

## A MONTHLY REVIEW OF EURO-GULF RELATIONS

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### REBUILDING SOCIETY IN SYRIA



Syria's civil war is raging on and has entered its 9th year. The intensity of fighting has been intermittent since the onset of war. During the conflict, alliances shifted, new factions emerged and new participants entered the fray. Despite continuous fighting, Al-Assad's government has begun reconstructing Syr-

ia. Reconstructing housing and infrastructure is a one thing and what about the society at large? Can it be built and if so in what form? There is an attempt to answer to this question, on the level on civil society, from the representatives of the Syrian communities. Delegates are engaged in a dialogue, which has been

happening for 3 years now, held on European soil, with the latest talks taking place in unspecified location in Berlin, Germany. As the London-based journalist, Ibrahim Hamidi, points out, the idea of this kind of dialogue first emerged in 2016, when several meetings were held in France and Switzerland. The first

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### IRAN'S DEZFUL BALLISTIC MISSILES

Iran once again demonstrated its intention to destabilise the Middle East by improving its ballistic missile arsenal for foreign policy purposes. Despite the international efforts to limit Tehran's regional meddling, the Islamic republic is increasing its support to militias in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon through logistics and military supplies, which makes its ballistic missile programme a primary security challenge in the region. On 8 February 2019, new footage according to Jane's Defence Weekly, was released from the secret, underground military laboratories of Dezful county. This footage introduced the new series of Dezful ballistic missiles which were modified to supply Houthi rebels in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq and

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### TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

The result of the 31 March 2019 local elections in Turkey topped the headlines internationally. This attention demonstrating their significance for the political dynamics in Turkey and the position of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the

country. Campaigning for his party and speaking for two months before the elections and at over 100 rallies around the country, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan considered these elections a matter of national survival. However, these elections have more to do with

his party, which is widely acknowledged as a conservative Islamist movement, inspired by the Muslim-Brotherhood ideology, centred on him as a cult of personality. The AKP plays a vital role in the wider Middle East, with international alliances connecting

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# THE REPORT

## Advanced Technologies and Terrorism

### Future Threats: Defence and Prevention

*The event was held on April 04 2019 at the EGIC HQ in Rome. More information are available at [www.egic.info](http://www.egic.info)*

On 4 April 2019, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted Professor Darya Bazarkina to further stimulate debate on the issues related to psychological warfare and their importance in the fight against global jihadi terrorism. Professor Bazarkina, teaching and researching at the Department of International Security and Foreign Policy of Russia (Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration) and School of International Relations (Saint Petersburg State University), is an accomplished expert in international cooperation on counter-terrorism, with a special focus on the war of ideas and propaganda. She presented her latest research on the developing relationship between advanced technologies and terrorism. This comes at the time in which technologies and cyberspace are increasingly important for the transitioning economies of the Arab Gulf. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), has very recently registered its first Crypto-currency Exchange in Dubai. Saudi Arabia, the largest country in the region, is currently committed to the Vision 2030 programme, an ambitious economic diversification plan, in which a key focus will be on new technologies, that aims to reduce and then end Riyadh's dependence on its oil reserves. Bahrain, notably, has invested to create its own FinTech

Bay, which is currently the leading FinTech Hub in the Middle East and Africa. In the Gulf, technology already plays an important role to prevent the spread of radical ideologies and track terrorism financing. As such, understanding the importance of Malicious Use of Advanced Technologies (MUAI) and the various techniques that can be employed to securitise the use of new technologies is crucial to predict some important future challenges that Gulf countries will have to face in the future. The terrorist threat has long been borderless, and global. Today, even more so, as groups commenced mastering technologies to their benefit. Globalisation is an ongoing and seemingly unstoppable phenomena and, due to the digital revolution, terrorist groups can still survive - and even thrive - in the cyber-sphere. This was recently demonstrated by the ability of groups such as Daesh and AQAP to use new technologies to organise and carry out terrorist attacks in Europe despite being forced to abandon territories, resources and logistical centres across the Greater Middle East. Beyond the organisation of specific attacks, advanced technologies have the potential to strongly enhance the impact of psychological warfare (PW), thus providing terrorist groups with yet another instrument in their effort to destabilise societies

and create chaos. According to a survey published by the US based Neustar company, 82% of the security experts interviewed currently regard MUAI as the most formidable threat to both private businesses and government functioning. According to Professor Bazarkina, this is due to the fact that MUAI is a diverse and multifaceted threat. For instance, it can take the form of reorientation of commercial AI systems. So called "Deepfakes", such as fake videos of prominent politicians disseminating hate or fake representation demonstrating popular support for terrorist activities are another example of MUAI. Terrorist organisations might also be able to master predictive algorithms using them as advanced technological weapons to interfere with elections results. What makes MUAI particularly attractive is the fact that to date attacks involving the use of advanced technologies are particularly difficult to predict and it is often very problematic to track down perpetrators. The mix of effectiveness and potential impunity is likely to increase the number of such attacks in the future. MUAI can also be used by terrorist groups in more traditional present-day activities. Artificial intelligence programmes which monitor personal internet behaviour, can be used by terrorist recruiters to select the most suitable profiles to be indoctrinated and



**Darya Bazarkina**, *Professor and Researcher Department of International Security and Foreign Policy of Russia at RANEP and at the Saint Petersburg State University.*

convinced to carry out a suicide mission. Artificial intelligence could also enable terrorist organisations to claim responsibility for nefarious events which are not related to one another for the purpose of weakening citizens' confidence in state institutions or, more dangerously, turning states against one another. The aforementioned considerations lead Professor Bazarkina to recommend a stronger national, regional and international focus to prevent and contrast MUAI, that requires the creation of specialised centres focusing on MUAI in the context of countering terrorism. Authorities should also use predictive analysis extensively to identify potential reasons for social unrest and implement policies to contain them. Despite not being strictly MUAI related, long term programmes enhancing social cohesion are likely to reduce the appeal of terrorist recruiters even if when those are able to increase their out-

reach via new technologies. Governments should also provide citizens with a better understanding about terrorism's destructive aims and its new tactics. As the struggle against terrorism carries on, soci-

eties and states must ensure they are more capable than terrorists in the use of new advanced technologies. Terrorist propaganda can be submerged online by anti-terrorism content ,while the monitoring of

online behaviour, used by terrorist to radicalise, can be undermined by using the same technology to identify radicalised citizens. When it comes to the use of advanced technologies, the largest possible level of in-

ternational cooperation and expertise sharing are needed to ensure that anti and counter terrorism efforts stay ahead of terrorism..

BY ANTONINO OCCHIUTO

## THE MONTH IN THE GULF

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### SAUDI ARABIA

09 April

Dr Abdel Aziz Hamad Aluwaisheg, The Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Assistant Secretary-General for Political and Negotiation Affairs, and Michele Cervone D'Urso, European Union's (EU) Ambassador to the GCC and its member states, discussed the progress in the implementation of the GCC-EU programmes; initiatives; revival of negotiations about the GCC-EU free trade agreement (FTA); the latest regional and international developments; creation of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) and the situation regarding Palestine.

### QATAR

24 April

Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, held talks with Secretary of the United States' State Department, Mike Pompeo, in Washington, DC. Secretary Pompeo highlighted the Qatari official's efforts to enhance strategic partnership between the United States and Qatar, including follow-through on Qatar's commitments to fair competition in civil aviation. They discussed a range of regional security challenges, situations in Afghanistan, Libya and Sudan, and efforts to counter the Iranian regime's malign regional activities.

### UAE

26 March

A delegation of leading Dutch energy and water companies, led by Ahmed Aboutaleb, Mayor of Rotterdam, and Hans Sandee, the Netherlands' Consul General in Dubai, met with Saeed Mohammed Al-Tayer, Managing Director and CEO of Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA), to explore opportunities for participation in DEWA's development projects and initiatives.

### KUWAIT

09 April

Military Attachés of the member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) gathered for talks at the NATO-Istanbul Cooperation Initiative Regional Centre in Kuwait to discuss prospects for cooperation, recent international developments and the achievements of the Centre, the occasion of the Alliance's 70th anniversary.



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# TURKEY'S LOCAL ELECTIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

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it to other Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties and governments. This network is one of the protagonists of an ongoing, large-scale, confrontation taking place between Islamists and anti-Islamists in the region. Meanwhile, in Turkey, over than 15 years of AKP government has shaped state identity by floating Islamism, which runs contrary to the secularism which Turkey was originally built on. The AKP-led alliance experienced a meaningful setback in the March elections. Despite the party's alliance taking an early lead obtaining 52% of the votes, it lost the country's three main cities: Ankara, Izmir, and, Istanbul - ruled by AKP for two decades. These elections represented an evaluation of public support to the AKP and President Erdogan's policies, as they were held after the enactment of a constitutional referendum in 2017, which transformed Turkey into an executive presidential system. For the AKP, winning these elections would have been the latest accomplishments that guaranteed total control on all political levels. The aforementioned losses are considered a direct vote of no-confidence and a shift in the mood of vot-

ers in favour of opposition parties. The opposition suffered several organisational and ideological problems, along with crackdowns on its officials and supporters, following the failed coup in July 2016. AKP began a structural targeting of the opposition groups, focusing on the Gülen movement and its leader, Fethullah Gülen, who stands accused

law for more than two years until late 2018. As result, more than 80,000 citizens were held under arbitrary detention, and around 200,000 government officials were sacked from their jobs, while the state legitimised its actions using the rhetoric of conspiracy and the war on terror. These events caused painful setbacks for the oppo-

ity Party (SP). Alternatively, they faced the AKP-led "People's Alliance," with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in a cross-ideological frame-work created as a consequence of extreme political polarisation's around the figure of Erdogan. Evaluating the results of the Turkish elections can be challenging due to government control over



of orchestrating the coup by establishing a "deep state" from the movement loyal members. With the controls over the media, the state institutions, and the judiciary system, the Turkish government oppressed the opposition systematically, and governed under the "state of emergency"

sition and forced them to reorganise and overcome differences. joining forces in May 2018 in within the framework of "Nation Alliance", which comprises four main opposition parties, namely: The Republican People's Party (CHP), Democrat Party (DP), the Good party (İYİ), the Felic-

media as well as the political environment, including through repressive practices on political rivalries. Voter turnout in these elections exceeded 80% (according to official numbers), which can be considered a positive sign of the public's awareness of the importance of these elections.



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Yet, it is paramount to ask what kind of political influence would these opposition parties have on their regions, if policies are held hostage by the central government and President Erdogan? The question has yet to be answered. The opposition was able to capitalise on the AKP's domestic failures, and the economic situation was the

bank. Moreover, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) suffered a 3% recession, in the worst performance of the last decade. Adding to the difficulty, the Syrian refugee crisis is considered an increasing burden on the economy and the cohesion of society. The opposition has consistently criticised the policy towards Syrian refugees. Turkey has been

constitute the main political vision of the İYİ party led by, Meral Akşener, which is the second biggest party of the Nation Alliance. On the international level, also concerning Syria, the head of the Republican People's party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, showed more commitment to the idea of establishing communication channels with the Syrian regime and

have always been a reflection of governance popularity, and Turkey's ability to project vibrancy democratic culture. Indeed, Erdoğan was a beneficiary of Turkey's democratic processes— his 1994 victory in the mayor elections of Istanbul gave him an advantage in developing an ideological platform that has come to impact an entire generation. Now, this formal stronghold of Erdoğan punished him sharply. Despite the looming challenges, administering Istanbul and other major cities can constitute a momentous opportunity for the opposition to prove to the public that they can provide a stable replacement to the current regime.

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The Euro-Gulf Information Centre is committed to monitor the events inside Turkey due to their relevance regionally and internationally. Turkey remains a pivotal actor in NATO— theoretically representing European security interest— and the wider middle east including the Levant and the Arab Gulf. Changes to Turkey's leadership will deeply affect alliances in and behind the region and assessing turkey remains a key task for EGIC.

BY AHMAD SAS



main reason for AKP punishment at the ballot box: the increasing cost of living and rising unemployment drove the results. Turkey economy is trying to recover from the Lira crisis, which lost more than 30% of its value against the dollar (USD), due to concerns over an ongoing diplomatic dispute with the United States and doubts of the independence of the central

the main destination for Syrians and is now hosting more than 3.5 million refugees fleeing the civil war and government persecutions. The Turkish opposition used the Syrian refugee crisis to practice political pressure and gain voters through promises of repatriations and the withdrawal of Turkish citizenship from Syrian refugees who gained it. Such measures

supports the efforts of Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad, to "preserve Syrian territorial integrity and stop the bloodshed". This position, which contrasts President Erdogan's strategy, has gained increased popularity among voters. Such pressure forced Erdogan to make the electoral promise to solve the Syrian crisis; a promise which is very difficult to keep. Local elections

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# REBUILDING SOCIETY IN SYRIA

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set of meetings had the primary task of creating proposals addressing issues related to a post-war political transition period and the establishment of a collective presidential council. With these first proposals being agreed on by the representatives, other meetings followed in mid-2017. During these meetings many individuals were representing different social groups, notably Sunnis and Alawites (the two main groups represented), in addition to others (Christians, Druze and Kurds). Due to security reasons and the sensitivity of the issues, meetings were held behind closed doors. Many participants of these meetings did not, and do not, want to be publicly identified. However, some people's identities were eventually revealed including: Mulham al-Shabali (Al-Fawara tribe), Sheikh Amir al-Dandal (Al-Aqaidat tribe), Aounein al-Jarba (Shamar tribe), Mustafa Kiyali (National Bloc in Aleppo-Idlib) and various Alwaite figures from Tartus, Homs and Latakia. When the initiative landed in Berlin, in 2017, it was sponsored and mediated by an independent German institution. In that context, the dialogue reached a

new level and the parties agreed on a document containing 11 Articles on coexistence policies to rebuild Syrian civil society. Intentionally leaked to the public before the peace talks in Sochi the beginning of 2018, the document is titled a Code of Conduct for a Joint Syrian Life and the best definition of it would be a social contract, which should guide the Syrian people into the future of peace and coexistence. The goal of the leak was to influence the official talks and to offer them an alternative in terms of negotiating options. However, ultimately the impact was minimal. The document's first Article stressed the importance of the unity of the Syrian territory and building a society where there are no conquerors or conquered. This is more of a wish or a vision for the future as, arguably, the reality will be quite different. Article five then highlights the importance of accountability, but not for the purpose of revenge and not in the terms of collective punishment, i.e. the group should not be held responsible for the crimes of the individual and vice versa. While this too might not be realistic, it is noteworthy that these concepts have

been put forward. The subsequent Article 6 then talks about the right of every Syrian to compensation of property destroyed, stolen or misplaced due to the conflict. The same Article also mentions the right of every citizen to return to the place of residence prior to the war. It is recognised, in this particular article, that the Syrian society varies on the different aspects, be it religious, tribal or cultural and Article 9 points out that society should not be politicised on these bases, while the right of the individual to belong to any particular group should be protected. Overall, the document aims to protect a common Syrian heritage and identity, rights and freedoms of individual, while guaranteeing equality for all and the humanitarian rights of those affected by the conflict. Why is it important to rebuild society level in Syria? While many focus on military dimension of Syria's civil war, a separate but related conflict is being waged on the societal front. Since Syria consists of many religious and tribal groups, who have lived along side each other for centuries, solutions must reflect such dynamics. In religious terms, the country's largest group are Sunni Muslims (re: 50-70% of the population). Internally they comprise of Arab majority, but also include Kurds and Turkmen. The second largest religious group are Shia Muslims (re: 10-15% of the population), which includes Alawites, Twelvers and Ismailis. Christians are the third biggest religious group (re:

around 10% of the social fabric). Syria's Christians groups include Orthodox, Catholic and Maronite sects. Finally fourth religious group Syria's populations are the Druze, accounting for around 3% percent of the population. While current numbers of the ethnic and religious make-up of Syria are unavailable since, many people fled or died as a result of the conflict. Before the war, however, some 21 million people lived in Syria. These millions coexisted in strict socio-political structures entrenched in the country's own political history. Syria gained independence from the France mandate in 1946 when it became a parliamentary republic. After a number of coups, which happened throughout the following 24 years, the country eventually turned into an autocratic semi-presidential republic, where the regime draws its support from the military. In the last internal coup of 1970, Hafez Al-Assad, who was Minister of Defence at that time, overthrew his comrades and became President of the country. With strengthened powers granted by the 1973 constitution, Hafez Al-Assad replaced all the important military and Ba'ath Party officials with loyalists from the ranks of the Alawite sect, the sect to which Al-Assad family belongs. Ever since, the ruling elite mostly consists of Alawites, over the subsequent decades the dissatisfaction of the Sunni population grew as the Al-Assad regime continued to favour the minorities over the Sunni ma-



majority in terms of both political civil and economic rights. In the second part of the 1970s an opposition, led by the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, rose against the regime. The opposition escalated at the beginning of the 1980s, when the army suppressed two uprisings in the city of Hama, in what later became known as the Hama massacres of 1981 and 1982. After the massacres, the regime made sure that any opposition was brutally suppressed. This continued even after Hafez Al-Assad's death, with his

son Bashar al-Assad, who oscillated between a reformist agenda and a security-centred approach to governance. By reconsidering this background, it is obvious that the conflict which erupted in 2011, would put the Sunni majority against the Alawite minority, with other minorities caught in the middle. The current conflict has deep roots in Syrian history. To ultimately produce a stable, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious Syria, structural changes and a deepening of societal engagement must

take centre stage. The latest talks in Berlin were, as the previous ones, moderated by a Syrian constitutional expert, Dr Nassif Naim, who is currently residing in Germany. During the latest talks, the representatives agreed on a statement that the country must be free from any form of foreign military presence. This once again is another example of an ideal vision rather than a probable reality for the upcoming years. Delegates also agreed to form a Council to implement the Code of Conduct for a Joint

Syrian Life Agreement. They further selected three spokesmen, who will present the document both inside and outside Syria. The statements and ideas agreed at these meetings represent noble visions for the future of Syria's society. Unfortunately the reality will be quite different as the meetings lack any kind of political backing or support from within the Syrian political scene. The only support they received was from the European countries which hosted the initiative and, even there, the support was received through Non-Governmental Organizations and civil society institutions rather than through official channels. Therefore, the question that arises is whether this project can succeed? Shy of a crystal ball it is impossible to tell. However, with a regime claiming military victory and heavy advancing narratives laden with sectarian rhetoric Syria's civil society may be the wars final victim.

*By ONDŘEJ NOVÁK*

## IRAN'S DEZFUL BALLISTIC MISSILES

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Lebanon which are supported by Iran (Quds Force, Hezbollah.) According to military experts, Dezful missiles were adjusted to be smaller and lighter than the previous generation, liquid-fuelled "Qiam" missile. This gives them the advantages of easily transportation to conflict zones and to operate more efficiently on the battlefields, with an increased range, enabling them to target both Saudi and the Emirati territories. The surface-to-surface Dezful ballistic missiles

are the latest member of the Fateh-110 family, with a range of 1000 km. These atmospheric-skip missiles are similar to the Zolfaghar 700km ranged ballistics, with an increase of 43% of its range. Such improvements illustrate Iran's commitment to support its proxy militias with strategic weapons. Reports highlight that the Houthi rebels and the Iran-backed militia in Iraq have already received these missiles from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

IRGC relies on improving its ballistic arsenal for a symmetrical projection purposes. The strategy is to guarantee range spheres over the entire Middle East. With a particular focus on GCC states and Israel. The qualitative shift that the Dezful missiles illustrate will likely increase the hostility of Iran-backed militias and will decrease the chances of diplomatic solutions in the main regional flashpoints which Tehran is involved in. Against the backdrop of the US can-

cellation of waivers for courtiers importing Iranian oil, it is clear that pressure is mounting on the Islamic republic, to end its paramilitary activities in the Middle East. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, Iran nuclear deal) didn't take special measures against Iran ballistic missile program. Given the scoop and danger these missiles pose, perhaps it should have.

*By AHMAD SAS*

# THE REPORT

## Book Launch

### L'Islam Italiano

The event was held on April 17 2019 at the EGIC HQ in Rome. More information are available at [www.egic.info](http://www.egic.info)

On 17 April 2019, the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) hosted Fabrizio Ciocca, an independent sociologist who has focused his studies on multi-ethnic urban systems who presented his latest book “L’Islam Italiano: Un’indagine tra religione, identità e islamofobia.” The book focuses on defining the identity, the aspirations and the main issues affecting Muslim communities across Italy. The book’s research is based on primary sources and on a comprehensive statistical analysis of the data collected by the author, relating mainly on Facebook and other social networks. The event, moderated by Arabpress blogger Beatrice Tauro, comes at a time in which right wing populist parties are increasingly popular across the EU as they campaign against migration flows while constructing a correlation between migration and islamisation. The author argues that Italy’s Muslim communities has unique characteristics, compared to other European Muslim communities, which justify and ad hoc study. This comes as part of EGIC’s efforts to build cultural bridges and enhance mutual understanding among people of different backgrounds. Italy’s Muslim community is characterised by two overarching features. The first one is the reduction of foreign Muslims as the children of Muslim migrants apply to obtain the Italian

citizenship. The second is the absence of a dominant community originating from a single country as it is the case in France, where Muslims are overwhelmingly from Algeria and the rest of the Maghreb region, Germany, characterised by

Most local and national institutions within Italy are reluctant to provide space and facilities for Muslim worshippers. Italy is currently home to a population of 2.5 million Muslims, making it Italy’s second most followed religion.

**Fabrizio Ciocca** is a Sociologist at Sapienza University of Rome; Scholar of migratory phenomena, he is author of several articles and essays on Islamic communities in Italy.



a large Turkish community, or the United Kingdom where Muslims of Pakistani origins are clearly the majority. While on the one hand, this facilitates integration, on the other it does not allow Italian Muslims to speak with one voice and to engage institutions ef-

Despite that, to date only 6 mosques have been built in the entire national territory. As a result, Italian Muslims find that practising their religion is increasingly problematic. According to Ciocca, practical difficulties in everyday life add to a general sense of discrimination

perceived by young Italian Muslims. Islamophobia has undoubtedly been on the rise in the West and across Europe since the 9/11/2001 attacks. Societal hostility, in turn, pushed second generation Muslims away from state institutions and to seek for other sources of identity such as religion and culture. As such, religion is likely to play a crucial role in the life of young European Muslims, at least for the foreseeable future. To date, Italy has not yet been fertile ground for the rise of violent grass-roots Islamophobic organisations such as the ones carrying out attacks targeting Muslims in France and in the United Kingdom. However, arguably, this is partially due to the fact that Italy’s Muslim population is currently very small compared to other major European countries. As the number of Italian Muslims is set to increase, there are some major points of contention that should be addressed to ensure societal cohesion in the years to come. Firstly, Italy’s legal system lacks specific legislation to prosecute cases of Islamophobia. Secondly, schools and universities are now experiencing unprecedented levels of discrimination while lacking the prep-

aration to limit and confront the phenomena. Arguably, the most problematic points of contentions are related to a the difficulties to obtain Italy's citizenship. It is a complicated and lengthy bureaucratic process. Furthermore, the Italian state does not grant the birth-right citizenship. This applies to all who migrated to Italy from outside the Eu-

ropean Union (EU), overwhelmingly from Muslim majority countries. All societal studies demonstrate that Italian Muslims are better integrated than Muslims who live in Italy without EU citizenship. This is related to the fact that citizenship implies a series of rights and duties which make individuals feel part of the wider society, inde-

pendently from their religious beliefs.

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre, through its analyses, conferences and cultural events is constantly working at building a network of experts in relevant fields with the ultimate goal of contributing guidance to policymakers for effective cross-regional and international peace building. This

book launch, constitutes a relevant example of how current national and international challenges such as national integration should be addressed. Social and cultural progress often paves the way for future concrete cooperation between local minorities and the State.

By ANTONINO OCCHIUTO

## THE MONITOR

### Militias in and against the Kingdom of Bahrain

#### Part II

*Part I is available at [www.egic.info/mapping-militia-bahrain-part-one](http://www.egic.info/mapping-militia-bahrain-part-one)*

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: Hezbollah Bahrain; Saraya al-Ashtar; Saraya al-Mukhtar; February 14 Coalition; The Resistance Brigades; Harakat Ahrar Bahrain.

Building on the first monitoring segment which identified and presented Hezbollah Bahrain and the Saraya al-Ashtar, this segment focuses on the Saraya al-Mukhtar and February 14 Coalition as a way to better understand the dynamic and multidimensional terrorist challenge that Bahrain faces from Iran and its proxies.

#### **SARAYA AL-MUKHTAR (THE MUKHTAR BRIGADE)**

The Saraya al-Mukhtar, is

among the most pronounced of the Iran-backed paramilitary organisations operating in Bahrain and has grown in both efficiency and potency since its first public declaration of war against Bahrain's government, its police forces, civil society members that work with the government and Saudi Arabian military forces on 26 September 2013 (via a Facebook statement). Saraya al-Mukhtar's strategic goal is to depose Bahrain's government which it announced in November 2013 with a threat to 'crush the fascist regime.' This strategic orientation is meant to pave the way for Iranian intervention and direct rule of Bahrain. In other words, Saraya al-Mukhtar intends for Bahrain to be a province of the Islamic Republic and its tactics are meant to punish Bahraini citizens, threaten the



national government and 'open the door' for Iran's revolutionary guards to enter Bahrain. The group's rhetoric is — decidedly — more pronounced than its capabilities and its modus operandi tends towards

deploying very crude improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and arson attacks. It seems to leave most of the actual violence to its sister-organisations (re: Hezbollah). Saraya al-Mukhtar does excel at one area and



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has advanced cyber-terrorism capabilities that is used to both radicalise young men to their cause and generate high definition terrorist propaganda materials for themselves and their affiliates. It is tech and social media savvy and maintains Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram accounts which air footage of attacks and as platforms for individual terrorists to claim and/or praise terrorist attacks. For instance, al-Mukhtar praised the Al-Ashar bombing of Bahraini police on 3 March 2014, and in October 2017, the group praised a terrorist attack on the Khalifa bin Salman highway near Manama (which killing one police officer and wounded eight) which was carried out by sister-radical group Saraya Waad Allah. The statement read that: ‘The Islamic Resistance in Bahrain – Saraya al-Mukhtar – congratulates our comrades in Saraya Waad Allah in their proper and blessed operation which tasted the enemies of God...who have long been tormented by our resistant people and the oppressed.’ Steeped in radicalised rhet-

oric, Saraya al-Mukhtar is the mouthpiece of nearly all Iran-backed militias in Bahrain and perceives itself as ‘soldiers’ contributing to the larger regional conflict between Shia-Sunni sectarianism fuelled by Iran’s revisionist ambitions. In February 2014, the group posted on Facebook that: ‘The cause of the people in the Eastern Region [of Saudi Arabia] and our defense is one... Resistance against Saudi occupation, our taklif, and our fate are united.’ Such anti-Saudi rhetoric, which is a part of Tehran’s revolutionary narrative, is commonly adopted by most of Iran’s regional proxies. Additionally, Saraya al-Mukhtar is increasing its capabilities in advanced hacking efforts aimed at producing propaganda, generating and distributing fake-news, sowing confusion in Bahrain and the wider region and, crucially, attacking critical infrastructure and official government platforms. Saraya al-Mukhtar hacked Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa’s, Twitter account in June 2017. It is also worth



noting that, in February 2018, Saraya al-Mukhtar claimed that fighters who were buried in Qom — Iranian state media publicised funeral ceremonies for ‘three martyrs of the Bahraini people’s resistance’ — belonged to its network. According to Amir Toumaj and Caleb Weiss, this appears to be the first instance that Iran has publicly buried Bahraini militants on its soil.

#### **FEBRUARY 14 YOUTH COALITION (Y14F)**

Since its 2011 emergence, February 14 Youth Coalition is possibly the most publicly known radical anti-government group in Bahrain. Over time, Y14F has transformed into a paramilitary organisation and become a “flagship” for an assortment of Iran-backed organisations active in Bahrain. Due to its sophisticated online presence, the group has also been recognised as an influential clandestine “cyber group.” The group got its name after the so-called ‘Day of Rage,’ — the day marking the beginning of anti-government riots on 14 February 2011. Y14F played a central role

in organising and inciting violent protests during the attempted coup—which was, in fact, orchestrated by Tehran. Y14F views Bahrain’s government as illegitimate and accuses the it of collaborating with Saudi Arabia as ‘foreign occupiers.’ According to the findings of Philip Smyth, Y14F draws parallels between Saudi Arabia and Israel in order to delegitimise Saudi Arabia’s leadership. Y14F accused both countries of using the same techniques of occupation and attempted to link the causes of Palestinians and Bahraini demonstrators. According to information available to Bahrain’s authorities, Y14F members frequently travel between Iran, Iraq and Lebanon to obtain financial support, political guidance as well as weapons training. Saeed Abdunabi al-Shahabi — a radical politician who played a key role in organising the 2011 uprisings — has been identified as being responsible for coordination between Y14F and Iranian leaders and for leading the Iran-backed coalition in Bahrain from abroad. Iran has been



openly supportive of Y14F activities—in the past Iranian media expressed support for the “revolutionary activities” of the Bahraini group. Hadi al-Mudaressi, a leading Shia cleric living in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala, has been identified as the group’s spiritual leader providing ‘divisive sectarian support to the organisation.’ The group maintains vivid presence on social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram) and operates an official website [www.14f2011.com](http://www.14f2011.com), where it posts vid-

eos and reports regarding their activities, projects and also news about operations conducted by affiliated groups such as Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha’biya. In their ‘Pearl Charter,’ Y14F claims that the ‘revolution in Bahrain is a continuation of a more than two centuries long struggle...’ In other words, since Bahrain regained its independence from 45 years of Iranian proxy-rule. The self-declared ‘Coalition of the Youth of February 14 Revolution,’ — the site continues — ‘vows to con-

tinue on the path of struggle and revolutionary action.’ As one of its ‘Principles of the Revolution,’ Y14F refuses ‘all forms of foreign intervention from Saudi Arabia or any other country, whether direct military intervention or indirect moral, financial or diplomatic support of the despotic regime and perceive such intervention as illegal occupation that must be driven out.’ Such statements demonstrate the group’s double standards: while it perceives any foreign intervention, direct or indi-

rect, as an act of violation of Bahrain’s sovereignty, it accepts all aid and support available by the Islamic Republic and its proxies. For example, in February 2018, Bahraini authorities detained four suspects affiliated with Y14F who were trained in Iran by a Revolutionary Guard unit and provided with the materials needed to launch a bomb attack on the Saudi Aramco infrastructure in November 2017.

By LUCIE ŠVEJDOVÁ

## THE PROFILE

### Kingdom of Bahrain

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Bahrain is an island country consisting of a small archipelago situated between the Qatar peninsula and the north eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, to which it is connected by the 25-kilometre (16 mi) King Fahd Causeway. Bahrain is the third-smallest nation in Asia after the Maldives and Singapore and the smallest nation in the Arab world. In the late 1800s, following a series of treaties with the British, Bahrain became a

protectorate of the United Kingdom. It reaffirms its full sovereignty in 1971 and was declared a Kingdom in 2002. The island Kingdom is ruled by the Al Khalifa dynasty as a constitutional monarchy. The Kingdom is governed by a civil legal system. During the years of reduced hydrocarbon exports, Bahrain has worked to diversify its economy and has emerged as a major financial hub for the

region. It has also developed a major tourism sector and is a key producer of aluminium for the region. In mid-2018, Bahrain announced the discovery of the Al Khaleej oil field which contains some 80 billion barrels of shale oil. Bahrain is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, the Arab League, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the World Trade Organization.

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**The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) is an initiative that aims to build social, political, strategic, cultural and economic bridges between the people of Europe and the Arabian Gulf.**

While the EGIC was only formed on 01 October 2015 as a legal association in Rome, Italy, it draws on the expertise of a multitude of scholars, policy makers, economists and members of European and Gulf civil societies to enhance inter-regional relations.

The EGIC has tasked itself with 5 activities over the short, medium and long terms:

- **Publishing Hub**—the first objective of the Centre is to act as a publishing hub on information related to the wider Arabian Gulf. This entails the launching of a new journal (re: The Arabian Gulf), book series, policy papers and newsletters. Literature will be made available in several languages (Arabic, English, Italian, German, French and several of the Slavonic languages) and be done in both hard and soft copy formats.
- **Seminars, Conferences and Roundtables**—in order to continue to attract attention for the Centre, a series of seminars, conferences and roundtable discussions will take place on a regular basis.
- **Specialised Certificate, Internships and Scholarship Programmes**—the EGIC will begin a targeted certificate programme for university-aged students, run as Spring Schools. Themes will vary, but stay related to European-Arabian Gulf dynamics. Also, the EGIC will also offer a 3 month internship based on the European ERASMUS Programme. This programme will focus on building the skill-set required of a socio-political organisation and includes: organisational, writing, presentation and innovative thinking skills. Finally, the EGIC will offer monthly and annual scholarships for research on Arabian Gulf-related topics.
- **Cultural Events**—the EGIC strives to offer a comprehensive cultural platform to expose the people of Europe and the Gulf to each other's cultural rites, rituals, festivals and writings. From book launches, poetry readings, talks, films and cookery, the EGIC aims to bring people together.
- **Web and Tech**—the EGIC has adopted a tech-savvy approach that entails the use of high-tech platforms to generate an interactive platform beyond the physical boundaries of the EGIC headquarters. All EGIC research and events will be made Open Access and the deployed technologies will reflect this approach.

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