

Potential Impact of Daesh Attacks Spreading to Lebanon and Bahrain

BY USSOCOM J2

One of Daesh's, formerly the Islamic State in the Levant, most dangerous courses of action would be to expand its pattern of targeting Shia mosques into Bahrain and Lebanon. Such attacks would likely have a disproportionately high impact on U.S. and partner interests. There is a high risk that attacks with significant Shia civilian casualties would prompt retaliatory sectarian violence in both countries. Sectarian violence in either country has the risk of drawing in Iran or Saudi Arabia at some level. Given Daesh's history and recent pattern of external operations, such attacks are likely in the near term.

Daesh, and its precursor al-Qaeda in Iraq, have an established history of attacking prominent Shia civilian targets to provoke sectarian violence. The group then leverages any subsequent retaliatory violence to reinforce the Daesh narrative that it is actively defending Sunnis. AQI used this tactic to expand across western Iran in 2006 after it destroyed the Shia "Golden Mosque" in Samarra. Over 1,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the cycle in of Sunni-Shia retaliatory attacks sparked by the destruction of the Mosque. AQI leveraged this violence to better establish itself within Iraq's Sunni community.

Daesh operations in Lebanon or Bahrain are very likely to employ a similar targeting strategy. In the region, Daesh had already publically claimed the May attacks on Shia mosques in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. In mid-July, Daesh killed more than 100 civilians with large VBIED attack on a Shia market in Diayala province. In its claim of responsibility for the attack, the Daesh

spokesman said the attack was in response to the death of Sunni in the Kirkuk at the hands of the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces.

It is very likely there are already Daesh elements in both Bahrain and Lebanon conducting pre-operational planning. In Lebanon, Daesh elements have confronted the Lebanese Armed Forces and Lebanese Hezbollah in the Aarsal area and the Al Qalamun border area. Lebanese press sources report local security service believe Daesh has established a network of sleeper cells and supporters across into northern Lebanon and in the Palestinian refugee camps. Reportedly, Daesh intends to use this network to build a supportive network among the Sunni in Lebanon to spread west towards Tripoli. In Bahrain, social media users affiliated with Daesh commented that it would be next following the mosque attack in Kuwait. The Bahraini government has increased security around mosques across the country and has met with Sunni and Shia religious leaders to better secure potential religious targets.

Existing local and regional dynamics in Lebanon and Bahrain make them more vulnerable to sectarian violence following a terror attack. Both countries have recent histories of Sunni-Shia violence and deep distrust between the local populations. In Lebanon, young Sunni from the Tripoli region have admitted they have joined Nusrah Front or Daesh in response to the "injustice committed against their people by Hezbollah." There is fear among Lebanese elites that aggressive Hezbollah responses to Daesh activity in or around Lebanon, something likely in the event of an attack on Shia civilians, will radicalize more young Sunnis. In Bahrain, the critics of the government asserted that the regime destruction of 38 Shia mosques over the last four years "set an example for others, including the Daesh terrorist group, to do so elsewhere." In late May, the anti-government 14 February Youth Revolution group accused the government of intentionally

allowing Daesh to operate in Bahrain to incite conflict to serve its own political interests. These comments suggest that the occasionally violent anti-government protests common in Bahrain since the 2011 "Arab Spring" would expand following an Daesh attack with significant Shia casualties. In both countries there is a higher risk that one or two successful Daesh attacks could spark an escalating spiral of conflict that eventually provides Daesh room to expand.

Exacerbating the internal Sunni-Shia tensions is the risk that sectarian violence in either country could spur outside intervention on behalf of their co-religionists. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have provided varying levels of support to allies in Lebanon and Bahrain. In the event of significant Sunni-Shia violence, both states are likely to increase their support to their allies or proxies. This has the potential to trigger a larger Sunni-Shia escalatory dynamic with the risks for broader regional unrest, the diversion of resources away from the current Daesh fight, and the creation of new Daesh opportunities for future expansion.

Critical to preventing sectarian retaliation in response to Daesh attacks in either country will be the public perception of the security forces' behavior. In Lebanon, if Lebanese Hezbollah is seen as leading the response to an Daesh attack there is a much higher risk for Sunni-Shia violence. The more the multi-confessional Lebanese Armed Forces leads in preventing or responding to an attack, the lower the risk of wider violence. In Bahrain, more aggressive public efforts to crack-down on Daesh and actively protect Shia facilities are the best options to mitigate potential sectarian retaliation to an Daesh attack. **SW**

PRIME TARGET The Golden Mosque in Samara, Iraq days after the landmark was bombed. U.S. Army photo Spc. Waine D. Haley.

