Bahrain

Quick Facts

Population: 1,410,942 (July 2017 est.)

Area: 760 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Bahraini 46%, Asian 45.5%, other Arab 4.7%, African 1.6%, European 1%, other 1.2% (includes Gulf Co-operative country nationals, North and South Americans, and Oceanians) (2010 est.)

Government Type: Constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): $33.87 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated April 2018)

Introduction

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 Shiites. 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 traditionally stood apart from other Gulf states in its relatively high degree of social and cultural openness. Unfortunately, freedom of the press, latitude for NGOs to operate, and what elements of democracy existed in the past have been degraded in recent years, to the point where Bahrain is now considered one of the region's most repressive states.[1]

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] Shiite 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.

The Bahraini government's response to the Arab Spring 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] As of late 2017, Bahrain remains locked in an uneasy stasis, with attitudes among both Sunni and Shiite residents hardened to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine how the country

can resume even the semblance of a functioning democracy.[5] Bahrain's domestic impasse, along with the intensifying regional conflict between the Iran-led Shiite bloc and the Saudi-led Sunni bloc, will strengthen the appeal and extremism of both Sunni and Shia 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 Shiite 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 Shiite 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 Shiite opposition include:

- Genuine democracy, in which the Shiite 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 Shiite demographic advantage. (Participants in the country's 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 Shiites are adherents of the Akhbari school of Twelver Shi'ism, as opposed to Iranian Shiites (and most Iraqi Shiites), 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 Shiites 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 Shiite 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 Shiite protests and political activism has significantly radicalized Shiite political discourse, to the extent that overt calls for the overthrow of the monarchy are now common.[9]

Despite the Shiite 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 Shiites of being suspiciously close, culturally and politically, to Iran; the fact that Bahraini Shiite clerics are often trained in Iran adds some credibility to this accusation. Shiites 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 Shiites, as well as Bahrain's participation in the Saudi-led campaign against the Shiite Houthi in Yemen, have increased the community's identification with Iran, as well as Iranians' feelings of solidarity with Bahraini Shiites.[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 Shiite 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 Shiite unrest can be quite adequately explained by the genuine grievances of Bahraini Shiites.[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 Shiite attacks does, however, strengthen the case for Iranian involvement, if not instigation.[14]

Ultimately, as long as Bahrain's Shiites 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 Shiite demonstrators wave Bahraini flags, many Bahraini Sunnis will continue to believe that the country's Shiites are, at best, a potential pro-Iranian fifth column. Even if Bahrain's Shiites 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 Shiites still have to the ruling regime.

Shiite Organizations

The most prominent Bahraini Shiite political "society" is the al-Wefaq National Islamic Society (Jam'īyat al-Wifāq al-Watanī 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 Shia cleric, Ayatollah Isa Qassim, 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 Shiites 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 Shiites, 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 Shiite 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 Shiite 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 Qassim was accused of financial misdeeds[28] and stripped of his citizenship,[29] and Sheikh Ali Salman and other leaders of the group were imprisoned.[30] Al-Wefaq appealed this decision, but in February 2017 its appeal was rejected.[31] Ali Salman, already serving a nine-year prison sentence for "inciting hatred, promoting disobedience and insulting public institutions"[32] (apparently later changed to "inciting hatred and calling for forceful regime change,"[33]) was further accused in November 2017 of spying and colluding with Qatar to carry out "hostile acts" and "damage Bahrain's prestige."[34] The U.S. and other Western powers have condemned the suppression of al-Wefaq, but Bahraini authorities remain unmoved.[35] In May 2017, Ayatollah Qassim and two aides were convicted, fined, and given one-year suspended sentences;[36] two days later, a raid on his home town of Diraz to "maintain security and public order" resulted in the killing of at least five protestors and the arrest of several hundred.[37] The government promised an investigation of these killings;[38] but given the government's recent track record, it is unlikely that security forces will be held accountable, and "security and public order" in the town do not appear to have improved.[39]

Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy

Al-Wefaq's main competition for the loyalty of Bahraini Shiites 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 Shiite 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 movement)[40], Ali Qasim Rabea, is a secular leftist nationalist.[41] Nonetheless, Haq is generally thought of as both Shia and Islamist, even though its leader, Hasan Mushaima, is a layman and the group is not endorsed by any senior Bahraini Shiite cleric.[42]

Haq has unquestionably benefited from the breakdown in the relationship between the Bahraini government and Bahraini Shiites, 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,"[43] even though its rejectionist record is not absolute: Mushaima met with King Hamad in London in March, 2008).[44] While al-Wefaq spent four years in the Council of Representatives ineffectually working for the Shiite community's interests, Haq (or, at least, groups of young Shiites apparently inspired by low-level Haq activists) was out on the streets throwing rocks at the police,[45] and Haq itself was submitting petitions to the United Nations and the United

States calling for condemnation of the Bahraini government.[46] 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 Shiites 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.[47]

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 Hezbollah 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 Shiites 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.[48]

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.[49] Upon his return, Mushaima attempted, together with other opposition leaders, to formulate a unified platform of demands and expectations.[50] As the government crackdown continued, Mushaima was again brought to trial and imprisoned, along with many other protest leaders.[51]

Wafa'

A third Shiite opposition movement, Wafa' ("Loyalty"), was founded in early 2009 by Abdulwahab Hussain, a cleric who had been a leading Shia 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 Shia 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 Shiites. 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 Shiite politics.[52]

Amal

Yet another rejectionist Shiite 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."[53] Amal refused to register as a "legal" faction before the 2002 election, did not win any seats in the 2006 election,[54] and decided not to participate in the 2010 election. The society's Secretary General, Sheikh Mohammed al-Mahfoodh, justified this decision by citing the usual objections to Bahrain's political system, claiming that: "We don't want to just be employees... the members of parliament are just employees who get a big salary."[55] (It is not entirely clear, however, if Sheikh al-Mahfoodh'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.[56]

The challenge for the official organized Shiite 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 Shiites) but could also be palatable to Bahrain's ruling family and its Sunni allies.[57] This challenge has only become more intractable as the conflict has drawn on.

Sunni Organizations

Unlike the country's Shiite majority, 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 Shiite colleagues in calling for genuine democratic reform (which would effectively disempower Sunni politicians and their supporters). 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"[58], they do not agitate for fully equal opportunity for Bahrain's Shiites. 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 Shiite Islamists largely disappeared,[59] and the government used Sunni Islamists as a counter to Shiite 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.[60], This dilemma (for both the Bahraini government and Bahraini Sunni Islamists) became even more extreme in 2017, with Bahrain joining Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Sunni countries in an outright diplomatic break with Qatar—precipitated mostly by the latter's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.[61] The most viable outcome for both the local Sunni Islamists and the government is for both to continue to assert that while the local organizations may share the Brotherhood's foundational ideas and ideology, they are not in fact part of the international Brotherhood. This allows the two sides to support each other[62] even as the government loudly condemns the external Muslim Brotherhood.[63]

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.[64] 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."[65] 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.[66]

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.[67] 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.[68] This strategy worked well, with the two groups winning seven seats each.[69] 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.[70] Furthermore, the Sunni Islamist "societies" lost two seats in the 2014 election, perhaps in part as a result of government redistricting.[71]

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 Shiites were protesting against government policies.[72] 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 Shiite 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 Shiite-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.[73])

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 Shiites, but also against the status quo in Bahrain.[74] 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 are likely to lack any personal feelings of loyalty to the al-Khalifa family.[75] 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.[76] 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.[77] (As of 2017, there have also been at least some cases of foreign workers becoming radicalized in Bahrain and joining ISIS.[78]) 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 Shiites while preventing it from becoming too much of a threat to the

monarchy.[79]

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.[80] 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, that Hamas has ruled the Gaza Strip since 2007, and that the Islamic University there has been associated with Hamas since its founding. (In fact, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin founded the university, ten years before he founded Hamas.)

As bitter rivals for political and economic power, Shiite 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 Shiite 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 (two-star) hotels in 2009;[81] this partial ban was extended to three-star hotels in mid-2014, but "viral" social-media rumors in late 2017 that the ban was to be imposed on all hotels, along with a ban on hotel discos and night clubs, appear—at least as of early 2018—to be false.[82]
- 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.)[83]
- 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.[84] 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.[85]
- 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.[86] (In fact, it is unclear whether the protesters in this case were Sunni or Shiite, or both. At the very least, one can say that there were no reports of Islamist pro-Kardashian demonstrations.)

Traditionally, Bahraini Sunnis and Shiites lived and worked together with minimal friction. However, the recent Shia protests and the Sunni government's response to them (including, in at least some cases, Sunni vigilante participation)[87] have done a great deal to damage the relationship between the two communities. Within a week of the February 14, 2011 onset of Shiite protests, Sunnis had begun to mount

counter demonstrations,[88] and as the crisis continued, confrontations between Sunni and Shiite groups became more frequent and more violent. Some Sunni groups explicitly came out against government-Shiite dialogue; apparently preferring the status quo to a resolution they felt would favor Shiites over their own community.[89] Even assuming that a political settlement is someday reached between Bahrain's government and the organizations representing the Shiite majority, it is difficult to imagine that Bahrain's social atmosphere will quickly return to the comfortable status quo ante.[90]

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-Nuwab); 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.[91] 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.[92] 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.[93]

While the ongoing Shiite 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 Shiite 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 Shias remain oppressed and disenfranchised." The initiative reportedly involved government payments to a number of individuals and NGOs, including both al-Eslah/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.[94]

The foreign-policy implications of Islamism can sometimes create problems for the Bahraini government. Al-Eslah'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-Eslah 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."[95] Anti-Zionism continues to serve as one of the few factors uniting Bahraini Sunnis and Shiites: in the midst of the government's dissolution of al-Wefaq, the Shiite 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.[96]

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."[97] 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.[98] 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,[99] and the other was among a group of prisoners officially pardoned in mid-2009.[100] Some other Bahrainis have been implicated in plots to support or engage in terrorism,[101] but until recently, the Bahraini government had far more serious problems dealing with domestic Shiite 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.[102] The ostensible justification was that Shiite 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 Shiite 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.[103]

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.[104] At first, it appeared likely that such a dialogue would soon take place.[105] But Shiite 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.[106] Calls for dialogue continued to be made on occasion, but some seven 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.[107]

Clearly, even once negotiations begin, they will be difficult; after years of protests, repression, killings, torture,[108] mass dismissal of Shiites from their jobs,[109] revocation of citizenship,[110] and demolition of Shiite

mosques,[111] there is very little good will or mutual trust between Bahrain's Shiites and their government.[112]

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 Shiite 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),[113] 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 in the past 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.[114] In the words of one anonymous U.S. official, Bahrain is "just too important to fail;"[115] and the current U.S. administration does not appear to be strongly motivated to pressure Bahrain's government about human-rights abuses in any case.

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 Shiite community, Bahrain's ruling class will have a difficult time maintaining long-term stability when and if the conditions promoting outside support for the *status quo* change. Lastly, as the regional Sunni-Shia conflict has intensified, Bahrain's rulers may face challenges even assuring the loyalty of their Sunni subjects.

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