

Iran's Policy Confusion about Bahrain

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Jun 27, 2011

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Brief Analysis

Iran's inability to aid Bahraini protestors could reduce its political influence among Shiite Arabs.

On June 23, eight Bahraini Shiite activists were sentenced to life in prison -- the latest in a string of government efforts to suppress ongoing populist uprisings. In a statement Friday, Manama defended the sentences, claiming that the activists had been convicted of "plotting to violently topple Bahrain's government" and "passing sensitive information to a terrorist organization in a foreign country." Yet even in the face of such sharp repression, Shiite Iran has been unable or unwilling to help its coreligionists in Bahrain. As a result, the crisis could lead to a significant decline in Iran's political influence with Shiite Arabs, while at the same time causing serious problems in Tehran's relations with Arab governments.

Tehran's View of the Arab Spring

Iran was quite content with the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt -- in fact, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and others presented them as part of a regional Islamic awakening inspired by Iran's 1979 revolution. For three decades before the Egyptian revolution, Tehran held no visible diplomatic relations with Cairo. Its relationship with Tunisia was not in great shape either, in part because Tunis feared that Tehran sought to use the country as a base for networking with African Islamists.

When the tremors of change reached Syria, Iran's leaders leapt to compare the protests with the crisis that followed the 2009 Iranian presidential election. That is, they denied the genuine nature of the movement while accusing the United States and Israel of plotting against what they described as a legitimate and popular government.

Confusion about Bahrain

The protests in Bahrain proved more difficult for Tehran to digest, stemming from the Islamic Republic's conflicting attitude toward the island. On the one hand, Iran has long sought to advance its relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including Bahrain. In 2007, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad became

the first Iranian president to attend a GCC summit, he offered to sign a security pact with Gulf Arab leaders. He also suggested forming an organization to improve economic cooperation between Iran and the GCC.

On the other hand, influential Iranians have issued a variety of inflammatory statements that have exacerbated the GCC's mistrust of Tehran. In 2009, for example, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri -- head of the accountability bureau in the Supreme Leader's office and former speaker of the Majlis -- declared that Bahrain had been "the fourteenth province of Iran until 1970." This statement echoed a July 9, 2007, editorial in the influential (and Khamenei-influenced) Kayhan newspaper, which described "undeniable documents" indicating that "Bahrain was a part of Iran's territory until forty years ago." The editorial went on to state that the island's independence from Iran was not legitimate. In response to Nuri's statement, Bahrain suspended natural-gas negotiations with Iran and referred to the remarks as an "infringement of sovereignty."

The deep relations between Iranian and Bahraini Shiite clerics are another important factor. Sheikh Isa Ahmad Qassem, the Friday prayer leader at Imam Sadeq Mosque in Diraz City, has particularly close ties with the Islamic Republic. Considered the spiritual leader of Bahrain's Wafaq Party, he (along with Sheikh Hossein Nejati) is a religious representative of Khamenei, collecting taxes for the Supreme Leader, propagating his religious authority, and encouraging people to follow him rather than other "sources of emulation" (marja taqlid). Qassem is also a religious representative of Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

From the early 1990s to 2001, when the majority of Wafaq leaders were in exile, Qassem was in Qom, Iran, receiving theological training from Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi (former head of the Iranian judiciary), Kadhim al-Haeri (both of whom were in Najaf, Iraq, before the Iranian revolution and were disciples of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr), and Muhammad Fazel Lankarani (a pro-regime ayatollah). Khamenei has described Qassem as "a star in the sky of Shia" and said he is "proud" of the cleric. Similarly, Sheikh Asad Qassir -- a member of Khamenei's fatwa office who is in charge of responding to religious questions from the Supreme Leader's Arab followers -- stated that Khamenei believes Shiites should obey Qassem's political positions and views.

Indeed, Qassem is so close to Khamenei that some Bahrainis believe the main reason why the Wafaq Party did not boycott the 2006 parliamentary elections (despite doing so in 2002) was because Khamenei advised him to participate in the political process. Those who did not follow Qassem's lead founded the Haq Movement for Liberty and Democracy, whose leader, Hassan Mushaima, has since been issued a life sentence by the Bahraini military court.

Not all Bahraini Shiite clerics are sympathetic to Khamenei and Iran, of course. The island has almost 300 Shiite clerics, and some of them remain close to Sistani in Najaf, while others are close to the family of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Shirazi (who was fanatically against the Islamic Republic). Most of these clerics, however, were trained in Qom and speak Farsi. And in recent years, Bahraini publishers have translated hundreds of religious and ideological books from Farsi into Arabic.

Inability to Help Bahraini Shiites

During the initial bloody demonstrations in Bahrain, Tehran verbally blasted Manama, especially after GCC countries deployed troops to help the island's government crack down on protestors. Iran has accused Bahrain and Saudi Arabia of killing scores of Shiites, demanding an end to discrimination by the ruling Sunni minority and calling on the Bahraini king to step down. In addition, Tehran has called the GCC intervention "unacceptable" and predicted it would complicate the kingdom's political crisis.

Despite such fiery rhetoric, the Islamic Republic has been extremely cautious about taking any concrete steps regarding the crisis. Iranian-government-connected groups organized two flotillas to Bahrain in support of Shiite dissidents, but both turned back, evidently under orders from Tehran. And in the wake of opposition setbacks on the

island, Iran might once again be forced to restore normal relations with Manama. In fact, widespread rumors in Tehran indicated that the Bahraini king's special envoy traveled to Iran on June 23, though the Iranian Foreign Ministry denied it.

In short, when it comes to Shiite protests in Bahrain, the Islamic Republic's national interests appear to have trumped its ideological ambitions. Tehran was constrained in part by harsh statements from GCC countries openly blaming Iran for the unrest, breaking from their usual caution about such accusations. In one joint statement, for example, GCC foreign ministers said they were "deeply worried about continuing Iranian meddling" in their region, arguing that "Iran's interference in Bahrain's internal affairs is in violation of international conventions and rules of good neighborliness."

Such statements are indicative of the region-wide dissolution of support for Iran. For example, Tehran no doubt took notice of the recent parliamentary no-confidence vote in Kuwait, where Prime Minister Nasser Muhammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah narrowly survived removal from office. Among other issues, some legislators had accused Sabah of boosting ties with Iran rather than with the GCC. Tehran is also likely worried about its relations with Arab countries outside the GCC -- especially Egypt, where it hopes to normalize relations following Mubarak's ouster. And more generally, Tehran wants to avoid being seen as igniting sectarian conflict in the Arab world, whether in Bahrain or elsewhere.

So far, however, the Bahrain crisis has hurt the Islamic Republic's relations with Arab governments and endangered its image among Shiites, given Tehran's ineptitude in providing help for Shiite dissidents and protecting them from Sunni violence. Many Arab Shiites expect Iran to act as the protector of their coreligionists throughout the region. And several groups of Bahraini clerics have written to Khamenei urging him to help the island's Shiites. This included a March 16 letter signed by "followers of Grand Ayatollah Khamenei in Bahrain" and widely published in the Iranian media, asking the Supreme Leader to help his "children and followers in Bahrain in any appropriate way." The letter also asked, "Who do we have to talk with about our suffering?" Yet there is no evidence that Khamenei has responded to this appeal.

Overall, the Bahraini crisis has been an important test of Iran's pro-Shiite propaganda. The Islamic Republic's policy toward Shiite communities in the region has shown itself to be quite complicated and increasingly muddled. The result has been mounting Shiite suspicion toward Iran -- not only in Bahrain, but also in places such as southwestern Saudi Arabia -- regarding the extent to which they can rely on Tehran to assist them in the event of confrontation with their governments.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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