



# Bahrain as an Arena for Iran Subversion and Terrorism

October 1, 2020

## Overview

- ▶ **Iran has been a permanent threat to the stability of the Bahraini regime since the country declared independence.** Iran's fundamental antagonism is based on a **combination of geopolitics, history and the Iranian regime's regional interests:** Bahrain is located in the heart of the Persian Gulf, where Iran seeks hegemony; the American army's largest naval base in the Persian Gulf is in Manama, the capital of Bahrain (where the Fifth Fleet is anchored); and Bahrain's internal politics are based on a Sunni minority ruling a Shi'ite majority which mostly has an Iranian orientation. Moreover, **Iran has historically aspired to annex Bahrain, claiming Bahrain is its "14<sup>th</sup> province,"** and claiming to have historical references.
- ▶ Since the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic revolutionary regime, **Bahrain has been a prime target for Iranian terrorism, subversion** and the export of the Islamic Revolution's ideology. **Some of Bahrain's Shi'ite population supported the Islamic Revolution** and were inspired to establish revolutionary organizations oriented towards Iran. In 1981 **the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) unsuccessfully attempted a coup in Bahrain.** More than 70 Shi'ite operatives were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment and many of them fled to Iran, from where they continued their subversive activities against the Bahraini regime.
- ▶ Since the failure of the coup there have been several waves of riots in Bahrain, accompanied by terrorist attacks which were **directed by and received support from Iran** in the form of money, weapons, training and propaganda. **Over the past decades the intensity of the riots and terrorism has had ups and downs,** influenced particularly by the effective preventive activities of the Bahrain security forces and support from Arab allies, especially **Saudi Arabia** (Bahrain's main political backer).
- ▶ The waves of Shi'ite protests and terrorist activities in recent years were the following:
  - ◆ **The 1990s:** Iran conducted extensive subversion activities through Hezbollah-Bahrain, the IFLB's military wing. They peaked in the capital city of Manama in **March**

**1996** with a wave of riots and attacks that destroyed property, including by burning hotels and stores, and killed dozens of civilians. The violence was accompanied by Iranian radio broadcasts calling for civil disobedience. The Bahraini security forces detained 44 Hezbollah-Bahrain operatives, who confessed they had been **trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Iran and by Hezbollah in Lebanon.**

◆ **The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:** After having been exposed, the Iranians focused their subversion on **supporting Shi'ite political organizations.** Several organizations were established, the most prominent of which was the **al-Wefaq National Islamic Society.** Its leader was **Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim,** Bahrain's senior Shi'ite cleric. **He lives in Iran, from where he orchestrates incitement and subversive activities.** The political organizations participated in Bahrain's parliamentary elections, but eventually some of them disintegrated or their representatives resigned.

◆ **2011, the year of the Middle Eastern regional upheaval (the "Arab Spring"):** Among the wave of protests that engulfed the Arab world were **the large Shi'ite protests in Bahrain (February 2011),** where demonstrators called for the overthrow of the al-Khalifa monarchy. The Bahraini security forces, supported by Bahrain's Arab allies, suppressed the protests. **In March 2011 the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF),** an Arab military force dominated by Saudi Arabia, was called to Bahrain's aid. The Force entered Bahrain with 1,200 soldiers from Saudi Arabia, 800 from the UAE and nominal forces from Kuwait and Qatar. The entrance of the forces was **a watershed moment influencing the relations between the Saudi Arabian-led Sunni world and the Iranian-led Shi'ites.**

◆ **Between 2001 and 2017:**

- Iran regarded the entrance of the PSF into Bahrain as **a threat to its regional interests that demanded a response.** However, the Iranians abstained from a military response and preferred instead, as usual, **to increase their subversive and terrorist activities against the Bahraini regime through proxy organizations.** The most prominent was the **al-Mukhtar Brigades;** others were the Popular Resistance Brigades, the al-Ashtar Brigades, the Wa'ad Allah Brigades and the Thaer Allah Brigades.

- **The organizations carried out hundreds of terrorist attacks** in Bahrain, most of them in the Shi'ite regions in the northern and eastern parts of the country. **Their operatives received support from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iranian-proxy Iraqi Shi'ite militias.** They usually attacked road blocks, police stations, military convoys, police patrol cars, jails and infrastructure facilities. **The attacks peaked in 2017 but tapered off and almost stopped in 2018.** In ITIC assessment, the attacks were ended by the intensive counterterrorism activity of the Bahraini security forces, which detained hundreds of operatives, seized weapons and exposed the connections between the terrorist organizations and Iran. In April 2019, 169 terrorist operatives of the aforementioned organizations were sentenced to long prison terms.

- **Between 2018 and 2020 Shi'ite protests declined, accompanied by a hiatus in terrorist organization activity.** That was mainly because the Bahraini security forces successfully prevented the activities of the Iranian-backed terrorist organizations. However, the civil disobedience of the Shi'ites did not end. The Shi'ites remain basically hostile to the Bahraini regime and Iran enjoys the support of many of them. That was evidenced by Bahraini Shi'ite participation in World Jerusalem Day, an annual event initiated by Iran, where demonstrators chanted slogans in support of Iran.

- In **September 2020** the Bahraini security forces exposed a terrorist network with the involvement of the al-Ashtar Brigades. The network was **handled by Bahrainis who had fled to Iran and by the IRGC.** The Bahraini operatives planned **attacks on senior officials and on security and economic installations and facilities** in Bahrain. The aim of the attacks was to avenge the American targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force. The announcement of the exposure was issued by the Bahraini ministry of the interior on September 20, 2020, a few days after the normalization of relations with Israel was declared. In ITIC assessment, the network had long been under surveillance and the timing of the exposure could have been linked to the normalization declaration, sending the message that security in Bahrain was under control.

► On **September 15, 2020**, normalization of Israel's diplomatic and economic relations with the UAE and Bahrain was declared in Washington. **Iran strongly condemned the normalization** and the IRGC publicly threatened the rulers of Bahrain. Shi'ite protests were held in Bahrain between September 16 and 18, 2020. The Iranian-backed Shi'ite organizations said in a statement that they were eager to fight the "Zionist entity" and to resist aggression [i.e., the United States]. The **Wa'ad Allah Brigades**, one of the Iranian proxy organizations, announced the establishment of the [so-called] **Martyrs of Jerusalem Brigades**, which would resist "**the Zionist presence in Bahrain.**" Hundreds of Bahraini clerics (all or most of them probably Shi'ite) signed an open letter claiming that Islam forbade normalization of relations with Israel.

In ITIC assessment, **the normalization agreement is liable to increase the motivation of Iran and its Shi'ite proxy organizations to turn the public threats into riots and attacks on the Bahraini regime** to disrupt the implementation of the agreement. **That may act as a catalyst for the renewal of Iranian-backed Shi'ite terrorist attacks in Bahrain** after three years of relative quiet.

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## Shi'ites in Bahrain: Overview

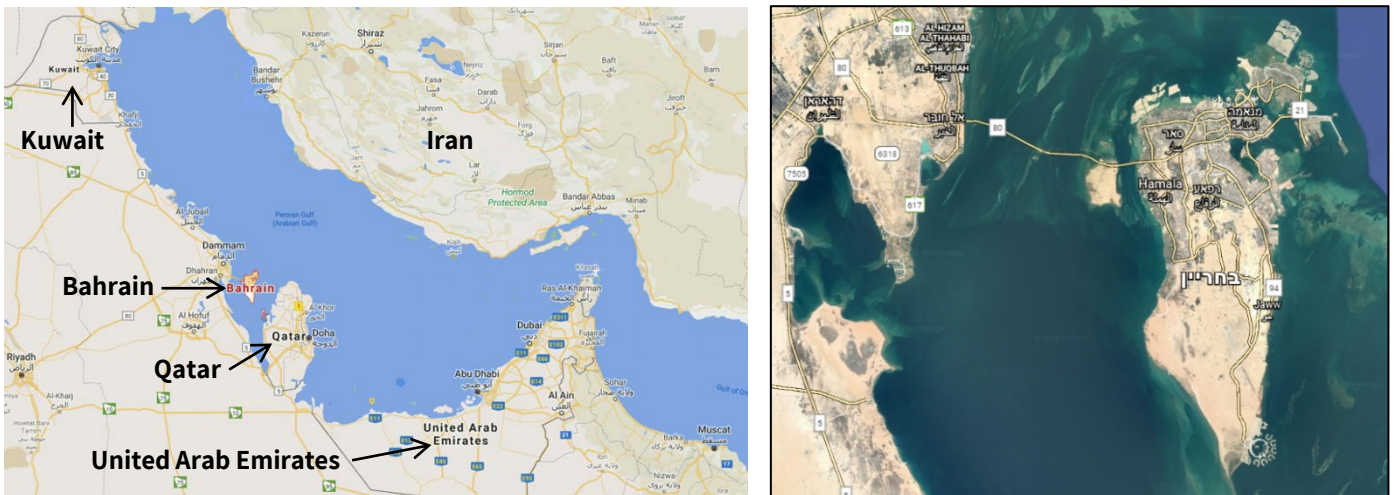
- ▶ **Islam came to Bahrain between May 629 and April 630 AD, the eighth year after the *hegira*.**<sup>1</sup> Muhammad sent an envoy to the region, which at that time was under Persian rule. The envoy convinced the local governor to convert to Islam and Bahrain adopted Shi'ite rather than Sunni Islam because of the good relations between the Banu Abdul Qays tribe, which had settled in what is now northern Bahrain, and the Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, the founding father of Shi'a.
- ▶ The **population of Bahrain is about 1.7 million people**, more than half of whom are foreigners. The majority of Bahraini citizens are Shi'ite, but in the absence of reliable, updated data, their numbers are uncertain and disputed. According to Western estimates, Shi'ites make up between **55% and 70%** of the Bahraini population. Inter-marriage is rare. The Shi'ites preserve their own separate identity (different religious customs, different dialect) and most of them live in the peripheral rural areas, far from the large cities. They are distributed throughout the country, however, and make up the majority in the western and northern provinces, and in Manama, the capital.
- ▶ When the Sunni al-Khalifa clan rose to power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century many Shi'ites, who had been property owners, were dispossessed and became farmers. The result was that generally speaking, today **the socio-economic status of most Shi'ites in Bahrain is far lower than that of the Sunni** and most of the senior positions in the country are held by Sunnis. Bahrain's political system neutralizes the power of the parliament and ensures the government will have a permanent majority through the automatic appointment to the parliament of unelected members.
- ▶ **The Shi'ites in Bahrain are systematically discriminated against by the Sunni regime.** They are subjected to political detention by police, security courts have been established to try Shi'ites, they are discriminated against by institutions of higher education and not allowed to celebrate Shi'ite holidays and events (Wikipedia in Arabic; Shi'ite website; al-Khaleej Online website, September 4, 2019). **Bahrain rejects the accusations** and claims its actions are designed **to protect national security from subversive Shi'ite terrorist groups, handled by Iran and seeking to overthrow the regime.**

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<sup>1</sup> The *hegira* marked Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina in AD 622, prompted by the opposition of the merchants of Mecca and marking the consolidation of the first Muslim community.

## Reasons for Iranian Antagonism to Bahrain

**Bahrain is a top Iranian target for terrorism and subversion<sup>2</sup>** and leading the Sunni monarchy to regard Iran as an **existential threat**. Relations between the two countries have been consistently tense and can be expected to worsen in the wake of Bahrain's normalization of diplomatic and economic relations with Israel (for Iran's reaction, see the **Appendix**). **Bahrain is located in the heart of the Persian Gulf,<sup>3</sup>** which is strategically important for Iran. In addition, **the majority of Bahrain's Shi'ite population identifies with Iran but is ruled by a Sunni regime** allied with Saudi Arabia, the leader of Iran's rival camp in the Arab-Muslim world.



Right: Bahrain (Google Earth). Left: The Persian Gulf (Google Maps).

► Bahrain's basic political, social, religious/sectarian and geographical attributes make it an attractive target for **Iranian subversion**, whose objective is to **overthrow the Sunni monarchy and institute an Iranian-backed Shi'ite regime**. However, there are several specific factors behind Iran's attempts to change Bahrain's regime and the country's identity. They include:

- ◆ **Iran's desire for hegemony over the Persian Gulf:** The Persian Gulf has **great strategic importance for Iran's security and economy**. Iran strives for **hegemony over it** and seeks to expel Iran's enemies, specifically the United States, the West, and Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies. Iran regards the Shi'ite communities in the Persian Gulf

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see the February 28, 2013 bulletin, "Bahrain as a Target Preferred by Iran for Terrorism and Subversion."

<sup>3</sup> Iran is very sensitive to the term occasionally used, "the Arab Gulf," and emphasizes that it is the **Persian Gulf**.

and neighboring countries, among them Bahrain, Yemen, southern Iraq and eastern Saudi Arabia, as possible **Iranian spheres of influence to advance its regional interests.**

◆ **The American military presence:** The largest **American naval base** in the Persian Gulf, home to the Fifth Fleet, **is in Bahrain.** Military operations supporting the American efforts in Iran and Afghanistan, and in defense of the Persian Gulf sea lanes, have been carried out from the base. The American military force can be expected to provide a response to the Iranian threat against Gulf countries and to threaten vital Iranian economic interests: most of Iran's commercial activity, including its oil exports, pass through the Straits of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. In addition, in Iranian perspective, the American force is liable, when the time comes, to be used by the United States and the West against Iran, as it was used in the past for the offensive against Saddam Hussein.



**Right: Aerial view of the Fifth Fleet's base in Bahrain (Google Earth). Left: Navy Support Activity (NSA) base in Bahrain (website of the United States Naval Forces Central Command, August 7, 2017).**

◆ **Bahrain's demography and politics:** Bahrain's Shi'ite majority is ruled by a monarchy supported by a Sunni minority. Iran regards the Shi'ite community in Bahrain (as it regards those in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen) as a natural target audience for the export of the Islamic Revolution, from where it might be able **to gain a sphere of influence and possibly control over Bahrain.**<sup>4</sup> Therefore, with the support of

<sup>4</sup> Successful Iranian subversion in Bahrain might leak into the Shi'ite community in eastern Saudi Arabia.



Hezbollah in Lebanon, Iran has been actively subverting the Shi'ite population in Bahrain, **including by using local terrorist proxy organizations to overthrow the monarchy**. Bahrain, on the other hand, regards itself as Arab and one of the Sunni forces led by Saudi Arabia, which heads the Arab camp opposing Iran's expansionist aspirations.

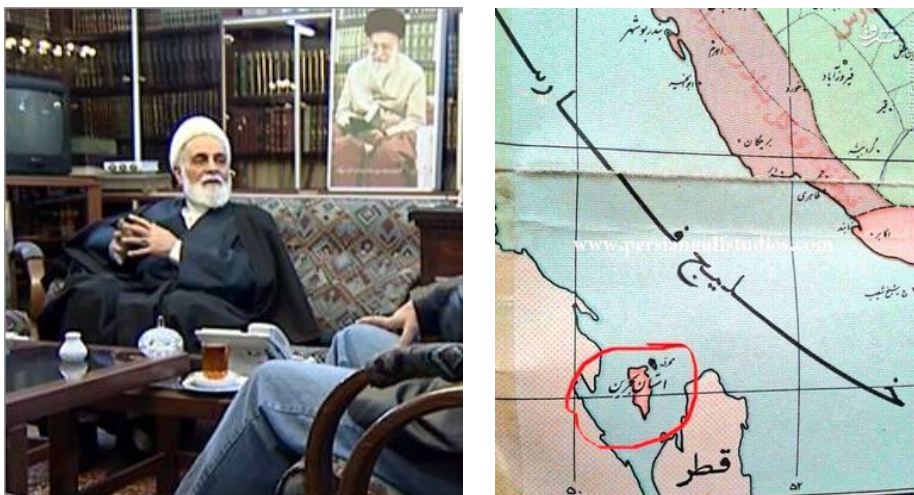


**Iran and Hezbollah supporters demonstrate against the Shi'ite regime in Bahrain. The yellow flags are of Hezbollah in Lebanon, carried by local supporters. At the left are pictures of Khomeini and Khamenei (bahaneews.com).**

◆ **Iran's irredentist demands:** Iran demands sovereignty over Bahrain, which it considers its "14<sup>th</sup> province."<sup>5</sup> The demand has frequently been made by senior Iranian officials: in February 2009 **Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri**, advisor to Iranian leader Khamenei, said, when Bahrain received independence in 1971, that it was Iran's 14<sup>th</sup> province and had representation in the Iranian parliament. He criticized the Shah's decision to drop the issue of Bahrain. At the time his statement (one of several) led to a furor in Bahrain and to expressions in the Arab world of solidarity with Bahrain. In 1979, in the first months after the Islamic Revolution, **Ayatollah Sayed Sadeq Rohani**, a senior Iranian cleric, said Bahrain was an integral part of Iran and its separation was illegal. He called on the residents of Bahrain and the other emirates to rise up against their rulers and establish regimes of "justice and equality." In July 2007 **Hossein Shariatmadari**, the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper Kayhan, and considered close to Khamenei, said "**Bahrain is part of Iran.**"

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<sup>5</sup> Iran claims sovereignty over Bahrain and has found a historical reference related to the years when Bahrain was under Persian rule (1602-1783). When in 1968 Britain announced its intention to withdraw its forces from the Persian Gulf, Iran renewed its demand for sovereignty over Bahrain. In 1970 the UN held a national referendum in which Bahrainis were asked to choose between independence and being annexed by Iran. **They chose independence**, which they received in August 1971. At that point the Shah dropped the subject. Since the Islamic Revolution, however, Iran has claimed, from time to time, that **Bahrain is an Iranian province**.



**Right: A map published by the Iranian media showing Bahrain (circled in red) as an Iranian province (the Farsi reads that until the 1970s Bahrain was part of Iran and was separated because of the haste and the [Shah's] inability to retain it (Shorouk News, January 9, 2016). Left: Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri, advisor to Khamenei (al-Jazeera, February 22, 2009). Calling Bahrain Iran's 14th province led to tension between Iran and Bahrain and to a furor in the Arab world.**

## The Beginning of Organized Political and Military Shi'ite Groups in Bahrain

### Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim

- ▶ **Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim** is a high-level Bahraini Shi'ite cleric. He was born in 1941 to a family of fishermen, and studied teaching and religious studies in Manama. In the 1960s he went to **Najaf, Iraq**, the burial place of Muhammad's son-in-law, the Imam Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, and studied under senior Shi'ite cleric Mohammed Bakr al-Sadr.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ During the 1960s and 70s, students at the religious institutions in Najaf began formulating **ideas for renewing an activist Shi'a**. The concept, of which Mohammed Bakr al-Sadr was one of the most important formulators and proponents, **called for a social and political revolution and for the establishment of a new state based on the principles of Islam and led by clerical scholars**.<sup>7</sup> At the time many Muslims studied in Najaf who eventually were among the core founders of Hezbollah in Lebanon (such as Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Abbas al-Musawi, Sheikh Subhi al-Tufayli and Sheikh Muhammad Yazbek).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia in Arabic.

<sup>7</sup> Shimon Shapira, *Hezbollah between Iran and Lebanon*, (Hebrew), published by Tel Aviv University-Hakibbutz Hameuhad, fourth edition (2006), pp. 100-101.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 102-114.



**Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim (al-Manar TV, July 27, 2016).**

- ▶ When Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim returned to Bahrain at the beginning of the 1970s **he began founding political and social organizations to protect the rights of the Shi'ites. In 1972 he established an association for increased Islamic awareness**, the first – and largest – Shi'ite Islamic association in the country. **On June 20, 2016**, the Bahraini regime stripped him of his citizenship, claiming he used his position to "serve foreign [i.e., Iranian] interests" (al-Jazeera, June 21, 2016; BBC, June 20, 2016). **In May 2017**, he and two others were indicted for raising funds without authorization. They were convicted and sentenced to a year in prison but the implementation of the sentencing was postponed for three years. His bank account was confiscated and he was fined 100,000 dinars [about \$38,000 at the 2017 exchange rate] (Wikipedia in Arabic; al-Mayadeen TV, January 5, 2017).
- ▶ Since May 2017 Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim has been under house arrest. His house is surrounded by Bahraini security forces and is permitted to leave only for medical treatment (al-Muqawem Center for Culture and Information website, Qassim's personal website, 2017-2018). In July 2018 he went to London for medical treatment and also attended the Ashura events held there.<sup>9</sup> In December 2018 **he went to Iraq to visit Shi'ite shrines and from there went to settle permanently in Qom, Iran** (al-Muqawem Center website, 2018-2020). In response to the normalization declaration between Bahrain and Israel he to declared a day of rage and protest marches in Bahrain (See **Appendix**).
- ▶ **Sheikh Dr. Abdallah al-Duqaq, a Bahraini cleric, served as Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim's official representative in Iran.** During the 1990s he emigrated to Iran and studied the religion of Islam in Qom and religious studies and philosophy at the Qom branch of Tehran University (where he was granted a PhD). He taught at various schools and was the spiritual leader of religious associations in both Iran and Bahrain. In April 2017 the Bahraini

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<sup>9</sup> For Shia Muslims, Ashura is a solemn day of mourning the martyrdom of Hussein in 680 AD at Karbala in modern-day Iraq. It is marked with mourning rituals and passion plays re-enacting the martyrdom (Wikipedia).

authorities stripped him and his wife of their citizenship (al-Manar website). While in Iran he founded an organization called al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain and was a consultant for authors of books and articles, especially regarding the philosophy of Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim (website of the legation of the al-Mustafa International University in Bahrain).

## Riots and an attempted coup in the 1980s and 1990s

Most of the Shi'ites in Bahrain supported the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Inspired by the Revolution, Iranian-oriented Shi'ite organizations were established in Bahrain, including the **Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB)**, headed by **Ayatollah Hadi al-Modarresi** (see below); **the Revolutionary Cell**, headed by Sheikh Nasser al-Haddad; and the **Movement of the Supporters of the Islamic Martyrs**, headed by Sheikh Jamal Ali al-Asfour.<sup>10</sup>

► **In 1981, a short time after the Iranian Islamic Revolution, the IFLB attempted a coup in Bahrain.** The network was established by Ayatollah al-Modarresi, a senior Iraqi cleric. He was born into a family of Shi'ite clerics in Karbala, Iraq, was supported by Iran and identified with the Iranian Islamic Revolution. He was involved in subversion against the regime of Saddam Hussein and was exiled to Bahrain where **he continued his subversive activities and incitement against the Bahraini regime** (his title was "Ayatollah Khamenei's personal representative in Bahrain"). The attempted coup failed and more than 70 Shi'ite operatives were sentenced to long prison terms. Many of them were expelled or fled. **Al-Modarresi himself fled to Iran, from where he continued his subversive activities against the Bahraini regime.**

► At the beginning of the 1990s **the IFLB established a military wing called Hezbollah-Bahrain.** Its operatives received **military training in Iran and Lebanon**, including the preparing and detonating of IEDs and using weapons. **In 1994 the Bahraini security services seized weapons smuggled by sea, under the direction of Iranian intelligence, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Hezbollah-Bahrain.** In March 1996 **Hezbollah-Bahrain joined the wave of civil disobedience and riots.** The wave peaked in Manama and included the burning property, including hotels, stores, vehicles and equipment. **The events were reported live by Iranian radio stations,** calling for civil disobedience.

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<sup>10</sup> For further information, see February 28, 2013 bulletin "Bahrain as a Target Preferred by Iran for Terrorism and Subversion."



**Right: A car set on fire during the wave of riots in Manama in March 1996 (YouTube). Left: Fire set during the riots in Manama (YouTube; ejabat.google.com).**

► **In 1996 the Bahraini security forces detained 44 Hezbollah-Bahrain operatives**, accusing them of plotting to establish a regime in Bahrain modeled on Iran. Investigation revealed that **they had been trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards at camps in Iran, and at Hezbollah in Lebanon camps**. They confessed that in 1993 Iran had been behind an attempt to overthrow the Bahraini regime by Hezbollah-Bahrain (Hewarona.com).



**The weapons found in the possession of Hezbollah Bahrain in 1996. The article quotes one of the Hezbollah-Bahrain operatives who confessed he was trained by Hezbollah in Lebanon with Iranian sponsorship (Hewarona.com)**

### Establishment of Shi'ite political organizations (2001-2011)

**In 2001, following political reforms in Bahrain, a number of Shi'ite political parties and organizations were founded**, and until the end of 2010 Iranian subversion focused on supporting them. Once the Saudi Arabia-dominated Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain, **Iran shifted its support to the Shi'ite proxy terrorist organizations** (See below).

- The Shi'ite organizations founded between 2001 and 2011 were the following:
  - ◆ The **al-Wefaq National Islamic Society**, established in November 2001. Its stated objective was to found a modern country with equality for Shi'ites. **It was headed by Ali Salman, with Sheikh Hussein al-Daihi as second in command**, and Ayatollah Isa

Ahmed Qassim as spiritual leader. Al-Wefaq first participated in Bahraini elections in 2006, **winning 17 seats and becoming the largest faction in the parliament**. In 2010 it won 18 seats, but in November 2011 all its representatives resigned in an attempt to exert pressure on the government. **In 2016 al-Wefaq was outlawed**. Party head Sheikh Ali Salman was sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of spying for Qatar (Bahrain broke off diplomatic relations with Qatar in 2017). His deputy, **Sheikh Hussein al-Daihi, moved to Beirut** (apparently with the sponsorship of Hezbollah in Lebanon), **from where he continued his activities**.

- ◆ **The Islamic Action Society (AMAL)**, established by IFLB members, was registered as an NGO in 2002. In 2012 the Bahraini authorities issued an order to disband it. Its leader was **Sheikh Muhammad Ali Mahfouz**, who was detained in 2011 and sentenced to ten years in prison. He was released in May 2016, after five years.

- ◆ **The National Brotherhood Society** was established as a political party in 2002, and was joined by Bahrain citizens of Persian extraction. Its stated objective was **to defend the country's ethnic and cultural diversity**. Its leader was **Sayid Musa Galum al-Ansari**.

- ◆ **The al-Wafa' Islamic Party** was founded in 2009. It called for boycotting Bahrain's political process. It was headed by **Abd al-Wahhab Hussein**, a leader of the Shi'ite opposition, and had a declared Iranian orientation.

### Shi'ite riots in the regional upheaval in 2011 (the Arab Spring)

As part of the wave of protests that engulfed the Arab world beginning at the end of 2010, on February 14, 2011 the Shi'ites in Bahrain began extensive rioting. They demanded political freedom and equality for the Shi'ite majority, which meant changing the Bahraini regime. Dozens of Shi'ites were killed in the riots. The protests were suppressed by the Bahraini security forces supported by an inter-Arab military force, dominated by Saudi Arabia and with significant UAE participation.

### The entrance of the Peninsula Shield Force (2011)

- ▶ To suppress the riots threatening the regime, Bahrain asked for help from the **Arab Peninsula Shield Force**, using the pretext of "defending the country's strategic installations and facilities." The Force is a joint military force of the Gulf Cooperation Council, established in 1982 to defend the security of its member states. **On March 14, 2011**, Bahrain's

government called on the Force for help in suppressing the riots. It was the first time the Force had been used for internal purposes. Its commander, Major General Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima, announced that its mission was to provide security for Bahrain's strategic infrastructure and protect it from the intervention of foreign forces [i.e., Iran]. He said the Force would defend Bahrain's borders while Bahrain's security forces dealt with internal problems.

► **On March 15, 2011 the Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain with 1,200 Saudi Arabian soldiers and 800 from the UAE.** Kuwait sent a naval force and Qatar sent soldiers who integrated into Saudi Arabian force; Oman did not participate.

► **Iran claimed it was a foreign invasion of Bahrain, but did not take military action.** The Bahraini foreign minister said the Force would remain until "the Iranian danger had been removed" (Wikipedia in Arabic). **The entrance of the Force into Bahrain was a watershed event which worsened the relations between Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Arab world on the one hand, and Iran and the Shi'ites on the other.**



**The Peninsula Shield Force enters Bahrain via the Kind Fahd Bridge, March 15, 2011**  
(al-Riyadh, a Saudi Arabian news site, April 27, 2011).

## The Establishment of Iranian Shi'ite Proxy Terrorist Organizations

### Overview

**Iran viewed the entrance of the Peninsula Shield Force into Bahrain as a threat to its regional interests and as demanding a response.** The Iranians did not respond with military force but rather established a number of Bahraini Shi'ite organizations which carried out guerrilla and terrorist attacks against the Bahraini regime (primarily between 2011 and 2017). During those years they established the **Islamic Resistance in Bahrain**, an umbrella

organization for the Iranian proxies. Some of them were designated as terrorist organizations by the United States and other countries. During the past three years their activity has tapered off, in ITIC assessment mainly as **a result of the successful efforts of Bahrain's preventive security activities.**

► The most prominent Iranian-supported terrorist organization in Bahrain is the **al-Mukhtar Brigades**. Four smaller terrorist organizations are the Popular Resistance Brigades, the al-Ashtar Brigades, the Wa'ad Allah Brigades and the Thaer Allah Brigades (website of the al-Abdal movement, a Shi'ite militia in Iraq, January 3, 2020) (See below).



**The flags of the five main Iranian-affiliated terrorist organizations of the Islamic Resistance in Bahrain (al-Abdal website, January 3, 2020)**

► After the Shi'ite protests in 2011, the opposition al-Wafa' Islamic Party joined other Shi'ite organizations to form a **Coalition for a Republic**. In addition to ordinary political reforms, the Coalition demanded the establishment of a republic in Bahrain, that is, **to change the constitutional monarchy system ruling Bahrain**. That same year **Murtadha al-Sindi** left Bahrain for Iran, using the excuse of furthering his religious education. While in Iran he engaged in subversive activities with Iranian support (al-Ayam, March 19, 2017). Apparently he stayed in Qom, and it is reasonable to assume that he continued his subversion against Bahrain from there, mainly his support of the Iranian proxy terrorist organizations.



**Murtadha al-Sindi delivers a speech in Qom (revolutionbahrain website, January 6, 2017).**



## The most prominent Iranian-sponsored Shi'ite terrorist organizations

### The al-Mukhtar Brigades



The logo of the al-Mukhtar Brigades. It has similarities to the logos of the IRGC and Hezbollah. The red map at the left includes Bahrain and part of Qur'an Sura 9, al-Tawbah, verse 14, "Fight them. Allah will punish them at your hands..." (website of al-Marja for the study of Islamic movements, August 20, 2018).



Right: The Qods Force logo. The Arabic above the rifle is Qur'an Sura 8, al-Anfal, verse 60, which refers to preparations for a military force to wage jihad against an enemy. Left: The Hezbollah logo. The Arabic above the rifle is Qur'an Sura 5, al-Ma'idah, verse 56, "Whoever allies himself with Allah, and his messenger, and those who believe—surely the party of Allah is the victorious."

**The al-Mukhtar Brigades**<sup>11</sup> is an Iranian proxy terrorist organization established in July 2011 following the Shi'ite riots in Bahrain. The organization tried to topple the government of Bahrain with guerrilla warfare tactics. It received support from Iran and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias affiliated with the IRGC . In July 2017 the organization was designated a terrorist organization by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, and in December 2017 by Britain.

► The al-Mukhtar Brigades adopted the Iranian concept of rule by Islamic sage (*velayat-e faqih*). Their source of religious authority is Iranian leader Ali Khamenei. In a message issued

<sup>11</sup> The organization is named for **al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi**, who commanded one of the Shi'ite rebellions against the Umayyad dynasty after the Battle of Karbala (680 AD).

on July 3, 2016, to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Khomeini, the organization swore loyalty to his path, emphasizing "**adherence to the path of resistance.**"

► The al-Mukhtar Brigades began attacking Bahraini security forces and Peninsula Shield Forces in July 2011, mainly with IEDs. They carried out about 200 attacks, more than any other terrorist organization in Bahrain. In March 2014 they announced the establishment of a wing to specifically attack the al-Khalifa family economically, focusing on electric and communications facilities. In addition, in July 2017 hacked into the Twitter account of the Bahraini foreign minister and threatened the royal families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia (al-Abdal website, March 9, 2014; al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, August 25, 2016).

### The Popular Resistance Brigades



The Popular Resistance Brigades' logo (al-Ayam, April 25, 2020).

**The Popular Resistance Brigades** were apparently established in 2012. The organization recruited and trained operatives to make explosives and carry out subversive activities. Their objective was to form sleeper cells in Bahrain which would be activated against the Bahraini regime at the appropriate moment. Operatives were sent to Iraq for training (in ITIC assessment, they were trained by the Iraqi Shi'ite militias supported by Iran<sup>12</sup>), bringing IEDs back with them to Bahrain. The organization may be based on the island of Sitra in northern Bahrain. The Brigades have been on Bahrain's list of terrorist organizations since March 2014 (Facebook page of the Information Center – the Bahraini Revolution, November 6, 2012; the al-Watan portal, June 9, 2017, al-Ayam, April 25, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> For further information, see the July 12, 2020 bulletin, "Kataeb Hezbollah: Profile of a Shiite-Iraqi militia handled by the Qods Force to promote Iranian interests in Iraq."

## The al-Ashtar Brigades



**Al-Ashtar Brigades logos. Right: A logo similar to that of the IRGC and of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Both logos have Qur'an Sura 47, Muhammad, verse 7, "O you who believe! If you support Allah, he will support you, and will strengthen your foothold" (website of the al-Ashtar Brigades).**

**The al-Ashtar Brigades** is a Shi'ite Iranian proxy terrorist organization established in 2013.<sup>13</sup> It is supported by Iran and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias handled by the IRGC. The organization claims it was founded "in response to a Sharia order to revolt against a dictator and to Saudi Arabia's oppression of the Bahraini people." **The organization carried out about 80 terrorist attacks.**

► Ideologically, the al-Ashtar Brigades support the Islamic revolution in Iran. Its leaders are Ahmed Yusuf Sirhan (Abu Muntazar) and Jassem Ahmed Abdallah (Zul Fikar), both Bahrainis who fled the country, apparently to Iran. In July 2017 the organization was designated as a terrorist organization by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. **The American State Department designated it as a terrorist organization** and its leaders are on the Department's wanted list (Wikipedia in Arabic; the websites of the al-Ashtar Brigades and al-Abdal).

<sup>13</sup> **Malik al-Ashtar**, for whom the Brigades are named, was a prominent commander in the army of the Imam Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the founding father of Shi'a (Wikipedia).



The United States designation of the al-Ashtar Brigades as a terrorist organization (Twitter account of the State Department CT Bureau, July 10, 2018).

### The Wa'ad Allah Brigades



The logo of the Wa'ad Allah Brigades. The red map at the left includes Bahrain and part of Qur'an Sura 9, al-Tawbah, verse 14, "Fight them. Allah will punish them at your hands..." (website of al-Abdal, June 19, 2018).

The Wa'ad Allah Brigades<sup>14</sup> were established in July 2015 after five years in preparation for "the day of defending the shrines and [our] honor, and of cutting off the hands of the attackers." The organization is supported by Iran. Its objective is to **overthrow the Bahraini regime through jihad and "resistance."**

► The Wa'ad Allah Brigades carried out a small number of terrorist attacks. In April 2019 they published a simulation of an attack on an Israeli delegation which was supposed to arrive in Bahrain, from the landing of the plane to the delegation's arrival at its hotel and to its participation in the event at Bahrain's International Exhibition and Conference center. The video was subtitled in Arabic and Hebrew and ended with the words, "**Last Warning.**" Iran claimed that the video led the Israeli delegation to cancel its trip to Bahrain (Pinterest

<sup>14</sup> **Wa'ad al-Allah**, "the promise of Allah," is an expression appearing in the Qur'an in various contexts Allah's promises to the faithful are elaborated on, for example, a reward on Judgment Day.

account of al-Abdal's combat information; website of al-Abdal; July 28, 2015; al-Arab website, July 31, 2015; al-Alam TV, April 16, 2019).



From the simulation of surveillance of an Israeli delegation to Bahrain, published on the Wa'ad Allah Brigades website (al-Alam TV, April 16, 2019).

### The Thaer Allah Brigades



Right: The IRGC logo. Left: The logo of the Thaer Allah Brigades, similar to the logos of the IRGC and Hezbollah (al-Sharq al-Awsat, November 24, 2018).

The Thaer Allah<sup>15</sup> Brigades were established in 2019, the last of the organizations established as part of the Islamic Resistance in Bahrain. So far it has carried out only one known terrorist attack (al-Abdal website, 2019; website of the information center of the Revolution in Bahrain, January 6, 2020).

## Similarities between the Methods of the Shi'ite Terrorist Organizations

► An analysis of dozens of claims of responsibility issued by Shi'ite proxy terrorist organizations in Bahrain reveals the following:

<sup>15</sup> **Thaer Allah** is one of the nicknames of Imam al-Hussein, the son of Ali Ibn Abi-Talib, the founding father of Shi'a. It means the "revenge of Allah." One interpretation is that Allah will avenge the blood of al-Hussein, shed at the Battle of Karbala (Wikishia).

- ◆ **The organizations were not geographically distinct** and did not specialize in attacking specific targets (with the exception of the al-Mukhtar Brigades, which specialized in attacking the Bahraini infrastructure).
- ◆ Most of the attacks were carried out in the **northern and eastern part of the country** (where there are Shi'ite majorities).
- ◆ They mainly attacked **roadblocks, police stations, military convoys, police patrol cars, jails and the infrastructure**. Attempts were made to **eliminate officers** (including from Saudi Arabia and the UAE), and to **expose agents**.
- ◆ The organizations also waged a battle for hearts and minds, and were careful to document their attacks. Hezbollah in Lebanon provided propaganda support for the terrorist organizations in Bahrain.



Right: UAV photo of operatives breaking into the Juw prison in southeastern Bahrain and releasing operatives. Left: Documentation of the IED attack on a security vehicle in Diraz in the northwestern part of the country (al-Abdal website, January 23, 2018).



Support for riots and terrorism in Bahrain from Hezbollah. Right: Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah in Lebanon leader, gave a speech on March 19, 2012, appealing to the Bahraini people to sacrifice themselves and not be silent until the removal of the "oppressor" (YouTube). Left: Extensive documentation on the website of the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Manar TV about the Shi'ite protests against Bahrain's "oppressive regime" (almanar.com.lb).

► The following are examples of prominent attacks carried out by terrorist organizations in Bahrain in 2017 (from an announcement from the American Department of State about terrorism in Bahrain in 2017, September 19, 2018):

- ◆ **January 29:** A police officer killed.
- ◆ **June 19:** A terrorist operative killed when an IED blows up in his hands.
- ◆ **October 1:** A terrorist group affiliated with al-Ashtar detonates an IED at a Bahrain ministry of the interior roadblock. Five police officers injured.
- ◆ **October 27:** An IED explodes on a highway in an attack on a Bahraini ministry of the interior bus. A police officer killed and eight people injured.
- ◆ **November 10:** An oil pipe blown up in the village of Buri. Members of the Bahraini administration blame terrorist organizations trained in Iran.

**Most of the attacks were carried out by the various terrorist organizations between 2011 and 2017.** In 2017 their activity peaked with both in quantity and quality. Murtadha al-Sindi, the leader of al-Wafa', said of the armed struggle that "From now on, it's a new era. We in al-Wafa' declare that we have begun a new stage: **One hand [raised at a demonstration] in the city square and [the other] hand on the trigger...**" However, **in reality, since 2017 the attacks have for the most part stopped.**

## Examples of attacks, exposures and prevented attacks (2011-2017)

### Exposure of an Iranian-directed terrorist squad planning showcase attacks (November 2011)

► At the beginning of November 2011 a terrorist squad directed by the IRGC (in ITIC assessment, by the Qods Force) planned attacks at the following locations:

- ◆ The King Fahd Bridge, which links Bahrain and Saudi Arabia
- ◆ The Saudi Arabian embassy in Manama
- ◆ The Bahraini ministry of the interior

► A spokesman for the Bahraini ministry of the interior at the time, **General Tariq al-Hassan**, said four squad operatives were detained in Qatar and deported to Bahrain on November 4, 2011. A fifth operative was detained in Bahrain. He added that the four detained in Qatar had come from Saudi Arabia. At the time of their detention **they had documents and a laptop containing Bahraini security information and information about a number of vital targets. They also had US dollars and Iranian rials.** During interrogation they confessed

that they had left Bahrain illegally and **were en route to Iran to set up a network** to carry out terrorist activities in Bahrain (Agence France-Presse, November 12, 2011).

► **The Saudi Arabian and Arab media accused the IRGC of directing the terrorist squad's activities.** On November 14, 2011, the Saudi Arabian newspaper Okaz reported that squad operatives had confessed that **the IRGC were behind the plot to blow up the Saudi Arabian embassy and the King Fahd Bridge.**

### Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in a series of explosions in Manama (2012)

► **On November 5, 2012, five IEDs exploded in Manama.** Two foreigners were killed and one person was critically wounded. The Bahraini security forces detained four men suspected of planting the IEDs. The Bahraini ministry of internal security reported that the police were looking for additional suspects.



Scenes of the explosions in Manama (nakshaat.com, November 5, 2012)

► **Sameera bint Ibrahim Rajab**, minister of information, said that the type of attack, the means used by the attackers and the training they had received in preparation for the attacks **all indicated the involvement of Hezbollah** [in Lebanon]. She added that the groups behind the attacks had been responsible for the attacks carried out during the ten previous months. According to the Bahraini authorities the five explosions bore the hallmarks of Hezbollah. According to Reuters, quoting the Bahraini News Agency (November 6, 2012), **"Their terrorist practices prove that they have been trained outside the kingdom...[and] the hallmarks of Hezbollah are crystal clear."**<sup>16</sup>

### The exposure of a terrorist squad planning to blow up the King Fahd Bridge (2013)

► **On February 16, 2013**, the Bahraini authorities announced **the exposure of a terrorist squad handled by the IRGC.** Sheikh Rashid Abdallah al-Khalifa, Bahraini minister of the

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-bombs-hezbollah-idUSBRE8A512A20121106>



interior, said eight detainees had been **trained in the use of weapons and explosives in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon**. He added that the squad had been involved in a number of recent IED attacks, including on the King Fahd Bridge. The squad was also involved in three shooting attacks on police, killing one security force operative and wounding 75 (al-Arabiya, February 16, 2013; AP, February 17, 2013).

► **Tariq al-Hassan**, head of Bahrain's public security, said his forces had **neutralized a bomb that weighed about two kilos** (about 4.4 pounds) and had been placed near **a mosque on the Bahraini side** of the King Fahd Bridge. The bomb was a locally-manufactured IED filled with nails and shrapnel. He said it could have caused all or part of a small building to collapse. "Bahraini security sources" reported that the chemical composition of the bomb was identical to that in the possession of the Bahraini terrorist squad **detained at the time en route to Iran** (**Note:** The squad was detained in Qatar and deported to Bahrain on November 4, 2011. The King Fahd Bridge was one of its targets.) (al-Arabiya, February 16, 2013).



**Right: The IED found near the mosque on the Bahraini side of the King Fahd Bridge (al-Arabiya, February 16, 2013). Left: The King Fahd Bridge, linking Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. It is a strategic target for Iranian terrorism (Photo: Wikipedia).**

► On February 19, 2013, **Tariq al-Hassan** held a press conference where he gave further information about the terrorist squad:<sup>17</sup>

- ◆ **The squad planned to set up a military network called "the Imam's Army."** During interrogation squad operatives confessed they planned to attack military and civilian targets in order to undermine Bahrain's security and sabotage the economy.

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<sup>17</sup> The information presented here by Major General Tariq al-Hassan is based on a Bahraini News Agency report issued on February 19, 2013. More information was obtained from an al-Andalou News report from February 20, 2013.

Among their targets were the **airport and the ministry of the interior's offices. They also planned to attack public figures.**

- ◆ The squad's operatives came from Bahrain and other countries. A total of eight operatives were detained, five of them with Bahraini citizenship. Three were detained in Oman in coordination with local security forces. The Bahraini security forces were searching for four more operatives, who had managed to escape.
- ◆ The squad operatives confessed to having been recruited by **two Bahrainis living in Qom, Iran**. The entire operation was orchestrated by **an IRGC operative calling himself "Abu Nasser," who was the squad's handler**. He gave the terrorist squad **\$80,000**.
- ◆ The squad operatives were trained in the **use of weapons and explosives, and taught how to gather intelligence information and photograph security sites**. Their training was held at installations belonging to **Iraqi Hezbollah in Karbala and Baghdad** (Note: Apparently a reference to the Iraqi Shi'ite militias directed by Iran).
- ◆ The terrorist squad operatives were instructed to collect intelligence information in Bahrain, including photographs of sensitive military and civilian installations. They were also instructed to prepare a stock of weapons, which would be **smuggled into Bahrain under Abu Nasser's supervision**.

### Intensive preventive activity in 2018

With the significant increase in riots and terrorist activities, in 2018 the Bahraini security forces carried out **intensive preventive activities** against the proxy terrorist organizations directed by Iran and the Shi'ite opposition. They carried out extensive detentions, leading to the exposure of **terrorist networks directed by Iran**.

- ▶ The main events were the following:
  - ◆ **In March 2018** the Bahraini security forces **detained 116 suspects and seized a large quantity of weapons**. According to the Bahraini ministry of the interior, **48 of the detainees had received military training in IRGC camps or in camps of their allies in Lebanon** (Hezbollah) and **Iraq** (the Shi'ite militias). The operatives belonged to networks planning to attack security forces and police patrols in Bahrain. They also planned to attack oil installations (DW and al-Arabiya, March 2018).

◆ **At the end of September-beginning of October 2018** there was another wave of detentions. On September 25, 2018 the Bahraini attorney general announced charges against **169 operatives** who had attempted to **establish an organization similar to Hezbollah in Bahrain. Iran funded the activities of some of the accused.** Some of them went to Iran or its allies for weapons and explosives training (alacrity in English, October 22, 2018; BBC, April 16, 2019; Ynet and news agencies, September 25, 2018).



**Detentions in Bahrain, 2018 (al-Alam TV, October 2 and December 1, 2018).**

◆ **On April 16, 2019**, an indictment was handed down for terrorist operatives. Sixty-nine (of the 169) were sentenced to life imprisonment and the rest received sentences of between three and seven years. They were stripped of their Bahraini citizenship. They were convicted of membership in Iranian-directed **Hezbollah-Bahrain**. The charges against them were detonating IEDs, attempted assassinations, property destruction and the possession of weapons and explosives (BBC, April 16, 2019).

## **Iranian and Hezbollah in Lebanon fingerprints on Shi'ite terrorist organizations in Bahrain**

**The Shi'ite terrorist organizations operating in Bahrain are directed by Iran and supported by Hezbollah in Lebanon.** Iran uses them as a tool to promote its local and regional interests (as it uses the Shi'ite proxy organizations in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen). **Iran's objective is to establish Shi'ite proxy organizations in various countries, according to the model of Hezbollah in Lebanon**, which in Iranian perspective has become a force for threatening Israel and has political power in Lebanon.

► **Iranian-Hezbollah fingerprints can be identified in the methods of the Shi'ite Iranian proxy organizations in Bahrain:**

◆ According to a claim of responsibility for an attack in 2015, it "tore the coward al-Khalif's spider web" (Facebook page of the Islamic Resistance in Bahrain, September

10, 2015). The term "spider web" was used for the first time by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who claimed Israel was "weaker than a spider web" in a speech he gave the morning after the IDF withdrawal from south Lebanon in 2000.

◆ A notice dedicated to the al-Mukhtar Brigades, the leading Bahraini Iran proxy, was issued from a site of the fighting in Syria (Twitter account of the al-Mukhtar Brigades, May 4, 2016). It was sent from Shi'ite fighters at the shrine of al-Set Zaynab,<sup>18</sup> south of Damascus, which was being defended by Iranian-oriented Shi'ite organizations, Hezbollah among them. **Hezbollah operatives have customarily sent such notices since the beginning of the organization's involvement in the war in Syria**, and spread them on the social networks.



**Right: A notice dedicated to the al-Mukhtar Brigades from the Shi'ite shrine of al-Set Zaynab, south of Damascus (Twitter account of the al-Mukhtar Brigades, May 4, 2016). Left: Hezbollah operative on the Aarsal ridge (the Syria-Lebanon border) holds a similar notice for his mother (Facebook).**

◆ **The organizations imitate Hezbollah anti-Israeli propaganda.** For example, the al-Mukhtar Brigades issued a picture of Bahraini security forces in their crosshairs, with the subtitle, "You are within range of our fire" (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, August 30, 2016). The al-Ashtar Brigades issued another example, a satellite picture of the American Fifth Fleet's base in Bahrain in the crosshairs, with the inscription, "The Islamic resistance in Bahrain is prepared to carry out actions, if Allah so wishes" (Twitter account of the al-Ashtar Brigades, September 11, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> The granddaughter of Muhammad.



Right: Bahraini security forces in al-Mukhtar's crosshairs. The Arabic reads, "You are within range of our fire" (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, August 30, 2016). Left: An aerial photograph issued by Hezbollah in Lebanon with a threat to attack Israel's oil and gas facilities in the Mediterranean Sea (al-Majed website, February 7, 2018).

- ◆ Glorification of the shaheeds and the sanctification of the value of the *shahada*.<sup>19</sup> for example, they give special weight to the day every shaheed died (called the "day of rising to paradise") (Twitter account of the al-Mukhtar Brigades, April 1, 2017). They hang pictures of shaheeds and dedicate terrorist attacks to commemorate and avenge them (Twitter account of the Ras Ruman youth movement, July 27, 2020). **Sanctifying the value of the *shahada* and glorifying shaheeds are central to the battle for hearts and minds waged by Hezbollah in Lebanon and to Iran's political and social activity among the Shi'ites of the Arab world.**



Right: Mourning notice for shaheeds of the al-Mukhtar Brigades (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, April 1, 2017). Left: The daily update of the Hezbollah Shaheed Institute includes pictures of shaheeds killed on that day over the years (Twitter account of the Shaheed Institute, April 2, 2020).

- ◆ **Solidarity with the Iranian-led "axis of resistance:"** for example, issuing opinion pieces condemning Saudi Arabia for its "slaughter" of Yemenis (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, October 9, 2016); visits paid by representatives of the Islamic

<sup>19</sup> Martyrdom of the sake of Allah.

resistance in Bahrain to the family of an Iraqi shaheed from the Iranian-supported Imam Ali Brigades (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, October 21, 2016).



**Representatives of the al-Mukhtar Brigades visit the family of an Iraqi shaheed from the Imam Ali Brigades (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, October 21, 2016).**

## Terrorist activity hiatus and a decline in the intensity of the Shi'ite population's protests (2018-2020)

### Overview

Between 2018 and 2020 the activity of the Shi'ite proxy terrorist organizations tapered off, in ITIC assessment mainly because of the effective preventive measures of the Bahraini security services. Iran and the remaining operatives of its proxy organizations apparently needed time to reorganize and rehabilitate their networks. The Shi'ite population in Bahrain also remained relatively quiet and refrained from riots and other forms of civil disobedience, although their fundamental anti-regime sentiments have remained unchanged.

► **One platform for Shi'ite public protest has been the social networks.** Since the Internet entered Bahrain its use by opponents of the regime has steadily increased, mainly by bloggers and forum administrators. The social networks are used to criticize the regime for its ongoing political and economic deprivation of the Shi'ites, and for the slow process of reform. **The Bahraini Shi'ites also use the social networks to express their identification with Iran and with the Shi'ites in Iraq and Lebanon.** They receive **media support and encouragement from Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Iran-sponsored Shi'ite militias in Iraq.**

## World Jerusalem Day events in Bahrain

World Jerusalem Day has been an annual Iranian-led event since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution (1979). It is held on the last Friday of the Muslim religious month of Ramadan and signifies support for the Palestinians and strong rejection of the United States, Israel, the West and the United States' Arab allies. Jerusalem Day events are held in Iran, the Arab-Muslim world and the Muslim communities in the West.

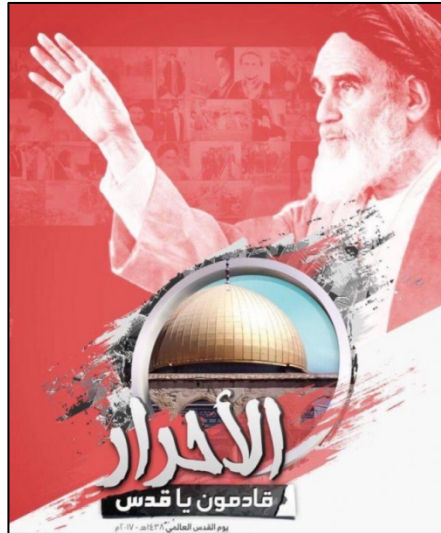
► The Shi'ite community in Bahrain also marks Jerusalem Day, **exploiting the events to spread Iranian propaganda**. For example, during the 2007 demonstrations participants chanted slogans calling for the destruction of the State of Israel, waved Hezbollah in Lebanon flags and held pictures of Hassan Nasrallah. So-called "resistance merchandise" was sold at stalls set up in the streets of Manama (scarves, flags, posters and books).



**A Jerusalem Day demonstration in Bahrain. The picture at the left is Hassan Nasrallah (Bahraini "Bh Future" forum, 2007).**

► Despite the decline in Shi'ite demonstrations in Bahrain in recent years, Jerusalem Day demonstrations and accompanying Iranian propaganda continue. For example:

◆ **In 2017** Shi'ite political organizations (including al-Wefaq) held demonstrations and marches at various locations in Bahrain. The demonstrators issued a statement claiming that "resistance to the Zionist occupation and the liberation of Jerusalem are the foundation of all regional alliances." The demonstrators praised the stance of the "resistance axis" [i.e., the Iranian-led anti-Israeli axis] against the conspiracies and plans of the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia (al-Alam TV, June 22, 2017). The demonstrators launched a logo for Jerusalem Day with a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini (Bahrain al-Yawm website, June 17, 2017).



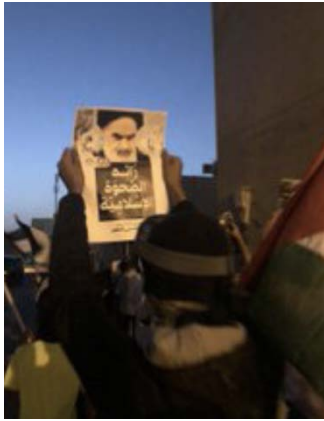
The Jerusalem Day in Bahrain logo. The picture is the Ayatollah Khomeini; under his arm is the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Arabic reads, "The sons of freedom, Jerusalem, we are coming" (Bahrain al-Yawm website, June 17, 2017).



Jerusalem Day demonstration in Bahrain, 2017 (Bahrain al-Yawm website, June 23, 2017).

- ◆ In 2018 Shi'ites in Bahrain held demonstrations in various locations. They held pictures of Khomeini and signs calling for the overthrow of the al-Khalifa family in Bahrain and the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia (al-Alam TV, June 9, 2018; Manama Post, June 8, 2018).





**Jerusalem Day demonstrations in Bahrain in 2018 (Manama Post, June 8, 2020).**

- ◆ **In 2019** Shi'ites in Bahrain held large demonstrations in Manama and other cities. Women figured prominently in the demonstrations (Bahrain al-Yawm, May 31, 2019). The theme of the demonstrations was "No! to the deal of the century" and "We are Jerusalem" (Marat al-Bahrain website, May 31, 2019).



**Jerusalem Day in Bahrain, 2019 (Marat al-Bahrain website, May 31, 2019).**

- ◆ **In 2020** Shi'ites in Bahrain marked Jerusalem Day while strictly following coronavirus public health guidelines. Residents of various cities hung pictures of shaheeds and signs supporting the Palestinians (al-Alam TV, May 23, 2020). **Senior Shi'ite cleric Isa Ahmed Qassim gave a speech** (apparently from Iran) calling for joint "resistance" to "Israeli aggression," to the normalization of Bahraini-Israeli relations and to the "deal of the century." He said the people of Bahrain rejected "surrender" to America and the "Zionists of Bahrain's regime." He thanked "all the people of the resistance and its heroes" who "worked to save the nation, its religion and its honor" (the Hezbollah-affiliated al-Manar TV in Lebanon, May 20 2020).



Jerusalem Day in Bahrain, 2020 (al-Alam TV, May 23, 2020).

## September 2020: Public announcement of the exposure of an Iranian-handled network in Bahrain

A few days after the normalization declaration with Israel was signed, the Bahraini ministry of the interior announced that **the security services had exposed a terrorist network of 18 operatives, nine of them Bahrainis who had escaped to Iran. The network was supported and funded by Bahrainis who had fled to Iran and by IRGC operatives.** It was planning to **assassinate public figures and attack security and economic installations and facilities** in revenge for the targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani (the commander of the IRGC's Qods Force) by the United States (Bahraini newspaper Akhbar al-Khaleej, September 19, 2020). Apparently **the network had been under Bahraini security surveillance for a long time**, but the timing of the announcement may have been linked to the normalization of relations with Israel.

► **On January 3, 2020**, Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, was killed in an American UAV targeted attack. The following day the Islamic Resistance in Bahrain, an umbrella organization for the Shi'ite terrorist organizations, issued a statement condemning the killing, noting that all the organizations felt it was their duty to react to it with determination. According to the statement, **the organizations regarded the United States and its interests in Bahrain as legitimate targets** for avenging the deaths of shaheeds (al-Ashtar Brigades website, January 3, 2020).

► **On September 20, 2020**, the Bahraini ministry of the interior announced the exposure of a new terrorist organization called the **Qassem Soleimani Brigades**. In ITIC assessment it is **not the name of a genuine organization** (a familiar tactic used by the terrorist networks backed by Iran) but rather **an alias for one of the existing proxy terrorist organizations**, possibly the **al-Ashtar Brigades**

► The following is initial information about the network and its planned terrorist attacks, based on the announcement of the Bahraini ministry of the interior (Akhbar al-Khaleej, September 19, 2020):

- ◆ It is apparently a network of **the al-Ashtar Brigades**, which is the military wing of al-Wafa'. **Network operatives were recruited and then trained in bases abroad, including camps of Hezbollah in Iraq** (Note: In ITIC assessment the reference is to the Hezbollah Brigades, a terrorist organization operating in Iraq under Iranian sponsorship).
- ◆ The network operatives were then sent to Bahrain **to collect information about "foreign and local military bases" and "security installations."** They surveilled places where employees of the target locations congregated, and photographed vital economic installations, **including oil reservoirs**, and sent the pictures abroad. The operatives in Bahrain **received IEDs and funds to carry out terrorist attacks from outside the country.**
- ◆ The first attack planned was on a **"security structure"** during a sports day held at the site. It was prevented by a technical fault in the IED. Another target was the **International Exhibition and Conference Center in Manama** during a conference, but again, the IED was faulty and did not explode. The third was an attack on a **foreign delegation** which had come to Bahrain for a state visit; the attack was to be carried out on Manama's main street. It was prevented by the Bahraini security forces, who found the IED before it could explode. The network also planned to attack **a police patrol** but on the assigned day no patrol passed by and the attack was aborted.

## Appendix

### Initial reactions to the normalization of relations with Israel

#### Overview

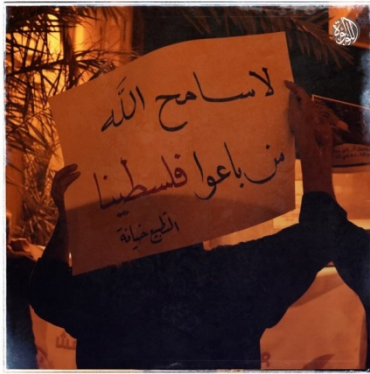
**On September 15, 2020**, a ceremony was held in Washington for signing agreements for the normalization of Israel's diplomatic and economic relations with the UAE and Bahrain. Abd al-Latif al-Zayani, the Bahraini foreign minister, signed for Bahrain. The agreement was condemned by Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shi'ite opponents of the Bahraini regime. The following were the initial reactions of the Shi'ites in Bahrain, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran.



The signing of the normalization agreements in Washington (Benjamin Netanyahu's Twitter account, September 15, 2020).

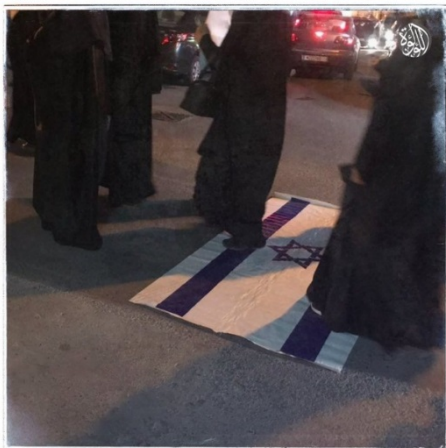
#### Initial reactions from the Shi'ites in Bahrain

► **Ayatollah Isa Ahmed Qassim, the senior Bahraini cleric living in Iran, called for a day of rage and mourning, and for mass protest marches in Bahrain.** In effect, the demonstrations were held on September 14 and 15, 2020, including during the ceremony in Washington (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account website, September 14 and 15, 2020). Protest demonstrations **continued on September 16, 17 and 18, 2020** (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account website, September 16, 17 and 18, 2020).



**Demonstrations against normalization of relations with Israel, September 14, 2020, the eve of the ceremony in the White House. Among the signs were those reading "Death to Israel," "I am a Bahraini and the normalization of the Bahrain regime does not represent me," and "Allah will not forgive those who sold Palestine. Normalization is treason" (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account website, September 14, 2020).**

- **On September 15, 2020, 143 Bahraini clerics** (in ITIC assessment, all or most of them Shi'ite) signed an open letter stating that **"the religion of Islam forbids any kind of normalization with the oppressive Zionist entity."** The clerics also stressed "the right of the oppressed Palestinian people to the full restoration of their rights and lands." By September 18, 2020, an additional 110 clerics had signed (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account website, September 15, 2020).



**Demonstrators wave Palestinian flags and signs condemning normalization, and step on an Israeli flag during the ceremony at the White House (al- Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account, September 15, 2020).**

- **On September 16, 2020, the Shi'ite terrorist organizations in Bahrain issued a joint statement** condemning the "false normalization with the Israeli enemy," which, they claimed, **"enables this cancerous cell [i.e., Israel] on the body of the [Muslim] nation to continue to exist."** They said they were "eager to fight the Zionist enemy and to resist the policy which the arrogant countries want to force on our people and nation." The Shi'ite

Iranian proxy organization **Wa'ad al-Allah Brigades** announced the formation of the **Shaheeds of Jerusalem Brigades**, which would operate as part of the "resistance to the Zionist presence in Bahrain" (al-Kawthar TV, September 16, 2020).



**Graffiti sprayed on walls during the protests against normalization, September 16 and 17, 2020. The Arabic reads, "The humiliation has nothing to do with us, you should be ashamed of the normalization, it is treason," "For the sake of Jerusalem, say NO to normalization," "Normalization does not represent us," and "Normalization is treason". Left: An anti-normalization demonstration (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account, September 16 and 17, 2020).**

► **September 18, 2020, was declared "Friday of the rage of Jerusalem"** to protest the normalization, and demonstrations and other protests activities were held in Bahrain.



**"Friday of the rage of Jerusalem" protests. Upper left: The Bahraini security forces deploy in preparation for the protests (al-Lu'lu'at al-Bahrain Twitter account, September 18, 2020).**

## Hezbollah in Lebanon

► In response to the normalization declaration in Washington, **Hezbollah in Lebanon** issued a statement strongly condemning "**the step taken by the ruling regime in Bahrain, the recognition of the Israeli entity and the other forms of normalization that can be expected.**" Hezbollah claimed there had been secret relations between the Gulf States and Israel which were now made public. Hezbollah also called the normalization "**a great betrayal**" and "**a painful stab [in the back]**" of the **Palestinian people**. He said that the "response to the treasonous measures taken by the rulers of the Emirates and Bahrain will come from the free Arab and Islamic people, especially from the Palestinian people, its resistance movements [i.e., terrorist organizations] and other regional resistance movements which adhere to the right of the Palestinian people to liberate its land and reject all forms of normalization and cooperation with the oppressive entity" (website of al-Abdal, September 12, 2020).

## Iran

► **Iran strongly condemned Bahrain's normalization agreement with Israel**, representing it as "treason" and **threatening Bahrain with "harsh reprisals."** In response to the UAE and Bahrain's normalization declaration with Israel, in the middle of September 2020 the Assembly of the Islamic Awakening held an online conference in Tehran. **Ali Akbar Velayati, advisor to the Iranian leader for international matters**, stressed the religious importance of Palestine for the Muslim world, condemned the normalization of relations between the Arab states and Israel, and stressed that **the "resistance" was the only path that would lead to the realization of Palestinian aspirations.**



Right: Ali Akbar Velayati speaking at the session of the Assembly of Islamic Awakening (Tasnim, September 16, 2020). Left: The front page of the Iranian newspaper Kayhan, September 14, 2020. The headline reads, "The occupiers of the Bahrain province [Iran claims Bahrain is an "occupied" Iranian province] recognized the occupiers of Palestine."

► The **IRGC** also issued a statement in response to the normalization agreement. It said, "**The hangman of the ruler of Bahrain is waiting for the harsh vengeance of the jihad fighters of Jerusalem and the people of Bahrain.**" It added that the act of the rulers of Bahrain violated the principles and will of the Bahraini people and would not be legitimized by the state. In addition, the objective of the normalization was "to humiliate the people [... to] steal their riches and to provide security for the occupiers of Palestine and the thieves of Jerusalem." The IRGC ended by saying that the move would fail, **accelerate the destruction of the State of Israel** and **turn the "proponents of normalization" into targets for "the sacred wrath and the harsh vengeance of the Islamic nation, especially the people of Bahrain"** (al-Mayadeen channel on YouTube, September 12, 2020).