



Iranian Subversion in Bahrain: The United States designates the Saraya al-Mukhtar as a Bahraini terrorist organization handled by Iran

December 17, 2020

Overview

On December 15, 2020, the American State Department announced it was **designating the Bahraini terrorist organization Saraya al-Mukhtar as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist organization**.¹ According to the announcement, the organization receives **"financial and logistic support" from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps**. The organization's "self-described goal is to **depose the Bahraini government** with the intention of **paving the way for Iran to exert greater influence in Bahrain**" (State Department website, December 15, 2020). Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that "[t]he group has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials" (Reuters, December 15, 2020). Bahrain welcomed the American decision, calling it "a significant positive step taken to confront ... [a] terrorist organization supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards..." (Bahrain News Agency, December 15, 2020).

¹ **Note:** The literal translation of Saraya al-Mukhtar is the "al-Mukhtar Companies." In most instances they appear as the a-Mukhtar Brigades. The Saraya al-Mukhtar is named for Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, the commander of one of the Shi'ite revolutions against the Umayyad Caliphate after the Battle of Karbala.



Today, the Department of State has designated the Saraya al-Mukhtar group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist pursuant to Executive Order 13224 for posing a significant risk of committing acts of terrorism that threaten the national security and foreign policy of the United States.

Saraya al-Mukhtar is an Iran-backed terrorist organization based in Bahrain, reportedly receiving financial and logistic support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Saraya al-Mukhtar's self-described goal is to depose the Bahraini government with the intention of paving the way for Iran to exert greater influence in Bahrain. The group has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials.

This designation seeks to deny Saraya al-Mukhtar the resources to commit acts of terrorism. Among other consequences, all of the group's property and interests in property that are in the United States, that hereafter come within the United States, or hereafter come within the possession or control of U.S. persons, are blocked, and U.S. persons are generally prohibited from engaging in any transactions with it.

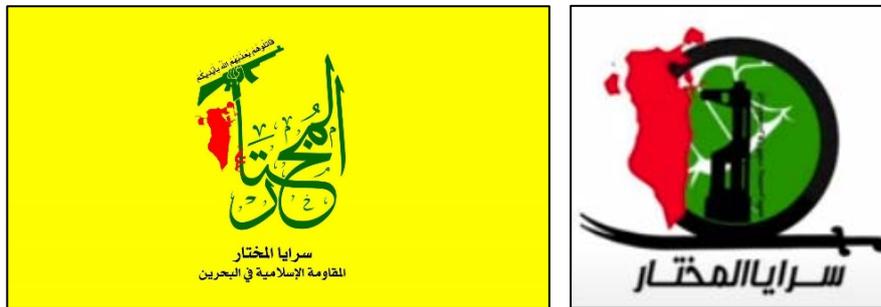
This action notifies the U.S. public and the international community that Saraya al-Mukhtar poses a significant risk of committing acts of terrorism. Designations of terrorist organizations expose and isolate them and deny them access to the U.S. financial system. Moreover, designations can assist the law enforcement actions of other U.S. agencies and governments.

The announcement issued by the American State Department regarding the designation of Saraya al-Mukhtar as a terrorist organization (State Department website, December 15, 2020).

- ▶ **Saraya al-Mukhtar is a terrorist organization founded with Iranian aid in 2011.** Since its inception it has carried out a series of terrorist and guerrilla attacks in an attempt to overthrow the Bahraini government. **In recent years its strength waned and it carried out fewer attacks,** in ITIC assessment because of the Bahraini regime's successful counterterrorist activities. In July 2017 the al-Mukhtar Brigades was **designated as a terrorist organization** by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, and in December 2017 by Britain.
- ▶ Nevertheless, although it is the most prominent terrorist organization handled by Iran, and has been active in Bahrain for almost a decade, **until now it has not been designated by the Americans.** In ITIC assessment, the reason for the designation may be because the United States has updated information indicating that the "group has plotted attacks against U.S. personnel in Bahrain and has offered cash rewards for the assassination of Bahraini officials," as noted by Mike Pompeo, the Secretary of State (Reuters, December 15, 2020). (**Note:** The Fifth Fleet is anchored in Bahrain, where the United States has its largest naval base in the area of the Persian Gulf.)

The al-Mukhtar Brigades

The two al-Mukhtar Brigades logos



Right: The Sword of Zulfiqar (which according to Shi'ite Muslim tradition Muhammad gave to the Imam Ali bin Ali Talib) with a rifle resting on it. To the left is the map of Bahrain and in the background a green (the color of Islam) clenched fist (the Ulum al-Dar channel, operating in Abu Dhabi, June 22, 2020). Left: Logo which includes the map of Bahrain and part of Qur'an Sura 9, At-Tawbah, Verse 14, "So fight them and Allah will punish them at your hands."

Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah logos with motifs similar to those of the al-Mukhtar Brigades



Right: The logo of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps above an upraised rifle and part of Qur'an Sura 8, Al-Anfal, Verse 60, "Prepare against [your enemies] what you believers can [with] military power and cavalry..." Left: The Hezbollah logo, above which is Qur'an Sura 5, Al-Ma'idah, Verse 56, "Whoever allies themselves with Allah, His Messenger, and fellow believers, then it is certainly Allah's party that will prevail."

Background

► The al-Mukhtar Brigades is a Bahraini terrorist organization which was established with Iranian support in July 2011, during extensive Shi'ite rioting in Bahrain, part of events of the so-called "Arab Spring." To suppress the riots, which threatened to destabilize the Bahraini regime, **the government asked the [Arabian] Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) for support.** A

force of 1,200 Saudi Arabian and 800 UAE troops **entered Bahrain on March 15, 2011**, and helped the Bahrainis calm the riots.

► The entrance of the PFS, with forces dominated by Saudi Arabia, Iran's rival, was **perceived by Iran as a threat to its regional interests**. However, the Iranians abstained from a military response, instead **using proxies to increase their subversion of the Bahraini regime**. Between 2011 and 2015 Iran established several Shi'ite terrorist organizations in Bahrain, **the most prominent of which was the al-Mukhtar Brigades**, part of the umbrella organization called the **"Islamic Resistance of Bahrain."** Other terrorist organizations established at the same time were the al-Ashtar Brigades, the Wa'ad Allah Brigades, the Thaer Allah Brigades and the Popular Resistance Brigades.²



Flags of the main organizations composing the "Islamic Resistance of Bahrain" (website of al-Abdal, an Iranian-supported Iraqi militia, January 3, 2020).

The al-Mukhtar Brigades' ideology

► From its inception, the al-Mukhtar Brigades **received aid from Iran and the Iranian-handled Iraqi Shi'ite militias**. They also accepted the Iranian concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the guardianship of the Islamic jurist. Their supreme source of religious authority is Iranian leader **Ali Khamenei**. On July 3, 2016, in an editorial for the anniversary of the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the al-Mukhtar Brigades **swore allegiance to his ideology, stressing "adherence to the path of resistance."** The al-Mukhtar Brigades also adopted **shaheed glorification**, apparently inspired by Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

² For further information, see the October 11, 2020 bulletin, "Bahrain as an Arena for Iran Subversion and Terrorism."



Death notice for al-Mukhtar Brigades shaheeds (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, April 1, 2017).

Al-Mukhtar Brigades' terrorist and guerrilla activities

► With its inception, the al-Mukhtar Brigades began **launching attacks on Bahraini security personnel and PSF forces** in the Arabian Peninsula, primarily with IEDs. Over the years **it carried out about 200 attacks, the largest number of any Bahraini terrorist organization established by Iran**. In March 2012 the Bahraini government detained al-Mukhtar Brigades operatives and supporters, and found explosive materials in their possession. In May 2014 the organization announced the creation of a wing aimed at economically damaging **the ruling Bahraini Khalifa clan. The wing attacked Bahrain's electric and communications grids**. In addition to physical attacks, in June 2017 they hacked the official Twitter account of the Bahraini foreign minister and threatened the ruling families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia³ (Sky News, December 16, 2020; al-Hadath, December 16, 2020).



Right: Operatives of the al-Mukhtar Brigades detonate an IED. Left: Rocket or mortar fire (Ulum al-Dar, Saudi Arabia, July 22, 2017).

³ Wikipedia in Arabic, the entry for the al-Abdal militias; the website of the al-Abdal militias, March 9, 2014; al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, August 25, 2016.



Bahraini security operatives in the crosshairs. The Arabic reads, "You are within our range" (al-Mukhtar Brigades Twitter account, August 30, 2016).

Waning of the al-Mukhtar Brigades' activity in recent years

► Most of the terrorist attacks carried out by the al-Mukhtar Brigades (and other Bahraini terrorist organizations handled by Iran) were **between 2011 and 2017**, peaking in 2017. **Since 2018 the strength of the al-Mukhtar Brigades and the other Bahraini terrorist organizations has waned.** In ITIC assessment, that was mainly a consequence of the successful counterterrorist activities carried out by the Bahraini security forces.

Possible reasons for the American designation

► Designating the al-Mukhtar Brigades as a terrorist organization, Mike Pompeo, the American Secretary of State, stated that **the organization planned to attack Americans in Bahrain and had offered rewards for the assassination of members of the Bahraini administration.** It is therefore possible that the Americans had indications of the organization's intention to renew its activities, directed and supported by Iran. As noted above, Bahrain is where the United States anchors the Fifth Fleet, which the Iranians perceive as a threat, and therefore American army personnel in Bahrain could be possible targets.