



Mapping Militias in the Middle East

Militias Operating in and against the Kingdom of Bahrain Part I

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Introduction

Infiltration by Iranian proxies is among of the most potent challenges currently facing Bahrain—and it is an enduring challenge. Since the mid-19th century, Iran has been attempting to forcibly absorb Bahrain into its administrative body. Referring to Bahrain as its ‘14th province,’ the Islamic Republic deploys its proxy agents to destabilise Bahrain’s government and attack its civil society. In fact, ‘most, if not all, the internal militarised groups fighting against Bahrain’s government and civil society are connected to, and directed from, Iran.’¹

Since 2011, Iran has intensified its support for an assortment of Shia militias in Bahrain and smuggles more and more to camps in Iran and Iraq where their operatives receive training by Tehran-backed terrorist groups such as Kata’ib Hezbollah under the patronage of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC). Those operatives are then reinserted into Bahrain often with military and command and communications equipment.²

With war raging in several parts of the Middle East, it is striking that Iranian engagements tend to be with aims that go beyond the theatre of their operations and their political-military leadership often equates battlefield ‘victories’ in one location as steps towards Iranian ‘victories’ in others. Consider that, after claiming military victory in Aleppo (December 2016), the Deputy Commander of the IRGC, General Hossein Salami, publicly declared that ‘the victory in Aleppo will pave the way for liberating Bahrain,’³ and assured that ‘the people of

1 Mitchell Belfer, *Small State, Dangerous Region: A Strategic Assessment of Bahrain*, Peter Lang 2013, pp. 203-204.

2 Matthew Levitt and Michael Knights, *Iranian-Backed Terrorism in Bahrain: Finding a Sustainable Solution*, The Washington Institute, 11 January 2017. Full report available: <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-backed-terrorism-in-bahrain-finding-a-sustainable-solution>>

3 Quoted in Al Arabiya English, 16 December 2016, available: <<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/12/16/Iran-s-Revolutionary-Guard-After-Aleppo-we-will-intervene-in-Bahrain-and-Yemen.html>>

Bahrain will achieve their wishes, the Yemeni people will be delighted, and the residents of Mosul will taste victory, these are all divine promises.⁴ In other words, Iran's engagement in Syria is part of a larger attempt by Tehran to deploy militia and consolidate power across the Arab Gulf and, indeed, the Middle East.

In the case of Bahrain, evidence is mounting that suggests that Iran deploys militias to attack both security personnel and civilians for the purpose of:

1. polarising Bahrain's civil society
2. deepening sectarianism in the country
3. paving the way for an armed insurrection
4. paving the way for direct intervention by Iranian forces
5. ultimately delegitimise, overthrow and replace Bahrain's government.

In June 2017 Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain collectively designated the following Iran-backed, Shia paramilitary units operating in Bahrain as terrorist organisations:

1. Hezbollah Bahrain,
2. Saraya al-Ashtar
3. February 14 Coalition
4. The Resistance Brigades
5. Saraya al-Mukhtar and
6. Harakat Ahrar Bahrain.⁵

In this Monitoring segment, the first two paramilitary organisations are introduced and assessed.

Hezbollah Bahrain

The Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain (MWHB) is one of the most notorious terrorist groups operating in Bahrain. Its primary role is to organise, supervise and provide support for other insurgent and paramilitary organisations whose primary political objective is to overthrow Bahrain's government and its royal family.⁶ The MWHB therefore serves as an umbrella organisation and the linchpin between Bahrain's Shia militias and Tehran.

4 Quoted in Al Arabiya English, 16 December 2016, available: <<http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2016/12/16/Iran-s-Revolutionary-Guard-After-Aleppo-we-will-intervene-in-Bahrain-and-Yemen.html>>

5 Full list available on: <<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/06/09/Arab-countries-release-list-of-terrorist-financiers-supported-by-Qatar.html>>

6 Hezbollah—"The Party of God"—is a Shi'ite militant jihadi organisation managed by IRGC. It adopts terrorism and the means of asymmetric warfare as central tools for achieving its political goals. It was established in Lebanon in the midst of political system crisis in summer 1982. One of Hezbollah's original primary goals was the expulsion of the multi-national (majority of Israeli) forces from the territory of Lebanon during the Operation Peace for Galilee in 1982 – 1983. Over time, Hezbollah has developed into a hierarchical hybrid terrorist organisation operating in the international arena, composing of political, social, and military wing.

There is no doubt regarding the nature of relationship between Hezbollah and the Islamic Republic it has been established that Hezbollah is an Iranian, extra-state, proxy advancing Iran's regional and international objectives. It relies on Tehran for its financing, its military and political leadership, strategic assets, tactical choices and overall strategic objectives.⁷

Iran is Hezbollah's principal financial sponsor. Although, widely known from its inception, this was confirmed by Hezbollah Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, in June 2016 when he noted that: 'We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything it eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, are from the Islamic Republic of Iran.'⁸

The unambiguity of relationship between Hezbollah and Iran is cemented by Hezbollah's ideological framework, which is directly derived from the Khomeini's radical doctrine of Shia Islam and his thoughts centred on the idea of revolutionary violence which justify his understanding "defensive" *jihad*. Hezbollah follows a model of governance for an Islamic state, which is based on submission to the *wilayat al-faqih*, the rule of the jurispudent, which was articulated by Khomeini.⁹ As Sheikh Naim Qassem confirmed in an interview with Fred Halliday, Hezbollah regards the Iranian spiritual leader as its ultimate authority.¹⁰

Hezbollah takes its orders directly from the IRGC and al Quds Force and is in frequent contact with their high command. The frequent contact is best illustrated by the popularity of IRGC al-Quds Force Commander, Qasem Soleimani, who became a social media celebrity among Hezbollah fighters, often being captured posing for Instagram pictures with Hezbollah and other Shia militia soldiers operating in various locations in the Middle East.

Together with the IRGC, Hezbollah's task is to ensure survival of the regime in Tehran and to promote its revisionist ambitions which includes the strategy of "revolution exportation." Bahrain is a central part of the Iranian attempt to spread its revolution into the Arabian Peninsula. MWHB is a branch of the wider Hezbollah framework and is responsible for untold death and destruction in Bahrain at the behest of military planners in Tehran.

7 Mitchell Belfer, *Small State, Dangerous Region: A Strategic Assessment of Bahrain*, Peter Lang 2013, p. 205.

8 Quoted by Nicholas Blanford, *Hezbollah's Evolution from Lebanese Militia to Regional Player*, MEI Policy Paper 2017- 4, p. 3. Available for download: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/hezbollah-s-evolution-lebanese-militia-regional-player>>

9 Nicholas Blanford, *Hezbollah's Evolution from Lebanese Militia to Regional Player*, MEI Policy Paper 2017- 4, p. 3. Available for download: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/hezbollah-s-evolution-lebanese-militia-regional-player>>

For a comprehensive account on Hezbollah ideology see, for example: Brumberg, Daniel and Zonis Marvin. *Shi'ism as Interpreted by Khomeini: An Ideology of Revolutionary Violence* in Kramer, Martin. (ed.) *Shi'ism, Resistance and Revolution*, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1987

10 **Halliday's account of the interview**, *A Lebanese fragment: two days with Hizbollah*, published by openDemocracy, 19 July 2009 is available on: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization/hizbollah_3757.jsp>

Al-Ashtar Brigades (Saraya al-Ashtar)

Since its premier statement — via their Facebook page — on 27 April 2013, the Iran-backed militant group Al-Ashtar has been responsible for carrying out numerous terrorist attacks — mostly detonating improvised explosive devices (IEDs) — against Bahrain’s civilian population, security personnel and government representatives. According information available to Bahraini intelligence, the group has been trained by Kata’ib Hezbollah, an Shia militia that is one of Iran’s most important proxies in Iraq.¹¹ In January 2016, Bahraini authorities arrested the leaders of a cell linked to Al-Ashtar—Ali and Mohammed Fakhrawi. The twin brothers travelled to Iran on several occasions to obtain financial and logistical support. Ali Fakhrawi met (in 2012) with Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and received some €18,520 in support of their organisation.¹²

The organisation was blacklisted as a terrorist group by Bahrain’s cabinet in March 2014 following a bomb attack that killed two policemen and an officer from the United Arab Emirates in the town of Daih. Al-Ashtar claimed responsibility for this attack on its Facebook and Twitter accounts declaring that ‘The operation comes in revenge for our martyrs.’¹³ Together with Al-Ashtar the cabinet outlawed the February 14 Movement, Saraya al-Muqawama (Resistance Brigade) and any group associated or allied to them.¹⁴

In March 2017, two of the group’s affiliates Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi were designated as global terrorists by the US State Department. In the statement officially announcing this declaration, US State Department recognised that Al-Ashtar receives funding and support from the Government of Iran.¹⁵

In February 2018, the group formally adopted the logo of the IRGC the branding that is shared by many Shia militias openly loyal to the Islamic Republic championing/promoting both Iran’s radical ideology as well as its political interests. This change of its public “image” reflects the official inclusion in the “Iranian Axis of Resistance” operating against the United States and its allies.¹⁶

The monitoring of these — and the subsequent — organisations will continue on a monthly basis and when significant developments occur.

11 Full report by Caleb Weiss, *Iranian-backed terror groups in Bahrain: Part Two*, 13 March 2017, available: <<http://publish.illinois.edu/illinijournalofinternationalsecurity/blog/blogs-spring-2017/iranian-backed-terror-groups-in-bahrain-part-two/>>

12 Information published by the New Arab news available on: <<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/1/6/bahrain-dismantles-terror-cell-linked-to-iran>>

13 Quoted by Philip Smyth in his *Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Ashtar: Bahrain’s Illusive Bomb Throwers*, published on Aaron Zelin’s blog *Jihadology.net*, 4 March 2014, available: <<http://jihadology.net/2014/03/04/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-ashtar-bahrain-illusive-bomb-throwers/>>

14 See, for example: Farishta Saeed, *Bahrain puts groups on terrorism list after bomb kills three police*, Reuters, 4 March 2014, available: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-unrest/bahrain-puts-groups-on-terrorism-list-after-bomb-kills-three-police-idUSBREA231FC20140304>>

15 Official declaration available on the US Department of State website: <<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/03/268504.htm>>

16 For a full report see: Caleb Weiss, *Bahraini militant group adopts IRGC branding*, Long War Journal blog, 23 February 2018, available: <<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/bahraini-militant-group-adopts-irgc-branding.php>>

