ARAB UPRISINGS

Breaking Bahrain

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POMEPS Briefings 10

PROJECT ON
MIDDLE EAST POLITICAL SCIENCE

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Bahrain's Epic Fail

By Marc Lynch, April 22, 2012

Nine days ago, the courageous Bahraini activist Ala'a Shehabi wrote for **Foreign Policy** about the then 64- day hunger strike by Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja. His death, she warned, "could mark a significant breaking point for the regime's efforts to rehabilitate its tarnished reputation — and could accelerate the disturbing trend toward militant radicalization in the opposition." As of today, Khawaja remains thankfully alive. But Bahrain's ill-conceived Formula One race event has nevertheless already turned a harsh international spotlight onto the regime's ongoing repression. And Shehabi, an academic with dual Bahrain-British citizenship whose husband was only recently released after nine months in prison, has been arrested.

Shehabi's detention might seem a minor footnote given the ongoing protests, the numbers of other activists and journalists arrested and pressured, Khawaja's hunger strike, and the Formula One controversy. She hopefully will soon be released*. But her detention while assisting journalists seems particularly symbolic at a time when Bahrain's regime has sought to burnish its international reputation and suppress critical media coverage without engaging in serious reforms at home.

This week's Formula One-driven media scrutiny has ripped away Bahrain's carefully constructed external facade. It has exposed the failure of Bahrain's regime to take advantage of the breathing space it bought through last year's crackdown or the lifeline thrown to it by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). That failure to engage in serious reform will likely further radicalize its opponents and undermine hopes for its future political stability.

Bahrain's fierce, stifling repression of a peaceful reform movement in mid-March 2011 represented an important watershed in the regional Arab uprising. Huge numbers of Bahrainis had joined in street protests in the preceding month, defining themselves as part of the broader Arab uprising and demanding constitutional reforms and political freedoms. Bahrain's protest movement began as a reformist and not revolutionary one, and the BICI found no evidence that the protests were inspired or supported by Iran.

The government's mid-March decision to forcefully clear the streets and bulldoze Pearl Roundabout, with Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) support and accompanied by a ferociously sectarian campaign of repression, had region-wide impact. The crackdown torpedoed a political compromise between regime reformists and opposition moderates who had seemed tantalizingly close. Regionally, it blunted the seemingly irresistible momentum of regional change. The regime's use of a sectarian narrative to disrupt a broad-based reform movement triggered sectarian polarization in Bahrain and across the region. And the Obama administration's grudging acquiescence to the Saudi-driven fait accompli, at almost the exact same time as it began a military intervention in Libya and violence began to spiral in Syria, opened a gaping wound in American credibility.

A ferocious battle over how to understand the events in Bahrain has unfolded in the months since the crackdown, as anyone who has attempted to report on or discuss it can attest. Supporters of the regime have argued that they did what they must against a dangerously radical, sectarian Shiite movement backed by Iran, and fiercely contest reports of regime abuses. The opposition certainly made mistakes of its own, both during the protests leading up to the crackdown and after. But fortunately the facts of Bahrain's protest movement and the subsequent crackdown have been thoroughly documented by Bahrain's Independent Commission of Inquiry [pdf].

The BICI report established authoritatively that the Bahraini regime committed massive violations of human rights during its attempts to crush the protest movement. Hundreds of detainees reported systematic mistreatment

and torture, including extremely tight handcuffing, forced standing, severe beatings, electric shocks, burning with cigarettes, beating of the soles of the feet, verbal abuse, sleep deprivation, threats of rape, sexual abuse including the insertion of items into the anus and grabbing of genitals, hanging, exposure to extreme temperatures, forced nudity and humiliation through acts such as being forced to lick boots of guards, abuse with dogs, mock executions, and being forced to eat feces (BICI report, pp.287-89). Detainees were often held for weeks or months without access to the outside world or to lawyers. This, concluded the BICI, represented "a systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture, with respect to a large number of detainees in their custody" (Para 1238, p.298). And then there was the demolition of Shiite mosques, widespread dismissals from public and private sector jobs and from universities, sectarian agitation in the media, and so much more. No political mistakes made by the opposition could possibly justify these acts.

The presentation of the BICI report to the king and his senior officials could have been an opportunity for the regime to come to terms with its past mistakes and begin serious efforts at turning a new political page. Some parts of the regime, reportedly including the crown prince, seem to have genuinely hoped to do so. But the moment was lost. Despite some surface changes, the regime has continued to ferociously repress protests while failing to push for meaningful accountability or serious political change. Amnesty International recently concluded that the regime had failed to fully meet the recommendations of the BICI report and that "nearly five months after the report's publication, real change has not materialized." More deeply, "the culture of impunity within the security services identified in the BICI report has yet to result in any meaningful form of accountability."

When I met Shehabi in Washington in February, she warned of the growing radicalization of the protest movement in the face of this ongoing sectarian campaign and continued repression. Bahraini protesters have indeed become more radical in the face of such abuses and political stalemate. It has become harder and harder for opposition leaders to hold out for reform and compromise as resentments grew and positions hardened. Protests have taken on a harder edge, and reports of violence have become more frequent. The regime's heavy-handed, sectarian crackdown on opposition has radicalized the opposition and pro-regime communities alike, while discrediting reformists on both sides. If it is not already too late to reverse this dangerous dynamic then that threshold grows near. If it continues on this path, Bahrain is likely one of the top three regional regimes most likely to face existential challenge in the short to mid-term future.

I hope that the international backlash this week and the mounting signs of the unsustainability of their domestic strategy pushes Bahrain's leaders to rethink their approach. They should immediately begin serious efforts at real accountability for abuses, an end to incitement, the release and reinstatement of the victims of political repression, and a genuine political opening. Their actions and words offer little reason to expect that they will, unfortunately, or that they even recognize the approaching abyss. And this would be truly an epic fail for Bahrain and for the entire region.

**Ala'a Shehabi was released late Sunday after 7 hours, to my great relief. Her release changes nothing about Bahrain's underlying problems, unfortunately.*

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BAHRAIN'S STALEMATE

Assessing the Arab Spring in its second year

By Mohammed Ayoob, April 6, 2012

The "Arab Spring" is now over one year old. In much of the popular analysis over the past year the term "Arab Spring" has become the defining characteristic of the "new" Middle East emerging from decades of authoritarian and repressive rule. However, one should be cautious about inflating the importance of the democratic uprisings in several Arab countries in shaping the future contours of the Middle East. This caution applies especially to exaggerating both the prospects of democracy — particularly the unhindered linear transition to representative rule — in the Arab world and the role of major Arab powers in determining political outcomes in the Middle East in the short and medium-term future.

The major reason for this caution is the fact that the transition to democracy in the Arab world is very much a work in progress that, after initial successes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, seems to have ground to a halt. The counter-revolution has succeed in Bahrain thanks to the military might of next door Saudi Arabia, which is firmly opposed to any political opening in its backyard and is not averse to sending in its storm troopers to crush democratic stirrings in the Arab sheikhdoms and emirates of the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, Syria has descended into civil war with Saudi Arabia, paradoxically, leading the "democratic" charge against the Assad regime.

As if to establish the fact that nothing in the Middle East is what it appears to be, Iran, which did not engineer but certainly supported the uprising in Bahrain, has stood solidly behind the authoritarian Assad regime in Syria. The geopolitical rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, that has dictated the actions of both countries toward democratic uprisings in the Arab world far more than normative concerns or ideological affinity, has for the moment contributed substantially to quashing the democratic aspirations of the Arab populations both in the Gulf and the Fertile Crescent. Even where the ancient regimes have been overthrown the success of the democratic movements cannot be taken for granted and the democratic wave is far from irreversible. Tunisia may still prove to be the exception to this rule, but both Egypt and Libya betray characteristics that make one "cautiously pessimistic" to put it in the mildest of terms. The overthrow of the Mubarak regime in Egypt has not led to a smooth transition to democratic rule. Despite the parliamentary elections and the plurality gained by the Muslim Brotherhood in these elections, the military brass is still well ensconced in power — an outcome that was predicted by some observers of the Egyptian scene at the time of Mubarak's fall.

It is far from certain that the tussle between Egypt's elected representatives and the military will be resolved in favor of the former. It is more than likely that a compromise will be reached providing a transfer of power to civilian rule in some spheres while the military will continue to control the more important arenas of governance — internal and external security, foreign policy — and also preserve a great deal of its corporate interests. This will be akin to the situation today in Pakistan and to the condition that prevailed in Turkey not so long ago.

Libya and Syria: Disintegration and Civil War?

The situation in Libya is even more precarious than in Egypt with the very unity of the state in jeopardy. Unlike Egypt, which is a relatively homogeneous society, regional and tribal rivalries exacerbated by the chaos accompanying the fall of the Qaddafi regime threaten to tear Libya apart. The writ of what passes for the central government does not run too far and already voices have been raised in the eastern part of the country demanding autonomy, a possible code word for independence. The fact that foreign intervention played a critical role in regime change in Libya also detracts from the legitimacy of the successor government and makes it more susceptible to domestic challenges.

The lack of an overarching political formation with roots in all or most of the country a la the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt could easily turn into the Achilles heel of the Libyan polity. The Libyan Brotherhood, which launched its own Freedom and Justice Party in March 2012 modeled after its Egyptian counterpart, is but a pale shadow of the Egyptian Brotherhood. The saga of Libya's democratic transition has become entangled with issues of national unity and the very integrity of the state. The jury is still out as to whether the new political dispensation will take root in Libya and, even if it does, whether it would be able to sustain its democratic character as well as preserve the territorial integrity of the Libyan state.

Syria, it is becoming increasingly clear, is headed toward a long-drawn out civil war for four reasons. First, there is no sign of the Alawite-dominated military officer corps abandoning Assad's cause, which is their cause as well. Second, the opposition — above all the Syrian National Council (SNC) — is divided between different bickering groups. One of the underlying disagreements hobbling the work of the SNCis the divide between elements representing the Muslim Brotherhood and those opposed to it. Probably even more important is the divide between the internal and external elements of the Syrian opposition that prevents the emergence of a united front that could act as an alternative and successor to the Assad regime. Third, Syria has become an integral part of the regional cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which had already been accentuated by the Saudi intervention in Bahrain. As a consequence, it has become impossible to disentangle the Syrian conflict from broader regional balance of power issues, thus making the situation conducive for a continuing stalemate. Fourth, external powers - the United States and its NATO allies - for a variety of geostrategic reasons are unwilling to launch a military campaign such as the one they did against Qaddafi to bring down Assad. It is also doubtful, even if they did launch such a campaign, whether it would topple the regime and could end up causing larger civilian casualties and huge damage to the country's infrastructure without achieving its goal of regime change. Current efforts by Kofi Annan, the U.N. and Arab League envoy, to bring about a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict may be laudable but are unlikely to succeed — especially given the Assad regime's view of the situation as an existential struggle.

The remaining North African front

After regime change in Tunisia, largely absent from this discussion because it remains the most optimistic case, Egypt, and Libya, the Arab states of North Africa, especially Algeria and Morocco, seem to be in a state of high alert. The Moroccan monarchy, adept at playing the game of electoral authoritarianism, has adopted a twin-pronged strategy. The first prong consists of accommodating the moderate Islamist party, the PJD, within the power structure by allowing it to emerge with a plurality in the elections of November 2011 and by appointing its head as the country's Prime Minister without diluting the reserve executive powers of the monarchy.

The second prong consists of making common cause with the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia, culminating in the GCC invitation to Morocco, as well as Jordan, to join the exclusive club of Arab monarchies (although neither of them qualifies geographically for this honor). Membership of the GCC must have appealed to the Moroccan king as a policy of reinsurance against popular revolt. The Saudi-led GCC intervention in Bahrain was above all intended to carry the message, which must have been pleasing to the ears of King Mohammed VI, that the organization is committed to, and capable of defending, the monarchical regimes of member states under threat from forces unleashed by the Arab Spring. While Morocco's geographic distance from Saudi Arabia considerably dilutes the effectiveness of this message, the prospect of economic aid from Gulf monarchies flush with petrodollars that can be used to buy off dissent adds to the attraction for Morocco of membership in the GCC.

Algeria had experienced a brutal civil war in the 1990s between the military-dominated regime and Islamist extremists frustrated by the army's decision to abort Algeria's electoral experiment when it became clear that the Islamist FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) would win a majority

in parliament. The shadow of that war which left 150,000 people dead still hangs over the Algerian society and polity. According to one observer: "This episode has taught Algerians the dangers of contestation. The 'black decade' remains an open wound within the society, preventing it from reproducing the next-door revolutionary model. In the collective mind, revolution involves considerable risks that the current generation of Algerians are [sic] not willing to take." This does not mean that Algeria is immune to the democratic contagion. The memory of civil war and its substantial oil revenues, which the regime has spread around as handouts to critical segments of society, has bought a reprieve for the military-backed Algerian government. But this is likely to be temporary and Algeria may be in a "calm before the storm" phase.

The Persian Gulf

The Arab states of the Gulf seem to fall in a category of their own because of their oil and gas wealth and rentier economies that have turned the adage "no taxation without representation" on its head. However, their capacity to buy social peace differs greatly from one to another. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (especially Abu Dhabi) lie at one extreme with their enormous wealth per capita from energy sources, providing them with more than enough resources to buy off their relatively miniscule populations. Yemen, which is poor, and Bahrain, which lacks oil wealth, lie at the other extreme. Yemen has been in the midst of political strife for several years with multiple secessionist movements and contenders of power slugging it out with each other. President Ali Abdullah Saleh's recent departure is unlikely to make too much of a difference to this chronically unstable country.

Bahrain, with a politically aware population and little oil wealth, has become the spearhead of the democratic uprising in the Gulf. The fact that it has a Sunni monarchy ruling over a 70 percent Shiite majority has allowed its rulers to portray the democracy movement in sectarian terms. This was not true at the beginning of the movement but is in danger of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy as the regime's repressive policy persists. Nonetheless, Bahrain continues to be the weakest link in the chain of Gulf autocracies and, therefore, of extreme concern to the GCC's leading power, Saudi Arabia. While the regime seems to have temporarily suppressed the democracy movement, Bahrain's revolutionaries are unlikely to give up the fight anytime soon.

It is Saudi Arabia, the largest and the richest of the kingdoms, that is the key Arab country to watch in the Gulf in the context of the profound changes affecting the Arab world. Saudi Arabia, with its enormous reserves of oil, a respectable demographic base, and a huge inventory of sophisticated weaponry bought from the West, principally the United States, is located at the center of the Arab Gulf system and is the predominant power in the GCC. Its geostrategic competition with Iran and its self-proclaimed role as the protector of Sunni interests against Shiite Iran make it the logical pillar of American policy in the Persian Gulf. However, Saudi Arabia is potentially a colossus with feet of clay. Bolstering Saudi capabilities, principally by the transfer of sophisticated weaponry by the United States, is unlikely to change the balance of power in the Persian Gulf given the vulnerabilities of the Saudi state, including its octogenarian leadership and lack of genuine political institutions, as well as its lack of soft power (other than cash) to influence events in the long term.

Despite much vulnerability the Saudi regime has so far been able to buy time with its hefty financial resources to purchase the loyalty of its subjects. Furthermore, it has cleverly played the anti-Shiite card by pointing to Iran as the primary cause of Shiite unrest in its oil-rich eastern province. It has also persuaded the Wahhabi religious establishment to denounce any form of protest against the House of Saud as anti-Islamic, thereby portraying supporters of democracy as enemies of Islam. Above all, as an astute analyst of Saudi Arabia points out: "Saudi Arabia's experience of the Arab Spring demonstrates that it lacks the structural conditions for mobilization, organization, and protest, let alone revolution...Saudi Arabia does not have trade unions-the majority of its working population is foreign, which has stunted the growth of organized labor-a women's movement, or an

active student population, three factors that helped to make protests in Tunis and Cairo successful." The only avenue left for any opposition, therefore, is violence that is likely to be met with much greater counter-violence by the state. With Saudi Arabia's close strategic links with the United States and its huge petroleum reserves, the regime is likely to overcome such opposition at least in the short to medium term as the preeminent status quo power.

What is clear in all cases is that the initial optimism regarding the prospect of a region wide "Arab Spring" quickly taking hold was clearly misplaced. In fact, given the current situation in Libya and prospects of similar outcomes if democratic uprisings take place in countries with brutally repressive military regimes such as Algeria, the Arab world maybe heading for more turmoil, death, and destruction — at least in the near term.

The Regional Influentials

Furthermore, the speculation about Arab countries such as Egypt playing a larger role in the international politics of the Middle East in the wake of democratic transformations now appear to be more a product of wishful thinking than of objective analysis. Most of the energies of Arab governments, whether authoritarian or democratic or in between, will be concentrated in tackling issues of domestic order and legitimacy for the next few years, if not decades. This would leave them with little inclination to pursue proactive foreign policies except for tiny Qatar that is flush with gas wealth and sees a high international profile as a strategy to enhance the legitimacy of its regime among its tiny native population. However, given its limited capabilities, the Qatari attempt to play a larger than life size role may eventually turn out to be counterproductive and lead to unforeseen negative consequences for the ruling house.

The only major Arab country likely to engage in active diplomacy is Saudi Arabia, both because of its enormous oil wealth and because its regime feels threatened by a nexus of external and internal forces that require an active foreign policy especially to curb the growth of Iranian influence in the region. However, as discussed above, Saudi Arabia's inherent vulnerabilities and built-in contradictions in its foreign policy are likely to limit its regional appeal and hobble its diplomacy to a considerable extent.

Egypt, the traditional leader of the Arab world, will remain politically introverted for a long time to come, thus detracting from its capacity to influence regional events. Despite more political openness and a public face of civilian rule, it is unlikely that the fundamental power structure in Egypt or its foreign-policy orientation will undergo radical transformation except in the very long run, if and when civilian forces are able to chip away at the military's domination of the country's political and economic life. It is worth noting in this context that it took six decades for Turkey to assert a reasonable amount of civilian control over its military, and that the process is still far from complete. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Egyptian revolution will have a major impact on the political and strategic landscape in the Middle East in the short and medium terms.

The other traditional major center of Arab power, Iraq, is located centrally in the Middle East connecting the Fertile Crescent to the Persian Gulf. However, Iraq's power was drastically depleted and its influence dramatically curtailed beginning with the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq's decline became a full-blown reality following the invasion by the United States in 2003. Since then it has been mired in the domestic mess created by the invasion and the attendant destruction of its state institutions and governing capacity. Furthermore, the invasion has decimated it militarily as well as drastically reduced its capacity to influence regional events diplomatically. In fact, it has become more an object of influence — by Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United States — rather than an autonomous center of power with the capacity to influence regional events.

The basic lesson that one draws from this account as far as the international relations of the Middle East is concerned is that the Arab world in general, and major Arab powers in particular, with the possible and partial exception of Saudi Arabia, will not be in a position to greatly affect

regional outcomes for the next couple of decades. This leaves the non-Arab powers, especially Turkey, Iran, and Israel, as major regional players whose actions and relationships with each other are likely to determine the future of the Middle East for quite some time to come. It appears that despite the initial promise of the "Arab Spring," Ankara, Tehran, and Tel Aviv will continue to dominate the regional political landscape far more than any of their Arab counterparts.

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The Strange Revolution in Bahrain, One Year On

By Christian Caryl, February 14, 2012

In my career as a journalist I've interviewed lots of people who have been persecuted for political reasons. Usually they're eager to tell you about the causes for which they've suffered.

I've never met another one quite like Ghazi Farhan. Not that long ago he was just another wealthy businessman, part-owner of several posh restaurants and cafes in the wealthy Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain.

But that was before the Arab Spring arrived. On April 12 2011, Farhan had just parked his car in a garage when he was waylaid by a group of men. Knocked to the ground by a flurry of punches and kicks, he was handcuffed, blindfolded, and pushed into a car. Ten hours later, when the blindfold was finally removed, he realized that he was in a police station.

It was a bewildering experience. When the uprising began one year ago, many Bahrainis gravitated to the mushrooming demonstrations against the ruling al-Khalifa monarchy — but not Farhan. "Politics is not my fight," he says. "I just want to have a happy life." If anything, he was pro-government.

He told his interrogators as much. He admitted that he had occasionally come along to watch the demonstrators converging on the famed Pearl Roundabout, the traffic circle that served as the lodestar of the marches. He didn't participate. But he also told his interrogators that he'd tell them that he had if it would help. Whatever they wanted to hear, anything, as long as it would stop the torture. But they didn't stop.

They beat him with lengths of rubber hose. They deprived him of sleep and forced him to stand long hours in stress positions. They threatened him with rape. They threatened to rape his wife or his mother. At times, still blindfolded, he was tortured in the company of other prisoners. Listening to them scream and cry, he says, was just about the worst.

Several other themes figured prominently in his interrogation sessions. One was religion. Farhan, like the majority of Bahrain's 600,000 citizens, belongs to the Shiite branch of Islam. The Bahraini royal family, which has ruled this tiny country since the late 18th century, is Sunni.

You aren't a real Muslim, his interrogators told him. You're a traitor; you're a friend of Iran. The allegation confounded

him. “What do I have to do with Iran?” he says. “We have nothing in common with them. We are a liberal country. You want to pray, you pray. You want to party, you party.”

Money was another big issue for his tormentors. Farhan was proud of his business success. Gucci is one of his favorite brands, and the car he drove was a Cadillac. He worked hard to get where he was. In Bahrain, he explains, Shiites are largely excluded from government jobs, so they have to study well and work hard to earn a good living in the private sector. He thought that he had made it.

One of the first questions his attackers asked him, that day in the car park, was about his salary. The low-level police thugs handling his case earned a pittance by comparison, and they hated him for it.

Many of them were Yemenis, Syrians, even Pakistanis — but all were Sunnis, recruited by the royal family from the poorest parts of the Muslim world to beef up Bahrain’s repressive apparatus. In return, some even receive the bounty of citizenship — a reward that most expatriates can get only after living in the kingdom for a minimum of 15 years. If anything can be said to worsen the country’s sectarian divides, surely this has to be one of them.

No one knows the precise number of people employed by the kingdom’s security forces. By some estimates the ratio could be as high as one security operative to every eight citizens.

The real reason for Farhan’s arrest soon became apparent: It was his marriage. His wife, Ala’a Shehabi, a British-trained PhD in economics, is the daughter of one of the founders of the Wefaq Party, Bahrain’s leading opposition group. She, too, had spent most of her life outside of politics, studying in the United Kingdom. Two years ago she returned to Bahrain, hoping to contribute at least a bit to the betterment of her country.

But she soon ran head-on into the reality of disenfranchisement. Even though Bahrain’s standard of living was high, the experience of being patronized by the all-powerful state soon rankled. “At the end of the day you have no avenue for expression,” she says. “People here are highly educated, but you have to force the government to acknowledge you and to recognize your existence. I need to have control over my destiny.” She joined the protests, but her husband remained aloof. She smiles sadly. “I’m the activist, not him.”

Attacking her directly, however, would have posed a tricky political challenge for the government. Shehabi, a dual passport holder, is British as well as Bahraini. So they went after her husband instead.

At least she had the resources to mount an effective campaign for his freedom. After nine and a half months Farhan was finally released. He had missed a lot of time with his son Nasser, born in August 2010. His business partners, pressured by the government, bought him out. So now he has to start over. But the nightmares won’t stop.

The government has vowed to prevent things like this from happening again. An independent investigation into last year’s turmoil documented 35 deaths in the crackdown on the demonstrators.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has said that he’ll reform the political system to give people more of a voice. So far not much has happened. In an interview published a few days ago, King Hamad denied the existence of political prisoners and suggested that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad should follow the advice of “the Syrian people” — remarks, according to one journalist I spoke with in the Bahraini capital of Manama, that merely served to enflame the populace.

On February 13, Bahrainis took to the streets again. The Pearl Roundabout has been dismantled, but the demonstrators have tried to find new rallying points. The police rained down tear gas canisters on an estimated 10,000 protesters. An overwhelming security clampdown around the kingdom seems to have largely deterred additional demonstrations on the day of the one-year anniversary.

Bahrain hasn't solved any of its problems. With time, the opposition — some of whom have moved from calling for constitutional monarchy to throwing Molotov cocktails at the police — will grow radicalized. Iran has little to gain from getting directly involved, but then it doesn't really have to. The deepening global schism between Sunni and Shiite can only be exacerbated by the images from Manama. (Right now, little noticed in the outside world, restive Shiites in the nearby Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia are battling the police once again.)

Like her husband, Ala'a never really thought of herself primarily as a Shiite before. But now she has no choice: "We're worthless. We're treated like second-class citizens." Now the authorities put photos of individual protesters on TV and the internet, urging people to inform on each other. The government, says Farhan, "is promoting the gap between Shia and Sunni."

Bahrain is small, and that makes it easy to ignore. But no one should make the mistake of thinking that that makes it unimportant.

Christian Caryl, a senior fellow at the Legatum Institute and a contributing editor of Foreign Policy, *is the editor of* Democracy Lab.

Tortured Justice

By Brian Dooley, March 3, 2012

MANAMA, Bahrain – In a house at the end of a maze of narrow streets, I sat listening to a dozen young men as they described their close encounters with the full force of Bahrain's government crackdown. We were in one of the poor, Shiite villages scattered across the country, which have remained hotbeds for revolt despite the government's persistent attempts to suppress the uprising that began last year.

The boys wore an assortment of soccer shirts, and those awful rat-tail haircuts teenage boys all over the world think look cool. They said they had been severely beaten by the police in the previous two days. "They beat us until they got tired, then other policemen would take over and beat us more," said one boy.

For all of the Bahraini government's efforts to show progress on human rights in response to the inquiry it commissioned last year, not much seems to have changed in places like this. The regime touts that "leading international legal, police and other experts" that have been shipped in "to advise on ... practical reforms," as Minister for Human Rights Fatima Al Balooshi told the U.N. Human Rights Council. These experts include John Yates, a former assistant commissioner to the London Metropolitan Police Service, and John Timoney, a former police chief in Miami and Philadelphia.

Some in Bahrain's government may be sincere about reform, but the gap between rhetoric and reality is huge. A new police code of conduct declares "a zero tolerance policy on torture and any other type of mistreatment" and that "force shall be not be used except when absolutely necessary or when it is used in self-defense in accordance with the law." But according to the young men from the village and others I met, these reforms are no more than empty words.

Local human rights activists say hundreds of young men have been taken to secret torture centers over the last few months. Instead of being formally arrested, booked into a

police station and mistreated, they say they're more likely to be simply grabbed by a group of riot police, robbed of their phones and money, and then taken to one of these buildings to be beaten for several hours and abandoned somewhere remote. Trusted local human rights organizations report tear gas attacks on villages almost every night.

Some of these young men told me they had been at a peaceful protest last week to mark the anniversary of the death of one of their friends, who had been killed in the pro-democracy demonstrations last year. "It was a peaceful protest in our village," said one. "About 150 men and 50 women, we were holding banners above our heads, not throwing anything at the police."

According to the young men, the riot police suddenly appeared at the protest and opened fire with rubber bullets and tear gas. "They chased us for about 200 yards and cornered about 12 of us in a house. They put us in the kitchen," said one. "They told us all to lift our shirts up over our heads to cover our eyes and stole our phones. They pushed us all into the kitchen and started beating us."

The young men said that about 25 policemen, three at a time, took turns beating the group over the next 90 minutes. "They hit us with rifle butts, broke kitchen plates on our heads, said things about our moms and sisters," another told me. Several showed me severe bruises on their backs and arms, marks they said were from the beatings.

Meanwhile, the police are using tear gas canisters as weapons. There are nightly reports of tear gas being used against peaceful protests and shot directly into people's houses. It is unclear how the police are supposed to account for the number of canisters they take per shift or to detail how many they used and why. The government justifies its use of tear gas by pointing to a fringe group of protestors who throw steel rods, petrol bombs, and other missiles at the police. The police, however, appear to be using as much as they want, whenever they want — not only against protesters, but also against random civilians.

The following night, I met with some medical professionals just outside the capital Manama as they received calls about injuries from different parts of Bahrain — pleas for advice or treatment. Within a few hours, they received calls about three serious head injuries caused by police-fired tear gas canisters. "It's shoot to kill," observed one doctor glumly. People who are injured in protests still fear going to hospitals or clinics — worried that they might be arrested, or worse. The main hospital, the Salmaniya Medical Complex, is under heavy security — police and military checkpoints guard the gates, and security officials even enter operating areas. Treating the injured is a risky business for medical personnel, who face prosecution if caught at one of the underground network of first aid posts.

For many in Bahrain, talk of reform and a commitment to changing the government from within sounds absurd. For them, police behavior appears not to have changed at all, except that officers have sometimes taken the torture out of the police stations and into other buildings — although even that is not a hard and fast rule. One 16 year-old boy told me how he and his friends were arrested in mid-February and beaten for several days in the Naim Police Station, north of Manama. Meanwhile, the government is still vigorously pressing charges against people convicted as part of the crackdown — including, notoriously, 20 medics who treated injured protestors.

Despite the ongoing abuses in Bahrain, the U.S. government has only temporarily paused a $53 million arms sale to the kingdom — a deal that includes 44 Humvees of the type used to crush the pro-democracy protests last year. The sale has not been cancelled, just delayed, while the administration waits for an appropriate time to resume it. This is hardly the moment.

Bahrain's government has lost control of the reform process, sending incoherent and contradictory signals about its progress. One Bahraini official announced last week a deal whereby 15 of the 20 medics being prosecuted would have charges against them dropped. But the deal was denied a few days later at their next court hearing. While the regime has allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross into its prisons, it called off last week's

planned visit by the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan Mendez, postponing it for several months.

Bahrain's top leadership also continues to traffic in conspiracy theories about foreign-backed plots to overthrow the government, rather than lay the blame for the domestic unrest on their own unrepresentative rule. Field Marshall Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, the commander in chief of the Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF), was quoted in the local press on Feb. 15 as saying a vast array of countries had "mobilized their media, embassies, agents and fifth columns in the Gulf" against Bahrain's government. He is quoted in the report as identifying the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and Belgium as part of the conspiracy. It is presumably into this field marshall's safe hands — as head of the BDF — that the $53 million worth of U.S. weapons will be delivered.

Real reform must include a genuine change in police actions. More than 160 policemen were convicted by Bahrain's military court last year for refusing to join the crackdown. They were each sentenced to between four and 12 years in prison. Dropping charges against them — and all the others convicted by the sham military court — would be a start to restoring confidence. So would bringing an immediate halt to torture, and establishing a mechanism to video record all police interrogations, a step recommended by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry last year. An initiative to install high-tech closed circuit televisions into all police stations has apparently begun, but will take many more months to complete. Using even ordinary camcorders until then would send a positive signal of intent.

Bringing more Shiites, who constitute the demographic majority in Bahrain, into the overwhelmingly Sunni police force is also a longer-term necessity. But despite chronic unemployment in the villages, there is little incentive for young Shiites to apply.

My suggestion to the young men I met that they might one day join the police was met with uproarious laughter. As one of them told me, "The police are killing people, not protecting them."

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Hunger, heroism, and hope in Bahrain

By Ala'a Shehabi, April 12, 2012

Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, a prominent Bahraini human rights activist who was sentenced to life imprisonment in a military court, is now in a critical stage of a hunger strike which has gone on for 64 days. Foreign doctors who have been to see him have said he is at serious risk of death if he continues. The Bahraini government has rejected increasing international pressure to release him, and has limited outside access. His plight has begun to draw attention to the failure of reform in Bahrain, including an unusual White House statement yesterday. If he dies, it could mark a significant breaking point for the regime's efforts to rehabilitate its tarnished reputation — and could accelerate the disturbing trend toward militant radicalization in the opposition.

Hunger striking has become a distinctive phenomenon in the current round of Arab protest movements. It has a long history, marking many of the major emancipatory struggles throughout the world from British suffragettes to Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers. It has recently emerged as a particularly important form of protest against tyrannical states. From Palestine, to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, prisoners of conscience have used the last thing they control — their bodies — as a tool of dissent. Palestinian Hana Shalabi was released by the Israelis after a 43-day hunger strike, while Mohamed Albajadi in Saudi Arabia is on his 33rd day. Al-Khawaja's hunger strike, by dovetailing on the back of a revolutionary tide, and supported by a digitally wired and outspoken family, has elevated his protest beyond his prison walls.

Al-Khawaja has a long history as the lone voice on taboo issues in the nation's political battle for self-determination. He turned his back on the militant Islamist group Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) that he was associated with in the 1980s and evolved into a leading advocate of non-violent direct action against the al-Khalifa ruling family. In exile in Denmark in the 1990s, he absorbed the human rights discourse and the democratic experience of living in the West. When he returned to Bahrain in 2002, he was determined to fight the system on a human rights platform — a campaign he brought to the international arena as well as to Bahraini civil society. In 2004 he landed in prison for demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister Khalifa ibn Sulman al-Khalifa who had been in power for 40 years, then a dangerously taboo subject but now the main demand of the "formal" opposition societies such as al-Wefaq. Last year, as he saw regimes appear to fall one by one, al-Khawaja began to call for Bahrain to become a republic, with no place for the royal family. On April 8, he was arrested, no doubt for voicing that radical demand.

The international attention to al-Khawaja has begun to force the long-submerged Bahraini struggle into the international limelight. He is a prisoner who according to Professor Cherif Bassiouni, the head of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), is a "prisoner of conscience" and should not be in jail in the first place, having already been subjected to multiple violations: systematic torture, a military trial, and persecution. His plight has put a major roadblock in the path of the team of international public relations firms who have worked for months to rebuild the Bahraini regime's international reputation. As the clock ticks over al-Khawaja's life, this tension could grow. If he dies ahead of the Formula 1 race still scheduled for Bahrain, it will be difficult to imagine the event going ahead at all.

The longer the hunger strike has gone on, the wider the fissures emerging within the regime, as opinion over how to deal with al-Khawaja appear to differ strongly within the royal family. Factions are torn between those who can see logic in releasing him ahead of the planned Formula 1 Grand Prix, and those, particularly the military, who appear blinded by vengeance and would probably rather see al-Khawaja dead than any potential benefits of good will at this critical point in time in the conflict. The Bahraini foreign minister, discussing the case on Twitter, questioned the religious permissibility of "voluntary starvation" and re-tweeted the responses that considered it suicide and hence, a sin. There have also been calls by officials and loyalists to deport al-Khawaja and revoke his citizenship on the basis that dual nationality is illegal. The hardliners however, would rather not be seen to cave in to pressure at all.

Al-Khawaja's death would put to end once and for all the hopes for Bahrain's already creaking reform process. His death will make the prospect of genuine peace and reconciliation a distant aspiration. The opposition will be forced to escalate its demands to meet the anger on the street. The long-feared rise of a more radical opposition movement appears to be coming closer to reality. Two bombs went off in the first two weeks of April alone, and militant rhetoric can be heard increasingly publicly from opposition cadres. As their frustration builds and their demands escalate, the conflict increasingly would shift from a political battle to an existential one. The popularity of al-Khawaja has soared over the past two weeks as he has been held up as a symbol of the revolution.

There are very few men like al-Khawaja, with as much resolve and audacity in speaking out against injustice, in a region where the choice for activists is either petro-dollars or prison. He has gained moral authority by showing impressive courage and self-dignity. The regime now faces a moment of truth. Will it allow him to die for his beliefs while the world, finally, is paying heed?

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The hollow shell of security reform in Bahrain

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, April 12, 2012

With the Bahrain Grand Prix weekend 10 days away, international attention is once again focusing on the critical situation in the troubled island kingdom in the Persian Gulf. Daily clashes continue between protesters and the security services, and the beleaguered Al-Khalifa regime faces a growing international backlash over its treatment of jailed human rights defender Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, who is reportedly nearing death after hunger-striking for more than 60 days in protest at the continuing detention of activists in Bahrain. Al-Khawaja's declining health and the imminent Formula One Grand Prix ensure that the spotlight will once again be trained on Bahrain, if only for a few days this April.

Led by 1996 Formula One world champion Damon Hill, a number of racing teams and commentators have expressed concern about the wisdom of holding a Grand Prix in the current climate (and its cancellation remains a possibility). Referring to the ongoing repression of opposition protests by the Bahraini security services, Hill suggested that, "It would be a bad state of affairs, and bad for Formula One, to be seen to be enforcing martial law in order to hold the race." He spoke after the youth-led February 14 movement vowed to disrupt the Grand Prix weekend, which appears to be building into a trial of strength between the regime and a re-energized opposition.

Meanwhile, a bomb explosion in Eker on April 9 that injured seven policemen awoke disturbing memories of the violent tactics of the previous uprising in Bahrain between 1994 and 1999. The attack on the security personnel reflected and reinforced the lack of mutual trust and goodwill in the absence of a political settlement, exacerbated by a splintering of both the government and the opposition, as moderate elements have been undercut by more extreme groups on all sides. Part of al-Khawaja's appeal lies in his emphasis on non-violent resistance, but the bombing indicates that elements of the opposition are taking an extremist turn that does not bode well for Bahrain.

World attention will focus on the policing of protests and the extent (or otherwise) to which the security services have modified their approach to dealing with demonstrators. Yet an intriguing subplot is developing around one of the "supercops" drafted in by the Government of Bahrain to advise it on police reform. This centers around a growing investigation into the role of Britain's Metropolitan Police in the News International "phone-hacking" scandal in the United Kingdom. The unlikely link revolves around the revelations of the shortcomings in the Metropolitan Police's initial response to the claims that journalists from the News of the World intercepted the voice mail of members of the Royal Family.

In July 2011, they claimed the resignation of its assistant commissioner, John Yates. Four months later, as the Leveson Inquiry launched a wide-ranging review of the culture and practice of the British press and the allegation of illicit payments from journalists to serving police officers, Yates suddenly turned up in Bahrain to advise and assist the government in police reform.

His appointment occurred days after the hard-hitting report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) into abuses committed during the crushing of the Persian Gulf state's pro-democracy movement last year. Yates was joined by the former head of the Miami police, John Timoney. Their appointment was seen by many to be an exercise in damage-limitation as the Government of Bahrain sought to reassure its nervous allies in Washington and London of its commitment to changing its ways. This was especially relevant to the scrutiny of the work of the security services, after the BICI report detailed a pattern of "systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture."

The arrival of Yates and Timoney was intended to signal a fresh start for an organization that is seen by many Bahraini citizens as exclusionary, unaccountable, and deeply partial in its application of law and order. Yet their arrival in Manama raised eyebrows as both men held controversial records, with Timoney coming in for criticism from legal organizations over the heavy-handed policing of demonstrators at the 2003 Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in Miami. For his part, Yates had been forced to resign in 2011 over his role in the News of the World scandal, having earlier earned himself the nickname "Yates of the Yard" for his high-profile role in investigating the "cash for honors" allegations against the government of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair in 2006.

Indeed, developments both in Manama and in London since then have cast doubt on the credibility of the reform process in Bahrain and the reputation of one of the men leading it. Although the Government of Bahrain insists that most of the BICI recommendations have been met, closer scrutiny reveals compliance to have been superficial at best. Police violence continues seemingly unabated with numerous instances of brutality against protesters and bystanders recorded on video and circulated on the internet. One such video taken in March showed a policeman lobbing Molotov cocktails at demonstrators in full view of several of his colleagues, who did nothing to stop or censure him. Most notoriously, graphic footage emerged in mid-December of up to 13 riot police officers savagely beating a group of 20 protesters on the roof of an apartment complex in Shakhura.

These incidents cannot be ascribed to the actions of individual officers. The active involvement or passive acquiescence of multiple participants at the very least suggests that a culture of permissiveness remains embedded in police tactics in Bahrain. In addition, the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of tear gas appears to have been accelerated, with entire villages being blanketed in its suffocating fumes. More than 20 deaths have been attributed to tear gas and smoke inhalation since the uprising began in February 2011, with the majority occurring after the publication of the BICI report. With each additional death and documented instance of police malpractice, it becomes harder to suggest that they represent a final spasm of violence rather than evidence of a continuing cycle of state repression of its own citizenry.

Perhaps most damagingly, the culture of impunity within the security services identified in the BICI report has yet to result in any meaningful form of accountability. The regime attempted to deflect the blame for abuses onto to 20 (supposedly renegade) low-ranking security personnel, and a trial began for five police officers — none of them Bahraini — charged with involvement in the death in custody of a blogger on April 9, 2011, which they attributed at the time to "complications from sickle-cell anemia." In addition, the regime appears to have chosen a highly-selective approach to the application of the rule of law depending on whether the perpetrators of the violence were police or protesters. Thus, the courts recently charged 28 civilians with attempted murder for throwing Molotov cocktails at the police. By contrast, and in spite of the plethora of documented video evidence to support

the claims of police brutality, just one officer has been investigated over allegations of mistreatment of protesters.

Significant questions therefore remain unresolved as Bahrain moves uncertainly toward its Grand Prix weekend. How widespread the protests become, and how they are policed, will tell us much about the likely trajectory of the next phase of Bahrain's stunted uprising; so, too, will the political and public response should al-Khawaja succumb to his hunger-strike in the face of worldwide pressure on the Bahraini government to release him.

In addition, the work of Yates and Timoney will come under international scrutiny as the trenchant criticism of policing tactics in the BICI report mean that they ought to have been among the first issues to be tackled by a regime which claims to have implemented almost all of its recommendations. Yet the problem facing them is that the evidence thus far points to little if any change in the manner of policing, amid a continuing reliance on the disproportionate use of force, both pre-emptively and reactively, to prevent or disperse protests.

On the eve of the first anniversary of the uprising, Yates gave a revealingly frank interview to London's Daily Telegraph on February 13 of this year. After hinting that the adoption of peaceful tactics to handle protests might include the highly-controversial practice of "kettling" demonstrators, Yates appeared to disregard any notion that the demonstrators might have political grievances, saying that "This isn't organized protests, it's just vandalism, rioting on the streets." This remarkable assertion offers little hope that those in charge of Bahraini political and security-sector reform have absorbed any of the lessons of the past year. Indeed, just weeks later, a similarly dismissive remark by made by the King of Bahrain, that the protesters were just a small minority of the population, brought more than 100,000 people onto the streets in response.

Bahrain's uprising is far from over, however much the government, its foreign advisers, and international partners might wish it were so. Bahraini politics is polarized as never before as the middle ground is being squeezed by extremists from all directions and positions on all sides harden against compromise. With the Al-Khalifa dynasty being supported by Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, it has neither the need nor the inclination to engage in serious dialogue with an energized and enraged opposition. This portends to an exceptionally bleak future for the archipelago, caught between a governing class that will not be allowed to fall and a significant segment of its population that no longer believes they have the legitimacy to rule.

Yates, meanwhile, faces problems of his own. On March 1, he appeared before the Leveson Inquiry by video link from Bahrain and came in for criticism over his wining and dining of senior journalists from the News of the World and other tabloid newspapers. Six days later, Robert Quick, formerly the senior counter-terrorism officer at Scotland Yard, claimed during his own testimony to the Inquiry that Yates had resisted attempts to hand over his cell phone records over suspicions that he might be leaking information to the media relating to the "cash-for-honors" investigation he was then leading. As the allegations mount in London, the Government of Bahrain may feel that their appointment of Yates has saddled them with an increasingly toxic asset. Regardless of how the rapidly-unfolding inquiry develops, Yates's troubled role in Bahrain will keep him in the headlines, and, for Bahrainis (and Britons) with longer memories, generate awkward comparisons with his British predecessors that formed the backbone of Bahrain's security apparatus for much of the twentieth century.

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Bahrain's Formula One for failure

By Jane Kinninmont, April 19, 2012

The Formula One (F1) has always been a loss-leader for Bahrain. The country pays a fee to host it — estimated to be at least $40 million each year — and doesn't recoup this in direct ticket sales. Rather, the race is supposed to stimulate business worth hundreds of millions of dollars through its knock-on effect on other business. A 2008 study commissioned by the state sovereign wealth fund, Mumtalakat, suggested that the race added $600 million — or about 2.7 percentage points — to Bahrain's gross domestic product (GDP) that year. This is mostly through the boost that the race gives to tourism, including flights on Bahrain's state-owned Gulf Air, and through the development of Bahrain's international "country brand," as millions of viewers around the world watch the race on television.

But this year, tourism is unlikely to perform well — and if anything, the "country branding" impact looks likely to be negative. Internationally, the publicity around the race has drawn attention to the country's continuing protests and violence, to a new Amnesty International report on the continuing allegations of torture and human rights abuses, and even to a controversial video that shows police taking part in the looting of a Shiite-owned supermarket. Without the race, these developments might not make the news in the West.

This means the picture isn't as simple as the usual portrayal of a government insisting on holding the race while the opposition protests against it. Yes, Bahraini officials have sought to make political capital out of the race, hoping it will send a message that the country is back to normal, and branding it as an indication of national unity with a slogan, "unF1ed," which has inevitably proven to be divisive. And yes, protesters from the February 14th Youth Coalition have been burning photos of F1's president and CEO Bernie Ecclestone in the streets.

Yet the opposition includes diverse viewpoints, and there are also activists from the main and moderate opposition party, Al Wefaq, who welcome the race because it puts Bahrain back in the media spotlight. Some of them also hope — probably forlornly — that the race, always seen as a pet project of Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, will strengthen the hand of the relative moderates in the government. The crown prince's camp has favored political dialogue and have sought to reduce the economy's reliance on the Saudi Arabian-administered oil field that provides almost all of the government's revenue.

Meanwhile, the more hard-line factions within the government may quietly think the race is more trouble than it's worth, as it brings in nosy journalists who wander off to protest-filled villages (a few say they have been asked to sign pledges not to report outside their sporting remit). After all, from the point of view of the security establishment, the economy is secondary to security, and can ultimately survive on oil revenue and Gulf aid.

Another worry is the risk of violence around the race. The Feb 14th youth movement has made statements about not being able to guarantee the safety of race attendees, but there is no recent history of terrorism against Western targets in Bahrain and it seems unlikely that this line is going to be crossed in the near future. However, attacks on the police have been slowly escalating, from stones to metal rods to homemade Molotov cocktails, and in a new development, a pipe bomb in the village of Al-Eker injured seven police a few days ago. Al-Wefaq condemned the act, however a small but determined minority of opposition youth are desperate to fight the police.

For many, it's personal — they know people who have been tortured or worse — and, claiming "self-defense," they are seeking vengeance. The government has acknowledged at least 18 civilians died at the hands of security forces between

February and April 2011, whereas activists say the number is now up to 80, including around 30 disputed deaths that they blame on the heavy, near-daily use of tear gas in politically active Shiite villages. In these areas, walls are covered with stenciled pictures of the "martyrs" who died in the protests.

Last year's Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report found that 26 Bahraini civilians, four expatriates, and five members of the security services died in the February to April period. Demonstrators were found to have killed at least three policemen. The government has promised accountability, but so far just 10 junior police officers have been put on trial, while hundreds of demonstrators have been jailed. A new police code of conduct has been introduced, and police were supposed to have had their guns taken away, but people in the Shiite villages say they still beat people, burn them with lighters, or threaten them with sexual assault. Police have been filmed lobbing their own Molotov cocktails at protesters. Cameras have been installed in police stations, but the riot police have set up new holding centers with no such oversight. A report released this week by Amnesty International described impunity as rampant.

There are some within the regime who are seeking to bring in greater accountability and a more intelligent approach to policing, but power seems to be firmly in the hands of the hardliners, and reformists, such as they are, will be further weakened by the escalating attacks on police. In the run-up to the F1, security measures have intensified; opposition sources say more than 60 activists (the government calls them "vandals") have been preemptively detained by the authorities, and that police are again using both birdshot and live ammunition.

For their part, the young people seeking to fight the police no longer believe in reforms or in reformists. While Al-Wefaq hope international attention will help to bring about pressure for political reform, and fear that violent tactics will reduce international sympathy, this angrier, younger group is not interested in the views of Western governments, which they see simply as supporting the Bahraini rulers. Worryingly, recent weeks have also seen the return of Sunni vigilantes, incensed by protester violence, who have threatened to take the law into their own hands if the security services do not respond in a tougher manner. The political scene is increasingly fragmented rather than "unif1ed".

Bahrain still remains largely safe for Westerners. But it can no longer claim to be the oasis of liberalism and tolerance that it once sought to brand itself as. The country has struggled to attract any significant new investment over the last year (with the main exception being a Saudi media company), and a recent survey by regional recruitment specialists Gulf Talent showed that its attractiveness to professional expats has diminished significantly. The F1 media spotlight will only highlight the ongoing troubles Bahrain faces in the absence of any serious attempts at political compromise.

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Why the Bahrain elections matter

By Kristin Smith Diwan, December 1, 2010

Earlier this month, parliamentary elections were held in Bahrain, an island nation in the Persian Gulf which hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and which is home to a restive Shiite majority population ruled by the Sunni al-Khalifa family. The ruling family has shown a willingness to amplify the sectarian divide to counter moves for political accountability, by polarizing the public and ramping up Sunni fears of a Shiite takeover of the country.

The elections thus took place under an intensive security crackdown in which hundreds of Shiite street protester s have been arrested and 25 media figures, NGO heads, and opposition activists were formally charged with forming a "sophisticated terrorist network with outside support." Still the electoral returns provide some room for optimism for those who view integration over division as the key to Bahrain's future. Two key outcomes — one from the Shiite side of the ledger and one from the Sunni side — open up space for progress, if the Khalifa-led government chooses to act on it.

Regional political shifts have increased tensions within Bahrain, as the minority Sunni have watched with trepidation the rise of a Shiite-led government in neighboring Iraq, and Iran's growing regional ambitions. Those external pressures have been matched by internal ones, as dissatisfaction over the half reforms and broken promises that characterize the re-instatement of the parliament by the ruling al-Khalifa have mounted. More recently this took the form an investigation by Shiite parliamentarians over the royal seizure of public land; their report received the backing of many Sunni members who are usually reliably pro-government.

The escalation of security moves on the eve of elections imposed difficult choices on the main Shiite opposition movement, al-Wefaq. Born out of similar street protests of the "intifada" of the 1990s, al-Wefaq has matured into a broad-based communal party, led by a young cleric Ali Salman. Al-Wefaq has steered the community through the heady days of the return of exiles and the promise of a new parliamentary rebirth initiated by the young Emir Hamad. It then led them into boycott in 2002 after the pledge of an elected lower house was countered by the imposition of a royally appointed upper house whose equal weight insured that the ruling family would have the final say in all political matters. It ushered the community back into elections in 2006 on the calculation that having a voice in a compromised political system was better than no voice at all.

The security crackdown hit many arms of the opposition, but struck deepest at the "boycott" wing of the Shiite community, led by rival movement al-Haq. Since splitting with al-Wefaq over its decision to enter the elections in 2006, al-Haq has followed a strategy of protest and civil disobedience which appeals to disenfranchised youth. With al-Wefaq making few gains through its engagement strategy, the appeal of the street appeared to be gaining. The government crackdown sought to raise the cost of the street strategy, linking it to the war on terror, and putting its leadership back in jail.

Al-Wefaq — whose website was shut down by the government in the midst of the campaign — responded with condemnation, but it did not pull out of the election. Their gamble paid off as the Shiite community threw their support behind al-Wefaq. Participation dropped, but not significantly, and the movement was rewarded by an impressive sweep of all 18 seats it contested, all clearing the hurdle of 50 percent support in the first round of voting.

The move is indicative of al-Wefaq's patient approach which seeks to calm the fears of the Sunni community, while pressing persistently for greater economic and political integration of the Shiite. Yet there are limits to

the pressure they can bring through this strategy. Their 18 seats, short of a majority in the 40-member parliament, represent the most they can win due to gerrymandered districts. And while boasting the largest delegation to the parliament, they were still unable to win the speaker position, which will remain in the hand of a Sunni independent. Clearly a broader coalition is needed to force change; but is there any hope of coalition building across the sectarian divide?

While the elections brought little change to the Shiite composition of the parliament, the Sunni delegation has been significantly transformed. Since the reinstatement of parliament in 2002, Sunni Islamist political groupings — both Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood — have held sway. Their cooperation in the 2006 elections earned them 15 seats in the parliament. They were aided on the margins by the ruling al-Khalifa, who worked to defeat secular opposition candidates from the Wa'ad party, ensuring the parliament had a strongly sectarian cast.

Yet while backing the ruling al-Khalifa in most matters, the Sunni Islamists cooperated with their Shiite Islamist counterparts on issues of morality, pushing legislation to curb the laissez faire social atmosphere that makes Bahrain a welcome vacation spot for libertarian Saudis. This angered the business community, which responded by fielding some well funded candidates in the current election. This challenge, plus the costly decision not to form an electoral alliance, spelled disaster for Sunni Islamists, who saw their parliamentary presence slashed from 15 to five members.

The newly elected independents, flush with the victory of 17 seats, are exploring the creation of a formal business bloc in parliament. They have also worked as a group to challenge for leadership positions, coveting the chairmanship of the Economic Committee. For the moment, their weight pits them against the almost evenly matched al-Wefaq, but their focus on economics may offer opportunities for constructive cooperation that transcends the explosive issue of sect. Still, much depends on the reaction of the ruling family.

The ruling al-Khalifa are likely pleased with the completion of elections at a time when Western human rights organizations have condemned the use of torture and warned of a return to "full blown authoritarianism" in Bahrain. Yet their ability to tame the streets depends on their ability to make progress in the political field. Al-Wefaq has proved its patience and ability to bring the Shiite community to negotiations. And the turn away from direct sectarianism and towards business issues offers a more fertile field for cooperation in the critical field of the economy. The crown prince has already paved the way for some reforms through the 2030 economic development initiative, and has even shown some propensity to challenge corruption in land use coming from the prime minister's office.

Clearly the al-Khalifa are willing to use the stick to maintain rule, but can they also use the carrot?

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Bahrain Brings Back the Sectarianism

By Marc Lynch, March 16, 2011

While the American and international debate over Libya continues, the situation in Bahrain has just taken a sharp turn for the worse. A brutal crackdown on the protesters followed the controversial entry of security forces from Saudi Arabia and three other (Gulf Cooperation Council) GCC states. Media access has been curtailed, with journalists finding it difficult to gain entry to the kingdom (I was supposed to be in Bahrain right now myself, but elected not to try after several journalists let me know that they were being denied entry and several embassies in Doha warned me off). The road to political compromise and meaningful reform — which appeared to have been within reach only a few days ago — now appears to be blocked, which places the long-term viability of the Bahraini regime in serious question.

The response of the Bahraini regime has implications far beyond the borders of the tiny island kingdom — not only because along with Libya it has turned the hopeful Arab uprisings into something uglier, but because it is unleashing a region wide resurgence of sectarian Sunni-Shiite animosity. Regional actors have enthusiastically bought in to the sectarian framing, with Saudi Arabia fanning the flames of sectarian hostility in defense of the Bahraini regime and leading Shiite figures rising to the defense of the protesters. The tenor of Sunni-Shiite relations across the region is suddenly worse than at any time since the frightening days following the spread of the viral video of Sadrists celebrating the execution of Saddam Hussein.

The sectarian framing in Bahrain is a deliberate regime strategy, not an obvious "reality." The Bahraini protest movement, which emerged out of years of online and offline activism and campaigns, explicitly rejected sectarianism and sought to emphasize instead calls for democratic reform and national unity. While a majority of the protesters were Shiite, like the population of the kingdom itself, they insisted firmly that they represented the discontent of both Sunnis and Shi'ites, and framed the events as part of the Arab uprisings seen from Tunisia to Libya. Their slogans were about democracy and human rights, not Shiite particularism, and there is virtually no evidence to support the oft-repeated claim that their efforts were inspired or led by Iran.

The Bahraini regime responded not only with violent force, but also by encouraging a nasty sectarianism in order to divide the popular movement and to build domestic and regional support for a crackdown. Anti-Shiite vituperation spread through the Bahraini public arena, including broadcast media and increasingly divided social media networks. This sectarian framing also spread through the Arab media, particularly Saudi outlets. The sectarian frame resonated with the narratives laid in the dark days of the mid-2000s, when scenes of Iraqi civil war and Hezbollah's rise in Lebanon filled Arab television screens, pro-U.S. Arab leaders spread fears of a "Shiite Crescent," and the Saudis encouraged anti-Shi'ism in order to build support for confronting Iranian influence.

Now, the struggle for democracy and human rights in Bahrain seems to have been fully consumed by this cynical sectarian framing, and the regional Saudi-Iranian cold war which had been largely left behind by the Arab uprisings has suddenly returned to center stage. The sending of Saudi and GCC security forces to Bahrain follows on similar political campaigns, while the regime's positions and sectarian framing have been backed across the Gulf media — including al-Jazeera Arabic, which has barely covered Bahrain even as it has focused heavily on Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. Meanwhile, leading Shiite political figures across the region, from Hassan Nasrallah to Ali Sistani, are rushing to the defense of the protesters. Both have the effect of reinforcing the sectarian frame and distracting from the calls for democratic change.

The United States may see the preservation of the Bahraini regime as essential to its strategic position, given its concerns about the Fifth Fleet and about losing a key part of its decades-long strategy of containing Iranian power. But what the Bahraini regime is doing to maintain power may badly hurt America's position as well. The harsh repression, immediately and publicly following the visit of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, suggests either American complicity or impotence. The refusal of serious reform probably makes the survival of the regime less rather than more likely. And finally, the sectarian framing of Bahrain has the potential to rebound upon other Arab states with significant Shiite populations, including Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It may also drive Iraq's leaders into a more assertively Shiite and pro-Iranian stance, as Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his rivals seek to win popularity with Iraqi Shiites who identify with their Bahraini counterparts. If the Obama administration hopes to define a new vision for the region, it needs to leave behind such outdated concepts and lines of division. Bahrain, sadly, with the help of its regional allies, has brought them back into fashion.

The other side of radicalization in Bahrain

By Justin Gengler, July 15, 2011

In a July 6 interview with Egyptian journalists carried in the *Al-Ahram* daily, a leading Bahraini revealed that his country's February uprising was "by all measures a conspiracy involving Iran with the support of the United States," the latter aiming "to draw a new map" of the region. "More important than talking about the differences between the U.S. and Iran," he insisted, are "their shared interests in various matters that take aim at the Arab welfare."

Who is this Bahraini conspiracy theorist? A radical Arab nationalist, perhaps? Or a leader of the popular Sunni counter-revolution that mobilized successfully against the Shiite-led revolt? Not exactly. In fact, he is none other than Marshall Khalifa bin Ahmad al-Khalifa: Minister of Defense, Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Force, and, as his name indicates, a prominent member of Bahrain's royal family. His outburst decrying American duplicity in Bahrain is but the latest in a string of similar incidents and public accusations that once more raise the question of political radicalization in Bahrain. But this time, in contrast to the usual narrative, the radicalization is not emanating from the country's Shiite majority.

The rise of this anti-American narrative among Bahrain's pro-government Sunnis can be traced back, ironically, to a March 7 protest in front of the U.S. embassy in Manama organized by Shiite political activists. Those present condemned the muted if not outright hostile American response to their then still-hopeful popular revolution. A seemingly trivial detail of that demonstration — a box of doughnuts reportedly brought to the protesters by the embassy's then-Political Affairs Officer, who had ventured outside to hear their complaints — provided fodder some weeks later for a widely-circulated online article portraying the official as a veritable enemy combatant. Photographs of him and his family, along with his local address and phone number, would soon appear on militant Salafi forums, where readers were urged to take action against this Hezbollah operative. Within a few weeks, the U.S. embassy had a new Political Affairs Officer; the old one had been very quietly sent home.

Around the same time, Bahrain's most hawkish government newspaper, *Al-Watan*, ran a series of editorials detailing the U.S.'s alleged duplicitous dealings in Bahrain. Titled "Washington and the Sunnis of Bahrain," the articles chronicled a wide range of U.S. policies and institutions meant to undermine Sunni rule of Bahrain and of the Arab Gulf more generally. These include the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative, the National Democratic Institute, Human Rights Watch, and the (subsequently "reorganized") American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain.

In late June, this series gave way to a new and even less-subtly titled one: "Ayatollah Obama and Bahrain," which draws on the president's Muslim name to portray not only a country whose strategic interests have led it to abandon the Arab Gulf to Iran, but a U.S. president who harbors personal ideological sympathies for the Shiites. Spanning nearly a dozen issues from June 26 to July 6, the articles ended only after an official protest by the U.S. embassy.

This is more than a mere media campaign. Bahrain's largest Shiite opposition society, al-Wefaq, held a festival last weekend to reiterate its demand for an elected government to be submitted at this week's sessions of an ongoing National Dialogue conference. Loyalist Sunnis countered with a rally of their own, one aimed not at domestic policy but at ending U.S. "interference" in Bahraini affairs. A 15-foot-wide banner hung directly behind the speakers' podium bore the flags of "The Conspirators Against the Arab Gulf," — the United States, al-Wafeq, Hezbollah, and Iran. Below it was the message: "Bahrain of the Al Khalifa: God Save Bahrain from the Traitors."

Rising Sunni cleric Sheikh 'Abd al-Latif Al Mahmud told listeners that, among other things, it is the United States that has divided Bahrain into Sunnis and Shiites, just as it had done in Iraq. "If the regime is too weak to stand up to the U.S., they need to declare that so people can have their say," he continued. "And if the regime needs a ... rally ... in front of the U.S. embassy, the people are ready." And then the crescendo: "And if the U.S. is threatening to withdraw its troops and the facilities it gives to Bahrain, then to hell with these troops and facilities. We are ready to live in famine to protect our dignity." This is from a man who just months ago led pro-government rallies that attracted several hundred thousand Bahraini Sunnis.

This anti-U.S. mobilization by regime supporters in Bahrain is ominous, and of course ironic inasmuch as the Obama administration's lukewarm response to the February protests was premised in large part on the assumption that a Bahrain controlled by the Shiite would be a Bahrain without the U.S. Fifth Fleet. But unfortunately the story only gets worse.

Underlying this popular sentiment is a still more troubling cause: a longstanding political dispute dividing members of Bahrain's royal family that the current crisis has brought to a head. Post-February, Bahrain has seen the empowerment of the less compromising factions of the ruling Khalifa family — in particular its prime minister of 40 years — at the expense of the more moderate king and crown prince. The former holds precariously to power; the latter, despite concerted U.S. efforts to revive his political standing highlighted by a June 7 meeting in Washington with President Obama, has been all but banished entirely following his failure to broker a deal to end protests in the early days of the crisis.

What is most remarkable about Mahmud's exhortation of fellow Sunnis is not his threat directed at the United States, but the threat directed at his own government. His suggestion that if "the regime is too weak to stand up to the United States, they need to declare that so people can have their say" is no less than an explicit challenge to Bahrain's ruling faction: either do what is necessary to guarantee the country's interests, or get out of the way of those who will.

That King Hamad has yet to put a stop to either strand of rhetoric — the embarrassing months-long harassment of the U.S. embassy and president, or the overt criticism of his own political handling of Bahrain's crisis — evidences a fear of losing what precious little support he still enjoys from among the country's significant Sunni Islamic constituency. Indeed, rather than move to silence these

radical voices, King Hamad has perhaps out of necessity legitimized them. On June 21, he went so far as to pay a personal visit to the home of Mahmud where, according to Bahrain's state news agency, he "lauded [him] for his efforts to serve his nation and religion."

When protests in Bahrain erupted in February, the primary storyline featured a friendly Sunni government under siege by a pro-Iranian Shiite majority, an inherently anti-Western faction feared to have been only further radicalized by the sweeping security crackdown necessary to quell the unrest. For U.S. policymakers, having now endured months of scrutiny for their unwavering support of the Bahraini government while backing pro-democracy uprisings elsewhere, the irony of the recent anti-American turn by Sunni Islamists must appear little humorous, particularly as the movement has been enabled if not cultivated outright by pragmatic members of the very family whose rule the U.S. has worked so steadfastly to preserve.

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Beyond Bahrain's dialogue

By Jane Kinninmont, July 18, 2011

Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, Bahrain's single largest political movement, yesterday announced its withdrawal from a much-heralded "national dialogue" after only two weeks. The immediate trigger for the decision was an anti-Shiite insult used by a pro-government Sunni MP at the discussions. But underlying this are deeper concerns that the dialogue process is unrepresentative and unlikely to bring meaningful reforms. The withdrawal of Wefaq marks a dangerous deterioration in an already fragile effort to move past the abortive uprising and sweeping repression that marked the first half of 2011.

The National Dialogue was already flawed, but the withdrawal of the largest opposition group after only two weeks is a further setback. The recent announcement of an independent commission to investigate the recent events and deliver a report in October is one of the few remaining sources of hope. There are few indications that the government is prepared to countenance the political reforms the opposition are seeking, such as empowering the elected parliament or ending gerrymandering. Indeed, a worrying narrative conveyed by some officials portrays much of Bahrain's Shiite population as disloyal and undeserving of democracy.

Bahrain's National Dialogue has been portrayed in some media reports as a series of talks between the rulers and the opposition over political reform. In practice, however, the process is very different. For one thing, the rulers are not actually taking part in the talks. Early speculation that the dialogue would be brokered by Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, proved to be incorrect. Instead, the month-long discussion forum is chaired by the speaker of parliament, Khalifa Al-Dhahrani, a conservative figure close to the prime minister. The 300 participants in the dialogue each take turns to speak about their "visions" for Bahrain's future, which are then to be edited into a summary document that will be delivered to King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa. King Hamad can then choose to issue new royal orders based on the recommendations, should he so wish. (A satirical view can be found here.)

In addition, the forum has been constructed in such a way as to make the opposition a small minority. Representatives of seven legally recognized opposition political societies, including Wefaq, were allocated only 35 out of the 300 seats at the forum. The rest went to NGOs, professional associations and trade unions (which have been purged of protestors and people who went on strike), as well as representatives of the media (which routinely self-censors and avoids criticizing the government), and "prominent personalities." There are no representatives of the youth protestors, many of whom are now in prison. Overall, the forum is even less politically representative than the country's parliament, and has even fewer powers to implement any of its decisions.

In May, President Barack Obama warned that a genuine national dialogue in Bahrain could not happen when parts of the peaceful opposition were in jail. They still are. Some prisoners have been released in recent days, including Ayat Al-Qormozi, a 20-year-old woman sentenced to a year in prison for reading an anti-government poem; her case was taken up by Amnesty International and the Hubail brothers, two national football stars whose case attracted attention from FIFA. That these cases had attracted international attention throws into question their value as domestic confidence-building measures.

Crucially, the releases have not included opposition leaders. Among the imprisoned politicians is Ebrahim Sharif, the head of Waad — a secular liberal political society that had a government license for its work — who has been sentenced to five years in jail for seeking to topple the government, after calling for a constitutional monarchy at the protests. Likewise, one of Wefaq's designated representatives, Jawad Fairooz, a former chairman of parliament's utilities committee, was unable to attend because he is in prison on charges of spreading "lies." An official told CNN that these "lies" related mainly to interviews he had given to satellite television stations. The most prominent detained politicians including Sharif, Fairooz, Hassan Mushaima and Abduljalil Al-Singace of Haq and Abdelwahhab Hussain of Al-Wafa — among others — recently had their appeal hearings postponed from July until September, after the dialogue is completed.

Given all this, the National Dialogue forum never seemed likely to be the venue where the specific political problems between the government and the opposition are resolved. That said, this type of wide-ranging forum could potentially be a useful platform for Bahrain's citizens to air their ideas, if they felt free to speak their minds. Saudi Arabia likewise holds a National Dialogue where members of civil society can debate issues, though there is no binding follow-up. In the Saudi case, some have been disappointed with what they see as an elite talking shop; others argue the dialogue process has subtly helped to foster discussions among Saudi society more widely about previously taboo subjects. But Bahrain already has a well-developed civil society, something that, in better times, the country is proud of. It started educating people before the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and it was the first to have trade unions. Sadly, this civil society is subject to significant intimidation today.

At a time of profound paranoia about opposition to the government, when people have been jailed for making political statements and attending protests, there is hardly an atmosphere conducive to open discussion about political reforms. Parts of the government, and the state media, have spent months, if not years, trying to convince much of the Sunni population that Shiite Bahrainis are incapable of taking part in democracy because they have religious links with clerics in Iraq and Iran — rather reminiscent of charges leveled against Catholics and Jews in different contexts. Some have described Bahrain's current climate as "McCarthyist," citing, for instance, Facebook pages that have identified even moderate critics of the government as "traitors," at a time when many officials have sought to portray the uprising as a foreign plot. Bahrain's angry Twittersphere is proving to be a striking example of the fallacy of the "cyberoptimist" view of social media as a force for democratization. In the wider society, "people have informed on their mates, in the workplace, the universities, the clubs," says one civil society activist.

Meanwhile, protests continue in Shiite villages, where they are contained by security forces using tear gas and rubber bullets. A recent report by Human Rights

First includes their observer's eyewitness account of police shooting rubber bullets at unarmed pedestrians, including woman and children, some 90 minutes before a protest was due to start in the mostly Shiite area of Bilad Al-Qadim on July 6 (just after the dialogue had started). Over the weekend, just before Wefaq announced its decision, opposition sources said Zainab Al-Juma, a 47-year-old mother living in the mostly Shiite village of Sitra — always a hotbed for political activism — died after inhaling tear gas. The government rejects the allegations, saying her death was due to natural causes. Riots ensued.

In this heated atmosphere, Wefaq has faced considerable pressure from its supporters not to take part in the dialogue; these constituents regard the dialogue as merely an effort by the government to improve its international image without compromising on any political reforms. Wefaq's original decision to participate in the dialogue was probably intended mainly as a symbolic gesture of conciliation toward the government, rather than being motivated by expectations that they could agree on real political reforms. It is likely that the United States and United Kingdom were also working hard to persuade Wefaq to join the talks, just as they sought to persuade it to end its boycott of the weak parliament a few years ago (which it did until its 18 members of parliament (MPs) resigned in response to protestor deaths in March).

However, the group also has to balance pressures from the street, which has hardly become more moderate as a result of this year's crackdown. Past experience suggests that there are likely to be unofficial talks between the government and some opposition leaders, probably including Wefaq, behind the scenes. These could be more productive, but will still fail to represent the youth movements. These movements, like their counterparts elsewhere in the region, have been expressing their dissatisfaction not only with the existing regime, but with the established opposition movements — including Al-Wefaq itself. Youth protestors will continue to criticize the group for going into the talks in the first place, seeing it as a sign of weak compliance with a government that continues to repress their pro-democracy uprising, while government supporters will castigate it for pulling out halfway through, seeing it as an attempt to destabilize a much-needed reconciliation after what they regard as an Iran-inspired terror plot. The polarization of narratives — within one tiny country — gives little ground for optimism in the coming months.

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Bahrain's uncertain future

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, Novermber 23, 2011

The long-awaited report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) on November 23 was launched with a blistering attack by its Chairman on the conduct of the Bahraini government and security services. In a televised speech in front of King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Cherif Bassiouni stated that the Bahraini authorities had used torture and excessive force during its crackdown on pro-democracy protesters earlier this year. He pinpointed a culture of non-accountability among the security services operating during the state of emergency imposed between March and June, and accused unnamed officials of disobeying laws designed to safeguard human rights. Further, he strongly criticized the pattern of masked men arresting people in the middle of the night and

extracting forced confessions — often under physical and psychological duress — and expressed reservations about the use of special security courts to try and convict them. Notably, he stated that the BICI believed that many of the protests did not fall outside the participatory rights of citizens, and that it had not found evidence of any link to Iranian involvement.

In response, the king pledged to create a task force to implement the BICI recommendations, which included a national reconciliation strategy and a further commission to investigate the more than 45 deaths during the uprising* since February. Admitting shortcomings by government ministries, he suggested the report offered a new starting-point for Bahrain in its long process of recovery, and called for national unity. The king also pledged that civilians would no longer be tried in military courts and promised to replace officials found to be responsible for human rights abuses.

Yet the release of the commission's findings has again highlighted the deep fissures and diverging narratives over the crushing of Bahrain's pro-democracy movement. Intended to draw a line under the unrest between February and June, its release occurred against the backdrop of renewed violence and the deaths of two more Bahrainis in suspicious circumstances. The BICI report also took on international significance as the Obama administration linked it to the passage (or not) of a $53 million U.S. arms sale to the country. Hence, in the days leading up to its publication, the ruling al-Khalifa family embarked on a damage-limitation exercise by attempting to deflect blame onto 20 low-ranking officials in the security services.

The commission was established on June 29 by King Hamad to "enquire into the incidents" in February and March and their consequences. Rather than being an impartial body set up by an international organization such as the United Nations, it was appointed (and funded) by the Royal Court. Still, M. Cherif Bassiouni and its other four commissioners all had extensive experience investigating human rights violations and war crimes allegations in the former Yugoslavia, the Balkans, and Iraq. During its deliberations the commission carried out more than 5000 interviews and witness statements, and compiled a list of more than 300 documented cases of abuse, of which they suggested 64 qualified as torture.

Nevertheless it ran into difficulties over the summer as Bassiouni made a series of controversial statements to the media. These appeared to prejudge the commission's findings and exonerate senior officials, including members of the ruling family, from responsibility for the widespread abuses that occurred. A statement in July that he had "not found evidence of a systematic policy of torture" caused particular anger among the Bahraini opposition, and fueled concerns about the commission's impartiality. As tempers across Bahrain flared in the face of continuing flashpoints, hundreds of people tried to force their way into the commission's office on August 15 to give evidence. Faced with an overwhelming volume of evidence, the commission opted to delay its final report (initially expected on October 30) by three weeks.

Tensions in Bahrain also escalated as the unrest continued throughout the summer and autumn. The security services were linked to the deaths of a further six people after Bassiouni was appointed as the policies of repression continued. Nightly protests continued in villages all over Bahrain and a dangerous polarization of society opened up between the demonstrators and pro-government groups. These assumed sectarian overtones as the security services cracked down mercilessly on the Shiite opposition, while Sunni hardliners used the state-run media to attack the supposed traitors in their midst. More than 500 political detainees, including a number of political opposition leaders, remain incarcerated in Bahraini jails following trials in military courts, and earlier this month, long sentences were handed down to a group of 20 doctors whose arrest and prosecution attracted international criticism.

Although hard-hitting in its tone, today's BICI report nonetheless falls short in several crucial respects. It does not name individual perpetrators of the widespread violations of human rights that took place. The scale and ferocity of the crackdown cannot simply be ascribed to the actions of 20 (ostensibly-renegade) junior officials, as suggested by the Bahraini government. More than 45 people have been killed, up to 1500 arrested, and several

thousand more fired from their jobs since February. Accountability cannot be narrowly limited to those who actively carried out abuses; it must be expanded also to include those who ordered and orchestrated the crackdown. Events in Bahrain did not unfold in a total vacuum. Such evidence that exists points to a chain of command extending upward to senior members of the ruling family implicated both in the abuse of detainees and in making inflammatory statements threatening violent retribution on the demonstrators.

What happens next will be important. To be effective in leading toward a process of reconciliation, the report's recommendations must be implemented in full, and, above all, be seen to hold high-level decision-makers fully to account. If not, then senior members of the security services and government ministries (and, by definition, ranking members of the ruling family) will be perceived as being above the law and shielded by a culture of impunity. A case in point is the ministry of interior, singled out in the report for its systematic practices of mistreatment, and headed by a powerful member of the ruling family, Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa. Yet while King Hamad may have promised to enact changes designed to ensure that such abuses will never recur, it is not at all clear whether he — or the Bahraini Parliament, shorn of its opposition members since March — wields sufficient influence to make them happen.

Power within the ruling family has shifted away from the king and his reform-minded crown prince and toward a group of hardliners clustered around the prime minister of 40 years and the security heads. As early as February 16, the king's relative impotence was demonstrated as the security services mounted a lethal assault on demonstrators camped at the Pearl Roundabout just a day after he had given a televised address expressing regret over the first killings on Feb. 14. Subsequent developments have all pointed to the marginalization of the reforming wing of the al-Khalifa family, and skeptics will question how and why this will have changed in the report's aftermath. In this context, the current government will struggle to convince the majority of its population that it has the capability or even the desire to fully confront its recent past.

Even if the reforming element of the ruling class manages to reassert control, it will still have its work cut out given developments in the immediate run-up to the release of the report. Indeed, on November 19, a 16-year old boy was killed after allegedly being run over by a police jeep, and his funeral procession was subsequently disrupted by police firing tear gas at the mourners. The morning of the report's release was further marked by another "road-related" death as a 44-year old man died after apparently being forced off the road at high speed by the police. The authorities called it a traffic accident but security forces then attacked protesters gathering at the site with tear gas and sound bombs. Heavy-handed actions like these continue to undermine trust in, and the credibility of, the government and its security forces on an almost daily basis.

Going forward, it is clear that Bahrainis face an exceedingly tough challenge. The events of the past year have shattered social cohesion in such a small country. Moreover, they cannot be seen in isolation from deeper trajectories and trends in Bahrain's recent history. The current bout of unrest pre-dates the onset of the Arab Spring and cannot thus be ascribed to external causes, such as its transformative impact of people struggling across the region or alleged Iranian meddling. Instead, the troubles which began in August 2010 ahead of last October's parliamentary elections reflect ongoing chasms in conceptions of political legitimacy and the fairness of governance in Bahrain. Opposition demands for reform are based on fundamental imbalances in the distribution of power, and rooted in decades of the politics of uneven and selective development.

The difficulty for the government is that Bahrainis have seen all this before: the uprising in the 1990s was followed by a general amnesty and political opening in 2001 before subsequent measures watered-down the initial promises. The events of 2010-11 marked the definitive end of this cycle of reform and repression. Its memory (and the fact that many of those who chose to engage are now in prison) now makes it all the more difficult to win popular trust and political re-engagement for this next attempt at national reconciliation. There is also a danger that the hollowing out of the middle ground will complicate the next steps. New

actors have appeared on the scene, notably the February 14th youth movement, and may be less inclined to operate within older lines of "official opposition." Meanwhile, the polarization of Bahraini society, largely along sectarian grounds, has left a poisonous legacy that continues to shape very different narratives about what happened in Bahrain, and why. It is very unlikely that the release of today's report will do much to change this precarious situation.

* [Correction: The article previously misstated that 45 people had died "in custody." This was incorrect. It has been corrected to state that 45 people have died "during the uprising since February," which was the original intent.]

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Bahrain's revolutionaries

By Toby C. Jones and Ala'a Shehabi, January 2, 2012

Bahrain's February 14th movement has become a symbol of resistance and fortitude...and the most powerful political force in Bahrain today. This confederation of loosely organized networks, named after the date of the beginning of Bahrain's revolution, is faceless, secretive, and anonymous. Its tens of thousands of supporters have abandoned the failed leadership of the country's better established, but listless, political opposition. They have suffered the most and have weathered the worst that the regime has so far meted out.

Most outside observers, particularly policymakers hopeful that a political resolution is still possible, have mistakenly ignored the February 14th movement or deemed it irrelevant. The Bahraini government is not interested in reform or reconciliation. It has ignored calls for an end to its assault on pro-democracy forces, and in the last few weeks has actually intensified its crackdown. Security forces have once again laid siege to the country's many poor villages, home to most of its Shiite majority as well as the country's pro-democracy movement. Several people have been killed in the last month by police. Thick and choking tear gas has become a fixture across the island. This recent turn for the worse comes just over four weeks after the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), headed by the respected M. Cherif Bassiouni, released its report charging the government and security forces with using excessive force in its handling of street protests in the spring. Many had hoped that the report would signal a new opportunity for Bahrain's competing political forces to come together and forge a way through the country's impasse. Sadly, neither the government nor the mainstream opposition has risen to the occasion. The country's political crisis is worsening as a result, and the prospects of reform fading from view.

This crisis was avoidable. Earlier this year, most supporters of February 14th called for political reform and for changes that would have, for the most part, kept the country's power structure in place. This is no longer the case. Partly because of the government's self-destructive political instincts and its poor handling of the country's affairs, calls for the fall of the ruling al-Khalifa family have hardened, garnered greater support, and gained legitimacy. As February 14th moves in this more revolutionary direction, it will most likely pull the rest of the opposition along. Bahrain's future will be determined by a test of wills between a government unwilling to accommodate change and an increasingly politicized youth movement unwilling to surrender.

The Bahraini regime has proven consistently unable to understand and combat the February 14th movement. The impulse behind Bahrain's revolution and the foundation for today's decentralized, but highly disciplined and organized, February 14th movement first took shape on the website bahrainonline.org. Launched in 1998, this forum receives over 100,000 visits a day and has long been a source of political activism. Last winter, a loose affiliation of anti-government cyber activists took to its pages, as well as Facebook and Twitter, and collectively organized a social protest movement.

It was this movement that inspired tens of thousands of people to converge on the Pearl Roundabout, in the capital of Manama, in February and March. Demonstrators were violently expelled several times, first on February 17 and then again in mid-March, when Saudi Arabian and Emirati military forces arrived in support of the Bahrain regime. Energized by the massive street support in February and March, the activists took to more traditional forms of grassroots organizing and forged an umbrella network known as the "Coalition of February 14 Youth." The Coalition operates more as a collective than a traditional organization. It relies on a broad base of supporters who first generate ideas for dissent or particular kinds of activism in various digital forums. Once they achieve consensus, members turn to grassroots campaigning. In almost every protest today, banners bearing revolutionary slogans are also adorned with the small logo of the "Coalition." Its inclusion is not just a symbol of affiliation, but it is also a signal of the power of decentralization and community, and is representative of the new kind of mass politics that has swept the region more generally.

Since the spring, the sophistication, reach, and influence of the movement have expanded. Indeed, the February 14th youth are not only focused on sustaining the protest movement, but they are also increasingly escalating it. While the Pearl Roundabout, which served as a central gathering point for protesters, has been destroyed, the protest movement lives on. Bahrain's revolutionaries have been neither quelled nor crushed. Rather, they have become dispersed. While they have been unable to congregate in mass, their power to mobilize nationally remains strong.

The movement has successfully organized weekly protests by coordinating efforts across Bahrain's many small villages. It has also remained defiantly committed to non-violent protest. This is particularly remarkable, since the government has devoted considerable effort and resources to violently repressing the villages, isolating them, and imposing a rigid security cordon that limits mobility and people's ability to organize more broadly.

February 14th has demonstrated its power to mobilize time and again. In late September it inspired activists who tried to breakout from the security cordon to re-converge on the Pearl Roundabout. Demonstrators were pushed back by heavy security, but they made clear their determination to continue to test the government's resolve. The February 14th youth maintain a weekly protest schedule (under the theme of "self-determination") and have also taken up other kinds of civil disobedience. In September activists launched a campaign known as "dignity belt" that disrupted car traffic across the country. The campaign was repeated several times in the fall. In October thousands of activists participated in a symbolic act of dissent in which they successfully evaded security forces and passed over 15 "torches of freedom" from one embattled village to another. Villagers have also taken to burning tires, turning the country's sky black when all else has proven impossible. Mostly recently, the organization called for what turned into the most widespread day of protests in months. Deemed the "Decisive Movement," what started off as a coordinated day of family picnics outside their front doors, escalated to a call for everyone to take to the main road.

Activists have also recently been successful at chipping away at the security forces' efforts to contain them in villages. Video from a protest that took place this fall at the Centre City shopping mall, one of the country's main retail outlets located close to the Ritz Carlton Hotel, was distributed widely. In December the movement organized an effort to occupy one of the country's main thoroughfares, the Budaiya Highway, an effort that was partly inspired by the international Occupy movement. The protest, which might have otherwise gone unnoticed outside Bahrain, gained international attention because security forces were videotaped arresting, and treating

harshly, the prominent youth activist Zainab al-Khawaja, whose father, the human rights activist Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, was sentenced to life in prison earlier this year.

February 14th's anonymity has proven to be a political necessity. In February and March the country's political powerbrokers, both from within the regime and the traditional opposition such as al-Wefaq, called for leaders of the February 14th movement to identify themselves and air their demands. Skeptical, the movement's dispersed leadership refused, fearful that a formal declaration would result in their imprisonment. Their reticence proved wise. Since March over 40 people have been killed, up to 3,000 arrested, and thousands more fired from their jobs. Considering that the revolutionary movement has gained in strength and is flourishing in spite of the crackdown, many Bahrainis take delight in the belief that that the government has failed to arrest the right people. Security forces have detained notable activists, but have failed completely to understand the nature of the movement and its capacity to regenerate.

The revolutionaries' resilience has also come at a cost. Because the regime has been unable to control the protest movement, let alone to identify a leadership, they have taken to viewing everyone as a threat. The result has been the assumption of collective guilt and the imposition of collective punishment. The regime and its supporters view all villagers as potential traitors, part of the logic that has fueled its vindictiveness. And while the February 14th movement has steadfastly prioritized non-violent resistance, the regime has made no such promise. Security forces continue to use a variety of means, including the heavy use of tear-gas to break up protests, and to punish entire communities.

February 14th has also challenged the power of the traditional political opposition, most notably al-Wefaq, the country's largest Shiite political society. Al-Wefaq has continued to call for political reform as the answer to the political crisis. But it has failed to convince the government to make serious concessions and it has failed to convince supporters of February 14th that reform is still possible. While al-Wefaq would prefer a negotiated resolution, its leaders understand that any attempt to work with the government alone would result in marginalization from the youth and undermine its authority. As a result, al-Wefaq has been forced to follow. As violence escalates, it will eventually be put in a position where it will have to reevaluate whether it will remain pro-reform or whether it too will become a revolutionary force.

Because the February 14th movement is clearly committed to sweeping political change, the network is more closely aligned with opposition figures who are currently in prison, including Hassan Mushaima', Abd al-Jalil Singace, and Ebrahim Sharif, than they are to al-Wefaq. Many Bahrainis believe that only those in prison wield influence over the February 14th youth. Therefore, any deal that excludes them or is struck by al-Wefaq through dialogue with the government alone would be disregarded by the youth. And protests would continue.

There are risks for the government and its supporters in continuing to ignore the substance of the February 14th movement's demands. Although they have remained mostly committed to non-violence, the youth are radicalizing and increasingly seeking to provoke confrontations with security forces. But, a violent turn is not inevitable. Whatever choices February 14th makes about tactics, considering their growing power, the legacy of their efforts will be with Bahrain for a generation. Finding a political resolution that will appease them and end the protests will prove difficult unless the core issues that mobilize them are addressed. Since repression has failed, Bahrain's revolution lives on.

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Battling over the legacy of Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout

By Toby Matthiesen Monday, February 13, 2012

On February 14, the uprising in Bahrain will be one year old. The results are depressing. The government's brutal crackdown persists and protesters continue their efforts to return to the intersection that was colloquially known as Lulu or the Pearl Roundabout.

The regime has tried everything to destroy the memory of "Lulu" not shying away from physically destroying the Pearl monument. The regime dislikes the mere term "Pearl Roundabout" and insists on the use of its official name "Gulf Cooperation Council Roundabout." Future PhD students will write about the relationship between power, memory, and physical violence in the Bahraini uprising, and it will become clear that by tearing down that monument the regime destroyed much of its legitimacy, and in fact strengthened the memory of the place for the majority of Bahrainis. As one youth activist put it, "the soul of freedom is coming from there and that is why we are going back on 14th of February." The regime and its Western allies seem determined to prevent that and a violent response from the security forces is expected if the protesters try to march back to Lulu.

Incidentally, I had been one of the only Westerners to witness the events on the first days in the Pearl Roundabout. I was standing on the Pearl Roundabout on February 16, 2011 after a group of young protesters stormed it and set up a tent city modeled on Cairo's Tahrir Square. The atmosphere was incredible, Bahraini opposition parties were there as were families, food stalls, makeshift medical centers, mobile phone charging stations and a podium for speakers. The protesters demanded democracy, the release of political prisoners, and an end to corruption. Here we were, in the heart of the Gulf, with all its strategic and economic interests, on an island between Saudi Arabia and Iran with a large U.S. military base, and thousands felt the wind of change. Then it occurred to me how close we were to the Eastern Province and what this meant for Saudi Arabia. Decision makers in Riyadh thought the same, and they as well as other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries sent troops to Bahrain on March 14, 2011, effectively underwriting the final crackdown on the protest movement in the days that followed.

I stayed on the Pearl Roundabout until after midnight, talking to people, listening to speeches, and eating free rice with shrimp from the waters around Bahrain. A few hours later, in the wee hours of February 17, the security forces attacked the protesters, killing several and injuring dozens, and razed the tent city to the ground, burning what was left behind. The Gulf Spring was over before it really started, as the Gulf monarchies had proven that they would shoot their own citizens if they were too vocal in demanding reform.

Much has happened since that horrible day, but the basic tenets of the conflict have remained the same. There was a brief interval of hope, when a deal between the crown prince and some opposition parties headed by the Shiite bloc al-Wifaq seemed possible. But that fell through and since then both repression and protests have continued. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry has described authoritatively what happened since, and its recommendations as well as wide-reaching democratic reforms need to be implemented.

One major conclusion from last year, which the regime should have learned but still refuses to take seriously is that repression does not work in Bahrain. Over the past year, security forces have engaged in excessive use of violence and systematic torture, according to the report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. As long as the regime sees violence, repression, and cosmetic changes as the answers to its problems, it will continue to face persistent popular mobilization — and potentially much worse.

After a year of failed political initiatives, persistent mobilization, and unending repression, all sides of the conflict seem entrenched and stuck in their current pathes. The youth groups and the illegal opposition continue to demand the fall of the regime and urge their supporters to go back to the Pearl Roundabout, even if that will result in a bloodbath. But the reality is that they will be unable to bring down the regime. They would be better served by working with the legal opposition groups in order to gain major concessions from the royal family. In October 2011, the legal opposition groups restated in the Manama Document that they are willing to engage in meaningful negotiations with the government, but that they refuse to participate in shallow National Dialogues. Their challenge will be to try to prevent the youth protesters from escalating their demonstrations, as well as to bring them into a future negotiated settlement.

In addition, the protest movement, which includes many Shiites, must do more to build bridges with the Sunnis, many who have rallied around groups like the National Unity Gathering and the al-Fatih Youth Union. But these overwhelmingly Sunni groups are more anti-Shiite than ever and pressure the government not to give in to the demands of an opposition they consider Shiite at its core. This ever-more entrenched sectarianism at the popular level has changed the dynamic of popular mobilization and will make any genuine reconciliation more difficult. No matter how unfair the protesters consider these allegations of sectarianism, they must respond more effectively to the charges if they hope to succeed.

There is also a question as to who exactly is calling the shots within the royal family. The usual narrative points to the division between doves and hawks, arguing that the moderate wing in the royal family needs support from the West in order to succeed. But the so-called moderates and liberals have not generally played their assigned role in the last year across the region. At worst they can be just legitimizing tools for a dictatorial regime that make more comfortable interlocutors for Western diplomats. What is more, decisions about Bahrain's political future are made these days in Riyadh rather than in Manama, a fact that has to be taken into account in the opposition's calculations and which sets a clear glass ceiling to the achievable demands. The opposition — and the West — needs to be aware of the limits of the ability or the desire of the so-called regime moderates to deliver on any deal.

The uprising in Bahrain and its crackdown will go down in history as the point when the West finally failed to live up to its commitment to democracy and lost the Arab Spring. One could even argue that the U.S. alliance with Bahrain could be compared to Russia's alliance with Syria. Both global powers have major naval bases in the respective countries that they do not want to relocate and fear to lose in case of a regime change. Of course the Syrian regime's response has been more vicious and deadly than in Bahrain, but Bahrain's tiny population means that the death toll per capita is one of the highest in the Arab uprisings. The West would indeed be well advised to live up to its ideals of democracy, citizenship, and human rights and develop a consistent response to the demands of people in the Middle East, rather than again becoming entangled in the old game of short-term alliances and geopolitics. The hopes that this could happen, however, were crushed in the crackdown on the Pearl Roundabout almost a year ago. It will not be easy to rekindle them.

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Cherif Bassiouni: The FP Interview

By Marc Lynch, April 18, 2012

The United Nations should establish an investigation commission to collect evidence about war crimes in Syria to prepare the ground for any future investigation, leading Arab international law expert M. Cherif Bassiouni told Foreign Policy during a wide-ranging interview yesterday following his talk at George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies. He warned that Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh should not count on his immunity deal holding up, discounted the ability of Libya's courts to try Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, and blasted Egypt's post-revolutionary trials as focusing on flimsy, marginal cases which avoided dealing with systemic, institutionalized corruption.

Also, he explained that Muammar al-Qaddafi was a sex addict whose heavy use of Viagra badly affected his decision-making — which could complicate the International Criminal Court's (ICC) efforts to convict Saif al-Islam (FP's web editors wanted that to be the lead, for some reason).

Bassiouni chaired Bahrain's Independent Commission of Inquiry, which documented and reported on the violations of human rights during last year's crackdown on the protest movement and offered a set of recommendations for reform (it can be downloaded here in PDF form; nobody should be opining on Bahrain these days without reading and internalizing its details). Our conversation began there.

Bassiouni naturally defended the efforts and impact of the BICI. He argued that the creation of the BICI itself deserved some credit: "this is the first time in the Arab world in which a national government established a totally independent international commission to investigate its own violations." The commission had total independence and access, he argued, even when his team knocked on prison doors at 2:00 am to interview prisoners, and at the end "we produced a report which we read in the face of the king and the prime minister and 600 senior officials, which felt like reading an indictment." I tend to agree with Bassiouni that the report's documentation of the regime's abuses will be an enduring contribution, regardless of the implementation of the recommendations — those violations can never disappear down the memory hole or be denied by regime apologists. They bear witness, and that matters.

Our evaluation of the Bahraini government's implementation of the BICI recommendations differed, however. I pointed to the regime's very limited reforms, the regime's refusal to concede in the face of Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja's hunger strike, and Amnesty International's blunt conclusion that not much has changed. I relayed the view of many Bahrainis that the government's response to the commission's recommendations might check off the boxes while stripping them of their meaning, and the ongoing examples of repression and abuse. But he pleaded for a case-by-case approach. Where efforts have lagged, he pointed to limited institutional capacity, such as a thinly staffed and trained attorney general's office. "There has not been a single reported case of torture" since the commission began its work, Bassiouni argued, while also pointing to the release of some detainees, the establishment of a follow-up commission, and other efforts by the government to respond to the BICI recommendations. "I know we did some good."

But if he offered a sympathetic view of the Bahraini government's "treatment of the symptoms," he offered scathing critique of its failure to undertake any deeper political or social reforms. Such broader issues lay outside the BICI's mandate, which only extended to specific human rights violations. Bassiouni's defense of Bahrain's response to the BICI recommendations may be music to the ears of a regime eager for international rehabilitation, but they should pay equal heed to his pessimistic views about the kingdom's political future. He is clearly disturbed by the emerging

trends towards radicalization and the disappearance of the political center in Bahrain, and disappointed with the regime's failure to offer genuine political reform. The core of the problem remains the absolute hold on power by the Sunni minority. "That can't be. Things have to change. These are the causes. Unless you change the causes, they are still going to have these problems."

On Yemen, Bassiouni argued that the immunity arrangements for former President Ali Abdullah Saleh would not likely stand up any more than did promises made to former Liberian President Charles Taylor. The demands of justice might have to wait for a new political constellation, in Yemen and internationally, but the GCC immunity deal had no real legal standing. "The fact that there is a political deal at a certain time... is not binding." International law now demands individual accountability for certain crimes, which states do not have the power to waive. Nor does any sort of "former president" status protect him even if offered at home. Those outraged by the impunity granted to Saleh and his people might find some comfort in this view of the transient nature of such guarantees.

Should Syria's Bashar al-Aasad be indicted by the International Criminal Court? Not until the evidence has been collected, argued Bassiouni. "I was very concerned with having the Security Council refer the Libya matter to the ICC before the investigation. I have a sense of orderliness about things. Do the investigation first, see what the evidence is, and then indict. You don't start by indicting without getting the evidence." Evidence collected only from abroad and from partisan sources could not suffice, he warned. "Mr. Okampo never had the opportunity to go to Libya to investigate, never had the opportunity to investigate in Darfur. When indictments come out on some evidence gathered from abroad, it undermines the legitimacy of the court. Me fear is that if we do the same with Syria it is simply going to add to it." Such a warning is well taken given the intense politicization of information about the violence in Syria today.

But this problem should not take the instruments of international justice out of the crisis in Syria. Instead of an ICC referral, Bassiouni "would strongly recommend having an investigative commission as was established by the Security Council in the former Yugoslavia." That commission, which Bassiouni chaired for several years, produced a 3500-page report backed by massive documentation which ultimately formed the basis for the efforts of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia. He urged the same for Syria. But he also warned about repeating the mistakes of the troubled Special Tribunal for Lebanon were such a Special Tribunal for Syria to be established — a warning which all advocates of international justice in Syria should take seriously.

Finally, about Qaddafi's Viagra. This came up in our discussion about the competing claims on Saif al-Islam Qaddafi by the ICC and the Libyan interim government, and whether Libyan courts could possibly be "capable and willing" to try him and other top regime officials. "Absolutely not" at the current time, he answered, though it would not be impossible to create an effective body with 5 to 10 good judges and some training, capacity building, and international support. Such a trial would be conducted according to local law, however, which would not necessarily accord with the statutes of the ICC.

But Saif personally posed another problem for prosecutors: establishing his role in his father's demonstrably paranoid and capricious decision-making. And here Bassiouni did, indeed, begin to speak about Qaddafi's sex addiction. (I started coughing right about then, as you'll see in the video). Qaddafi, he argued, had serious psychiatric problems for which he had long been self-medicating. He was extremely secretive and paranoid. On top of that, well, let's go to the tape: "Most people don't know, he was almost addicted, he had sexual addiction, consumed enormous amounts of Viagra and other similar pills, which had a very serious negative effect when combined with his other medication." How did Bassiouni know this? Sometimes, it's perhaps better not to ask.