



# Mapping Militias in the Middle East

## Militias Operating in and Against Saudi Arabia

### Part I

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#### Introduction

With the unravelling of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and, with it, Iran's hopes for a long-term revival of its shattered economy, the likelihood of revenge-sabotage against Saudi Arabia and its regional allies is rapidly growing. In addition to Tehran's 'shock and awe' programme, many of the Islamic Republic's proxies are again resorting to acts of terrorism in pursuit of Iranian interests.

The main terrorist groups operating in Saudi Arabia are affiliated to the usual suspects which are, for the most part, affiliated to Iran:

1. Hezbollah
2. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQIP)
3. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)
4. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)
5. Houthi militia (Yemen)

In relation to Saudi Arabia, agents of these umbrella militias tend to operate small (sleeper) cells in the border areas of the country's famed Eastern Province where their main objective is to incite violent uprisings, smuggle weapons, proliferate radical ideologies and fighters in and out of the country.

This first segment of analysing militias in and against Saudi Arabia begins with an overview of Hezbollah affiliates operating in the Kingdom.

## Hezbollah al-Hejaz

After Iran's failure to radicalise moderate Shiite leaders in Saudi Arabia — known as the Shiraziyin — the Hezbollah al-Hejaz was established in 1987 under the direction of IRGC commander Ahmad Sharifi.<sup>1</sup> Engaged in subversion and revolution exportation on behalf of the Ayatollahs in Tehran, the group concentrated its activities primarily to the Eastern Province. Among the organisation's members, apart from a significant number of Saudi Shiite religious-studies students who resided in Iran, were defectors from the Mu-nazzamat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya (Islamic Revolution Organization in the Arabian Peninsula) a radical Shia organisation responsible for Qatif uprising in 1979.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to attempts at radicalising the Saudi Shia population against the government in Riyadh, Hezbollah al-Hejaz also targeted American military personnel in the Arab Gulf. After the 1996 attack on a complex in Khobar that was housing US Air Force personnel, Saudi authorities conducted an extensive security campaign which led to effective disintegration of Hezbollah's organisational structure in Saudi Arabia.<sup>3</sup> Since then, Hezbollah in Saudi Arabia had gone to a vegetative state, and is playing a wait-and-see game via its sleeping cells. Later, in 2006, the United States District Court in the District of Columbia concluded that Iran was responsible for the Khobar attacks and that Hezbollah al-Hejaz conducted the attack on Tehran's behalf.<sup>4</sup>

There is a direct relationship between Hezbollah al-Hejaz and **Hezbollah in Lebanon**. In August 2015, the identified leader of Hezbollah al-Hejaz military wing, responsible for planning and perpetrating of the Khobar attacks was named as **Ahmed al-Mughassil**—he was arrested in Beirut where he had lived for some 19 years under the protection of Lebanese Hezbollah.

Al-Mughassil was also a central figure in Iran's plan to revive Hezbollah al-Hejaz and he attempted to renew its full operational capabilities. As Saudi security officials

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1 Ahmad Majidiyar, "Saudi Arabia jails two on charges of working with Iran and Iraqi Hezbollah to attack Eastern Province," *Middle East Institute*, 28 March 2018, available: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/io/saudi-arabia-jails-two-working-iran-and-iraqi-hezbollah-plot-attacks-eastern-province>>

2 For details see: Hassan al-Mustafa, "Hezbollah al-Hejaz, A Story not yet Written," *Al Arabiya English*, 1 October 2015, available: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/10/01/Hezbollah-al-Hejaz-A-story-not-yet-written.html>

3 Ibid.

4 A full report by David D. Kirkpatrick, "Saudi Arabia Said to Arrest Suspect in 1996 Khobar Towers Bombing," *The New York Times*, 26 August 2015, available: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/27/world/middleeast/saudia-arabia-arrests-suspect-khobar-towers-bombing.html>

discovered, the IRGC trained Saudi citizens, mostly from the town of al-Awamiyah, on the use of weapons and explosives including RPGs TNT, RDX and C4, among others. The suspects then formed a terrorist cell which operated under al-Mughassil's command. Documents captured by Saudi authorities revealed that similar operations were a part of Iran's plan to ignite a revolution in al-Qatiff governorate by training and radicalising Saudi youths.<sup>5</sup>

Another example of the Lebanese connection is the case of the **al-Qedehi brothers**. In July 2017, the notorious town of al-Awamiyah, the neighborhood of al-Masoura in particular, was a sanctuary to the four al-Qedehi brothers (Jassim, Ghazi Ali, Bassim, Maitham). The brothers were associated with terrorist operations in al-Qatiff, where they had been involved in drug dealing, kidnapping of civilians and other terrorist operations over the past two decades. The brothers interacted with other terrorists from al-Masoura and the al-Qatiff areas such as **Mohammed al-Ammar, Yousif Ali Almushaikhis** and **Mahdi al-Sayegh** (a convict responsible for numerous terrorist attacks in al-Qatiff since 2011). Maitham al-Qedehi is responsible for recruiting the terrorists who kidnapped al-Qatiff Judge Mohammed al-Jirani. It is believed the brothers received training from Lebanese Hezbollah. One of the brothers, **Ghazi al-Qedehi**, was arrested by Saudi authorities in al-Awamiyah while trying to enter Bahrain through the King Fahad bridge.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, in March 2018, the Criminal Court of Riyadh sentenced two Saudi citizens on charges of engaging in acts of terrorism and conspiring with Iran. In particular, they were convicted of joining the Iraqi Hezbollah camps in Iran and Iraq where they were trained in how to dismantle, install, and use weapons and explosives. The two individuals were also passing sensitive information about Saudi oil infrastructure in Eastern Province to their affiliates in Iran. Although the two individuals were not identified, it is plausible they were members of Saudi Hezbollah.<sup>7</sup>

Hezbollah also periodically threatens Saudi Arabia in the context of the conflict in Yemen. In April 2015, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General, Naim Qassem, warned

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5 Turki al-Suhail, "Iran Planned to Revive 'Hezbollah Al-Hejaz' Under Al-Mughassil's Command," *Asharq al-Awsat*, 25 August 2017, available: <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/turkisuhail/news-middle-east/iran-planned-revive-hezbollah-al-hejaz-al-mughassils-command>

6 A full report: "How four brothers triggered terror across Saudi Arabia's al-Awamiyah district," *Al Arabiya English*, 15 July 2017, available: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/07/15/How-four-brothers-triggered-terror-across-Saudi-Arabia-s-al-Awamiyah-district.html>

7 Reported by Ahmad Majidiyar, "Saudi Arabia jails two on charges of working with Iran and Iraqi Hezbollah to attack Eastern Province," *Middle East Institute*, 28 March 2018, available: <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/saudi-arabia-jails-two-working-iran-and-iraqi-hezbollah-plot-attacks-eastern-province>

that the Kingdom will ‘incur very serious losses ... and pay a heavy price’ as a result of its Yemen campaign.<sup>8</sup>

Such threats remain largely hollow as the Saudi wing of Hezbollah seems to have lost its potency. However, the organisation still retains the potential to fully re-emerge from its relative dormancy. One of the contributing factors to possible future revival of Hezbollah al-Hejaz is the decision of European states whether or not to withdraw from the Nuclear Deal if they opt to abide by the deal despite US withdrawal, they will continue to contribute to the operational capabilities of Iran-backed militias and terrorist organisations. And, their withdraw from the agreement will inspire Tehran towards revenge attacks on European interests in the Gulf region—notable on its stability.

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8 Reported by Matthew Levitt, “Iranian and Hezbollah Threats to Saudi Arabia: Past Precedents,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 19 May 2015, available: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-and-hezbollah-threats-to-saudi-arabia-past-precedents>