



The Bahrain Uprising: Towards Confrontation or Accommodation?

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Executive summary

Introduction

- ◇ Tensions have been rising in the run-up to the scheduled 23 November report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry into alleged abuses during the uprising earlier this year.
- ◇ However, a 21 November Bahraini cabinet statement provides some hope the report will strengthen moderates within the government and opposition, and provide new opportunities for accommodation.

The Bahrain uprising

- ◇ Sectarian divisions between the Sunni Royal family and elites and the Shiite majority have been a source of tension for many decades. These flared up again on 14 February, leading to a 14 March intervention by Saudi and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces.
- ◇ The uprising was crushed with over 40 deaths, hundreds of detentions and the mass trial of 21 opposition leaders.

The crisis has continued to evolve

- ◇ The crisis in Bahrain in many ways has deepened. Tensions have been driven by repression against doctors, students and labourers including mass sackings, notorious incidents of abuse, and controversial deaths.
- ◇ A "National Dialogue" this summer failed to promote calm, and at present there is no effective mechanism for dialogue between the government and opposition.

Conspiracy theories and propaganda warfare

- ◇ Divisions in Bahrain have been characterized by

conspiracy theories and propaganda war. Many Sunnis appear to believe Iran and Hezbollah are driving the unrest. These heretofore-unsubstantiated allegations were recently boosted when Qatar claimed to uncover a cell linked to Iran.

- ◇ Opposition groups accuse the government of nationalising Sunni foreigners in order to tilt the sectarian balance against Shiites. Both sides, especially the government, have been using aggressive online and social media tactics.

The role of external players

- ◇ Saudi Arabia's military intervention asserted its role in the future of Bahrain, leadership of the GCC independent of American policy, and attitude towards Shiite uprisings.
- ◇ Iran has long-standing claims on and ambitions towards Bahrain but does not appear to have had a direct role in the uprising thus far.
- ◇ United States interests in Bahrain reflect its broader strategic concerns in the Gulf and the basing of its Fifth Fleet in the country. In no other Arab state is tension between American "values" and "interests" as pronounced.

Prospects for progress towards greater stability in Bahrain

- ◇ On-going tensions have played into the hands of hardliners within the government and opposition. However neither can "win" because neither is going to be driven out or indefinitely suppressed.
- ◇ The real struggle in Bahrain is not between the government and the opposition, or between Sunnis and Shiites, but to find a win-win scenario.
- ◇ The commission report and cabinet statement could provide the first opportunity in many months for such a process to begin.

Introduction

Tensions have been rising in Bahrain in the run-up to the scheduled 23 November report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry into alleged abuses during the uprising earlier this year. Clashes between police and demonstrators marked the recent funerals of 16-year-old Ali Al-Badah, who was run over by a police vehicle under controversial circumstances,¹ and of Ali Hasan al-Dehi, father of the deputy head of one of the main Shiite opposition groups, Al-Wefaq.² Al-Wefaq members claimed al-Dehi had been beaten by police while the Ministry of Health said he “died of natural causes.” Ongoing tensions between the largely Shiite opposition and the Sunni royal family and its supporters have not subsided since the uprising began in mid-February and are now being most troublingly punctuated by a series of controversial deaths and subsequent clashes at the ensuing funerals, of which these are only the most recent instances. The Independent Commission of Inquiry, headed by Egyptian war crimes expert Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, was established to investigate the deaths of over 40 people during the unrest and other alleged human rights abuses. The Commission has said that it has been granted access to the subjects of investigation “most of the time.”³

A largely unexpected statement issued by the Bahraini cabinet on 21 November, however, provides some basis for hope that the Commission’s findings will strengthen the hands of moderates within the royal family and the government and provide opportunities for more serious re-engagement with the opposition

towards reform and accommodation.⁴ The cabinet accepted that the report will demonstrate there were “instances of excessive force and mistreatment of detainees,” and stated that at least 20 police officers would be prosecuted and that additional prosecutions are possible. It promised that “all forms of torture will be criminalized,” and to establish “a Human Rights Institution that will be truly independent of the Government.” The statement also affirms that the “right to speak freely is to be protected and not criminalised.”

The cabinet statement and commission report will no doubt be met with considerable scepticism internationally and by much of the Bahraini opposition. Most of the opposition has already expressed objections to the commission’s formation by royal decree, doubts about its credibility and ultimate purpose, and scepticism that it will produce any real political changes. Nonetheless, this is probably the furthest that any Arab regime facing an on-going protest movement has gone in terms of self-criticism. However, given the failure of the “National Dialogue” held mainly in July to achieve any significant measure of reconciliation or calm in the country, the Commission’s report and the cabinet statement will almost certainly not in themselves be sufficient to stem the drift towards further confrontation and potential violence in Bahrain. This will require a new formula for a more frank and equitable exchange and the acceptance by both sides of the need to accommodate each other’s fundamental concerns.

1 “Clashes break out in Bahrain after teen’s death”, CNN, 20 November 2011 available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/11/19/world/meast/bahrain-unrest/>

2 “Elderly Shiite ‘beaten to death’ by Bahrain police”, Agence France Presse, 3 November 2011, available at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jSYCGpD4luU-y1knb_L5nNavonxQ?docId=CNG.0dcb7d3d860d0cf5c7d1a0b3866f2f13.851

3 “Bahrain has ‘investigated every death and torture case’”, The National, 2 November 2011, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/bahrain-has-investigated-every-death-and-torture-case>

4 “Cabinet Issues Statement in Preparation for the BICI Report”, Bahrain News Agency, 21 November 2011, available at <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/481295>

The Bahrain uprising

The uprising in Bahrain that began in February undoubtedly owed much of its initial inspiration and some of its tactics to the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt that immediately preceded it. But it has far deeper origins. The Arab Sunni Al-Khalifa family has ruled Bahrain since the late 18th century, after driving out a Persian garrison that had been controlling the island. The family originates from Najd, which is now the central region of Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Bahrain was a British protectorate from the 1830s until independence in 1971. The exact demographic makeup of the country is the subject of considerable dispute, but it is generally accepted that a large Shiite majority, some of it ethnically Persian in origin, is governed by a minority Sunni Arab royal family and ruling elite.

Sectarian divisions have been a source of tension for many decades. They led to significant uprisings against the ruling family, largely led by disenfranchised Shiites, in the mid-1950s and again in the mid-1990s. As with the present ongoing tensions, in both cases there were varying perceptions regarding the extent to which the protests were essentially sectarian in nature or more broadly focused on demanding greater constitutionalism and access for Bahraini citizens generally. The protest movement in Bahrain is, therefore, both a manifestation of a broader pattern of Arab uprisings for greater rights, democracy and human dignity, and also a reflection of country-specific tensions with far deeper roots and implications.

The protests that began on 14 February were neither entirely sectarian in nature nor aimed at overthrowing the government, but called for a transition to a constitutional monarchy. However, as tensions and violence escalated, the sectarian nature of the political division in Bahraini society became increasingly pronounced. Moderates on both sides

were outflanked by more extreme forces that pushed the uprising into becoming a more overtly sectarian confrontation. This foreclosed efforts at conciliation by moderates in the protest movement and forces in the government led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa that appeared open to dialogue.

The turning point appears to have been the creation of the "Coalition for a Bahraini Republic," which by its very name sought to replace the monarchy altogether. The formation of this group was announced on 8 March by three of the more radical Shiite organizations involved in the protests: Al-Haq, Wafa and the Bahrain Freedom Movement.⁵ It was particularly the involvement of Al-Haq leader Hassan Al-Mushaima, who the government has long regarded as an agent of Iranian influence, and who declared that the coalition had "chosen to fight for a complete downfall of the regime," that caused the greatest alarm for the ruling family and its allies.⁶

In the eyes of the royal family as well as its Sunni supporters in Bahrain and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, the term "Republic" was seen as strongly implying "Islamic Republic," meaning the replication of the Iranian theocratic system in Bahrain and, by extension, Iranian hegemony. Iran has had long-standing territorial claims on Bahrain, which were particularly a source of tension with the United Kingdom and Arab states, during the rule of the Shah in the 1960s. But there is a widespread belief among Sunni Arabs in the Gulf that Iranian political and territorial ambitions regarding Bahrain have never been fully abandoned. Indeed, the Bahraini government blamed Iranian "meddling" for the protest movement of the 1990s while it was in progress.

⁵ "Shiite groups form 'Coalition for a Bahraini Republic'", Agence France Presse, 8 March 2011, available at <http://www.france24.com/en/20110308-shiite-groups-form-coalition-bahraini-republic>

⁶ Ibid.

The reaction was swift and, in the short term, decisive. On 14 March, over 1,000 Saudi troops crossed the causeway between the two countries, followed by additional forces from other GCC states. As Marina Ottaway, director of the Middle East programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has noted, the “message was clear: Shias are a fifth column for Iranian ambitions and under no circumstances could a Shia-dominated government be allowed to form on the island.”⁷ After a brief flirtation with conciliation, the government and its GCC allies returned to their initial approach of zero-tolerance towards protest and dissent, and even demolished the Pearl Roundabout, the main landmark of the capital Manama which had become a focal point of demonstrations. Many observers have noted the irony that the once-iconic pearl was upheld by six pillars representing the six GCC member states.

Twenty-one opposition leaders, from a wide ideological gamut, were subjected to a highly divisive mass trial that led to stiff prison sentences, including many life terms. Perhaps the most instructive was the shockingly harsh five-year sentence imposed on Ibrahim Sharif, Secretary-General of the National Democratic Action Society, also known as Al-Wa’ad, who had never called for the overthrow of the government and is a Sunni social democratic reformist. As blogger and journalist Sal Gentile observed, this harsh sentence might be best attributed to, “[t]he fact that a Sunni politician was among the leaders of the uprising severely undercut... claims [by the government that the uprising was a Shiite and Iranian-inspired plot], and revealed rifts in the powerful Sunni minority.”⁸ In any event, the violent suppression of the protest movement and harsh sentences meted out against opposition leaders without distinguishing between different ideological

7 “Bahrain: Between the United States and Saudi Arabia”, Marina Ottaway, Carnegie Endowment, 4 April 2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/04/bahrain-between-united-states-and-saudi-arabia/t8#>

8 “Treatment of jailed Bahrain dissidents called ‘brutal,’ as activists call for U.S. action”, Sal Gentile, Need to Know on PBS, 23 June 2011, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/need-to-know/the-daily-need/treatment-of-jailed-bahrain-dissidents-called-brutal-as-activists-call-for-u-s-action/10035/>

strands left the country simmering with political and, increasingly, sectarian tensions.

The crisis has continued to evolve

In spite of the successful efforts by the Bahraini government and its allies to crush the protest movement and imprison its leaders, the crisis in Bahrain has not only remained unresolved, in many ways it has deepened. In addition to the deaths, injuries and mass detentions during the uprising, and the jailing of opposition leaders, another major source of tension has been the repression by the government against parts of the medical profession and organised labour.

The General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions, the largest labour group in the country, claims that up to 2,500 people, largely Shiites, were dismissed from their jobs as punishment for dissent or participation in protests.⁹ A report from Human Rights Watch seemed to substantiate these charges of mass retaliation by sacking.¹⁰ The Bahrain government, for its part, says that some 1,600 employment cases are pending before disciplinary councils and that at least 200 workers have been reinstated.¹¹

There has also been a major outcry over retaliation against doctors and other medical employees who say they were arrested for treating protesters but who are accused by the government with committing “crimes against the state.”¹² In late September, some 20 medical staff from the Salmaniya Medical Centre in

9 “US labor team probes job purges in Bahrain”, Brian Murphy, Associated Press, 26 October 2011, available at http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5htfsuUV1MSZIZPRfwRPI_QFhy1_Q?docId=586e6d52944142b6bb9725f6c2d4d725

10 “Bahrain: Revoke Summary Firings Linked to Protests: US to Investigate Compliance With Free Trade Agreement”, Human Rights Watch, 14 July 2011, available at <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/07/14/bahrain-revoke-summary-firings-linked-protests>

11 “US labor team probes job purges in Bahrain”, Brian Murphy, Associated Press, 26 October 2011, available at http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5htfsuUV1MSZIZPRfwRPI_QFhy1_Q?docId=586e6d52944142b6bb9725f6c2d4d725

12 “Bahrain doctors jailed for treating injured protesters”, Martin Chulov, The Guardian, 29 September 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/29/bahrain-protester-death-sentence>

Manama were accused of various seditious crimes and sentenced to harsh prison terms ranging from five to 15 years.¹³

There have been a number of other sensational cases involving abuse or persecution of Shiite Bahrainis that became causes célèbre since the crushing of the protests and also contributed to increased tensions. In one of the most notorious cases, a 20-year-old poet called Ayat al-Gormezi was arrested on 30 March for reciting a poem critical of the King and sentenced to a year in prison on 12 June. A few weeks later, following an international and domestic outcry, she was released but subsequently alleged she had been severely abused while in custody and even beaten by a member of the royal family.¹⁴ Several Shiite university students were sentenced in October to lengthy terms in prison over clashes at the National University on 13 March, over 100 professors and administrators fired, and 60 students prohibited from returning to class.¹⁵

During the summer, the government attempted to restore calm by initiating a "National Dialogue" with the opposition, which was ostensibly aimed towards creating a greater consensus on the path forward for the country. This dialogue was initiated after a failed effort by elements of the government to ban the largest Shiite opposition party, Al-Wefaq, which hardly set a positive tone for the conversation.¹⁶ From its outset, the dialogue was criticised by the opposition for being too broad (it included some 300 participants representing a vast array of constituencies and interest-groups, with only 35 seats granted to actual opposition parties as opposed to other types of

organisations), and for affording the main opposition figures little scope or time to express their views. As frustration mounted and amid a climate of increasing recrimination and even thinly-veiled sectarian insults, Al-Wefaq withdrew from the talks on July 19.¹⁷

As this author noted at the time, one of the final blows to the credibility of the National Dialogue occurred when "the pro-government Salafist Member of Parliament Jassim Al-Saeedi referred to the organization [Al-Wefaq] as 'rawfidh' ('refusers' of traditional Sunni narratives about Islamic history, effectively the equivalent of 'heretics'), a term regarded as highly derogatory by Shiites. During the course of the unrest, Shiite derogatory terms for Sunni Bahrainis, including the royal family, have also become well-known, generally some form of 'visitors,' 'strangers,' or 'immigrants,' suggesting their presence is alien and temporary and their rule illegitimate."¹⁸

With the failure of the National Dialogue to produce any reconciliation, accommodation or progress, and amid continued tensions produced by mutual bitter accusations, violent clashes, controversial deaths, arrests and prosecutions, the situation in the country remains highly unstable. Indeed, when the government announced elections in September to fill 18 seats in parliament abandoned by Shiite MPs, Al-Wefaq and other major opposition parties said they would boycott both the balloting and the parliament.¹⁹ At present there appears to be no effective mechanism for dialogue between the government and the opposition and hence no clear way of moving beyond confrontation and towards accommodation.

13 "Bahrain doctors jailed for treating injured protesters", Martin Chulov, The Guardian, 29 September 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/sep/29/bahrain-protester-death-sentence>

14 "Poet jailed in protests claims she was beaten by Bahraini royal", The Independent, 18 July 2011, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/poet-jailed-in-protests-claims-she-was-beaten-by-bahraini-royal-2315431.html>

15 "Bahrain Cracks Down on Student Protesters With Harsh Sentences", Ursula Lindsey, The Chronicle, 10 October 2011, available at <http://chronicle.com/article/Bahrain-Cracks-Down-on-Student/129335/>

16 "Bahrain seeks to dissolve main opposition group", Gulf News, 14 April 2011, available at <http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-seeks-to-dissolve-main-opposition-group-1.792483>

17 "Beyond Bahrain's dialogue", Jane Kinninmont, Foreign Policy, 18 July 2011, available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/18/after_bahrain_s_dialogue

18 "The Bahrain Stalemate", The Atlantic, 18 July 2011, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/07/the-bahrain-stalemate/242086/>

19 "Bahrain's main opposition to boycott by-polls", Al Jazeera, 13 August 2011, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/08/2011813162813638336.html>

Conspiracy theories and propaganda warfare

Conspiracy theories abound on both sides of the divide in Bahrain, often reflecting deep sectarian consciousness, tensions and even paranoia. As Jane Kinninmont, senior research fellow in the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, has pointed out, “[p]arts of the government, and the state media, have spent months, if not years, trying to convince much of the Sunni population that Shia Bahrainis are incapable of taking part in democracy because they have religious links with clerics in Iraq and Iran—rather reminiscent of charges levelled against Catholics and Jews in different contexts.”²⁰ One of the strangest of the anti-Shiite conspiracy theories currently making the rounds of pro-government advocacy is the allegation of the existence of an alternative Bahraini flag, substituting a 12 point banner for the traditional 8, 10 or 5 point national flag. It is apparently alleged by the proponents of this theory that this flag, which does not appear to exist, is meant to represent the 12 imams of the Shiite denomination and therefore is the symbol of a seditious sectarian conspiracy.²¹

Many Bahraini and other Gulf Arab Sunnis appear to believe deeply, or at least are continuously told, that dissent and unrest in the country is driven by not only Iran, but Hezbollah, which supposedly has a large and long-standing organisation in Bahrain, although its existence has never been substantiated in any meaningful way. For example, pro-government columnist Sawsan Al-sha’er in a 13 October commentary for the Al-Watan newspaper claimed that “70% of the Shiites [in Bahrain are] under the party’s [Hezbollah] exclusive umbrella.”²² She gave no

indication of how she arrived at this figure or even what, exactly, Hezbollah Bahrain actually is.

The question of the existence of a Hezbollah in Bahrain, and what precisely pro-government commentators are referring to when they denounce it, is a matter of much dispute and speculation. There is no organization that openly describes itself in such a manner, and denunciations of “Hezbollah Bahrain” almost always leave the reader wondering who or what is really being referred to. Clearly the government and its supporters believe that Al-Haq and its leader, Hassan Al-Mushaima, constitute something at the very least analogous to that, but it is unclear if the allegations refer to a shadowy but vast underground conspiracy that is both more militant and right-wing (and for which there is no apparent evidence), or whether, alternatively, they refer to the Shiite opposition in general including the more mainstream Al-Wafaq. The fact that the government tried 21 leading opposition figures together, including the Sunni social democrat Sharif, muddied the waters even further. Most pro-regime discussion of “Hezbollah” in Bahrain seems to assume that the reader already knows exactly who and what is being referred to although names and other specifics are almost never proffered. The same omissions and vagueness marred a Wall Street Journal editorial by Mitchell Belfer making similar claims.²³

Heretofore unsubstantiated allegations from the government and its supporters of a direct Iranian role in not only instigating the uprising but also terrorist activities in Bahrain were given a sudden boost in mid-November when Qatar announced that it had uncovered a violent cell linked to Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Qatari and Bahraini authorities said the group was planning to attack the Saudi Embassy and the causeway between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.²⁴

20 “Beyond Bahrain’s dialogue”, Jane Kinninmont, Foreign Policy, 18 July 2011, available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/18/after_bahrain_s_dialogue

21 “Racist Mythology and the Search for the Elusive 12-Point Flag in Bahrain”, Chan’ad Bahraini 2.0, 26 October 2011, available at <http://chanad.posterous.com/the-search-for-the-elusive-12-point-flag-poli>

22 “The last to speak of unity”, Sawsan Al-sha’er, Al Watan, 13 October 2011, available at <http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=LF8q2KpXam1/CbDb5A05Oi6TivEwOMsDFyiZDefWj2F5w+asdZpTit9v8QVGXqO>

23 “Iran’s Bahraini Ambitions”, Wall Street Journal, 6 October 2011, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204612504576608852457881450.html>

24 “Bahrain says terror suspects linked to Iran’s Revolutionary Guard”, The Guardian, 14 November 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/14/bahrain-terror-iran-revolutionary-guard?newsfeed=true>

Bahraini public prosecutors alleged links between the group and Ali Mushaima, son of Al-Mushaima who the government has long accused of being an agent of Iran. Details of the alleged plot were exceptionally scant.

Even if true, because they are the first substantive effort to link Iran directly to any campaign of terrorism or sabotage in Bahrain, the allegations themselves suggest that previous accusations have been exaggerated, if not baseless. It seems more the start of something new, rather than the extension of an existing phenomenon. It is also noteworthy that almost all the accused were arrested outside of Bahrain, further undermining the narrative that the uprising has been largely inspired or led by Iranian agents in the country. If that had been the case, why did these would-be terrorists have to leave Bahrain in the first place, only to plan to return? The existing narrative suggests such groups have already been active in the country for quite a while. For its part, Iran angrily denied the charges and summoned the Bahraini ambassador to express its displeasure.²⁵

There are also significant conspiracy theories present in opposition discourse in Bahrain. Almost all opposition groups, including the nonsectarian Al-Wa'ad party, accuse the government of a concerted policy of nationalising Sunni foreigners in order to tilt the sectarian balance against the Shiite majority. Noted Al-Wa'ad leader Munira Fakhro denounced the government for this alleged policy while campaigning for parliament in October 2010.²⁶

Much of the united opposition to the nationalisation and even presence of large numbers of non-Bahraini-origin Sunnis seems to stem from two concerns: first, that because these migrants are non-Bahraini

and non-Shiite, they can and do serve as a ruthless arm of repression against the majority on behalf of the government; and second, a sense that for various reasons these migrants are privileged even over working or middle-class Bahraini Sunnis. While the Bahraini security forces rely heavily on foreign mercenaries, and the program to attract them clearly exists, evidence is scant that this is a concerted policy to shift the demographics of the country away from the Shiite majority, as the total numbers do not appear to have had a significant impact on the sectarian demographic ratio overall.

In early July, an extremely murky but highly revealing controversy erupted over an alleged government report that supposedly claimed that 51 per cent of Bahrain's population is Sunni Muslim, a figure not believed by any credible observer. The opposition claimed the alleged report was further evidence of the government's sectarian agenda and demographic machinations. The government denied the existence of any such report and strongly implied that reports of its existence were an opposition conspiracy to discredit the government itself. No such report was ever released, and the Bahrain government insists it has no figures on sectarian demography as it does not classify citizens in such a manner. The bizarre controversy was analysed by Bahrain scholar Justin Gengler on his blog.²⁷ Whatever the truth of the matter, this controversy again demonstrates how conspiratorial and indeed paranoid the discourse about demography in Bahrain is on both sides of the sectarian and government/opposition divide.

Another aspect of the confrontation in Bahrain is a propaganda war, which seems to be unusually intense. Both sides employ traditional and online media with varying degrees of credibility, although the government has cracked down on newspapers and bloggers. The independent newspaper Al-Wasat was

25 "Iran summons Bahrain's envoy in Tehran", Gulf News, 21 November 2011, available at <http://gulfnews.com/news/region/iran/iran-summons-bahrain-s-envoy-in-tehran-1.934632>

26 "Bahraini Oppositionist: Stop Nationalizing Sunnis", The Media Line, 4 October 2011, available at http://www.themedialine.org/news/print_news_detail.asp?NewsID=30186

27 "Dialogue, Representation, and Statistics", Religion and Politics in Bahrain, 4 July 2011, available at <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2011/07/dialogue-and-statistics.html>

attacked by pro-government supporters on 15 March, and its editor, Mansoor Al-Jamri, was forced out of his position for several months, although he was reinstated in early August.²⁸ Even more disturbingly, Karim Fakhrawi, one of the paper's founders and board members, who was also a member of Al-Wefaq, died under mysterious circumstances while in police custody in April.²⁹ The Committee to Protect Journalists protested lengthy prison terms against bloggers Abduljalil Alsingace and Ali Abdel Imam handed down in June and reaffirmed in September, and other bloggers have faced arrest, harassment and other forms of abuse.³⁰

A less violent but more unusual, and in some ways perhaps darkly innovative, battle has been waged in the social media. There are strong indications that the Bahraini government, and in some cases the opposition as well, have rushed at the forefront of some novel uses of PR, including Twitter trolling (harassing people systematically with a barrage of usually abusive replies) and other online tactics. Director of International Freedom of Expression at the Electronic Frontier Foundation Jillian York examined Twitter trolling as a propaganda tactic being used in different ways by the governments of Bahrain, Syria and Israel.³¹ British graduate student and blogger Marc Owen Jones also noted the explosion of trolling on the issue of Bahrain, although on both sides of the divide, in March.³² Simeon Kerr of the Financial Times described the war of words between Bahrainis on social media³³

and the admonition from the government's "SafeSurf Newsletter" to "think twice before posting, forwarding, or reTweeting messages."³⁴

Writing about the social media wars surrounding the uprising for the New York Times, J. David Goodman noted that while "the Bahrain government was an early and aggressive adopter of Twitter at the start of the Arab Spring — especially the Interior Ministry and Khalid Alkhalifa, the foreign minister — no direct connection has been shown between the government and its aggressive supporters online."³⁵ However, the Bahrain government does appear to have employed an unusually large number of Western PR agencies, as listed most exhaustively on an opposition blog post that appears to be credible and accurate.³⁶

And, of course, the opposition has its own online media outlets, some more credible than others, and strong support from many sections of the blogosphere and other "netizens." It can also rely, often to its own detriment, on Iranian government propaganda outlets. As David Roberts, Deputy Director of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies in Qatar, has observed, when it comes to overheated rhetoric about Bahrain, "the current elite in Iran are practically a parody of an angry, tub-thumping revolutionary Shia leadership: they do half of the work of the Sunni Arab elite for them."³⁷

28 "Gangs with clubs attack Bahrain newspaper", ABC News, 15 March 2011, available at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-15/gangs-with-clubs-attack-bahrain-newspaper/2656814?section=world>

29 "Al-Wasat founder dies in custody in Bahrain", Committee to Protect Journalists, 15 April 2011, available at <http://www.cpj.org/2011/04/al-wasat-founder-dies-in-custody-in-bahrain.php>

30 Ibid.

31 "Twitter Trolling as Propaganda Tactic: Bahrain and Syria", Jillian C. York, 12 October 2011, available at <http://jilliancoryork.com/2011/10/12/twitter-trolling-as-propaganda-tactic-bahrain-and-syria/>

32 "So Many Trolls but so Few Leaders: The Information War in Bahrain", Marc Owen Jones, 14 March 2011, available at <http://www.marcowenjones.byethost2.com/?p=176>

33 "Bahrain: 'Think Twice' about tweeting", Simeon Kerr, Financial Times, 27 April 2011, available at <http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2011/04/27/bahrain-think-twice-about-tweeting/#ixzz1eSAwa8Bh>

34 "TRA Releases Bahrain SafeSurf Newsletter on the Abuse of Social Media", Press Release, TRA Bahrain, 25 April 2011, available at http://www.tra.bh/en/pdf/SafeSurfNewsletter_socialMedia_Pressrelease_en.pdf

35 "'Twitter Trolls' Haunt Discussions of Bahrain Online", The Lede, New York Times, 11 October 2011, available at <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/twitter-trolls-haunt-discussions-of-bahrain-online/>

36 The Bahrain Regime's Western Harbara Agents, Chan'ad Bahraini 2.0, 2 October 2011, available at <http://chanad.posterous.com/73487625>

37 "Blame Iran: a dangerous response to the Bahraini uprising", The Guardian, 20 August 2011, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/20/bahraini-uprising-iran>

The role of external players: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United States

Saudi Arabia

The primary external actor currently influencing events in Bahrain is Saudi Arabia, which asserted its leadership of the GCC, and Bahrain as a part of that organization, through its military intervention in the island. Along with the government of Bahrain, the rest of the GCC, led by Saudi Arabia, interpreted the uprising as a threat to collective security, thereby justifying the intervention. The Peninsula Shield Force, the collective military wing of the GCC, ostensibly intervened, its commander Major General Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima said at the time, "to secure Bahrain's vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference" as it was "preoccupied with its internal security."³⁸

The main effect of the Peninsula Shield intervention was not only to help suppress the uprising but also to bolster the position of hard-liners within the regime who wanted to focus on asserting government authority across the board before, or even instead of, looking for an accommodation with the Shiite majority and the political opposition. It squarely cast the confrontation between the government and the protesters in the context of Bahrain's status as an integral part of the Arab Persian Gulf community, as well as the GCC alliance. It served as an implicit but powerful warning to Bahrain's Shiite community, and possibly Iran, that Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states regarded the uprising as an existential crisis that was virtually domestic in nature for them. Saudi Arabia itself has a significant, repressed and restive Shiite population, particularly in its oil-rich eastern provinces.

The extent to which the Saudis regarded the intervention as an existential necessity akin to dealing with a major domestic crisis is indicated by initial

reports from the Pentagon that the United States (US) did not receive any prior notification from its Saudi allies.³⁹ Subsequent reports clarified that the US may have received some pro forma notification. An unnamed American official reportedly later said, "[w]e received word that they were planning to head into Bahrain, but not with a significant amount of lead time," with another official adding, "we were informed just before, not consulted."⁴⁰ According to the New York Times, in the weeks leading up to the intervention, senior Americans found communicating with Saudi leaders extremely difficult, particularly following US support for the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The paper quoted a US official as saying of the Saudi government at the time, "[t]hey're not in a mode for listening."⁴¹

For the Saudis, therefore, the intervention served at least three purposes: a statement on the future of Bahrain; an assertion of its own leadership among the Arab Gulf states independent of American opinion and policy; and a clear indication regarding its attitude towards Shiite uprisings in GCC countries. Evidence suggests that Saudi influence has thus far either mostly or entirely strengthened the hand of hardliners within the regime, although Saudi attitudes towards Bahrain's long-term future and the prospect of a reasonable domestic accommodation are unclear, but not promising.

Iran

As noted above, Iran has historically made territorial claims on Bahrain, but these have generally been downplayed, at least in public, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The mainstay of pro-government rhetoric surrounding the uprising in Bahrain places the blame squarely at the feet of

³⁹ "US defense officials not warned of Bahrain deployment", Reuters, 14 March 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/14/bahrain-protests-usa-idUSN1418655820110314>

⁴⁰ Saudi told US of Bahrain intervention: US official", Agence France Presse, 14 March 2011, available at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gb-bd6kd7ayQRpR56KXBeNAnLQ5g?docId=CNG.c19d1813ea36bee1adc0e937cdf564ed.1b1>

⁴¹ "U.S.-Saudi Tensions Intensify With Mideast Turmoil", New York Times, 14 March 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15saudi.html?pagewanted=all>

³⁸ <http://www.webcitation.org/5xYJcDTUV>

Tehran and sees most if not all of the opposition as either consciously or unwittingly serving its interests. Yet there is almost no evidence to support these claims. The recent arrest of the alleged Revolutionary Guard-related Bahraini cell in Qatar constitutes the first substantive effort to actually link Iranian conduct to events occurring inside Bahrain, or rather in this case to potential events by people who had allegedly left Bahrain but were planning to return with terrorism or sabotage in mind. This author has spoken to more than one highly credible individual who has examined a confidential Bahraini government document intended for other governments and multilateral institutions purporting to demonstrate Iranian meddling in, and ultimate responsibility, for the uprising, and was assured it contains no substantive evidence.

Very few Western observers believe that Iran has played a direct role thus far in the upheaval in Bahrain. There is widespread agreement that Iran undoubtedly does have at least hegemonic, if not territorial, ambitions towards Bahrain, but most note the lack of evidence of Iranian involvement in the uprising in spite of enormous efforts on the part of the Bahraini government and its allies to promote this narrative. More tellingly, they note that the long history of sectarian and political tensions in the country, and the reaction of the regime to the protest movement when it first emerged, meant that conditions inside the country were more than sufficient to produce the confrontation without any direct Iranian or other foreign role. Brian Dooley summed up the prevailing attitude among Western observers in early October commentary on Foreign Policy's website: "I'm not naïve. Does Iran enjoy Bahrain's difficulties and would it like to get involved in making them worse? Probably. But that doesn't mean it created the legitimate grievances of the Bahraini opposition. Blaming mysterious outside forces for protests against autocratic rule is par for the course in the region..."⁴²

42 "Red Scare in Pearl Square", Foreign Policy, 7 October, 2011, available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/07/red_scare_in_pearl_square?page=full

It's worth noting, however, that in sharp contrast to its apparent initial expectations, Iran is anything but the primary beneficiary of what some people call the "Arab Spring," but which Tehran has dubbed the "Islamic Awakening." Indeed, thus far Turkey seems to be the primary regional beneficiary of the broader realignment brought about by the Arab uprisings, and Iran does not seem to have gained ground in any sector. Its relationship with and sympathy from the Sunni Arab world is in sharp decline. Moreover, Tehran has surely come to realise that even if Arab Sunni Islamists gain significant influence in post-dictatorship Arab societies, this will not necessarily benefit Iran. Whatever illusions the Iranian ruling faction may have had, by now it must have become obvious that Arab Sunni Islamists have not only sectarian but also ideological and ethnic differences with Tehran, and, if they gain a share of government, will also have to secure their own national interests.

It is, therefore, possible that the recently arrested alleged Bahraini terrorist cell represents a shift not only in the tactics of the most extreme Shiite elements in Bahrain (this author in April asked how long the status quo could hold before a campaign of urban terrorism and sabotage was launched by opposition extremists⁴³) but also in Iranian strategy towards Bahrain. If these allegations are correct, and so is the unbelievably amateurish purported Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, it might indicate a growing desperation and recklessness on the part of some elements in the Iranian government. That might signal a greater willingness to risk getting directly involved in events in Bahrain, especially if there are receptive extremist elements within the Shiite opposition that have decided to take up arms. This seems a remote possibility, but it cannot be entirely dismissed in light of the arrests in Qatar especially when seen in the context of continued

www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/07/red_scare_in_pearl_square?page=full

43 "Is Bahrain Creating a New Terrorist Threat?", Foreign Policy, 14 April 2011 available at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/04/14/is_bahrain_creating_a_new_terrorist_threat?page=full

tensions inside Bahrain and an increasingly difficult and deteriorating regional strategic situation facing Iran.

The United States

The Obama administration, through major speeches by both President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, has made it clear that its fundamental approach to the Arab uprisings is to try to find a balance between American “values” and “interests.” This idea was first and most forcefully explained in President Obama’s 28 March speech on the intervention in Libya⁴⁴ and reiterated in Secretary Clinton’s 7 November speech at the National Democratic Institute.⁴⁵ Nowhere is the tension between these values and interests more explicit, obvious or difficult than in the case of Bahrain.

Bahrain’s strategic importance for the US is both broader and specific. It serves as the home of the U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet, which reports directly to the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and is the primary American naval force in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea and parts of the African coast. During the summer, several commentators publicly, and some politicians and analysts privately, called for serious consideration for the relocation of the Fifth Fleet to another Persian Gulf location.⁴⁶ However, at this time that prospect appears to have receded and the debate more or less foreclosed, and it appears that no move is presently being contemplated. It is by no means clear that moving the base would constitute “punishment” or pressure on the regime, or that this would alarm or change the policies of Saudi Arabia or other GCC states.

Moreover, Jasim Husain, a leading member of Al-

44 “Obama’s Remarks on Libya”, New York Times, 28 March 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/us/politics/29prexy-text.html?pagewanted=all>

45 “Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute’s 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner”, Hillary Clinton, U.S. Department of State, 7 November 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/11/176750.htm>

46 “US fleet may quit troubled Bahrain”, The Australian, 21 July 2011, available at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/us-fleet-may-quit-troubled-bahrain/story-e6frg6so-1226098580227>

Wefaq, told The Daily Beast, “[w]e want the U.S. Fifth Fleet to remain in Bahrain because it is providing the sort of security needed for the larger Gulf region.”⁴⁷ Al-Wefaq Secretary-General Ali Salman similarly told the Washington Times that he supported the maintenance of the fleet in the short run in order to maintain stability, but that in the long run democracy would ensure enough stability to eliminate the need for foreign forces.⁴⁸ So, there does not appear to be any strong objection to this presence by the main Bahraini Shiite opposition grouping or any suggestion that removing it would be useful to their immediate cause.

Indeed, in light of increased concerns regarding Iranian nuclear and intelligence activities, the US is preparing to upgrade and increase its defense relationship with the entire GCC, including Bahrain.⁴⁹ New US weapons sales to Bahrain are said to be contingent on the content and reception of the Independent Commission of Inquiry report, and the recent cabinet statement could well be sufficient to quiet congressional and other objections, given the intense preoccupation with Iranian ambitions in Washington.⁵⁰ In April, Marina Ottaway noted: “[t]he United States has kept largely silent since the crackdown—criticism has been muted and has come from mid-level officials. Washington has seemingly accepted that for the time being the Saudis have won the battle for influence in Bahrain and concluded that mending relations with Saudi Arabia should take precedence right now.”⁵¹ She concluded, “[t]his is a policy that cannot continue.”

47 “Bahrain Opposition No Pawn of Iran’s Mullahs, Shiite Leader Says”, The Daily Beast, 10 November 2011, available at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/10/bahrain-opposition-no-pawn-of-iran-s-mullahs-shiite-leader-says.html>

48 “Bahrain’s opposition leader sees future without U.S. fleet”, The Washington Times, 1 September 2011, available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/sep/1/bahraini-opposition-leader-sees-future-without-us/?page=all>

49 “US to bolster GCC military presence”, Emirates 24/7, 31 October 2011, <http://www.emirates247.com/news/world/us-to-bolster-gcc-military-presence-2011-10-31-1.426248>

50 “Analysis - Arms deal for Bahrain hinges on human rights report”, Reuters, 16 November 2011, available at <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE7AF1OZ20111116?sp=true>

51 “Bahrain: Between the United States and Saudi Arabia”, Marina Ottaway, Carnegie Endowment, 4 April 2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/04/04/bahrain-between-united-states-and-saudi-arabia/t8#>

For now, this policy is in fact continuing because in Bahrain broader US strategic interests are trumping US values and it is difficult to anticipate a series of events in the near future that will reverse that calculation or find a means of harmonising them. The Obama administration and its successors will be tempted to continue to see Bahrain primarily through the lens of its relationship with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC, its broad strategic interests in the Persian Gulf region, and its concerns about Iran. However, Ottaway is correct that the status quo is ultimately not amenable to American interests, let alone values, because it is inherently unstable and potentially regionally destabilising, as well as a threat to US credibility. In the long run, it presents potential opportunities for mischief or worse for Iran and other potential rivals, and could become a major flashpoint of Sunni-Shiite tensions in a wide and strategically located crescent around the Gulf region.

Americans should also bear in mind that, as Justin Gengler has pointed out, a hard-line faction within what sometimes appears to be a traumatized and paranoid ruling elite in Bahrain has interpreted any expression of American values, and sympathy with the legitimate grievances of protesters, as yet another conspiracy to overthrow the regime. He noted that Minister of Defense, Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Force, and leading Royal family member, Marshall Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, said in a June interview with the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram that the uprising was, "by all measures a conspiracy involving Iran with the support of the United States," aiming "to draw a new map" of the region with the intention of undermining "the Arab welfare."⁵² This is only part of a broader anti-American narrative holding the US in part or in full responsible for the government's predicament that has taken hold in the most conspiracy-minded elements of the Bahraini elite. Allies in this state of mistrust and

unease are unlikely to prove reliable in the long run. For all of these reasons, it is strongly in the American national interest to find a means of calming tensions across the board by helping Bahrainis achieve a workable accommodation between the majority and the minority, and between the government and the citizenry.

Prospects for progress towards greater stability in Bahrain

Since the uprising broke out last February, all efforts to find a means to defuse tension in a sustained way have failed. Although the actual uprising has been successfully suppressed, tensions have continued and in many ways increased. This heightened tension has thus far played into the hands of hardliners within both the government and the opposition. However both sides of the Bahraini equation must recognise that neither of them can "win" in any kind of meaningful sense over the long run because the other party is neither going to be driven out nor indefinitely suppressed.

Although some extremist Shiites may dream of the day in which the royal family, and perhaps the entire or majority of the Sunni community, leaves the island, there is no foreseeable scenario in which that can happen. Indeed, events over the past year, painful as they no doubt have been, have only underscored that all parts of Bahraini society are tied to a future deeply embedded in the Arab Persian Gulf region and the GCC. There is no evidence that any of the major Shiite parties or groupings in Bahrain look to Iran as a saviour, and this is may in part be due to the fact that they know this is a completely unrealistic scenario. Moreover, most Bahraini Shiites are Arabs and despite their grievances are economically, culturally and socially deeply interwoven with the rest of the Gulf Arab societies.

The royal family and its supporters similarly cannot hope to maintain a stable situation in which a

⁵² "The other side of radicalization in Bahrain", Foreign Policy, 15 July 2011, available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/15/the_other_side_of_radicalization_in_bahrain

sectarian majority and multi-faceted political opposition continues to accept extremely limited forms of constitutionalism without real meaningful popular input or legitimacy to government. Shiite grievances are in part communal and sectarian, as well as historic, and have already accounted for the bulk of three major spasms of unrest in the past 60 years. But the violence and acrimony in 2011 is unprecedented and potentially sets the stage for the emergence of a self-fulfilling prophecy: an actual version of "Hezbollah Bahrain" or an analogous extremist, armed and sectarian group engaged in urban terrorism and sabotage. Despite all the talk, no such organisation has yet existed, and even the recent arrests in Qatar do not mean that one is being formed now. But at the very least, without serious reforms aimed at providing both more political freedoms across the board and specifically addressing Shiite sectarian grievances, the government must surely expect further outbreaks of unrest and instability. Ultimately, a strategy of suppressing a huge percentage, almost certainly a majority, of the population of any country, no matter how small, will surely prove unworkable.

Therefore, the real struggle in Bahrain is not between the government and the opposition, or between Sunnis and Shiites, but is to find the means to take what has been increasingly cast as a zero-sum relationship between two parties, neither of which is going to disappear or surrender, and transform it into a win-win scenario. The most obvious answer, at least in the medium term, is steady progress towards a genuinely constitutional monarchy with real parliamentary powers and significant, meaningful democratic processes that have a major impact on decision-making.

Thus far, every opportunity to begin to move in that direction since the uprising began in February has been squandered, generally by the government which holds most of the cards, but also at times by the opposition. The inescapable reality is that Bahrainis

have no choice but to find a way to live with each other in a workable, sustainable relationship, and the process of building such a relationship must begin sooner rather than later.

Given the number of false starts in recent months, it would be naïve to identify the commission report or the cabinet statement as the likely starting point for such a dialogue. But it is the first genuine opportunity for such a process to begin in many months. It should strengthen the hand of moderate forces within the government, and in turn that should strengthen the hand of moderate forces within the opposition. It would be a tragic error for either or both to squander yet another opportunity. And it is to be strongly hoped that both the US and Saudi Arabia will increasingly come to understand their own stake in building a workable, stable political and social structure in Bahrain, and encourage this process. Bahrain as it is currently structured looks very much like a social and political time bomb that could blow up in everyone's faces if it is not urgently defused.

Policy recommendations for the United States and its allies

1. Move forward in a framework that emphasises the need to harmonise American interests and values in dealing with Bahrain as the only way to secure long-term policy goals and strategic concerns in the region.
2. Take every opportunity to strengthen the hand of moderates within the government and to pressure hard-liners, emphasising that it is in their own strategic and political interests to reach a workable, stable accommodation with the Shiite majority and the political opposition.
3. Reach out to moderate opposition forces to try to help them develop an effective, credible dialogue with the government leading to reforms that provide

increased constitutionalism, popular input and the redress of Shiite communal grievances.

4. Push for the release of unjustly detained political prisoners such as Ibrahim Sharif and other victims of persecution, and do as much as possible to hold the Bahraini cabinet to the promises it issued in its statement welcoming the report of the Commission of Inquiry.
5. Attempt to restore confidence and cooperation with Saudi Arabia on Gulf security issues, emphasising that unrest and instability in Bahrain will only play into the hands of Iran and could ultimately lead to a broader Sunni-Shiite confrontation in a number of Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.
6. Place the issue of Bahrain in the broader context of the Arab uprisings and recognise that American credibility on democracy and human rights, and being on “the right side of history,” requires a stronger stance on these issues in Bahrain than has heretofore been forthcoming, while building stronger credibility with moderates on all sides.
7. As a last resort, consider the prospect of relocating the Fifth Fleet, but only if that will serve as an effective lever to achieve greater Bahraini government and Saudi cooperation on achieving real reforms towards more inclusive governance and social structure in Bahrain.
8. Emphasise in word and deed the vital American role in containing Iranian ambitions and hegemony in the region, particularly in Bahrain, with the understanding that this is ultimately dependent on real reforms to be plausible and effective, and to serve long-term US policy goals in the region.

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