

Bahrain's Planned Day of Rebellion

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Brief Analysis

Tension is peaking in Bahrain, where some opposition groups have called for huge protests that could turn violent.

For more than two years, members of Bahrain's majority Shiite population have been protesting against the Sunni king, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, resulting in mass demonstrations as well as near-nightly skirmishes between Shiite youths and government security forces in villages outside the capital. On August 7, the American embassy noted that incidents of civil disobedience had increased during the previous three weeks. It also warned U.S. citizens that demonstrators may block roads with spikes, debris, oil, and burning tires during a planned day of protest on August 14, predicting opposition clashes with police and the use of improvised explosive devices, projectiles, and Molotov cocktails. Some groups have called for demonstrations near the embassy, which has announced that it will close for the day.

The day of protest is clearly intended to mimic the Tamarod (rebellion) demonstrations in Cairo, which forced the collapse of Muhammad Morsi's government and the introduction of military-led rule. Yet while Egypt's uprising was a mass, peaceful movement, Bahrain's has apparently been organized by Shiite militant groups that chose August 14 because it is the anniversary of British forces leaving the island in 1971. These groups are not involved in the near-deadlocked dialogue between the government and the main Shiite opposition faction, al-Wefaq, whose eighteen representatives resigned from the forty-seat national assembly in February 2011 following a Saudi-backed government clampdown on demonstrations.

Al-Wefaq has been put in an embarrassing position by the call for protests tomorrow. Although its declared stance is that Bahrainis have a right to engage in peaceful rallies, it has deliberately not asked its supporters to take part so as to appease the king's son, Crown Prince Salman, who is seen as favoring government concessions. But hardliners in the royal family seem to believe that al-Wefaq is effectively endorsing the Tamarod by not condemning the planned protests.

The call for demonstrations is also an apparent reaction to the June arrests targeting senior members of the February 14 Youth Coalition, a clandestine opposition group suspected of holding ties with Iran and organizing attacks on security forces. Yet the arrests do not seem to have curbed the group's ability to stage protests.

Tension has also increased after a rare joint session of the lower (elected) and upper (appointed) chambers of the island's parliament on July 28, when members recommended a clampdown on opposition violence. In addition to threatening those involved in such violence with harsher sentences and loss of citizenship, the legislators warned foreign ambassadors not to interfere in Bahrain's domestic affairs; a few days later, the Foreign Ministry called ambassadors in to deliver the warning in person. Some commentators have likened the list of suggested measures to a declaration of emergency rule.

U.S. POSITION

Although Americans have not been targeted in the months of violence, the August 14 day of protest reflects the increasing challenges to Washington's close alliance with Bahrain, which has hosted the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet for decades. King Hamad appears to be in a quandary, valuing the U.S. links but irritated by Ambassador Thomas Krajeski's efforts to encourage dialogue. Krajeski has often been criticized in the state-controlled media and was no doubt the principal target of the government's warning about foreign interference. His predicament was likely exacerbated by the expulsion last weekend of a young American teacher accused of writing critical web articles about the country.

A further indication of the fraying U.S.-Bahraini relationship was last week's report that Manama plans to buy British Typhoon fighter jets for its air force, which is currently equipped with U.S. F-16s bolstered by a squadron of U.S. Marine F-18s temporarily assigned to the island. Some senior members of the royal family are even believed to welcome the prospect of a U.S. exit, thinking it would give them a freer hand to deal firmly with the opposition. In contrast, al-Wefaq sees the U.S. Navy's presence as a means of preventing worse Sunni abuses against Shiites, though more extreme Shiites mirror Iran's position of wanting the American base to close.

In light of these challenges, Washington should seek Saudi assistance with facilitating a political breakthrough in Bahrain. Despite its own antipathy to political demonstrations and Shiite rights, Riyadh has been frustrated by the lack of progress next door, believing the impasse could make the island vulnerable to Iranian mischief. Saudi diplomatic intervention should therefore be encouraged -- alongside a warning that any repeat of its 2011 military intervention will be condemned. But if tomorrow's demonstrations are large and/or violent, that opportunity may well have been missed.

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

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