



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

### Iran and Bahrain: Ancient Ambitions, New Tactics

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BESA Center Perspectives No. 762, March 7, 2018

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Bahraini government has long claimed that Iran is encouraging the Shiite opposition, which is fighting for recognition and political change. This is not an empty fear. Tehran's push for hegemony in the archipelago is not a new phenomenon. However, unlike monarchic Iran, whose hegemonic drive focused on the international political-diplomatic arena, the Islamic Republic is working for change from within and is using both soft power and subversion.

Iran's push for hegemony in the Persian Gulf is hardly new. It stems from geostrategic and geopolitical factors related to the region's importance in all regards, from security to economic and trade aspects. At the same time, Iran's hegemonic ambitions in Bahrain can be considered a special case given the fragile demographic-political makeup of the principality, in which a Sunni minority rules a Shiite majority that is fighting for its rights and its role in governing the kingdom. Tehran's subversive activity is, of course, condemned by the ruling establishment, which has long relied on Saudi patronage.

In early March 2018, the *Al-Arabiya* network [reported](#) a major counterinsurgency operation by the Bahraini security forces that seized large quantities of weapons and arrested 116 suspects belonging to a terrorist network established by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This came on the heels of the reported arrest of 47 Bahraini citizens from three different terror cells working to destabilize Bahrain. Bahraini interior minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa pointed an accusing finger at the Revolutionary Guards, Hezbollah, and the al-Hashd al-Shaabi organization; these, he said, had trained, financed, and directed the terror cells. This was not the first time the Bahraini authorities had

leveled such charges at the Iranians, who, they maintain, are working to subvert the Bahraini archipelago's fragile balance of power in favor of the Shiite majority.

In a country where Shiites are about 70% of the population, the ruling establishment's main charge is that Tehran is encouraging the Shiite opposition as it fights for recognition and political change. Members of the House of Khalifa accuse Iran of ongoing subversion in the archipelago, with the aim of destabilization and a change of government. For evidence, the Bahraini media highlight the numerous arrests of terror cells trained by the IRGC for the purpose of toppling the government. A mysterious explosion in Bahrain's oil pipeline in November 2017 was also attributed to Iranian-backed elements. In addition, in March of last year, the Bahrain News Agency (BNA) reported the foiling of an attempted attack on senior officials, leading to arrests of suspects who had been trained in Iraq by the IRGC and Hezbollah. A month earlier the BNA reported on a wave of arrests that led to the [exposure of several terror cells](#) in the emirate.

The struggle between Iran and Bahrain predates the Islamic Republic. Monarchic Iran made a historically based claim to sovereignty over the archipelago, which it saw as an integral part of its territory. In Tehran's view, the artificial separation created by a series of agreements between Bahrain and Britain (in 1861, 1880, and 1892), which put the principality under British patronage, stemmed from a weak governmental mechanism and not from historical reality. Tehran further claimed, on the same historical basis, that the 1951 Oil Nationalization Act, which was ratified in the Iranian parliament at the initiative of Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddegh, also applied to the Bahrain Petroleum Company.

Britain's departure from the Persian Gulf at the beginning of the 1970s resulted in geopolitical changes that directly affected Bahrain. After Bahrain declared independence in 1971, monarchic Iran and Saudi Arabia worked out arrangements for territorial control of the Persian Gulf. On the one hand, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi assented to Saudi control of Bahrain and the Arab principalities; on the other, King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz recognized Iran's role as guardian of the Persian Gulf. Moreover, during the Iran-Iraq War the House of Khalifa publicly acknowledged the House of Saud as its main patron. This dependence has continued – de facto – until the present, and was well evident in March 2011 when Riyadh sent its forces to Bahrain to shore up the Khalifa family's rule. The Saudi move came in response to the civil unrest in the archipelago, which was seen as part of a chain reaction to the events of the so-called Arab Spring.

In the monarchical period, Iran used diplomatic channels to pursue its claims against members of the Arab League, then led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser; the League strongly opposed those claims. Tehran went so far

as to threaten the Arab states that if they did not recognize its claim to sovereignty over Bahrain, it would institutionalize its ties with Israel – a threat that remained on paper only.

The current approach of the Islamic Republic is different. It entails working for change from within and focusing considerable effort on certain interrelated spheres of activity. The **first sphere** involves enhancing Iranian influence through the use of "soft power": helping to establish culture and welfare centers, providing Islamic (Shiite) guidance, contributing to the building of mosques, and setting up Husseiniyat (community-religious centers for mourning and prayer over the death of Hussein in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE). Most of the activity is carried out in neighborhoods with a sizable Shiite population. The aim is to attract people to religion and instill sympathy for Khomeini's doctrine of *velayet-e faqih*, or the rule of the Islamic jurist. The effort to attract people to religion, which is an integral part of the soft-power model, helps in recruiting potential candidates for opposition movements.

The **second sphere** involves strengthening opposition elements who oppose the autocratic-tribal rule of the Khalifa family. The object is to create a governmental alternative and undermine the current government. In December 1981, for example, the organization al-Jabha al-Islamiya li-Tahrir al-Bahrain (the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain) made a failed attempt to topple the monarchic regime and replace it with a theocratic regime led by Hadi al-Modarresi. Born in Iraq and a scion of a family of Shiite clerics, Modarresi became active in Bahrain after fleeing an arrest warrant issued against him by the Baath regime. According to the researcher Hassan Tarik al-Hassan, Modarresi not only drew inspiration from the doctrine of *velayet-e faqih* but received support from envoys of the revolutionary regime. After the coup was foiled, a number of Iranian diplomats were indeed expelled from Bahrain.

The 1990s saw another putsch attempt in Manama. The Bahraini opposition, which called for restoring the constitution (not in force since 1975) and granting equal opportunity to all citizens, ratcheted up its struggle. Protests intensified, and in 1996 the government revealed a further attempt to overthrow the regime and replace it with an Iranian-style Islamic republic. Bahrain's state television claimed the rebels had admitted belonging to the group Hezbollah al-Bahraini, which was supported by Iran and inspired by Hezbollah al-Hijaz – which, in turn, was active in Saudi Arabia and was blamed for the Khobar Towers terror attack on American soldiers that same year.

The Bahraini government also drew a link between the presence of Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim in the Iranian city of Qom (for theological studies) and the 1996 coup attempt. That allegation was not proved, and Isa Qassim was allowed to return to Manama in 2001. Today he is considered the spiritual leader of al-

Wefaq, the largest Shiite opposition movement in the kingdom. However, al-Wefaq (whose operative leader is Ali Salman) was outlawed in June 2016, and Isa Qassim's citizenship was revoked a week later.

The **third sphere** is a direct extension of the second and reflects changes in the Iranian approach that were largely impelled by the Saudi-led forces' March 2011 invasion of the archipelago to quell the agitation there. This sphere draws inspiration from the model used in Iraq and involves setting up a network of underground cells with operatives who have been trained outside Bahrain, while maintaining internal compartmentalization. Individuals seen as capable of leading the cells have been sent for operational training and further theological study, all under suitable cover so as to evade the authorities.

Researchers Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt [note](#) that Iran often infiltrates people and weapons into Bahrain by sea. For this purpose, Tehran makes use of speedboats, which are an important part of the IRGC's doctrine of maritime warfare. According to reports of the Bahraini authorities, the largest of all the underground organizations appears to be Saraya al-Ashtar. Other groups include Saraya al-Mukhtar, Saraya al-Muqawama al-Sha'biya, Saraya Waad-Allah, and Saraya al-Karar. Despite their different names, these groups appear to operate under a single umbrella based in Tehran.

In sum, since the founding of the Islamic Republic, the regime has worked tirelessly to spread its revolutionary ideology to the Muslim world. Since Bahrain's demographic makeup provides fertile ground for promoting this worldview, Iran seeks to boost its influence in the principalities whether through soft power or support for opposition groups and the training of militant organizations that serve as proxies. Manama's complaints about ceaseless subversion on Iran's part are therefore far from baseless.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family