

Between ISIS and Iran: Bahrain Tweaks Washington

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Brief Analysis

Amid electoral boycotts and continued concerns about ISIS and Iran, King Hamad has reappointed a prime minister whom Washington regards as an impediment to political progress.

A flurry of recent events in Bahrain could have a significant impact on the island's future domestic politics and its relationship with the United States. On November 22, the first round of elections was held for the forty-member lower house of the national assembly, which has only limited powers. Along with several smaller groups, al-Wefaq -- the political society that draws support from the majority Shiite population and won eighteen seats in the 2010 election -- boycotted the vote to protest the lack of progress in the so-called "national dialogue" involving the Sunni ruling family. On November 25, security forces raided one of the homes of Sheikh Isa Qassim, al-Wefaq's spiritual leader, while searching for a bombing suspect. And on November 29, the run-off round of elections was held; the next day, King Hamad asked Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa -- who is seventy-nine and has been prime minister continuously since 1970 -- to form another government.

Meanwhile, the *Financial Times* carried a long interview today with Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Muhammad al-Khalifa in which he announced the formation of a joint Gulf military command aimed at countering Iran as well as working with the United States against the "Islamic State" (also known as ISIS or ISIL). On December 5, a major international conference opens in the capital and will likely be attended by senior U.S. government and military officials (e.g., last year, Defense Secretary Hagel was a speaker). Will the U.S. presence sanctify a flawed political system or celebrate greater military cooperation?

Usually, it is Washington that sets the tone for bilateral relations, balancing its desire for greater democratic freedoms in Bahrain with the utility of maintaining the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet there. Now Bahrain is trying to dominate the relationship, which has been under tension since demonstrations in early 2011 prompted the resignation of al-Wefaq parliamentarians. Relations have been especially raw since July, when Manama expelled

visiting assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor Tom Malinowski, apparently for upsetting King Hamad by meeting with members of the Shiite opposition before seeing any of his Bahraini government counterparts. Although that rift seemed to be patched up during the UN General Assembly in September, Malinowski has so far been thwarted in his attempts to revisit Bahrain.

CHANGES, BUT NO CHANGE?

Bahrain's political structure is dominated by the al-Khalifa ruling family, members of which counted for about half of the now-caretaker cabinet. King Hamad (age sixty-four), who assumed the title of monarch after a 2001 referendum on political reform, rules in an uneasy triumvirate with his uncle, Sheikh Khalifa, and his eldest son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad (45), who is also the first deputy prime minister. Photos of all three are displayed across Manama and in government offices.

The main tension in their relationship is between the king's frequent vacillation and the prime minister's people skills; a subsidiary tension is the crown prince's willingness to contemplate political reforms on a scale that is anathema to Sheikh Khalifa. Although the rest of the royal family never challenges the king's supremacy, they tend to divide up across this political spectrum. The most significant camp is the hardliner faction known as the Khawalids, who include military chief Khalifa bin Ahmed bin Salman al-Khalifa and his brother Khalid bin Ahmed bin Salman al-Khalifa, the minister of the royal court.

Today's front page of the English-language *Gulf Daily News*, which closely reflects government thinking, carried the banner headline "Time for Change" along with photographs of the king and prime minister. Although the broadness of this editorial conclusion is debatable, the election results at least show change in the lower house of parliament. (Members of the upper house are directly appointed by the king.) Three quarters of the incoming members are new faces -- in addition to al-Wefaq's absence, the representation of Muslim Brotherhood affiliates and other Sunni political societies has been reduced. "Citizens for Bahrain," a pro-government website, noted the broad mix of new Sunni and Shiite representatives, including women, pointing out that candidates campaigned on such issues as better education, infrastructure, and health services.

The island's next significant political event is the holding of internal elections for al-Wefaq this week. A court banned the group in October for breaching the government's rules on political societies, even though it had already announced it would boycott the elections. The justice minister quickly suspended the ban for three months, apparently to allow al-Wefaq's planned internal elections to take place. But if Manama hopes that the group's self-marginalization will prompt a leadership change, it will likely be disappointed. Despite al-Wefaq's internal debate over the boycott and subsequent realization that it may have been a mistake, Sheikh Ali Salman and Khalil al-Marzouq are expected to be reelected as general-secretary and spokesperson, respectively. The government views both men as unwilling to compromise.

For now, the prime minister's age and reported ill health suggest that his reappointment may be a stopgap measure. Despite American officials counseling the king to remove him for decades, Sheikh Khalifa shows no desire to step down, and those close to him portray his possible departure in terms of "apres moi, le deluge." A quiet campaign of support for him has been growing for several months, with big posters showing his photo and the words "The People. Khalifa bin Salman. The Red Line," implying that getting rid of him would be a step too far. But if he were to go, several of the royal family members currently serving as deputy prime ministers could potentially replace him:

- Crown Prince Salman, who would likely push his reformist agenda amid opposition from the hardliners.
- Muhammad bin Mubarak al-Khalifa (age 79), the next most senior deputy prime minister after Salman, who is regarded as a conciliatory figure and was foreign minister for thirty-five years until 2005.
- Ali bin Khalifa al-Khalifa, Sheikh Khalifa's son.

- Khalid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, the favored candidate of the Khawalid hardliners.

THE ROLE OF ISIS AND IRAN

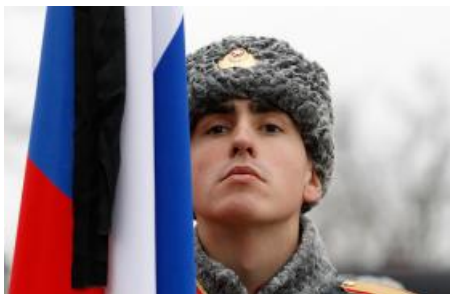
The emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq and the formation of the U.S.-led coalition have enabled Manama to emphasize a different dimension in its relationship with Washington. Bahraini F-16s have taken part in airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria, and the Fifth Fleet's island headquarters has been at the center of related naval actions. Foreign Minister Khalid's announcement of a new regional command to coordinate Gulf policy against ISIS and Iran seems like a further step down this path -- and perhaps a means of distracting Western and Gulf Arab leaders from Bahrain's domestic political tensions.

The State Department and the British Foreign Office have been exasperated by al-Wefaq's election boycott, which they saw as a lost opportunity to calm Bahrain's troubled political waters. Manama's allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are also keen to see the island's domestic politics quiet down; both countries sent security forces to bolster the government during Bahrain's 2011 street riots. Riyadh in particular is anxious because ISIS-linked jihadists killed Saudi Shiites last month in the kingdom's oil-rich Eastern Province, which is joined by a causeway to Bahrain. A similar incident on the island could have catastrophic consequences for tense intercommunal relations. The House of Saud is also fearful of contagion between Bahrain's troubles and its own Shiite community.

Such is the background to this weekend's "Manama Dialogue," an annual event organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies and hosted by Bahrain. Manama will want to show off its role in the anti-ISIS coalition while also emphasizing the threats posed by a nuclear Iran, which it blames for subversion among its Shiite population. The third leg of the stool is Bahrain's political system, for which last week's elections are a probably short-term fix. But for how long it will remain stable is uncertain.

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

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