

Iranian EFPs in the Gulf: An Emerging Strategic Risk

[Michael Knights](#)

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Tehran and its proxies have increased their efforts to provide armor-piercing explosive devices to Shiite cells in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and this game-changing escalation could pose even greater challenges if Riyadh takes further action in Syria.

As Saudi Arabia publicly discusses its options for direct intervention in Syria, Riyadh and its partners will need to consider how Iran might react to such a move. The answer may be apparent in the increasingly bold efforts by Iranian-backed Shiite militant groups to smuggle advanced roadside bombs into not only Bahrain, but also the neighboring Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, a predominately Shiite area that holds more than 20 percent of the world's total proven oil reserves and serves as the center of the kingdom's oil and petrochemicals industries. Almost unnoticed by the international community, Tehran has been ramping up its risk-taking behavior amid growing sectarian polarization in the region and intensified competition with Riyadh. Among other provocations, it began sending advanced armor-piercing explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) into the kingdom last year and has provided cells in Bahrain with the know-how for manufacturing such weapons themselves -- a stark warning to the Saudis and a harbinger of what may unfold if they do in fact upgrade their military commitment in Syria.

IRAN'S GULF ESCALATION

Alongside support for proxy forces in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, another form of Iranian escalation against Saudi Arabia is the smuggling of EFPs and other arms directly into the Gulf states, carried out by Iraqi proxies of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Although Bahrain's government has exaggerated Iran's role in domestic unrest in the past, the country's intelligence agencies have consistently produced well-evidenced information on local terrorist and militia cells, their ties with the IRGC, and their efforts to import advanced explosives.

On December 28, 2013, a speedboat was tracked by coastal radar and intercepted carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including thirty-one Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines and twelve armor-piercing EFP charges, plus electronics to arm and fire the devices. The captured crew led investigators to a bombmaking workshop in al-Qurayyah village the following day.

The most recent maritime interception occurred on July 25, 2015, when Bahraini navy, coast guard, and police personnel captured a speedboat that had received weapons from a ship just outside the island's territorial waters. The boat was carrying forty-three kilograms of C4 explosive, detonators, and eight AK-type assault rifles with thirty-two magazines and ammunition. One of the two Bahraini men in the boat testified to having received weapons and explosives training at an IRGC camp in Iran two years prior.

Over the past year, the kingdom's security operations have uncovered a range of other indicators that Iran is intensifying its preparations to undertake proxy warfare inside Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia:

- *Increased number of bombmaking workshops.* Bahrain uncovered three such workshops in the latter half of 2015. One underground room found in Dar Kulaib on June 6 contained advanced bomb components and an industrial press for fabricating EFPs. Two more shops were found in October and November; the latter was discovered within a concealed underground room.
- *Expansion into Saudi Arabia.* On May 8, 2015, a vehicle carrying EFP charges was intercepted as it attempted to transit the King Fahd Causeway from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. It was eventually linked to the bomb workshop at Dar Kulaib, where the smugglers received the EFPs.
- *Growing connections to Iranian and Iraqi networks.* The Dar Kulaib workshop contained weapons linked via fingerprints to the previously mentioned December 2013 speedboat interception. And in June 2015, Bahraini police chief Maj. Gen. Tariq al-Hassan stated that the IRGC-supported Iraqi Shiite group Kataib Hezbollah (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) provided EFP training at a camp in Iraq and "offered logistical and financial support" to a Bahraini terrorist group called "Saraya al-Ashtar."
- *Potential harbor security threats.* General Hassan also claimed that detained Shiite terrorists had received "scuba diving skills to plant mines and explosives in the sea," presenting a potential threat to U.S. warships in Bahrain, where the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters is located. (Iranian-backed cells have been detected monitoring U.S. naval berths and coastal infrastructure in Kuwait since 2011.)
- *Use of antivehicle bombs.* On July 28, 2015, a roadside bomb destroyed a police vehicle in Sitra, Bahrain, killing two policemen and wounding six others. Magnetically attached mines of this type have been a constant feature of weapons finds in Bahrain. This technique and some of the magnetic devices themselves have been

smuggled into the island from Iraq, where Shiite militias use them for assassinations and other attacks on unarmored vehicles.

THE EFP PROBLEM

The provision of EFPs and firing kits is a particularly dangerous phenomenon. The EFP is a form of roadside charge that has exceptional armor-piercing capabilities and is easily concealed and detonated. High explosives are packed into a cylinder akin to a paint can with the lid removed. A concave liner of professionally milled copper or steel is then clamped over the cylinder's open end. When the explosive is detonated, it creates a focused jet of hypervelocity molten metal that can cut through even the heaviest main battle tank armor at close range. In Iraq, 1,526 EFPs killed a total of 196 U.S. troops and injured 861 others between November 2005 and December 2011; British troops were intensively targeted as well and suffered many casualties.

Apparently, the IRGC has sought to preposition EFPs in Bahrain since at least 2013. And last year's discoveries by security forces indicated that the IRGC is also helping local Bahraini Shiites to mass produce EFPs. The Dar Kulaib workshop included an industrial press that used specialized dies (possibly imported) to make EFP liners. A range of EFPs were found there as well, with diameters of six, eight, and twelve inches, indicating a variety of dies were in use. Also uncovered were at least twelve passive infrared sensors (used to initiate a device as vehicles pass) and numerous radio-controlled arming switches (to turn on the sensors), indicating that the devices were using the exact same configuration as Iraqi EFPs and would be highly accurate. High-quality copper liners were in evidence alongside less effective steel ones. Moreover, the press and other large equipment had been installed in a concealed basement, a major logistical undertaking.

As mentioned above, EFPs built in Dar Kulaib were intercepted en route to Saudi Arabia last May. This marks a major escalation because EFPs could enable Shiite militants in the Eastern Province to keep Saudi armored vehicles out of key towns, making mini-uprisings much more practical if Iran wished to foment such incidents. In 2008, EFPs used en masse created a formidable perimeter defense in Baghdad's Sadr City, requiring an extensive U.S. demining effort. If such explosives had been present during the February 2011 uprising in Manama, the Bahraini crackdown -- backed by Saudi and Emirati armored forces -- might have been impossible.

In short, bringing EFPs into Bahrain, let alone Saudi Arabia, is a military game-changer for Gulf security forces. And given that restive Shiite townships are threaded between some of the world's largest oil fields, refineries, pipelines, and export terminals, it could be a game-changer for global energy security as well. This is why Iran's actions, through its Iraqi proxies, hold such potential for destabilization. In conjunction with recent provocations by the IRGC-Navy in the Persian Gulf, the EFP uptick points to a wider pattern of increasingly bold IRGC risk taking.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

If Saudi Arabia intervenes more intensively in Syria, it will likely face blowback at home. In 2011, Riyadh's intervention in Bahrain and its early support for the Syrian opposition may have contributed to the attempted Iranian assassination of the Saudi ambassador in Washington later that year, as well as Tehran's eventual decision to ramp up paramilitary backing for proxies in Yemen, Bahrain, and now the Eastern Province.

In light of these dangers, Washington should expand intelligence assistance to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in order to stem the flow of IRGC-provided weapons. It should also help publicize the discovery of weapons caches so that the international community can follow the trail of evidence pointing back to Tehran. More broadly, Washington should view Iran's transfer of EFPs and bombmaking know-how to opposition elements in these countries as a game-changing escalation, not an incremental tactical adjustment. Riyadh will certainly view the up-arming of Shiites in the kingdom's largest oil province in existential terms.

In addition, Washington should speak with the Saudis about enhanced military cooperation on vehicle survivability and defensive tactics. The United States can greatly assist Saudi forces on two counts: reducing their heavy losses to Houthi antitank missile teams on the southern border, and preparing for the emergence of an advanced antiarmor roadside bomb threat in the Eastern Province. These efforts could include provision of up-arming kits and the considerable benefit of hard-earned U.S. tactics and training against EFPs.

Finally, Washington should combine such security assistance with dialogue on conflict termination and reduction of civilian casualties in Yemen. It should also urge Bahrain and Riyadh to increase their confidence- and security-building measures with domestic Shiite communities. As the United States learned firsthand, the best defense against roadside bombing networks is for security forces to work with local communities that can provide essential intelligence to reduce or halt attacks.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute.