

Bahrain Rounds Up Organizers of Antigovernment Violence

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Brief Analysis

Although Bahrain's ongoing troubles are domestically focused, the latest developments are a reminder of the region's wider Sunni-Shiite divide and the problematic role played by Iran.

Tension is peaking in Bahrain after authorities arrested leading members of a clandestine opposition group suspected of Iranian ties. Announced two days ago, the arrests came just ahead of a mass sit-in planned for tomorrow. All of the forty-four suspects (including two women) are linked to the shadowy February 14 Youth Coalition, named after the day antigovernment demonstrations began in 2011. Initially emulating uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, the protests quickly divided along sectarian lines, pitting members of the majority Shiite population against the Sunni ruling family's security forces. Since then, February 14 members have apparently engaged in near-nightly clashes with police, resulting in more than 100 dead and 2,000 injured among civilians and security personnel.

Al-Wefaq, the country's main Shiite opposition faction, condemns all violence. Yet after the group announced it was leading a march in a Shiite village outside the capital today, the U.S. embassy issued a warning to American citizens that a "violent opposition group" had called for a mass rally later in the same village as well. The message also warned of a mass sit-in by the unnamed violent group planned for Saturday, telling residents to expect clashes between police and demonstrators. Although no specific places or times were mentioned in the sit-in announcement, the embassy recommended that U.S. citizens avoid shopping malls this weekend.

Typically, such violence takes place in areas off-limits to U.S. official personnel. Last week, however, the embassy warned that "extremist elements of certain opposition groups have conducted surveillance on U.S. persons and locations," listing the embassy itself, a school, the naval base where the U.S. Fifth Fleet is headquartered, and "American Alley," the street where U.S. sailors frequent bars and restaurants. Yet demonstrations held over the past two years have been antigovernment rather than anti-American, with al-Wefaq and its allies arguing that they

welcome the U.S. presence because it restrains the excesses of local security forces.

Some of those arrested this week have been accused of planting homemade bombs, while others were involved in blocking roads with burning tires and making Molotov cocktails and other weapons. Several were also accused of links to a terrorist cell known as the al-Imam Army -- according to an Interior Ministry statement, their spiritual leader is Hadi al-Modaressi, a Shiite cleric living in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala who "provided divisive sectarian support to the organization."

Bahraini officials regard Iran as a key supporter and instigator of the recent troubles. For example, the Interior Ministry statement accused thirteen individuals of helping February 14 from abroad, including the London-based Saeed Shehabi, who was purportedly "responsible for coordination with Iranian leaders." The ministry also noted that some of the accused "frequently travel between Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon."

Earlier this week, the Gulf Cooperation Council -- composed of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman -- condemned the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah for intervening in support of the Iranian-backed Assad regime in Syria. The GCC now plans to revoke residency permits of Hezbollah supporters and apply financial and commercial sanctions.

Although the increasing tension in Bahrain is worrisome, the United States continues to support dialogue between al-Wefaq, other opposition groups, and the government. One key figure appears to be Crown Prince Salman, who leads a liberal faction of the royal family. But al-Wefaq has been frustrated by the government's insistence that political talks include myriad Sunni groups -- a requirement that has impeded discussions on such vexatious issues as the districting of Shiite areas, resulting in the country's majority constituency holding a minority of seats in the parliament.

It is difficult to predict whether the latest arrests will dampen the violent protests or encourage them. Although Bahrain's tensions remain focused on domestic issues, recent developments are a reminder of the region's wider Sunni-Shiite divide and the troublesome role played by Iran. The United States should therefore continue to support the political dialogue, urging concessions from both sides.

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