

The Shadow of Iran over Bahrain's Problems

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Concerns have risen in Bahrain following a lethal clash between police and Shiite demonstrators.

Tension has increased again in the Persian Gulf island kingdom of Bahrain, the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, after one policeman was killed and a second seriously injured by a homemade bomb during a clash with Shiite demonstrators in a village outside the capital, Manama.

These latest casualties in Bahrain, in the troubles that started in early 2011, occurred just three days after the Bahraini Foreign Ministry had summoned Iran's top diplomat on the island to complain about Tehran's interference in Bahrain's internal affairs. Specifically, and without mentioning by name Bahrain's majority Shiite community, the Bahrainis accused Iran of inciting sedition and sectarianism "via its mass media; and through ties and contacts with specific groups in the Bahraini community." Tehran was also accused of falsely claiming that Bahrain had requested Iranian mediation to help resolve the island's problems.

Fatalities in Bahrain's security forces are comparatively rare despite nightly clashes. Both the government and the opposition regularly release horrific video clips of the exchanges, in which the rioters use rocks and gasoline bombs against armored vehicles belonging to the police. Civilian casualties, including young children and old people who have been overwhelmed by widespread use of tear gas, include more than sixty killed since last year. Although the death toll is small compared with that in Syria, the events in Bahrain have considerable regional significance because of ancient tensions between Sunni and Shiite communities, overlaid with a perception of Iranian malevolence toward the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

The troubles in Bahrain are of particular concern to neighboring Saudi Arabia, whose own Shiite community is the local majority in the oil-rich Eastern Province, just a dozen miles from Bahrain, and the other end of a causeway joining the two countries. On the same day as Bahrain protested to Iran, the Saudi interior minister, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, who is emerging as a key member of the otherwise aging Saudi leadership, met the Iranian

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