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Iran and Bahrain: Crying Wolf, or Wolf at the Door?

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt](#)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The Bahraini government will need to distinguish better between protestors and terrorists if it wants Washington and other foreign partners to believe its claims of Iranian support for local militants.

On May 5, in what has become an increasingly typical event in Bahrain, several individuals threw Molotov cocktails at a police post in a Shiite village, damaging storefronts but causing no casualties. Such incidents have intensified over the past few months in villages surrounding the capital, Manama -- in March, three police officers were killed by a bombing in al-Daih; last month, an explosion wounded another officer in the same village; days later, a police car was firebombed in Hamad Town.

In many cases, members of Bahrain's majority Shiite population have been implicated in such attacks, and the island's Sunni monarchy has blamed Iran's Shiite regime for supporting the violence and undermining its rule. Meanwhile, U.S. officials have their own concerns about Tehran supporting terrorist activity in Bahrain, with the State Department highlighting a recent shipment of Iranian arms to the island in its latest annual counterterrorism report. Yet Manama has a credibility problem given its heavy-handed response to peaceful protests over the past three years, making it very difficult to assess the extent to which Tehran is actively fostering violence.

CREDIBILITY GAP

Low-level unrest has plagued the kingdom since February 2011, when peaceful protestors took to the streets in the context of the Arab Spring. The al-Khalifa government violently suppressed the demonstrations, even sentencing doctors and nurses who treated injured protestors to jail terms of five to twenty years on terrorism charges. Those charges were trumped up, but once peaceful protests gave way to violent outbursts, charges against certain other

suspects seemed legitimate.

Unfortunately, Manama is largely responsible for obscuring the line between political protest and violence. The government has blacklisted Hezbollah and various smaller violent Shiite groups as terrorist entities, insisting that Iran is behind the violence. Yet its indiscriminate crackdowns have led some to view the claims of Iranian sponsorship as mere propaganda aimed at tainting any challenge to the monarchy.

Even so, it is undeniable that low-level attacks continue to plague the kingdom with increasing frequency. And while not every such act can be traced back to Tehran, reports pointing to an Iranian fingerprint have emerged. In particular, the December 2013 seizure of a speedboat from Iraq carrying Iranian arms and explosives showed that fears of Iranian interference in Bahrain cannot be discounted out of hand. Indeed, given Tehran's history of fomenting violence on the island, such concerns need to be carefully investigated.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Like other Persian Gulf governments, Manama has long accused Iran of inciting unrest and supporting militants who oppose the monarchy. Bahrain is a particularly sensitive case given that the Sunni ruling family governs over a Shiite-majority populace on a small island linked by causeway to Saudi Arabia and just 124 miles across the Gulf from Iran. Demographics and geography have long heightened Manama's sensitivity to possible Iranian meddling, and the instability of the past few years has only underscored concerns that date back to the early 1980s.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran began to sponsor terrorist activity in numerous countries as a means of exporting its revolution and furthering its strategic interests. According to a CIA report on Tehran-sponsored terrorism, Bahrain was the "target of a terrorist plot" in 1987, though the details are redacted from the otherwise declassified report. Writing in July 1988, the CIA warned that U.S. interests in Bahrain and Kuwait were "convenient, suitable targets" for Iranian-sponsored attacks given each country's relationship with Washington and their large Iranian expatriate populations. In another report that year, the agency explained:

Although some acts of terrorism by Shias in the Gulf may have been conducted without Tehran's explicit authorization, Tehran encourages such acts in principle and can call on these extremists to mount terrorist operations. Iranian-backed factions include the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, and the Islamic Call (Dawa) Party, which has branches in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon.

The agency also indicated that Iran often leveraged Lebanese Hezbollah's expertise to train Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Bahraini recruits. By the late 1980s, several Hezbollah branches -- which, according to the CIA, "were inspired, supported, and directed by elements of the Iranian government" -- operated around the Gulf.

In Bahrain, Tehran has long backed branches of militant Shiite organizations such as Hezbollah and the Dawa Party. In 1986, Manama began to crack down on Bahraini Hezbollah; a year later, it arrested and tried fifty-nine accused members. Yet the group was far from beaten -- in March 1997, Kuwaiti intelligence arrested thirteen Bahrainis and two Iraqis in Kuwait City, at the time operating under the name "Hezbollah Gulf." Correspondence seized at their homes revealed that they had connections with individuals in Damascus, Syria, and Qom, Iran, and that they were raising money to send back to Bahrain. According to Kuwaiti officials, evidence also showed that the cell may have been operating under the direction of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS). Whatever the case, Bahraini Hezbollah was clearly working with militant Shiite elements across the Gulf.

Despite effectively disabling the group by 1997, intelligence officials in Manama remained concerned at the time that "several key leaders" of Bahraini Hezbollah, including "three military council members," had avoided capture and were perhaps "attempting to regroup and conduct Hezbollah-related activities." According to the CIA, Muhammad Habib Mansur Saffaf, "one of the group's top leaders," reportedly ran a safe house in Kuwait that served

as a "key transit point between Bahrain and Lebanon"; the agency also noted that he had "engaged in weapons smuggling and may still be involved in terrorist-related activities." In addition, the agency reported that Bahraini Hezbollah military council member Adil Shuala, who had fled the island, might also have been affiliated with the Saudi Hezbollah group behind the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing. According to Bahraini officials, thirty-seven other known members of the group likely fled to Iran or Lebanon. Their possible ties to Iran, along with the "Hezbollah Gulf" name adopted by the Kuwait cell, led CIA analysts to suggest in a May 1997 report that "Tehran may be working to create a new Hezbollah cell to oppose the Bahraini Government."

BAHRAIN'S NEXT-GENERATION "RESISTANCE"?

After Manama began to crack down on public protests in 2011, several militant Shiite groups organized to challenge the al-Khalifa government. Along with the better known Bahraini Hezbollah, three of these groups are particularly worrisome:

- **Saraya al-Ashtar**, listed as a terrorist group by Manama, issued its first public statement in April 2013 and has since claimed credit for twenty bombings against security personnel. According to analyst Phillip Smyth, it claimed the March 3 bombing that killed three policemen, including an Emirati officer who was part of the forces that Saudi Arabia and the UAE deployed beginning in 2011 to help Bahraini authorities maintain order.
- **Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya** (the Popular Resistance Brigades, or SMS) also claimed responsibility for the March 3 attack and was subsequently listed as a terrorist group. It has been conducting operations since August 2012 and openly affiliates with the February 14 Youth Coalition, an antigovernment protest group. According to Smyth, SMS claims it is fighting a "jihad against the infidel Khalifas" and describes its fighters as jihadists. Thus far it has detonated two improvised explosive devices in a Bahraini mall (issuing a communique in advance to warn of the explosion); it also used bombs to target the country's National Bank and, reportedly, a power plant. In addition, the group claims that it planted car bombs in the capital targeting the airport and internal security forces, and that it detonated an IED near the U.S. naval base in Bahrain, which serves as headquarters of the Fifth Fleet.
- **Saraya al-Mukhtar** emerged in September 2013 and has taken credit for a number of attacks on Bahraini security forces, including crude IED attacks, though Manama has yet to list it as a terrorist organization. According to Smyth, the group maintains a robust online presence and is the only militant Shiite faction in Bahrain to openly espouse regional goals, viewing the island's strife as part of a larger conflict with the Saudi monarchy -- a significant claim given the ongoing Shiite unrest in Saudi Arabia's neighboring Eastern Province.

The extent to which these groups have received support from Iran remains a matter of debate, but reports suggest at least some level of Iranian backing for Shiite militancy in Bahrain. For example, a 2011 *Washington Post* story by David Ignatius cited a Saudi official who stated that Gholam Shakuri -- who was reportedly involved in the 2011 Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington -- was "an important Qods Force case officer who had helped organize militant Shiite protesters in Bahrain." Specifically, Shakuri and other Iranians met with radical Bahraini Shiite cleric Hassan Mushaima during a February 2011 stopover in Beirut, "when Mushaima was on his way back home to lead protests in Bahrain."

IRANIAN ARMS SHIPMENT

On December 30, 2013, the Bahraini coast guard intercepted a speedboat from Iraq carrying arms and explosives intended for Shiite extremists in Bahrain. Among the seized materials were 50 Iranian-made grenades and nearly 300 explosive devices labeled "Made in Syria." Under interrogation, "the suspects admitted to receiving paramilitary training in Iran," according to the State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism*. In a subsequent BBC story, one Western diplomat characterized the incident as "the biggest counterterrorism arms haul in two years" and said "it was being taken extremely seriously by Western governments." Such scrutiny would come as no

surprise given that Yemeni authorities had intercepted a similar shipment in January 2013, also involving defendants who admitted to receiving military training in Iran.

Shortly after the boat seizure, Bahraini officials conducted raids on suspected arms warehouses, uncovering "a huge quantity of explosives" along with commercial detonators made in Syria, guns, bombmaking materials, and more. The raids in turn led to the arrest of seventeen people, including a Saudi national, and reportedly uncovered evidence of outside support for Bahraini militants.

CONCLUSION

Because the Bahraini government has cried wolf more than once -- referring to protestors and medical professionals as "terrorists" and repeatedly blaming Iran for domestic unrest -- it has created a credibility gap that will not be easily overcome. Manama's ham-fisted response to peaceful protestors and violent assailants alike has left analysts pondering how much credence to give the various evidence reportedly seized in December. Moving forward, the Bahraini government will need to exhibit a clearer commitment to rule of law, distinguishing between demonstrators and terrorists and dealing with each accordingly. Only then will its foreign partners be able to effectively assess new evidence of Iranian support for local militants.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. His latest book is [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#). ❖



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