

Washington's Over-Rigid Policy toward Bahrain

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Dec 14, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

To be more effective, U.S. policy intended to encourage reform in Bahrain should be part of a common approach with allies, especially Britain.

This Friday, Bahrain will mark the fortieth anniversary of its independence from Britain. Although celebratory fireworks are scheduled in the capital, Manama, the U.S. embassy has warned Americans living in the country that they should also expect demonstrations "throughout the day," involving "tactics such as placing debris and oil on roadways and throwing steel spikes." The island's majority Shiite population will be protesting their second-class status and harsh treatment by the security forces of the Sunni ruling family, the Khalifas.

Following last month's report from an international inquiry into riots that erupted earlier this year, Washington's diplomatic challenge is to help Bahrain reform its security forces and bring the Shiite opposition back into the political system. The bottom line is clear: the United States wants to maintain its local naval base, which houses the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, while blunting any troublemaking by Iran, whose various media outlets continually try to incite the Islamic Republic's co-religionists in Bahrain. The current U.S. approach -- pressuring the government -- is not working.

Indeed, despite disappointment that the opposition al-Wifaq Party has been distancing itself from a conciliatory approach, Washington's main strategy appears to favor tough love for the Khalifas. This week, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Michael Posner is visiting Bahrain for talks with "senior government officials and civil society representatives." Notably, his political-military affairs counterpart, Andrew Shapiro, who visited neighboring Saudi Arabia today, has no plans to include Bahrain in his itinerary, despite the Fifth Fleet connection and the island's dependence on U.S. military equipment.

In case Bahrain did not get the Obama administration's message regarding the need for government action, the most senior State Department official to attend the National Day celebration at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington, held last week, was the Bahrain desk officer. As if to emphasize the point, the junior official merely posed for a photograph

with the ambassador and then left without consuming a single canape or drink.

Washington's tactics contrast with those of London. In the past, the United States and Britain have usually worked in tandem on restraining the ruling family's worst excesses -- and both countries' diplomats have been criticized in the local government-controlled media for doing so. Earlier this year, a junior American diplomat was threatened, while the British ambassador, ending a four-year assignment, was refused farewell meetings with both King Hamad and the powerful prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa.

On Monday, however, King Hamad met with Prime Minister David Cameron in London, despite being blocked from visiting the United States this summer. Underlining his ability to secure top-level meetings, the king also spoke with Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne. Cameron reportedly urged Hamad to press ahead with national reconciliation and engage the Shiite opposition. Prince Charles, who receives advice from the government before meeting with foreign dignitaries, probably made the same pitch.

Overlapping with Assistant Secretary Posner's trip to Manama, British Minister for the Middle East Alistair Burt, a top deputy of Foreign Secretary William Hague, is also visiting the island. Before his trip, Burt urged "all groups in Bahrain, in particular the opposition, to engage fully to seize this moment for reconciliation and broader reform."

Although none of Bahrain's fellow Arab monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council are paragons of democratic values, they all have political systems that usually favor consensus rather than confrontation. They also tend to echo the Obama administration in regarding Iran as their most significant threat. Yet these countries also view Washington's current stance on democratic change as too ideological. Following London's example, then, it might be time to emphasize carrots of encouragement rather than policy sticks.

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

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchetskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)