

# Bahrain on the Brink Jeopardizes U.S. Interests in the Gulf

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Brief Analysis

## The ethnic strife between majority Shiites and the ruling Sunni al-Khalifa family in Bahrain is worsening, with a growing risk that the U.S. naval base there could become contentious.

A near perfect political storm has been developing in Bahrain in recent days. In one incident on April 9, seven policeman were injured, three seriously, when their checkpoint was devastated by an improvised explosive device attached to a container of gasoline. As an apparent consequence of this, a mob of Sunnis armed with iron rods and sticks ransacked a supermarket owned by a major Shiite-owned business group. The U.S. embassy in the capital, Manama, which has issued ten alerts to U.S. nationals since the start of the month, warned today that "demonstrations, coupled with instances of possible sectarian clashes, are possible throughout the weekend."

Meanwhile, the organizers of the Formula One motor race, due to be held on the island April 20-22, are under pressure to cancel the event, as it was last year because of Bahraini violence that did not abate until after the imposition of emergency law and the arrival of Saudi paramilitary forces trained in riot control. Hosting the race is a matter of prestige for Bahrain, but the participating teams are reportedly concerned about security. They also do not want to be associated with a regime being criticized for violating human rights. An imprisoned Shiite activist leader has been on hunger strike for more than two months, and Amnesty International is due to release a damning report about flawed reforms on April 17.

Yesterday, the White House issued a statement expressing deep concern about the situation and urging all parties to reject violence "in all its forms." The statement also expressed concern for the well being of the hunger striker, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, calling on Manama to urgently consider "all available options." One proposal is for Khawaja, who has joint Danish and Bahraini citizenship, to be sent to Denmark, an idea he has accepted. But the government appears divided on whether to allow this.

The troubles on the streets of Bahrain are often viewed in the context of the historical rivalry between Arabs and

Persians. Iran did not give up its territorial claim on Bahrain until the 1970s, and regional tensions were tweaked yesterday when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the Gulf island of Abu Musa, which is under Iranian control even though its sovereignty is meant to be shared with Sharjah, a member of the United Arab Emirates. Bahraini officials added their condemnation of the visit to the UAE's own diplomatic protest.

For Washington, concern for human rights and political reform in Bahrain has always been seen in the context of the island's longtime hosting of the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, which plays a crucial role in protecting oil-export routes in the Gulf and conducting antipiracy patrols in the Indian Ocean. The base has not been a political issue except for Shiite extremists, but with tensions rising and the ground being cut from underneath more moderate elements on both sides, the American naval presence could become contentious. Earlier this month, the U.S. embassy made an area adjacent to the base off-limits to American personnel between 8:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m.

As a first step, Washington needs to emphasize to Bahrain that the current tension can be eased by releasing the hunger striker abroad. In addition, this message should be delivered to Saudi defense minister Prince Salman, who this week has been meeting with President Obama and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta in Washington. Prince Salman should also be warned that hardline elements in the Bahraini ruling family all too often find support for their intransigence in Riyadh, and that this is unacceptable to the United States, as is any prospect of further Saudi military intervention on the island.

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