



# Mapping Militias in the Middle East

## Militias Operating in and against the Kingdom of Bahrain Part II

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### Introduction

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 Saraya al-Mukhtar
- 4 February 14 Coalition
- 5 The Resistance Brigades
- 6 Harakat Ahrar Bahrain.

Building on the first monitoring segment (available [here](#)) 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).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For full report on Saraya al Mukhtar see: *Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Mukhtar: A Bahraini Militant Group with Regional Goals*, available on: <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-mukhtar-a-bahraini-militant-group-with-regional-goals/>

Saraya al-Mukhtar's strategic goal is to depose Bahrain's government which it announced in November 2013 with a threat to 'crush the fascistic regime.'<sup>2</sup> 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 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.'*<sup>4</sup>

Steeped in radicalised rhetoric, 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.'*<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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2 Quoted in: *Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Mukhtar: A Bahraini Militant Group with Regional Goals*, available on: <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-mukhtar-a-bahraini-militant-group-with-regional-goals/>

3 Video available on: <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-mukhtar-a-bahraini-militant-group-with-regional-goals/>

4 Quoted in Caleb Weiss, *Bahrain blames "Iran-trained" cell for deadly bombing*, available on: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/bahrain-blames-iran-trained-cell-for-deadly-bombing.php>

5 Quoted in: *Hizballah Cavalcade: Saraya al-Mukhtar: A Bahraini Militant Group with Regional Goals*, available on: <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/06/hizballah-cavalcade-saraya-al-mukhtar-a-bahraini-militant-group-with-regional-goals/>

6 See: *Bahrain: Foreign minister's twitter account hacked*, available on

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.<sup>7</sup>

### 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 counties of using the same techniques of occupation and attempted to link the causes of Palestinians and Bahraini demonstrators.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Iran has been openly supportive of Y14F activities—in the past Iranian media expressed support for the “revolutionary activities” of the Bahraini group.<sup>11</sup> Hadi al-Mudaressi, a leading Shia cleric living in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala, has been iden-

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/bahrain-foreign-minister-twitter-account-hacked-170603145615713.html>

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed report see: **AMIR TOUMAJ & CALEB WEISS, *Bahraini militants buried in Iran*, available on:**

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/bahraini-militants-buried-in-iran.php>

<sup>8</sup> For a full report see: Philip Smyth, *Hizballah Cavalcade: Bahrain’s Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha’biya: Militants of the February 14 Youth Coalition*, available here:

<http://jihadology.net/2014/03/15/hizballah-cavalcade-bahraains-saraya-al-muqawama-al-shabiya-militants-of-the-february-14-youth-coalition/>

<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in: Philip Smyth, *Hizballah Cavalcade: Bahrain’s Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha’biya: Militants of the February 14 Youth Coalition*, available here:

<http://jihadology.net/2014/03/15/hizballah-cavalcade-bahraains-saraya-al-muqawama-al-shabiya-militants-of-the-february-14-youth-coalition/>

<sup>10</sup> For further details read: *Bahrain swoops on opposition youth group*, available on: <http://www.mei.edu/content/bahrain-swoops-opposition-youth-group>

<sup>11</sup> Mentioned by Philip Smyth, *Hizballah Cavalcade: Bahrain’s Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha’biya: Militants of the February 14 Youth Coalition*, available here: <http://jihadology.net/2014/03/15/hizballah-cavalcade-bahraains-saraya-al-muqawama-al-shabiya-militants-of-the-february-14-youth-coalition/>

tified as the group's spiritual leader providing 'divisive sectarian support to the organisation.'<sup>12</sup> 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 videos and reports regarding their activities, projects and also news about operations conducted by affiliated groups such as Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha'biya.<sup>13</sup> 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 continue on the path of struggle and revolutionary action.'<sup>14</sup>

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.'<sup>15</sup> Such statements demonstrate the group's double standards: while it perceives any foreign intervention, direct or indirect, 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

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12 For further details read: *Bahrain swoops on opposition youth group*, available on: <http://www.mei.edu/content/bahrain-swoops-opposition-youth-group>

13 See the group's official website: <http://14f2011.com/ar>

14 Available for download in English, Russian and Arabic on: <http://14f2011.com/ar/meethaq>

15 Quoted in Y14F charter, available: <http://14f2011.com/files/MethaqEN.pdf>

16 Read, for example: Bahrain arrests alleged militants behind 'Iranian-supported' Saudi Aramco pipeline attack, available: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/2/7/iran-accused-of-training-bahrain-saudi-oil-pipeline-attack-militants>