

Exceeding Expectations: Bahrain One Year after Succession

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Brief Analysis

March 6 marks the one-year anniversary of the succession of Shaykh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa in Bahrain following the death of his father, Shaykh Isa Bin Salman al-Khalifa, who had ruled the Persian Gulf nation since independence in 1971.

A Strategic Ally. Bahrain is an important ally in America's drive to contain threats from Iraq and Iran. The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet (usually about twenty vessels, including an aircraft carrier) is headquartered on the island at the 1,500-man Naval Support Activity-Bahrain (NSA). Bahrain further allows the United States to occasionally maintain forces at the Shaykh Isa air base on the southern tip of the island. As tensions mounted with Iraq in 1998, the U.S. Air Force deployed thirty-six fighters, three B1-B bombers, and several aerial tankers to Bahrain. The importance of the Fifth Fleet's peacetime presence in the Persian Gulf was most aptly demonstrated by its February 2 interception of a Russian tanker smuggling Iraqi oil in violation of United Nations (UN) sanctions. Importantly, Bahrainis across the political spectrum seem to welcome the American presence. During the height of the domestic unrest in 1996 and 1997, the Bahraini opposition did not target the NSA or American servicemen in town. There does not appear to be the resentment toward the American presence that exists in some circles within Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Stability. Bahrain, like Iran and Iraq, has a Shi'i majority. And like Iraq, its Shi'i population is ruled over by a Sunni elite. Iran has historically claimed Bahrain as part of Greater Persia, though the Shah had accepted a 1970 UN survey which determined that Bahrainis overwhelmingly desired independence. Nevertheless, cultural ties remain strong and Persian is widely spoken.

Many Bahraini Shi'is complain of economic discrimination and the lack of democracy. Shaykh Isa had dissolved the elected National Assembly in 1975, and democracy advocates complained that the unelected consultative council which replaced it was not enough. In December 1994, riots erupted across the island, followed by a sustained campaign of bombings and sabotage which left perhaps forty dead, scores injured, and many Shi'i activists in prison. The crisis reached an apex when, in June 1996, Bahrain accused Iran of seeking an armed revolution to replace the Westward-looking monarchy with an Iranian-style theocracy. Under interrogation, members of Hizballah-Bahrain reported receiving funds and other resources from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Intelligence Department. After a crackdown, a tense calm returned. Many Bahraini Shi'is, though, believed that Shaykh Hamad would take an uncompromising line toward the Shi'i population, and that--on assuming power--he might further inflame tensions.

A Succession That Exceeded Expectations. As with King Abdullah II's rise to power in Jordan, Shaykh Hamad has exceeded many expectations and has markedly reduced tensions both by his outreach to the Shi'i community and by his willingness to address root causes of tension. In June, he pardoned more than 300 Shi'is imprisoned in the wake of the 1996-97 crackdown, and in July he freed prominent Shi'a cleric Shaykh Abdul-Amir al-Jamri. In December, he announced elections for local councils thereby restoring a measure of democracy to Bahrain.

While the near-tripling in oil prices infuses extra cash into the Bahraini economy, oil wealth is not enough to support

the state. Bahrain is not a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and produces only 38,000 barrels per day (bpd), although Saudi Arabia gives Bahrain an additional 140,000 bpd from the Abu Safa oil field as a gift. In contrast, even under sanctions, Iraq produces about 2.3 million bpd. Bahraini officials have acknowledged that Bahrain would be the first country in the region to deplete its oil reserves and would therefore have to further diversify. Shaykh Hamad has begun to further open Bahrain to foreign investment, allowing the citizens of Gulf Cooperation Council members to own up to 100 percent of any company listed on the Bahrain stock exchange; citizens of other countries may own up to 49 percent. Transparency, low inflation, and efficient courts also encourage international investment. On the down side, Bahrain's labor force lacks the skills to justify paying salaries as high as Bahrainis expect, and the government's efforts to improve labor skills and encourage employment are not impressive.

A Dangerous Neighborhood. Less than four times the size of Washington, DC, Bahrain lies in one of the world's most dangerous regions. Iraq can menace Bahrain. For instance, during the Persian Gulf War, Saddam Husayn launched several SCUD missiles at the island nation. Iran has been bolstering its naval presence in the Persian Gulf, with frequent military exercises. And Saudi Arabia, just 25 kilometers off the coast and connected to Bahrain by the King Fahd Causeway, could overwhelm the tiny shaykhdom; Saudi troops deployed to the island at the height of the unrest in 1995.

Shaykh Hamad has launched an initiative for outreach to Bahrain's historic enemy: its neighbor, Qatar. The ruling families of the two countries have quarreled for generations. On several occasions during the late 1980s and early 1990s, territorial disputes over the potentially oil-rich Hawar Islands and minor reefs erupted into gunfire and artillery duels. Shaykh Hamad has restored diplomatic relations with Qatar which itself had a leadership transition in 1995. The two shaykhdoms will now cooperate in other matters while their disputes are adjudicated by the International Court of Justice.

Shaykh Hamad has also agreed to an exchange of ambassadors with the Vatican, and toleration toward Christians and Jews on the island continues. More importantly for U.S. interests, Bahrain has not been apologetic for Saddam Husayn's continued defiance of the international community, nor has Bahrain sought to diminish the American presence to appease Iran. Bahrain has participated in the multilateral part of the Middle East peace process but has no official ties of any sort with Israel.

Conclusion. Bahrain continues to be an American ally in a still-troubled region. Shaykh Hamad has exceeded expectations in his domestic outreach. The resulting domestic stability will make Bahrain a useful strategic ally to counter possible regional aggression by Iraq or adventurism by factions within Iran.

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