

# A Testing Weekend in Bahrain

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## While international concern has focused on the strategic Strait of Hormuz and Iranian threats against U.S. Navy ships, tension is growing on the streets of Bahrain.

**W**hile international concern has focused on the strategic Strait of Hormuz and Iranian threats against U.S. Navy ships, tension is growing on the streets of Bahrain. The U.S. embassy in the capital, Manama, has relocated some of its personnel to safer areas, warning that it anticipates widespread demonstrations to continue throughout this weekend. Although the island state is usually not anti-American, the embassy has noted an increase in such sentiment observed on Bahraini websites and social media outlets. Moreover, part of the Shiite opposition to the Sunni ruling family has called for U.S. flags to be burned tomorrow. Despite finding "no indications that U.S. citizens are being directly threatened or targeted at this time," the embassy also warned that "an unauthorized demonstration" is planned near its compound tomorrow afternoon, and that heavy traffic and possible clashes should be expected.

Bahrain is approaching the first anniversary of troubles that broke out in February 2011. Although the protests were initially seen as an imitation of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, they quickly developed along sectarian lines. Fearing subversion from Shiite Iran, the government responded with a security clampdown supported by tanks and riot-control units from neighboring Saudi Arabia and police from the United Arab Emirates. Since then, a fragile calm has been restored and an independent inquiry has proposed reforms. Yet daily skirmishes continue between security forces and Shiite youths.

Despite the overlay of the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with its undercurrent of historical tension between Sunnis and Shiites, the challenges in Bahrain have more subtle dimensions for the island's rulers, the majority Shiite community, and Iran, whose media daily endeavors to inflame the situation. The Khalifa ruling family has yet to reestablish dialogue with the main Shiite leadership -- members of the al-Wefaq political society

who resigned from parliament last year in protest at the clampdown. Meanwhile, young Shiite activists appear to be beyond the control of their elders. And Tehran seems to be playing a longer game, avoiding direct involvement for now and leaving its coreligionists to be bludgeoned by Bahrain's security forces.

As if to goad Tehran, one Shiite group -- the February 14 Freedom Movement -- has invoked the words of the founder of Iran's Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in calling for the burning of posters depicting King Hamad of Bahrain and the U.S. flag: "Wherever killing is widespread, the USA is involved." The movement's statement, distributed on Twitter, also accused the Khalifa government of allowing the U.S. Fifth Fleet to be based on the island without the approval of the "brave people of Bahrain."

Iran's current cautious stance on Bahrain's troubles will likely continue. But the tension on the streets will persist as well, with confrontations that hold the potential for more significant casualties among demonstrators or security forces, which could radically exacerbate the situation.

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

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