises Rendon and Mia Kazman, *Maduro’s Mafia State*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 31 October 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/maduros-mafia-state>
- 2 The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project has an excellent profile of El Aissami and his importance to the Maduro regime: *Former Venezuelan Oil Minister and Vice President Arrested for Corruption*, OCCRP, 11 April 2024. <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/18646-former-venezuelan-oil-minister-and-vice-president-arrested-for-corruption>

## Turkey Conducts Counterterrorism Operations Against the Islamic State

By Christopher Betts  
OE Watch Commentary

Turkey's Anti-Terrorism Division continues its offensive against the Islamic State (IS) and other groups as the government attempts to restrict Tajik nationals access after a string of international attacks. Turkey is actively attempting to disrupt the remaining cells of the IS in the country after several deadly terrorist attacks linked to the group have occurred throughout the globe. Over a week period in January 2024, IS conducted bombings in Kerman, Iran, conducted a shooting at the Santa Maria Catholic Church in Istanbul, Turkey, and finally, the group killed over 130 people during an attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, Russia. According to the first excerpted article from the Saudi-owned international newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, in April 2024, the Turkish Anti-Terrorism Division personnel arrested 48 IS members in Istanbul. Thirty of those arrested were said to be connected to the Santa Maria Catholic church attack. 18 additional members were arrested in Ankara, many of whom are Tajik. The article also notes that at least two of the perpetrators of the Crocus attack in Moscow spent time in Istanbul immediately before the attack. IS fighters traveling through Turkey or using the country as a temporary place to stay is not a new phenomenon, as thousands of fighters and recruits



Turkish Army vehicles in south-eastern Turkey. In light of recent regional attacks by the Islamic State, Turkey is ramping up counterterror measures in the country, especially targeting Tajiks.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkish\\_Army\\_vehicles\\_in\\_south-eastern\\_Turkey.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkish_Army_vehicles_in_south-eastern_Turkey.jpg)  
Attribution: Public Domain

**“Turkish security services have carried out continuous campaigns against the [terrorist] cells and members of the organization, which resulted in the arrest of thousands, in addition to the deportation of nearly 3,000.”**

have passed through Turkish borders since 2013. IS fighters and supporters have consistently used Turkey as a hub, despite counter-terrorism efforts. Many IS-affiliated individuals will cross the border from Syria, and Ankara's primary countermeasure has been deportation to the country of origin with over 9,000 deported to date.<sup>1</sup>

According to the second excerpted article from the Turkish-based news outlet *TürkRus*, Tajik nationals now face deportation and rescinded visa exemptions as a result of the

Tajik connection to the recent terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow, the Santa Maria Catholic church attack, and a planned attack in Istanbul. Tajiks in Turkey were given a deadline of 20 April 2024 to leave or be under the threat of being forcibly expelled. Although Tajikistan is a small former Soviet republic just north of Afghanistan, approximately half of IS fighters are recruited there. A combination of poverty, lack of religious freedom, and an oppressive dictatorial regime give citizens few options, which IS has capitalized on.

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*It is noteworthy that the decision was taken after it was announced that some of the defendants, who were Tajik citizens, who were announced to have carried out the terrorist attack in Crocus City in Moscow, had traveled to and from Turkey before this action, and after many news about this issue appeared in the*

*Russian press.*

*It was noted that Tajikistan is considering the issue of imposing a visa requirement for Turkish citizens in accordance with the principle of reciprocity.*

#### Notes

- 1 The International Crisis Group provides a detailed analysis of the overall challenge Türkiye faces with ISIS-linked foreigners in Türkiye. For more information, see: An Enduring Challenge: ISIS-Linked Foreigners in Türkiye, *International Crisis Group*, 28 February 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkiye/267-enduring-challenge-isis-linked-foreigners>

## Islamic State Resurgence Demoralizes Mozambican Soldiers

By Jacob Zenn  
OE Watch Commentary

Until recently, Mozambique asserted that the insurgents were retreating, and the country's vital economic activities, including the export of natural gas from Cabo Delgado, would resume. However, the excerpted article from the Portuguese-language *Evidencias.com* reveals the insurgents are not just increasing in number, but also in sophistication and coordination. According to the article, more than 500 IS-loyal fighters<sup>1</sup> recently attacked a 40-man contingent of Mozambique's Rapid Intervention Unit (RUI)<sup>2</sup> near Quissanga—forcing

its retreat to the Quirimbas islands. The article emphasized that only days before the attack on the RUI, the government claimed the IS-loyal fighters were only capable of small unit hit-and-run tactics.

The article challenges government narratives about the insurgents' impending demise. Based on interviews with Mozambican soldiers, the article describes that low morale, largely due to false information presented about the insurgency by the government, is manifest in the soldiers' ranks. According to the article, only a true accounting of the insurgency will lead

**“Despite all efforts by the government to prove that the situation is returning to normal in Cabo Delgado province, terrorists continue to carry out attacks with a greater number of fighters”**

to the military receiving the support, weapons and equipment necessary to defeat the insurgents.



◀ Mozambique army personnel are demoralized in their fight with IS-loyal fighters.

Source: Steve Evans, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mozambique\\_army\\_personnel.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mozambique_army_personnel.jpg)  
Attribution: CCA 2.0

**Source:** “Terroristas atacaram Quissanga com mais de 500 homens e perseguiram batalhão da UIR até Quirimbas (Terrorists attacked Quissanga with more than 500 men and pursued the UIR battalion to Quirimbas),” *evidencias.com* (Portuguese-language website specializing in investigative journalism on Mozambican affairs), 5 March 2024. <https://evidencias.co.mz/2024/03/05/terroristas-atacaram-quissanga-com-mais-de-500-homens/>

*Terrorists attacked Quissanga with more than 500 men and pursued the UIR battalion to Quirimbas several after the President of the Republic, Filipe Nyusi, supported by the Minister of Defense, stated that the terrorists attack in small cells of three or four individuals and then flee.*

*Despite all efforts by the Government to prove that the situation is returning to normal in the province of Cabo Delgado, terrorists continue to carry out attacks with a greater number of fighters, which contradicts the discourse that has been propagated by the*

*President and Minister of National Defense.*

*UIR elements told Evidências that the insurgents in operations are accompanied by women (including pregnant women) and children and apparently use them as human shields.... In fact, the military has no doubt that the government has been providing false information about the real situation of terrorism in the province of Cabo Delgado.*

#### Notes

- 1 This report about 500 total IS-loyal fighters involved in the attack near Quissanga was consistent with other major attacks by the group, including, for example, in 2020 when Voice of America (VOA) Português reported on 500 attackers in another operation in Cabo Delgado. See Cabo Delgado: A rede de terroristas está a ser desmantelada , repete o chefe da polícia moçambicana, VOA Português, July 20, 2020, <https://www.voaportugues.com/a/cabo-delgado-a-rede-de-terroristas-est%C3%A1-a-ser-desmantelada-repete-o-chefe-da-pol%C3%ADcia-mo%C3%A7ambicana/5507231.html>
- 2 The *Unidade Intervenção Rápida* (Rapid Intervention Unit, or RUI) was formed after the first IS-loyal insurgents attacks in 2017 and were supported by units of the national police and the national military. The RUI as intended to focus on the IS-loyal insurgents, but from the RUI s inception it was insufficiently equipped and trained, partly because the insurgency commenced suddenly and caught the government off guard and because the government had prioritized economic development and not the military in the prior decade. As a result, the RUI suffered from low morale for years even before the resurgence of the IS-loyal fighters in 2024. See Meryl Demuynck and Gijs Weijenberg, The Upcoming SADC Intervention: A New Way Ahead to Combat Terrorism in Mozambique?, ICCT, July 22, 2021, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/upcoming-sadc-intervention-new-way-ahead-combat-terrorism-mozambique>.

## Ecuador's Raid on Mexican Embassy Fractures Regional Comity



Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa has sought to project an image of being tough on crime and impunity. He has come under fire for authorizing the raid on Mexico's embassy in the country.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidenciaecuador/53497882306/>; Attribution: PDM 1.0 DEED.

By Ryan Berg  
OE Watch Commentary

Tensions between Ecuador and Mexico have been simmering since Mexican President Obrador questioned the legitimacy of Ecuadorian President Noboa's election victory in October 2023. A short time later, in December 2023, Ecuador's former Vice President, Jorge Glas, thrice convicted of corruption, exiled himself to Mexico's embassy in Quito to avoid another prosecution.<sup>1</sup> According to the excerpted article in the Spanish daily *El País*, President Noboa gave the order to raid Mexico's embassy and detain Glas. The

**“Glas was to receive safe passage from the Ecuadorian authorities allowing him to fly to Mexico City, but instead, Noboa ordered his immediate capture.”**

trigger for the action appears to have been President Obrador's decision to grant Glas political asylum, which the Noboa government argues would have served the cause of impunity. In response, as the article from *El País* reports, Mexico accused Ecuador of contravening the Vienna Convention and broke diplomatic relations.

The regional outcry was swift, according to the second excerpted article from the Argentine daily *Clarín*. Nicaragua immediately broke relations with Ecuador, while other countries expressed grave concerns, rebuked Ecuador's actions and threatened to rupture their own bilateral relations. At the center of the debate appears to be the interpretation of the inviolability of embassies in the Vienna Convention and the need to balance with the Caracas Convention, which states that political asylum cannot be abused by those already convicted in competent domestic courts. The nature of the Noboa government's raid on Mexico's embassy

and the uproar of condemnation has impacted the entire region. Latin America has fractured along familiar political lines in response to the raid, with leftist governments generally taking Mexico's side and moving to sever relations with Ecuador, and governments ruled by the right decrying Ecuador's actions while emphasizing Mexico's abuse of asylum procedure. Many countries have observed others' responses as a litmus test for their own sets of bilateral relations.<sup>2</sup> For Noboa's part, domestic politics likely drove much of the decision-making, as a truncated presidential term and the country's security crisis have led him to project an image of tough-on-crime. Glas' connection to organized crime, and foreign criminal organizations driving some of Ecuador's surge in violence, made the decision to seize him politically popular among Ecuadorians.



**Source:** “México rompe relaciones con Ecuador tras el asalto policial a su Embajada en Quito (Mexico breaks relations with Ecuador after the police assault on its Embassy in Quito),” *El País* (Spanish daily with excellent regional coverage), 6 April 2024. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2024-04-06/mexico-rompe-relaciones-con-ecuador-tras-el-asalto-policial-a-su-embajada-en-quito.html>

*Mexico has broken relations with Ecuador. The measure was adopted after the Ecuadorian police attacked the Mexican Embassy in Quito with armored cars and masked agents...and forcibly took away former vice president Jorge Glas, who hours before had received political asylum from the Government*

*of Andrés Manuel López Obrador...In the following hours, Glas was to receive safe passage from the Ecuadorian authorities allowing him to fly to Mexico City, but instead, Noboa ordered his immediate capture.*

**Source:** “La canciller de Ecuador afirma que México violó primero las normas diplomáticas: ‘Hubo incumplimientos y respuestas negativas’ (The Foreign Minister of Ecuador affirms that Mexico first violated diplomatic norms: ‘There were non-compliance and negative responses’),” *Clarín* (Argentine daily that covers most of Latin America), 8 April 2024. [https://www.clarin.com/mundo/canciller-ecuador-afirma-mexico-violo-primero-normas-diplomaticas-incumplimientos-respuestas-negativas\\_0\\_ozE6HjUzaH.html](https://www.clarin.com/mundo/canciller-ecuador-afirma-mexico-violo-primero-normas-diplomaticas-incumplimientos-respuestas-negativas_0_ozE6HjUzaH.html)

*For Mexico, Ecuador violated the Vienna Convention, which has some 115 countries, and which regulates relations between states through treaties. It is considered one of the main sources of international law and its compliance is mandatory for the states that have ratified it& In response, [Foreign Minister] Sommerfeld noted that Mexico did not*

*respect Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention of 1933 or Article 3 of the Caracas Convention of 1954, regarding the fact that it is not lawful to grant asylum to people accused of common crimes, as was the situation of Glas in a case for alleged embezzlement of funds in the reconstruction of the province of Manabí after the 2016 earthquake.*

#### Notes

- 1 President Noboa is grappling with a surge of gang-related violence, and Glas stands convicted of corruption, including links to transnational criminal organizations. For more information on the origins of Ecuador’s insecurity crisis, see: Ryan C. Berg, President Lasso Calls for 41 Plan Ecuador Amid Growing Security Concerns, *OE Watch*, December 2021. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-2-singular-format/400849>
- 2 For more information on how the international fallout could negatively impact the Noboa government, see: James Bosworth, The Mexican Embassy Raid in Ecuador Will Backfire for Noboa, *World Politics Review*, 8 April 2024. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/ecuador-mexico-embassy-corruption/>

## India Successfully Tests Agni-V Ballistic Missile Upgrade

By Matthew Stein  
OE Watch Commentary

India's ability to carry out a strategic or tactical nuclear strike has been limited compared to that of its adversary, China. However, in recent years, India has made efforts to match Chinese capabilities. In early March 2024, India announced the successful test of a multiple independently targetable reentry vehicle (MIRV) for its **Agni-V** ballistic missile, further strengthening India's nuclear strike capabilities even as it maintains a "no first use" policy.<sup>1</sup>

The accompanying excerpted article from the conservative-leaning English-language newspaper *The Hindu*, reports on the recent MIRV test for the Agni-V and considers what it means for India. The article suggests that with a MIRV capable 3100 mile range Agni-V missile, India has now achieved more balance in its nuclear deterrence capability with China. The article acknowledges that some of its specific capabilities remain unknown, critical being how many warheads it can carry (the authors speculate that it

carries three) and whether it can carry decoys. Finally, the article mentions that India's defense industry will test a long-range submarine-launched ballistic missile, likely the latest variant of the K-series, at some point in the future.<sup>2</sup> Altogether, the successful MIRV test for the Agni-V, and future testing for its submarine-launched ballistic missile, indicate that India will continue to seek nuclear parity with China.

***"The opacity surrounding this MIRV missile is about the number of warheads it can carry, which in all likelihood would remain classified."***



Agni-V ICBM Range Envelope centered at Integrated Test Range, Odissa. Declared range of 5500 km in pale indigo and estimated expanded range of 7000+ km in faded circumference.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agni-V\\_ICBM\\_Range\\_Envelope\\_centered\\_at\\_Integrated\\_Test\\_Range,\\_Odissa.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agni-V_ICBM_Range_Envelope_centered_at_Integrated_Test_Range,_Odissa.jpg); Attribution: CCA 4.0

**Source:** Harsh V. Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, “The MIRV leap that fires up India’s nuclear deterrence,” *The Hindu* (privately owned, conservative-leaning English-language newspaper in India), 19 March 2024. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-mirv-leap-that-fires-up-indias-nuclear-deterrence/article67965762.ece>

*The Agni-5 ballistic missile test dubbed the “Divyastra”, that was conducted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), is strategically consequential. With a range of over 5,000 kilometres, the Agni-5 is the longest-range missile India has tested so far. But it is not simply its range but, equally, its potency which represents a watershed moment for India’s nuclear deterrent. The potency of India’s nuclear deterrent is enhanced because this variant is integrated with Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicles (MIRVs)...*

*Though MIRV technology is not new, it is to India... MIRV-tipped missiles are a necessity simply because they strike multiple targets simultaneously and help evade ballistic missile defences. China is building ballistic missile defences such as the Hongqi (HQ-19) ground-based ballistic missile interceptors, which have been tested, but their capacity to intercept Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) such as the Agni-5 is still suspect...*

*Now that India has integrated the Agni-5 with multiple warheads, greater balance has been restored in the Sino-Indian nuclear deterrent relationship. To be sure, more testing of the MIRV-capable Agni-5 will*

*be required...*

*The opacity surrounding this MIRV missile is about the number of warheads it can carry, which in all likelihood would remain classified. Going by speculation, it is improbable that it can carry more than three warheads. Further, the yield of the nuclear warheads is likely to be limited due to the small number of atomic tests India has conducted. In addition, it is unclear whether the Agni-5 can carry decoys and chaff, especially during the boost and intermediate phase of the missile’s flight. Agni-5 will in all probability be launched from a road mobile platform.*

*This is a China-specific missile. There could be more to come from the DRDO and AEC with India adding more punch to its nuclear arsenal when it tests a long-range Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), which India’s nuclear ballistic missile submarines can launch. The Agni-5 with MIRV capability bolsters India’s nuclear capabilities vis-à-vis China. It puts China on notice — that India is preparing itself to counter the advances Beijing has made with its missile and missile defence programmes...*

#### Notes

- 1 India adopted its “no first use” policy shortly after its first successful nuclear test in the late 1990s. In August 2019, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh mentioned that India’s policy might change depending on the circumstances, but India continues to have a no first use policy when it comes to its nuclear arsenal.
- 2 In November 2018, Indian officials announced the country had joined the ranks of nuclear triad governments when the INS *Arihant*, a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, carried out its first deterrence deployment that month. While India reportedly only maintains the triad when one of its ballistic missile submarines are deployed, the 2018 deployment demonstrated India’s long-term goals of nuclear deterrence. For background, see: Matthew Stein, “Is India’s Nuclear Triad Complete?,” *OE Watch*, January 2019. <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/oe-watch-articles-singular-format/296884>