

ISSUE BRIEF

Bahrain's Inconvenient Truths

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This short analysis benefits from insights gathered during a research trip by the author to the Kingdom of Bahrain in April 2016, during which he held meetings with senior Bahraini officials from various ministries, lawmakers, representatives from the Bahraini opposition, researchers and heads of local and foreign think tanks, civil society activists, CEOs and entrepreneurs, and average Bahrainis. In addition, the author met with US officials and Navy personnel serving in Bahrain including US Ambassador to Bahrain William V. Roebuck and Commander of US Naval Forces Central Command, Combined Maritime Forces, and the US Fifth Fleet Vice Adm. Kevin M. Donegan. Former US Fifth Fleet commanders shared their own perspectives as well. Any quotes mentioned below are taken from discussions between the author and his Bahraini and American interlocutors.

Bahrain has been in the political doghouse in Washington ever since its government crushed Arab Spring-inspired popular protests in February 2011, leading to a political crisis between the government and the opposition that has deepened over the past few weeks. So, it was not surprising when the Bahraini government justified its latest crackdown against Al Wefaq, the largest Shiite opposition faction in the country, its explanations fell mostly on closed American ears.

Yet, Manama has learned how to live with the ups and downs of its relationship with Washington in recent years. “The cards are stacked against us,” Bahraini officials said. “It seems that no matter what we do, Washington’s view of a minority Sunni regime intent on oppressing and discriminating against a majority Shiite population is set in stone.” Instead of fighting a losing battle and obsessing over what their American counterparts say or think, Bahraini officials believe that they are better off focusing on the task at hand. With a subdued but defiant tone, they asserted: “Our core priority is to continue the path of reform, not to please Washington or anybody else.”

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A Costly Silence

Manama's position is understandable. The buy-in of its own people matters more than anything else. However, the government's bunker mentality, sense of resignation regarding Washington, and disinterest in correcting what it claims are gross misperceptions and distortions of the truth about past and current events in the Kingdom has its costs. With the possible exception of North Korea, no country can afford to live in a bubble in this age of increased globalization, let alone a country such as Bahrain whose economic survival relies on its ability to engage positively with the world and attract foreign investment. Even the perception of increased social instability could scare off international business and credit agencies, which would make the Bahraini government's goal to improve its deteriorating fiscal situation and execute its long-term reform plan even more difficult to achieve.

The government's ineffective response to intensifying US and international criticism could have security implications too. Pressured by an increasing number of members of the US Congress and the human rights community, White House and State Department officials are having a harder time defending the partnership with the tiny but strategically vital Gulf island nation. This is *not* a position in which the Bahraini government wants to be. Occasional grumblings about Washington notwithstanding, Manama realizes that its relationship with the United States is of critical importance and cannot be taken for granted. Bahrain can call on its bigger Saudi neighbor for help in the event of internal turbulence (as it did in March 2011 when it struggled to control the riots), but Washington's security commitment, so visibly and robustly manifested by the presence of the US Fifth Fleet in the heart of the capital, is paramount and constitutes an irreplaceable deterrent against overt Iranian mischief.

Myths and Misperceptions

Gulf security and the free flow of global goods in one of the most vital East-West highways of the world depend to a large extent on a more stable and functional US-Bahraini relationship. Both sides, however, have a responsibility to put it on a more solid footing.

Dispelling harmful myths about each other's intentions and policies is a good start.

For its part, Bahrain has to realize that merely playing victim only takes it so far. It has to explain itself, present facts, and make its voice heard more often and assertively to as wide a net of American officials, civil society actors, and members of the media. As for the United States, it has to address more seriously Bahraini concerns over reduced US engagement and its perceived shift toward Iran. It is seriously detrimental, for example, that more than one senior Bahraini official believes that the United States is in bed with Iran and its proxies. Manama's anxieties about Washington have been exacerbated by the United States' indefensible Syria policy that arguably has increased Iran's relative power in the region; Washington's blind spot concerning Iranian advances in Iraq in recent years; and its failure to consult with Gulf partners over a major nuclear agreement with Iran that has massive repercussions for regional security.

In addition, when US diplomats meet with pro-Iranian leaders of Al Wefaq privately and express support for them publicly (even though there are currently criminal cases against them in the Bahraini courts), the Bahraini government sees that as blatant interference, which undermines their efforts to solve the internal political

crisis and further serves the interests of Iran. The most baffling and widespread rumor among Bahraini officials, parliamentarians, and intellectuals is that the United States suspiciously withdrew all its ships from the naval base in Manama the moment the 2011 uprising began. Some even believe that such a move by Washington, if it did indeed happen, was part of a conspiracy concocted with Iran. It is a ludicrous accusation, of course, but it is there, shared by serious, intelligent, influential, and high-level individuals.

It's Not So Simple

For the Bahraini government to address effectively US and international concerns over its stalled reforms and seemingly inadequate handling of the crisis with the opposition, it first has to build a credible case. Not even the most impeccable strategic communications will do if Manama's story is implausible—you can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear, as the old saying

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goes. Indeed, the government's efforts to defend itself, convince skeptics, and influence international public opinion are only as good as the content of its argument. But Bahraini officials are adamant that the truth has been twisted by radical opposition figures with foreign allegiances and dishonest human rights activists with questionable backgrounds, all of whom have continued to mislead the international media and foreign governments.

It has been very difficult to be sympathetic with the Bahraini government's justifications for its actions against the opposition. Live video footage of police brutality against unarmed protestors and stories of extreme torture, some leading to death, are deeply disturbing (although there was, and continues to be, a good bit of deadly violence against the police, too). The arrests and incarcerations of thousands of activists who dared to speak their minds also have been very troubling (although those not engaged in acts of violence were soon released). The government's

apparent flip flopping and breaking of reform promises has been thoroughly disappointing. In short, the story of harmless and innocent Bahraini citizens calling for freedom, dignity, and opportunity was powerful and compelling. Government explanations faded by comparison.

However, between the extreme narratives of an uprising orchestrated by Iran on one end, and a bloodthirsty monarchy opposed to any Shiite empowerment on the other, lies a complex reality that defies easy explanations and tests conventional wisdom. Former US Ambassador to Bahrain Ronald E. Neumann (2001-04) is one of the very few American observers of Bahrain who has expressed a more balanced view on the situation in the country.¹

¹ For a good sample of Amb. Neumann's views on Bahrain, please see Ronald E. Neumann, "Bahrain: A Very Complicated Little Island," *Middle East Policy Council*, vol. XX, no. 4, Winter 2013. <http://mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/bahrain-very-complicated-little-island>.



US harbor patrol in formation moving past the aircraft carrier *USS Harry S. Truman*. Photo credit: US Navy/Flickr.

While Bahrain's citizens have a just cause and a legitimate set of demands that ultimately were at the root of the revolt in 2011, there are serious questions, which Washington seems to have gravely overlooked, about some of the high-profile leaders in the opposition who have misrepresented these grievances in national and international forums. These personalities are not only unfit to lead their constituents due to their radicalism, theological allegiance to Iran, and refusal to formally recognize Bahraini state institutions (despite their tactical participation in talks with the government), they also pose a challenge to societal peace because of their documented attempts to foment sectarian discord. The real tragedy is that these individuals have hijacked the conversation within the Shiite opposition, imposed their views on a large part of the Shiite community, boycotted elections, and mismanaged the dialogue with the government, through which they could have achieved many of the demonstrators' demands.

This conclusion represents neither a shameless apology for the Bahraini government nor a cynical assault against a righteous popular uprising. It is an inconvenient but necessary truth. There is a desperate need for nuance in the US policy debate on Bahrain, which thus far has been mostly one-sided. Washington would be doing itself a major disservice if it continues to dismiss or mute almost everything the Bahraini authorities say. A dispassionate and better informed US assessment of the political circumstances in Bahrain will help secure long-term US interests in the country and the broader Gulf region. When major US interests are at stake, there should be no room for political correctness or bias in the policy debate.

Contrary to a lot of the US analysis on Bahrain, the issue is not an existential sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shias, or a static political confrontation between a Sunni government and a Shiite opposition. There are too many Shiite loyalists and Sunni oppositionists across the Bahraini political spectrum to challenge this

claim. Many also have bounced from one camp to the other over the years. Most Bahrainis are repulsed by the thought and reject the notion of sectarian division in the country, citing decades of communal peace and coexistence (until the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran). That seminal event in the history of the region brought with it tensions in societal relations in Bahrain and various other countries with mixed, Sunni-Shiite populations.

Agents of Influence

Many Bahrainis, not just Sunnis, believe that Iran has sought for years to plant the seeds of sedition in the hearts and minds of Shias in the country and across the region. However, while Tehran's strategy in Lebanon succeeded spectacularly with Hezbollah because the preconditions were right (a raging civil war, a weak Lebanese state apparatus, and an Israeli occupation that further marginalized and threatened the security of Lebanese Shias), it failed in Bahrain because the majority of Shias there have recognized Bahrain as their final homeland. But some Bahraini individuals did heed the Iranian Supreme Leader's call and have tried for years to promote a pro-Iranian agenda (which consists of a Shiite Islamist society and a political theocracy with "*wilayat al-faqih*," or rule by the jurisprudent, as its core principle) with the financial, military, and political assistance of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Even though they are few, these individuals who have assumed leadership positions in the Bahraini opposition, have been vocal and influential. They have managed to form a sizeable following by capitalizing on local Shiite discontent, caused to a large extent by the government's failure to improve substantially the conditions of poor Shias living in villages on the outskirts of the capital. These opposition figures are not the free thinkers, democrats, peaceful agents of change, or sensible negotiators that they claim to be. They are politically sophisticated ideologues who have rigid views about politics and society in Bahrain. Publicly, they claim to be in favor of a gradual, nonviolent transition toward a constitutional monarchy. Behind closed doors, however, many have pledged allegiance to Iran and continue to call for regime change through violence.

While the Bahraini opposition has various political societies (political parties are not allowed in the Kingdom), the largest and most influential is Al Wefaq,

founded in 2001 and led by Sheikh Isa Qasem, its spiritual figure, and Sheikh Ali Salman, its secretary general. The Bahraini authorities recently suspended the citizenship of the first and extended the prison sentence of the second from four to nine years for playing a key role in creating a sectarian atmosphere and working to divide Bahraini society, according to the government. It also closed down the group and seized its assets, sending a loud and clear message that the authorities will no longer tolerate pro-Iran troublemakers among the opposition. And to deal a final blow to problematic clerics (Sunni and Shia alike) who for a long time have exploited religion for nefarious political purposes, the government issued a new, highly progressive law that bans the participation of serving Sunni and Shiite clerics in national politics.

The Bahraini government claims that it is individuals like Qasem and Salman (whose supporters often chant "Death to America" during protests), along with prominent political activists including Nabeel Rajab, the head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and his friend and colleague Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, who have caused considerable harm to societal reconciliation and the process of dialogue between the government and opposition. To many US officials and most of their Western counterparts, however, they are considered as heroes and victims of oppression by the Bahraini government, very much deserving of the various awards they have received from foreign governments and human rights organizations.

However, the government asserts that both Rajab and Al-Khawaja, for example, were members of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, a violent radical group that in the early 1980s tried to overthrow the monarchy. Qasem and Salman, for their part, have sought to Islamize the Bahraini Shiite community (a careful look at Al Wefaq's parliamentary record between 2006 and 2011 shows their rejection of various progressive laws), actively suppressed liberal views within the opposition, opposed the emancipation of Bahraini Shiite women (using their parliamentary weight, Al Wefaq's leaders, for example, blocked a bill which gave Shiite women the right to go to court for issues of divorce, child custody, and inheritance), forced a fairly diverse opposition movement to adopt their own ideologically-informed views and act as a single uniform bloc, rejecting all the non-Al Wefaq parliamentarians (and replacing them with their own candidates). All of these important details, however,

seem to have gone unnoticed by Washington and other foreign capitals.

While extreme poverty and alienation in Shiite villages across Bahrain, growing regional sectarian tensions, and the rise of the Islamic State have all contributed to the emergence of Shiite (and Sunni) militancy in the Kingdom, the Bahraini government maintains that it is those radical opposition leaders who have played active roles in inciting and recruiting young Shias (while liaising with Iran's paramilitary units, the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shiite militias). Iran's proxies in Bahrain, whose role and influence are dangerously pooh-pooed by Washington (with the notable exception of parts of the US Department of Defense and intelligence community), are inspired, if not controlled, by some of these Shiite doctrinaires.

Iran's Role

Since the uprising (and even before), Iran's terrorist cells have wreaked havoc across Bahrain. They have planted bombs that led to the deaths of innocent people, tried to assassinate prominent politicians and security personnel, smuggled arms into the country, killed more than a dozen policemen while severely injuring many others, and plotted major attacks against multiple, high-value targets. Following a meeting at the Bahraini Ministry of Interior, Chief of Public Security Maj. Gen. Tariq Hasan Isa Al Hasan displayed some of the various weapons that have been confiscated by the Bahraini authorities over the past few years: Highly potent and sophisticated plastic explosives, claymore mines, detonators for various explosive devices, gun silencers (which indicates assassination missions), improvised explosive devices (IEDs), hand grenades, and firearms including AK-47s. This shattered any notion that the revolts in 2011 and in subsequent years were entirely peaceful. Herein lies the tragedy: While the innocent and honest majority in Bahrain were demonstrating peacefully at the Pearl Roundabout and across the country, a powerful, tiny minority were plotting in the shadows and betraying the cause. That the government has focused almost exclusively on countering the threat posed by the

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latter and has struggled to address the concerns of the former has ultimately proved neither wise nor effective.

Few in the US government have paid serious attention to Iran's increasingly dangerous role in Bahrain. Some US officials just do not see it or claim that the threat is overblown. Others are concerned that even acknowledging Iranian interference would legitimize any wrongdoing by the Bahraini government against the opposition, sending a wrong message to Manama. However, Iran not only preys on the political fragility of Bahrain, it also actively seeks to destabilize it; ignoring this has consequences.

The history of Iran-Bahrain relations is instructive. Since the nineteenth century, Tehran has considered Bahrain as another Iranian province. With the arrival of a radical leadership in Tehran in 1979, Iran has increased its meddling in the Kingdom's internal affairs. Perhaps Tehran's most visible, violent attempt at exporting the Islamic revolution into Bahrain happened in 1981, when the Bahraini authorities intercepted a large cache of Iranian weapons that were smuggled into the country to facilitate a coup against the monarchy. In a speech on April 22, 2016, former US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander James N. Mattis captured Iran's more recent destabilizing actions in Bahrain and the region: "They [Iran] have increased the flow of arms . . . into Saudi Arabia, explosives into Bahrain, and arms into Yemen. In fact, in the last three months, February, March and April, the French Navy, the Australian Navy, [and] the US Navy have all seized arms shipments each month. . . . the idea that we're catching all the arms shipments is a flight of fantasy."²

Although the United States has enough firepower in the region to deter or deal with any Iranian conventional aggression if it has to, and although the military balance in the Gulf tilts heavily in favor of the Arab Gulf states, Iran has caused harm to Bahrain in

² General (Ret.) James N. Mattis, "The Middle East at an Inflection Point with Gen. Mattis," Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 22, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/events/middle-east-inflection-point-gen-mattis>.



US Fifth Fleet officers in Bahrain hold a flag raising ceremony. *Photo credit: US Navy/Flickr.*

indirect and asymmetric ways. But it could do much more, and the reason why it has not, yet, is unclear. During a meeting at the US naval base in Manama, US Fifth Fleet Commander Vice Adm. Kevin M. Donegan and his team discussed privately Iran's security challenge to the Kingdom and US interests. Vice Adm. Donegan said: "the United States maintains a robust naval presence in the region to both deter aggression [by Iran] and reassure our partners. But more than just the size and capability of our Fifth Fleet, I am focused on demonstrating through our actions and our interactions with the other regional maritime forces our resolve to remain here in this region in part to ensure the free flow of commerce so vital to the world's economies. The simple message to others is that the close cooperation between the United States Navy, our allies and our regional partners minimizes the chance of any disruption to that flow." Former US Fifth Fleet Commanders John W. Miller and Kevin J. Cosgriff held similar views. When asked recently what worried him the most about Iran's influence in Bahrain, Vice

Adm. Miller responded: "I was concerned about the malign, asymmetric threat Iran poses in Bahrain. The Bahraini government discovered high end explosives and sophisticated detonators for improvised explosive devices being smuggled into their country that were attributed to Iran. Directed or inspired sophisticated IED attacks presented a collateral threat to American forces and their families that we had to develop mitigation measures." Vice Adm. Cosgriff had long-term concerns of his own too: "Iran's unofficial presence in Bahrain tends to frustrate the monarchy by encouraging some disaffected parts of the Bahraini population [to rise against the government]. This complicates US policy toward Manama specifically, but also broader Gulf security goals where Iranian military aspirations pose real risks beyond Bahrain."

Manama's Political Strategy

There is no question that the most powerful antidote to Iranian interference in Bahrain is comprehensive reform that provides economic opportunity and a

political voice to as many segments of the Bahraini population as possible. The Bahraini government is not oblivious to this reality. Its strategy is to isolate the radical elements in the opposition and deny them further recruits, while creating a larger political space for the moderates and their followers. Various secular members of the opposition, however, do not buy the government's strategy of political dissociation. They argue that the government lumps all oppositionists in the same basket and does not discriminate with its punitive measures.

During a meeting in the capital's financial district, Isa al Kooheji, an influential member of the council of representatives said: "The trick is to further open up the system while keeping the bad apples out." According to various intellectuals and researchers in Bahrain including Dr. Abdulaziz Hassan Abul, the chairman of the National Institution for Human Rights of the Kingdom of Bahrain, some of the bridge-builders from Al Wefaq who have played helpful roles in reducing the trust deficit and attempting to forge common ground include Abduljalil Khalil, the head of the group's political department, and former parliamentarians Abd-Ali Muhammad Hassan, Abdul Hussein Al Mutaghawi, and Jasim Hussein.

It is through the prism of this political strategy that one has to read the Bahraini government's recent actions against Al Wefaq. The risk, of course, is that given the considerable support-base of the group, dissolving it might close the doors of political participation to a substantial portion of the Shiite community, which could lead to deeper radicalization and more political violence. The government's response, however, is that such a risk is reduced because Al Wefaq's leaders have lost credibility in the eyes of the Shiite street, having pursued a strategy that failed to deliver on any of their promises and ended up worsening the conditions of their supporters. Bahraini officials mentioned privately that the moderate members of the opposition, even those belonging to Al Wefaq, now have an opportunity and enough time to reorganize politically ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections. "The problem was never Al Wefaq or any other opposition faction," said one senior Bahraini official, "it is individuals with leadership responsibilities who disrespected the rule of law and sought to blow up the entire system by doing Tehran's bidding."

While combatting terrorism and blocking Iranian access is crucial to preserve order and security in Bahrain,

the long-term solution to what is essentially a political and economic crisis is more effective implementation of reform and a return to dialogue. Even the Bahraini police and security services recognize that the path to the country's salvation lies through development and modernization. "That's why we work hand in hand with other ministries in the government," said Maj. Gen. Al Hassan, "so that our activities complement those of our colleagues." The good news is that the monarchy has been thinking about and experimenting with reform longer than any other government in the region. Indeed, Bahrain has one of the oldest and most ambitious reform agendas in the Arab world. The bad news is that despite its various accomplishments, the reform process has not kept up with the pace and gravity of the political crisis and largely failed to ameliorate significantly the living conditions and employment prospects of average Bahrainis.

Stalled Reforms

Bahrain's reforms over the past couple of decades have allowed it to establish itself as a center for banking, information technology, telecommunications, and health care in the region. The Kingdom resembles Singapore in many ways: both are island nations that serve as bridges to larger markets; they boast a high quality of life and excellent infrastructures; and they have a well-educated society. However, such reforms have stalled in recent years. Bahrainis attribute these shortcomings to a lack of an effective reform strategy, sound execution, local capacity, and financial liquidity. Another factor, discussed more quietly, is the influence of Saudi Arabia and its preferences regarding the scope, pace, and depth of Manama's reform process. Several Bahraini officials shared in confidence the delicate balance that their government has to perform in moving forward with reforms while remaining sensitive to Saudi preferences and concerns. It is evident that what happens in Bahrain does not stay in the country, but rather has direct effects on the plight of Saudi Shias in the Eastern Province.

Beyond a boiling regional environment, the last, but not least, important factor that seems to have hampered or slowed down the reform process is the power struggle inside the Bahraini government. While palace politics remain an intrigue, theories of old guard, led by Prime Minister Khalifa Bin Salman Al Khalifa, versus new guard, led by Crown Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa (who also occupies the positions of deputy supreme commander and first deputy prime minister),

with King Hamad somewhere in the middle, may be exaggerated or misleading. Still, there is no doubt that factionalism exists in the Bahraini system (hardly a unique condition in any political system). There are influential ministers and wealthy (ironically Shiite) business families who favor the preservation of the status quo because their political and financial fortunes depend on it. And there are younger technocrats and political reformers including Sheikh Salman Bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the director of the Crown Prince's First Deputy Prime Minister Office, and Ausamah Al Absi, one of the Crown Prince's chief economic reform architects who heads the large and crucial Labor Market Regulatory Authority (which, among other important functions, performs the critical job of regulating and controlling work permits for expatriates in a country where non-nationals are more than half of the total population) and has played a key role in the Economic Development Board, a semi-independent coordinating mechanism focused on attracting foreign investment and facilitating the implementation of the country's 2015-18 National Development Strategy. These individuals and several others have not been afraid to bend the political rules, promote accountability, think about solutions more creatively, and push for change confidently and relentlessly. The result in the Bahraini system is a typical push-pull dynamic. The reformers push, the conservatives pull. Time, however, is on the side of Prince Salman and his reformist camp for the following reasons.

Prince Salman is next in the line of succession. While King Hamad is relatively young (sixty-six years old), he could, at any moment, decide to step down and allow his son to take over, like ex-Qatari Emir Hamad did with Tamim and as Saudi King Salman is likely to do with Mohamad Bin Salman, the deputy crown prince and defense minister. Further, Prime Minister Khalifa, the most powerful political force who is believed to have resisted faster and bolder reforms, is ninety years old. He will not be around much longer. Additionally, Prince Salman's potential transition would be welcomed by the people and even most members of the opposition, given his sincere earlier attempts at launching a dialogue with the opposition and seeking

reconciliation. Prince Salman also is respected by his Gulf peers and enjoys the support of both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which is important. Finally, he has a friend in Washington, which is a significant factor.

US Policy

Washington has managed to alienate both the government and the opposition in Bahrain, which indicates clearly that US policy is not working. The Bahraini government believes Washington is too hard on it, while the opposition insists that Washington is too soft on the government.

Washington's challenge with Bahrain is a familiar feature to relations with most of its Middle Eastern security partners: Encouraging them to broaden and speed up reforms, which is so crucial for internal stability, without alienating their national leaderships and upsetting whatever political balance exists in their countries, or risk losing their critical intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation. Finding the perfect mix of negative and positive incentives in US policy toward partners in the Middle East has been extremely difficult.

Without question, there exists an enduring tension between values and interests in US policy toward Bahrain (and the broader region). However, the reckless pursuit of values is equally if not more damaging to US interests than the complete abandonment of such values. If Washington pushes more aggressively for greater political openness in Bahrain but the system ends up collapsing and the country slides toward civil war, then there would be no more human rights to protect. Bahrain has fallen short, however, and thus requires help, especially from its oldest and closest friends.

A reasonable starting point or assumption is that the Kingdom wishes to reform, and unlike other authoritarian states in the region, it has actually been involved in a real reform process. Indeed, it is worth remembering that Bahrain is one of the most open societies in the Arab world, possibly second to Lebanon. In the Arab Gulf, it was "the first [nation] to have trade unions, the second (after Saudi Arabia) to have a newspaper, and the first to have a formal

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King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa greets US Secretary of State John Kerry on March 14, 2015. *Photo credit: US Department of State/Flickr.*

civil association for women.”³ Unlike other Gulf nations, Bahrain has a widespread political opposition movement and a high degree of contentious politics, and its government has recognized nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) since 2006.

Washington’s instincts to urge Bahrain to institute more representative politics are right (although it would be good for US officials to spell out what they mean, and equally important, what they do not mean by reform), but some of its activities in the country have run counter to such instincts. By appearing to side with what the Bahraini government considers as problematic leaders of the opposition and largely snubbing any information provided by the Bahraini authorities regarding these individuals’ backgrounds, Washington is deepening Manama’s mistrust. For example, it does not help when US officials interfere

in the state’s legal and judiciary processes by calling publicly for the release of individuals from prison, even though they have criminal charges levelled against them.

Manama also suspects that Washington is oblivious to its own double standards when dealing with Bahrain. For example, US citizenship requires that an applicant “show that he or she has been and continues to be a person attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States.” Therefore, membership in the communist or any other totalitarian party can be a bar to US immigration and naturalization. The Bahraini government argues that the case of Sheikh Isa Qasem, for example, whose citizenship recently has been stripped, is not different. Manama says that Qasem’s commitment to the Iranian political concept of “*wilayat al faqih*” indicates allegiance to a foreign government and constitutes sufficient grounds, along with his refusal to acknowledge formally the Bahraini state, for suspension of his citizenship.

³ Jane Kinnimont and Omar Sirri, “Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination,” Chatham House, October 2014, p. 5.

A more effective US-Bahrain policy requires first, a more nuanced understanding of the political crisis in the country, and second, a realization of the limitations of both Manama and Washington. As long as the monarchical system, social/tribal makeup, and political culture in the Arab Gulf region remains as it is, Bahrain, or any of its Arab neighbors, will never be a democracy as Americans and Westerners understand it. Constitutional monarchy, with the parliament having greater powers, the cabinet being more representative, and the King assuming a symbolic status, is the farthest it can go. This political model is in fact what the King's 2001 National Action Charter proposed, but has yet to be fully implemented.

To push Bahrain to comply with US preferences, Washington could withdraw its military assets from the country or re-impose an arms ban. It also could ask Citibank, Microsoft, American Express, and other US businesses to pull out of Bahrain or threaten to discontinue the US-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement. But all of these options would be self-defeating. If the US Navy withdraws from Bahrain, Washington has no real alternative basing arrangement in the area, given what the Kingdom provides in terms of space and flexibility on a range of important issues. Putting this mammoth command-and-control center at sea is not a serious proposition, and recreating it elsewhere in the region, where the authorities would be unlikely to be as flexible and similar political problems might well arise will not solve the problem either. The United States needs Bahrain as much as Bahrain needs the United States.

It is also critically important to remember that Washington's Bahrain policy is heavily influenced by, or essentially an extension of, its policy toward Saudi Arabia. Indeed, whatever the United States chooses to do, or not to do, in Bahrain has direct reverberations in Riyadh. Bahrain's political future and security situation affect Saudi Arabia profoundly and more so than any other neighboring country, including Yemen. Saudi Arabia's military intervention soon after the Bahraini uprising started is proof of how sensitive the Saudis are regarding their much smaller but crucial neighbor. How

Washington balances its Bahrain and Saudi Arabia policies will always be an enormous challenge.

The reality is that Manama will move at its own pace (without creating frictions with Riyadh) irrespective of what Washington says or does. In a statement before the US Congress on November 19, 2013, Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Arabian Peninsula Barbara Leaf rightly suggested that solutions in Bahrain must be locally driven for them to be sustainable. She added importantly that "strong leadership is needed from all sides in order to move Bahrain beyond its current situation of impasse."⁴

A US approach that provides Bahrain with tailored assistance to implement its reforms more effectively has a better chance of succeeding. "Instead of reprimanding us, it would be a lot better if Washington helped us build local capacity," a senior Bahraini diplomat advised. Washington would do well to take a closer look at and support Crown Prince Salman's economic reform initiatives including Mumtalakat ("holdings" in Arabic), a sovereign wealth fund established to help diversify the Bahraini economy; Tamkeen ("enable" in Arabic); the Bahrain Polytechnic; and the Bahrain Teachers College, all of which seek to create a more skilled and better educated workforce in the country.

Even though Crown Prince Salman represents Bahrain's future and best hope for positive change, the last thing the United States should do is play favorites in Manama, at least publicly. It would constitute the kiss of death for the young and promising leader. In addition, it would complicate political dynamics within the royal family and stiffen the conservatives' resistance to reform. Patience is a virtue, and it may not be too long before the Prince assumes power. When he does, he will be judged on his ability to deliver on the seven key principles he promised on March 12, 2011, during his dialogue with the opposition: a fully empowered

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⁴ Barbara Leaf, "U.S. Policy Toward the Arabian Peninsula: Yemen and Bahrain," Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, House of Representatives, November 19, 2013.

parliament; a government representing the will of the people; fair voting districts; a serious debate on (Sunni) naturalization policies; anti-government corruption; protection of national assets; and defusing of sectarian tensions.

Conclusion

By ordering and accepting the conclusions of an independent commission of investigation in November 2011 that found the Bahraini government guilty of human rights abuses, Manama made a public admission that it had made terrible mistakes, some of which led to the loss of innocent life and the torture of many other individuals. But the opposition's Shiite leadership has not been perfect either, to say the least. It rejected compromise, miscalculated, promoted violence, radicalized youths, and conspired with Iran, all of which deceived the national protest movement.

Sadly, the biggest loser from the struggle between the government and the opposition's radical elements has been the innocent Bahraini, who longs for a better Bahrain. Yet, it is precisely the average Bahraini protestor in whom the government should invest, for while the government may succeed in terminating the activities of uncompromising leaders or possibly

converting them to moderates by way of political dialogue and bargaining, the country would still have to address the plight of thousands of alienated young members of the Shiite community who feel that the only way for them to express themselves is by engaging in violence against the authorities. As stated before, the violent protest movement would lose many of its recruits if the designs of radical leaders were thwarted. But it would not end it. In fact, many of these violent protestors belonging to anonymous networks emerged precisely because they felt that the Shiite opposition's leadership made compromises and were not radical or bold enough with their demands.

In conclusion, it is not enough for Manama to commit to the reform process, it should also communicate its plans more effectively to the external audiences that matter. The government may believe it is heading in the right direction, but its US (and British) partners, as well as the global business community on whom Bahrain depends for security and economic wellbeing, have to be believers, too.

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