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Iran's Clandestine War on the Kingdom of Bahrain: Saraya al Ashtar and the Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain

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Abstract

The 1979 Iranian revolution continues to reverberate throughout the Middle East. While many of the more pronounced Iranian proxies, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthi militia in Yemen, are the focus of a wide assortment of terror-state explorations, it is important to look at some of the other organizations that Tehran utilizes in pursuit of its regional and international interests. Bahrain, has long been of a strategic interest to the Islamic Republic as it regards it as its Fourteenth Province and a stepping stone to a more direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp prioritizes operations against Bahrain, for Manama has faced a host of radicalized terrorist groups commanded by the IRGC over the years which conducted terrorist attacks and coup attempts. While Bahraini security operations were able to contain most Iranian terrorist groups, the 2011 upheaval in much of the Arab world provided clandestine groups with new opportunities to polarize Bahrain and inspire political violence. This study focuses on several of the main Iran-backed groups to have emerged in Bahrain since 2011. Identifying the so-called: Saraya al Ashtar, along with its political umbrella Al Wafa movement, and the Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain, as the main groups, this study seeks to provide an understanding of those organizations since they pose the most pronounced challenge to Bahrain (at present) and to stability in the wider Arab Gulf. Additionally, the study presents and analyses the groups noted above (with reference to their context). It then assesses areas of impact of the groups and concludes with summarizing Bahrain's measures on how to curtail these groups and their Iranian backers.

Introduction and Overview

The Islamic Republic of Iran was born and continues to live under the double concepts of *taqqiyah* and *khode*, which simultaneously encourage the use of mis- and disinformation and the generation and pursuit of hidden agendas. In a modern political context, this is manifesting itself in the manner in which Iran deploys its propaganda and the way it fights its wars. Iran is heavily involved—and bears responsibility (to a degree) for initiating conflict—in the civil wars and sectarian violence in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and the Sahel. In those conflicts it is a direct and explicit actor that uses an assortment of its assets in pursuit of its strategic objectives, which include constructing land bridges from Iran to the Mediterranean (such as the Iran-Iraq-Syria highway) and eroding, through various means, regional nodes of traditional stability, such as the countries of the Arab Gulf. These are meant to increase Iran's geopolitical position and establish a grand pincer with which to surround and pressure Saudi Arabia. Analyzing Iran's behavior in the region exposes these objectives and the tools it uses to reach them.

Iran has been, metaphorically, testing the waters in Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain¹ to gauge the level of traction it has to commence and fuel insurgencies in those countries. For the most part, it is not yet able to inspire such activities, but not for lack of trying. Much like its behavior in Lebanon in the early 1980s, Iran is currently developing and utilizing special clandestine organizations imbedded within the Shia communities of the Arab Gulf states to conduct acts of sabotage and terrorism, and to generally stoke sectarian violence. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Bahrain: Iran's hardliners claim Bahrain as their fourteenth province

(1) Qatar is deliberately omitted from this list, given the recent information about Doha's duplicity in Iranian actions in the Gulf, coupled with its clear bandwagoning tendencies in the region, which involve engaging both Turkey and Iran on the strategic level, at the expense of its relationship with its traditional allies.

and they are determined to expand their revolution to the Island State. If Iranian claims to Bahrain were regulated as a rhetorical game, few would take notice. However, Iran has been steadily recruiting, training, and ultimately, deploying radicalized members within some of the Bahraini community—who pledge their allegiance to the Islamic Republic—to physically attack Bahrain, both to disrupt that country’s development and cohesion and as a stepping stone to doing the same in Saudi Arabia.

Over the decades, Bahrain has faced a variety of terrorist groups that were trained and deployed under the command of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The most formidable challenges in the past have been: (1) the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), (2) the Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain (MWHB), and (3) Sacred Defense Bahrain (SDB). While the IFLB was subdued and dismantled following the Shia intifada in the 1990s, many of its proponents evaded arrest and joined the other active groups. The MWHB and the SDB survived into the 2000s and have been joined—in a post-2011 security environment—by several others, including the Youth of 14 February and the Saraya al Ashtar (SaA). Effective police work, coupled with several cases of infighting, thinned the numbers of these organizations, and a process of incorporation began. At present, while the Youth of 14 February remain active, their operations have been reduced to petty vandalism and limited Molotov cocktail attacks on stationary police forces. However, on the other end of the spectrum, Iran has honed the capacities of its two most pronounced agents in Bahrain: the SaA and the MWHB. As such, this study is meant to provide an understanding of those organizations, which currently pose the most pronounced challenge to Bahrain and to stability in the wider Arab Gulf.

This study will proceed as follows. First, it presents and analyzes the SaA, followed by the MWHB. Second, the study will assess some areas of potential impact of

the groups' activities in Bahrain. This study will conclude with analyzing the Bahraini security policy toward Iran's clandestine operatives in the region.

Saraya al Ashtar (SaA)

Clandestine operations organized and executed by members of an Iran-backed militia—later named Saraya al Ashtar (SaA)—can be traced to 2007. At that time, acts of violence had been greatly reduced as the result of coordinated police actions and high-profile prosecutions. However, a regrouping and incorporation of members of the (then) dissolved IFLB was in process. Although operating without the SaA brand until 2012, the organization existed as a clandestine unit that took advantage of the mounting troubles in early 2011 to form a new, radicalized terrorist group in Bahrain.

As part of their training exercises, young men in the SaA (all from the Shia sect) from some of Bahrain's villages—for example, Sanabis, Sitra, Diraz, Daih, and Bani Jamra—began the process of militarizing demonstrations by using political dissent as a means of triggering strategic riots aimed at attacking Bahrain's security forces.² The process followed a pattern: First, groups of young men and women would stage a march or protest in one of the Shia villages. The police would be present but would not engage with the protesters. From behind the main part of the protest lines, young SaA members would pelt security personnel with stones. The police would then attempt to arrest those engaging in stone throwing, which poses a danger to public safety. In response, the SaA trainees would scatter and regroup behind prearranged street barricades. Tires would be set ablaze and small arsenals of Molotov cocktails would be hurled at security force vehicles and riot police. At the time, such acts were seen as the last embers of the violent intifada from the

(2) See Mitchell Belfer, *Small State, Dangerous Region: A Strategic Assessment of Bahrain* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Publishing, 2014), pp. 202–240.

previous decade. However, they were, in fact, training exercises for far more violent and coordinated campaigns that came to fruition in the wake of the 2011–2012 wave of public violence.

While many in Europe applauded the 2011 events in Bahrain, such an approach was misguided. Bahrain was not facing a human rights–centered protest only, but rather a new form of Iranian-supported public violence. As a result, Bahrain was forced to deal with the opportunistic SaA, which sought to exploit the regional upheaval and deploy its fighters to engage Bahrain’s security forces. Rather than “dry runs” conducted in the years leading up to 2011, now the SaA drew on its developed expertise in urban warfare to draw security personnel into the villages and kill them in highly publicized, highly charged sectarian violence. The stated objective was the “overthrow of Al Khalifa rule.” This objective was reiterated in their public discourse and their online platforms, and also was chanted during the pitched battles that they filmed, edited, and released for propaganda purposes. The Islamic Republic also facilitated Hezbollah’s training support for the SaA. Together, the additional monies and the training by Hezbollah improved the SaA’s capabilities, and its *modus operandi* expanded from predominately street violence to include acts of more orthodox terrorism, such as remote bombings and vehicle-based improvised explosive devices (IEDs)³. Episodes of gun violence have been recorded and the police have, periodically, confiscated caches of arms. However, shooting attacks have not been popularized by the SaA, which prefers larger, more public operations. Indeed, between 2013 and 2015, the SaA was responsible for an estimated twenty-three bombing attacks that killed fourteen members of Bahrain’s security forces and wounded another twenty-five⁴. These were,

(3) See Kyle Orton, “Iran Escalates its Subversive Activities in Bahrain,” Henry Jackson Society, November 19, 2017.

(4) Michael Knights and Mathew Levitt. “The Evolution of Shi`a Insurgency in Bahrain.” *Combating Terrorism Center*, 11:1 (January 2018): ctc.usma.edu/evolution-shia-insurgency-bahrain/.

for the most part, IEDs. Within this bombing wave, it is worth noting the March 2014 attacks, when the SaA exploded a device that killed two Bahraini police officers and an officer from the UAE; these officers had been part of the contingent that assisted Bahraini security forces in the 2011 Operation Peninsular Shield deployment.

Even as its capabilities were enhanced, the SaA did not see its numbers swell and, according to Bahrain’s Ministry of the Interior, it only retains three attack cells and a similar number of bomb-making workshops at any given time. This appears to be a strategic choice; a part of the transition from being a hub of “resistance”—more public but easier to infiltrate by the security personnel—to a refined, professional terrorist group that no longer requires Molotov cocktail and riots but rather members with paramilitary training and bomb-making capabilities. This new generation of SaA militants is being trained directly in Iran and, increasingly, in Iraq, where Tehran controls an array of proxy Shiite militias, organized under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs). While in Iraq, training is exhaustive and includes actual battlefield conditions. Reports suggest that SaA members were brought into frontline positions in the war against Daesh for training experience.

Sea “shuttles” of known SaA members were organized by Hussein Ali Dawood, who was arrested in 2017 as part of Operation Ax, which was carried out by Bahrain’s security forces.⁵ He has since revealed the scope of his network and the manner in which he evaded naval security mechanisms in Bahrain and from allied states—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, and the United Kingdom—through the use of fast boats and fishing vessels that link up to IRGC vessels in international waters. Hussein Ali Dawood has since admitted

(5) Information related to Operation Ax and the arrest of Hussein Ali Dawood is based on the Kingdom of Bahrain, Ministry of Interior, “Public Security Chief Briefs Press on Security Operation,” *Ministry News*, June 29, 2017. <http://policemc.gov.bh/en/news/ministry/63776/>.

to organizing missions for SaA members from Bahrain to Iran and Iraq for training in the use of explosives and automatic weapons. These missions are enhancing the SaA's standing in the wider Iran-backed militia network and bringing its members into close proximity and contact with leading members of other terrorist groups from around the region.

Hussein Ali Dawood's testimony is also reflected in the security opinions of Bahrain's counterterrorism staff, which have been observing the deepening of the connection between SaA militants and other Iran-backed militias in Iraq. In June 2015, Bahrain's chief of police, Major General Tariq Al-Hassan, stated that the Iraq-based group Kata'ib Hezbollah (led by Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, who has been designated as a terrorist by the United States) provided training on explosively formed penetrator (EFP) armor-piercing bombs at a camp in Iraq and offered additional logistical and financial support to the SaA. Bahrain's Ministry of the Interior has also provided evidence linking the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (another Iran-backed, Hezbollah offshoot in Iraq) to the SaA.⁶

The connection between the SaA, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq is underscored by the fact that the latter two groups are directly controlled by the IRGC's Quds Force, which was the first to deploy EFP munitions among the anticoalition resistance groups in Iraq prior to 2011. The SaA falls under that organizational structure and has begun training in these munitions. Moreover, and importantly, Iranian-backed militias such as Kata'ib Hezbollah are ideologically committed to support other Shia communities and regularly profess strong support for the supposed struggle of Bahrain's Shia. There is a strong emotional connection between members of the Iraqi and Bahraini Shia communities, with the latter looking to Iraq's shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, and not to Iran, for religious guidance. In other words, Iran uses Iraqi

(6) See Kingdom of Bahrain, Ministry of Interior, "116 Suspects Arrested in Counter-terror Operations," *Ministry News*, March 3, 2018. <http://www.policemc.gov.bh/en/news/ministry/79965>.

Shia to assist in using Bahraini Shia for local and regional operations. Thus they amplify threats made against Bahrain's security personnel and leadership.

Operationally, the SaA has been tasked with assisting with the outbound exfiltration of wanted men (usually prison escapees) in cooperation with Iran's IRGC in Iraq and Bahrain. The SaA's "shuttling" does not only cater to Bahrainis but also applies to any militant requested by Iran. For instance, in December 2013, the Bahraini Coast Guard intercepted a boat with thirteen wanted individuals heading toward Iran, and in 2016 the brothers Ali and Mohammed Fakhrawi were arrested on their way back from Iran, further evidence of Tehran's complicity in the international SaA's activities. The very sophisticated Jaw Prison break in January 2017—and the subsequent attempted smuggling of escapees to Iran—attests to Iran's direct activities *within* Bahrain as well.

The Al-Wafa Islamic Movement and the SaA

The Iranian support of the SaA can be observed while analyzing the political umbrella of the SaA that is the Al-Wafa Islamic movement. Al-Wafa is a Khomeinist movement established in 2009 by Ayatollah Abduljalil al-Miqdad. From its inception, the group rejected the political process that existed in Bahrain, describing it as a charade. Back then, it wanted to reform the political system and end what it perceived as systematic discrimination against the Bahraini community. However, since 2011, the group became more radical and began to call for a regime change. Its political leaders reside in Iran, from where they release their publications.

Al-Wafa opposes the monarchic system in Bahrain and, since 2011, has called for the downfall of the regime. The group's strategic vision document calls for the establishment of a republic in Bahrain. Al-Wafa is inherently anti-Semitic and has threatened to attack anyone holding an Israeli passport whether they

are dual citizens of the US or any European state or not, calling it an act of “resistance.”⁷ It seeks a constitution in which Islam plays the central role in legislations. To achieve this, its charter calls for revolutionary acts through the use of mosques and Islamic centers and under the supervision of the religious clergy.



Figure 1. Supporters of Al-Wafa movement march on the streets of Qum carrying banners that contains the symbols of the IRGC, Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and the Youth of 14 February.

The leading figure within Al-Wafa is Sayed Murtada Majid Ramadan Alawi Al-Sindi, a Bahraini-born individual who is currently residing in Iran. Al-Sindi, who was designated as a terrorist by the United States for his involvement with the SaA and arrested by the Bahraini government five times between 1997 and 2011, calls openly for armed struggle against the Bahraini government and believes that the phase of peaceful revolution has ended. His lectures, in which he calls for the departure of foreign troops and threatens to

(7) Al-Wafa, Full Text: “Stability and Resilience (نص الكامل: وثيقة الثَّبات والصمود: “تيار الوفاء الإسلامي، ٤)”, November 2018, www.al-wafa.co/19213/.

turn the American base into a “region of hell,” are available online. Al-Sindi praises the SaA “martyrs” as well.⁸

The connection between Al-Wafa and the SaA is clear, for the former celebrates openly the latter’s operations. For example, Al-Wafa leaders who reside in Iran celebrated the successful operation of smuggling terrorist detainees out of Bahrain into Iran, an operation known as the Swords of Vengeance.



Figure 2. The three wanted escapees, Sadiq Jafar Taki, Hussein Attia Saleh, and Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Touq, being honored by Al-Wafa in a conference in Qum, Iran.

In December 2017, Al-Wafa hosted three “liberated captives” in Qum, including Mohammed Ibrahim Al-Touq, the mastermind behind two SaA

(8) Al-Wafa Youtube channel, Sayed Murtada Al-Sindi: “The people of Bahrain is capable of turning the [American] base into a Hell”.

(السيد مرتضى السندي : بإمكان شعب البحرين تحويل مقر القاعدة إلى “جحيم”).
August 14, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3n5PhgoqEM>, accessed December 17, 2018.

operations in 2013 and 2015, which resulted in eleven casualties (including the death of three police officers). Two years prior to his participation in the conference, Al-Touq confessed on Bahraini TV that he had undergone training in Kata'ib Hezbollah's camps in Iraq on how to use guns and install bombs. After his participation in the first operation, he fled to Iran and communicated with IRGC, but he chose to return to Bahrain later. After his participation in the 2015 bombing, the Bahraini authorities arrested him and later sentenced him to death.



Figure 3. A depiction of Rida al-Ghisra as a martyr, similar to the way in which Hezbollah depicts its “martyrs.”

Al-Touq, along with others at the conference, including Sadiq Jafar Taki and Hussein Attia Mohammed Saleh, wanted fugitives who had escaped from the Jau prison, praised Rida al-Ghisra, one of the escapees from Jau prison, who was killed at sea while trying to escape to Iran. They offered him and Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr eulogies and spoke of his operations against the “mercenaries”

of Al Khalifa. Indeed, Al-Wafa produced a 100-page booklet praising al-Ghisra and documenting his acts of resistance against the Bahraini forces throughout the years. It is worth mentioning that the SaA also used drones to film the operation of Swords of Vengeance. Thus, Al-Wafa praises convicted terrorists while residing under full protection in Iranian territory.



Figure 4. The route Rida al-Ghisra took while trying to escape to Iran before being killed by the coastal guards⁹.

Yet the principal coordinator for the foreign military training within the SaA appears to be none other than Sheikh Qassim Abdullah Ali Al-Moumen, who studied at Hawza al-Imam Zain al-‘abidin in Bani Jamrah in Bahrain. He is the uncle of Ali Ahmed Abdullah Al-Moumen who was among the first to be killed during the 2011 uprising. Ali became a “martyr” for the uprising in Bahrain and his death created a cult of admirers among the Bahraini community. Qassim was able to recruit several of his family members to the

(9) Amani Al-Masqati, “The Interior Ministry: Rida Al Ghisra, Mahmoud Yahya, and Mostafa Abedali were killed during their failed attempt escaping to Iran” (الداخلية: مقتل رضا الغسرة) (ومحمود يوسف ومصطفى يوسف خلال إحباط محاولة هروبيهم لإيران), *Al-Wasat News*, 09, February 2017. <http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/1209083.html>

SaA and facilitated their travel to Iraq and Iran in order to receive training in camps supervised by Hezbollah and the IRGC. Ali's brother Hussein received training from the IRGC, while his other brother, Yasser, received training in Kata'ib Hezbollah's camps. Their cousin, Ali Jaafar Abdullah Al-Moumen, a follower of Al-Wafa, departed his medical studies in India to receive training in Iraq as well. All of them received foreign training under the supervision of their uncle Qassim, and all of them participated in bombing a bus in February 2017.

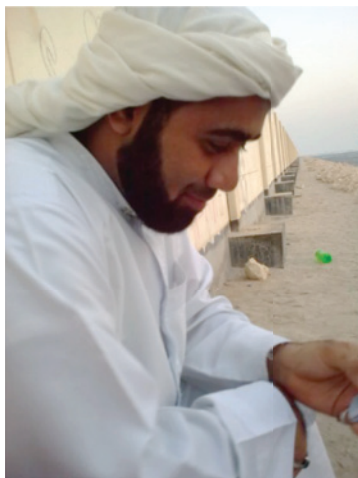


Figure 5. Qassim Al-Moumen, 2010.

According to Al-Touq's own confessions, Qassim also facilitated his travel to Iraq. Thus, Qassim is one of the top wanted terrorists in Bahrain and was placed on the U.S. terrorist list. According to a report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Qassim was arrested on August 13, 2015 before escaping to Iran.¹⁰ However, the author of this piece disputes this claim, arguing that the Bahraini Ministry of Interior

(10) Michael Knights and Mathew Levitt. "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain." Combating Terrorism Center, 11:1 (January 2018): ctc.usma.edu/evolution-shia-insurgency-bahrain/.

released a video on the same date claiming that Qassim is a wanted escapee in Iran. Furthermore, a senior Bahraini official denied Qassim's arrest, indicating that he was smuggled into Iran¹¹.

In 2015, Mohammed Radhi Abdullah, one of the members of the SaA who was arrested for his participation in the 2015 bombing, claimed that two years earlier Al-Wafa had provided him with about \$1,300 to distribute it to wanted individuals. By the next two years, more money was sent to him, in Saudi currency, to distribute, though this time, by the Youth of 14 February. The amount of money varies for singles and those who are married. The former group received 250 SR, while the latter received 500 SR. According to the same member, he would go to pick up the money from Wadiyan cemetery or a nearby location and the money is used for logistical support such as providing Internet access for their phones.¹²

All in all, the SaA remains a potent terrorist group that looks to Tehran for its financial and logistical support and is firmly in the Shia-terrorist network in the wider Arab Gulf region. Bahrain—and its allies—have successfully interdicted several attacks and have managed to prosecute nearly 300 members of the group over the past decade or so; however, the SaA is versatile and has developed more lethal clandestine capabilities over the past five years. This is also, importantly, a reflection of its continued relationship with the MWHB.

The Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain (MWHB)

The existence of the MWHB was only revealed in the aftermath—during investigations—of the attempted coup d'état in Bahrain in June 1996. This

(11) Correspondence with a senior Bahraini official, December 18, 2018.

(12) Ministry of Interior in Bahrain. "The Arrest of Perpetrators of the terrorist Sitra Blast" (القبض على مرتكبي تفجير سكرة الإرهابي Bahrain#), August 19, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dhDgTtr2i0>, Accessed December 18, 2018.

was MWHB's debut, and it came very close to succeeding in its high-profile coup attempt. Only the rapid reaction of Bahrain's security services, supported by its allies in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, prevented the attack from achieving its goals of decapitating the leadership in Bahrain. Tehran's main international terrorist group, Hezbollah in Lebanon, had, it was revealed, deployed to Bahrain and also had begun to absorb many of the IFLB fighters—those that did not join other groups, like the SaA later on—that had managed to evade capture by the country's police forces. The MWHB was, at that time, allegedly led by Muhammed Taqi Mudarassi, a well-known Shirazi scholar and the mastermind behind the IFLB coup attempt in 1981.¹³

The success of Hezbollah in Lebanon, created a franchise system that allowed Tehran to control by proxy activities in countries that typically were far beyond its sphere of influence. While it is true that Hezbollah plays on sectarianism in Lebanon, in other countries its Shia identity is less pronounced than other aspects of its ideology. For instance, in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE where national and tribal identities are strong, Hezbollah attempted (early on) to sow seeds of sectarianism in an indirect manner—by generating narratives of “resistance,” for example, to Americanization, rather than to pit Sunni versus Shia. This helped Hezbollah anchor itself in the political communities of Shia in the Arab Gulf without ruffling too many feathers at the beginning of its deployments. Instead Hezbollah is playing the long game in the region. It does not act with the same brashness and impunity as the more locally based groups (such as the SaA), and instead plays several fundamental roles:

(13) See Knights and Levitt, “The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency,” *CTC Sentinel*, pp. 18. Nonetheless, the claim made in this source ought to be taken with caution, for Hezbollah usually follows the ideology of Khat al-Imam (Khomeinist), while Taqi al-Mudarassi is a leading figure within the Shiraziyyun movement. This confusion could be attributed to the fact that many of the earlier publications called the IFLB a Bahraini Hezbollah. In addition, the Saudi journalist Kamil al-Khatti al-Khunayzi, an expert on Shia affairs in the Gulf region, rejects this claim.

1. *The Recruitment, Training and Deployment (RTD)*—of local Shia into the various Hezbollah structures
2. *Becoming a Structured Hub*—for training, logistics and financing of affiliated groups
3. *Planning, Coordinating and Carrying Out Attacks*—occasionally, but often with devastating effect (such as the attack on the Khobar Towers)

Since the 2000 withdrawal of Israel from South Lebanon—which was seen as a strategic victory for Hezbollah—the organization changed tactics. The image that it was fighting to end Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory (for example, South Lebanon and the Shabba Farms) was soon eclipsed by its more nefarious interests of spreading Iran’s Islamic Revolution throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds. Instead of laying down its arms (as prescribed by its own dictates), Hezbollah has unmasked itself and its sectarian agenda and began, in an uninhibited manner, to represent Iranian interests throughout the region and beyond. As a matter of fact, the reality of Hezbollah as an Iranian, extrastate proxy, reliant on Tehran (and the international drug trade)¹⁴ for its financing, military and political leadership, strategic assets, tactical choices, and overall strategic objectives, is well established.

Hezbollah’s military and political leader, Hassan Nasrallah,¹⁵ together with the IRGC’s Quds Force operational leader, Qasem Soleimani, remain in very close contact and openly coordinate in their operations within Syria, Yemen, and internationally (such as the Iranian plot to bomb an opposition conference in Paris, France, in summer 2018). While the full-scale of MWHB’s activities in Bahrain remained clouded in a form of strategic ambiguity that sought to

(14) See Josh Meyer, ‘The Secret Backstory of how Obama Let Hezbollah Off the Hook,’ *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>.

(15) Some have sought to generate the myth that Hezbollah retains separate military and political wings. See Matthew Levitt, “Debating the Hezbollah Problem.” *Russia’s Energy Goals in Syria - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, 22 Jan. 2018. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/debating-the-hezbollah-problem>.

hide the intentions of Iran by attempting to camouflage the role being played by Hezbollah. However, those efforts were abandoned when Iran—and Hezbollah—saw and exploited the political unrest in Bahrain (as in 2011) in an attempt to generate a long, drawn-out war of attrition in which the radicalized terror group had the clear advantage since it could easily vanish into, and incite, the sizable Shia population in the country.¹⁶

In the wake of the 2011 events (and ever since), Hezbollah has become the vanguard terrorist organization in Bahrain. Toward the end of March 2011, Hezbollah cells were openly recruiting, conducting an assortment of intelligence operations, and photographic evidence is available that shows MWHB members training Shia youth in bomb-making techniques. Unlike the SaA, whose members are mostly comprised of Bahraini Shia, the MWHB originate, largely, from Lebanon and Iraq—and they have grown in power and capabilities ever since.

The MWHB and the SaA cooperate on the ground and are both part of the Iranian clandestine network that Tehran deploys in pursuit of its regional and international ambitions. However, the former is the senior partner in their relationship. This is testified by the group's effectiveness in supporting what the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Academy terms the "third generation of militants" in Bahrain. Consider that in 2017, the MWHB launched or organized (with the SaA) some nine bombing attacks, which caused seven deaths and injured twenty-four security personnel. This number represents a decrease from 2011 and 2012 but a clear increase from 2013 and after. In other words, the MWHB was able to advance and refine its operational capabilities even after the 2011-2012 unrest and the threat of more

(16) It is estimated that Bahrain's Shia population is roughly 51%–55% of the total citizenry. See Mitchell Belfer, "Demographic Warfare," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, 8:2 (2013).

potent terrorist actions at the hand of radical Hezbollah members is growing year-on-year. This is confirmed by the uncovering of several sophisticated explosive manufacturing workshops by Bahrain's security forces over the past few years where usable claymore-type devices and EFPs were found. In 2017, in one such operation, some 127 kilograms of high-grade explosives and bomb-making material, including 24 kilograms of C4 plastic explosives; triacetone triperoxide (TATP), a new terrorist explosive; nitrocellulose, as used in gunpowder; chemicals of various types; electric detonators; grenades; and ammunition were retrieved by Bahrain's security forces.

In addition to the weapons (and cash) seized during police raids, digital videos of step-by-step instructions for bomb making and operational support were also retrieved. The instructors were from Hezbollah cells in Lebanon and Iraq. This points to yet another challenge Bahrain faces in combating the radicalized terrorism of Hezbollah—being an island in a region plagued by Iran-orchestrated sectarian violence it is difficult to interdict human traffic in its territorial waters. Indeed, the maritime connection is key for the MWHB's clandestine activities since the sea spaces surrounding Bahrain connect Bahraini-based cells with Iran- and Iraq-based training and logistical bases. Fast boats and fishing vessels are increasingly being used by the MWHB to smuggle people and weapons in and out of the country. And, at times of heightened alert—when Bahrain and its allies increase their coastal patrols—Hezbollah and IRGC weapons smugglers appear to be flexible and are able to shift from direct delivery of weapons to the Bahraini mainland to an indirect system of dropping water-proofed weapons' caches in Bahraini waters, with militants undertaking recovery operations themselves.

As the MWHB's capability increases so does the general threat to Bahrain and the wider Arab Gulf since the organization is merely a cog in the wider Iranian efforts to destabilize the region. With the ambiguity gone and the

true nature of the threat growing, it is time to explore what impacts such a radicalized terrorist group is having on Bahrain.

Some Impacts to Consider

Although the goals of the SaA and the MWHB are reflective of Iran's general ambitions, the manner in which operations are unfolding, combined with the nature of Bahrain, are producing an interesting dynamic. Bahrain retains an open and vibrant political culture which is not easily radicalized (as a whole). The early operations of the MWHB and, later, the SaA, intended to undermine the national cohesion of the Island and trigger sectarian struggles so that Iran—as their incubator, sponsor, and director—could legitimize a direct intervention and occupation of Bahrain. In other words, the terrorist cells that Iran originally deployed to, or developed in, Bahrain intended to trail-blaze and/or soften the ground for more regular Iranian forces to intervene in and, ultimately, subdue the country and turn it into a vassal of the Islamic Republic—an Islamic Republic of Bahrain.

However, the methods used by such radical groups did not bode well with the political and social culture of Bahrain. The Shia community is not unified. The Ajam community, for instance, is very supportive of the government and most Shia remain committed to a unified Bahrain that is multicultural and multireligious. Being unable to draw the majority of Bahrain's Shia into a sectarian conflict in the country, the MWHB, the SaA (and others) have attempted to do the opposite—target selected sectors of Bahrain while hiding among Bahrain's Shia community to force the government to overreact and force the very polarization that they could not achieve. This explains much of their behaviors on the ground and why they have focused on:

Attacking important aspects of Bahrain's infrastructure—to interrupt traffic (economic and social) by roadblocks, oil slicks, burning tires, destroying

the public spaces in their towns and villages, destroying the Saudi-Bahrain oil pipeline, and so on. They want individual Bahrainis to feel the direct consequences of their actions so that pressure will mount for Bahrain's security services to respond harshly while undermining international trust in Bahrain's economic life.

Attacking expatriate workers—to make Bahrain seem unsafe for foreigners to live and work. During the 2011 unrest, MWHB kidnapped at least eleven expatriate workers and at least five were murdered.¹⁷ Since then, many of the spates of violence involved gangs attacking expatriate workers. The main discourse among the MWHB, the SaA, and many others is to term the expatriate workers as “mercenaries” in order to justify ethnically cleansing them from the country in yet another destabilizing effort and in the hope that Bahrain's security response will be overwhelming.

Attacking Bahrain's security personnel—to elicit a direct and harsh response by police, military and counterterrorism agents. Operations against Bahrain's security forces have taken on grotesque forms: car ramming, shootings, remote improvised explosive device attacks, Molotov cocktail ambushes, close-range assassinations and even the use of a bulldozer to destroy the houses of security personnel. This is meant to hurt Bahrain's morale, scare its civil society, generate outrage among the country's decision makers, and, thus (it is hoped), undermine national cohesion. Attacks are also used for propaganda efforts, and all MWHB and SaA videos contain operational clips to stoke sectarianism.

Developing mechanisms of national political support—to represent radicalized and highly sectarian narratives in a less-than-violent manner as a means of their legitimizing terrorism. Political agents of the former IFLB formed the Al Wefaq

(17) See Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), 10 December 2011, pp. 223-227.

bloc under the double religious authority of Ayatollah Isa Qassim—from the Qom school—and Shia cleric Ali Salman. They have participated in political life in Bahrain but since 2011 took more revolutionary stances which resulted in undermining the country’s national cohesion and security. During 2011, Ali Salman met with individuals that the state accuses of involvement in terrorist plots, such as Abdul Jalil Al Singace and Hasan Mushaima, and then, during the February protests, he erected a sign declaring that he will remain in the camp “Until the End of the Al Khalifa Government.” In other words, Al Wefaq took stances that are more revolutionary and became a political voice for the more radical groups, such as MWHB and the SaA, and participated in generating of false narratives about Bahrain. The Wefaq bloc also tried to isolate Bahrain from its western allies, an act that further erodes national cohesion.

Constraining the Iranian Threat

The nature of the challenge faced by Bahrain, emanating from Iran, is complicated. Here, a recognized state actor is largely responsible for the use of non-state, clandestine groups that incite, recruit, train, and deploy radicalized individuals in Bahrain. As a result, Bahrain is being forced to configure its security policies to reflect the double-edged sword of Iranian conventional and unconventional power: the threat of external interference and internal subversion. To constrain Iran and its theocratic ambitions, Bahrain’s security policy is focused on three main areas:

Alliances—regional and international are required to assist in providing the necessary strategic cover for Bahrain to overcome the terrorist threat at home. The deployment of troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE to protect vital infrastructure like the airport, seaport, oil refinery and business districts in 2011 prevented the IRGC from playing a more direct role. The show of force under Operation Peninsular Shield, essentially, deterred Iranian intervention. In

addition, the stationing of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and the UK's new naval station enhance Bahrain's ability to restrict Iran's direct role. However, since both the United States and United Kingdom respond to different threat perceptions, Bahrain security relies on its alliance to Saudi Arabia and the UAE more so than others.

Deterrence in motion—to combat, directly, the radicalized terrorist cells that operate in the country. Bahrain has developed a sophisticated system of deterrence against those intending to join and/or assist Iranian-backed terrorist groups—especially those from Bahrain. This has taken the form of escalated punishments for terrorism-related offenses and range from lengthy prison sentences, the revoking of citizenship to—in very rare and extreme cases—capital punishment. The intention is to generate and disseminate the message that the cons of belonging to such terrorist organizations far outweigh the benefits. In other words, Bahrain produced a system of deterrence in motion against the individual members of MWHB and the SaA (and others). This is largely meant for Bahrainis and does not work as effectively against non-Bahraini radicals (such as those from Iraq and Lebanon).

Police actions, including investigations, counterterrorism agents, sentry duty, crowd control teams, riot police, public policing, and public outreach officers have been instrumental in limiting the social damage of Iranian militias and terrorist ground in the country. For instance, police investigation units have been able to penetrate and disrupt dozens of terrorist cells over the years and many hundreds of arrests have been made to break the potency of the groups. Also, Bahrain targets the leadership of terror cells and the political bodies that support them. The dissolution of the Al Wafaq group and the imprisonment of Ali Salman, Nabeel Rajab, and Ayatollah Isa Qassim, combined with the disruption of the SaA during Operation Ax, attests to the judicial response Bahrain has developed in relation to terrorism in the country.

Conclusion

As the international community grapples to contain Islamic radicalism as manifested by Daesh and Al Qaeda, it is important not to dismiss the forms of radicalism promoted by Iran and its proxies in the Middle East and beyond. In dealing with the latter, the war against radical terror cells in Bahrain is wrought with difficulties. In this case, the problem centers on the nature of Bahrain's adversary, Iran, which seeks to export its corrupted version of Islam through its revolution. Since Iran is largely contained by the region's great powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain has little to fear from Tehran's conventional forces—for now. However, what Iran lacks in asserting conventional power in Bahrain, it makes up for in its clandestine forces, which are used to attack Bahrain's public security. With continued policing efforts and coordination between Bahrain and its allies, even those forces can be overcome and national cohesion preserved. Nevertheless, it is a herculean task, especially as many in the international community are reluctant to reduce their economic relations to the Islamic Republic and therefore interrupt the money flows that Tehran needs to cover the costs of international terrorism. Until the Islamic Republic is restrained by the international community, Bahrain (and many other nations) will be forced to invest funds and political energy into combating its agents of upheaval.

About the Author

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