



JULY 2011

**REPORT**

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## CITIZENS, NOT SUBJECTS:

*Debunking the Sectarian Narrative of Bahrain's Pro-Democracy Movement*

by Sahar Aziz<sup>1</sup> and Abdullah Musalem<sup>2</sup>



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Abdullah Musalem holds degrees in sociology as well as Middle Eastern language and cultures. Mr. Musalem grew up in Bahrain, where he has conducted social research, and has been a frequent visitor to the country over the past decade. During his visits, he kept in touch with local human rights activists. He has continued to monitor Bahrain's political and social progress since the current wave of protests broke out.

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## Executive Summary

While President Obama's Middle East speech on May 19, 2011 was a welcome change of course,<sup>3</sup> it was delivered long after the United States should have started backing its rhetoric with action and trying to stop the gross human rights violations occurring in Bahrain. His administration must take advantage of the shrinking window of opportunity to implement the ideals envisioned in his historic 2009 Cairo speech, for the United States' standing is now at risk in a pivotal region in the world – one that is at the center of its entire national security strategy.

Washington has continued to defer to Manama based on the pretext that the ongoing conflict is more about sectarianism than democracy. But to dismiss the demonstrations as merely the latest iteration of a centuries-old sectarian conflict ignores the complex social, political, and economic factors that far surpass mere sectarian rivalries. Bahrain suffers from the same ills plaguing other Arab countries: a shortage of professional jobs for the growing number of its college graduates, increasing prices in the face of stagnating wages, and little political space for citizens to call upon their government to address existing social and economic challenges. As with other Arab regimes, the government diverts its citizens' attention to external forces and actors to avoid assuming any responsibility for solving its domestic problems. Specifically, allegations of an Iranian conquest via the Bahraini Shi'a are simply another iteration of the royal family's traditional manufacturing of sectarian conflict for its own benefit. Although Iran's goals of regional dominance are no secret, the threat of an Iranian-style Shi'a takeover is a government assertion put forward and then exaggerated to persuade its Gulf neighbors, western allies, and the Sunni political elite that there is no acceptable alternative to the monarchy's absolute control and consequent suppression of its citizens.

Strikingly absent from the discourse about the country's ongoing pro-democracy movement are the non-sectarian grounds upon which the calls for democracy are based. A closer look at the recent demonstrations indicates that the movement's impetus is the Bahrainis' desire for universal social, economic, and political rights irrespective of religious sect. A growing sense of political disenfranchisement is spreading among both Sunni and Shi'a citizens who have been excluded from political and business opportunities. Bahrain's culture of nepotism and cronyism benefits a select few. As the quality of life for the majority declines among all sectarian affiliations, the government leverages the beneficiaries of its patronage system to

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counter all calls for an equitable distribution of wealth, political freedom, and equal employment opportunity based on merit. As tempting as it may be to reduce all of these factors to mere sectarian rivalry, accepting that particular narrative has grave consequences on American strategic interests in Bahrain and the wider Middle East.

This report counters the false assumption that Bahrain's pro-democracy movement is merely another round in the longstanding sectarian strife that destabilizes the country and the Gulf writ large. Rather, the ongoing demonstrations are a cooperative effort between the country's Sunni and Shi'a citizens to call for meaningful democratic processes and institutions. Whatever animosity exists within the Bahraini population is directed at a government and members of a ruling family that have broken their promises for more economic opportunity and political freedom, and less corruption and authoritarianism. Upon witnessing the remarkable display of people power in Egypt and Tunisia, Bahrainis are no longer satisfied with being treated as subjects; rather, they are demanding to be treated as citizens with twenty-first-century political, social, and economic rights and the power to shape their nation's destiny.<sup>4</sup>

This pro-democracy movement faces significant obstacles, given the backdrop of regional power struggles for control of this strategically located island coupled with a ruling family desperate to retain its relevancy. Trapped within the broader Saudi-Iranian geostrategic struggle for power, it can expect unrelenting opposition from oil-rich Saudi Arabia. Indeed, Saudi Arabia's desire to maintain the status quo, supplanted with financial incentives, has apparently become a greater challenge to Bahrainis' reform efforts than any opposition from the Bahraini ruling family.

Meanwhile, despite calls for universal human rights, the Obama administration has been disappointingly reticent. In stark contrast to its response to the Egyptian, Tunisian, and Libyan protests, Washington's (until recently) timid response has been interpreted as a green light by the royal family to brutally crackdown on anyone involved, be they middle-class professionals, blue-collar workers, or unsupportive of the official narrative of sectarian conflict. Nurses and doctors are tried in military courts,<sup>5</sup> school-aged girls are beaten to extract false confessions against their families, Shi'a mosques are destroyed for supporting the demonstrations,<sup>6</sup> and political prisoners are beaten to death.

The Arab people have spoken loud and clear – they will no longer tolerate either the authoritarian regimes or the double standards of their western allies. Based on the foregoing analysis, this report recommends steps that would both promote democracy in Bahrain and preserve American interests in the Gulf and the wider Middle East.

# Against the Winds of Political Change

The origins of Bahrain's pro-democracy movement are not sectarian. For the past three decades, Bahrainis have been dissatisfied with a weakening economy that does not fairly distribute the national wealth, a shortage of jobs for its growing number of youth, and the lack of any rule of law that grants equal rights to all of its citizens. In the past, these deep-seated grievances would occasionally erupt into protests and acts of defiance that were often met with violence. As with other Arab states, the Bahraini ruling family did all it could to suppress the growing demand for political reforms and a more equitable distribution of wealth.

The few occasions when it appeared that Manama was serious about reform ended in retrenchment as soon as the citizens exercised their increased freedoms. Hence much of the official rhetoric or negligible steps taken to support democracy were merely political posturing designed to create an image of liberalism for the international community in the hopes of increasing foreign investment.

## An Ethnically and Religiously Diverse Arab State

Being a center of international trade has endowed Bahrain with a very diverse population. Throughout history, its ports have hosted Arab, Persian, South Asian, African, and European traders and invaders, many of whom settled down and assimilated.

The majority of Bahrainis are Shi'a Muslims.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, the European colonial powers sought to create colonies or protectorates in their own image; the French established republics and the British established monarchies. The fall of the largely Sunni Ottoman empire and its competition with the Shi'a Persian empire found Arab and non-Arab members of both sects caught in a web of emerging nation states devised to serve colonial interests.

The current borders of Arab countries were determined in London and Paris. Elites who cooperated with them were rewarded economically and politically. Power was thus concentrated in the hands of a few. Bahrain was no exception. The ruling Al-Khalifa family does not consider itself indigenous; rather, it traces its ancestry to the Sunni tribes inhabiting the western coast of the Gulf with familial ties strengthened by decades of intertribal marriage and alliances.<sup>8</sup> The

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legitimacy of its claim to the island is traced to the 1783 battle for power.<sup>9</sup> London accepted and upheld this claim and, according to the Al-Khalifas, the local inhabitants accepted it unconditionally. The result was the nation of Bahrain.

Most Bahrainis identify themselves as Arab but distinguish between the faith of the Sunni ruling family and the faith of the Shi'a majority. Despite Bahrain's history, most of Bahrain's indigenous Arab Shi'a stress their Arab identity, roots, and ancestry, all of which are linked to Arab tribes in the Arabian Peninsula. Most Bahraini Sunnis and Shi'as share this identity. Over time, different communities continued to socialize, intermarry, and live side-by-side. In fact, a Sunni with no sons would become a Shi'a in order to take advantage of and bequeath to his daughters a friendlier set of inheritance laws. Bahrainis therefore represent a far greater diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and opinions than those promoted by those internal and external parties who benefit from the sectarian narrative.

In light of its dominant Arab identity, the same intellectual and political currents occurring in other parts of the Arab world also influenced Bahrain. In fact, many Bahraini intellectuals were educated at centers of Arab learning in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Most members of Bahrain's post-World War II generation studied in Egypt and adopted Nasserism, the Arab nationalist ideology personified by Gamal Abdul-Nasser that emphasized Arab unity and unifying the impoverished masses of the Middle East and North Africa. It also sought to create a socialist pan-Arab state that would reject tribal allegiances and clan-based conflicts. Many Bahraini intellectuals educated within this ideological framework returned home seeking to implement their ideas locally. When Arab nationalism engulfed much of the Middle East, ruling tribal families across the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf, viewed it as an existential threat to their own power.

### **Dissolving the 1974 Parliament and the National Action Charter**

Bahrain gained its independence from Britain in 1971 and adopted its first constitution two years later.<sup>10</sup> Its first parliamentary elections proved that Bahrainis could work on common ideological platforms across sectarian lines. However, by 1975 the emir (the current king's father) dissolved parliament, suspended the constitution, and declared emergency law.<sup>11</sup> This

latter action suspended most individual rights, including the formation of political parties, and enabled the arbitrary persecution of any opposition.<sup>12</sup> The resulting crackdown, which remained in effect for the next thirty years, affected all opposition movements in Bahrain, but fell hardest on those secular and Arab nationalist dissidents who were either imprisoned or exiled.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1990s, a significant number of educated and professional Sunni, Shi'a, secular Bahrainis, as well as religious groups, petitioned for an end to emergency law and the enforcement of the constitution.<sup>14</sup> The government responded with a brutal crackdown that produced internal conflict for years, as deep-seated grievances caused violent clashes and many deaths.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the loss of life and property, Bahrain lost crucial economic development. Despite its professionally educated population and liberal attitudes (at least by regional standards) toward foreigners, investors took their money to other Gulf locations that sought to mimic Bahrain's advantages, most notably Dubai. Bahrain's lack of relative stability convinced the merchant class and ruling family that another course of action was needed.

Upon ascending the throne in February 2002, King Hamad bin Salaman Al-Khalifa sought to liberalize Bahrain politically and turn a new page in its history. He oversaw a process that culminated in a National Action Charter (NAC) that was supposed to establish a constitutional monarchy with an elected body, as well as an independent judiciary, and end the state of emergency that had suspended all constitutional protections.<sup>16</sup> Opposition leaders were encouraged to join a political process that, they anticipated, would lead to meaningful reform.

These reform efforts boosted his popularity with all segments of Bahraini society, including the majority Shi'a.<sup>17</sup> A general amnesty was granted to all political prisoners and exiles, and for any acts of violence committed by opposition leaders.<sup>18</sup> The law also gave a similar amnesty to the security services, thereby preventing torture victims from holding their abusers accountable.<sup>19</sup> Many Bahraini's believed that the NAC would initiate a process of reconciliation. Torture victims and exiles were permitted to publicize their stories, something that had never been permitted. New non-government organizations (NGOs) planted the seeds of a vibrant civil society; sought to address public grievances related to housing and employment discrimination, as well as elections and district manipulation; and expedited naturalization in the army and security forces.

Despite the initial belief that NAC would reactivate the suspended 1971 constitution, the outcome was a major disappointment.<sup>20</sup> King Hamad retained control of all three branches of government and his uncle was appointed head of the executive branch despite having served as prime minister ever since the nation's independence forty-one years ago. The king appointed half of the legislature and could veto all legislation. Laws could be issued by royal decree with no parliamentary oversight, and he also had the authority to appoint the constitutional court and judges. The security services maintained their position in government with many of the same personnel, and the parliamentarians' salaries continued to be increased with additional housing and transportation perks.<sup>21</sup> The public soon lost faith in parliament's ability to remain independent and adequately represent the population.

Due to the ruling family's refusal to loosen its stranglehold over the country, NAC became nothing more than a thinly veiled authoritarian monarchy bent on maintaining its power structure.

### **The Economic-Political Patronage Structure**

The economic-political patronage system is a key component of the ruling family's control. Bahrain suffers from many of the same social and political ills that plague other Arab nations. Chief among them is the pervasive economic and political power exercised by a small group of families and clans. Regardless of whether the political system is republican or monarchical, these entrenched families benefit disproportionately from choice appointments to ministries and government offices. The conflict of interests created by their vast commercial enterprises is often disregarded, which allows them to enrich themselves. The lines that supposedly separate personal wealth, commercial interests, and public monies are often blurred, thereby causing a de facto inclusion of public assets and scarce public land in the elite's personal wealth portfolios. Independent businesses owned by the politically marginalized or entrepreneurial youth are often forced to choose between working with one of the established families in exchange for kickbacks or contending with staying small and marginalized. Since sons often inherit their father's position, political status and economic wealth remains concentrated among the same few families over many generations. The ruling family exploits this deeply rooted patronage system to bolster its own power, notwithstanding popular opposition to the status quo.

Unsurprisingly, land is a precious resource in this smallest of all Arab countries that also has one of the world's highest population densities. Once a green island filled with palm trees that ancient civilizations called Arados (Paradise),<sup>22</sup> over time the government began to acquire new land for sale and development by redesignating "public" land as "private" and through sea reclamation.<sup>23</sup> The fast pace of development has all but eroded the environment with grave consequences for the population and its politics.<sup>24</sup> Reclamation projects initially concentrated in one area have spread to almost every coast on Bahrain's islands, so much so that few public beaches remain. Not confined to the coastal areas, this unregulated development has ended up destroying historical sites, some of which were registered by the United Nations as world heritage sites, for development projects that would enrich the ruling family.<sup>25</sup> A great deal of productive farmland was also developed, leaving in its wake increasingly small and crowded dwellings with almost no outlet for the local population.<sup>26</sup>

As the ruling family's palatial properties continued to sprout, the palm trees for which Bahrain used to be famous disappeared.<sup>27</sup> Any objections on environmental or historical grounds, even from some members of Al-Khalifa family, were dismissed. When the ensuing environmental devastation became undeniable, the government was compelled to stop referring to Bahrain as "the Mother of a Million Palm Trees."<sup>28</sup>

For a population that subsisted on farming and fishing, all of this environmental destruction was more than just a loss of income; it was a loss of identity caused by the gross mismanagement of an indifferent government. The loss of access to land and sea has deprived many Bahrainis of gainful employment, thereby reducing them to dependence upon charity and state welfare for survival.<sup>29</sup> While rapid development is a common phenomenon in the Gulf, other countries used their extensive oil wealth to compensate citizens for land acquisitions or other economic losses. As populations in other Gulf countries experienced a collective increase in living standards, the profits of development in Bahrain were concentrated in the hands of a small elite beholden to the ruling family.

As a result of this economic-political patronage structure, government policies for education, healthcare, and social security via the Bahrain General Organization for Social Insurance remains highly ineffective. Minimal investment in them has failed to meet the people's needs.

The political, as opposed to merit-based, selection of key government personnel is perceived as directly contributing to Manama's inability to meaningfully address the socio-economic challenges faced by the population, especially the burgeoning youth sector. Pervasive corruption limits the benefit of economic growth to a select few, at a time when the majority must struggle to make ends meet.

This situation has been devastating for the youth. In a socially conservative society where the only acceptable contact between the sexes is marriage, the number of unemployed youth unable to start their adult lives has mushroomed. Similar to Egypt and Tunisia, the grievances of disaffected youth searching for dignity has been – and remains – a leading contributor to Bahrain's pro-democracy movement.

### **The Al-Khalifa Ruling Family: Ruling Subjects Rather Than Governing Citizens**

The ruling family considers itself owners of the land and rulers of its subjects: the Bahraini population. In return for protecting its subjects, the royals expect unconditional obedience. In the early nineteenth century, such a master-subject relationship was not uncommon in the Gulf. But now, over fifty years after the Al-Khalifa's rise, the public's perception of its relationship vis-à-vis the ruling family has changed considerably.

The most commonly shared sentiment is the frustration felt after reading the small print in their property title after paying off their mortgage. Included there is the term *heba*, a giveaway or gift from His Royal Highness. This particular term only drives home the point that any property rights acquired by the people are subject to nullification by the ruling family, regardless of how much they paid to acquire them. The ruling family's belief that its members "own" the island is hardly unique to Bahrain. Many other ruling families throughout the Gulf have adopted the same philosophy with regard to the land and their relationship with their subjects.

Bahrainis, however, are now demanding rights as citizens in a modern nation-state, as opposed to the traditional patronizing relationship between the patriarchal ruler and his obedient subjects. While some of the royals have accepted a modernized definition of their governing role, the attitudes of many others have not evolved. As a result, there are political tensions

within the ruling family as well as confrontations with the majority of Bahrainis demanding equal citizenship rights.

The 1974 dissolution of parliament and suspension of the 1971 constitution should be interpreted within this context. Specifically, the subjects disobeyed their ruler by challenging his rule when parliament refused to ratify his newly introduced draconian security law. In response, he abrogated parliament altogether. The message was clear: subjects may make suggestions, but are not to be involved in the actual decision-making process.

Despite this history of violence, members of the moderate Shi'a and Sunni opposition ultimately accepted the monarchy's legitimacy. Rather than attempting to overthrow it, they eventually came to view the ruling family as a protector of their limited freedoms, which are liberal by regional standards, and as a guardian against Saudi incursion. Accordingly, these moderate political groups want a framework for self-governance within a constitutional monarchy rather than a deposed ruling family. Unfortunately, their reasonable demands are being drowned out by an alarmist and exaggerated sectarian narrative.



# Exporting the Image of Liberalism While Promoting the Sectarian Narrative

The dissolution of parliament occurred only five years before the Iranian revolution of 1979.

Following the Islamic Republic of Iran's rise, a new government devised paradigm emerged. Faced with a nation of seventy-seven million people ruled by a Shi'a clergy eager to export its religious revolution, Bahrain's Sunni ruling family worried that its majority Shi'a population would succumb to Iran's expansionist agenda.<sup>30</sup> To preserve its power, the Al-Khalifa promoted sectarian divisions at the expense of national unity.

At around the same time, the cold war strategies that had previously defined many Arab rulers' relationship with the West were losing prominence. Iran – rather than Arab nationalism, socialism, and communism – was perceived as the rising threat to the West's regional interests. The Bahraini Shi'a, co-religionists of the new Iranian rulers, thus became vulnerable to scapegoating. Portrayed as agents of Iran, Manama sought to cultivate the loyalty of its Sunni citizens while marginalizing its Shi'a majority through systemic discrimination.<sup>31</sup> Toward this end, it adopted a previously controversial stance by embracing and promoting the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>32</sup> In exchange for its political acceptance, the Brothers and the more conservative Salafi Sunni movement were expected to perpetuate the sectarian narrative by vilifying the Shi'a.

While inequitable government policies affected all Bahrainis, the Shi'a were the most adversely impacted. Much of this purposeful and calculated political-economic patronage system sought to bolster the existing power structure. Allegations of links between the indigenous Shi'a and such militarized anti-western movements as Hezbollah were used to justify the ensuing repression and discrimination, although no factual proof was presented.<sup>33</sup>

Land distribution became the most powerful tool. Due to a major shortage of residential land, many residents depend on government-subsidized housing. Shi'a residents saw their wait for affordable housing extended for years, sometimes for over a decade, while others in the army's almost entirely Sunni institutions and security forces were fast-tracked.<sup>34</sup> As the Shi'a cannot join these bodies, Sunni recruits from Pakistan, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere were vested with the power to police the state.<sup>35</sup> Many of these recruited soldiers often imported their own anti-Shi'a biases, which were grounded in the Sunni-Shi'a political and social tensions back home. Another powerful tool in its sectarian promotion arsenal is the gerrymandering of districts and the naturalization of thousands of foreign Sunnis, both of which aim to limit the

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political representation of the Shi'a majority.<sup>36</sup> It quickly became clear that the government was fostering a sectarian narrative to preserve its grip on power.

The flaws in the monarchy's myopic sectarian narrative are many. First, the country's Shi'a Arabs are not alone in sharing cultural, familial, and commercial links with Iran. The powerful Farsi-speaking Sunnis of Bahrain, who immigrated from Iran generations ago and retain many of their Persian traditions, are noticeably not targeted because they are members of the elite business class. Second, a similar reasoning is not applied to Sunni Arab Bahrainis, who are rarely accused of being more loyal to Saudi Arabia simply because they belong to the same sect. Just as American Catholics would bristle at any suggestion that they are more loyal to the Vatican than to the United States, many Bahraini Shi'as are insulted by the suggestion that their faith makes them any less loyal to Bahrain. Finally, non-Arab Bahrainis, whether Shi'a, Sunni, or non-Muslim, consider themselves Bahraini first. In other words, their nationalism transcends their religious affiliations. In these recent pro-democracy demonstrations, the diversity of religious groups involved displays the predominance of national loyalty.

Despite this reality, Manama continues to emphasize Iran's supposed "influence" and "meddling" in local affairs to justify its disproportionate use of force against pro-democracy protesters. Its strategy during this current uprising seeks to stoke sectarian tensions so that any ensuing condemnation from Shi'a religious circles could be presented as proof of Iranian involvement.

Meanwhile, the Bahraini government portrays the nation as a liberal, pluralistic society by regional standards. For example, Houda Nonoo was the first Jewish Arab female ambassador assigned to an embassy in the United States.<sup>37</sup> Alees Samaan, a Christian woman, was appointed as speaker of the upper chamber of parliament.<sup>38</sup> Foreign dignitaries such as Cherie Blair and Hillary Clinton have participated in open town hall meetings and hailed Bahrain's political reforms.<sup>39</sup> And finally, Bahrain elected Latifa Al-Quood – the first female member of parliament (MP) in the entire Gulf region.<sup>40</sup> Cultivating this image of liberalism not only negates all allegations of authoritarianism and discrimination, but also serves a utilitarian purpose: Bahrain desperately needs to attract foreign investment to float its vulnerable economy. But underneath this fragile image of modernity lies an economic-political patronage structure that perpetuates the unequal distribution of wealth, quality education, and economic opportunity.

By the end of the 1990s, frequent protests, closures, and acts of vandalism were damaging the country's economic and political standing. The ruling family attempted to address the protesters' grievances and help the country strengthen its standing as a stable center of finance and tourism in the Gulf, especially in the face of rising competition from Dubai. The subsequent reforms brought a dizzying array of changes to the political landscape of Bahrain: Political prisoners were released, political exiles came home, and trade unions and political societies were permitted to exist across a large array of ideological spectrums. New human rights organizations opened, anti-corruption organizations started to monitor the country more closely, and torture victims talked openly of their experiences and trauma. Human rights organizations lobbied for holding those accused of torture accountable, and once-taboo topics (e.g., government services and inequitable resource allocation) became regular topics of public debate. Even elected MPs questioned ministers about how government money was spent. The dividends for Bahrain's image abroad and subsequent developments in tourism and the economy were significant.

The speed at which civil society flourished in 2002-04 caught Manama by surprise. As civil society became an effective mechanism for citizens to demand more rights and challenge the government's discretion, the royal family retreated from its earlier commitment to democratize. Starting in 2005, the avenues for secular opposition through political parties, trade unions, and NGOs were systematically eliminated. Political parties were banned and NGOs were repressed through heavy regulation and subjected to license revocations if they received external funding or criticized the ruling family.<sup>41</sup> Their boards, such as that of the respected Bahrain Human Rights Society, were dissolved and taken over by government ministries.<sup>42</sup> Public protests were restricted by vague and arbitrary regulations that defined "legal protest" in very narrow terms. Media freedoms were arbitrarily denied due to political prerogatives, and editors and journalists who published critical pieces were harassed and questioned. The use of torture was also on the rise after a brief hiatus of its use.<sup>43</sup> By 2010, a crackdown on civil society resulted in the detention of many activists on trumped-up terrorism charges.<sup>44</sup> Many Shi'a and Sunni Bahrainis felt that the rug was being pulled out from under them as the royals returned to their traditional authoritarianism.



## The Arab Spring of 2011

**O**n January 25, 2011 Egypt again inspired Bahrainis.<sup>45</sup> The peaceful pro-democracy protests by young men and women across sectarian and class lines that eventually ousted Hosni Mubarak resonated strongly in Bahrain.<sup>46</sup> Seeing an opening to fulfill their political aspirations,<sup>47</sup> approximately 200,000 Bahrainis of all secular and religious persuasions – fully one-third of the country's citizens – marched peacefully in the streets.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to the events in Egypt, Bahrain's secularist and religious groups often held separate protests about the same issues, but the trans-class and trans-religious unity of those young Egyptians inspired Bahraini national unity. With a motivated youth movement leading the pro-democracy protests, both secular and religious organizers transcended sectarian lines and joined forces. Contrary to the monarchy's sectarian narrative, Sunni opposition figures helped organize the protests and worked with Shi'a opposition groups to negotiate reforms.<sup>49</sup> Both secular and Shi'a opposition groups emphasized their desire to *reform*, rather than overthrow, the system.<sup>50</sup> Specifically, they asked for more transparency in governance and allocation of state resources, an end to corruption, greater participation in electoral politics, legalization of political parties, and a transition to a constitutional monarchy. Unfortunately, their requests fell on deaf ears.

The protesters remained peaceful, contrary to the state-sponsored propaganda calculated to undermine their credibility. The highly organized and inclusive protests made forums available for everyone, regardless of gender or sect. The leaders instructed the crowds on how to manage the media by emphasizing nationalist slogans and rejecting sectarian ones. They also criticized those members who blocked traffic in the capital. Even after the brutality and many deaths perpetrated by the police, most of the leaders continued to insist upon peaceful civil disobedience. For example, they encouraged the crowds to chant from the rooftops, a technique inspired by Iran's opposition Green Movement. They also continued to recognize the monarchy's legitimacy, even when faced with criticism from aggrieved family members seeking revenge. While the movement does contain some radical elements, these are no more than a small minority.

In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, where protesters burned down buildings belonging to the ruling parties and interior ministries, in Bahrain the opposite occurred: government forces attacked

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and burned down the offices of Al-Wifaq (the moderate Shi'a opposition group), Wa'ad (the Sunni-lead secular opposition group), and the opposition Al-Wasat (The Middle) newspaper.<sup>51</sup>

### **Exploiting the Sectarian Narrative to Justify a Brutal Crackdown**

Despite media coverage to the contrary, Manama refuses to disavow the sectarian narrative.<sup>52</sup> According to the government, the protests were manipulated by “outside” forces (code for Iran) to destabilize the country. The Shi’as are allegedly proxies for Tehran, which is supposedly pursuing the exact same goal.<sup>53</sup> And yet it simultaneously proclaims that the country is democratic, that the separation of powers exists, and that the Shi'a face no discrimination.<sup>54</sup>

Aside from its lack of veracity, this sectarian narrative emboldens extremist elements within the opposition.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, after a harsh crackdown the small minority of rejectionists began shouting “Death to Al-Khalifa,” despite the fact that moderate Shia’s and the Bahraini middle class had not approved of this slogan’s use. Conflict spread to the streets, as reports of fights between Shi'a and Sunni schoolchildren and sectarian standoffs surfaced.<sup>56</sup>

While the ruling family may have reconciled itself to tolerating protests after the National Action Charter, disobedience was another matter. The peaceful pro-democracy protests were interpreted as subjects disobeying their masters and thus fully deserving of any punishment the government wished to enact. Given this attitude, its sustained response was brutal: over thirty people died, hundreds were injured, and the dozens of those who were disappeared are now feared dead.<sup>57</sup> Government officials acknowledge that at least four individuals died in custody.<sup>58</sup> Subsequent photographs taken by CNN and BBC of the corpses bear shocking evidence of extreme torture.

One of those corpses was Karim Fakhrawi, the publisher of *Al-Wasat*.<sup>59</sup> This particular newspaper’s history represents the ruling party’s disingenuous support for democracy. Founded by Mansoor Al-Jamri, a former exile who was invited home by King Hamad to publish an independent newspaper,<sup>60</sup> it subsequently passed into Manama’s hands. Its editor was removed and some of its journalists were deported; others were “questioned” before the newspaper was allowed to reopen (under the guidance of the Information Ministry) and then

shut down. Another corpse was a blogger named Zakariya Rashid Hassan al-Ashiri. Yet another one used to be Ali Isa Ibrahim Saqer, a man accused of running over a policeman who had turned himself in while proclaiming his innocence.<sup>61</sup> The photographs of his corpse bore signs of torture that cast doubt upon the government-released taped “confession.”<sup>62</sup>

The level of violence unleashed against the protesters was shocking. Doctors, lawyers, bloggers, teenagers, and members of all opposition groups, including prominent Sunnis, were jailed, beaten, and killed.<sup>63</sup> The military police entered hospitals and closed medical centers to prevent the injured from being treated.<sup>64</sup> The corpses of missing men and women have been found with bullet wounds to the head and chest. Tanks have been stationed in Shi'a villages, and armed pro-government vigilantes roam the streets.<sup>65</sup>

Particularly troubling is the government’s prosecution in military courts of those doctors, nurses, and emergency personnel who have treated injured protesters.<sup>66</sup> International rights groups, among them Amnesty International and Physicians for Human Rights, have urged the government to immediately cease its crackdown on medical personnel due to reports of incommunicado detention, torture,<sup>67</sup> sexual abuse,<sup>68</sup> excessive force,<sup>69</sup> and death due to “suspicious circumstances.”<sup>70</sup> By dismissing the international professional standards that require medical personnel to treat the injured irrespective of political affiliation, the royals are sending a message: any association with dissenters shall result in expedited prosecution and imprisonment.

Even lawyers defending arrested opposition figures, among them Sunnis and secularists, have been arrested. Athletes, union workers, and employees of public and private companies have been fired en masse for protesting; students who criticize the government have been harassed; and villages around the country have been surrounded with tanks and checkpoints to terrify the populace. Reports continue of night raids into these villages and ensuing pre-dawn arrests and disappearances. Such draconian and violent responses are intended to not only stop the protests, but, more importantly, to stamp out any and all future opposition.

To justify this disproportionate use of force, the government incessantly emphasizes Iran’s “influence” and “meddling” in local affairs. It undertakes actions designed to stoke sectarian

tensions to provoke a condemnation from Shi'a religious circles that can be used to “prove” Iranian involvement. Specifically, it has engaged in the following gross violations of social and political rights:

- Systematic destruction of Shi'a mosques, religious sites, and mourning halls;<sup>71</sup>
- Exclusion of Shi'a from public life, such as expelling them from government, trade groups, state companies, and even sports leagues;<sup>72</sup>
- Use of official media, including Bahrain TV, to depict the protesters as “saboteurs” and “terrorists” and to distinguish between Bahrainis and Shi'a (implying that Shi'a citizens are not really Bahraini);<sup>73</sup>
- Inaction as government-allied thugs enter and destroy private property in Shi'a villages;
- Raids on girls' schools and the harassment of female students, including those who have not protested;<sup>74</sup> and
- Banning of Bahrainis from traveling to countries with large Shi'a populations, such as Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>75</sup>

Pursuing a sectarian agenda in the region, even in a small country like Bahrain, has an adverse ripple effect in the broader Middle East. In response to Manama's deliberate attack on its Shi'a population, the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Iran is bolstering its waning popularity by exploiting the same narrative. Using this conflict to distract his discontented population from domestic economic problems has been particularly effective among the conservative rural population, who is more likely to sympathize with fellow Shi'as in other countries. By emphasizing this deliberate persecution, he is also able to galvanize support for his government's harsh crackdown on the Iranian pro-democracy movement. Ever since the pro-democracy protests in Bahrain began, Tehran has been suppressing protesters and prosecuting political leaders of the anti-government Green Movement in ways that would not have been politically possible in the past two years.

In Iraq and Lebanon, sectarian reconciliation is in jeopardy as certain members of Sunni and Shi'a political parties capitalize on the inflamed emotions among their adherents.<sup>76</sup> The formation

of stable governments in these countries is therefore being delayed, which only undermines the United States' security interests. Iran-allied elements in Baghdad have used Bahrain's conflict to deflect the growing criticism by local Sunni and Shi'a opposition groups of its ineptitude. In Lebanon, Shi'a and Sunni factions have used the conflict to speak in explicit sectarian terms eerily reminiscent of Lebanon's civil war. Such rhetoric is also likely to strengthen Hezbollah's position in that country.

Ultimately, this sectarian narrative is self-defeating. On May 21, just two days after President Obama's Arab Spring speech, unknown assailants attacked the home of democracy activist Nabeel Rajab.<sup>77</sup> Either the royal family is continuing to perpetuate violence, or worse, it is losing control of its forces and supporters as they violently attack protesters. Such vigilantism severely undermines the government's monopoly on power and the use of force, a development that destabilizes the country even further.

Accordingly, the United States should reassess its national security interests in Bahrain to reflect these on-the-ground realities. Accepting the official sectarian narrative at face value may turn out to be far more detrimental to American interests in the Middle East than anticipated. In sum, the issue has moved from normative or moral arguments in favor of protecting individual rights to the broader geopolitical cost of permitting one group to be persecuted because of its sectarian affiliation.

### **Foreign Intervention by Saudi Arabia Instead of Iran**

The Saudi monarchy watched in horror as one Arab dictator after another was deposed by a population demanding democracy. Fearing for its own rule, the Saudi royal family has gone to great lengths to quash the flames of revolution in hopes of avoiding a similar fate. It offered sanctuary for Tunisia's ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Bin Ali and committed itself to replacing any aid that the United States threatened to withhold from Egypt for its human rights violations.

Soon realizing that the Obama administration would not support, either politically or militarily, a violent crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrators in neighboring countries,<sup>78</sup> Riyadh took events into its own hands by intervening directly in the internal affairs of Bahrain and other Gulf countries. It also torpedoed American efforts to dissuade Manama from launching a military crackdown.<sup>79</sup> In exchange for financial support designed to offset any economic damage caused by the violent crackdown, it was given carte blanche to bring in its troops

and systematically crush the pro-democracy movement. The Saudi-lead Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) laid the political groundwork for Saudi and Emirati intervention by accusing Iran of foreign intervention.<sup>80</sup> Fearing that the movement would spread within its borders, Saudi troops were ordered to quash it in its tracks; Manama vowed that the Saudi forces would not leave until the “threat to Gulf Arab countries from nearby Shi’ite power Iran was over.”<sup>81</sup>

This deployment corroborates the Bahraini opposition’s fears of Saudi intervention.<sup>82</sup> The royal family, with full Saudi backing, rebuffed the subsequent Kuwaiti and Qatari offers to mediate. Most notably, the posters on Bahrain’s streets that once showed the picture of the king, the prime minister, and the crown prince now show the king next to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, clearly signifying Saudi influence. To further challenge the United States’ ability to support democracy in the region, Saudi Arabia has invited Jordan, Morocco, and other Arab monarchies to join the GCC and adopt its aggressive crackdown on pro-democracy movements. It is pledging enormous resources to GCC members to help them counter any popular uprising that seeks to depose either authoritarian political leaders or monarchies.

Notwithstanding this intervention, Washington still wields enormous influence in Bahrain. When the country’s security forces initially backed down from a violent crackdown, protesters cried out for American, not Iranian, help. When the police pulled back and allowed the protesters to retake their stronghold in Pearl Roundabout, the United States received most of the credit. And when Saudi troops entered the country and violently suppressed the protesters, many of the latter saw an implicit green light to do so from the United States.<sup>83</sup>

Bahrain, a key American ally, sits strategically in the Gulf just miles away from Iran. Until recently, its people viewed the United States as a model of modernity, technological advancement, and democracy. However, Washington’s restraint from supporting democracy in Bahrain, through both its actions and its words, has eroded its credibility in Bahrain and its influence in the region. The Obama administration’s pro-democracy policies in Pakistan, Tunisia, Egypt, and other allied countries should also be applied to Bahrain. The administration has endorsed dialogue, but it must go significantly beyond that if it wants to promote democracy as well as protect its interests in the region. The peaceful opposition cannot negotiate with a gun to its head and a significant number of its members in detention.

## The Way Forward

If nothing else, the ongoing pro-democracy revolutions in the Middle East make one thing clear: supporting authoritarian regimes there is no longer an option. Quite the contrary, doing so only leads to instability as the population becomes a powder keg just waiting to explode at the most unpredictable moment. Arabs across the region have categorically rejected the traditional reason for supporting dictators: it is a necessary evil to maintain American interests. Accordingly, American foreign policy officials must come to terms with the fact that meaningful democracy for Arabs is in the best interest of the United States over the long run.

While democracy in the Middle East may not guarantee the hegemony that some American officials seek, it is more likely to produce nations whose commitments are kept because they are based on the will of their people. As opposed to relying on the fragility of coerced cooperation, democratically run Arab countries will become more reliable allies, ones that act on the basis of mutual national interests. Over the long run, America will save trillions of dollars by avoiding unnecessary wars and bribes to dictators who forcibly deny their populations the rights to dissent, contribute toward economic development, and define their society based on fluid and evolving values within a globalized world. Moreover, a free media, a vibrant civil society, active trade associations, and an engaged citizenry will ensure that dictators are not replaced by religious or secular extremists.

Meanwhile, the region's American allies are openly challenging its support for democracy. Saudi Arabia, for example, has already shown it is willing to go to extreme lengths to quash the spread of pro-democracy uprisings, particularly in its own neighborhood. As demonstrated in Bahrain, the Saudi monarchy provides significant economic assistance and military resources to those Arab regimes that crackdown violently on their restive populations. But despite these enticements, the Arab world's royal families pay close attention to the United States' position. While it is unlikely that the United States can or, for that matter, should unilaterally transform these monarchies into full-fledged democratic nations, its action-based support for universal democratic freedoms favorably influences the realization of much needed political reforms.

Recently, Washington and London welcomed speeches, notably highlighted only in the English-language press, and gestures by Manama toward engaging in dialogue with the opposition. In particular, Washington expressed support for Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad's diplomatic efforts to salvage the country's reputation and revive the dialogue process in order

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to somehow resolve the crisis.<sup>84</sup> However, Bahrain's Arabic-language media carried no words of reconciliation. On the contrary, the crackdown has actually intensified as more opposition figures are being harassed, tortured, detained, and sentenced to decades in prison. According to the government's own sources, the only change in its behavior came after President Obama's Arab Spring speech, in which he specifically condemned the destruction of Shi'a mosques in Bahrain.<sup>85</sup> Soon thereafter, Manama ceased this particular campaign. American officials should be wary of the Bahraini government's lofty rhetoric, for it seeks to create the false impression of official engagement vis-à-vis reconciliation and dialogue with the people.

Some diplomats proffer that supporting reformers within the royal family may bolster the chances of convincing the hardliners to back down and accept the reform process.<sup>86</sup> The problem with this reasoning is that in a tribal society it is highly unlikely that a family member, let alone a royal family member, will place the people's political and commercial interests above those of the family. In Bahrain, the political and commercial interests of each royal family member are intimately intertwined via very close familial and tribal alliances. Thus neither the king nor the crown prince can appear to side with the demonstrators against the prime minister, who happens to be the king's uncle. Hence a divide and conquer strategy that pits the royal family's reformers against its hardliners is likely to fail. Instead, Washington should adopt a systemic approach that makes it in the best interest of the royal family as a whole to engage in meaningful dialogue in order to address the demonstrators' legitimate grievances.

In the end, a long-term strategy should transcend engaging with individuals within the royal family by engaging with Bahraini society as a whole. The Obama administration must be clear and explicit about its expectations of the Bahraini government so that it cannot claim, as it has done repeatedly in Bahrain's state-controlled Arabic-language press, that Washington implicitly approves its aggressive crackdown.

Accordingly, Washington should:

- Reaffirm its commitment to Bahrain's territorial integrity and right to be free from interference of any neighboring country, whether Arab (e.g., Saudi Arabia) or non-Arab (e.g., Iran);

- Encourage a multilateral dialogue between the government and secular and religious opposition figures to peacefully address the citizenry's grievances;
- Review its 2006 Free Trade Pact with Bahrain to determine if the ongoing human rights violations merit its suspension or termination<sup>87</sup>;
- Alter the supply chain for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which is based in Bahrain, to make it in the best interest of the highly influential merchant class to support democracy in Bahrain. Bahraini suppliers should also have effective non-discrimination policies and reflect the country's diversity;
- Endorse, as a starting point for reform, the agenda presented by the crown prince and accepted by Al-Wifaq, which includes a representative parliament and cabinet, fair election districts, and serious discussions of ethnic naturalization, corruption, and sectarian tension;
- Meet with opposition MPs and other elected officials, including those currently in jail;
- Demand that detained opposition figures and political prisoners, particularly elected MPs, be released from jail immediately, granted due process rights in a civil court of law, and receive competent defense counsel;
- Call on Manama to lift its restrictions on the media, including the Internet, and guarantee the freedom of the press;
- Send independent observers to attend the trials of protesters and opposition members to ensure that they are given a fair trial with due process rights;
- Call on Manama to implement its earlier commitments to allow human rights monitors access to the country's villages and detention centers; and
- Support those trying to establish the rule of law as well as an independent judiciary, and those seeking to abolish emergency law so that individual rights can be enforced.

Bahrain has reached the tipping point in its transition to a more democratic nation. Despite the ongoing state-sponsored violence, both Shi'a and Sunni Bahrainis will regroup, reassess, and continue to demand their human rights until they finally succeed – whether in this generation or the next. And, the new leaders will take note of the United States' role and respond accordingly. Therefore supporting reform in Bahrain and democracy in the Middle East is no longer a lofty ideal; it is in the United States' national interest.

## Endnotes

1. Sahar Aziz is a legal fellow at the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, an associate professor of law at Texas Wesleyan University School of Law (fall 2011), and has served as a senior policy advisor at the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. She holds an M.A. in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Texas. Ms. Aziz dedicates this report to the Bahraini people who inspired her with their generosity, kindness, and love for their country during her visits to Bahrain. Special thanks are also due to Danielle Jefferis for her excellent research assistance.
2. Abdullah Musalem holds degrees in sociology as well as Middle Eastern language and cultures. Mr. Musalem grew up in Bahrain, where he has conducted social research, and has been a frequent visitor to the country over the past decade. During his visits, he kept in touch with local human rights activists. He has continued to monitor Bahrain's political and social progress since the current wave of protests broke out.
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