

# High Noon in Bahrain: Will Tehran Blink First?

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Brief Analysis

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**Bahrain's action against a high-profile Shiite figure has brought long-simmering tensions with Iran to a boil, and extremists could feel empowered to further escalate the crisis even if officials turn down the dial.**

On June 25, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei described Bahrain's recent decision to revoke the citizenship of the island's top Shiite religious leader as "blatant foolishness and insanity." Although he added that the sheikh in question, Isa Qassim, would "advise against radical and armed actions," the threatening nature of Tehran's rhetoric was made clear six days earlier, when Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force, warned that action against the sheikh would "cross a red line and ignite a response...to make the al-Khalifa [Bahrain's Sunni ruling family] disappear."

Such rhetoric fits the narrative of Bahrain's Sunni rulers, who have been deeply fearful of Iran's regional reach since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In 2011, street demonstrations broke out on the Shiite-majority island, imitating "Arab Spring" events in other countries. Bahraini authorities have since clamped down with the backing of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, attempting to end collective political activity and completely separate politics from religion.

The pace of Manama's recent actions has been extraordinary. On May 30, a court more than doubled the prison sentence for incitement against the detained leader of al-Wefaq, the country's main Shiite political group and the largest single party in the national assembly prior to its withdrawal in protest in 2011. On June 14, the group was shut down, and six days later, Sheikh Isa's citizenship was revoked, making him stateless. Meanwhile, a prominent rights activist was recently detained for tweets accusing the security forces of torturing detainees -- more than 3,000 Shiites are being held for taking part in often violent demonstrations and other antigovernment activities.

Almost lost in this maelstrom, and certainly underreported outside Bahrain, has been the government's action against Sunni extremists. On June 23, twenty-four Islamic State conspirators were sentenced for a variety of plots, including attacks on Shiites. Like Sheikh Isa, thirteen were stripped of their citizenship.

The situation has created a dilemma for the Obama administration. Although it is concerned about human rights -- a State Department report sent to Congress last week was critical of Manama -- it is also appreciative that the island hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, a crucial component of U.S. reassurance for regional allies. The administration now finds itself under growing pressure to act against Bahrain -- in recent days the *Washington Post* and *Financial Times* have editorialized that arms deliveries should be frozen.

Yet transferring such pressure to Manama is always a challenge. King Hamad generally tries to stand above the fray -- his most prominent recent appearance was alongside Britain's Queen Elizabeth at her ninetieth birthday celebrations in April. The resultant vacuum has given free rein to hardliners in the Khalifa family, who are notoriously impervious to U.S. prodding. Washington's support for liberal-minded Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad provides little leverage.

At the very least, the administration should strongly advise Bahrain not to expel the seventy-nine-year-old Sheikh Isa, asking Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to send the same message. Even if Tehran and Manama can walk back from what seems like an inevitable train wreck, the danger is that extremists might take their own action. Shiite groups could be pushed toward more violence now that the moderate option, al-Wefaq, has been closed down, while Sunnis could be further radicalized by fears of Shiite backlash or other factors. Either way, Bahrain's reputation as a comparatively safe Gulf locale, hospitable to foreigners in general as well as the U.S. military, could be irretrievably tarnished.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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