

The Evolution of Shi`a Insurgency in Bahrain

By Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt

Since 2011, Iran and its proxy militias in Lebanon and Iraq have undertaken an unprecedented effort to develop militant cells in Bahrain. These cells have evolved from easily detectible groups of amateurs to small cells of attackers with overseas training and combat experience and the ability to mount effective IED attacks. The threat of Iranian-backed Shi`a cells in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia is likely to expand with their use of unmanned air and sea vehicles, anti-armor weapons, and assassination tactics.

In Bahrain, where a Sunni monarchy rules over a predominantly Shi`a population, the government has faced numerous waves of militant opposition to the government since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. In the early 1980s, the Iranian government supported a coup attempt by the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), which planned to assassinate Bahraini royals and seize television and radio stations to foment a Shiite uprising on December 16, 1981.¹ Later in the 1990s, another coup effort was planned for June 3, 1996, by a Tehran-backed offshoot of the IFLB called Bahraini Hezbollah, led by Muhammed Taqi Mudarassi.² During and since the Shiite “intifada” in the 1990s, the Bahraini intelligence services maintained extensive documentation on Iranian recruitment of Bahraini Shi`a, including their selection for religious courses in Qom and for further intelligence and paramilitary training at the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Bahnar Camp, near Iran’s Karaj Dam.³ Carefully sealed arms caches buried during the 1980s and 1990s were periodically discovered during building work in Manama as late as the mid-2000s.⁴

Post-2011 Militarization of Resistance in Bahrain

Despite these episodes of Iranian support, Shi`a militancy in Bahrain was a largely indigenous phenomenon until 2011. Before then,

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young Shi`a men from slums such as Sanabis, Daih, and Bani Jamma regularly mounted riots against the security forces, barricading off their streets, burning tires, and throwing Molotov cocktails at security force vehicles and riot police on foot. When bombs were detonated, they were invariably “sound bombs,” small pipe bombs that were used at night away from passers-by and rarely caused injury.⁵ The Shi`a rioters did not own guns. Indeed, the loss of even a single police weapon—such as the loss of a police MP-5 sub-machine gun in Sanabis in December 2007—sparked a months-long effort to recover the weapon.⁶ Where Iranian support for the rioters was cited by the Bahraini government, it related to the spinning-off of militant cells such as al-Haq, a group that Bahrain accused of receiving Iranian training in the use of social media and SMS text messages to orchestrate the rapid mobilization and deployment of rioters.⁷

The crackdown on the 2011 “Arab Spring” protests in Manama seems to have pushed some Bahraini Shi`a oppositionists and the Iranian intelligence services toward a new level of militancy. The deployment of Bahraini Defense Force tanks, backed by Saudi Arabian and UAE forces,⁸ caused shock and anger among Bahraini Shi`a and among the Shi`a leadership and people of Iran and of Iraq.⁹ There is some indication that the Iranian leadership—from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei down—regretted not being in a position to support the Bahraini Shi`a in what might have been a decisive political action against the Sunni monarchy.¹⁰ It was immediately after the 2011 protests that Iran’s IRGC Quds Force began planning the assassination of the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir. Gholam Shakuri, the IRGC Quds Force officer identified by one of the plotters as being in charge of the operation, is believed by Saudi Arabian intelligence to have met Bahraini protest leaders in early 2011 before the operation began.¹¹ In addition to trying to strike a painful blow against Saudi Arabia, Iran’s main reaction to the Arab Spring crackdown in Bahrain appears to have been to strive to better prepare the Shi`a resistance for the next uprising in Bahrain, should it come.

The post-2011 evolution of armed resistance in Bahrain began with increased use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Some of these attacks conformed to the historic pattern of attention-grabbing, non-lethal attacks, mostly undertaken at night or following a warning. Targets included shopping malls, ATM machines, car dealerships, and unsecured outer perimeters of prominent sites such as a power station, the national airport, the Bahrain Financial Harbour, and the U.S. naval base in Manama.¹² In parallel, lethal attacks were also increasing. In 2011, there were no IED attacks on the security forces; this rose to four in 2012 and 10 in 2013. Initially, the devices were crude. In April 2012, a victim-operated IED was placed in a pile of tires in Hamad Town to target a security force member, but it ultimately ended up killing a civilian who tried to move the obstacle.¹³ In October 2012, a homemade grenade was used to kill a police officer in Al-Eker.¹⁴ At this early stage, there

were numerous incidents of fratricide as devices exploded prematurely, killing bomb makers and those transporting the devices.¹⁵ Bahraini militants were already getting weapons training abroad, and electronic surveillance caught some of the militants, including Abdul Raouf Alshayeb,^a maintaining contact with the IRGC, according to Bahraini authorities.¹⁶

By 2014, the picture had changed. On March 3, 2014, the Bahraini police suffered its worst terrorist incident when a sophisticated IED was used to kill three policemen (including one UAE advisor) and injure seven others. Under the cover of darkness, a “daisy-chain” of three anti-personnel “Claymore”-type IEDs (loaded with ball bearings) was positioned to create a kill-zone in the Daih area.¹⁷ Police were lured to the site by the staging of a local protest.¹⁸ The explosions were initiated by a rooftop spotter who armed the devices using a cellphone-controlled arming switch.¹⁹ A passive infrared firing switch detonated the device as the unarmored police bus passed. Single “Claymore”-type devices were used on two other occasions in the month afterward, killing another policeman in one incident. The attack was claimed by a new Bahraini militant group called Saraya al-Ashtar. The Bahraini government accused Saraya al-Ashtar’s Iran-based leadership of facilitating travel for members of the group to Iraq for training by “Shi’ite Hezbollah Brigades” (a reference to the Iraqi group Kata’ib Hezbollah) in bomb-making and IED use.²⁰

Evolution Toward Externally Backed Resistance

The Bahraini government has often sought to undermine the domestic Shi’a political opposition by painting it as an Iranian project. Even if this is almost certainly an exaggeration, there is mounting evidence of external support to Bahrain’s militant opposition since 2011. The story is familiar to the one that played out previously in Lebanon and Iraq. This article will show, in a step-by-step manner, that the IRGC has latched onto more hardline elements of the Shi’a opposition, brought some of them to training bases outside Bahrain, and then reinserted them into Bahrain as cell leaders. A network of safe houses was developed to receive and store arms shipments and to train individuals with the set-up of bomb-making workshops to integrate locally sourced and imported bomb components.

The first stage in this process appears to have been the grooming and training of leadership figures in 2011-2013. According to both the U.S. and Bahraini governments, the leaders of Saraya al-Ashtar (Al-Ashtar Brigades, or AAB in U.S. terminology) are Ahmad Hasan Yusuf and Alsayed Murtadha Majeed Ramadhan Alawi, both of whom were named as Specially Designated Global Terrorists by the United States on March 17, 2017.²¹ The 31-year-old Yusuf is described by the U.S. State Department as “an Iran-based AAB senior member,” and the designation notes that “AAB receives funding and support from the Government of Iran.”²² The 33-year-old Alawi (usually known by the name Mortada Majid al-Sanadi) is a junior cleric with a long record of being detained by the Bahraini security services. Since 2011, he has been based in Qom, Iran. Since relocating to Iran, he has been a vocal supporter of armed resistance

against the Bahraini royal family.²³ His Bahraini citizenship was revoked in January 2015 when he received a life sentence in absentia from a Bahraini court.²⁴

Since 2012, a number of Bahraini resistance groups have emerged—Saraya Mukhtar, Saraya al-Kasar, Saraya Waad Allah, Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya, and the aforementioned Saraya al-Ashtar.²⁵ While it is questionable whether they are truly separate organizations or simply different “brands” within the same broad network, there are strong indications that all are IRGC-backed groups that share a similar outlook and methods. When cells are discovered by the security forces, they tend to have been working under an Iran-based coordinator who is a Bahraini militant who left the country since 2011. In December 2013, Bahrain linked some 2013 bomb-plotting activity to Iran-based Bahraini national Ali Ahmed Mafoudh al-Musawi.²⁶ In March 2017, Bahrain described one such Iran-based individual—prison escapee Qassim Abdullah Ali—as the offshore coordinator for a 14-man cell.²⁷ Bahrain recently identified a 31-year-old Iran-based coordinator, Hussein Ali Dawood, as the offshore director of two cells (one 10-man Saraya al-Ashtar²⁸ cell arrested in August 2017 with a large amount of explosives and another cell that killed a policeman in a bombing in Diraz on June 18, 2017).²⁹

In-country teams are supported by offshore threat finance. In 2015, Bahrain assumed control of the Iran Insurance Company, as well as Future Banks, which comprised two major Iranian banks.³⁰ While it initially refrained from closing Future Bank, Bahrain opted to close the bank shortly before its March 2016 designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, suggesting Bahrain was concerned that the bank might be used as a means to finance Shi’a extremism in Bahrain.³¹

Training in Iran and Iraq

The training³² of the new generation of Bahraini militants has been carried out in Iran, Lebanon, and increasingly Iraq. On February 20, 2013, the head of Bahrain’s Public Security Forces announced that a militant cell had been disrupted, which included members who had received training in Iran and by Lebanese Hezbollah in the use of weapons, explosives, and surveillance. Following a series of arrests in December 2013, Bahraini prosecutors claimed that those detained “confessed that they had travelled to Iran and received training by Iranian personnel at Iranian Revolutionary Guard camps.”³³ An arms smuggler detained by the Bahraini security forces in July 2015 testified to having received weapons and explosives training at an IRGC camp in Iran two years prior.³⁴

On March 4, 2017, the Bahraini government issued its most explicit descriptions of the foreign training of Bahraini terrorists. Bahrain’s chief prosecutor, Ahmed al-Hammadi, stated that a Germany-based leader of the Saraya al-Ashtar group had helped organize trips for members from Bahrain to Iran and Iraq for training. Hammadi added that “several members [were sent] to Iran and Iraq to train on the use of explosives and automatic weapons in Revolutionary Guards camps to prepare them to carry out terrorist acts inside the country.”³⁵

On March 26, 2017, Bahraini authorities further detailed that six arrestees had received military training in IRGC camps in Iran, five had been trained by the Iraqi Kata’ib Hizballah group, and three received training in Bahrain itself.³⁶ The connection between Bahraini militants and Iranian-backed Iraqi militias has been growing in significance since at least 2015. In June 2015, Bahraini police

a Alshayeb was sentenced in the United Kingdom to five years for terrorism offenses after being detained in possession of bomb-making manuals when arriving in the United Kingdom from Baghdad in 2015. See Rori Donaghy, “Bahrain warns of fake activists after UK convicts Bahraini dissident of terrorism,” Middle East Eye, December 19, 2015.



Manama, Bahrain, in 2016 (Mohammed Al-Shaikh/AFP/Getty Images)

chief Major General Tariq al-Hassan stated that Kata'ib Hizballah (led by U.S.-designated terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) provided training on explosively formed penetrator (EFP) armor-piercing bombs at a camp in Iraq and “offered logistical and financial support” to Saraya al-Ashtar.³⁷ On August 13, 2015, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior arrested Qasim Abdullah Ali, who they claimed trained in Iraq with Kata'ib Hizballah before attempting to smuggle explosives back to Bahrain.³⁸ (Qasim Abdullah Ali later escaped and reemerged as an Iran-based network runner.³⁹)

The allegation of a Kata'ib Hizballah connection is credible on a number of counts. First, Kata'ib Hizballah is directly controlled by the IRGC Quds Force, and it was the premier user of EFP munitions in the anti-coalition resistance operations in Iraq prior to 2011.⁴⁰ Second, Iranian-backed militias such as Kata'ib Hizballah are collectively committed to supporting other Shiite communities in a so-called “axis of resistance,” which regularly professes strong support for the Bahraini Shi'a and levels military threats against the Bahraini monarchy.⁴¹ Third, there is a strong emotional connection between Iraqi and Bahraini Shi'a, with the latter looking to Iraq's shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala—not Qom, Iran—for religious guidance.⁴² One particularly significant Karbala-based preacher was Mohammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi, whose nephew Muhammad Taqi Mudarassi established the aforementioned Bahraini Hizballah and whose other cousin Hadi Mudarassi headed the 1981 coup attempt by the Iranian-sponsored IFLB.⁴³ According to Bahraini authorities, Hadi Mudarassi met in 2016 with Iraqi Shiite militias “to talk about escalating militancy in Bahrain in 2017.”⁴⁴

Dependency on Maritime Routes

The sea spaces surrounding the Bahraini archipelago connect Bahraini-based cells with Iran-based leadership and Iran/Iraq-based training and equipping bases. If Bahraini militants have not yet been identified by the authorities, they can leave Bahrain using

conventional transportation options, including Shi'a pilgrim flows headed to Iraq and Iran. Militants can also return to Bahrain in this manner until they have been identified as suspects. Covert egress and insertion is required for three types of transit. The first and rarest is inbound insertion of fighters. In December 2016, a group of men armed with AK-47s fled security forces after being dropped off by boat in Bahrain. Two individuals were traced from the drop-off and were found to have just traveled to Iran for a 10-day visit the previous month.⁴⁵ The boat carried a GPS device that showed numerous trips into Iranian waters stretching back to February 2015.⁴⁶ Thus, at least one boat was able to operate for almost two years without being intercepted.

Outbound exfiltration of wanted men (usually prison escapees) is more frequent. In December 2013, the Bahraini Coast Guard impounded a boat containing 13 wanted individuals trying to flee to Iran.⁴⁷ On June 5, 2016, the Bahraini Coast Guard recaptured eight escapees (out of 17 convicted terrorists) from a mass escape from the Dry Dock Detention Center the day before. The boat's GPS indicated they were headed toward a pick-up point with a ship in Iranian waters.⁴⁸ On February 9, 2017, Bahraini Special Forces intercepted a boat carrying escapees from a December 31, 2016, prison break at the Jau Reformation and Rehabilitation Center. Seven of the 10 escapees were rearrested and three killed in the operation.⁴⁹

The most regular known use of militant boat sorties is the inbound smuggling of explosives, weapons components, or whole weapons systems.⁵⁰ The first major shipment to be intercepted came on December 28, 2013, when a speedboat was tracked by coastal radar and intercepted carrying large quantities of advanced bomb components, including 31 Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines and 12 EFP warheads, plus the electronics to arm and fire the devices.⁵¹ On July 25, 2015, another inbound speedboat was intercepted carrying 43 kilograms of C4 explosives and eight AK-type assault rifles with 32 magazines and ammunition.

The speedboat had received weapons from a ship just outside the island's territorial waters, and one crew member testified to having been trained by the IRGC in Iran in 2013.⁵²

No inbound weapons shipments were intercepted in 2016 or 2017. One reason for this may be that the logistical suppliers of Bahraini militants are adapting to the government's more effective maritime policing. In 2017, Bahrain began intercepting bags containing small arms and explosives that had been professionally water-proofed. Other bags were found offshore, sunken in shallow water and attached to floating buoys. Weapons smugglers appear to have shifted from direct delivery of weapons to the Bahraini mainland to an indirect system of dropping water-proofed weapons in Bahraini waters, with militants undertaking pick-up themselves, to lessen the risk to smugglers.⁵³ The next stage of this process is expected to be delivery by unmanned vessels, with Bahraini security officials stating that they anticipate the use of programmable drone boats to bring materials into Bahrain in the future in order to make it completely unnecessary for smugglers to risk penetrating Bahraini waters with manned craft.⁵⁴

Foundations of Insurgency, 2013-2016

Bahrain has, by now, arguably seen the cycling of three generations of post-2011 militants. The first were the unsophisticated small bombing cells that activated in 2012-2013, who did not show signs of having received significant training or equipment from abroad. A second wave comprised the named groups emerging since 2013, which showed more sophistication and debuted new capabilities such as advanced remote-control IEDs. As Phillip Smyth suggested in the earliest analysis of the pantheon of post-2013 Bahraini groups, some of the newer and more ephemeral brands, such as Saraya al-Kasar and Asa'ib al-Muqawama al-Bahrainia, might have been "fronts" for more enduring entities, such as Saraya al-Ashtar, Saraya al-Mukhtar, and Saraya al-Muqawama al-Shabiya.⁵⁵ The Bahraini government has claimed that new brands emerging in 2017, such as Saraya Waad Allah, are fronts for Saraya al-Ashtar.⁵⁶

What can be said with more certainty is that these organizations appear to have maintained quite small active-service memberships, with even the largest—Saraya al-Ashtar—limited to operating two or three attack cells and a similar number of bomb-making workshops at any given time.^b The narrowing down of active-service units may have been deliberate, replacing the insecure networks of amateur bomb-throwers with small cells of externally trained terrorist operators. Arrest announcements suggest members tended to range in age from 22 to 29 years of age during their active service, with the odd older recruit in his late 30s and some younger members involved in moving and hiding weapons and explosives.^c Women played only a supporting role, typically coordinating male relatives to back their militant husbands with passive and active support.⁵⁷ In 2013-2015, these networks launched 23 bombing attacks that killed 14 security force members and wounded 25.⁵⁸ In contrast to earlier years, there were far fewer reports of fratricide by bomb makers, emplacements (one who installs device at detonation

point), or transporters, indicating more skilled operators and better-constructed devices.

This second generation of militants was mostly arrested in 2014-2015, seemingly in large part because of the intelligence materials gained during the interdiction of boat movements, which in turn led the authorities to bomb-making workshops and broader networks. In September 2015, Bahraini authorities raided a home in Nuwaidrat where they found "a secret hide-out underground used for storing and manufacturing explosive devices." Among the weapons found were 20 military-grade hand grenades manufactured in Iran (and embossed with the logo of the Defense Industries Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran).⁵⁹

The Bahraini 'resistance' fell into a lull in 2016. The loss of trained manpower may have triggered the two prison breakouts and related exfiltration efforts to Iran that were undertaken in 2016-2017 to free key unit members such as Muhammed Ibrahim Mulla Redhi al-Tooq, described by the Bahraini government as the triggerman⁶⁰ for a July 28, 2015, remote-control IED attack that killed two policemen outside a girls' school in Sitra.⁶¹

Third-Generation Cells Active in 2017

A third generation of militants is now arguably active, and the insurgency picked up again in 2017. Though fewer explosive devices were detonated in 2017 (nine bombings) than in 2013 (10), the attacks caused seven security force deaths and 24 injuries in 2017 versus six security force deaths and seven injuries in 2013.⁶² The networks active in the summer of 2017 had access to multiple bomb-making workshops and cache sites.⁶³ Bahrain's Ministry of Interior listed the assembled contents as including unspecified numbers of usable Claymore-type devices and EFPs, plus "127kg of high-grade explosives and bomb-making material including more than 24kg of C4, TATP and nitro cellulose, chemicals ... [and] automatic and other homemade weapons, electric detonators, grenades and ammunition."⁶⁴ Seven MAGICAR automobile security systems were seized in Sadad and al-Dair in mid-2017 where they were being prepared for use in remote-control IEDs.⁶⁵

No instances of self-inflicted accidental deaths have been reported, and there is evidence that Bahrain-based cells are using externally provided prototype IEDs as training aids and models for domestic production of IEDs, including making digital videos of step-by-step actions in order to gain input from bomb-making instructors based outside Bahrain.⁶⁶ Causing more security force deaths in 2017 than 2013, attacks are increasingly set to occur when and where the fewest civilians are present, in part due to growing public disquiet over the collateral damage caused by bombings.⁶⁷

The cells are not only undertaking remote-control IED attacks on police buses but also new categories of targeted attack. Under-vehicle IEDs (so-called "sticky bombs") are emerging in the militants' arsenal. From January to October 2017, Bahraini authorities report seizing four sticky bombs in Daih and Karzakan. Militants are also becoming more skilled at small unit tactics and shootings, resulting in attacks such as close-quarter assassinations of off-duty police officers^d and a successful December 31, 2016, assault on a maximum security prison that involved drone surveillance, exploitation of

b The authors' time-lining of security events in Bahrain since 2013 suggests that Saraya al-Ashtar does not appear to have had more than three bombing cells active at the same time at any point.

c The authors created a spread of ages of arrested suspects from open source announcements.

d A police lieutenant was shot dead in Bani Jamra on January 14, 2017, and another in Bilad al-Qadeem on January 29, 2017. Authors' dataset of attacks on Bahrain security forces.

a shift change by guards, and use of an IED to delay police reinforcements.⁶⁸ In one arms cache, Bahraini investigators found five Makarov pistols and five AK-pattern rifles with specialized barrel modifications to accept custom suppressors, all with internal and external serial numbers professionally removed.⁶⁹ Bahraini authorities are increasingly concerned that militant cells seem to be arming and training to attack protected facilities or armored convoys, possibly to strike government leadership figures.⁷⁰

Militant Cell Case Studies

Arrest data from 2017 paints an interesting picture of contemporary Bahraini militant networks. On August 24, 2017, the Bahraini government arrested the members of one Saraya al-Ashtar cell linked to a workshop containing 52 kilograms of high-grade TNT explosives, including C4, urea nitrate, and ammonium nitrate.⁷¹ The network's offshore coordinator was claimed to be the aforementioned Iran-based Hussein Ali Dawood, and its Bahraini cell leader was identified as 27-year-old Hassan Maki Abas Hassan, who Bahraini authorities arrested when he returned to Bahrain from a trip to Lebanon. Hassan Maki Abas Hassan's sister is accused of storing explosives for him.⁷² Hassan Maki Abas Hassan is characterized by Bahraini authorities as a bomb maker, trained in Syria and possibly Iraq in 2013 and instructed by Dawood to construct IEDs and handle the warehousing of weaponry and explosives sent into Bahrain.⁷³ Hassan Maki Abas Hassan returned from Lebanon in the company of Mahmood Mohammed Ali Mulla Salem al Bahrani, an older (33-year-old) Bahraini man who authorities say helped train Hassan Maki Abas Hassan as a bomb maker.⁷⁴ All the other individuals arrested or sought in relation to the cell were characterized as involved in moving and hiding devices and buying components (ball bearings and gas cylinders).⁷⁵ Bomb makers seem to be operating as bomb emplacers in some cases, suggesting cells lack the manpower to spare skilled bomb makers from such dangerous work.⁷⁶

In another case, another Saraya al-Ashtar cell linked to Hussein Ali Dawood was arrested on June 29, 2017. The local cell leader was named as Sayed Mohammed Qassim Mohammed Hassan Fadhel, a 25-year-old man who the government claims led one previous bombing attack in February 2016 (for which he was sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment).⁷⁷ Evading capture as a wanted man for over 12 months, Fadhel allegedly orchestrated two IED attacks and one grenade attack on a checkpoint, none of which caused security force casualties. His five-man team all ranged between 19 and 21 years of age, and it allegedly included one individual who had visited Iran multiple times, one who traveled to Syria to fight as a Shi'a volunteer, and two accused of training in Iraq, one with Kata'ib Hizballah.⁷⁸

The EFP Conundrum

One of the most alarming aspects of the post-2011 evolution of Bahraini militancy has been the introduction of EFPs into the arsenal of the resistance. As readers of this publication will well appreciate,

the EFP^f is a potentially game-changing weapon for Iran and its proxies to deploy in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf. The size of a paint can, an EFP munition can cut through any vehicle armor deployed by the Bahraini and Gulf militaries, potentially giving militants the ability to prevent a Saudi-backed state crackdown such as occurred in 2011 and to create urban "no-go zones" for security forces. An uprising by Shi'a youth might stand a far better chance of succeeding if such weapons can be employed, even in small numbers. As already mentioned, alongside 31 Claymore-type antipersonnel fragmentation mines intercepted on the speedboat heading for Bahrain on December 28, 2013, were 12 EFP warheads, plus the electronics to arm and fire the devices. The EFPs had eight-inch copper focusing "liners" (which create the armor-piercing effect).

Though these devices were the first EFPs to be intercepted, they were probably not the first to be imported. EFPs were also found in two bomb-making workshops in Bahrain: in Dar Kulaib (on June 6, 2015) and in Nuwaidrat (on September 27, 2015). In the first workshop, Bahraini forces uncovered a number of EFPs. The devices were collocated with 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 Lebanese Hizballah and Iraqi EFPs.⁷⁹

On September 27, 2015, security forces discovered another bomb-making facility in Nuwaidrat that contained an EFP-making industrial press and EFP components.⁸⁰ The workshop had been built around an industrial press used to make the armor-piercing liners. A variety of specialized dies were found, allowing the site to manufacture EFPs of different diameters. At the workshop were twelve disassembled EFPs with 4-inch and 10-inch copper focusing "liners" (which create the armor-piercing effect).⁸¹

Most recently, on June 29, 2017, the Bahraini Ministry of Interior announced that an unspecified number of EFPs were found in safe houses in Daih.⁸² Bomb makers active at the site seem to have been using imported 12-inch EFPs as prototypes, with locally made versions showing an iterative improvement in technique over time.⁸³ Four-inch EFPs, unusually small for such a weapon, were also discovered at the site.⁸⁴

The obvious question to pose is if EFPs have been present, why have they seemingly not been used. One answer is that EFPs may be overkill at this stage, with the main target—Bahraini police—moving entirely in unarmored vehicles that are more susceptible to high-explosive blasts than the fist-sized molten slugs produced by EFP munitions. Furthermore, EFPs are not simple weapons to employ correctly; their precise effect means it is very possible to miss a moving vehicle completely. This means that significant training may be required, especially when there are no "on-the-job" training

f One of the authors has written: "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." Michael Knights, "Iranian EFPs in the Gulf: An Emerging Strategic Risk," *PolicyWatch* 2568, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 23, 2016.

e The individuals had an average age of 33.

opportunities in active theaters where EFPs are being used in combat. Another option is that EFPs are being deliberately withheld for some reason—perhaps to react to a Saudi-Bahraini escalation, to send a signal regarding Iranian “red lines,” to avoid harsh retaliation against the population, or to complement some form of future uprising. All that is clear is that Bahraini networks were given small numbers of imported EFPs and were told to experiment with replicating them and to build up stocks of them.⁸⁵

Expansion to Saudi Arabia?

Located across a 25-kilometer causeway from Bahrain, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia is a predominately Shi`a 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.⁸⁶ The Shi`a population has become more restive in recent years,⁸⁷ in part reacting to a tough crackdown that saw Saudi Arabia execute Nimr al-Nimr, the most senior Shi`a cleric in the Eastern Province, on January 2, 2016. Facing unrest, Saudi Arabia also began to demolish parts of Nimr al-Nimr's hometown of Awamiyah in the summer of 2016,⁸⁸ sparking intense skirmishes between the Saudi armed forces and unnamed groups of armed Shi`a militants.⁸⁹

In terms of attack metrics, the increase in violence in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province is even more notable than in Bahrain. In 2014-2015, there were just four attacks on security forces, all shooting incidents that left a total of five officers dead and three wounded.⁹⁰ In 2016-2017, the number of attacks jumped to 24, with 18 killed and 39 wounded, with an even balance of shootings and bomb attacks.⁹¹ The importation of IEDs from Bahrain may be one factor in this change. On May 8, 2015, an unspecified number of remote-controlled Claymore-type IEDs were intercepted as they were being smuggled into Saudi Arabia over the causeway. These devices were eventually matched to IEDs found on June 6, 2015, in a bomb maker's workshop in Dar Kulaib, Bahrain.⁹² One notable trend in 2017 has been the use of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) by militants on six occasions,⁹³ though it is unclear if these were imported or captured from security forces.⁹⁴ EFPs would have been an ideal weapon for militants to deploy in the fighting in Awamiyah, but there is no evidence that they have been used and no evidence of vehicle losses of any kind for the security forces.

As Phillip Smyth has noted, Bahraini Shi`a militias such as Saraya al-Mukhtar are clear in their communiqués that they are joined with Saudi Arabian ‘resisters,’ noting as far back as February 20, 2014, that “the cause of the people in the Eastern Region [of Saudi Arabia] and our defense is one ... Resistance against Saudi occupation, our taklif, and our fate are united.”⁹⁴ (Taklif is an order from God that must be followed.)⁹⁵ On November 10, 2017, Bahraini militants may have acted on this intent by bombing a key pipeline, the AB3 pipeline supplying Saudi Arabian crude to the Bahrain Petroleum Company refinery at Sitra and a major source

of Saudi Arabian economic support to Bahrain.⁹⁶ The incident also looks like a warning sign from Tehran, recalling Saudi Arabian rhetoric about the November 4, 2017, missile strike on Riyadh by Yemen's Houthis, which Saudi Arabia characterized as “an act of war” by Iran. According to Saudi investigative files provided to Saudi media in August 2017, Saudi authorities had at some point before then uncovered a five-man cell of Saudi Arabian Shi`a who were trained inside Revolutionary Guard camps in Iran on the use of RPGs and explosives, including TNT, RDX, and C4. Riyadh claimed this was the leading edge of an Iranian effort to revive “Hizballah al-Hejaz,” an Iran-affiliated Saudi group that has been inactive since it carried out the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, which killed 19 U.S. servicemen.⁹⁷

Outlook for Resistance in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia

Since 2011, Iran and its proxy militias in Lebanon and Iraq have mounted an unprecedented effort to train, activate, and resupply IED cells inside Bahrain. Following the military suppression of Arab Spring protests in Bahrain, a fragment of the Shi`a youth traveled abroad to receive Iranian training in camps and battlefronts in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Iran's effort brought significant quantities of military high explosives into Bahrain and assisted Bahraini cells in developing IED workshops capable of churning out reliable, remote-controlled IEDs. Bahraini militants have witnessed the attrition of two generations of fighters since 2011 and have emerged as a smaller, tempered movement with better operational security. Iran is adapting its resupply methods to cope with tighter maritime policing, using at-sea caching of weapons and perhaps drone boats.

The next steps for the insurgency are less clear. On June 19, 2016, Major General Qassem Soleimani, head of the IRGC's Quds Force, made the most explicit Iranian threats against the Bahraini royal family since the 1980s, warning that Manama's actions would lead to a “bloody uprising” that would “leave people with no other option but the toppling of the regime in armed resistance.”⁹⁸ To be sure, the months that followed saw several terrorist plots and expanded recruitment efforts as well. This month, Bahraini Minister of Interior Shk Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa highlighted a series of Shi`a militant operations carried out in 2017. He pointed to seized envelopes containing BD50 (Bahraini dinar), which he said were handed out as cash rewards for terrorist operations and acts of vandalism and tied these to cells “run by individuals in Iran who coordinate with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, the Popular Crowd Forces in Iraq (Al-Hashd al-Shaabi) and the Hezbollah in Lebanon to train terrorists.”⁹⁹

For now, this threat looks unrealistic due to the energetic efforts of the country's security forces. This may change in the future, however. Iran might be trying to deter Bahraini crackdowns or develop leverage over the Gulf States more generally. Or Soleimani's words might reflect the longstanding Iranian determination to overthrow the monarchy if another 2011-type opportunity emerges. Indicators of a more ambitious Iranian strategy in Bahrain might include assassinations of Bahraini security leaders, stockpiling of larger stores of small arms and ammunition, further prison breaks or weapons thefts, and an expansion in the manpower pool of trained Bahraini militants available for use in a future uprising. **CTC**

g Saudi Arabian security force members have taken video of their colleagues shooting RPGs in Awamiyah. See “Secret Saudi War In Al-Awamiyah,” South Front, August 6, 2016.

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