

American Foreign Policy Council

BAHRAIN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,378,904 (estimated WHEN)

Area: 760 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bahraini 46%, non-Bahraini 54%

Religions: Muslim (Sunni and Shi'a) 70.3%, Christian 14.5%, other 15.2%

Government Type: Constitutional Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$31.82 billion (estimated 2015)

Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Bahrain has traditionally been something of an anomaly among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. While its ruling al-Khalifa family and as much as 30 percent of its population are Sunni Muslims, a substantial majority of its citizens are Shi'ites. One of the first major oil exporters in the region, it was also the first of the Gulf "oil sheikhdoms" to face significant depletion of its petroleum reserves and the need to develop a non-resource-based economy. Further, although it has never been close to qualifying as a truly free country, Bahrain stands apart from other Gulf states in its relatively high degree of social and cultural openness: the sale and consumption of alcohol are permitted; discos, movie theaters, and labor unions are allowed; freedom of worship is respected; the press was, until recently, somewhat free; the NGO sector is active (albeit regulated and constrained); and, at times, there has even been a significant—albeit limited—degree of democracy. However, freedom of the press, latitude for NGOs to operate, and what elements of democracy existed in the past are all currently under threat.¹

While political parties are officially banned in Bahrain, an assortment of “political societies,” most of them sectarian and Islamist, field slates of candidates for legislative elections, and in general function as political parties in all but name. The royal family has attempted to preserve Bahrain’s stability (and their rule) by pitting Shi’ites against Sunnis and Islamists against secularists, and until the onset of the “Arab Spring” this strategy generally worked rather well.

Islamism in Bahrain has traditionally maintained an almost exclusively domestic focus, largely directed at confronting economic and morality issues through political action rather than violence. There are indications, however, that this relatively peaceful type of Islamism may be giving way, at least in part, to more violent forms: while in the past only a few Bahrainis traveled overseas to join in jihad, and some others were involved in providing financial or logistical support for al-Qaeda, there are now accusations that Bahrainis have joined ISIS, received combat training, and attempted to form local terrorist cells.² Shi’ite attacks on Bahraini security forces also show signs of increasing sophistication.³ While the presence of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain would appear to make the country an attractive target for anti-American terrorism, neither Bahrain’s government nor its traditional Islamists appear ready to condone or facilitate such attacks. However, if ISIS succeeds in creating a local infrastructure in Bahrain, U.S. facilities and personnel could find themselves at risk.

Sadly, since the “Arab Spring” protests began in February 2011, Bahrain has become less of a happy exception and more of a typical example of Middle Eastern despotism. The Bahraini government’s response to the protests often consisted of brutal repression, coupled with occasional promises of a reconciliation dialogue that became less and less convincing over the succeeding years.^{4,5} As of late 2016, Bahrain seems locked in an uneasy stasis, with attitudes among both Sunni and Shi’ite residents hardened to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine how the country can resume even the semblance of a functioning democracy. Bahrain’s domestic impasse, along with events in nearby countries, will strengthen the appeal and extremism of both Sunni and Shi’a Islamist forces. And despite the country’s tiny size, the failure of major powers and international organizations to exert effective pressure on the Bahraini government to reform has had significant regional implications.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Bahrain's majority Shi'ite population is significantly poorer than its Sunni minority counterpart, and complains of discrimination in employment (particularly with regard to senior-level government and security-service jobs—a significant issue given the government's dominant status as an employer, not to mention the importance such jobs have in influencing the nature of life in Bahrain), housing, immigration policy, and government services. Accordingly, the Shi'ite opposition—which is almost entirely Islamist in character—has an agenda largely based around the attempt to redress these inequalities, in addition to more traditional Islamist goals such as the imposition of *sharia* law. The political and economic goals of the Shi'ite opposition include:

- Genuine democracy, in which the Shi'ite community, as the majority population, would have a much greater say in legislating and setting policy. This would necessitate the rewriting of Bahrain's constitution, as well as revising an electoral-district system that favors Sunni candidates.⁶
- The dismantling, or at least a substantial weakening, of Bahrain's internal-security apparatus, and the release of political prisoners.
- Economic justice, including equality of opportunity in employment and equal provision of government services.
- Equal access to positions of authority in the government bureaucracy and the military/security services.
- An end to Bahrain's policy of facilitating Sunni immigration, which is perceived as a governmental effort to reduce or eliminate the Shi'ite demographic advantage. (Participants in the February 2011 demonstrations noted that many of the security personnel confronting them were immigrants from other Arab countries, and even Urdu-speaking Pakistanis, who had been granted Bahraini citizenship as an inducement to serve in the Bahraini security services.)⁷
- Traditional Islamist moral and social issues, such as the elimination of alcohol, prostitution, and other evils from the kingdom, the application of *sharia* law, etc.

It is worth noting that most Bahraini Shi'ites are adherents of the *Akhbari* school of Twelver Shi'ism, as opposed to Iranian Shi'ites (and most Iraqi Shi'ites), who are members of the more common *Usuli* Twelver faction. Among other differences, *Akhbaris* believe that while clerics can and should advise political leaders, they should not seek or be given direct political power. As *Akhbaris*, Bahraini Shi'ites traditionally claimed that they were loyal to the state and to its ruling family, seeking change within the system rather than wanting to overthrow it.⁸ The Bahraini Shi'ite community does not have its own *marja* ("source of emulation") or any other religious figure of

sufficient stature to constitute a Khomeini-style threat to the Bahraini establishment. However, the Bahraini government's heavy-handed response to Shi'ite protests and political activism has significantly radicalized Shi'ite political discourse, to the extent that overt calls for the overthrow of the monarchy are now common.⁹

Despite the Shi'ite community's past assertions of loyalty to Bahrain and its governing family (if not to its Constitution, which provides some semblance of democracy but effectively leaves the monarchy and the Sunni minority in firm control of the country), many Bahraini Sunnis have long accused the Shi'ites of being suspiciously close, culturally and politically, to Iran; the fact that Bahraini Shi'ite clerics are often trained in Iran adds some credibility to this accusation. Shi'ites have often responded by pointing out that many Bahraini Sunnis have just as much cultural connection to Iran, and that quite a few of these Sunnis in fact speak Farsi, rather than Arabic, at home. The ongoing government repression of Bahraini Shi'ites, as well as Bahrain's participation in the Saudi-led campaign against the Shi'ite Houthi in Yemen, have increased the community's identification with Iran, as well as Iranians' feelings of solidarity with Bahraini Shi'ites.¹⁰

The Bahraini government and others in the Sunni elite, as well as outside commentators concerned about Iranian influence in the region, have repeatedly claimed that Shi'ite unrest in Bahrain is the product of Iranian scheming, aided by allies and proxies such as Syria and Hezbollah. At first glance, such accusations are plausible: Iran is certainly not averse to meddling in other countries' affairs, and Iranian officials occasionally reassert their country's historical claim on Bahrain as Iranian territory.¹¹ However, little to no concrete, convincing evidence has ever been produced to back these claims of Iranian interference; and neutral observers have pointed out that Shi'ite unrest can be quite adequately explained by the genuine grievances of Bahraini Shi'ites.¹² The protests that began in February 2011 did not strengthen the case for an Iranian conspiracy to destabilize Bahrain; nothing in the protestors' goals, capabilities, or tactics at that time was inconsistent with what would be expected from an entirely domestic movement.¹³ The use of more sophisticated explosives in recent Shi'ite attacks does, however, strengthen the case for Iranian involvement, if not instigation.¹⁴

Ultimately, as long as Bahrain's Shi'ites are kept relatively powerless, there is no way to validate their claims of loyalty to the country and its al-Khalifa rulers; and no matter how enthusiastically Shi'ite demonstrators wave Bahraini flags, many Bahraini Sunnis will continue to believe that the country's Shi'ites are, at best, a potential pro-Iranian fifth column. Even if Bahrain's Shi'ites are sincere in their expressions of patriotism, there is no question that, should they achieve significant political power, Iran will view Bahrain as "low-hanging fruit" and likely attempt to gain their allegiance;¹⁵ In any case, the Bahraini government seems intent on doing everything in its power to destroy whatever loyalty the country's Shi'ites still have to the ruling regime.

Shi'ite Organizations

The most prominent Bahraini Shi'ite political "society" is the *al-Wefaq* National Islamic Society (*Jam'iyyat al-Wifāq al-Watānī al-Islāmīyah*, also known as the Islamic National Accord Association), led by Qom-educated cleric Sheikh Ali Salman, with at least 1,500 active members.¹⁶ (Salman himself is considered a "mid-level" cleric. Bahrain's most prominent Shi'a cleric, Ayatollah Isa Qassim, himself a disciple of Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is generally considered *al-Wefaq's* spiritual leader, although this is not an official position; in 2005 he publicly endorsed the group's decision to register as a "political society" and enter the Council of Representatives.¹⁷) After boycotting the 2002 elections to protest the new constitution's failure to provide a fully democratic constitutional monarchy, *al-Wefaq* decided to compete in the 2006 elections, and scored a resounding success: out of 17 candidates fielded by the group, 16 won their districts outright in the first round of voting (and the 17th candidate won his seat in a second-round run-off), making *al-Wefaq* by far the largest bloc in the Council of Representatives.¹⁸ The group repeated this success in the 2010 elections, winning all 18 seats it contested; and were the Bahraini electoral system not gerrymandered to favor Sunni candidates, there is little question that, given the country's demographics, *al-Wefaq* would have easily won a commanding majority of the Council's 40 seats.¹⁹

Until the 2011 Arab Spring protests and the government's violent response to them, *al-Wefaq* had consistently positioned itself as a loyal opposition, working to achieve equality for Bahraini Shi'ites while maintaining allegiance to Bahrain and its monarchy, if not to the current Constitution and Cabinet. This stance has since largely evaporated. All 18 *al-Wefaq* members of the Council of Representatives resigned in protest in early 2011, and the group's leaders initially refused to enter a dialogue with the government until Prime Minister Khalifa al-Khalifa, perceived to be the primary driving force behind the marginalization of Bahraini Shi'ites, was replaced.²⁰ *Al-Wefaq*, partly in response to American and British persuasion, did agree to participate in a government-organized "national consensus dialogue" that began in July 2011; but the group's representatives walked out about a week later, frustrated at the allocation of only 25 out of 300 seats to the opposition, and the failure of the "dialogue" effectively to address Shi'ite grievances.²¹

Al-Wefaq, along with the rest of the opposition, boycotted the September-October 2011 by-election called to fill the seats it had vacated.²² Protests were violently suppressed,²³ and, despite government claims backed by some rather odd mathematics,²⁴ the vast majority of Shi'ite voters obeyed calls to boycott the vote.²⁵ With no opposition representation, the Council of Representatives could no longer claim to provide even a skewed representation of the citizens of Bahrain. Matters did not improve with the next elections in 2014, when *Al-Wefaq*, along with other opposition groups, boycotted the vote.²⁶

In 2016, the government significantly escalated its conflict with *al-Wefaq*, first suspending its activities and freezing its funds, and then in July ordering the organization dissolved and its assets turned over to the national treasury.²⁷ Ayatollah Isa Qasim was accused of financial misdeeds²⁸ and stripped of his citizenship,²⁹ and Sheikh Ali Salman and other leaders of the group were imprisoned.³⁰ Most recently, Salman's prison sentence (which had previously been increased from four to nine years—the charge being “inciting hatred, promoting disobedience and insulting public institutions”³¹) was overturned, and he will face retrial for “inciting hatred and calling for forceful regime change.”³² The U.S. and other Western powers condemned the suppression of *al-Wefaq*, but Bahraini authorities were unmoved.³³

Al-Wefaq's main competition for the loyalty of Bahraini Shi'ites is the *Haq* Movement for Liberty and Democracy, founded in 2005 by a group consisting mostly of *al-Wefaq's* more radical leaders, who objected to *al-Wefaq's* decision to participate in the 2006 elections and thus grant an appearance of legitimacy to Bahrain's quasi-democratic constitution. *Haq's* agenda is more specifically targeted at achieving full democracy, and the group is less identified with morality issues and Shi'ite sectarianism than its parent movement; in fact, one of *Haq's* leaders, Sheikh Isa Abdullah Al Jowder (who died in September 2011), was a Sunni cleric, and another founder (who eventually left the movement³⁴), Ali Qasim Rabea, is a secular leftist-nationalist.³⁵ Nonetheless, *Haq* is generally thought of as both Shi'a and Islamist, even though its leader, Hasan Mushaima, is a layman and the group is not endorsed by any senior Bahraini Shi'ite cleric.³⁶

Haq has unquestionably benefited from the breakdown in the relationship between the Bahraini government and Bahraini Shi'ites, since—unlike *al-Wefaq*—*Haq* never invested its credibility in a political process that it perceived (and loudly denounced) as inherently unfair and dishonest. (In fact, *Haq* has consistently refused even to register as an official “political society,”³⁷ even though its rejectionist record is not absolute: Mushaima met with King Hamad in London in March, 2008.³⁸) While *al-Wefaq* spent four years in the Council of Representatives ineffectually working for the Shi'ite community's interests, *Haq* (or, at least, groups of young Shi'ites apparently inspired by low-level *Haq* activists) was out on the streets throwing rocks at the police,³⁹ and *Haq* itself was submitting petitions to the United Nations and the United States calling for condemnation of the Bahraini government.⁴⁰ While the rocks and petitions accomplished no more at the time than did *al-Wefaq's* political maneuvering, they established *Haq* as a genuine “fighting opposition”—one respected by Shi'ites and feared (and persecuted) by the Bahraini government. The fact that *Haq* leaders Hasan Mushaima and Abdeljalil al-Singace were among the opposition leaders imprisoned by the government in the aftermath of the 2011 protests only reinforced the movement's credibility.⁴¹

As part of the Bahraini government's efforts to confront *Haq*, officials have accused the organization's leaders of being in the pay of Iran, either directly or through Hez-

ollah intermediaries. While it is very difficult to prove that such a relationship does not exist, and many in the Sunni community take it as an article of faith that Bahraini Shi'ites are more loyal to Iran than to Bahrain, disinterested observers, including the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain, have pointed out that no convincing evidence has ever been produced to back these accusations.⁴²

Haq Secretary General Hasan Mushaima (one of the founders of *al-Wefaq*, who left that group to co-found *Haq*) returned to Bahrain from Great Britain in late February 2011 to a “rapturous” welcome; he had previously been charged and tried in absentia for conspiring against the government, but the charges against him were dropped as part of a package of government concessions aimed at establishing a dialogue with the Bahraini opposition.⁴³ Upon his return, Mushaima attempted, together with other opposition leaders, to formulate a unified platform of demands and expectations.⁴⁴ As the government crackdown continued, Mushaima was again brought to trial and imprisoned, along with many other protest leaders.⁴⁵

A third Shi'ite opposition movement, *Wafa'* (“Loyalty”), was founded in early 2009 by Abdulwahab Hussain, a cleric who had been a leading Shi'a activist in the 1990s and a co-founder of *al-Wefaq*. Unlike *Haq*, *Wafa'* enjoys the open backing of senior cleric (and rival of Ayatollah Isa Qassim) Sheikh Abduljalil al-Maqdad. And unlike *al-Wefaq*, *Wafa'* has consistently and firmly opposed participation in Bahrain's quasi-democratic constitutional government.

The period when *Haq* leader Hasan Mushaima was in a brief self-imposed exile should have presented something of an opportunity for *Wafa'* to attract support from Shi'a rejectionists. However, despite the fact that *Wafa'* has the clerical backing *Haq* lacks and has credible, experienced leadership, it does not appear so far to have gained much traction among Bahraini Shi'ites. Now that Hasan Mushaima has returned to Bahrain (and is unlikely to be able to leave any time soon) and *al-Wefaq* has quit the Council of Representatives, *Wafa'* is likely to have a great deal of difficulty finding a meaningful niche for itself in Bahraini Shi'ite politics.⁴⁶

Yet another rejectionist Shi'ite Islamist “political society” is Amal (the “Islamic Action Society,” *Jam'iyyat al-Amal al-Islami*, also referred to by Bahrainis as “the Shirazi faction”). This group is “the non-violent heir to the defunct Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which launched a failed uprising in 1981 inspired by Iran's Islamic revolution.”⁴⁷ *Amal* refused to register as a “legal” faction before the 2002 election, did not win any seats in the 2006 election,⁴⁸ and decided not to participate in the 2010 election. The society's Secretary General, Sheikh Mohammed al-Mahfooth, justified this decision by citing the usual objections to Bahrain's political system, claiming that “[W]e don't want to just be employees... the members of parliament are just employees who get a big salary.”⁴⁹ (It is not entirely clear, however, if Sheikh al-Mahfooth's feelings would have been the same had there been a significant likelihood

of his actually becoming one of these “employees.”) *Amal* was apparently considered enough of a threat to the Bahraini government that the movement was effectively shut down in July 2012.⁵⁰

The challenge for the official organized Shi’ite opposition (both legal and illegal), as well as for leaders of the young, self-organizing protestors (known for using Twitter and social media) and the leftist secular organizations that have joined the anti-government protests, was to agree on a set of demands that were ambitious enough to maintain the enthusiasm of the protestors (and, of course, to offer a realistic hope of solving the genuine problems facing Bahraini Shi’ites) but could also be palatable to Bahrain’s ruling family and its Sunni allies.⁵¹ This challenge has only become more intractable as the conflict has drawn on.

Sunni Organizations

Unlike the majority Shi’ites, Bahrain’s Sunni community is not overwhelmingly Islamist in its beliefs. This means that Sunni Islamist “political societies” must compete with secular groups and independent candidates for voter support. Further, Sunni Islamist groups are constrained in their ambitions by Bahrain’s demographic and economic situation: because Sunnis are a relatively wealthy, privileged minority, Sunni Islamists do not join their Shi’ite colleagues in calling for genuine democratic reform (which would effectively disempower Sunni politicians and their supporters), and⁵²—while they may aspire to “increase the standard of living for Bahrainis; strengthen political, social and economic stability; and enhance financial and administrative oversight of the government and industry”—they quite understandably do not agitate for fully equal opportunity for Bahrain’s Shi’ites. Because the American military presence contributes to Bahrain’s economy and provides a bulwark against supposed Iranian designs on their country, the mainstream Sunni Islamist groups do not oppose the presence of the infidels on Bahrain’s territory.

In short, Bahrain’s organized Sunni Islamist “societies” have traditionally been seen as basically pro-government parties, working at times for incremental modifications to the status quo but not advocating full democracy or other large-scale, disruptive changes. Further, as the ongoing protests assumed an increasingly sectarian character, what goodwill and cooperation there was between Sunni and Shi’ite Islamists largely disappeared,⁵³ and the government used Sunni Islamists as a counter to Shi’ite agitation.

More recently, however, it appears that the relationship between local Sunni Islamists and Bahrain’s government may be becoming slightly less cozy, largely as a result of outside pressure. The Muslim Brotherhood, which has a branch in Bahrain, is increasingly seen by *status quo* Sunni-dominated states as an antagonist; and given its substantial dependency on Saudi and Emirati support, official Bahrain policy has little to no choice but to toe the line, or at least create some anti-Brotherhood atmospherics.⁵⁴

There are two principal Sunni Islamist “political societies” in Bahrain. The first is the *al-Menbar* National Islamic Society (*al-Minbar al-Islami*), the political wing of the al-Eslah Society, which is generally seen as Bahrain’s branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The second is the al-Asala Political Society, which in turn is the political wing of the Islamic Education Society (*al-Tarbiya al-Islamiya*), a conservative Salafist organization. *Al-Menbar* is the more liberal of the two Sunni Islamist parties, and has, for example, taken positions in favor of women’s rights.⁵⁵ However, this liberalism has its limits: in 2006 the group’s Council of Representatives members formed part of a bloc that prevented Bahrain from ratifying the government’s signature on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, on the basis that the Covenant would mean “that Muslims could convert to another religion, something against the Islamic law, since those who do so should be beheaded.”⁵⁶ *Al-Menbar* had promised to field several female candidates for the 2006 election, but as part of an electoral pact with *al-Asala*, which does not approve of women’s standing for political office, this pledge was dropped. Further, *al-Menbar*’s parent organization (with “support” from the Islamic Education Society) held a 2008 workshop opposing government efforts to promote gender equality.⁵⁷

Its association with al-Eslah, which runs a network of mosques, gives *al-Menbar* a solid social support base among Bahraini Sunnis. Furthermore, al-Eslah (and, by extension, al-Menbar) benefits from the official patronage of the Bahraini royal family (its President is Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed al-Khalifa), as well as from some of Bahrain’s largest businesses.⁵⁸ While charitable contributions to *al-Eslah* do not necessarily provide direct support for *al-Menbar*’s political activity, they unquestionably contribute to al-Eslah’s standing in society, and thus to al-Menbar’s credibility.

Al-Asala takes a harder line than *al-Menbar* on various issues. As noted above, *al-Asala* does not approve of fielding female candidates, and the group is, in general, opposed to Bahrain’s comparatively modern, freewheeling character. It has also taken positions opposed to U.S. military action in Iraq. Despite their differences, however, *al-Menbar* and *al-Asala* have often cooperated; and, like *al-Menbar*, *al-Asala* cannot be accurately described as an opposition “society” even though it dissents from some Bahraini government policies.

In the 2006 elections, *al-Menbar* and *al-Asala* agreed to divide the Sunni electoral districts between them in order not to compete with each other and split the Sunni Islamist vote.⁵⁹ This strategy worked well, with the two groups winning seven seats each.⁶⁰ In 2010, however, they failed to organize a similar arrangement. As a result, the two “societies” ran against each other in many districts, and the consequence was the loss of most of their seats. *Al-Menbar* won only two seats in the Council of Representatives, and *al-Asala* received just three.⁶¹ Furthermore, the Sunni Islamist “societies” lost two seats in the 2014 election, perhaps in part as a result of government redistricting.⁶²

Unsurprisingly, Sunni Islamist organizations have not participated in the anti-government demonstrations in Bahrain; if anything, they may have been one of the forces behind several pro-government rallies that took place while Bahrain's Shi'ites were protesting against government policies.⁶³ While these pro-government rallies were not openly acknowledged as *al-Menbar* or *al-Asala* events, there is no question that Bahrain's Sunnis consider Shi'ite protests to be a threat to their privileged situation, and Sunni "societies," like all political parties, need to be seen as promoting the interests of their constituents. Beyond any such cynical calculations, Sunni Islamists would be justifiably concerned that a Shi'ite-Islamist-governed Bahrain would be much less hospitable to Sunni practices and beliefs than a relatively liberal Sunni-dominated Bahrain—despite the latter's tolerance of various social vices. (It is also worth noting that these pro-government rallies may not have been quite the "spontaneous outpouring of affection" that they appeared to be; Bangladeshi expatriate workers claimed that they had been forced to participate.⁶⁴)

Traditionally, then, Sunni Islamists were seen as a "loyal opposition" to the al-Khalifa rulers of Bahrain, if they were properly considered an opposition at all; any more militant expressions of Sunni extremism were directed outward. There is now concern that Bahrainis drawn to fight for ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups in Syria may return to their country radicalized not only against Shi'ites, but also against the *status quo* in Bahrain.⁶⁵ The al-Khalifa regime is far enough from *sharia* compliance that it is easily classified as *kafir* (infidel) and thus in need of overthrow; it has been further pointed out that the government's policy of recruiting foreign Sunnis to join the security forces and receive Bahraini citizenship could ultimately backfire, as some of these recruits may be easily (or already) radicalized, and they are likely to lack any personal feelings of loyalty to the al-Khalifa family.⁶⁶ One irony in this situation is that while Bahrain is officially part of the international coalition fighting ISIS, those native-born Bahrainis joining the organization are typically from social strata close to the al-Khalifa monarchy.⁶⁷ To date, at least 24 Bahrainis have been accused of joining ISIS, and have been sentenced to prison and, in many cases, to loss of Bahraini citizenship;⁶⁸ but at the same time, the Bahraini government has failed to demonstrate consistent attitudes and policies to counter Sunni radicalization, apparently preferring to attempt to use it against Shi'ites while preventing it from becoming too much of a threat to the monarchy.⁶⁹

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

In addition to political activities, many of the established Islamist groups in Bahrain engage in conventional charitable and outreach work: supporting widows, orphans, and other poor people, operating mosques and providing religious education, and proselytizing for their particular brand of Islam. *Al-Eslah*, in particular, runs a large charitable enterprise, supported by corporate zakat as well as private contributions. Notably, *al-Eslah* has also made a number of prominent humanitarian contributions

to the Gaza Strip, including funding construction of a building at the Islamic University there in 2005 and sending five ambulances to Gaza in 2009.⁷⁰ The particular affinity of *al-Eslah* for aid to Gaza is explained by the fact that both *al-Eslah* and Hamas are offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood; Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, and the Islamic University there has been associated with Hamas since its founding. (In fact, the university was founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, ten years before he founded Hamas.)

As bitter rivals for political and economic power, Shi'ite and Sunni Islamists in Bahrain are not particularly comfortable cooperating, even when they agree. However, some issues are uncontroversial enough (at least within Islamist circles) that Shi'ite and Sunni leaders have joined forces to fight for their shared ideals, or at least have managed not to interfere with each others' efforts:

- While they have not been successful in completely banning the sale and consumption of alcohol in Bahrain, Islamists have done what they can to impose limits on drinking in the kingdom. Islamist organizations supported a government move to close bars in cheap hotels in 2009.⁷¹

- Horrified by reports that Manama had been ranked as one of the top ten “vice cities” in the world, Islamists have attempted to eliminate prostitution—either by banning female entertainers in cheap hotels or by attempting to prevent the issuance of visas to women from Russia, Thailand, Ethiopia, and China. (The latter measure, proposed by the *Salafist al-Asala* “society,” fell flat; even other Islamists in the Council of Representatives pointed out that it would cause diplomatic damage if passed, and probably not be very effective in any case.)⁷²

- In 2007, Islamist parliamentarians condemned a performance by Lebanese composer/oudist Marcel Khalife and Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad that was presented as part of a government-sponsored culture festival, complaining that it included “sleazy dance moves” that would “encourage debauchery.” It appears the show went ahead as planned.⁷³ A year later, the same Council members united again to attempt to ban a show by provocative Lebanese singer Haifa Wehbe; this show also went ahead, although Wehbe did tone down her act a bit in response.⁷⁴

- In late 2012, between 50 and 100 “hardline” Islamists protested U.S. celebrity Kim Kardashian’s visit to Bahrain to open a milkshake shop. Among the signs at the protest was one asserting that “[n]one of our customs and traditions allow us to receive stars of porn movies.” The government responded with tear gas.⁷⁵ (In fact, it is unclear whether the protesters in this case were Sunni or Shi'ite, or both. At the very least, one can say that there were no reports of Islamist pro-Kardashian demonstrations.)

Traditionally, Bahraini Sunnis and Shi'ites lived and worked together with minimal friction. However, the recent Shi'a protests and the Sunni government's response to

them (including, in at least some cases, Sunni vigilante participation)⁷⁶ have done a great deal to damage the relationship between the two communities. Within a week of the February 14, 2011 onset of Shi'ite protests, Sunnis had begun to mount counter-demonstrations,⁷⁷ and as the crisis continued, confrontations between Sunni and Shi'ite groups became more frequent and more violent. Some Sunni groups explicitly came out against government-Shi'ite dialogue, apparently preferring the *status quo* to a resolution they felt would favor Shi'ites over their own community.⁷⁸ Even assuming that a political settlement is someday reached between Bahrain's government and the organizations representing the Shi'ite majority, it is difficult to imagine that Bahrain's social atmosphere will quickly return to the comfortable *status quo ante*.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

After a turbulent period during the 1990s, the country's new king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, restored constitutional government in 2002. From then until January 2011, Bahrain's government was largely successful in channeling the energies of the country's Islamists into non-violent political activity rather than terrorism or major civil unrest. In accordance with the 2002 constitution, elections with universal suffrage are held every four years (most recently in November 2014) for the lower chamber of the National Assembly, the Council of Representatives (*Majlis an-nuwwab*); all members of the upper chamber, the Consultative Council (*Majlis al-shura*), are appointed by the King. Both chambers must approve any legislation, giving each one effective veto power over proposed laws. As a result, since the one national body that is democratically elected has such limited ability to accomplish anything against the wishes of the ruling establishment, Bahrain's version of democracy has never been entirely satisfactory to the majority of the country's citizens. Still, for a few years, even this limited form of democracy provided the people of Bahrain with a voice and hope for future improvement.

Nevertheless, Bahrain has retained most of the essential characteristics of traditional Gulf emirate governance. Real power is concentrated in the ruling al-Khalifa family, members of which occupy the most important governmental positions, including 20 of the country's 25 Cabinet seats.⁷⁹ The Prime Minister, Prince Khalifa ibn Sulman al-Khalifa, has held office since the country was granted independence in 1971, and is currently the world's longest-serving Prime Minister. He is the uncle of King Hamad, and is also thought to be one of the wealthiest people in Bahrain.⁸⁰ Even the Council of Representatives' ability to block legislation is not really much of a constraint on royal power; under the Constitution, the King retains the right to rule by royal decree, bypassing the legislature entirely.⁸¹

While the ongoing Shi'ite unrest in Bahrain has eclipsed most other news about Bahraini Islamism, earlier news stories paint a more complex picture of a government quite willing to work with Islamists to achieve its goals, but equally willing to take strong measures to limit the actions and influence of Islamist forces. The Bahraini

government is generally perceived as working against Islamism (or at least working to limit Islamists to minor victories while preserving Bahrain's modern, relatively open character). However, it is not above using Sunni Islamists as weapons against the Shi'ite community. In a 2006 report, the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development detailed a government effort led by Sheikh Ahmed bin Ateyatalla al-Khalifa to "manipulate the results of... elections, maintain sectarian distrust and division, and to ensure that Bahrain's Shi'as remain oppressed and disenfranchised." The initiative reportedly involved government payments to a number of individuals and NGOs, including both *al-Eslab/al-Menbar* and the Islamic Education Society/*al-Asala*. Among the tasks to be achieved by the various participants in this scheme were "running websites and Internet forums which foment sectarian hatred" and running "Sunni Conversion" and "Sectarian Switch" projects.⁸²

The foreign-policy implications of Islamism can sometimes create problems for the Bahraini government. *Al-Eslab's* affinity for the Gaza Strip has already been mentioned, and is harmless enough when it involves sending ambulances and other forms of aid there. But when, in late 2009, *al-Eslab* leader Sheikh Fareed Hadi gave a sermon condemning the Egyptian government for building a steel barricade across the Egypt-Gaza Strip border, Bahrain's government, not wishing to ruffle feathers, stepped in and suspended him from delivering further sermons. The eloquently-named "Bahraini Society to Resist Normalization with the Zionist Enemy" promptly objected, reminding Bahrain's government and citizens of "the dangers of Zionism and its drive to infiltrate Arab and Islamic societies and influence them."⁸³ Anti-Zionism continues to serve as one of the few factors uniting Bahraini Sunnis and Shi'ites: in the midst of the government's dissolution of *al-Wefaq*, the Shi'ite organization's Deputy Secretary General, Sheikh Hussein al-Daihi, found time to condemn the government's permission for an Israeli delegation to attend an international conference of the world soccer association FIFA to be held in Manama in May 2017.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, Bahrain is not usually considered a major source of *mujahideen*, terrorists, or financial/logistical support for overseas *jihad* in its various forms. Much of this is probably due to the fact that Sunni Bahrainis are neither especially impoverished nor exposed to the more radical forms of *Wahhabi* Islamic fundamentalism—and, of course, they are also not very numerous. Still, a number of Bahrainis have traveled abroad to participate in *jihad*. One, Khalil Janahi, was arrested by Saudi authorities in the course of his religious studies in Riyadh, and was accused of being one of a group of 172 al-Qaeda militants planning "to storm Saudi prisons to free militants and attack oil refineries and public figures."⁸⁵ Another was royal family member Sheikh Salman Ebrahim Mohamed Ali al-Khalifa, who was captured near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and held by the United States in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as a Taliban/al-Qaeda supporter before eventually being released to return to Bahrain.⁸⁶ The Bahraini government is actively concerned about the trend toward increasing Sunni radicalization through participation in fighting abroad, as well as radicalization through the internet.

Inside Bahrain itself, the government has acted against individuals providing funding or other support to al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other radical Sunni organizations. For example, two men associated with a small *Salafist* movement known as “National Justice” were arrested in June 2008 for sending money to al-Qaeda; one was released shortly afterwards for lack of evidence,⁸⁷ and the other was among a group of prisoners officially pardoned in mid-2009.⁸⁸ Some other Bahrainis have been implicated in plots to support or engage in terrorism,⁸⁹ but until recently, the Bahraini government had far more serious problems dealing with domestic Shi’ite popular unrest than it does with the global jihad.

In the months leading up to the country’s 2010 elections, Bahrain’s government instituted a crackdown on many political organizations and news outlets, and vigorously suppressed demonstrations and civil unrest.⁹⁰ The ostensible justification was that Shi’ite opposition leaders were planning to lead a revolt against the government. In February 2011, Bahrain experienced a new and significant round of demonstrations and rioting by Shi’ite citizens, triggered by this apparent rollback of democratic reforms, and by the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. The beginning of the mass demonstrations also coincided with the February 14th anniversary of the restoration of constitutional government in 2002 and the referendum in 2001 that approved the new constitution.⁹¹

The government’s initial reaction to these demonstrations was an indecisive and unproductive vacillation between brutal suppression and attempts at conciliation. But after seven demonstrators had been killed and many more injured, Bahrain’s rulers decided to back down from lethal confrontation, and on February 19th began a concerted effort, led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, to de-escalate the crisis and promote a “national dialogue” to iron out a solution.⁹² At first, it appeared likely that such a dialogue would soon take place.⁹³ But Shi’ite leaders demanded substantial concessions before talks could begin, and when a dialogue was eventually begun in July 2011, its mechanism—apparently dictated by the hardline faction of the royal family—was clearly not intended to facilitate a genuine airing and resolution of Bahrain’s problems, and ended with no accomplishments.⁹⁴ Calls for dialogue continued to be made, but some six years after the beginning of the “Arab Spring,” it still seems impossible for the faction-ridden royal family, the disparate opposition, and loyalist groups to agree on conditions that would enable a meaningful and productive dialogue to take place.⁹⁵

Clearly, even once negotiations begin, they will be difficult; after years of protests, repression, torture,⁹⁶ mass dismissal of Shi’ites from their jobs,⁹⁷ revocation of citizenship,⁹⁸ and demolition of Shi’ite mosques,⁹⁹ there is very little good will or mutual trust between Bahrain’s Shi’ites and their government.¹⁰⁰

The Bahraini government has a number of factors in its favor as it attempts to maintain the *status quo*:

- It appears to have solid support from almost all members of the country's Sunni minority, which holds most economic power and controls all of Bahrain's security forces.

- It enjoys substantial outside support from neighboring Sunni states—particularly Saudi Arabia, which is concerned about the possibility of unrest or even rebellion by its own large Shi'ite minority and has a history of intervention to preserve Bahrain's Sunni regime. In March of 2012, a 1,500-strong force of Gulf Cooperation Council troops and policemen (which may in fact have been as large as 5000 or more men),¹⁰¹ headed by Saudi Arabia, entered Bahrain to assist government forces in restoring order. In all likelihood, the Saudis will quickly return at any time they (or the al-Khalifas) feel that the existing order is threatened.

- It is backed by the United States. Although the U.S. has been critical of the Bahraini government's more extreme measures to confront unrest, and has called for more democratic rule and better protection of human rights, Bahrain's importance as a naval base and the dangers a regime collapse would pose to other Persian Gulf governments give Washington little real maneuvering room.¹⁰² In the words of one anonymous U.S. official, Bahrain is "just too important to fail."¹⁰³

Nonetheless, it is clear that the Bahraini government has done tremendous damage to its own perceived legitimacy, both at home and abroad. While it would appear unlikely that the regime faces any real danger of being overthrown in the near future, it is equally true that unless it can find some way to regain the trust of the country's Shi'ite community, Bahrain's ruling class will have a difficult time maintaining long-term stability in an era of increasing democratization and rising expectations. Lastly, as the regional Sunni-Shi'a conflict has intensified, Bahrain's rulers face challenges even assuring the loyalty of their Sunni subjects.

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