

American Foreign Policy Council

BAHRAIN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 1,281,332

Area: 760 sq km

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

Religions: Muslim (Sunni and Shi'a) 81.2%, Christian 9%, other 9.8%

Government Type: Constitutional Monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$27.03 billion



Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2013)

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, the overwhelming 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 make the transition to a non-resource-based economy. Further, although it was never 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; movie theaters, discos and labor unions are allowed; freedom of worship is present; the press is 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.

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 playing off Shi’ites against Sunnis and Islamists against secularists, and until the onset of the “Arab Spring” this strategy generally worked rather well. Although a few Bahrainis raveled overseas to join in jihad, and others have been involved in providing financial or logistical support for al-Qaeda, Islamism in Bahrain traditionally maintained an almost exclusively domestic focus, largely directed at confronting economic and “morality” issues through political action rather than violence. 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 Islamists appear ready to condone or facilitate such attacks.

Sadly, in the last few years Bahrain has become less of a happy exception, and more of a typical example of Middle Eastern despotism. Beginning in February of 2011, the Bahraini government’s response to the “Arab Spring” protests has consisted of often-brutal repression, coupled with occasional promises of a reconciliation dialogue that have become less and less convincing over the succeeding years.¹ As of mid-2013, 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 impasse is likely to strengthen the appeal and extremism of Islamist forces, particularly among the country’s majority Shi’ite community; and despite the country’s tiny size, the failure of major powers and international organizations to exert meaningful pressure on the Bahraini government to reform has had significant regional implications. In the words of one expert, “The uprising in Bahrain and its crackdown will go down in history as the point when the West finally failed to live up to its commitment to democracy and lost the Arab Spring.”²

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 imposing *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.³
- 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).⁴
- 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.⁵ 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 the recent protests has significantly radicalized Shi'ite political discourse, to the extent that overt calls for the overthrow of the monarchy are now common.⁶

Despite the Shi'ite community's past assertions of loyalty to Bahrain and its governing family (if not to its Constitution), 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 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 Ara-

bic, at home. The recent government repression of Bahraini Shi'ites is ultimately likely to increase the community's identification with Iran, as well as Iranians' feelings of solidarity with Bahraini Shi'ites.⁷

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, in general, averse to meddling in other countries' affairs, and Iranian officials occasionally reassert their country's historical claim on Bahrain as Iranian territory.⁸ However, 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.⁹ The protests of the last years have not strengthened the case for an Iranian conspiracy to destabilize Bahrain; nothing in the protestors' goals, capabilities, or tactics is inconsistent with what would be expected from an entirely domestic movement.¹⁰

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;¹¹ 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.

The most prominent Bahraini Shi'ite political "society" is the *al-Wafaq* National Islamic Society (*Jam'iyyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiyah*, also known as the Islamic National Accord Association), led by Qom-educated cleric Sheikh Ali Salman, with at least 1,500 active members.¹² (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, does not openly take political positions but is considered an *al-Wafaq* supporter; in 2005 he publicly endorsed the group's decision to register as a "political society" and enter the Council of Representatives.¹³) After boycotting the 2002 elections to protest the new constitution's failure to provide a fully democratic constitutional monarchy, *al-Wafaq* 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ *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.¹⁷

As the crisis has ground on, positions have hardened: more and more demonstrators and opposition leaders have called for the outright abolition of the al-Khalifa monarchy, and it will be difficult for ^{Al Wefaq's} leadership to return to a conciliatory position if the group's Shi'ite supporters are no longer willing to work within the system.¹⁸ ^{Al Wefaq}, along with the rest of the opposition, boycotted the September-October 2011 by-election called to fill the seats it had vacated¹⁹; protests were, as usual, violently suppressed,²⁰ and, despite government claims backed by some rather odd mathematics,²¹ the vast majority of Shi'ite voters obeyed calls to boycott the vote.²² With no opposition representation, the Council of Representatives can no longer claim to provide even a skewed representation of the citizens of Bahrain.

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 upcoming 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 recently left the movement²³), Ali Qasim Rabea, is a secular leftist-nationalist.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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,”²⁶ even though its rejectionist record is not absolute: Mushaima met with King Hamad in London in March, 2008.²⁷) 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,²⁸ and *Haq* itself was submitting petitions to the United Nations and the United States calling for condemnation of the Bahraini government.²⁹ 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 are among the opposition leaders imprisoned by the government in the aftermath of the 2011 protests has only reinforced the movement's credibility.³⁰

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 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.³¹

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.³² Upon his return, Mushaima attempted, with other opposition leaders, to formulate a unified platform of demands and expectations.³³ As the government

crackdown continued, Mushaima was again brought to trial and imprisoned, along with many other protest leaders.³⁴

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'* is "officially" Shi'ite, and enjoys the open backing of senior cleric (and rival of Aya-tollah 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 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 Shiite politics.³⁵

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."³⁶ *Amal* refused to register as a "legal" faction before the 2002 election, did not win any seats in the 2006 election,³⁷ 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 "[W]e don't want to just be employees... the members of parliament are just employees who get a big salary."³⁸ (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 2012.³⁹

The challenge for the "official" organized Shi'ite opposition (both "legal" and "illegal"), as well as for leaders of the young, self-organizing "Twitter generation" protestors and the leftist secular organizations that have joined the anti-government protests, is to agree on a set of demands that are 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

can also be palatable to Bahrain's ruling family and its Sunni allies.⁴⁰ This challenge has only become more intractable as the conflict has drawn on.

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), and—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"⁴¹—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 infidel presence on Bahrain's territory. In short, Bahrain's organized Sunni Islamist "societies" are 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 have assumed an increasingly sectarian character, what goodwill and cooperation there was between Sunni and Shi'ite Islamists has largely disappeared.⁴²

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, 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.⁴³ 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."⁴⁴ *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.⁴⁵

Its association with *al-Eslah*, which runs a network of mosques, gives *al-Menbar* a solid social support base among Bahraini Sunnis. Further, *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.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ This strategy worked well, with the two groups winning seven seats each.⁴⁸ In 2010, however, they failed to come up with 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* now has only two seats in the Council of Representatives, and *al-Asala* has just three.⁴⁹

Unsurprisingly, Sunni Islamist organizations have not participated in the recent 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹)

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 2009.⁵² 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 2009⁵³; and a few years earlier, a mob of Islamist youths (of unspecified affiliation) stormed into a Manama restaurant and firebombed cars parked outside it, in a protest against its sale of alcohol.⁵⁴
- 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.)⁵⁵

- 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷
- 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.” True to recent form, the government responded with tear gas.⁵⁸ (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 (including, in at least some cases, Sunni vigilante participation)⁵⁹ have done a great deal to damage the relationship between the two communities. Within a week of the February 14th onset of Shi’ite protests, Sunnis had begun to mount counter-demonstrations⁶⁰ and as the crisis has continued, confrontations between Sunni and Shi’ite groups have become more frequent and more violent. Some Sunni groups have explicitly come out against government-Shi’ite dialogue, apparently preferring the *status quo* to a resolution they feel would favor Shi’ites over their own community.⁶¹ Even assuming that a political settlement is 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 activ-

ity 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 October 2010, with a by-election in 2011 to fill the 18 seats vacated by *al-Wefaq*) 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.⁶² 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.⁶³ 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.⁶⁴

While the current 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.

While 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, open character), 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 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 "run-

ning websites and Internet forums which foment sectarian hatred” and running “Sunni Conversion” and “Sectarian Switch” projects.⁶⁵

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.”⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Bahrain is not known as 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 Bahrainis are neither especially impoverished nor exposed to the more radical forms of Wahhabi Islamic fundamentalism. Still, a small 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.”⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

Inside Bahrain itself, the government has acted against individuals providing funding or other support to al-Qaeda. 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,⁶⁹ and the other was among a group of prisoners officially pardoned in mid-2009.⁷⁰ Some other Bahrainis have been implicated in plots to support or engage in terrorism,⁷¹ but the Bahraini government has 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 2010 elections, Bahrain's government instituted a crackdown on many political organizations and news outlets, and vigorously suppressed demonstrations and civil unrest.⁷² 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.⁷³

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.⁷⁴ At first, it appeared likely that such a dialogue would soon take place.⁷⁵ 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 hard-line 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.⁷⁶ Calls for dialogue continue to be made, but two 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.⁷⁷

Clearly, even once negotiations begin, they will be difficult; after years of protests, repression, torture,⁷⁸ mass dismissal of Shi'ites from their jobs,⁷⁹ and demolition of Shi'ite mosques,⁸⁰ there is very little good will or mutual trust between Bahrain's Shi'ites and their government.⁸¹

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),⁸² 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 the recent 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.⁸³ In the words of one anonymous U.S. official, Bahrain is "just too important to fail."⁸⁴

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.

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