



## Mapping Militias in the Middle East

By Lucie Švejdová

Anthony Cordesman once remarked that the real Game of Thrones is not in Westeros but is currently unfolding in the Middle East.[1] With the outbreak of Syria's latest civil war (2011-present) an assortment of regional actors — states, terror groups and others — are now scrambling for optimal strategic positions on the proverbial chessboard.

Daesh may be in a free-fall but the terror-state is not being fully degraded. Instead, it is morphing into a guerrilla-cum-insurgency — an ISIS 2.0 — which will take on a new role in Arab and European political life—of hiding, waiting and attacking when the opportunities arise. Daesh is not alone. Al Qaeda is making a comeback while a wide spectrum of other jihadi groups are entering the fray (including those allied to the Muslim Brotherhood).

Then there is Iran and the collection of Shia militias, terrorist groups and Islamic Revolutionaries that fill the spaces left open in the wake of Daesh's disintegration. Tehran's Motley Crew of assets sometimes fight, other times cooperate, with the Sunni jihadi groups operating in the region. In other words, a twin-peaks of terrorists and insurgents currently dot the Middle East with one a reflection of state failure (re: ISIS in Iraq and Syria) and the other of state policy (re: those Shia groups aligned to Iran). While many international broadsheets focus on the prospects of ISIS 2.0, far too little attention is being paid to the spread of radicalisation amongst Shia communities which reflect Iran's policy of regional subversion, revisionism and expansion.

It is here where this project begins.

As the political fluctuation in Syria, Iraq and Yemen continues, Iran has clearly abandoned its Shia crescent for a 'Full Moon' and has been recruiting, supporting, financing and training numerous proxy groups and placing them into strategic positions. These proxies — Shia paramilitary groups — serve as enforcers of the Islamic Republic to tilt the balance of power in the Middle East in Tehran's favour and realise the Ayatollahs' revisionist dream of gaining a leading position in the region and replace Saudi Arabia as the Custodian of Islam. The reference to Iran's 'Full Moon' is no fabrication. Qais al-Khazali — leader of the Iraqi Shia militia, Asaib Ahl al-Haq [2] (the League of the Righteous, AAH) — announced that his organisation aims to establish a 'Shiite full moon not a Shiite crescent [3] and added 'that an alliance of Shiite forces across the region would be ready to achieve that goal by the time the hidden Shiite Imam Mahdi reappears.'[4]

While there are a number of reports which monitor Iran's subversive activities in Iraq, Syria and

Lebanon (re: Naame Shaam: Silent Sectarian Cleansing and Iran in Syria, from an Ally of the Regime to an Occupying Force [5]) Iran's activities in the Arab Gulf countries — where it relies on the policy of revolution exportation — are less well mapped. As are its strategic goals. On reflection, it is evident that Tehran seeks to provoke sectarian violence and social divisions in the Arab Gulf—to overthrow local governments and replace them with puppet regimes loyal to, and dependent on, Tehran.

\*\*\*

This analysis series monitors the activities of the main militias in the Middle East and will provide insights and explorations into the development and deployment of the Shia militias in the Arab Gulf (as a reflection of Iranian state policy) and the Sunni, jihadi militias, treated as non-state actors with ties to certain states rather than as an extension of state actors.

This project is organised by Lucie Švejsová, expert in Radical Ideologies and Homeland Security.

[1] A commentary by Anthony Cordesman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and the New 'Game of Thrones,' Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 13 July 2017. Available on: <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/saudi-arabia-uae-qatar-and-new-game-thrones>> (accessed on 17th March 2018).

[2] See a brief comment by Ahmad Majidiyar, Iran-Controlled Militant Group Says Regional Alliance Will Create "Shiite Full Moon," Middle East Institute, 11 May 2017. Available on: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-controlled-militant-group-says-regional-alliance-will-create-shiite-full-moon>> (accessed on 17th March 2018).

[3] Ahmad Majidiyar, Iran-Controlled Militant Group Says Regional Alliance Will Create "Shiite Full Moon," Middle East Institute, 11 May 2017. Available on: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-controlled-militant-group-says-regional-alliance-will-create-shiite-full-moon>> (accessed on 17th March 2018).

[4] Quoted by Ahmad Majidiyar, Iran-Controlled Militant Group Says Regional Alliance Will Create "Shiite Full Moon," Middle East Institute, 11 May 2017. Available on: <<http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-controlled-militant-group-says-regional-alliance-will-create-shiite-full-moon>> (accessed on 17th March 2018).

[5] Both reports Naame Shaam providing evidence about sectarian cleansing and forced demographic change by Iran available on: <<http://www.nameshaam.org>>