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Iranian-Backed Terrorism in Bahrain: Finding a Sustainable Solution

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Brief Analysis

The United States needs to balance tough love with public validation of justifiable security concerns as Manama seeks to reverse the dangerous growth of Iranian-supported militant cells on the island.

On January 1, a prison break in Bahrain resulted in the escape of ten Shiite detainees, all convicted of serious militancy offenses. The well-planned operation, in which attackers carrying assault rifles killed a guard, is one of many indicators that Iranian-backed Shiite cells are becoming much more dangerous after at least four years of escalated training and equipping by Tehran.

EXPANDING IRANIAN NETWORKS

Conflict between Bahrain's Sunni ruling family and Shiite majority population has intensified greatly since February 2011, when mass protests triggered a military crackdown backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

Emirates. Tehran reacted furiously to the Gulf Cooperation Council's muscular support for Manama, even backing a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington later that year. It also ramped up support to Bahraini militants, bringing more of them to training camps in Iran and Iraq (where Tehran-backed terrorist groups such as Kataib Hezbollah prepare operatives under the aegis of the Popular Mobilization Units).

These trained personnel have been periodically reinserted into Bahrain by boat, along with formidable weapons caches. For example, on December 28, 2013, a speedboat was tracked by coastal radar and intercepted carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including thirty-one Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines and twelve armor-piercing explosively formed penetrator (EFP) charges, plus electronics to arm and fire the devices. The captured crew led investigators to a bombmaking workshop in al-Qurayyah village in Bahrain.

Indeed, the growing network of bombmaking facilities and weapons stores is one of the most disturbing aspects of Iran's destabilization campaign in Bahrain. A number of other discoveries have been made along those lines in the past year and a half:

- On June 6, 2015, Bahraini authorities discovered a bombmaking workshop under a new home, into which an industrial press had been installed before the house was built overhead. The shop's main function was to fabricate six-, eight-, and twelve-inch EFP liners, the shaped dishes that give the devices their armor-piercing effect. At the time of its discovery, it was producing very accurate EFPs with passive infrared sensors (used to initiate a device as vehicles pass) and radio-controlled arming switches (to turn on the sensors). Local militants had also attempted to send a number of these advanced munitions into Saudi Arabia by road that May.
- On July 15, 2015, authorities captured a speedboat that had received 43.8 tons of C4 explosives, forty-nine detonators, and ball-bearings for Claymore-type devices from a ship just inside Bahrain's territorial waters. Eight AK-47 assault rifles and thirty-two magazines were also on the boat; two individuals were arrested.
- On September 27, 2015, security forces discovered another bombmaking facility in Nuwaidrat that contained 1.4 tons of C4, RDX, and TNT explosives plus significant quantities of precursors for developing homemade ammonium nitrate-based explosives. Also discovered onsite were an EFP-making industrial press, EFP components, six large pipe bombs, Claymore-type warheads, a bomb disguised as a fire extinguisher, a number of improvised mortars and rocket launchers, four AK-47s, four pistols, and twenty hand grenades.
- In December 2016, a group of men armed with AK-47s fled security forces after being dropped off in Bahrain by boat. Their escape car was traced to an address where a new workshop was discovered. The site contained detonators and other bombmaking equipment, some of which bore fingerprints of an individual wanted for previous bombing and arson attacks. Two individuals linked to the house had just traveled to Iran for a ten-day visit the previous month. A boat registered to the address carried a GPS device that showed numerous trips into Iranian waters stretching back to February 2015.

The importation of roadside bombing equipment and expertise has gradually transformed the level of terrorist threat inside Bahrain. Prior to 2011, the island saw only a smattering of arson bombings and concussion-inducing "sound bombs," which almost never caused fatalities. Since 2012, however, at least twenty-four terrorist bombings have occurred, killing twelve security personnel and maiming forty others. And whereas the loss of a single police weapon might have prompted the government to turn whole neighborhoods inside out before 2011, at least some militants now possess assault rifles that outgun a typical police patrol.

THE PRISON BREAK

Against this backdrop, the prison break at the Jau Reformation and Rehabilitation Center was seen as shocking new evidence that advanced militant cells are not only present in Bahrain, but are becoming operationally active. According to the Interior Ministry, the incident was preceded by drone reconnaissance of the jail facilities and

involved the bribing of one or more prison workers. Four to six attackers gained access armed with AK-type assault rifles and pistols, which they used in a firefight with watchtower guards. They killed one guard as he arrived for his shift, then tried to execute another on their way out of the facility.

Currently, four young men are being investigated for supporting the breakout, but none of the escapees has been recaptured. Nine of the ten Shiite convicts ranged in age from twenty-four to thirty-one years old; the tenth was a bit older at thirty-seven. Eight of them were serving life sentences, and the other two had long sentences as well, all on charges of militancy. Escapee Muhammed Ibrahim Mulla Redhi al-Tooq, sentenced to twenty-eight years, is described by the Bahraini government as the triggerman for the July 28, 2015, bombing that killed two policemen and injured six outside a girls' school in Sitra. Local authorities characterize all of the men as among the most dangerous terrorist suspects they had in custody.

The sophistication of the breakout and the value of the prisoners to Tehran-backed networks make it plausible that the operation was an Iranian-coordinated effort. Bahraini authorities point to the December incident in which two wanted militants were smuggled back into the country by boat from Iran, fearing that it may be connected to the prison escape. More broadly, such a high-profile breakout carries considerable cost and risk, so if Tehran was involved, it sends a strong message to Shiite militants that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) looks after its own. This kind of success also makes Iranian networks more resilient and motivated, increasing their recruitment potential.

Manama's fears have been further stoked by periodic threats from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, which are often issued in response to actions such as Saudi Arabia's January 2016 execution of Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr, or Bahrain's major crackdown on Shiites last summer. On June 19, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, head of the IRGC's elite Qods Force, made the most explicit Iranian threats against the Bahraini royal family since the 1980s, warning that Manama's actions would lead to a "bloody uprising" that would "leave people with no other option but the toppling of the regime in armed resistance." This is no idle threat -- the workshop raids and other discoveries indicate that Iran was already laying the practical groundwork for an armed uprising well before Soleimani's summer tirade.

The government now fears that Iranian-supported Shiite extremist groups on the island may be preparing to escalate hostilities to a new level. To support this argument, Bahraini authorities point to individuals like Hadi Modarresi, a radical Iraqi Shiite cleric who headed the 1981 coup attempt by the Iranian-sponsored Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain. At some point last year, Modarresi apparently met with Iraqi Shiite militias "to talk about escalating militancy in Bahrain in 2017."

BALANCING SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Long before the Jau prison break, Bahrain's Interior Ministry and National Security Agency had determined that one of the reforms the government had agreed to implement at the behest of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) -- namely, the dilution of arrest and interrogation powers -- presented unique challenges in the area of counterterrorism. Under these reforms, an NSA agent was only permitted to pass written questions to police officers as they interrogated terror suspects. The agent could not follow up on the suspects' answers, even though the kind of intelligence the agency tends to seek (financial information, travel patterns, networks of associates) is not covered in the standard criminal questioning carried out by police, whose goal is usually limited to convicting the suspect at hand, not collecting intelligence.

The NSA and Interior Ministry identified this change as the most serious handicap on their ability to collect timely intelligence in counterterrorism cases, particularly at a time when the militant threat in Bahrain was measurably increasing. Ever since the P5+1 nuclear deal was reached in 2015, Bahraini officials say they have seen a sharp increase in Iranian-sponsored militant activities, including more Bahrainis traveling to training programs in Iran

and Iraq. They also note an uptick in activity by operatives affiliated with groups such as the al-Ashtar and al-Mukhtar Brigades since the U.S. election in November, claiming that Iran wanted to pick up the pace of operations during the lame-duck period between administrations (some local officials also opined that Tehran may regard President-elect Trump as a wildcard and does not want to challenge him right out of the gate). Taken together, these factors could explain why Manama amended the BICI reforms after the Jau prison break, allowing the NSA to directly question terrorism suspects for intelligence purposes.

Although Washington would be justified in casting this reasonable amendment in a positive light, it should also emphasize that Bahrain needs to implement the change in a way that addresses human-rights concerns. Various organizations have highlighted well-documented problems with the island's adherence to the rule of law in determining what constitutes a counterterrorism case and protecting suspects against abuse while in custody. Providing strong but qualified U.S. validation regarding the threat facing Bahrain may be more productive than issuing vague warnings, as the Obama administration did in September 2016 when it threatened to restrict the island's access to \$3.8 billion of U.S.-produced F-16 aircraft and upgrades. This is particularly true given Bahrain's continued willingness to serve as home base for the U.S. Fifth Fleet.

At the same time, Manama needs to understand that it has created a credibility gap for itself by treating protestors and medical professionals as "terrorists" and blaming Iran for any and all domestic unrest, violent or not. The island's very real security challenges do not seem to justify putting human-rights activist Nabeel Rajab on trial for Twitter comments critical of Saudi-led military operations in Yemen, for example, or shutting off the Internet service for the entire community of Diraz just because it happens to be the home of Isa Qassim, the spiritual leader associated with the banned al-Wefaq society who was recently stripped of his citizenship. Moving forward, the government should strive to exhibit a clearer commitment to the rule of law, distinguishing between demonstrators and terrorists and dealing with each accordingly. The balance of evidence shows that Iran is aggressively working to erode Bahrain's stability: there is no need for Manama to undermine this proven narrative through self-inflicted human-rights controversies.

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