



PolicyWatch 2228

Iranian Aid to Fighters in the Gulf Peninsula

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A number of U.S. interests could be served by expanding support to strategic Gulf partners in their efforts to curb Iranian aid to local fighters.

On March 6, Bahrain's foreign minister told the UN Human Rights Council that the ongoing violence in his country "is directly supported by elements of the Islamic Republic of Iran." The statement does not accurately explain all political violence in Bahrain, but not every claim of Iranian support for violence should be assumed to represent part of a government propaganda campaign. U.S. intelligence assesses that Iran is in fact providing arms and more to Bahraini and other fighters in the Arabian Peninsula, and Washington should increase support to important Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners to curb it.

BACKGROUND

The various Iran-linked attacks that occurred in GCC countries following the 1979 Islamic Revolution helped shape perceptions about Tehran's willingness and ability to support violence in the Gulf. The most famous attacks include coup attempts in 1981 and 1996 by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain and Hezbollah Bahrain, respectively; bombings, airplane hijackings, and an assassination attempt against the emir in Kuwait by Hezbollah and its Iraqi associates in the 1980s; and the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing by Hezbollah al-Hejaz in Saudi Arabia.

In February 2011, large groups of predominantly Shiite protestors began demonstrating for reform in Bahrain, prompting Saudi Arabia to dispatch troops to help quash the uprising a month later. The United Arab Emirates dispatched police units to the island for the same purpose. These developments appear to be primary factors behind Iran's reinvigorated support to some fighters in GCC countries. From the outset, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman called Riyadh's intervention "unacceptable," and parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani warned that "the deployment of forces by a number of regional countries...will

definitely harm their glassy palaces in the future."

WEAPONS AND TRAINING FOR BAHRAINI FIGHTERS

Periodically during the past three years, Bahrain has reported weapons seizures that often included some combination of homemade bombs, guns, and ammunition. In late December 2013, Manama reported a particularly significant seizure -- of a boat ferrying guns, ammunition, and explosives, including dozens of blocks of C4, mines, and hand grenades. Some of the items featured markings that indicated they were made in Iran or Syria. The vessel was stopped while apparently heading from Iraq to Bahrain, and its crew included two Bahrainis.

The extent of Iran's connection to the apparent smuggling attempt remains unclear, but Western governments reportedly took the weapons seizure seriously. The incident may have informed the U.S. intelligence community's assessment that Tehran has been providing arms to Bahraini fighters, as indicated in the "Worldwide Threat Assessment" published by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on January 29.

Since the uprising began, Manama has also accused Tehran of providing militant training for some Bahrainis in Iran and elsewhere, both directly and indirectly via allied groups. In a private report to the United Nations in April 2011, Bahrain charged Hezbollah with training opposition elements at camps in Lebanon and Iran. And on several occasions in 2013, it identified Iraq as another training site. In November, Bahrainis implicated in violent plots were said to have attended Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) training camps in Iran and Iraqi Hezbollah camps in Baghdad and Karbala. More recently, Bahrain alleged that some of the suspects in the March 3 bombing that killed three security officers in al-Daih received training in Iran, as did the two Bahrainis captured in the December boat seizure.

There is no substantive public evidence for current Iranian training of Bahrainis, but unclassified interrogation transcripts from Iraqi Shiites trained by Iran in the previous decade provide a granular description of the methods Tehran may use to train Gulf Shiites.

SAUDI ACCUSATIONS

Like Bahrain, Saudi Arabia has also cited an Iranian hand in almost all forms of domestic Shiite activism, violent and nonviolent. In particular, Riyadh has accused Iran of supporting violence in the kingdom's Shiite-majority Eastern Province since "Arab Spring" protests first emerged there. As violence intensified in November 2011, the Saudi Interior Ministry announced that "a number of security checkpoints and vehicles have...been increasingly coming under gunfire attacks in the Qatif region by assailants motivated by foreign orders" -- certainly a reference to Iran.

While the accuracy of Saudi claims about "foreign orders" remains unclear, Saudi authorities are genuinely convinced that Iran is instigating the violence. According to a contact close to an Arab intelligence agency, Riyadh believes that the IRGC's Qods Force has trained Saudis to carry out effective drive-by shootings against security personnel in the areas of Qatif and al-Awamiyah, with the apparent intent of drawing counterfire into Shiite crowds.

SPY RINGS

The three GCC countries that proved the most common targets of past Iran-linked attacks -- Kuwait, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia -- have each busted alleged Iranian intelligence networks in recent years. Kuwait convicted several individuals in March 2011 for collecting intelligence on military sites for the IRGC, including U.S. facilities. The foreign minister noted that the network possessed the means and intent "to explode vital Kuwaiti facilities."

In July 2011, Bahrain convicted one of its nationals as part of the same case. The suspect had identified and photographed sensitive sites in Kuwait, including the homes of individuals employed at the U.S. naval base, then transferred the information to Iranian diplomats in Kuwait.

In March and May of 2013, Saudi Arabia detained more than two dozen individuals -- mostly Saudis -- for allegedly collecting information on important installations and receiving money from the IRGC, though prominent Saudi Shiites have denounced the accusations as a sham. In any case, Tehran could have several reasons for recent intelligence-gathering efforts in GCC countries, such as assessing Gulf and U.S. military postures toward Iran, preparing for counterattacks in case of strikes against its nuclear capabilities, or laying the groundwork for attacks independent of a strike on Iran.

U.S. ROLE

By expanding its support for efforts to curb Iranian aid to Gulf fighters, Washington could serve several purposes at once. Strategic Gulf partners would view it as meaningful action to accompany verbal assurances about U.S. policy toward Iran -- in particular, Riyadh would see it as direct support for the kingdom's efforts to address its own domestic challenges, and as support for its neighbor, Bahrain, whose security situation holds implications for Saudi Arabia. Assistance to Bahrain could in turn give Washington additional leverage to press for reforms there, based on the correct argument that measures against Iranian interference will be effective only if accompanied by respect for human rights and forward-moving dialogue between the government and the opposition's nonviolent majority.

On the security front, U.S. and Gulf intelligence agencies have no doubt cooperated on cases involving surveillance of American installations, and Washington could build on this cooperation by addressing other Iranian-linked operations in partner states. New support could take several forms: greater intelligence sharing on individuals in GCC countries who are connected to Iranian militant aid; new training and development assistance for local coast guard, border, and customs personnel to help them limit Iranian infiltration; deeper cybersecurity cooperation; and even additional measures to address Iranian aid to the Houthi rebels along Saudi Arabia's border with Yemen -- something the kingdom views as a threat to its own security.

Finally, measures to counter Iranian activity should be complemented with private statements to GCC partners discouraging the blatantly false portrayal of all Shiite activism as evidence of Iranian subversion. Such portrayals may wind up radicalizing more Gulf Shiites, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy of Shiite collusion with Tehran on seditious activity.

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