



# Arab Uprisings: Bahrain's Turn

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POMEPS BRIEFINGS **2**



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## Fifth columns in the Gulf?

*Posted By Frederic M. Wehrey, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Monday, May 24, 2010 - 9:09 AM*

The discovery in Kuwait earlier this month of an alleged spy cell working for Iran's Revolutionary Guards has sent tremors throughout the Gulf, raising fears of Iranian meddling in the region's domestic affairs to near hysteria. At the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Riyadh following the incident, Gulf leaders quietly deferred to Kuwait to handle the incident. But in the Gulf and pan-Arab press, the Arabian Peninsula is widely portrayed as under siege by a network of Iranian subversives and local proxies, stretching from north Yemen to Dubai to Manama. Comparisons to Iran's revolutionary adventurism in the 1980s abound.

While the full extent of Iran's current clandestine influence remains murky, the "proxy narrative" is instructive more for what it reveals about Gulf insecurities -- both domestic and regional -- than any truths about Iran's capabilities or intentions. And perhaps more importantly, it shows that the Iranian threat to the Gulf -- while certainly potent in terms of naval warfare and ballistic missiles -- is ultimately ideological, symbolic, asymmetric, and not easily contained with conventional arms.

During our recent travel in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), we found that many of these fears are closely related to the impending U.S. pullout from Iraq and the belief that the resulting vacuum will empower Iran to maneuver more freely in Gulf affairs. Even with U.S. forces still in Iraq, regional leaders have grown increasingly alarmed over Iran's influence and reach since the 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein, which regional actors perceive as upsetting the regional balance of power. Even though Iraq's ability to balance Iranian influence during the 15 years before the 2003 invasion was always doubtful, the demise of a once powerful Sunni-led Arab state and its replacement with a Shiite-dominated government with longstanding ties to Iran has had a dramatic psychological impact. What is particularly troubling to Arab leaders is that Iran's influence has not only increased in its near

abroad (Iraq), but also is believed to stretch across the broader region to the "shores of the Mediterranean," as one former Egyptian diplomat told us. In conversations with Gulf leaders we found a good deal of resignation that Iraq had effectively "fallen" to Iran, leading some to focus instead on Yemen, Lebanon, and Gaza as more hopeful arenas to roll back Iranian influence.

The reality of Iranian power is actually far more limited than such perceptions suggest. For one thing, Iran's weak conventional military and political and economic unrest at home limit its ability to project influence. Iran's 2009 presidential election and subsequent domestic turmoil may have also provided an internal distraction from Tehran's regional agenda and tarnished Iran's rejectionist luster among Arab publics. Moreover, Iran faces push-back even from its staunchest allies in Iraq and certainly from its other state and nonstate allies, which are pursuing local agendas not entirely aligned with Iranian interests.

Nonetheless, perceptions often drive policy in the Middle East, and Arab fears of Iran are compounded by the perceived erosion of U.S. power -- a perception little changed by U.S. military successes in Iraq after the surge and Anbar Awakening. Added to this is the growing disappointment with the Obama administration's peace process diplomacy, which is viewed as critical in undermining Iranian influence. In the UAE and Saudi Arabia, there was widespread consternation about the lack of viable levers against Iran; officials opposed military action as destabilizing to the broader region, yet also criticized sanctions as ineffective. At the same time, they view U.S. engagement efforts with Iran suspiciously, fearing the United States will cut a deal with Tehran at the expense of Arab partners -- but then are at a loss when pressed to suggest alternatives. One member of the Saudi royalty opined that it was simply a matter of waiting for generational change in Iran. "After all," he said, "it took us 50 years to defeat the Soviet Union." The result is that Gulf

regimes are engaged in a careful balancing act that avoids antagonizing Iran even while accepting a steady supply of U.S. military assistance.

Given their paralysis on external policy, the Gulf states have turned inward, seeing the hidden hand of Iran behind a broad spectrum of local dissent, political opposition, and insurgency. Whether justified or not, the climate of fear has had a toxic effect on domestic politics, particularly with regard to the integration of local Shiites and political reform more broadly. It has provided grist to hard-line voices, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, who oppose concessions to Shiite identity and have used the specter of Iranian influence to cast doubt on the nationalist bona fides of local Shiites. In Bahrain, for example, Salafi parliamentarians recently attacked the main Shiite bloc for clandestinely supporting the Huthis of Yemen and being agents of Iran. In Saudi Arabia, this atmosphere has put the Shiite community on the defensive, forcing Shiite leaders to once again “prove” their loyalty to the kingdom and fend off accusations about their divided loyalties.

The domestic and regional political reverberations from the Iraq war are likely to affect perceptions of Iran’s ascendancy for years to come. While U.S. policymakers are understandably focused on the nuclear challenge, the regional alarm over Iran is often much more closely linked to Iran’s political and ideological agenda. Missile defense and arms sales may be a critical element of preparing for a future with a nuclear-armed Iran, but the most effective way to contain Iranian influence may be on the political, not military, battlefield. Movement on Arab-Israeli peace, preventing failed states and encouraging better governance may prove more successful in diminishing both Iranian penetration and the ability of Arab regimes to exploit the specter of Iran for domestic, parochial purposes.

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## Bahrain’s torture problem

*Posted By Joe Stork, Monday, March 29, 2010 - 8:44 PM*

Human Rights Watch held a news conference in Bahrain in February to release a report on torture that I helped to research and write. Such an event publicizing serious human rights abuse in the Kingdom would not have been possible 10 or 15 years ago, a testament to the durability of some reforms and to persistent Bahraini human rights activism. In our investigations, we found solid evidence that torture, for the purpose of securing confessions, is back in the repertoire of Bahrain’s General Directorate of Criminal Investigations. By all accounts, Bahrain had successfully ended the use of torture for a good part of the

last decade. It is therefore distressing that the government has refused to investigate, much less take action on, these documented abuses.

Bahrain is one of those Arab countries, like Morocco and Jordan, where son succeeded father to the throne a decade or more ago and ushered in reforms along with promises of full respect for fundamental human rights. All three of these “reforming monarchies” have demonstrated real limits to their reforming zeal, though, in basic areas like eliminating torture and ill-treatment of security suspects.

Our evidence in the Bahrain case, in addition to the consistency of the victim testimonies we took, consisted of court documents and reports of government medical examiners that consistently cited evidence of injuries consistent with the allegations of former detainees that they were suspended in painful positions and beaten. Many former detainees also alleged they had been subjected to electric shock devices. These findings as well as other human rights violations have also been documented in the State Department's 2009 Human Rights Report on Bahrain.

In a meeting shortly before our news conference, Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa, the minister of interior, told me that the ministry investigates all allegations of abuse, and would do so again. But neither his ministry nor the Ministry of Justice responded to our requests months ago for information about any investigations of torture allegations, and to date no officials have been able to cite a single such investigation. After our report appeared, Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa issued a statement saying that the government would examine the allegations and take "necessary actions" if violations were found. But the interior ministry's public statement flatly denied that any torture happened, and contended that such allegations were politically motivated, despite the abundant evidence presented in the report.

Because we were able to research and write the report at all, and to have discussions about it with government officials, I would dispute any claim that Bahrain has gone back to the "bad old days," when criticism of the government would get you fired from your job (if you were lucky enough to have one) and a lengthy jail term after an unfair trial in a State Security Court. Bahrain's State Security Courts are thankfully now history, and the margin for free expression, while not great, is better than it had been. But torture? Why is this terrible scourge once again a problem in Bahrain?

The abject failure of Bahraini authorities so far to investigate these allegations goes to the heart of why

torture has once again raised its ugly head. For many decades, Bahrain had a deserved reputation as a country that systematically practiced torture. By 2005, the country could fairly claim to the UN Committee Against Torture that torture no longer occurred there. These were years of relative political calm. But starting in 2007, street protests over alleged discrimination against the majority Shia community became more frequent, and often deteriorated into clashes with security forces.

This was when we started hear, with disturbing regularity, allegations of systematic abuse. Some prosecutors referred those making these complaints to medical examinations by government doctors affiliated with the Public Prosecution Office. Other prosecutors, though, were consistently derelict in meeting their responsibility under Bahraini law to make such referrals. And to our knowledge, in no case did the Attorney General, as head of the Public Prosecution Office, meet his responsibility under the law to conduct a criminal investigation into the allegations. In the face of persisting impunity for serious abuses, those abuses continue.

In my meeting with Shaikh Rashid, the minister of interior, he stressed the need for discipline in society, referring to the obligation of law enforcement officials to protect lives and property in the face of street unrest. I replied that I completely agreed, and that the absence of discipline and accountability underlies the revival of torture as security officials resort to earlier tactics for securing confessions at any cost. This is what has to change, and the change has to come from the top.

American silence on the subject thus far, at least in public, makes such a needed change less likely, to the detriment of Bahraini citizens, global norms against torture, and American credibility as an advocate of human rights.

*Joe Stork is the deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division.*

# The Internet in Bahrain: breaking the monopoly of information

*Posted By Fahad Desmukh, Tuesday, September 21, 2010 - 3:19 PM*

When there is breaking news in the tiny island state of Bahrain, you are not likely to hear about it on the local television or radio channels. Instead, the first place it is likely to be reported is on one of the scores of Internet discussion forums run by Bahrainis. This is just what happened earlier this month when someone posted a message on the popular forum BahrainOnline.org breaking the news that the site's founder, Ali Abdulemam, had been arrested by the National Security Agency.

Abdulemam's arrest was part of a wider government crackdown on Bahrain's political opposition in recent weeks in which more than 200 people have reportedly been detained, a gag order has been imposed on the press and a prominent human rights group has been taken over by the government. Although Abdulemam is not directly involved in politics himself, he was targeted because of the key role that his website plays in serving as a space where opposition activists can air their point of view.

Bahrain was my home for the first 26 years of my life, and I was among the first generation of bloggers in the country. In 2006 I was interrogated by the National Security Agency for activities seemingly connected to my blog, after which I was put on a blacklist and banned from entering Bahrain again. I have had a chance to see Bahrain through some of its ups and downs, but friends in the country tell me the political situation today is worse than it has been since the end of the last uprising in the 1990s.

The extreme lengths to which it has gone in its latest crackdown (lawyers of several detainees say their clients have been tortured in custody) suggests that the government is now looking to break the back of, and not just suppress, any meaningful political opposition once and for all. The government knows that it will not be able to achieve this without clamping down on Internet activism. The Internet has been a thorn in the side of the Al Khalifa ruling regime since the time it was introduced to Bahrain

in the mid-nineties. This recent crackdown certainly is not the first time the government has tried to muffle online voices -- in fact, Ali Abdulemam was arrested once before in 2005 during a period of political contention.

The Internet has been a crucial site for political life in Bahrain for many years. During the pro-democracy uprising in Bahrain of the 1990's, information in the country was controlled entirely by the regime. The only radio and television stations were owned by the state (as continues to be the case today), while self-censorship was the norm in the nominally-independent press. Despite the civil unrest on the streets, there was no reporting on it, or any local politics, beyond public statements released by the government. The arrival of the Internet though created a breach in the state's control of information. As early as 1996, the London-based dissident group the Bahrain Freedom Movement was sending out mass emails to Bahraini domain email addresses detailing the civil unrest and reports of state torture in the country at the time. But the real change came at around the turn of the millennium, when several online discussion forums about Bahrain started popping up, most prominent among them, Bahrain Online.

On these discussion forums, Bahrainis could for the first time discuss and debate local news and politics openly and anonymously, without fear of being arrested -- and they did. At any time of the day, the number of users on Bahrain Online, for example, is in the hundreds, and at peak hours it is in the thousands. That is significant for a country of less than 600,000 nationals. Soon, the online forums became the first stop that opposition activists turned to when issuing public statements or announcing protest rallies. It was on these forums that news about the "Bandargate scandal" was first broken in 2006 -- an alleged conspiracy in which the government was accused of trying to rig parliamentary elections. The forums also highlighted cases of sectarian discrimination, police

brutality, state corruption and political naturalization.

The discussion forums were also an early form of crowdsourcing on the Internet. When opposition protests were held, for example, users on the discussion forums would give minute-by-minute updates on the situation from different locations, especially when clashes would break out with anti-riot police. Photos and videos of the events would be posted on the forums within hours (now minutes) of being taken.

At one point when I was living in Bahrain, the forums were so active that if I heard a bang at night I would be able to check on the Internet forums and, sure enough, someone would have posted about it within minutes. Some users have even posted photos of government security agents who show up at protests, prompting the agents to start covering their faces when appearing in public.

In these ways, cyberactivism in Bahrain stands out from comparable cases in other parts of the world. Users on the online forums are not just commenting on news from the traditional media, but are constantly generating news from their own sources, and online activism in Bahrain actually translates in to activism on the street. (The Arabic term “*abtal al-keyboard*,” literally “keyboard heroes,” is used to disparagingly describe those online users who post angry messages but fail to show up at street protests).

The rise of the discussion forums sparked a cat-and-mouse game between the government authorities and the website administrators. The government would block websites it deemed dangerous, while the administrators would respond by changing domain names, or coming up with new ways to bypass the filters. By 2005, the regime began to show signs of frustration when it arrested Ali Abdulemam for the first time, along with two other administrators of Bahrain Online for 15 days before releasing them. In April of that year, the government announced that all websites in Bahrain (the exact definition left unclear) would be required to register with the Ministry of Information. The following year, the government blocked Google Earth, after cyber-activists

used it to show satellite images of the vast lavish palaces of the royal family and compared them to the cramped villages of most of the country's population. In the latest crackdown, the government has arrested Abdulemam once again, accusing him of “spreading false news,” while scores of new websites have also been blocked.

The issues are deeply political. Although the conflict in Bahrain has a very important sectarian factor to it (a Sunni family ruling over a majority Shia population), the central dispute today is over the country's constitution. All of the human rights and political activists detained in the latest crackdown have been campaigning for a reform of the 2002 Constitution which would limit the wide-ranging powers of the King and his family and give more legislative authority to the elected representatives. They have also been calling for a boycott of the parliamentary elections scheduled for next month -- a likely factor in the timing of the government clampdown on their activities.

But there is more than just constitutional reform and elections at stake, as the Internet discussion forums have made another, much more subtle, political impact. Prior to the Internet, the regime's stranglehold on the flow of information in the country extended beyond just news and politics to history and culture also. (Up until just a few months ago, the ministries of culture and information were a single entity). The aim was to ensure that the Al Khalifa regime had the exclusive ability to define what Bahrain was. At its core, this was about conflating the ruling family with the state itself.

School textbooks teach that the ruling Al Khalifa tribe “liberated” Bahrain when it conquered the islands in the 18th Century; displays in the National Museum gloss over the periods when Bahrain was ruled by Shia dynasties; the local radio and television stations feature only the dialect of Arabic spoken by the Sunnis, to the exclusion of the Bahraini accent used by the Arab Shia.

The arrival of the Internet though created a new space in which alternate views of history and culture were easily disseminated. The alternative history commonly

discussed on the online forums describes the arrival of the Al Khalifa family to Bahrain as an “invasion” that was resisted by the native population. Dozens of community websites devoted to individual villages collect local oral histories never recorded before. Amateur films uploaded on youtube feature stories set in a typical Shia village, with the characters speaking the Bahrani dialect.

In effect, it has ended the government monopoly over history and culture and has created a marketplace of competing ideas about what it means to be Bahraini. In this sense, there is something very democratic and

equalizing about the change brought about by the Internet to the country’s politics. And the extreme length that the rulers have gone to quash online activism is an indicator of the potential threat it poses to them.

It is important to be clear though: the Internet alone will by no means bring down any government. But the continued repression of discussion on the Internet may certainly exacerbate the desire for change.

*Fahad Desmukh is a Karachi-based journalist and former Bahraini blogger.*



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## Ahead of elections what do Bahraini Shias really want?

*Posted By Shenaz Kermali, Friday, October 22, 2010 - 5:54 PM*

Bahraini authorities are getting increasingly irritated with their indigenous community. Since August, Shias have taken to the streets, demanding the government release dozens of activists who have been rounded up on suspicion of conspiring against Bahrain’s rulers. In September, a police clampdown on opposition leaders made headlines across the world and Human Rights Watch released a damning report stating that after having taken steps to curtail the use of torture in recent years, the government had returned to it for interrogations of security suspects.

It’s a strange paradox, as Bahrain is often praised for its ‘liberal, open and transparent’ financial market and efforts to establish a progressive and accountable parliament. But the opposition movement has only grown since democratic reforms were implemented in 2002, including a return to constitutional rule. And the reason for this lies largely in the country’s demographics. More than 75 percent of Bahraini’s are Shia of Persian or Arab origin (only over half of whom are citizens), while the remaining population and the ruling Al-Khalifa family are Sunni.

Despite their demographic predominance in the Kingdom, however, Shias have long complained of systematic discrimination by the government and its Sunni supporters, and are unable to secure adequate housing or public-sector jobs. “While the Shia form...[the majority]... of the population, they only fill 13 percent of the senior positions in Bahrain,” says Najeeb Rajab, president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. “Most of these posts are based in service institutions or the non-government sector.” The government dismisses these claims, denying that discrimination exists at all and that the mass arrests by police had only to do with a “cell” of activists who stand accused of “plotting to overthrow the ruling family”.

Following the arrests, the Bahraini authorities referred ominously to the involvement of “outside forces”; which most observers have taken to mean Iran, which has long been accused of harboring territorial ambitions over Bahrain. For Adel Al Moawda, the chairman of Bahrain’s Parliamentary Foreign Affairs, Defense and National Security Committee, the reason behind the opposition movement rests largely

on Iran's alleged support to Bahraini Shias in establishing an independent state. "They [the Shia] are loyal to the land of Bahrain, not to the regime or to the political system. We need them to be loyal to everything. It takes time. This problem has occurred after Khomeini and his revolution [in Iran]. Since then, they thought they needed their own state." Does the ruling government feel the vast majority of Shias, then, want their own state? "Yes, I think the majority of illiterate ones do. The educated ones know better."

But how inclined are actually Bahraini Shias towards Iran?

Maryam Al-Khawaja is a 23-year-old human rights activist who has been active in the opposition movement within Bahrain since she was 14. "People in Bahrain do have a connection to Iran but it's a religious connection...it's the same connection that people have to the Pope or to Italy," she says. "What the government talks about is the Shia being funded by Iran. If that were true, they would have been more violent with the government. Up until now, the Shia have never taken up arms."

Educated at the University of Bahrain, Maryam recalls Shias in her classes not being allowed to express their views. "In the mandatory history class, which speaks about the Sunni ruling family and their glorious achievements, all parts of Shia involvement in the making of Bahrain are overlooked," she says. "When one of our American professors allowed us to express our opinions in class, he was put under probation by the university board and threatened with expulsion." Maryam's worst experience with the Bahraini authorities came nearly three years ago when she saw her father being beaten at a protest. "He was attending a peaceful demonstration organized by a group of unemployed Shia youth that was and attacked by the Bahrain Special Security Services," she recalls.

Ali, a 24-year-old IT technician who has never participated in a protest, lives in a Bahraini village and relates a similar encounter with police. Last month, his brother was arrested in front of his home by riot police after youth demonstrations broke out in the village:

We heard two jeeps pull up in front of our house. They pulled my brother from the door and beat him...punching him and then putting a cover on his head. My mother and father were watching and my mother was crying. We all went to the police center and they asked him to sign a paper saying that he had been involved in some sort of issue and that he would not be involved in any other crime or else he would be returned back to them. He is not even a protestor...he is a driver for a small company. This sort of thing caused terror in my family, especially for my mother. It is this image in my head that I consider even worse than my brother being beaten -- seeing my parents helpless. My father begged the police to release him but they refused. They kept him for one night.

Ali says the experience has only strengthened his identity as a Bahraini. "All of this makes me feel even more like a part of the country." "It's a contradiction," he admits. "We are the majority...that means it's our land so they should give us at least a bit of freedom. I just want a bit of reform. The King can be there, yes, but we just want some reforms in parliament and freedom of speech. The government knows as well as anyone that we are loyal citizens."

It's a sentiment that's echoed even among the more hard-line opposition activists. "You can't question the loyalty of those whose ancestors are from Bahrain. You can question the loyalty of someone whose ancestors are from outside," says Saeed Shehabi, who leads the Bahrain Freedom Movement based in London. "It's they [the government] who feel like they do not belong -- not us."

Shehabi's movement aims to bring a new constitution to parliament and played a leading role in the 1990s uprising in Bahrain, after which Shehabi was exiled to the UK. Shehabi says that the Bahrain Freedom Movement does not have ambitions to overthrow the current regime, but that a "different government would be ideal". "They think we're an illegitimate movement and we think they're an illegitimate government...it is clear they want to change the demographic nature of the country," he says, referring to a whistleblower's claim in 2006 that the authorities are trying to erode the country's Shia majority by granting citizenship

to foreign Sunnis. "But you can't suppress a majority population or make them second class citizens."

With parliamentary elections being held on Saturday, it is possible that the rise in protests and ensuing Shia crackdown are a warning to other Arab governments (who have been supportive of the ruling family) and the silent

Western governments, that Bahrain's Shias are unlikely to remain acquiescent.

*Shenaz Kermali is a London-based freelance journalist with a focus on Middle Eastern politics. She has previously worked for Al Jazeera English (London and Doha), BBC News and CBC Television.*



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## Why the Bahrain elections matter

*Posted By Kristin Smith Diwan, Wednesday, December 1, 2010 - 10:50 AM*

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 Shia 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 Shia takeover of the country.

The elections thus took place under an intensive security crackdown in which hundreds of Shia street protestors 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 Shia 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 Shia-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 Shia 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 Shia opposition movement, al-Wifaq. Born out of similar street protests of the "intifada" of the 1990s, al-Wifaq has matured into a broad-based communal party, led by a young cleric Ali Salman. Al-Wifaq 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 Shia

community, led by rival movement al-Haq. Since splitting with al-Wifaq 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-Wifaq 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-Wifaq -- 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 Shia community threw their support behind al-Wifaq. 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-Wifaq's patient approach which seeks to calm the fears of the Sunni community, while pressing persistently for greater economic and political integration of the Shia. 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 Shia 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 Shia 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-Wifaq, 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-Wifaq has proved its patience and ability to bring the Shia 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 Ministers' 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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# The siege of Bahrain

*Posted By Toby C. Jones, Friday, February 18, 2011 - 10:42 AM*

Bahrain is burning. Confronted earlier this week by a wave of peaceful public protests and calls for democratic reform, Bahrain's rulers and their mercenaries have laid siege to their own country. Police and security forces have brutalized crowds of demonstrators in recent days. In a pre-dawn assault on sleeping activists on February 17th in Manama, police went on a murderous rampage and killed at least five people.

Those who survived the assault reported that at least one of those killed was executed at close range with a bullet to the head. Police went out of their way to mete out cruelty. One doctor who attempted to treat the wounded immediately after the attack was singled out and savagely beaten. Activists on the scene observed authorities loading unidentified dead bodies into refrigerated trucks and whisking them away. Photographs and video from the scene are horrifying. With regard to Bahrain's police, the only thing that remains unclear is the real depth of their depravity. Reports are pouring out of Manama this morning that Bahraini forces are intensifying their savagery, opening with live fire on those mourning the dead from Thursday. Bahrain is turning into a war-zone. And the number of dead is quickly rising.

Bahrain's activists are consumed with grief and anger. But they remain defiant and hopeful. Many continue to believe that their deliverance is still possible through peaceful means. There is an earnest sense that by emulating the example of their fellow democracy activists elsewhere in the Middle East, they may achieve long-held dreams of true political reform. So far, and remarkably considering the regime's actions, the vast majority of Bahrainis remain committed to a project of peaceful political transformation.

Their demands and the terms of that transformation are less certain today than earlier in the week, however. On Monday, they hoped for political reform, the creation of a genuine constitutional monarchy. By the end of the

week the mood had understandably soured with many demanding nothing short of the fall of the regime. Minor reforms are now viewed as too little, too late. It is entirely possible that their anger may lead to confrontation, but it is a farce to suggest that it is the country's opposition that needs to show restraint. That burden is entirely on the regime.

Bahrain's protesters were not the only ones watching events in Egypt and Tunisia closely. So too were Bahrain's rulers. They learned their own lessons from the fall of their fellow tyrants. The resort to police brutality on February 17th was just one of those lessons. Their view seems to be that Egypt's police and pro-Mubarak thugs did not go far enough. Bahraini authorities have moved quickly to crush the demonstrations before the crowds swelled beyond the regime's control, to prevent a possible replay of what happened in Cairo's Tahrir Square. Since the attack the country's small mercenary army has joined the police in the streets, establishing a sprawling security cordon throughout Manama and surrounding areas that aims to keep crowds from gathering in meaningful numbers in the capitol. The violence also sent a clear message: public dissent will not be tolerated, and those who turn out in the streets will be destroyed.

Amidst the furor, bloodshed, and anguish of Thursday, it also became evident that what happens in Bahrain is of considerable concern for its neighbors. There are fears in Riyadh and elsewhere that what happens in Bahrain may not stay in Bahrain. The clearest indication that anxieties are sweeping through the Arab capitals of the Gulf came Thursday afternoon when the Foreign Ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council convened an emergency meeting in Manama. Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khaled bin Ahmad al-Khalifa remarked afterward that the meaning was meant to serve as a demonstration of solidarity, remarking that "the GCC ministerial council declared its total support to Bahrain because GCC's security and stability is indivisible."

It is true that the meeting was meant to make demonstrate that Bahrain's crackdown enjoys the seal of approval from its closest neighbors and allies. But there very well may be more at play.

Unconfirmed rumors swirled throughout the day on the 17th that Saudi riot police had taken part in the early morning attack. It is hard to determine the veracity of these reports, but at the very least it is likely that Riyadh has been instrumental in encouraging Bahrain's rulers to take quick and violent actions to preempt an escalation. Saudi Arabia is perhaps the most concerned of the other Gulf countries with any potential demonstration effect. With its massive oil reserves located just a few miles from the drama gripping Manama, the Saudis no doubt want to see it put down immediately. But the Saudis are not alone in their fears. Worry about potentially restive populations is becoming increasingly acute throughout the Gulf. For Bahrain's neighbors, the small island country is serving as a test-case for authoritarian resiliency. And the autocrats appear willing to coordinate to ensure a favorable outcome.

The demonstration effect is not their only concern. So too is what many of them claim to be the protests' sectarian character and agenda. The Sunni Arab leaders of the Gulf have long insisted that the Shia who constitute the majority of Bahrain's native population, and the majority of the country's pro-democracy protesters, take their marching orders from Iran. The specter of sectarianism troubles

Riyadh in particular. In addition to concerns about the proximity of the unrest to the kingdom's oil reserves, they also fear that Bahrain's example and Iranian influence might ignite their own sizeable Shia community.

The Gulf states' turn to a sectarian explanation is predictable, but it does not make their claims true. The connections between Shia in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are based not on politics, but on spiritual matters. The rulers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain know this, of course. The truth is that their pseudo-concerns about Iranian influence and Shia revolutionary politics are thinly disguised excuses to continue to justify their autocratic ways and frame the blood-vetting that is taking place in the streets of Manama.

For Bahrainis and for other citizens in the Gulf, this moment is not about sectarian politics, score settling against Sunnis, or advancing Iran's interests. It is about justice, democracy and political rights. It is precisely about overturning the authoritarian systems that the region's rulers are desperately and violently struggling to keep in place.

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# **Crackdown in Bahrain**

## **Sectarian and hardline politics have brought protesters out into streets of this once quiet Gulf nation. And as the bodycount rises, the United States should be gravely concerned.**

*By Jean-François Seznec, February 17, 2011*

The crackdown was brutal.

At 3 a.m. on Feb. 17, hundreds of Bahraini riot police surrounded the protesters sleeping in a makeshift tent camp in Manama's Pearl Square. The security forces then stormed the camp, launching an attack that killed at least five protesters, some of whom were reportedly shot in their sleep with shotgun rounds. Thousands of Bahraini citizens gathered in the square on Feb. 15, in conscious emulation of the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, to push their demands for a more representative political system and an end to official corruption.

The tanks and armored personnel carriers of Bahrain's military subsequently rolled into the square, and a military spokesman announced that the army had taken important areas of the Bahraini capital "under control."

Perhaps alarmed at the recent revolutions that toppled the regimes of Egypt and Tunisia, the Sunni ruling family in Bahrain has been taking no chances against its young and mostly Shiite protest movement. Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has been able to overcome past troubles by posing as an enlightened autocrat, willing to show leniency. But divisions within the monarch's family, which he relies on to maintain his authority, may be forcing the king into a harsher position. And that spells trouble for Bahrain's stability, as well as the country's halting reform efforts.

The United States has a considerable national security stake in what goes on in this tiny island kingdom. Bahrain is home of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which protects the vital oil supply lines that pass through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz -- an important asset for the United States in the event of a conflict with Iran. Bahrain is also a key logistical hub and command center for U.S. naval operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Indian Ocean.

For the past few years, quasi-Salafist and arch-conservative elements of the Khalifa family have been gaining power over more liberal members of the family, who advocate widening the economic and political involvement to all spheres of Bahraini society.

Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the oldest and richest member of main ruling clan, has emerged as the leader of these conservatives, who seek to ensure the Khalifa family's continued stranglehold over the politics and economy of the country. His resignation has become one of the protesters' primary demands.

While the successful mass protests in Egypt and Tunisia clearly inspired the protesters in Manama, trouble has been brewing in Bahrain -- which is divided between a Sunni ruling family and a majority Shia population -- for years. Skirmishes broke out between young Shia Bahrainis and police forces last March, and political dissidents were arrested in the run-up to the Oct. 30 parliamentary elections.

The growing influence of the more extreme Khalifas was on full display during the Feb. 17 police crackdown. The police force that raided the camp is legally under the control of the prime minister. The brutality with which the raid was conducted may have been a bid to create a state of emergency on the island, forcing the more liberal members of the family to side with them against the protesters.

It is not only the Sunni ruling family that is divided -- the Shia opposition parties are also split. The al-Wefaq party is the largest opposition party in Parliament, but its support among Shia has declined due to its failure to win any concessions from the leadership on the issues of increased political power and representation or economic opportunities. As a result, the more confrontational al-

Haq movement has been taking to the streets to wrest leadership away from al-Wefaq.

In the past year, reports that al-Haq members were arrested and tortured by the security forces only bolstered its popularity among the Shia youth and unemployed. According to some Shia leaders, al-Haq now is seen by a majority of Shia as the leading group of the community. The efforts of the demonstrators to reject violence -- noble aspirations supported by the majority of Bahrainis -- may represent an attempt by al-Wefaq to take back leadership of the opposition from the more confrontational al-Haq.

The October 2010 elections to the Majlis al-Nawaf -- the lower house of Parliament -- were expected to bring some stability to the country. Al-Wefaq won 18 out of 40 total seats, and the election was relatively free and fair (though some constituencies were gerrymandered to ensure that al-Wefaq did not gain a majority). What's more, the influence of some of the more extremist Sunni groups was undermined by centrist Sunni-Shia alliances.

However, these hopes were dashed by Parliament's inability to affect real change in the country. All its decisions can be negated by the Majlis as-Shura, whose members are nominated by King Hamad. And the king can also veto any parliamentary decision. The sectarian divide that has emerged in parliament over the past three elections has also meant that most issues, such as the public availability of alcohol, the segregation of sexes in schools, are framed in purely religious terms. This has led the public to see parliamentary action as mostly irrelevant to their lives, increasing the pressure for citizens to take to the streets.

These particularities of Bahraini politics aside, it is clear that the present mass demonstrations are trying to follow the nonviolent example set by their counterparts in Egypt. The current wave of protests originated from 14,000 young

people on Facebook. They represent a new generation, fed up with the impasse between the al-Khalifa clan and the older Shia leadership. The chant today on the street is: "No Sunni, No Shia, just Bahraini!"

This is a message that the Khalifa family, and the U.S. government, would do well to take to heart. Anyone who has traveled to or lived in Bahrain knows that Bahrainis -- both Sunnis and Shia -- see themselves as Bahraini first, not stooges of Iran or Saudi Arabia. Some, of course, are influenced by Tehran or Riyadh -- but by and large citizens are influenced by what happens in Manama.

The Khalifa family has skillfully drawn on Western fears of the Shia as tools of Iran, which has so far obtained unquestioned U.S. support for their continued rule. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's mealy-mouthed statement today, in which she called for the government to show "restraint," is further evidence of this fact. Her remarks will not sway the prime minister and his cohorts, nor will they convince the demonstrators that the United States is a defender of their rights.

In the absence of real reform, the Iran threat could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Khalifas are not able to open up the state to their own citizens, the more extreme Shiite leaders could start to see Iran as a protector, and a curb to U.S. and Saudi influence. And a turn towards Iran would likely bring Saudi intervention in support of the monarchy. The Khalifa leadership is faced with the choice of truly liberalizing or risking outside intervention -- which would mean a grave loss of their position, and a potential catastrophe for the United States as well.

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