

Nervous Bahrain Marks Anniversary of Shiite Protests

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Feb 13, 2012

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Brief Analysis

Washington must find a way to encourage more political reform in Bahrain, which hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet.

February 14 marks one year since Bahrainis began emulating the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions by launching protests of their own. The demands for greater political reform quickly divided the island along sectarian lines, sparking clashes between majority Shiites and the Sunni ruling family's security forces. This week is turning out to be a test of whether the government can stop Shiite activists from retaking the site of the Pearl Roundabout, and whether Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies might again send forces to bolster the suppression of protests. Also of concern is potential action by Iran, which once had a territorial claim to the island and is now viewed as a prospective ally by the Shiites and a malign force by the Sunnis.

Background

The Bahraini government styles itself as a democracy because of reforms it carried out ten years ago creating a two-tier national assembly: an elected lower house of forty representatives and an upper house with members appointed by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. But the drawing of electoral districts left the majority Shiite population underrepresented. Most power remained in the hands of the king and his cabinet, many of whose members were al-Khalifas, including Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman, the king's uncle who has held the job for more than forty years.

Last year's troubles exacerbated political resentment and what Shiites see as their low socioeconomic status, made worse by fast-tracked citizenship for Sunni immigrants. Under international pressure, King Hamad set up an independent inquiry to look into the causes of the unrest and propose reforms. The inquiry's findings, presented last November, were critical of the government, and although changes have been made in response, the political stance of the Shiite opposition has become more hardline. Al-Wifaq, the main opposition bloc, has insisted on further concessions, which the government -- responding, it says, to pressure from the Sunni community -- has refused. One

of the opposition's main objectives has been to replace Prime Minister Khalifa with an elected official. And some elements resist any notion of engagement with the government and seem determined to provoke more violence.

Differing Views within the Royal Family

The Khalifas continue to exhibit a spectrum of political approaches to the unrest, as they did last year. The king's eldest son, Crown Prince Salman, is said to be among the more conciliatory but appears burned from the failed attempt to negotiate with the opposition last March. Meanwhile, the family hardliners -- of whom the prime minister is the perceived godfather -- reject any hint of compromise.

On February 12, U.S. Central Command head Gen. James Mattis met in Manama with Bahrain Defense Force commander-in-chief Field Marshall Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa. Reported as an opportunity to "review bilateral relations," the meeting was more likely an official U.S. warning to practice restraint against protestors. The day before the visit, a small group of armored vehicles had crossed the causeway from Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. Initially thought to be Saudi, they were identified as Bahraini forces returning from deployment, but the timing of the movement only added to the sense of impending crisis.

Thus far, King Hamad has vacillated between a soft and tough approach to the Shiite opposition's demands. At times he even gives the impression of being out of touch, as in today's interview with Der Spiegel in which he stated, "In a sense there is no 'opposition' in Bahrain, as the phrase implies one unified bloc with the same views...We only have people with different views, and that's okay." He also said that when demonstrators shout "Down with the King," they are only showing bad manners. And he defended the high number of royal family members in the cabinet, saying they received their posts because of merit. In addition to the prime minister and three of four deputy prime ministers, the Khalifas hold eight other portfolios, including finance, foreign affairs, interior, justice, and the royal court.

U.S. Interests

The United States has had a long friendship with Bahrain, dating back to American missionaries living on the island and American companies discovering oil there. Bahraini society has traditionally welcomed expatriates, who make up half of the 1.2 million population and have helped convert the country into a financial services center (though this role has now been usurped by Dubai).

The local U.S. naval headquarters began as an anchored ship but is now a base manned by personnel controlling numerous key assets, including forces deployed to counter Iranian threats in the region and conduct antipiracy patrols off the Horn of Africa. Fifth Fleet vessels spend most of their time at sea, apart from making port calls in Bahrain and other Gulf states.

The island's strategic importance was emphasized yesterday, when Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral Mark Fox briefed journalists at his headquarters in Manama. He said that although Iran had built up its naval forces and prepared boats that could be used in suicide attacks, the U.S. Navy could prevent it from blocking the Strait of Hormuz. Responding to a question about whether his forces were prepared for such problems, he said, "We are very vigilant, we have built a wide range of options to give the president and we are ready...What if it happened tonight? We are ready today."

Government Tactics

Some Bahraini officials are acutely aware of international criticism and have expressed frustration at not being able to engage more with the Shiite opposition. They acknowledge that Manama has recently opened quiet compromise talks with Wifaq -- which the government nearly banned last summer -- and note that the situation is changing for the better. Yet they also admit that it could be another six months before reforms and retraining of the

security forces are completed. In the meantime, the government is allowing some demonstrations to take place while moving against those that are unauthorized or interfere with normal life. According to some officials, the majority of Bahrainis are criticizing the government for allowing any demonstrations.

Al-Wifaq itself has rejected violence, but this week will indicate the strength of those who are against all compromise. Shiite activists have declared themselves determined to retake the site of the Pearl Roundabout, the intersection where a monument depicting a pearl (a symbol of Bahrain's heritage as a pearl-diving center) was demolished last year after protestors briefly occupied it. The demonstrators seem bent on provoking a draconian response by security forces, some of whom are probably ready to oblige. More than thirty people died in last year's clashes, and the total has crept up during near-nightly skirmishes since then.

A large number of casualties this week -- whether among demonstrators or security forces, who are being subjected to volleys of gasoline bombs -- could lead to a complete collapse of reforms and any hope of political compromise. It could also prompt another intervention by Riyadh, which is concerned about a contagion effect among Saudi Shiites who live in the nearby oil-producing Eastern Province. (Last week, a Saudi Shiite died during a clash with Saudi security forces.) Others fear potential Iranian action: on February 3, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told his Friday prayer audience that the outcome of last year's protests would have been very different if Iran had intervened on behalf of Bahrain's Shiites.

Washington's Options

During his visit to Manama last week, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael Posner urged the government to do more to heal the rifts left by last year's unrest. This week, however, the tension on the streets will likely dominate the agenda. Washington is concerned that violence will set back the clock and ruin official bilateral ties, especially if U.S.-supplied weapons are deployed. Moreover, efforts to curb Iran's regional influence and hamper its nuclear program would become awkward if Bahrainis began to question whether the Fifth Fleet should even be headquartered on the island. Bahraini officials, citizens, expatriates are jittery about what is in prospect. Indeed, the great danger is that the small advances and reforms of the past few months could count for nothing.

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

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