

Bahrain's Crisis: Saudi Forces Intervene

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Brief Analysis

On March 14, the Saudis dispatched military forces to Bahrain, marking a major step in the troubles that have wracked the Gulf state for the last month. Although clearly intended to help the government in Manama reduce unrest, the move also increases the risk that Iran will come to the aid of its fellow Shiite Muslims in Bahrain, who have been protesting about discrimination. From the perspective of the Obama administration, the Saudi action is at odds with U.S. policy, which has encouraged political dialogue. The Saudi gesture also comes three weeks after Washington pressured Manama to withdraw Bahraini military units from the streets.

The Saudi forces arriving on the island are said to number 1,000, along with about 150 vehicles, including wheeled, light-armored vehicles with roof-mounted heavy machine guns. The soldiers themselves appear to hail from the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), possibly constituting a military police unit rather than paramilitary forces of the Saudi Ministry of Interior. A son of King Abdullah, Prince Miteb, took over command of SANG forces from his father last year. News reports indicate that forces from other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including 500 police from the United Arab Emirates, will soon be joining the Saudis in Bahrain.

Observers have long anticipated that the Saudis would reinforce Bahraini forces if the security situation looked to be running out of control. After Bahraini government and Shiite political groups tried for days to develop a political dialogue, tensions swelled on March 11 when thousands of Shiites attempted to march on Riffa, a Sunni township at the center of the island where several palaces of the al-Khalifa ruling family happen to be located. The protesters were stopped at roadblocks, and some clashed with security forces. On March 13, further protests flared in Manama when Shiites tried to block off the financial district, disrupting the operations of Bahrain's substantial banking sector.

Bahrain's Shiites, who make up more than half the island's estimated 600,000 citizens, have been frustrated by the al-Khalifas' reluctance to concede any political power. At present, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa is effectively in full control, supported by his son, the crown prince, Sheikh Salman. Much authority, though, rests with the long-serving prime minister, the king's uncle, Sheikh Khalifa, who is widely regarded as corrupt. Eight other members of the al-Khalifa family hold the portfolios in the cabinet, including responsibility for foreign affairs, defense, and finance. The bicameral parliament has an upper house appointed by the king and an elected lower house that nonetheless

has a Sunni majority, achieved by districting that discriminates against Shiites.

Key Actors

Developments over the next few days and weeks will likely be crucial for Bahrain and may indicate how other Gulf Arab states will respond to the challenge posed by the political winds of change sweeping the Arab world:

- *The al-Khalifa royal family:* Bahrain's politics over the years -- and crisis management, in particular, in the last year -- are often framed according to the tension between the king and his uncle, the prime minister, whom he is unable or unwilling to sack. The king and the crown prince are seen as moderates; the prime minister is viewed as conservative, though politically more canny than his two perceived counterparts.
- *Bahrain's minority Sunnis:* Saudi forces intervened after several Sunni members of parliament had called for martial law to be imposed. Although cooperation between some Sunni and Shiite groups in Bahrain ensued earlier this year following the political upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt, this cooperation has now stopped. Bahrain's Sunnis now appear solidly behind the government.
- *Bahrain's majority Shiites:* Shiites in Bahrain have described the Saudi intervention as a declaration of war and an occupation. A senior member of the Shiite Wafaq Party, formerly the main opposition bloc in parliament, said: "It will deepen the crisis. The conclusion to this could be very dramatic. I think [the al-Khalifas] are playing their last card." The Shiites themselves have been split on political tactics for several years. The Wafaq has been prepared, until this year's crisis, to work within the system to reduce institutional and social discrimination against Shiites. Other Shiites, including the al-Haq movement in particular, have regarded such efforts as a waste of time. Differences continue to divide the Shiites, and politics are now so fluid that no single group can be identified as holding majority support within the community.
- *Iran:* Until the 1970s, Iran staked a territorial claim to Bahrain and occasionally Iranian politicians still refer to Bahrain as an Iranian province. But, for the most part, Tehran has avoided taking steps to inflame the developing crisis in Bahrain, although it is often blamed by the al-Khalifas for plotting insurrection. With the intervention of Saudi forces, Iran might feel freer to comment. Despite their own vicious suppression of political opposition figures, Iranian officials have now said that violence should not be used against peaceful demonstrators.
- *Saudi Arabia:* Riyadh has two fears: that unrest among Bahraini Shiites will spread to Saudi Arabia's own two million Shiites, and that any political concessions won by Bahraini Shiites will be demanded also by their Saudi brethren. Indeed, Saudi intervention came a day after Bahrain's crown prince announced the acceptance of the idea of a parliament with full authority and fair voting districts. On March 14, King Abdullah chaired a rare top-level meeting of the Saudi national security council, and Bahrain was probably top of the agenda.
- *The United States:* Bahrain is a longtime U.S. ally, providing headquarters for the U.S. Fifth Fleet and allowing U.S. military aircraft to operate from Bahrain's main air base in the island's sparsely populated south. Losing access to these facilities would represent a major setback for U.S. operations protecting shipping in the Persian Gulf and in support of troops in Afghanistan. Bahrain, along with other conservative Arab states in the region, has viewed implicit Obama administration support of political uprisings with disquiet -- as inherently out of tune with the compact shared by long-term allies. The Saudi intervention in Bahrain came two days after visiting U.S. defense secretary Robert Gates criticized the island's government for taking only "baby steps" toward implementing democracy.

U.S. Policy

The White House appears to be frustrated that Bahrain, along with Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman, is reluctant to move toward recognizing universal political rights. For their part, these states are angry that Washington has let staunch allies such as President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt be forced from power while doing little to push Col. Muammar Qadhafi of Libya from his position. The "Gulf way" clearly entails an arrangement in which the region's richer members give financial support to poorer states such as Bahrain and Oman, as was announced last week, and tag dissent as sedition. To prevent the possibility that Iran will take advantage of the developing crisis, the United States and the GCC need to "reset" their relations -- and quickly. Assistant secretary of state for the region Jeffrey Feltman has been dispatched to Manama, and it is not clear if he will be in listening mode. But he should be.

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

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