Bahrain

Quick Facts

Population: 1,505,003 (July 2020 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): $35.33 billion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)

Introduction

Bahrain is anomalous among the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Islamism in Bahrain is traditionally domestically focused, directed at confronting economic and morality issues through nonviolent political action. Although it has never even remotely qualified as "free," Bahrain offers a relatively high degree of social and cultural openness compared to other Gulf states. Unfortunately, freedom of the press, operational latitude for NGOs, and what elements of democracy existed in the past have been degraded in recent years, particularly since the Arab Spring-inspired protests of 2011. Bahrain is now considered one of the region's most repressive states.[1]

There are some indications, however, that Bahraini Islamism is becoming violent: while in the past only a few Bahrainis traveled abroad to join in jihad or supported al-Qaeda either financially or logistically, a number of citizens are known to have joined ISIS, received combat training, and attempted to form local terrorist cells in the recent past.[2] *Further, some observers believe that the regime's emphasis on sectarian divisions helps to spur Salafi jihadism, which is particularly hostile to Shi'a Islam.*[3] *Although today the regional focus on Syria may have receded, both anti-Shi'a sentiment and loyalist tendencies remain.*

At present, Bahrain remains locked in an uneasy stasis. Both the Sunni and Shiite residents of the country are now so cynical that it is difficult to imagine how it can pretend to run a functional democracy – especially since opposition blocs were prohibited from participating in the November 2018 polls.[4] *Bahrain's domestic impasse, along with the intensifying regional conflict between the Iran-led Shiite bloc and the Sunni one led by Saudi Arabia, may in turn strengthen Sunni and Shia Islamist forces in the country.*

Islamist Activity

While as much as 70 percent of Bahrain's citizens are Shiites,[5] this majority is significantly poorer than its Sunni counterpart. As a result, it complains of facing discrimination in employment (particularly with re-

gard to senior-level government and security-service jobs), housing, immigration policy, and government services. Accordingly, the Shiite opposition seeks to redress these inequalities while rhetorically mentioning more traditional Islamist goals. Its political and economic goals include:

- Genuine democracy, a system that would benefit the country's majority Shiite population.[6]
- The dismantling (or substantial weakening) of Bahrain's internal-security apparatus and the release of political prisoners.
- Economic justice, including equal access to employment and government services.
- An end to Bahrain's policy of facilitating Sunni immigration.
- Traditional Islamist beliefs like the elimination of alcohol, prostitution, and other evils from the kingdom and the application of *sharia* law.

Most Bahraini Shiites adhere to the Akhbari school of Twelver Shiism. Akhbaris believe that, while clerics should advise political leaders, they should not have direct power. Akhbaris traditionally claimed loyalty to the state and to its ruling family, seeking to change the system rather than overthrow it.[7] While the Bahraini Shiite community does not have its own *marja* (source of emulation) that represents a threat to the legitimacy of the Bahraini establishment, the Bahraini government's heavy-handed response to Shiite protests and political activism has radicalized Shiite political discourse.[8]

Despite the Shiite community's past assertions of loyalty to Bahrain and its governing family, many Bahraini Sunnis are suspicious that the country's Shiites maintain close cultural and political ties to Iran. The fact that Bahraini Shiite clerics are often trained in Iran adds credibility to this accusation, even though this arrangement is due at least partially to the lack of Shi'a clerical training facilities in Bahrain. The ongoing repression of Bahraini Shiites, as well as Bahrain's participation in the Saudi-led campaign against the Shiite Houthis in Yemen, have only increased the community's identification with Iran, and vice versa.[9]

The Bahraini government and others in the regional Sunni elite, as well as outside commentators concerned about Iranian influence, have repeatedly claimed that Shiite unrest in Bahrain is the product of Iranian scheming. Such accusations are plausible: Iran has a history of meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, and Iranian officials occasionally reassert their country's historical claim on Bahrain.[10] Further, the use of more sophisticated explosives in recent Shiite attacks does strengthen the case for Iranian involvement, if not instigation.[11] However, these claims are circumstantial in nature, and neutral observers point out that Bahraini Shiite unrest can likewise be explained by genuine domestic grievances.[12]

Even if Bahrain's Shi'a are sincere in their patriotism, Iran may attempt to gain their allegiance in the unlikely event that they achieve significant political power.[13] In any case, the Bahraini government seems intent on disintegrating any loyalty the country's Shiites may have to the Iranian regime, particularly as tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have risen in recent years.

Jam'īyat al-Wifāq al-Watanī al-Islāmīyah (the al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, also known as the Islamic National Accord Association)

The most prominent Bahraini Shiite political "society" is Jam'īyat al-Wifāq al-Watanī al-Islāmīyah, officially led by Qom-educated "mid-level" cleric Sheikh Ali Salman. Bahrain's most prominent Shi'a cleric, Ayatollah Isa Qassim, a disciple of Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is generally considered al-Wefaq's unofficial spiritual leader.[14] Al-Wefaq has at least 1,500 active members.[15]

After boycotting the 2002 elections to protest the new constitution's failure to adopt fully democratic values, al-Wefaq candidates competed in the 2006 elections. They won big; out of 17 candidates fielded by the group, 16 won their districts in the first round of voting and the 17th candidate won in a second-round run-off. This group represented the largest single-political bloc in the elected lower house

of the Bahraini legislature between 2006 and 2011, making it a target of government crackdown after these same representatives participated in the Arab Spring protests.[16] It aimed to unite "all the Shi'a Islamic currents under one banner" within Bahrain, eventually converting the country into a constitutional monarchy.[17] The group repeated this success in the 2010 elections, winning all 18 seats it contested. Were the Bahraini electoral system not gerrymandered to favor Sunni candidates, al-Wefaq would have easily won a commanding majority of the Council's 40 seats.[18]

Until the Arab Spring protests of 2011 and the government's violent response to them, al-Wefaq positioned itself as a loyal opposition. It worked to achieve equality for Bahraini Shiites while maintaining allegiance to the monarchy. However, this stance has 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 was replaced.[19] Al-Wefaq, partly in response to American and British persuasion, agreed to participate in a government-organized "national consensus dialogue" that began in July 2011; however, the group's representatives walked out when the opposition was allotted only 25 out of 300 seats and by the failure to address Shiite grievances.[20]

Al-Wefaq, along with the rest of the opposition, boycotted the 2011 and 2014 elections.[20] The vast majority of Shiite voters obeyed calls to boycott the vote,[21] and protests were violently suppressed with the help of Saudi GCC forces in March.[22] With no opposition representation, the Council of Representatives could no longer claim even a skewed representation.

In 2016, the government significantly escalated its conflict with al-Wefaq. It first suspended its activities and froze al-Wefaq's funds; then, in July, the government ordered al-Wefaq dissolved and its assets turned over to the national treasury.[23] Ayatollah Isa Qassim was accused of financial misdeeds[24] and stripped of his citizenship,[25] and Sheikh Ali Salman and other leaders of the group were imprisoned.[26] Al-Wefaq appealed this decision, but in February 2017 its appeal was rejected.[27] Ali Salman, already serving a nine-year prison sentence for "inciting hatred, promoting disobedience and insulting public institutions"[28] (later changed to "inciting hatred and calling for forceful regime change,"[29]) was accused of colluding with Qatar to carry out "hostile acts" and "damage Bahrain's prestige" in November 2017.[30]

The U.S. and other Western powers have condemned the suppression of al-Wefaq, but Bahraini authorities remain unmoved.[31] In May 2017, Ayatollah Qassim was convicted, fined, and given a one-year suspended sentence alongside two aides;[32] 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.[33] The government promised an investigation of these killings;[34] but it is unlikely that security forces will be held accountable. Meanwhile, "security and public order" in the town have not improved.[35] In May 2018, ahead of November's election, parliament approved a bill to bar members of al-Wefaq from contesting the polls, "due to their serious violations of the constitution and laws of the kingdom."[36] Since that time, the group continues to voice its opinions about the government, primarily online and from abroad, yet is largely inactive within Bahrain.

Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy

Al-Wefaq's main competition for the loyalty of Bahraini Shiites, prior to its dissolution, was the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy. The Haq Movement was founded in 2005, largely by al-Wefaq's more radical leaders, who objected to al-Wefaq's participation in the 2006 elections. Haq specifically hopes to institute full democracy and is less concerned with morality issues or Shiite sectarianism. 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),[37] Ali Qasim Rabea, is a secular leftist nationalist.[38] Nonetheless, Haq is considered both Shi'a and Islamist (despite receiving no endorsements from any senior Bahraini Shiite cleric) due to its support base.[39]

Haq has unquestionably benefited, in terms of popular support, from the breakdown of the relationship between the Bahraini government and Bahraini Shiites. Indeed, unlike al-Wefaq, Haq never invested its credibility in a political process which it considered inherently unequal. In fact, Haq has consistently refused to register as an official "political society."[40] While al-Wefaq spent four years in the Council of Representatives ineffectively working for the Shiite community's interests, Haq (or, at least, groups of young Shiites inspired by Haq) threw rocks at the police.[41] The group submitted petitions to the United Nations and the United States condemning the Bahraini government.[42] While the rocks and petitions accomplished no more than al-Wefaq's political maneuvering, they did establish Haq as a genuine opposition force. The fact that Haq leaders Hasan Mushaima and Abdeljalil al-Singace were among the opposition leaders imprisoned after the 2011 protests only reinforced the movement's credibility; both leaders have been sentenced to life in prison for plotting to overthrow the monarchy.[43] Following these arrests, Haq, like Wafa*'* (discussed in detail below), both of which refused to register officially under the Political Associations Law of 2005, were effectively dissolved.[44]

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 exist, and many in the Sunni community truly believe that Bahraini Shiites are more loyal to Iran than to Bahrain, observers have pointed out that no convincing evidence has ever been produced to back these accusations.[45]

Wafa' (Loyalty)

Wafa' was founded in early 2009 by Abdulwahab Hussain, a cleric and leading Shi'a activist in the 1990s and a co-founder of al-Wefaq. Unlike Haq, Wafa' is backed by senior cleric (and rival of Ayatollah Isa Qassim) Sheikh Abduljalil al-Maqdad. Wafa' has also resisted participating in Bahrain's quasi-democratic government.

Despite the fact that Wafa' has clerical backing and credible, experienced leadership, it never managed to gain much traction among Bahraini Shiites. Now that Hasan Mushaima has returned to Bahrain (where he is in prison) and al-Wefaq has quit the Council of Representatives, it will be difficult for Wafa' to find a meaningful niche in Bahraini Shiite politics.[46] It is unlikely that Wafa' will have a domestic political future with Abdulwahab Hussein, its leader, in prison for life and with the organization charged with housing a terrorist wing.[47]

Amal ("Islamic Action Society," Jam'iyyat al-Amal al-Islami, or "the Shirazi faction")

Amal is "the non-violent heir to the defunct Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), which launched a failed uprising in 1981 inspired by Iran's Islamic revolution."[48] In 1981, 60 members of the IFLB were accused of plotting against the ruling family and was accused of attempting similar attacks in the 1990s.[49] Amal refused to register for the 2002 election, won no seats in the 2006 election,[50] and did not participate in the 2010 election. The society's Secretary General, Sheikh Mohammed al-Mahfoodh, did not participate because Amal "[does not] want to just be employees... the members of parliament are just employees who get a big salary."[51] Amal was effectively shut down in July 2012 after some 200 of its members were arrested.[52]

Sunni organizations

Bahrain's Sunni community is not overwhelmingly Islamist in its beliefs. Indeed, Sunni Islamist groups compete with secular organizations and independent candidates for voter support. Moreover, because Sunnis are a relatively wealthy, privileged minority, Sunni Islamists do not join in calls 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,"[53] they do not agitate

for a fully democratic system. Because the American military presence contributes to Bahrain's economy and rebuffs supposed Iranian influence, mainstream Sunni Islamist groups do not oppose the presence of the American Fifth Fleet on Bahrain's territory.

In short, Bahrain's organized Sunni Islamist groups (including the two principal Sunni-Islamist political societies in Bahrain, al-Menbar al-Islami – the political wing of the al-Eslah Society and what is generally considered Bahrain's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood – and the al-Asala Political Society – the political wing of al-Tarbiya al-Islamiya, a conservative Salafist organization) – are seen as pro-government parties that work to incrementally modify the *status quo* while not advocating full democracy or other large-scale, disruptive changes.

The government, however, has used Sunni Islamists to counter Shiite agitation, even fostering cross-Sunni Islamist cooperation among the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis to provide a counterweight to Shiite influence.

Al-Menbar's association with al-Eslah, which was founded in 1948 and runs a network of mosques, gives it a support base among Bahraini Sunnis (especially those from the merchant elites). Furthermore, *al-Eslah* (and, by extension, al-Menbar) benefits from the official patronage of the Bahraini ruling family (its former President was Sheikh Isa bin Mohammed al-Khalifa), as well as from some of Bahrain's largest businesses.[54] 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. Indeed, al-Menbar, through its connections to the ruling family and elite merchant families, enjoys preferential access to the security apparatus, judiciary, royal court, and ruling family.[55]

Al-Asala takes a harder line than al-Menbar on various social issues and is allegedly supported by the poorer and more tribal Sunni population. The group is, in general, opposed to Bahrain's comparatively socially liberal character. It has opposed U.S. military action in Iraq. Despite their differences, however, al-Menbar and al-Asala cooperate; 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 intentionally divided the Sunni electoral districts between them.[56] Each group won seven seats.[57] In 2010, however, they failed to organize a similar arrangement: the two groups ran against each other in many districts and subsequently lost most. Al-Menbar won only two seats in the Council of Representatives, and al-Asala received just three.[58] Furthermore, the Sunni Islamist "societies" lost two seats in the 2014 election, perhaps in part as a result of government redistricting.[59] Al-Menbar, in the November 2018 election and for the first time since its creation in 2002, failed to win a single seat in parliament; meanwhile, al-Asala won three seats, the cross-Sunni Islamist bloc National Unity Gathering (NUG), whose creation was aided by the government, won a single seat. That left four seats to Sunni Islamists. Weeks after the elections, Al-Asala MPs called for crackdowns on "gay sheesha havens," suggesting that their agenda may focus on social policies they view as objectionable.[60]

Indeed, in 2006 Al-Menbar's Council of Representatives helped prevent Bahrain from ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights because the Covenant would mean "that Muslims could convert to another religion, something against the Islamic law."[61] Al-Menbar promised to field female candidates for the 2006 election, but this pledge was dropped as part of an electoral pact with *al-Asala*, which does not approve of women participating in politics. Further, al-Menbar's parent organization ("supported" by the Islamic Education Society) held a 2008 workshop opposing government efforts to promote gender equality.[62] This is in direct opposition to Al-Menbar's historic support for women's rights.[63]

Unsurprisingly, Bahraini Sunni Islamist organizations have not participated in any anti-government demonstrations. If anything, they may have been one of the pro-government forces behind several rallies that took place while Bahrain's Shiites were holding their own anti-government demonstrations.[64] 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.

However, as protests have slowed and outside pressure has continued, it appears the relationship be-

tween local Sunni Islamists and Bahrain's government is becoming more tense. The Muslim Brotherhood, which has a branch in Bahrain, is increasingly considered antagonistic by *status quo* Sunni-dominated states. In 2014, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both key allies for Bahrain, designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization.[65] Given its dependency on Saudi and Emirati support, official Bahrain policy can do little other than toe the line or create anti-Brotherhood atmospherics.[66]

There is now concern that Bahrainis drawn to fight for ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups in Syria may return to their country radicalized against both Shiites and the societal *status quo*.[67] The government's policy of recruiting foreign Sunnis to join the security forces could ultimately backfire, as some of these recruits may be easily (or already) radicalized while they lack loyalty to the al-Khalifa family.[68] One irony in this situation is that, while Bahrain is officially part of the international coalition fighting ISIS, native-born Bahrainis joining the organization are typically from social strata close to the al-Khalifa monarchy.[69] But at the same time, the Bahraini government has failed to consistently counter Sunni radicalization, preferring to attempt to focus on Shiites.[70] The more the Shi'a population is smeared as an Iranian outgroup, the likelier radical Sunni Islamism will emerge.

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 the poor, operating mosques and providing religious education, and proselytizing for their particular brand of Islam both at home and abroad. Al-Eslah runs a large charitable enterprise, supported by corporate *zakat* (charity) as well as private contributions. Al-Eslah has also made a number of prominent humanitarian contributions to the Gaza Strip, funding a building construction project at the Islamic University in 2005 and sending five ambulances to Gaza in 2009.[71]

Shi'a and Sunni Islamists in Bahrain are not comfortable cooperating even when they agree, especially following the events of the Arab Spring. However, there are some issues upon which Shiite and Sunni leaders have joined forces:

- While they have been unsuccessful in banning the sale and consumption of alcohol in Bahrain, Islamists have done what they can to impose limits on them. Islamist organizations supported a government move to close bars in two-star hotels in 2009 and three star hotels in 2014;[72] however, "viral" social-media rumors suggesting that the ban would be imposed on all hotels, along with a ban on hotel discos and night clubs, appear—at least as of the end of 2019—to be false.[73]
- 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, fell flat; even other Islamists in the Council of Representatives pointed out that it would cause diplomatic damage if passed, and probably would not be very effective.)[76]
- 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] There were no reports of Islamist pro-Kardashian demonstrations.

Traditionally, Bahraini Sunnis and Shiites lived and worked together with minimal friction. However, over the past several years Shi'a protests and the Sunni government's response to them (including, in at least some cases, Sunni vigilante participation)[76] have damaged this relationship. Within a week of the February 14, 2011 onset of Shiite protests, for instance, Sunnis mounted counter demonstrations

(often encouraged by the government).[77] As the crisis continued, confrontations between Sunni and Shiite groups became more frequent and more violent. Some Sunni groups explicitly opposed the government-Shiite dialogue, preferring the *status quo* to a resolution they felt would favor Shiites over their own community.[78] Although the political environment in Bahrain today is far more placid than it was eight years ago, largely due to repression of protests, large numbers of political arrests, and restrictions placed on opposition organizations, even assuming if a political settlement is someday reached, it is difficult to imagine that Bahrain's social atmosphere will quickly return to the *status quo*.[79]

Islamism and the State

After a turbulent period during the 1990s, the country's new king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, restored Bahrain to a constitutional government in 2002. In accordance with the 2002 constitution, elections with universal suffrage are held every four years (most recently in November 2018) for the lower chamber of the National Assembly, the Majlis an-Nuwab (Council of Representatives); all members of the upper chamber, the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council), are appointed by the King. Both chambers must approve 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, the extent of public participation in politics has been unsatisfactory for many Bahrainis since 2002. Even the Council of Representatives' ability to block legislation does not constrain the ruling family's power; the King retains the right to rule by royal decree and can therefore bypass the legislature entirely.[80]

Real power is concentrated with the ruling al-Khalifa family; its members occupy the most important governmental positions, including 20 of the country's 25 Cabinet seats.[81] The Prime Minister, Prince Khalifa ibn Sulman al-Khalifa, has held office since the country was granted independence in 1971. He is currently the world's longest-serving Prime Minister, the uncle of King Hamad, and is thought to be one of the wealthiest people in Bahrain.[82]

While the Shiite unrest in Bahrain in the early 2010s has eclipsed most other news about Bahraini Islamism, earlier news stories paint a picture of a government willing to work with Islamists to achieve its goals, but equally willing to take strong measures to limit their actions and influence. The Bahraini government generally rejects Islamism; however, it is not above weaponizing Sunni Islamists against the Shiite community. The government, for instance, has in the past reportedly paid a number of individuals and NGOs, including both al-Islah/al-Menbar and the Islamic Education Society/al-Asala; in return those groups would operate "websites and Internet forums which foment sectarian hatred," as well as "Sunni Conversion" and "Sectarian Switch" projects.[83] More recently, however, the Bahraini government has sought to stymie the role of religion in politics: in May 2016, for instance, legislation was introduced to ban preachers from joining any political society or engaging in political activities.[84]

The foreign policy implications of Islamism can sometimes create problems for the Bahraini government. Indeed, as part of the so-called "blockade" of Qatar in recent years, regional states have vociferously rebuked Sunni Islamists – something that has perhaps spurred the Bahraini government to encourage the separation of religion and politics. Further, anti-Zionism continues to unite 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, condemned the government's permission for an Israeli delegation to attend an international conference of the world soccer association, FIFA, held in Manama in May 2017.[85]

Nevertheless, Bahrain is not usually considered a major source of terrorists or financial/logistical support for overseas *jihad*, likely because Sunni Bahrainis are not especially impoverished, exposed to more radical forms of *Wahhabi* Islamic fundamentalism, or especially numerous. Still, a very small number of Bahrainis (estimated at 24 as of 2016, the last date for which comprehensive statistics were availabe) have

indeed participated in foreign *jihad*.[86]

Inside Bahrain itself, the government has targeted individuals supporting al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other radical Sunni organizations. Concern about both Sunni and Shiite terrorism is often used as an excuse for political repression, particularly of nonviolent Islamist organizations. Indeed, in the months leading up to the country's 2010 elections, Bahrain's government targeted political organizations and news outlets, suppressing demonstrations and civil unrest.[87] 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 regional "Arab Spring" unrest. The mass demonstrations also coincided with the February 14th anniversary of the restoration of constitutional government in 2002 and the 2001 referendum that approved the new constitution.[88]

The government's initial reaction to these demonstrations was a vacillation between brutal suppression and attempts at conciliation. But after seven demonstrators were killed and many more injured, Bahrain's rulers backed down from lethal confrontation; on February 19th it began a concerted effort, led by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, to de-escalate the crisis and promote a solution-oriented "national dialogue."[89] However, the talks ended with no accomplishments; they were clearly not intended to facilitate a genuine resolution of Bahrain's problems and Shiite leaders demanded substantial concessions before talks could begin.[90] Calls for dialogue are still occasionally made but nearly a decade later it still seems impossible for the factious ruling family, the disparate opposition, and loyalist groups to agree on conditions.[91] Clearly, even if negotiations do begin at some point, they will be difficult; after years of protests, repression, killings, torture,[92] mass dismissal of Shiites from their jobs,[93] revocation of citizenship,[94] and demolition of Shiite mosques,[95] there is very little good will or trust between Bahrain's Shiites and their government.[96]

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

- It is supported by almost all members of the country's Sunni minority, which holds most economic power and controls Bahrain's security forces.
- It is supported by neighboring Sunni states—particularly Saudi Arabia, which is concerned about unrest or even rebellion by its own large Shiite minority and has a history of intervening to preserve Bahrain's Sunni regime.
- 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.[97] In the words of one anonymous U.S. official, Bahrain is "just too important to fail."[98]

Nonetheless, the Bahraini government has done tremendous damage to its own perceived legitimacy. 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 regain the trust of the country's Shiite community, Bahrain's ruling class will have a difficult time maintaining long-term stability. Lastly, as the regional Sunni-Shia conflict has intensified, particularly with rising tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf, Bahrain's rulers may face greater tensions among Sunni and Shia populations within their borders.

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