

Bahrain as a Sunni-Shia Fault Line

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Bahrain has been in turmoil since a 2011 uprising backed by majority Shia Muslims, supported by Iran, which demanded greater rights from the Sunni-led monarchy. The government crushed the protests with the help of its Sunni Arab Gulf allies. Sporadic violence and bomb attacks largely aimed at Bahraini security forces have become the norm since 2011.¹

The Bahraini government has often accused Iran of meddling in its internal affairs and trying to lure its Shi'ite population (60% Shia) towards Tehran's ideals.

Bahrain officials also believe that Iran is providing weapons, funding, and training to Bahraini insurgents through the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.²

Bahrain's Ministry of Interior announced on May 23, 2017 that, in an operation carried out by security forces in al-Diraz village, 286 suspects were arrested on terrorism charges and five were killed. Many of the detainees were hiding in the home of Sheikh Issa Qassim, a leading Shia spiritual leader, in the village. Diraz is located in the northwest of the main island and has an estimated population of 20-30,000, most of them Shi'a Muslims.³

The Diraz Operation (2017)

Security forces were operating on intelligence information about terrorist organizations in the area. The Ministry of Interior said that 48 hours prior to the operation on the village of Diraz, the Interior Ministry had engaged with community leaders in an attempt to communicate with those responsible in order to resolve the situation peacefully. Security forces, while removing an illegal roadblock in the area, came under direct attack by a large number of assailants using firebombs, knives, and axes. The attack resulted in severe injuries to 31 officers.⁴

The head of Bahrain's public security, Tariq al-Hassan, affirmed that his department would firmly confront any illegal gatherings, stressing that the security operation was aimed at arresting wanted persons and calling on citizens and residents to abide by instructions from security authorities.⁵

Bahrain's Ministry of Interior noted that among those arrested in Diraz were ten Shi'ite terrorist convicts who had escaped in a January 2017 prison break. Two of these escapees were killed in February 2017 when their boat was intercepted en route to Iran. Others are believed to have reached Iran, but as many as four were considered to be still at large.

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Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Jordan have voiced their support to efforts by Bahraini authorities to preserve the country's security and stability in the wake of a targeted security operation in the region of Diraz.

The Diraz Incident (2016) and Sheikh Issa Qassim

On June 20, 2016, Bahrain stripped Sheikh Issa Qassim of Bahraini nationality, following a request from the Interior Ministry. A statement by the Ministry claimed that Qassim had endorsed "the theory of theocracy" and had used his sermons to serve foreign interests, an apparent reference to Iran. In addition, the statement claimed that he had played a key role in creating an "extremist" sectarian atmosphere and working to divide Bahraini society and, in doing so, had harmed the supreme interests of the country. After the decision was announced, several hundred Qassim supporters gathered outside his house in the mostly Shia village of Diraz, carrying posters and chanting religious slogans.⁶

In response, police established blockades closing off most of the roads leading into and out of Diraz, and only persons with a Diraz address on their ID could enter the village.⁷ All major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) enforced a daily Internet blackout on Diraz but the blackouts also affected the surrounding villages.⁸

Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia group, said the decision to strip Sheikh Issa Qassim of Bahraini nationality would have "grave consequences", while Qassem Soleimani, the Commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, gave a warning of armed resistance to Bahrain's rulers. In a statement published by Fars news agency, Soleimani said: "The Al Khalifa [rulers of Bahrain] surely know their aggression against Sheikh Issa Qassim is a red line that crossing it would set Bahrain and the whole region on fire, and it would leave no choice for people but to resort to armed resistance. Al Khalifa will definitely pay the price for that and their blood-thirsty regime will be toppled."⁹

Al-Ashtar Brigades

Saraya al-Ashtar, also known as Al-Ashtar Brigades or AAB, claimed responsibility for more than 20 attacks in Bahrain, mainly against police officers and security forces. The name "Al-Ashtar" links the group to Malik al-Ashtar, a figure from early Islam revered by Shi'ites.¹⁰

AAB operates in cells of fewer than 10 young men overseen by emigre militants based in Iran. Recruited on religious pilgrimages or study trips to Iran, the suspects were given weapons and explosives training in Iran or neighboring Iraq. Iran denies the accusation.

AAB announced an alliance with the Iran-backed Hezbollah Brigades via an online statement in February 2017.

Murtada al-Sanadi

Bahrain security officials named the cleric, Murtada al-Sanadi Sanadi, as leader of AAB. Al-Sanadi has powerful allies in Iran, where he has lived since he went into exile in 2012. Bahrain accuses Sanadi of having organized deadly attacks against police and smuggling arms from Iran.

Bahraini authorities consider AAB to be the armed wing of the cleric, Murtada al-Sanadi's, Islamic Wafa Movement, a political party that is banned in Bahrain. In January 2017, Sanadi called on Bahrain's opposition to abandon mostly peaceful protests in public squares and to take up arms. "From today and hereafter, the period has changed. We in the Islamic Wafa Movement announce that we have begun a new phase as a tribute to the martyrs: one grip on the squares and one grip on the trigger!", he said in a speech in Qom.¹¹

Sanadi is the only official in his party to have eluded a long-term jail sentence, although he spent six months behind bars amid 2011 protests on rioting charges. Six months later he departed legally for Iran.

Murtada al-Sanadi and the United States

Murtada al-Sanadi has been named by the United States as a "specially designated global terrorist" backed by Iran. The US State Department put al-Sanadi on its proscribed "terrorist" list on March 17. His name appears alongside leaders in Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The US cited al-Sanadi's links to AAB, which it said "receives funding and support from the Government of Iran."¹²

The official Web site of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, published an editorial by al-Sanadi in December 2016 criticizing the US. Speaking to Iranian state TV channel, al-Alam, in March 2017, al-Sanadi said: "I'm proud that America considers me an enemy." While not commenting directly on the State Department's accusations, he said that the US was using "so-called terrorism and... an imaginary danger they claim is coming from the Islamic Republic of Iran" to sell arms to Gulf allies and maintain influence.

Iran and al-Sanadi

Iran's promotion of al-Sanadi appears to point to an endorsement of his agenda. Next to an Iranian flag, al-Sanadi delivered a sermon at Friday prayers in the country's most prestigious mosque in Qom in September, which is considered an exceptional honor.

Al-Sanadi also took to the main stage at a 2013 conference of Ahl al-Bayt, a Qom-based global fraternity of scholars founded by Khamenei in 1990. "We are truly thankful to the Iranians, especially the leader of all Muslims, Ayatollah Khamenei," al-Sanadi declared.

Iran's foreign ministry called Bahraini government accusations that Iran had any role in supporting al-Sanadi or AAB in violent acts "baseless and fabricated."¹³

AAB has claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks – some of which have resulted in casualties – mainly against police and security targets in Bahrain. In March 2014, AAB conducted a bomb attack that killed two local police officers and an officer from the United Arab Emirates. AAB targets the security services of Gulf countries, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The March 2014 Attack

AAB is responsible for the March 2014 attack that claimed the lives of Bahraini police officers, Ammar Abdu-Ali al-Dhalei and Mohammed Arslan Ramadhan as well as Emirati officer, First Lieutenant Tariq al-Shehhi. The three Bahraini perpetrators with links AAB were executed for their actions. The accused had planted a bomb and lured the police officers into a trap where one of the suspects then detonated the device from a distance using a mobile phone.¹⁴ The three policemen were part of security forces tasked with dispersing violent protesters in the village of Daih in March 2014 when the improvised bomb detonated, killing the men.¹⁵

Members of AAB were found to have been trained and armed by Iran and some of their most senior members have taken refuge in Iran, leading it to be considered a wholly Iranian proxy organization with aims that are hostile to Bahrain's security and sovereignty.¹⁶

State Department Terrorist Designations of AAB Members

The US State Department has designated Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGT) under Executive Order (E.O.) 13224, which imposes sanctions on foreign persons who have committed, or pose a serious risk of committing, acts of terrorism that threaten the security of US nationals or the national security, foreign policy, or economy of the United States. As a consequence of these designations, US persons are generally prohibited from engaging in transactions or dealings with Yusuf or Alawi, and all of their property and interests in property subject to United States jurisdiction is frozen. Alawi is affiliated with the Bahrain-based AAB. Yusuf is an Iran-based AAB senior member. AAB receives funding and support from the government of Iran – a state sponsor of terrorism.¹⁷

These actions follow a recent increase in militant attacks in Bahrain, where Iran has provided weapons, funding, and training to militants. This marks yet another step in our continued effort to aggressively target Iran's destabilizing and terrorism-related activities in the region. We will continue to stand with Bahrain in addressing these threats, even as we encourage the government to clearly differentiate its response to violent militia groups from its engagement with peaceful political opposition.¹⁸

Designations of terrorist individuals and groups expose and isolate organizations and individuals, and result in their denial of access to the US financial system. Moreover, such designations assist and complement law enforcement actions of other US agencies and other governments to counter terrorist groups and individuals.

Iranian news agencies have remained silent ever since the US government placed two AAB affiliates on its terrorist list.

Bahraini authorities welcomed the designation and viewed it as an acknowledgment of Iranian involvement with terror groups in Bahrain. In a statement, Bahrain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs praised the "positive and important decision" by the US, saying that its position reflects the country's determination to confront all forms of terrorism, and all those who support and sympathize with it.

Terrorism and Insurgency in Bahrain (2015 – 2017)

In September 2015, Bahrain's Interior Ministry said that it had seized 1.5 tons of high-grade explosives after it raided a warehouse in a residential district. Authorities said they arrested a number of individuals suspected of being responsible for assembling and concealing explosives on suspicion of having "terror" links with Iran and the Iraq-based militant group, Hezbollah.¹⁹

Since June 2015, the number and the sophistication of terrorist-related incidents in Bahrain have increased markedly. There are clear examples that Iran's fingerprints are all over the rise in tactical capabilities and increasingly advanced weapons systems in the possession of Bahraini Shia Islamist militants, and in the growing numbers of attacks.

On July 15, 2015, Bahrain's security forces seized a ship with arms smuggled from Iran. The ship had sailed out to international waters where it was met by a boat from Iran. Weapons were then passed to the Bahraini boat. The cargo included Kalashnikov type rifles with their serial numbers sanded off, more than 50 Iranian-made hand grenades, EFPs, Claymore type IEDs, hundreds of pounds of C4 plastic explosive, detonators, and a belt-fed machine gun.²⁰

In August 2015, the Bahraini Interior Ministry arrested five individuals suspected of conducting a bomb attack in Bahrain. It said they were connected, funded and trained by Iran's Revolutionary Guard and a militant group called "Hezbollah Brigades" in Iraq.²¹

Chief of Police, Major-General Tariq al-Hasan, said: "This significant discovery marks yet another disturbing incident in which relentless Iranian actions are attempting to undermine security and stability within Bahrain and the wider region," as quoted by the Bahraini state news agency.²²

In July 2016, a woman was killed and three children were wounded when a roadside bomb exploded south of Bahrain's capital, Manama.²³

In February 2017, a 29-year-old militant named Reda al-Ghasra was killed in a gun battle with Bahrain's security forces a few weeks after he had escaped from prison where he was serving a life sentence for terrorism.²⁴

At a wake in Iran's holy city of Qom in February 2017, a small group of Bahraini emigres and clerics mourned al-Ghasra. The eulogy was delivered by an exiled Bahraini cleric who has called for the island's Shi'ite Muslim community to uproot the monarchy in a jihad (holy war). In a statement online, the group hailed al-Ghasra as a "martyr commander" on his death. According to the security assessment, al-Sanadi tasked al-Ghasra with forming militant cells with Iranian help.²⁵

Al-Sanadi received funding from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and commissioned al-Ghasra to organize the military training of Bahraini militants in Iran by the IRGC and in Iraq by the Hezbollah Brigades militia.

Al-Sanadi spoke of his relationship with al-Ghasra in a communication to his followers on the Telegram messaging application, dated March 2017. "I found him a lover of (Shi'ites), ready for the highest sacrifice and dedicated to the choice of resistance."

Bahrain's Counter-Insurgency Measures

In May 2016, a Bahraini appeals court increased the jail sentence of Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of the country's main Shia opposition group, Al-Wefaq Society, from four to nine years on charges of inciting violence.²⁶

A month later, a Bahraini court issued an order suspending the activities of Al-Wefaq Society on charges of "terrorism, extremism, and violence" in the Kingdom.²⁷ Bahrain's Interior Ministry has frequently accused Al-Wefaq of maintaining ties with Iran.

On April 2017, a court in Bahrain jailed 36 people convicted of forming a "terrorist" group to attack police, and stripped them of their citizenship. Three of those sentenced received life terms, while the rest were jailed for between three and 10 years.²⁸

In May 2017, Bahrain enforced Law No. 12 of 2017, amending certain provisions of the Military Justice Law, which provides jurisdiction for the military judiciary to try crimes committed on premises and facilities under the control of the Bahrain Defense Force and its property or against its employees.²⁹

Summary

There is nothing new in Iran's subversive activity in various Middle Eastern countries aimed at exporting the Iranian Islamic revolution. The Arab Spring and the collapse of the old regional order, as well as the "nuclear deal" reinforced and accelerated this activity.

Iran is exploiting the Arab regimes' weakness, along with the decline of US influence and power projection in the region during the Obama administration, to aggressively promote its agenda, which centers on strengthening the Shia element in the Arab countries. The main change in Iran's policy is that its senior officials no longer fear voicing Iran's real intentions and have become open, blunt, and defiant in doing so.³⁰

The Bahraini government has often accused Iran of meddling in its internal affairs. On September 10, 2015 Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Khalifa urged Iran to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and said the Islamic Republic should stop what he described as “dualism” between its language and actions. He also called on Iran to revise its foreign policy.³¹

Bahrain is a member of the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthi rebels in Yemen, backed by Iran. Bahrain recalled its ambassador from Iran on October 2, 2015, a day after it said its security forces had discovered a large bomb-making factory and arrested a number of suspects linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guards.³²

Saudi Arabia is engaged in a region-wide struggle for power and influence with Iran, a struggle that, in turn, reflects the Sunni-Shia schism across the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia is accusing Iran of fueling unrest among Shias across the region, including among Saudi Arabia’s own 10% Shia minority. The internal conflict in Bahrain is part of the power struggle (the "Great Game") between the regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

President Trump's administration is determined to counter Tehran’s expanding influence in the Middle East and to reassure US allies that Washington will take their concerns about Iran’s foreign policy more seriously. The internal turmoil in Bahrain is far from over but with the Trump administration’s support for the al-Khalifa family, the rulers of Bahrain will be able to confront the Shia insurgency backed by Iran.

Notes

¹ Bahraini woman killed in roadside bomb attack, Al Jazeera, July 1, 2016.

² Simeon Kerr, Explosion in Bahrain raises tensions in Gulf, FT.com, March 4, 2014.

³ Bahrain: Five deaths of outlaws in al-Diraz village, Al Arabiya, May 24, 2017.

⁴ Obaid Al-Suhaymi , Arab States Voice Support to Bahrain in Security Operations, Asharq al Awsat, May 25, 2017.

⁵ Bahrain authorities arrest 286 wanted terrorists, Al Arabiya, May 24, 2017.

⁶ Bahrain strips Sheikh Issa Qassim of nationality, Al Jazeera, June 21, 2016.

⁷ Bahrain’s Diraz: A Community under Siege, Bahrain Observer, July 16, 2016.

⁸ Bahrain’s Diraz: A Community under Siege, Bahrain Observer, July 16, 2016.

⁹ Bahrain strips Sheikh Issa Qassim of nationality, Al Jazeera, June 21, 2016.

¹⁰ Ismaeel Naar, Al Arabiya, Who are the al-Ashtar Brigades, latest US-designated ‘terrorist group’? Al Arabiya, March 18, 2017.

¹¹ Noah Browning and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Shiite exiled cleric points to Iran’s strong interference in Bahrain, Al Arabiya, April 18, 2017.

¹² Noah Browning and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Shiite exiled cleric points to Iran’s strong interference in Bahrain, Al Arabiya, April 18, 2017.

¹³ Noah Browning and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Shiite exiled cleric points to Iran's strong interference in Bahrain, Al Arabiya, April 18, 2017.

¹⁴ After three executed in Bahrain, a look back into their deadly attack, Al Arabiya, January 16, 2017.

¹⁵ After three executed in Bahrain, a look back into their deadly attack, Al Arabiya, January 16, 2017.

¹⁶ Mohammed Al Sayed, a spokesperson for Citizens for Bahrain, told Al Arabiya English.

¹⁷ State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, March 17, 2017.

¹⁸ State Department Terrorist Designations of Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington, DC, March 17, 2017.

¹⁹ Bahrain says uncovers large bomb-making factory, Reuters, September 30, 2015.

²⁰ Phillip Smyth, After nuke agreement, blocking Iranian aggression in Bahrain, The Hill, September 28, 2015.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bahraini woman killed in roadside bomb attack, Al Jazeera, July 1, 2016.

²⁴ Noah Browning and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Shiite exiled cleric points to Iran's strong interference in Bahrain, Al Arabiya, April 18, 2017.

²⁵ Noah Browning and Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, Shiite exiled cleric points to Iran's strong interference in Bahrain, Al Arabiya, April 18, 2017.

²⁶ Bahrain ramps up opposition chief Ali Salman's sentence, Al Jazeera, May 30, 2016.

²⁷ Bahraini court suspends Al-Wefaq opposition group, Al Jazeera, June 14, 2016.

²⁸ Bahrain jails 36, strips them of citizenship, Al Arabiya, April 26, 2017.

²⁹ Bahrain: Military judiciary tries three terror suspects, Al Arabiya, May 10, 2017.

³⁰ Lt. Col. (ret.) Michael Segall, How Iran Views the Fall of Sana'a, Yemen: "The Fourth Arab Capital in Our Hands", Institute for Contemporary Affairs, November 3, 2014.

³¹ Staff writer, Bahrain: Iran explosives enough to destroy capital, Al Arabiya News, September 10, 2015.

³² Ibid.