

U.S. Differences with Bahrain Playing Out in Public

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Brief Analysis

Despite Bahrain's latest negative rhetoric, Washington must step up its efforts to mend the bilateral relationship.

Washington's relations with Bahrain are under strain after royal comments at a regional strategy conference in the island's capital. The incident, described by the Associated Press as a "diplomatic flap" and a "public slap against Washington," reopens the debate about the progress of reforms as street violence continues between Shiite protestors and security forces deployed by the Sunni al-Khalifa royal family.

Over fifty people, including security personnel, have died in protests pressing for more political representation and other rights over the past two years. In February 2011, most Shiite members of parliament resigned, and subsequent by-elections reinforced the Sunni majority in the assembly despite the island's majority Shiite population. Protests continue on an almost daily basis -- an embarrassment to Washington given that the island hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, a key component in efforts to deter Iran.

U.S. diplomats at the conference, the annual Manama Dialogue, were surprised when Bahrain's heir apparent -- Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, previously seen as the royal family's leading reformer -- failed to mention the United States by name when listing allies that have provided critical support during the disturbances. He also spoke of countries that "selectively" criticize Bahrain's leadership, without citing specific examples. While calling for dialogue, he also stated that Shiite religious leaders, whom he referred to as "ayatollahs," should denounce violence more forcefully.

Salman's tough words were echoed by Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Saud, the son of the Saudi monarch and the kingdom's deputy foreign minister. Apparently justifying last year's Saudi military intervention in Bahrain, he warned that the Gulf states "cannot tolerate instability."

Meanwhile, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, who led the U.S. delegation, emphasized "the urgent challenges of Iran's reckless behavior." On reform, he stated, "There is no one-size-fits-all approach to such transitions or

reform processes; much will depend on local circumstances and the quality of local leadership." However, he also noted that "Long-term stability, and enduring security, depend on the full participation of all citizens in political and economic life; the belief of all citizens that their peacefully expressed views are heard and respected; [and] the conviction of all citizens that they share a stake in their country's future." In the email text of the speech distributed by the State Department, the three mentions of the word "all" were each in bold type.

The exchange suggests that the gap in perceptions between Washington and Manama is as wide as ever. The United States sees political reform as compatible with maintaining the historical security relationship, while the royal family views Shiite leaders with suspicion, believing they are too sympathetic to Iran and determined to change the political status quo.

In addition, the conference organizers had hoped that Defense Secretary Leon Panetta would be a keynote speaker. Although CENTCOM commander Gen. James Mattis and Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral John Miller were listed as speakers, the defining statement on U.S. policy and the region was delivered by Burns, who was accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights Michael Posner. In remarks yesterday, Posner stated: "To create a climate where dialogue and reconciliation is possible, the [Bahrain] government needs to prosecute those officials responsible for the human rights violations that occurred in early 2011. It also should drop charges against all persons accused of offenses involving non-violent political expression and freedom of assembly."

Going forward, two dangers threaten U.S.-Bahraini relations. The first is that Iran will attempt to further weaken the relationship; the second is that Washington has made seemingly little effort to repair it. In December 2011, for example, only a single, junior U.S. official attended the Bahrain National Day celebration in Washington. Despite the tension, U.S. representation at this year's event -- scheduled for Wednesday, December 12 -- should be larger and more senior.

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

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