

Iranian-Backed Proxies in the Arabian Peninsula: Examining the Al-Ashtar Brigades and the Houthi Movement

Overview

Iran has long used proxy forces in the Middle East to wage campaigns of terror on its behalf, particularly against Sunni states that it sees as obstacles to regional hegemony. This is particularly true in the Arabian Peninsula, where Iran aims to keep its archnemesis Saudi Arabia off balance. To that end, Iran has historically supported terror organizations in both Bahrain and Yemen. This paper will examine two of those groups, the Al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain and the Houthi Movement in Yemen. It will address each group’s links to Iran, messaging employed by each group, and the tactics and capabilities of the two groups as they operate in very different strategic environments, with theater-specific goals designed to advance a broader vision.

Al-Ashtar Brigades

Background and Links to Iran

The Al-Ashtar Brigades (AAB), also known as Sarya Al-Ashtar, is among the newest terror groups on the island of Bahrain, rising to prominence in 2013 and 2014 for its role in at least two dozen attacks¹ on police and security forces. Since that time its tactics have evolved, though its goal of overthrowing the Sunni monarchy of the majority-Shia nation remains the same. Iran has long sought to exploit the religious difference between the rulers and the ruled,² and its backing of the AAB is the latest example of this. Bahrain’s government has long considered the group a terror organization and its objective a serious threat, and believes its

¹ Roule, Norman. “What a New Terrorist Designation Says About Iranian Action in Bahrain,” *Just Security*. 9/21/2018. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://www.justsecurity.org/60818/terrorist-designation-iranian-action-bahrain/>

² Ibid

center of operations to be in the Iranian city of Qom.³ The AAB officially adopted a new flag and logo in 2018 that are similar in color and composition to the flags of other Iranian-backed proxies in the region, among the most concrete public evidence of AAB's connections to Iran.⁴ Iran supports AAB by providing weapons and explosives directly to the militants in Bahrain, providing training to its members (typically in camps in Iraq), and offering safe haven to militants once they have committed their attacks in Bahrain.⁵ Iran has also buried the bodies of "martyred" members of AAB on Iranian soil, another indication of the closeness of the two groups and the depth of Iranian support for the AAB.⁶

Messaging

The AAB's messaging begins with its self-conception. The group is named for Malik al-Ashtar, one of the loyal companions of the Prophet Muhammad's cousin Ali Ibn Abi Talib.⁷ This imbues all of the AAB's communications with religious overtones, and it invokes the Koran at the beginning of every public statement it makes in addition to religious themes throughout, something that differentiates it from all other Bahraini terror groups.⁸ Its messaging efforts took a new step when the group released its first ever video in 2019,⁹ possibly a sign that increasing Iranian backing is allowing the group to expand its efforts. This video¹⁰ included eulogies for recently killed members of AAB who were traveling to Iran for training and ended with an

³ Al-Khalida, Abdulla R. Bahrain's Ambassador to the United States. 7/10/2018. Accessed 2/17/2020 <https://twitter.com/abdullarak/status/1016776680998866945>

⁴ Weiss, Caleb. "US adds Iranian-supported Bahraini militia to terrorism list" *Long War Journal*. 7/10/2018. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/us-adds-iranian-supported-bahraini-militia-to-terrorism-list.php>

⁵ U.S. State Department Counterterrorism Bureau. Infographic tweeted 7/10/2018. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://twitter.com/StateDeptCT/status/1016680737330925570>

⁶ Weiss, Caleb. "Iranian proxy warns of more attacks in Bahrain," *Long War Journal*. 2/9/2019. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/02/iranian-proxy-warns-of-more-attacks-in-bahrain.php>

⁷ "Why did US State Department Designate al-Ashtar Brigades as A terrorist Organization?" Future for Advanced Research and Studies. 7/16/2018. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://futureuae.com/m/Mainpage/Item/4078/assuring-the-allies-why-did-us-state-department-designate-al-ashtar-brigades-as-a-terrorist-organiz>

⁸ "In Bahrain, Opposition Groups Become More Radical," *Stratfor Worldview*. 7/19/2013. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/bahrain-opposition-groups-become-more-radical>

⁹ Weiss, "Iranian proxy warns"

¹⁰ Ibid.

explicit call for Bahraini citizens to join the Iranian “Axis of Resistance.” All of this messaging flows from AAB’s alignment with Iran’s Shirazi movement which “calls for a Shiite armed rebellion for the emergence of the absent Imam.”¹¹

Tactics and Capabilities

The AAB’s tactics and capabilities are largely determined by its backing from Iran. AAB cells are typically very small, operate independently from one another, and are overseen from abroad by a handler from Iran, typically a Bahraini militant who has fled the country.¹² When the group first rose to prominence there was a noticeable increase in the number of explosives and weapons of Iranian origin that were captured by Bahraini security forces.¹³ These weapons remain the primary mechanism AAB uses in its terror attacks, though the group (or its allied groups) have developed more sophisticated weaponry.¹⁴ Early on in the group’s existence, its explosives were very rudimentary – possibly evidence of the effectiveness of Bahrain’s policing to prevent illicit material from entering the country.¹⁵ However, its bomb making capability has grown more sophisticated since its inception. Iran has provided more and better training and seems to have found ways to circumvent the existing security infrastructure.¹⁶

The group has not claimed credit for any attacks since 2017 – however, the government of Bahrain believes AAB has developed front groups that have claimed credit for attacks since then¹⁷. In fact, AAB may simply be one of many “brands” operating in Bahrain with the backing

¹¹ “Why did US State Department Designate...?”

¹² Knights, Michael & Levitt, Matthew. “The Evolution of the Shi’a Insurgency in Bahrain,” *CTC Sentinel*. January 2018, Vol. 11, Iss. 1. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://ctc.usma.edu/evolution-shia-insurgency-bahrain/>

¹³ Roule, “New terrorist designation”

¹⁴ “Bahrain May Have a New Shiite Militant Group” *Stratfor Worldview*. 7/29/2015. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/bahrain-may-have-new-shiite-militant-group>

¹⁵ “In Bahrain, Opposition Groups Become More Radical,” *Stratfor Worldview*. 7/19/2013. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/bahrain-opposition-groups-become-more-radical>

¹⁶ Knights & Levitt, “Evolution of Shi’a Insurgency in Bahrain”

¹⁷ Weiss, Caleb. “Bahrain blames “Iran-trained” cell for deadly bombing.” *Long War Journal*. 11/17/2017. Accessed 2/17/2020. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/bahrain-blames-iran-trained-cell-for-deadly-bombing.php>

of the Iranian regime¹⁸. Recent attacks on an oil pipeline running from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain using drones have been blamed on Iranian-backed proxies, and AAB is one of the likeliest candidates given its past efforts to attack oil pipelines.¹⁹ This kind of attack would represent a major change in capabilities, which to this point have been mostly confined to small scale bombings targeting police and security forces.

Houthi Movement

Background and Links to Iran

The Houthi Movement emerged in the early 2000s but rose to international prominence in 2015 during the Yemeni civil war when they seized control of the nation's capital and deposed of then-President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.²⁰ The movement was founded by Hussein Badr al Deen al-Houthi and its goal at first was to dispose of longtime Yemeni ruler Ali Abdullah Saleh, whom the Houthis viewed as a corrupt leader. This changed following the American invasion of Iraq, which radicalized the movement and changed their aims to overthrowing the Sunni government, now led by Hadi, who was considered a pawn of the Saudis.²¹ The Houthis have endeavored to create a "state within a state" and have focused on limiting the power of local sheikhs and giving assistance to areas of the country that have long felt neglected by the central Yemeni government.²² In this way the Houthi's goal is to create a full, functional state.

¹⁸ Knights & Levitt, "Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain"

¹⁹ Al Arabiya English Staff Writers. "US designates leader of Bahrain's Al Ashtar Brigades as global terrorist" *Al Arabiya English*. 8/14/2018. Accessed 3/1/2020. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/08/14/US-designates-leader-of-Bahrain-s-Al-Ashtar-Brigades-as-global-terrorist.html>

²⁰ Saul, Jonathan and Hafezi, Parisa, and Georgy, Michael. "Exclusive: Iran steps up support for Houthis in Yemen's war – sources" *Reuters*. 3/21/2017. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-iran-houthis/exclusive-iran-steps-up-support-for-houthis-in-yemens-war-sources-idUSKBN16S22R>

²¹ Riedel, Bruce. "Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?" Brookings Institution. 12/18/2017. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/12/18/who-are-the-houthis-and-why-are-we-at-war-with-them/>

²² Leaked diplomatic cables from Sana'a to CIA, published by Wikileaks. 12/9/2009. Accessed 2/27/2020. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09SANAA2186_a.html

While the Houthi movement practices Shiite Islam, it is the Zaydiyyah tradition and is different than that practiced in Iran – nonetheless recent Houthi leadership changes have brought the movement closer in line with Iran, as new leaders are more orthodox in their interpretations of al-Houthi’s teachings, who in turn borrowed heavily from Iran’s revolutionary ideology.²³ This is reflected in the way that the Houthi movement relies on Iran for funding – by some accounts they are among the least reliant on Iranian largesse among the various proxies. Nonetheless the group has reportedly received assistance from Iran designed to “empower” the Houthis, including modern weaponry, the assistance of military advisers, and financial support²⁴.

Messaging

The Houthi movement communicates through a number of messaging platforms that all exist to serve the overarching goal of the movement: the establishment and maintenance of an independent Shiite state in Yemen. The Houthis have made fighting corruption one of the stated centerpieces of their agenda, in line with their religious beliefs (the Zaydiyyah Shiites take their name from Zayd bin Ali, who was the great grandson of the cousin of Muhammad, and whom they believe was a righteous man martyred in his rebellion against the corrupt Umayyad Empire).²⁵ The Houthi slogan, similar to Iran’s and adopted in 2003, is “God is great, death to the U.S., death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam.”²⁶ Beyond that, the Houthis also claim to be fighting in opposition to Salafi-Sunni Islam, which is often affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and have destroyed religious schools suspected to have been training militants.²⁷ In this way, the Houthi’s messaging is centered on religious themes.

²³ Lenarz, Julie. “Who are the Houthis and Why Do They Should ‘Death to America?’” *The Tower*. August/September 2017, Issue 51. Accessed 3/1/2020. <http://www.thetower.org/article/houthis/>

²⁴ Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy. “Iran steps up support for Houthis”

²⁵ Riedel. “Who are the Houthis, and why are we at war with them?”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Newsweek Staff. “Rise of the Houthis” *Newsweek*. 2/9/2015. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/photo-essay-rise-houthis-305511>

The Houthis are able to deliver their message to a mass audience very effectively through a mature and diverse system of media outlets, both domestically and abroad. This “propaganda machine” is modeled on the one built by Hezbollah, and is enabled by the Lebanese terror group (and in turn by their Iranian benefactors), and produces “news reports, images, and videos, and leaked information to newspapers and social media forums.”²⁸ The flagship outlet is the Yemeni TV channel “Al Masirah” which is headquartered in Beirut and pushes pro-Houthi and pro-Palestinian stories with additional international coverage that is pro-Iranian.²⁹ One of its permanent sections on its website is titled “Saudi-American aggression” and is used to compile stories related to the ongoing conflict in Yemen that paint the Saudi-led coalition as the aggressors and the American government as its enablers.³⁰

Beyond television, Houthi rebels have gained control of the majority of radio stations in Yemen through outright violence, which has allowed them to have wide control of the airwaves and the ability to censor stories they believe are damaging to the cause and to spread pro-Houthi propaganda even further.³¹ These radio stations have allowed the Houthis to develop significant fundraising capability built on the spread of radical messages – in the summer of 2019 the group hosted a fundraiser on one radio station that raised \$300,000 to benefit Hezbollah. The general manager of the responsible radio station “celebrated the fundraiser by chanting, ‘Death to America! Death to Israel! Victory for Islam!’”³²

The Houthi movement also invests in print and digital publications.³³ For example, the

²⁸ Taqi, Abdulelah. “Houthi propaganda: following in Hizballah’s footsteps.” *The New Arab*. 4/12/2015. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/4/12/houthi-propaganda-following-in-hizballahs-footsteps>

²⁹ Al Masirah website. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://www.almasirah.net/>

³⁰ Al Masirah website, Keyword page. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://www.almasirah.net/keyword/5/>

³¹ Holmes, Joshua. “Radio Becomes New Battlefield in Yemen War,” *The Jerusalem Post*. 9/12/2019. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://m.jpost.com/Middle-East/Radio-becomes-new-battlefield-in-Yemen-war-601371/amp>

³² Ibid

³³ Taqi. “Houthi propaganda: following in Hizballah’s footsteps

group is affiliated with the English language online publication *Uprising Today* that was launched in January 2018 as “a renewed new multimedia outlet focused on the struggles of indigenous people all across the globe - but primarily in the MENA region...[and striving] to become the #1 western-based news source on the Yemeni struggle.”³⁴ Despite this alleged commitment, it spreads nakedly pro-Iranian propaganda that has nothing to do with the civil war in Yemen.³⁵ It is officially run by the “Yemen Resistance Watch Network” and is designed to “carefully monitor the frontlines against foreign aggressional [sic] nations, especially the frontlines against the Saudi-led coalition forces.”³⁶ The publication runs concurrent social media channels that reach thousands of people and is indicative of a messaging campaign that is growing in sophistication and reach.

Tactics and Capabilities

The Houthi movement has a wide array of tactics and capabilities, the majority of which are more reminiscent of an insurgency than a terror campaign. Houthi tactics and capabilities have evolved during their long war against the Yemeni government, culminating in the 2015 capture of the capital city Sana and the ongoing campaign against the Saudi-backed Coalition’s efforts to restore the Sunni government in exile to its prior position of power. However, as early as 2009, it was evident that the Houthi’s were learning and adapting to the ongoing war, and it was suspected by various international intelligence agencies that they were receiving outside help.³⁷ This outside help has come in the form of training from military advisers and weapons supply to broaden the scope of capabilities the Houthis can bring to bear against the Saudis and their coalition partners.

³⁴ Uprising Today Official Facebook Page. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://www.facebook.com/uprisingtoday/>

³⁵ An instructive example: “Iran strikes back: at least 80 US soldiers reported killed in missile attack” 1/8/2020. Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://www.uprising.today/iran-strikes-back-at-least-80-us-soldiers-reported-killed-in-missile-attack/>

³⁶ Uprising Today Official Facebook Page.

³⁷ Leaked diplomatic cables from Sana’a to CIA , published by Wikileaks.

Houthi forces confront other armies in the open field and fight with combined arms tactics. Most Houthi foot soldiers are equipped with small arms and do not have standard uniforms, but are capable of launching attacks at brigade strength in concert with armored vehicles.³⁸ These capabilities have been augmented by the successful 2014 takeover of the capital, which left much of the state's defense infrastructure, including tanks and anti-air weapons, in Houthi hands.³⁹ Despicably, the Houthis have reportedly supplemented their fighting force with child soldiers in an effort to dilute the Saudi-led coalition's numerical advantage, with some reporting indicating children as young as 10 have been pressed into the fight.⁴⁰

The Houthis are also executing a strategy of targeting civil infrastructure to pressure the Saudis to relent,⁴¹ and have claimed credit for drone strike attacks on Saudi oil infrastructure in September of 2019 that halved oil output from Saudi Arabia for a number of days.⁴² The Houthis have used Iranian-made drones since at least 2017 for kamikaze-style attack missions, and have even used "drone" attack boats to try and sink or disable Saudi naval vessels.⁴³ Additionally, the Houthis have used Iranian munitions to lay naval mines in the Red Sea and have utilized anti-ship missiles to hold both international shipping and Coalition forces at risk.⁴⁴ 137 mines have been disabled by coalition forces through February 2020, though there are an unknown number still deployed.⁴⁵

³⁸ Knights, Michael. "The Houthi War Machine: From Guerrilla War to State Capture," *CTC Sentinel*. September 2018, Volume 11, Issue 8. Accessed 3/1/2020. <https://ctc.usma.edu/houthi-war-machine-guerrilla-war-state-capture/>

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Michael, Maggie. "Children as young as 10 fight, kill and die in Yemen's war" *Associated Press*. 12/19/2018. Accessed 3/1/2020. <https://apnews.com/082c0b7b6253468e97da5ee0c3f43066>

⁴¹ European Eye on Radicalization. "Remote Controlled Terror: Houthi Suicide Boats." 9/27/2018. Accessed 3/4/2020. <https://eeradicalization.com/remote-controlled-terror-houthi-suicide-boats/>

⁴² Taylor, Adam. "Why Iran is getting the blame for an attack on Saudi Arabia claimed by Yemen's Houthis" *The Washington Post*. 9/16/2019. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/09/16/why-iran-is-getting-blame-an-attack-saudi-arabia-claimed-by-yemens-houthis/>

⁴³ Saul, Hafezi, and Georgy. "Iran steps up support for Houthis

⁴⁴ Weiss, Caleb. "Analysis: Houthi naval attacks in the Red Sea," *Long Wars Journal*. 8/17/2019. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/08/analysis-houthi-naval-attacks-in-the-red-sea.php>

⁴⁵ AW Staff. "Yemen naval forces find more Houthi planted mines in Red Sea" *The Arab Weekly*. 2/11/2020. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://thearabweekly.com/yemen-naval-forces-find-more-houthi-planted-mines-red-sea>

Despite international interdiction efforts, the Houthis have smuggled automatic weapons, sniper rifles, anti-tank weapons, and other munitions from Iran into Yemen.⁴⁶ This ability to be resupplied by the Iranians has enabled the Houthis to continue the civil war despite the efforts of the Saudi-led coalition (backed intermittently by US air support) to try and crush it.⁴⁷

Additionally, the Houthis have a ballistic missile program and are known to be armed with Scud-B and -C type missiles seized from the Yemen government in addition to other missiles likely supplied by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah.⁴⁸ Particularly, the Houthis have recently deployed Burkan-1 and Burkan-2 missiles that are “almost an exact replica in range and shape as the Iranian Qiam-1 missile” which “given the improved guidance systems and stabilizing fins the Burkan has, [make it] unlikely that it was developed without Iran’s assistance.”⁴⁹ It is clear that the Houthis rely on Iran for some substantial portion of their capabilities, but that much of their early success came without overt Iranian support.

Conclusion

The Al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain and the Houthi Movement in Yemen both represent two strategies implemented by the Iranians for carrying out proxy campaigns. The Al-Ashtar Brigades behave more like a traditional terrorist group, working out of small cells and mainly relying on small scale bombings and attacks to try and overthrow the Sunni government of the majority-Shiite country. In contrast, the Houthi Movement has organized into a full-grown insurgency, has captured significant portions of Yemen and begun to set up their own

⁴⁶ Gibbons-Neff, Thomas. “How Iranian weapons are ending up in Yemen,” *The Washington Post*. 11/30/2016. Accessed 2/27/2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/11/30/how-iranian-weapons-are-ending-up-in-yemen/>

⁴⁷ Saul, Hafezi, , and Georgy., “Iran steps up support for Houthis”

⁴⁸ Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance. “Houthis” Accessed 2/28/2020. <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/missile-threat-and-proliferation/todays-missile-threat/non-state-actors/houthis/>

⁴⁹ Ibid

government. They have a variety of tactics and capabilities, some of which are quite advanced. Both groups preach some version of Shiite Islam, though the brand preached by the Al-Ashtar Brigades is closer to that preferred by Tehran. The fact that Iran still supports the Houthis is the latest example in a long history of Iran putting aside its religious preferences in service of its overarching strategic goal of defeating Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, the true common denominator between the two groups is that their continued existence and success would be made difficult, if not impossible, without the help of the Iranian regime. Addressing this state sponsor of terror then would go a long way toward a more peaceful, and stable, Middle East.

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