



# Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse

Jane Kinninmont

June 2012



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Charity Registration No. 208223

ISBN 978 1 86203 268 2

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Bahraini security forces block a road leading to the Budaiya area, where clashes with demonstrators were reported, in Manama on March 17, 2011 as Shiite protesters retreated to their neighbourhoods and villages near the capital a day after heavily-armed police crushed a month-old anti-regime protest at Pearl Square, killing three protesters. © JOSEPH EID/AFP/Getty Images.

Designed and typeset by Soapbox Communications Limited  
[www.soapbox.co.uk](http://www.soapbox.co.uk)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Latimer Trend and Co Ltd



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# About the Author

Jane Kinninmont is Senior Research Fellow on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme at Chatham House, where her research focuses on the Gulf countries and the political economy of the Arab world. Previously she was Associate Director for the Middle East and Africa at the Economist Group, directing a briefing service for senior executives operating in the Middle East. She has a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the University of Oxford, and an MSc in International Politics, with a focus on the Middle East, from the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

As part of her research on the wider region, she has been following developments in Bahrain since 2003, analysing political, economic and business trends there for Business Monitor International from 2003 to 2006 and subsequently for the Economist Intelligence Unit. Some of her other publications on Bahrain include a chapter in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2012); 'Bahrain: Unresolved Divisions', in *The Arab Spring: Implications for British Policy* (Conservative Middle East Council, October 2011); 'Bahrain's Re-Reform Movement', *Foreign Affairs*, February 2011; 'Framing the Family Law: A Case Study of Bahrain's Identity Politics', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 2011; 'Assessing Al-Wefaq's Parliamentary Experiment', *Carnegie Arab Reform Bulletin*, 2009; and 'Castles Built on Sand', *Open Democracy*, 2006. She is writing a book on Bahraini politics, *Bahrain in Focus*, for IB Tauris.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank the following for their comments on drafts of the paper: Dr Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen, Research Fellow, London School of Economics Kuwait Programme; Dr Neil Partrick, Partrick Mideast Consultancy; Dr Sajjad Rizvi, Associate Professor of Islamic Intellectual History, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, Exeter University; Dr Omar Al Shehabi, Assistant Professor, Gulf University of Science and Technology; and Dr Claire Spencer, Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House.

The paper has benefited greatly from the insights provided by participants in a series of workshops on Bahrain at Chatham House in 2011 and 2012, including a conference on 'Bahrain after the Bassiouni Report' in December 2011. Two research trips were funded by Chatham House's Director's Research Innovation Fund and by the MENA Programme's 'Future Trends in the GCC' project.

Thanks are also due to the many Bahrainis from different political viewpoints who have shared their thoughts, insights and ideas for the future over the years.

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# Executive Summary

The political stalemate that has followed the 2011 uprising in Bahrain has generated tensions far beyond the tiny island kingdom, contributing to a growing sectarianization of politics in the wider region, and testing the ability of Western countries to define new policies towards the Middle East in response to the seismic and unpredicted changes of 2011. In the absence of any serious process of political reform, the situation in Bahrain is increasingly fragmented and violence is gradually escalating – raising the spectre of civil conflict that could draw other regional actors into a strategic financial and military hub.

From being a country buffeted by sectarian tensions from elsewhere, Bahrain has begun to export them. Sunni–Shia tensions and mistrust have increased in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE since February 2011. The situation offers a stark warning about the problems that could arise in other Gulf states if the transition to a post-rentier economy is not well managed; Bahrain’s sectarian problems partly reflect efforts to concentrate the state’s limited wealth in the hands of a (largely Sunni) few.

Bahrain faces a long-running local dispute about the sharing of power and wealth, currently heavily concentrated in the hands of core members of the ruling family and their allies. This is not an exclusively ‘Sunni elite’: although the ruling Al Khalifa family is Sunni, its allies include prominent tribal and merchant families from Sunni and Shia, Arab and Persian communities. However, politics have become increasingly polarized along sectarian lines.

In a worst-case scenario, the country could become an arena for proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia, which is allied with the ruling family and provides most of the government’s income, and Iran, which has an interest both in defending a ‘Shia cause’, popular with its domestic public, and in criticizing its traditional rivals, the Gulf monarchies. Saudi officials have accused Iran of fomenting the unrest in Bahrain, while Iran’s state-run media have accused Saudi Arabia of trying to annex its much smaller neighbour through the much-discussed ‘union’ proposal. In a sign of the intensifying tensions, in May 2012 an Iranian newspaper seen as close to the country’s top cleric revived an old Iranian territorial claim to Bahrain.

The recent intensification of Bahrain’s economic and political dependence on Saudi Arabia has bolstered the most conservative elements of the Al Khalifa family against the relative reformists. The other GCC states – which all have different approaches to political representation and to relations between different religious groups – can also play an important role in encouraging the ruling family to focus not only on a narrow and often blunt approach to security, but on the economic and political development it needs to ensure stability.

The uprising of 2011 has redrawn the political map in Bahrain, shifting the relationships within the government, the ruling family, the traditional opposition and newly emerging political groupings. All groups were taken by surprise by the scale of the 2011 protests, and have lacked long-term strategies to respond to them. No single group is now in control of the situation, which is unlikely to be resolved by an agreement between only a few established political figures.

Since the report of the royally established Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (the ‘Bassiouni report’) in November 2011, the government has taken some steps to address human rights abuses and to create new mechanisms for oversight of the security services. However, in a political system dominated by ruling-family members rather than by independent institutions, the effect of these potentially important mechanisms will depend on political will. So far the indications are negative.

Reforms and accountability would be in the national interest and would help to promote the rule of law and improvements in public order called for by the supporters of the government. Their absence

reflects the narrow interests of a few members of the royal family who have been at the centre of decision-making since mid-2010. Power within the ruling family remains firmly with those who presided over the crackdown in 2011. They have few incentives to develop effective mechanisms for accountability and justice, as these could threaten their own positions.

Most Bahraini Shia do not adhere to the Iranian political-religious doctrine of *wilayet-e-faqih* (rule of the jurists), but fear of Iranian interference is a major complicating factor. The government has been unable to substantiate claims of an Iranian coup plot, but this narrative is widely accepted among Bahrain's Sunni population, mindful of Iran's machinations in Iraq and Lebanon. Efforts by the authorities to portray even the most mainstream and conciliatory Shia opposition leaders as traitors and foreign agents have helped to weaken Sunni support for the uprising, but have badly damaged social cohesion. A better defence against Iranian interference would be to ensure that Shia Bahrainis are equal citizens with equal political representation, job opportunities and a stake in the nation-state.

The problems in Bahrain can be solved if there is the political will to compromise, reform and share power within the existing state, which is one of the oldest in the Arab world, rather than relying on external support. There is still scope to find common ground between the different elements of Bahraini society in support of a constitutional monarchy, based on equal citizenship and a revitalized social contract. Conversely, options based on sect-based power-sharing, or well-meaning suggestions that the issues could be fixed by appointing a few more unelected Shia to positions of power, are likely to be counterproductive – entrenching the importance of sectarian affiliation, casting religious groups as rivals for power, and failing to respond to genuine demands for institutional reform.

There is not going to be a political consensus in Bahrain any time soon. But that makes it all the more urgent for a process of political negotiation and reform to begin, so that there is a way forward for resolving political conflict without violence. The current political fragmentation creates uncertainty and weakens the ability of leaders to negotiate. But it also raises the possibility that surprising coalitions of interests may emerge in negotiations that deal with specific issues rather than focusing on identity politics.

### Elements of a successful political solution

- Ensure that nationals have a stake in the country's political and economic system, regardless of their political views or religious identity;
- Focus on common interests and building a middle ground, rather than taking actions that push actors towards the extremes;
- Involve genuine power-sharing in response to the clearly expressed demands of much of the population for greater political representation (all the more so since the 2011 crackdown has damaged the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of many);
- Address socio-economic issues such as land reclamation, corruption, naturalization and labour-market discrimination in conjunction with political issues;
- Take account of the genuine fears of a large part of the population – both the anti-uprising factions and some independents – that democratization would empower theocrats or result in the 'tyranny of the majority';
- Obtain support from the country's GCC neighbours, possibly through a conference or dialogue process that involves advice from GCC diplomats and politicians as well as Bahrain's own factions, but emphasize Bahrain's distinct national identity and ability to reach its own political settlement.

Socio-economic grievances around unemployment, housing shortage, perceptions of economic discrimination and of corruption will need to be addressed as part of a political solution, though not as a substitute for it. A long-term vision for the country's future will need to address the changing economic role of the state as well as the evolving political demands of citizens; the long-term decline of oil production may help to bring about political reform, but responsible opposition groups will also need to manage their supporters' economic expectations.

The repression in Bahrain, a Western ally, complicates and hinders efforts of the US and UK to sketch out a new policy towards a Middle East where demands for democracy have become increasingly vocal. Both governments face increasing criticism from both the Bahraini opposition, who see them as complicit in the crackdown, and from parts of the Bahraini establishment, where there have been allegations that the US plotted with Iran to organize the protests. The UK alliance with the Al Khalifa also draws criticism at home, as indicated by the furore over the 2012 Formula One. Allies of the Al Khalifa want the Bahraini monarchy to be sustainable and accepted. They should help to persuade the ruling family that one of the biggest risks it faces is its own reluctance to reform.



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## Future Trends in the GCC

This report forms part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project on 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states.

The research has two main tracks: political and economic development, looking at the prospects for the GCC countries to adapt and develop their systems to meet the aspirations of their citizens; and identity politics, assessing the politics of sectarianism and prospects for developing more inclusive national identities.

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# 1 Introduction

The political stalemate that has followed the 2011 uprising in Bahrain has generated tensions far beyond the tiny island kingdom, contributing to Sunni–Shia sectarian tensions in the wider Middle East region. It has tested the ability of Western states to define new policies towards the Middle East in response to the seismic and unpredicted changes known as the Arab awakenings, raising criticisms of perceived Western double standards and mixed messages, and sparking wider questions about how the West will react if demands for political change spread more widely in the Gulf states. For Bahrain itself, the unrest and the shift towards a more hardline, security-oriented model of government have compromised the country's stability, damaged the economy and strained relations with a number of allies. Many Bahrainis, especially in the Shia community, have been pushed into the opposition for the first time as a result of the blunt and often sectarian approach of the security forces. Meanwhile, some of Bahrain's pro-government Sunnis are so worried about putative Shia disloyalty that they are now calling for Bahrain to form a union with Saudi Arabia. Violent clashes between protestors and police have continued and appeared to be escalating at the time of writing.

Since the report of the royally commissioned Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) in November 2011, the government has taken partial steps to address some of the human rights abuses of last year. It has established new laws and structures apparently aimed at preventing similar abuses recurring. But the credibility of the legalistic approach to creating new mechanisms for accountability has already been undermined by the failure of the governing authorities to hold any senior officials accountable for the torture, deaths in custody and excessive force detailed in the BICI report, and by signs that at least some of the abuses have continued in the post-BICI period. Officials have tried to downplay the abuses as the mistakes of a few rogue officers, but the country has a long record of torture and deaths in custody. Since virtually all the officials who presided over last year's crackdown remain in power, and since decision-making appears to be in the hands of security-minded hardliners, it is questionable whether those in charge have any incentive to oversee reforms that might ultimately threaten their own jobs.

Meanwhile, none of the root causes of the 2011 uprising have been seriously addressed. At the heart of the uprising were long-standing grievances over the distribution of power and wealth – including calls for a fully elected parliament, an elected government, and an end to the gerrymandering of elections and corruption. Uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world inspired a new generation of protestors from a wide range of backgrounds, who did not feel represented by existing political societies or by weak and co-opted parliaments. Critically, youth groups of all hues remain unrepresented in the few tentative attempts at dialogue, which of late have focused on contacts between the government and licensed political societies,<sup>1</sup> notably Al-Wafaq National Islamic Society, the largest opposition group, led by a Shia cleric, Sheikh Ali Salman.

While Bahrain's mainstream opposition societies have consistently called for constitutional reforms and a change of prime minister under the existing monarchy, an increasing proportion of the opposition now believes the government is neither legitimate nor capable of reform. The open questioning of monarchic legitimacy is currently unparalleled in other states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Yet although Bahrain has a unique social and religious mix, it has often set precedents for other GCC states, and its neighbours should not assume they will be immune from similar pressures. It is no coincidence that Bahrain and Oman, which of all the GCC states faced the greatest unrest in 2011, are

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<sup>1</sup> Technically, political parties are banned, as in all the Gulf states, but 'political societies' perform some of the functions of political parties.

the first in the region to face declining oil production. While each Gulf country has a unique history and demographic mix, the case of Bahrain raises worrying scenarios for what could go wrong in other Gulf countries if the transition to post-oil economies, and the associated changes in the political expectations of citizens, are not well managed.<sup>2</sup>

The small Gulf monarchies have always had to contend with both real and perceived pressures from larger neighbours, which continue to complicate the local dispute in Bahrain. The government and many of its supporters fear that Iran has undue influence over Bahrain's Shia citizens, while opposition activists are concerned that the government's growing economic and political dependence on Saudi Arabia presents an obstacle to reform. Bahrain's political faultlines have never simply matched sectarian lines, but in a context of heightened regional sectarian tensions Sunni and Shia communities have become increasingly polarized. The failure to resolve the tensions in Bahrain increases the danger of sectarianism spreading more widely through the Gulf, particularly to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and has added to tensions between the GCC states and Iraq, as well as the more pronounced tensions between the GCC states and Iran.

Iran is not the driving force behind the unrest in Bahrain, but it is a complicating factor. Most Bahraini Shia look towards clerics in Iraq rather than those in Iran, and do not adhere to the Iranian model of *wilayat-e-faqih* (rule of the jurists), which is a minority view in Shia Islam. However, the ruling Al Khalifa dynasty has always been wary of potential intervention by Iran, not least because Iranian officials sometimes stoke tensions by harking back to the days before 1783 when Bahrain was part of the Persian empire. In the early days of the Iranian revolution, a Bahraini opposition group sought to overthrow the monarchy with Iranian support. In the three decades since then, Shia movements in the Gulf monarchies have changed greatly. Even the Shirazi religious and political movement formerly supported by Iran has turned against the Iranian model. Yet from the point of view of the Bahraini (and Saudi) rulers, the spread of Iranian influence into Iraq since 2003 has increased the fear of Iranian expansionism. Claims of direct Iranian involvement in the protests have not been substantiated and are not widely believed by Western diplomats familiar with Bahrain (see below). The irony is that if Iran does want entry points, it is far more likely to find them if Bahrain's Shia citizens are repressed and excluded. Rather, the best defence against Iranian interference is to bring Bahrain's Shia citizens firmly into the framework of an inclusive nation-state, with equal voting rights and equal job opportunities.

Bahrain's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia – which provides 77% of Bahrain's oil<sup>3</sup> – has only intensified since 2011, and the increased Saudi role so far appears to have bolstered the most conservative elements of the Al Khalifa family against its reformists. Saudi wishes will remain a factor in Bahraini decision-making. However, they may also sometimes be used as a convenient excuse. Some diplomats in Saudi Arabia think the country's interest is in stability in Bahrain, not in its specific constitutional arrangements. Saudi Arabia's *de facto* importance in Bahrain suggests that it will need to be engaged in any solution. While it has so far largely bolstered hardliners within the Al Khalifa, the latter's focus on hard security is failing to resolve Bahrain's problems and generates risks of political and sectarian tensions spreading throughout the Gulf: in particular, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province has seen repeated demonstrations in support of the Bahraini protestors. The other GCC states can still play an important role in encouraging the Bahraini ruling family to focus on the economic and political development it needs to ensure stability.

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2 See Chatham House MENA Programme, 'Kuwait Study Group: Identity, Citizenship and Sectarianism in the GCC', Workshop Summary, February 2012. <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/183415>.

3 Bahrain typically receives 50% of output from a shared offshore field administered by Saudi Aramco, the Saudi state oil company. This provided 147,452 barrels per day (b/d) out of Bahrain's total production of 192,000 b/d in the third quarter of 2011, according to the latest official figures available. See Central Bank of Bahrain, 'Economic Indicators', September 2011.

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## 2 The 2011 Uprising and After

In February 2011, Bahrain saw mass protests calling for constitutional reform and for the removal of the prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the world's longest-serving premier, who has held his position since 1971. Protests were called for 14 February because it represented the tenth anniversary of a popular referendum on establishing a 'democratic constitutional monarchy' in Bahrain; 98.4% of voters had approved the plan in the 2001 referendum, but it was never fully implemented. Ten years later, frustration with the weak half-elected and gerrymandered parliament was building. While the opposition wanted more meaningful representation, key players in the ruling family felt they had already been generous by bringing in any kind of elected parliament, a luxury not known in neighbouring Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the government was beginning to take a more hardline approach towards dissenters.

The opposition was divided between those that favoured participating in the officially sanctioned but tightly constrained political system, such as Al-Wafaq National Islamic Society, a Shia grouping that won 45% of the vote in parliamentary elections in 2010, and those that boycotted the weak parliament and focused on street protests, such as the Haq movement. The latter's support base was narrower but more vocal. In mid-2010, several high-profile leaders of the boycotting faction had been imprisoned. Opposition activists reported it was becoming harder to recruit and many were afraid of the potential repercussions of political activity. But in early 2011, galvanized by what they had seen in Tunisia and Egypt, young political activists began to form new groupings, using Facebook to call for their peers to join the demonstrations on 14 February. In a pattern that was also seen in other countries, the numbers of protestors swelled after a heavy-handed police response that resulted in six deaths in the first week of protests. Estimates suggest that on 22 February over 150,000 people joined a march to the Pearl Roundabout to commemorate the 'martyrs' of the first few days.<sup>4</sup>

No political grouping – not even the various groups who called for the initial protests – predicted the eventual scale of the uprising. Protests took on a momentum of their own, catalysed by regional developments and then by anger at the shooting of protestors. The initial rallying calls, which focused on widely supported demands for constitutional reform and for the removal of the prime minister, escalated and then splintered after the initial deaths, and after a minority of opposition groups began to call publicly for a republic.<sup>5</sup> The intervention of GCC troops in mid-March also took a number of political actors by surprise.<sup>6</sup>

The element of surprise meant there was a lack of strategic direction on all sides, which helps to explain a variety of miscalculations and short-term decisions, as well as the weakening of established political figures. The uprising of 2011 has redrawn the political map in Bahrain, shifting the relationships within and among the government, the ruling family, the traditional opposition and newly emerging political groupings. There is a new political fragmentation on all sides and many voices now complain about a lack of representation.

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4 Estimates cited by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry.

5 A 'Coalition for a Republic' was formed by three political groupings, Haq, the Bahrain Freedom Movement and Al-Wafa. A number of Haq activists resigned in response.

6 The intervention by GCC troops was not entirely unprecedented. There are plentiful eyewitness reports of Saudi National Guard units entering Bahrain during the 1990s uprising. However, opposition activists interviewed by the author in late February 2011 regarded it as unlikely that this would recur. The move may also have surprised ruling-family reformists.

The BICI, a commission of inquiry commissioned by the king, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa, found that 35 people, mostly civilians, died in the unrest of February–March 2011, five of them tortured to death in custody. Nearly 3,000 people were arrested and 4,539 people – 3.6% of the Bahraini workforce – were fired from their jobs.<sup>7</sup> In the months since the ‘state of national safety’ ended, most of those imprisoned have been freed, and most of those who were fired have returned to work (see below), though not always to the same jobs. However, arrests and beatings continue. Opposition activists say the death toll has now risen to around 80, though the government contests this. Far from cowing people into submission, the wide-ranging crackdown has swelled the ranks of the opposition.

The crisis has increased the likely future costs of reform. The government has hoped to assuage some of the pressure for reform by offering a few minimal amendments to the powers of parliament, as suggested by participants at a ‘National Dialogue’ in July 2011. As opposition groups were given only 35 out of 300 places at the dialogue, and as hundreds of activists were imprisoned on charges relating to political expression at the time the dialogue was held, it was not able to act as a credible forum for resolving the deep differences between the opposition and the government.<sup>8</sup> In line with its recommendations, the constitution has been amended to enhance the powers of parliament as follows:

- Parliament has the right to vote no confidence in the government’s four-year work-plan (seen as implying no confidence in the cabinet);
- The speaker of the elected chamber, not the speaker of the appointed chamber, will be the speaker of the joint houses of parliament when they sit in joint session;
- The king should consult both speakers before dissolving parliament;
- MPs will be allowed to question ministers before the parliament, rather than before smaller parliamentary committees as before.

The unequal constituency boundaries have not been addressed.

These limited changes might well have been received positively by the opposition two years before. After the violence of early 2011, they were seen as too little, too late. The lack of confidence in the state-sanctioned political process was shown in the 17% turnout for the September 2011 by-elections in 18 constituencies, which were triggered by the resignation of the 18 Al-Wefaq MPs (Al-Wefaq boycotted the by-election in protest at the ongoing crackdown).

### Government and opposition internal power shifts

The two parties that worked the hardest to negotiate a political solution to the unrest in February and March 2011, the crown prince and Al-Wefaq, have both been weakened since their failure to reach an agreement during that highly charged period. One of the core problems was that both factions had already gradually become weakened within their own camps, owing to the disappointment of their rivals with the results of the political reform process. This led to doubts about the ability of either side to reach an agreement.<sup>9</sup> Al-Wefaq lacked a clear mandate from the decentralized mass of protestors, many of whom were expressing frustration with the traditional opposition as well as with the government,<sup>10</sup> while some opposition activists were also sceptical as to whether the crown prince had sufficient authority to strike a deal. In the event, he received his father’s approval on 12 March to conduct a dialogue on the basis of seven core issues, namely:

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7 This comprised 2,464 from the private sector, including state companies (BICI, p. 341), and 2,075 from the public sector (BICI, p. 354). The total workforce figure of 123,654 is from Central Bank of Bahrain, ‘Economic Indicators’, September 2011, <http://www.cbb.gov.bh/assets/E%20I/EI%20Sep2011.pdf> (accessed May 2012).

8 I analyse this more fully in ‘Beyond Bahrain’s Dialogue’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 July 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/18/after\\_bahrain\\_s\\_dialogue](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/18/after_bahrain_s_dialogue).

9 Various interviews, Manama and London, 2011 and 2012; also discussed in BICI.

10 A number of opposition activists were seeking to build a consensus between all the opposition groups behind the crown prince’s ‘seven principles’ for dialogue when the GCC troop deployment was announced and the offer of dialogue was withdrawn.

- A parliament with full authority;
- A government that represents the will of the people;
- Fair voting districts;
- Discussion of naturalization policy (given questions about sectarian discrimination);
- Combating corruption;
- Public lands (given concerns about privatization and corruption);
- Addressing sectarian tensions.

It was perhaps unsurprising that a political dispute that had been years in the making would not be resolved in four weeks. But when efforts at talks hit their first serious impasse – possibly because of a miscalculated negotiating tactic by Al-Wefaq, which, according to BICI’s account, said on 13 March that it would not enter a formal dialogue unless the government agreed to the election of a new constitutional assembly – the king announced that military forces from other GCC states<sup>11</sup> would enter Bahrain. Two days later, the king announced a three-month ‘state of national safety’, which gave sweeping powers to the head of the army. In the subsequent days, the government turned down US, Qatari and Kuwaiti attempts to mediate.<sup>12</sup>

The failure of the dialogue process may simply reflect miscalculations during a period of great uncertainty, but was seen outside the opposition as an indication that the authorities lacked any interest in negotiation, at a time when many were extremely frightened by a breakdown in law and order, with protestors setting up roadblocks in central Manama and with reports of violent clashes in different areas of the country.<sup>13</sup> These fears were used by government hardliners to justify their attempts to resolve the problem through a hard security approach. More than a year on, however, this approach has also failed to resolve Bahrain’s disputes, suggesting that a return to a serious process of dialogue and reform is needed.

### Ruling-family dynamics

Within the ruling family, since the intervention by the GCC forces on 14 March 2011, power appears to have shifted away from the crown prince towards more hardline, security-oriented princes. Internal family interrelationships are not transparent, but differences of opinion have become more public in recent years, especially between a more conservative faction associated with the prime minister, responsible for much of the day-to-day running of the country, and a more reformist faction associated with the crown prince. The king is not seen as leaning towards any particular ideology, but as the ruler he is the key person whom the other factions seek to influence.

The intervention by GCC troops and the weakening of the crown prince have benefited the prime minister, whose personal position would have been at risk if a political agreement had been struck. However, analysts may sometimes focus too much on the role of the prime minister without looking at the rest of the state power structure.

The traditional picture of a ruling family oriented around two main camps – of the prime minister and the crown prince – now appears over-simplistic, with the emergence in recent years of a strong power base around two brothers, Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the head of the Bahrain Defence Forces, and Khaled bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the Minister of the Royal Court (nicknamed the ‘Khawalid’). Both

11 These mostly consisted of Saudi troops, with the second largest contingent coming from the UAE. Qatar and the Kuwaiti navy sent smaller deployments.

12 According to Al-Wefaq, the crown prince had told them that he had been given a six-week window to conduct the dialogue (interview, Abduljalil Khalil, Manama, March 2012). This six-week period was separately confirmed by a Bahraini diplomatic source (London, April 2012). The Bahraini diplomatic source said there was no reason for the opposition to have thought the time for dialogue was over when the GCC forces came in and the state of national safety was declared. For their part, Al-Wefaq sources have said they went to see representatives of the crown prince on 14 March 2011, the morning after GCC troops entered the country, but were told the crown prince no longer had the authority to negotiate with them (interview, Ali Al-Aswad, London, July 2011).

13 Allegations that ‘thugs’ working for the security services acted as *agents provocateurs* are widespread but were not investigated by the BICI.

are significantly younger than the prime minister.<sup>14</sup> They are thought to be closely allied with another important figure, Ahmed bin Attiyatullah Al Khalifa, a central figure in the Bandargate report (see below), who now holds the title of Minister of the Royal Court for Follow-Up Affairs, with wide-ranging powers. An efficient and hard-working figure, he is said to be unofficially coordinating the implementation of the BICI report. These figures are also thought to be allied with other security-focused members of the royal family, such as Khalifa bin Abdullah Al Khalifa. He was the head of the National Security Agency until November 2011, when he was moved sideways to become an adviser to the king, after the NSA was roundly criticized in the BICI report (however, he is believed still to be closely involved with the agency). Senior members of the ruling family are represented in a Family Council which the king consults on key decisions, underscoring the ruler's need to build consensus within the family.

Before the uprising, the balance of power within the ruling family had been most affected in recent years by a struggle over economic policy. The crown prince had taken on an increasingly prominent role in policy-making with the establishment of the Economic Development Board (EDB), sometimes seen as virtually a parallel cabinet. The EDB was responsible for the country's long-term economic plan, 'Vision 2030', and for a series of labour-market reforms designed to encourage Bahrainis to work in the private sector and to narrow the cost gap between Bahraini and expatriate workers. The crown prince has many supporters among the business elite, but his labour-market policies also alienated some traditional business interests, particularly in the construction sector, where employers objected to having to pay higher labour costs. The country's Western allies have viewed the crown prince extremely favourably; he had studied in the United States, and they see him as a proponent of reforms that would make Bahrain's monarchy – and its economy – more sustainable. However, Western support has also had some drawbacks domestically, with critics regarding him as too pro-Western and lacking in military credentials.

Since the failure of efforts at talks with the opposition, the crown prince appears to have lost some of his standing among the Sunni community in particular, especially as the state and pro-government media have sometimes tried to portray the opposition as a monolithic group of traitors with whom it would be naïve to hold a dialogue. Meanwhile, the crown prince's half-brother Khaled became more prominent following the March 2011 announcement of his engagement to a daughter of the Saudi king. Another half-brother, Nasser, who shares a mother with Khaled and who is married to a daughter of the ruler of Dubai, has become particularly prominent and now commands an expanded army battalion. The BICI report praised the crown prince's attempts at dialogue and countered some of the more sectarian and Iran-focused claims made by more hardline figures. Yet he continues to maintain a low profile, and two of his key allies moved out of powerful economic policy-making positions in early 2012. First, the head of the Bahrain's sovereign wealth fund, Talal Al Zain, resigned to take up a position in the private sector; and, second, a royal decree announced that the head of the EDB, Sheikh Mohammed bin Essa Al Khalifa, was leaving his position to become an adviser to the crown prince. He has been replaced by a part-time acting head, Kamal Ahmed, who is also the minister of transport. This suggests that the role of the EDB is being significantly downgraded and that the power struggle over control of economic policy has tipped back towards more conservative factions, at least for the present.<sup>15</sup>

### The opposition youth movement

The 2011 protests were led by youth activists from a variety of different backgrounds and with differing viewpoints. The initial protests were organized by several small circles of youth who coordinated independently through social media and on popular Bahraini web forums, notably Bahrain Online. The youth movement subsequently started to call itself 'February 14th', although this is a fairly loose

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14 The personalization of rule and the weakness of institutions in most Arab countries sometimes leads to an excessively analytical focus on individuals rather than power structures.

15 Kamal Ahmed was chief operating officer of the EDB until joining the cabinet in February 2011. As such, his appointment signals the kind of continuity of approach that may reassure some of the country's foreign investors, but the fact he is taking on this role as his second job implies the commitment will have to be limited.

term for a decentralized and leaderless organization. It should not be seen as a proxy for Al-Wefaq, but rather represents a new generation of activists, including a mixture of Islamists and secularists. As well as rejecting the limited political space offered by the parliament, the youth-led uprising was an attempt to find an alternative to the existing political opposition, and thus was able to draw in many protestors who were not affiliated with existing groups. Like the April 6th youth movement in Egypt, at the beginning of the protests it operated as a highly inclusive, very loose coalition that united around broad calls for political change, without making potentially divisive decisions on more detailed issues.<sup>16</sup> The movement still has no defined public leadership. It has built up some activists into popular heroes, but these are icons who influence the movement rather than leaders who command it or are responsible for it. These figures tend to be lionized for being outspoken or being seen to make sacrifices, and include 14 high-profile detained political leaders, especially the former hunger striker Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, as well as Nabeel Rajab, head of the banned Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (co-founded with Al-Khawaja).

The name 'February 14th' is now used mainly by the self-styled 'Coalition of February 14th Youth', which has articulated defined positions on many issues, including a call for regime change rather than for a constitutional monarchy. Over time, the coalition has also become more anti-Western in its rhetoric, criticizing the United States and United Kingdom for maintaining their close alliances with the Al Khalifa and calling for the withdrawal of the US Fifth Fleet from its base in Bahrain.<sup>17</sup> It has also become more inclined towards violence against the security forces, which it seeks to justify as 'self-defence' (though such violence is then used by the authorities to justify police 'self-defence'). This is not restricted to the coalition itself, but is a potentially dangerous phenomenon among a broad range of localized opposition youth groups (sometimes dubbed 'Ahrar' or 'free people') that are organizing themselves within individual Shia villages with a long history of political activism, such as Sanabis and Sitra. These villages witness frequent clashes with the police and their walls are daubed with graffiti showing pictures of young men who died in the uprising. Their youth groups are now sharing online information on ways to attack the police with Molotov cocktails or metal rods.

From its beginning as part of a broad-based youth movement that rejected sectarian or ideological divisions, the coalition has also adopted a more religious vocabulary, using terms such as 'sacred defence'. However, it does not defer to the Shia clerics on political issues; indeed, its political culture is not one of deference.

For its part, Al-Wefaq continues to call for reform rather than a wholesale change of the system. Together with four other opposition societies, it has set out a political vision for Bahrain's future entitled the 'Manama Document', calling for an elected government under a constitutional monarchy, a fully elected parliament with no gerrymandering, a fair and transparent judiciary and an end to the exclusion of Shia from the security service – and for all these reform proposals to be put to a referendum.<sup>18</sup> Al-Wefaq's demands are focused on the constitution and the reform of state institutions; ending gerrymandering is one of its top priorities.<sup>19</sup> It has a strong infrastructure of political support, given its history as a social movement as well as a political grouping; for instance, it has helped injured and unemployed protestors by collecting and disbursing aid. It has also been able to gather larger crowds for its legally authorized rallies than February 14th has for its unlicensed protests (which are at greater risk of being broken up by the police).

February 14th spokespeople are critical of Al-Wefaq's approach and aims. They have written of an 'internal counter-revolution' that seeks to derail the revolution by manipulating people into keeping 'regime reformists', and have argued that the narrative of 'reformers' versus 'hardliners' in the regime

16 This choice of structure reflects an awareness of the ways in which opposition movements have been weakened in the past, first through the repression or co-opting of individual leaders, and secondly through internal divisions over ideology or strategy.

17 See, for instance, Pearl Revolution Political Centre, 'To the US Policy Makers: Your Policy in Bahrain Has Gone Beyond Tolerance', Facebook, 28 March 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/14FebPRPC/posts/326202810770624>.

18 Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, Wa'ad, Al-Ekha, National Assembly and Patriotic Assembly, 'Manama Document: Bahrain's Road to Freedom and Democracy – A Joint Document by Opposition Societies', available at <http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=5934> (accessed May 2012).

19 Interviews, Manama, March 2012 and London, February and May 2012.



ultimately helps to preserve the power structure, providing ‘the justifications needed by the colonial powers to continue supporting the regime and sell billions’ worth of arms.’<sup>20</sup>

Three pre-existing movements, Haq, the Bahrain Freedom Movement and Al-Wafa, formed a Coalition for a Republic in March 2011 and continue to call for revolution, although they have been hindered by the imprisonment of most of their key leaders.

Bahrain’s opposition thus faces internal differences over strategy – revolution or negotiation – and goals – whether for limited reform, a constitutional monarchy or a republic. While the mainstream opposition has for years asked for a constitutional monarchy (based either on a return to the 1973 constitution or on one to be drafted by a new constitutional assembly), an increasingly significant faction now does not regard the monarchy as legitimate. But these divisions would only become an issue if there were a credible promise of a deal on the table or a meaningful dialogue process under way.

## New Sunni voices

Another critical change is the emergence of new anti-uprising political groupings, variously described as ‘Sunni’, ‘pro-government’, ‘pro-unity’ or an ‘alternative opposition’. All of these labels are problematic. These movements are nominally cross-sect, although largely Sunni, and they do not necessarily represent all Sunnis, as labels such as ‘the Sunni street’ may suggest. They tend to be more anti-opposition than anti-government, but are not reflexively pro-government; they support the continuation of the monarchy, but so do most of the opposition groups.

These came together on 21 February 2011, when a ‘Gathering of National Unity’ drew tens of thousands to Al Fateh mosque.<sup>21</sup> The key speaker was a Sunni cleric, Dr Abdellatif Al Mahmood, who outlined a mixture of criticisms of the protestors and criticisms of the government.

Dr Al Mahmood has since become the leader of The Gathering of National Unity (TGONU), an umbrella movement for a number of other Sunni political groups, including Al Asala (a Salafist party) and Al Menbar (associated with the Muslim Brotherhood), and some secularists. These disparate groups have united primarily around their shared criticisms of Al-Wefaq and February 14th, which they see as violent, sectarian and pro-Iranian.<sup>22</sup> TGONU has held rallies in support of the security services and has called for Al-Wefaq to apologize for acts of violence committed by protestors as a precursor to any political dialogue.<sup>23</sup> It strongly opposes any suggestions that there should be a bilateral dialogue between the government and Al-Wefaq, and wants to ensure its supporters’ interests are represented in any political deal.<sup>24</sup> While TGONU has thus far been useful to the government, it has its own demands, such as a stronger parliament (but not an elected government<sup>25</sup>), a more independent judiciary and less corruption – and it could ultimately present a challenge to the government if it becomes too strong and independent.<sup>26</sup>

TGONU now faces an internal challenge with the emergence of a new Sunni faction, Sahwat Al Fateh. On the anniversary of the first Gathering of National Unity, this faction held a mass rally (at which Dr Al Mahmood did not appear) at Al Fateh mosque, for which it received a cable of thanks from the

20 The post came two days after the United States had agreed to resume some arms sales to Bahrain while the crown prince was visiting Washington. See Josh Rogin, ‘Obama administration seeks to bolster Bahraini crown prince with arms sales’, *Foreign Policy*, 11 May 2012, [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/11/obama\\_administration\\_seeks\\_to\\_bolster\\_bahraini\\_crown\\_prince\\_with\\_arms\\_sales](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/11/obama_administration_seeks_to_bolster_bahraini_crown_prince_with_arms_sales).

21 People of various religious and political persuasions attended the first rally, held in the largest mosque in Bahrain. The mosque is Sunni and the term ‘Al Fateh’ – The Conqueror – is a reference to the first Al Khalifa ruler of Bahrain. TGONU reportedly includes Shia, Christian and Jewish members, though probably very few.

22 Some opposition activists see TGONU as essentially a government proxy, echoing long-standing rumours that the Royal Court has bankrolled Sunni political societies (for instance, a Wikileaks cable from the US embassy in September 2009 cites such rumours, though no evidence: A Field Guide to Bahrain’s Political Parties, ID: 168471, 4 September 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/168471>). The government has made ample use of TGONU and the ‘Sunni street’ in its international PR efforts. However, TGONU has been able to attract tens of thousands of people to some of its rallies, suggesting its message finds genuine resonance among parts of Bahraini society.

23 Author interview with Dr Abdellatif Al-Mahmood and other TGONU representatives, Manama, March 2012.

24 Dr Abdellatif Al-Mahmood, author interview, Manama, March 2012.

25 ‘An elected government was possible and acceptable before the crisis that we had last year, but now after the crisis and the sectarian friction it is not acceptable. But other solutions could be provided, like developing the judiciary.’ Dr Abdellatif Al-Mahmood, author interview, Manama, March 2012.

26 One supporter (not an official representative) said: ‘We are not for the government, just temporarily allied with them.’ Author interviews, Manama, September 2011 and March 2012.

king. A youth leader of the movement, Khalid Al Bloashi, pledged support to the king and said the country's priorities should be security, deterring vandalism and opposing foreign agendas in Bahrain.<sup>27</sup> Speeches at the rally by Kuwaiti Salafists, who denounced the alleged interference of Kuwaiti 'Safavids' in Bahrain, marked the growing regionalization of sectarian tensions.

Sahwat Al Fateh is seen as loosely aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood but more youth-oriented. Since it is one of the newest groups, its demands are less well known, but some of its prominent figures have taken a more hardline stance than TGONU on the opposition, while also echoing some of its criticisms.<sup>28</sup> For instance, one of its prominent figures, Mohammed Khaled, a former Al-Menbar MP, tweeted that people should run over protestors as the government was not doing enough to enforce the law against rioters. By contrast, Dr Al Mahmood has called on people not to take the law into their own hands. Via Twitter, Sahwat Al Fateh has questioned the need for dialogue, opposed secret negotiations between the government and opposition, and objected to 'American interference' in Bahrain.

Many Bahraini Sunnis, especially secularists and business people, still feel unrepresented by the existing political movements. Wa'ad, a long-established secular liberal opposition party with a religiously diverse membership, has been greatly weakened by the imprisonment of its secretary-general, Ebrahim Sharif, a secular Sunni economist, who is one of just a handful of Sunni political activists to be jailed for their role in the protests.

### The sectarianization of politics

Bahrain's complex political scene is sometimes oversimplified in the image of a Sunni minority ruling over an oppressed Shia majority, but in fact there have always been Shia Bahrainis who supported the government, and Sunni Bahrainis who opposed it. Today, both groups have dwindled. Many Bahrainis with different religious and political viewpoints have stated that the social fabric has been torn, that sectarianism exists to a degree unprecedented in their lifetime, that they have broken with friends from other sects, and that they have heard about 'mixed' Sunni-Shia marriages ending.<sup>29</sup> Both pro-government media and social media have propagated sectarian messages, particularly against the Shia community. Some even say that they fear 'another Iraq' in Bahrain. Such fears may seem exaggerated for those who know Bahrain as a tolerant, quiet and law-abiding place where weapons are scarce. Yet the history of ethnic conflict elsewhere suggests that the increasing use of narratives justifying violence, even if they come from a small minority on both the opposition and the pro-government sides, gives cause for alarm.<sup>30</sup>

The uprising was mostly but not exclusively Shia. Protestors called for national demands and chanted 'no Sunni, no Shia, just Bahraini'. The opposition, keen to build cross-sectarian support, speaks of the Bahraini people rather than the Shia sect and argues that the real divide is between government and people, not between sects. Al-Wefaq's Sheikh Ali Salman worked closely with Wa'ad's Ebrahim Sharif during the protests. But broader Sunni sympathy with the mostly Shia leaders proved limited, and much of that was lost after the Coalition for a Republic called for the overthrow of the ruling family. Many Bahraini Sunnis assumed 'republic' meant a (Shia) Islamic republic.<sup>31</sup>

The minority of Sunni Bahrainis who helped to organize the initial protests in 2011 are now in danger of being written out of their history. The sectarian nature of the subsequent crackdown meant that Sunni oppositionists did not face the same degree of retribution as their Shia counterparts, with only a very

27 'Bahrain Sunnis warn government over dialogue at rally', Reuters, 22 February 2012.

28 Its emergence may also reflect personal rivalries for leadership of the 'Sunni street' following Dr Al Mahmood's meteoric rise over the past year.

29 Author interviews, Manama, September 2011 and March 2012.

30 See also International Crisis Group, 'Conflict Risk Alert: Bahrain', 16 April 2012, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2012/mena/conflict-risk-alert-bahrain.aspx>.

31 This was predicted by some Sunni opposition activists, such as former MP Ali Rabea, who opposed the call for a republic for that reason, telling *Gulf States Newsletter* in February 2011 that 'an overthrow of the Al-Khalifas would go against all Sunni Bahrainis, potentially causing sectarian conflict'. *Gulf States Newsletter* noted – presciently – that while the protests had not so far been advancing a specifically Shia agenda, the question of regime change could lead to a Sunni-Shia divide, and that if this happened, the regime's hand would be strengthened. *Gulf States Newsletter*, 'Bahrain protests lead contagion in region where opposition voices demand to be heard', 25 February 2011.

small number imprisoned. With a better chance of avoiding retribution, and often facing significant family pressure in a very family-oriented society, they are now largely quiet.

Meanwhile, what is probably a far larger proportion of Bahrain's Sunnis distrust the Shia-led opposition and do not believe it will protect their interests. This may have less to do with the policies and statements of opposition leaders than with the fear that they secretly represent Iran or that they will prove to be as violent and sectarian as the post-Saddam political groupings in Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Fears among some of the Sunni population that the uprising had a sectarian agenda were exacerbated in March 2011 by a protest march to Riffa – an area popular with upper-class Sunnis including the royal family, and where the royal court is based – and by reports that the country's main hospital was denying medical treatment to Sunnis.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, a minority of Bahraini protestors attacked security forces and expatriates (who were possibly taken for members of the security forces), all of whom were Sunni – triggering further alarm through much of the Sunni community.<sup>34</sup>

Such fears were exacerbated by the local media (mostly either state-owned or broadly pro-government), which, BICI found, defamed protestors and used derogatory and inflammatory language against them. Sectarian discourse has burgeoned in the media since the uprising. In one telling example of its new-found acceptability, a 2007 Wikileaks cable reported that a highly sectarian documentary was screened at a pro-Saddam conference held in Manama on Saddam Hussein's birthday – but noted that local activists and journalists had generally criticized this. In April 2012, the organizer of the conference, a Baathist journalist, Sameera Rajab,<sup>35</sup> was promoted to a ministerial position.

In the crackdown that followed the uprising, Shia Bahrainis were disproportionately targeted by the state in arrests, workplace interrogations and mass dismissals that took place across public-sector companies.<sup>36</sup> They also faced sectarian insults from the security forces at checkpoints, during arrest, at police stations and in prison.<sup>37</sup> In addition, at least 30 Shia mosques and religious structures were destroyed by security forces.<sup>38</sup> Some of these moves have now been partly or largely reversed. The government says the majority of those fired have now returned to their jobs, while students have recovered scholarships withdrawn on account of actual or suspected political activity.<sup>39</sup> Opposition groups counter that many of the 'reinstated' have been given lower-level, lower-paid jobs and that a change in scholarship requirements, moving away from grades to interview assessment, has enabled greater discrimination.<sup>40</sup> In terms of the impact on Bahrain's political economy, the crackdown appears to have weakened the ties of patronage between the state and the Shia population.<sup>41</sup> There are suggestions that more Shia Bahrainis are now seeking work overseas.<sup>42</sup>

32 The demands of the opposition were not published in the state or pro-government media, which, instead, tended to portray them as extremists, radicals, terrorists or hijackers. Some Bahrainis became aware of the opposition's demands for the first time when they read the BICI report (henceforth BICI).

33 BICI noted there were allegations of denial of treatment, and that the occupation of the open areas outside the hospital by protestors created the perception of an insecure environment for medical care. 'Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry' (English version), p. 216, <http://www.bici.org/bh/BIClreportEN.pdf>. See also Médecins Sans Frontières, 'Health Services Paralyzed: Bahrain's Military Crackdown on Patients', Public Briefing Paper, April 2011.

34 Several Bahraini Sunnis interviewed by the author said that during this period, they made contingency plans to leave Bahrain. Such was the level of fear that some interpreted the opposition's use of the phrase 'the Bahraini people' as referring only to Shia Bahrainis and implicitly denying the rights of Sunnis to live in the country. Various interviews, Manama and London, September 2011–March 2012.

35 Rajab's more colourful claims about the uprising include the notion that Bahraini Shia used an altered version of the Bahraini flag that had twelve red points instead of the usual five, in order to show their allegiance to the twelve Shia imams (oddly, this claim was based on a photo of a Bahraini flag with ten points on it, not twelve). She is now minister of state for information. See videos on Chanad Bahraini blog, 'Racist Mythology and the Search for the Elusive 12-Point Flag in Bahrain', October 2011, <http://chanad.posterous.com/the-search-for-the-elusive-12-point-flag-poli>.

36 751 people were arrested and charged during the 'state of national safety'. In total, 2,929 were arrested during this three-month period, though most were released without charge. This figure is roughly equivalent to 1% of the Shia population.

37 BICI, p. 271 ('With few exceptions, all of the arrested individuals were Shia. The verbal abuse generally involved insulting religious and sectarian beliefs and symbols'); pp. 285, 289, 354 ('Shia employees were often treated differently from similarly-situated employees who were not Shia in investigations and firings').

38 Officially, this was because they lacked the correct licences, although BICI found that five of them had all the necessary documentation and that the government did not follow the legal procedures for demolishing those without licences.

39 This could be for as little as a Facebook status update. See BICI, pp. 360–61.

40 Central Bank of Bahrain data suggest the average public-sector wage fell by more than one-quarter between the second and third quarters of 2011: <http://www.cbb.gov.bh/assets/E%20I/EI%20Dec%202011.pdf>.

41 Bahraini officials and government supporters often point to the country's provision of healthcare, education and public-sector jobs as evidence of the magnanimity of the rulers. For its part, the opposition either sees these as economic rights or as part of the rentier-state bargain.

42 Discussion with human resources consultant, Manama, February 2012.

Reflecting the recent sectarianization of politics, some government supporters comfort themselves with the thought that the Shia population has effectively become a minority owing to expatriate Sunni immigration, or that it will become an even smaller minority through eventual integration with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states.

## BICI and its limits

The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which submitted its report to the king in November 2011, was an unprecedented step for the country to take. The king invited five senior international lawyers, led by Egyptian-American lawyer Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the February–March 2011 events in the light of international human rights norms. The detailed and well-documented 513-page ‘Bassiouni report’ confounded opposition expectations that it might be a whitewash. It found that the security forces had carried out torture (‘a systemic problem’<sup>43</sup>), used excessive force and exhibited ‘terror-inspiring’ behaviour, while most defendants were denied a fair trial.<sup>44</sup> It documented 35 deaths, including 19 civilians killed by security forces, one policeman shot by the army, three policemen killed by protestors and two expatriates killed by mobs.<sup>45</sup>

The report also criticized the opposition, presenting the crown prince’s offer of dialogue as a major missed opportunity, and stating that some demonstrators had targeted expatriates and harassed Sunni Bahrainis. However, it quietly contradicted a number of assertions made by the ministries of interior and justice, among others. It did not bear out the official contention that Iran was involved in the protests (see below), and found no evidence that GCC troops were involved in human rights abuses. The BICI stopped short of investigating the responsibility of superior officers or officials for the abuses it detailed, instead recommending the establishment of an independent and impartial body to investigate the deaths and torture allegations, as part of a series of recommendations including a review of sentences passed by the military courts and reinstating workers who had exercised their legal right to strike.

In response, the government reversed some of last year’s human rights abuses – for instance, by freeing 334 political prisoners in December 2011. It has begun to establish new institutions and mechanisms that are supposed to improve scrutiny and the accountability of the security services. However, in a political context where virtually all power lies with the executive branch of government and where the role of institutions is relatively weak, the implementation of these potentially important steps will depend on the official political will to back them up. So far, confidence in future accountability has been badly undermined by the lack of accountability for the abuses committed in 2011, and by credible reports that abuses continue. While a government-appointed commission, boycotted by the opposition, praised the government’s progress in implementing the BICI recommendations, the authorities have sharply tightened restrictions on any independent observers who want to verify such claims.<sup>46</sup>

Official investigations have been promised repeatedly since the first protestors were shot. Yet more than 15 months later, just 10 junior police officers – some only able to speak Urdu – have been put on trial in connection with the deaths and torture. This reflects the official narrative that seeks to portray the abuses detailed by the BICI as the ‘mistakes’ of a few rogue officers. Indeed, the day after the BICI report was released, the prime minister, who did not meet with the commission, paid a high-profile visit to the interior minister and praised the security forces. Yet the BICI report said the ‘terror-inspiring’ behaviour showed ‘a systematic pattern’, indicating that ‘this is how these security forces were trained and how they were expected to act.’<sup>47</sup> It also noted that practices of torture and incommunicado detention resembled those seen in Bahrain in the 1990s and that this indicated ‘a systemic problem, which can only be addressed on a systemic level.’<sup>48</sup>

43 BICI, p. 300.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 419.

45 The 19 civilian deaths attributed to the security forces included five Bahrainis killed by torture and one expatriate. The other deaths – nine civilians and a military officer – were unattributed.

46 International NGOs visiting Bahrain are now limited to a maximum of five days in the country. Visa restrictions for foreign journalists have been increased. In February, one day after telling the UN Human Rights Council that the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture would be visiting in March, the Bahraini authorities postponed his visit until July.

47 BICI, p. 281, also repeated on p. 416.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

So far, no senior officials have been held to account. Not a single minister resigned, nor were any removed from their posts. The most high-profile change was to move the head of the National Security Agency, which was extensively criticized by the BICI and has since lost its powers of arrest, to become chairman of the Supreme Defence Council and adviser to the king.<sup>49</sup> A detailed report by Amnesty International in April 2012 described ‘rampant impunity’ in Bahrain.<sup>50</sup> The king’s inability or unwillingness to replace officials who presided over – and praised – the crackdown contrasts with the moves taken by the monarchs of Kuwait, Oman and Jordan. The latter alleviated pressure from protestors by sacking senior ministers, thus distancing themselves from unpopular policies that could be blamed on them. The head of the BICI, Cherif Bassiouni, suggested there was a choice to be made between the unity of the ruling family and the unity of his country.<sup>51</sup>

Despite verbal commitments by the government to freedom of speech, the authorities have continued to arrest people for protesting without a licence or for comments made on Twitter, from the high-profile Nabeel Rajab of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and Zainab Al Khawaja to a 14-year-old boy who was jailed for 12 months for trying to return to the site of the Pearl Roundabout (now bulldozed and declared a closed security zone).<sup>52</sup> Political leaders including Sharif and Khawaja, who say they were tortured to extract ‘confessions’, remain in prison pending the resolution of a long-drawn-out retrial process.

Meanwhile, reports of human rights abuses persist. The police have been given a new chief, US and UK advisers, a new code of conduct and fresh training, and closed-circuit television (CCTV) has been installed in police stations. But without a deeper change in attitudes or accountability, there are ways around these restrictions. Shia villagers have reported that young men suspected of rioting, demonstrating or refusing to act as informants were beaten, slashed with box-cutters, burned with cigarette lighters, or threatened with sexual assault. After CCTV was installed in regular police stations, the riot police set up new stations with no CCTV, close to Shia villages. The heavy, near-daily use of tear gas is thought by activists and villagers to have caused deaths and miscarriages. Several young demonstrators have died in mysterious circumstances in 2012. An independent autopsy on the body of one of these young men, Yousif Mawali, by a forensic doctor working for the International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims, found he had died of ‘forced drowning’ and found skin changes consistent with allegations of electrical torture in custody.<sup>53</sup> During the Formula One motor race in Sakhir, police were again using both birdshot and live ammunition. Over the race weekend, a demonstrator, Salah Habib, was found dead, after having been beaten, partially burnt and peppered with birdshot.

Opposition activists, circulating pictures and stories of such ‘martyrs’, increasingly speak of the right to ‘self-defence’. Some, in the absence of accountability, are seeking revenge on the police, attacking them with Molotov cocktails and, in the village of Al Ekher in early 2012, a pipe bomb. Even the conservative Sheikh Issa Qassim said in January 2012 it would be legitimate to ‘crush’ those who abused women, universally understood to mean the police, after allegations of violence and sexual assault against female demonstrators. By contrast, Al-Wefaq’s secretary-general, Sheikh Ali Salman, has repeatedly condemned violent acts by the opposition as well as the government, though this usually goes unreported in Bahrain.<sup>54</sup> In the eyes of government supporters, opposition violence legitimizes the

49 Being made an adviser can sometimes be a face-saving form of demotion – but in this case, the official is believed to remain closely involved with the NSA.

50 Amnesty International, ‘Flawed Reforms: Bahrain Fails to Achieve Justice for Protestors’, 17 April 2012, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE11/014/2012/en/a23b192e-c518-49e1-8a97-c11e4789f06f/mde110142012en.pdf>.

51 Andrew Hammond, ‘Tense Bahrain under spotlight again over uprisings’, Reuters, 2 February 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/02/02/bahrain-bassiouni-return-idINDEE8110BK20120202> (accessed May 2012).

52 ‘Jailed demo teenager loses appeal’, *Gulf Daily News*, 24 April 2012, <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=328694> (accessed May 2012).

53 Matthew Cassel, ‘Autopsy finds torture behind Bahrain drowning’, Al Jazeera.com, 18 May 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/05/2012515155335968439.html>.

54 In May 2012, Hizbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said in a speech that his party did not call for opposition violence in Bahrain and that it supported the opposition leadership’s insistence on peaceful protest (referring specifically to Sheikh Issa Qassim). Batoul Wehbe, ‘Sayyed Nasrallah: The time has come when we remain and they disappear’, *Al-Manar News*, 11 May 2012, <http://www3.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=55499&frid=23&seccatid=14&cid=23&fromval=1>.

use of violence by the police. They believe that with the BICI the government has recognized and dealt with its mistakes, and that any violence must be started by protestors or that security forces are acting with relative restraint. Many distrust Western media and international human rights NGOs, which are routinely accused in the Bahraini media of harbouring a nefarious agenda to undermine the country.<sup>55</sup>

In the absence of independent sources or institutions that are trusted by both opposition and government supporters, narratives vary wildly. The former will automatically blame the police if someone is found dead in a village, while the latter will blame natural causes or tell themselves the dead person was probably a violent rioter. The biggest worry is that in the absence of accountability or an independent judicial system, people will be increasingly tempted to take the law into their own hands. Seeing the opposition using Molotov cocktails, some of the government's supporters are threatening vigilante action.<sup>56</sup> Weapons are in short supply, but some may be looking to obtain them.

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55 See, for instance, Mohamed Mubarak Ju'a 'Ba 'ad al-furmila... i'adat al-nazar,' (After the Formula One, the reassessment), *Akhar al-Khaleej*, 20 April 2012, which argues that foreign countries conspired to undermine the 2012 Formula One in Bahrain as part of a political, economic and media campaign against the country.

56 See, for instance, Justin Gengler, 'When Ruling Family Divisions Come to Society: Bahrain's New Civilian Police', Bahraini Politics blog, April 2011, <http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/04/when-ruling-family-divisions-come-to.html>.

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## 3 Understanding the Grievances: Bahrain's Local Context

No one predicted the scale of the uprising in Bahrain in 2011, but underlying political conflicts have been evident for many years. Bahrain faces a long-running local dispute about the sharing of power and wealth, both of which are heavily concentrated in the hands of core members of the ruling family and their allies. This is not an exclusive 'Sunni elite': while the ruling Al Khalifa family is Sunni, their allies include prominent tribal and merchant families from both Sunni and Shia, Arab and Persian communities. Indeed, in the context of the Arab nationalism that swept the region in the 1950s and 1960s, before the 1973 oil boom and the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Bahrain's opposition movements were led by both Sunnis and Shia and were supported largely by urban Sunnis. Like Kuwait, Bahrain has a long history of education, political organization and civil society activity. Like Oman, it has an indigenous working class.

It is generally believed that the majority of the population is Shia, but not by an overwhelming proportion; a recent survey suggested the ratio was 58:42.<sup>57</sup> For decades there have been groups calling for greater powers for elected institutions, more constraints on the power of the ruling family, and less corruption. There has also been a long-term trend of blaming external influences for domestic unrest. In the 1950s and 1960s, the 'external threat' was seen as coming from Nasser's Egypt.

Contrary to official claims that Bahrain's experiment with elected institutions began only ten years ago, the country held its first nationwide elections in 1926 – for half the seats on municipal councils. When Bahrain gained full independence after the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, an elected constituent assembly wrote a constitution that gave the country a fully elected parliament, something that opposition groups now romanticize as a kind of golden age.<sup>58</sup> However, the emir dissolved the parliament after only two years after it raised awkward questions about the country's budget, land ownership and the presence of the US military base. The rise in oil prices in the 1970s greatly improved the government's ability to provide citizens with state jobs, services and other forms of patronage, strengthening political support for the status quo. But opposition activists continued to call for the restoration of the parliament.

### The impact of the Iranian revolution

The 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1981 uncovering of an Iranian-supported coup plot, attributed to Bahraini Shia associated with the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), were game-changers for Bahraini politics. Bahrain used to be part of the Persian empire, and the Shah only formally rescinded Iran's territorial claim to it in 1971, after a plebiscite found most of the Bahrainis canvassed would prefer to be part of a nation-state than to join with Iran.<sup>59</sup> The revolution in 1979 reawakened concerns about Iranian expansionism, as the then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini explicitly stated his opposition to the Gulf monarchies and intention to 'export the revolution'. In 1981, these fears were realized when the authorities uncovered the Islamic Frontcoup plot,<sup>60</sup> inspired by an Iraqi cleric of the Shirazi school

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57 Justin J. Gengler, 'Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf', PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2011, <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/89701>.

58 This is well described in G.P. Parolin, 'Reweaving the Myth of Bahrain's Parliamentary Experience', in Mary Ann Tétreault, Gwenn Okruhlik and Andrzej Kapiszewski, eds, *Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011).

59 This was based on a survey and interviews by a UN official, although many Bahrainis think it was based on a national referendum.

60 For a recent archive-based account by a Bahraini historian, see Hasan Al Hasan, 'The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), pp. 603–17.

of Shiism, Sheikh Hadi Al Mudaressi, then based in Bahrain.<sup>61</sup> On the one hand, the Iranian revolution encouraged Shia activism across the Gulf; on the other, the authorities, who had previously seen Islamic movements as a counterweight to secular Arab nationalist opposition movements, became more inclined to see their Shia population as a potential ‘fifth column’ for Iran.

In contrast to their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, Shia Bahrainis have not traditionally faced discrimination in terms of freedom of worship, although this tradition was damaged in 2011 when the authorities destroyed more than 30 Shia mosques. Rather, where there has been discrimination, it seems to have been politically motivated, based on a fear that their transnational ties may make the Shia disloyal to the nation-state. This has created a vicious circle as, in addition to general opposition concerns over political and economic accountability, Shia Bahrainis face particular issues of communal discrimination, being largely excluded from jobs in the security services and given less weight in elections. It is also widely believed that citizenship policy favours Sunni Muslims. Given all these issues, it is unsurprising that activists from the country’s Shia community have been particularly prominent in opposition protests.

However, protestors have consistently called for what they would see as fairer representation and economic inclusion in a democratic Bahrain rather than for a theocracy or a union with Iran. There is a strong national identity among Bahraini Shia, most of whom are Arab rather than Persian. Opposition narratives of history often focus on the ‘Baharna’, an ethnic group of Arab Shia, as being ‘indigenous’ inhabitants, predating the arrival of the Al Khalifa from the Arabian Peninsula in 1783.<sup>62</sup> They are insulted when critics call them ‘Iranians’ or ‘Safavids’. When an Iranian MP, Darius Guenbri, claimed in 2009 that Bahraini Shia would prefer to be ruled by Iran, Mohammed Mezel, an MP from the Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, wrote him an open letter asking him to stop making such statements and read some history books instead.

Shia movements in the Gulf have undergone a significant evolution over the past three decades. They have come to focus more on working within the frameworks of existing nation-states than on any transnational project. Several factors have contributed to this trend:

- The failure of Iran’s attempts to export the revolution, and the severe costs, in terms of domestic repression, of being associated with Iran;
- The emergence of some limited political space for Shia movements to participate in political institutions within their countries, such as the parliament in Kuwait, the weaker parliament in Bahrain, and the even weaker half-elected municipal councils in Saudi Arabia;
- The increasingly obvious weaknesses in the Iranian model, which have alienated a number of influential clerics inside and outside Iran, and which became particularly visible during the Iranian protests of 2009;
- The re-emergence of Iraq’s religious centre, Najaf, as a rival theological centre to Qom in Iran;
- The stance of the leading Najafi *marja’iyya* (high-ranking clerics seen as religious reference points by Shia Muslims) against the Iranian model of *wilayet-e-faqih*.

Despite the efforts of domestic political movements, concerns about foreign intervention have been stoked by the rhetoric of Iranian officials and MPs, who periodically lament the loss of their former ‘fourteenth province’. The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait added to Bahrain’s concerns about the potential risk from larger neighbours acting on their historical territorial claims.

Al-Wefaq, which won 18 out of 40 seats in the 2010 parliamentary election, has consistently called for a constitutional monarchy in Bahrain and says it is committed to a *dawla madaniya* (‘civil [rather

61 The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain evolved into a legally recognized political party, the Islamic Action Society. Its secretary-general, Muhammad Ali Al-Mahfudh, is among the political leaders who have been imprisoned since the 2011 uprising. In February 2011, Sheikh Hadi Mudaressi, still regarded as a significant influence on the group, broadcast a sermon from Iraq in which he called for the Bahraini protestors to reject dialogue and push for the overthrow of the ruling family.

62 In one of many illustrations of the contested and sensitive nature of Bahraini history, some were offended by a speech given by the king in early 2011 in which he said that Bahrain’s Shia had come with the Al Khalifa from Zubara, their former home in what is now Qatar. While the speech was presumably intended to underline the fact that Shia are not recent arrivals in Bahrain, it also understated the length of Shia history in the islands.



than Islamic] state').<sup>63</sup> Many of Bahrain's Sunnis assume this is simply a cover for a hidden agenda of *wilayat-e-faqih*, a view constantly repeated in the pro-government media. Yet *wilayat-e-faqih*, a theological innovation by Ayatollah Khomeini, is a minority view in Shia Islam, and while some religious Shia Bahrainis seek religious guidance from Iran, most look to Iraqi clerics, especially Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, who is not a proponent of clerical rule. Al-Wefaq's supporters come from a range of different Shia schools of thought. Its leader, Sheikh Ali Salman, is a follower of Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem Al-Khoei, Sistani's predecessor. (Al-Khoei's son was murdered in 2003 in a killing widely blamed on supporters of pro-Iranian Iraqi cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, an incident that illustrates the absurdity of seeing Shia Islam as monolithic or as reflexively pro-Iranian). However, the most influential Shia cleric within Bahrain itself, Sheikh Issa Qassim, who has a higher rank of clerical scholarship than Sheikh Ali, is seen as sympathetic to *wilayat-e-faqih*, although he has not called for the model to be applied to Bahrain.<sup>64</sup> Al-Wefaq's informal alliance with Sheikh Issa is a double-edged sword, helping the group win popularity among pious Shia, but weakening its credibility in the eyes of many secularists and Sunnis.<sup>65</sup> More revolutionary opposition groups, such as the Coalition for a Republic and the February 14th movement, have been more openly critical of Sheikh Issa, whom they regard as too politically conservative.<sup>66</sup>

Another game-changer for Sunni-Shia relations in Bahrain was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The end of Saddam Hussein's rule allowed Bahraini Shia to rekindle contacts with their co-religionists in Iraq, who are closer to them politically and ethnically than Iranian Shia; Bahraini Shia often visit southern Iraq on pilgrimage and some have also developed business links. Meanwhile, the government's traditional fears of Iranian expansionism were fuelled by the rise in Iran's influence in Iraq and Lebanon, while the sectarian violence in Iraq awakened fears of possible inter-communal conflicts in Bahrain.<sup>67</sup> The latter helps to explain the visceral fears among many of Bahrain's Sunnis when they saw mostly Shia faces leading the 2011 uprising, even though Bahrain does not have the brutal and violence-ridden history of Iraq, a country that has been involved in three bloody interstate wars in the past three decades.

### ***The 1990s uprising and the 2000s 'reform era'***

The last major uprising in Bahrain began in 1994 after the failure of attempts to negotiate the reinstatement of the parliament through a series of petitions to the ruler.<sup>68</sup> Its main demands were the return of the parliament, the ending of the state of emergency, and measures to create jobs. The uprising was largely Shia, but opposition leaders, including the then most influential Shia cleric, Sheikh Abdelamir Al Jamri (now deceased), had some success in building alliances with Sunnis.<sup>69</sup> At least 40 people died during the uprising, mainly in custody, although protestor violence, including arson attacks and improvised explosive devices, also claimed lives. There is no equivalent of the BICI report to provide a basis for a national consensus on the 1990s uprising; a general amnesty was decreed in 2002 in an attempt to draw a

63 See for instance Al-Wefaq, 'General Platform of the al-Wefaq Parliamentary Bloc' (Arabic), 2006, pp. 9–14.

64 See, for instance, Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 206–07.

65 Sheikh Issa is sometimes described as the group's *éminence grise*. Al-Wefaq need to take account of his views, but there are sometimes differences; notably, Sheikh Issa has in the past opposed cooperation with secular groups, whereas Sheikh Ali cooperated closely with Wa'ad during the 2011 protests.

66 For instance, the February 14th Political Centre writes that Sheikh Issa's ceiling of demands is reforming, not overthrowing, the government, and that this 'constitutes the best assurance to preserve the Alkhalifa dynasty in power' and 'severely hinders the other part of the opposition that seeks to overthrow the monarchical regime altogether': February 14th Political Centre, 'Counter-Revolution Axioms (misconceptions): Are They Going to Trick Us?', BahrainOnline.org, 13 May 2012.

67 Accounts of sectarian violence in Iraq are often refracted through a sectarian lens. For instance, Sunni Bahrainis are more likely to focus on Shia groups' violence against Sunnis, while Shia Bahrainis are more likely to focus on the issues their Sunni counterparts downplay.

68 The 1990s uprising was largely hidden from the world, with tight restrictions on the presence of foreign journalists, and even within Bahrain there were families and whole areas that knew virtually nothing of the uprising. By contrast, the prevalence of social media today means that accounts of protests and violent clashes are spread widely throughout Bahrain and internationally; the reliability of information remains an issue, and facts on the ground are often fiercely contested, but it would be extremely difficult today for Bahrainis not to be aware of disturbances in their country. See J.E. Peterson, 'Bahrain: The 1994–1999 Uprising' *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, No. APBN-002, January 2004; Fred H. Lawson, 'Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain', in Quentian Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Indiana University Press, 2004); Munira Fakhro, 'The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment', in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds, *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997).

69 Such as Abdelrahman Al Noami. However, the uprising, which opposition activists call the Bahraini 'intifada', was decentralized and not controlled by these popular political figures.

line under the period.<sup>70</sup> The deaths, mass arrests and alleged torture in the 1990s suggest that the abuses detailed in the BICI report cannot in context be described as isolated events, although 2011 was a more deadly year than any in the 1990s.<sup>71</sup>

After the accession of the current ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, in 1999, there were hopes for a step change in Bahraini politics, as he offered a referendum on the National Action Charter. This document called for the parliament to be restored and said the constitution would be amended to create a bicameral chamber, but that the elected house would have legislative power while the upper house would only advise. This was ratified by an overwhelming majority of 98% in a referendum on 14 February 2001. Sheikh Hamad also ended the state of emergency, cancelled the State Security Law (which gave sweeping powers to the security forces) and invited political exiles to return. Bahraini activists recall that when he visited the Shia village of Sitra around this time, jubilant crowds carried his car through the streets on their shoulders.

However, the Charter was never fully implemented. Instead, the authorities designed an entirely new constitution that watered down the power of the elected MPs, giving equal powers to royally appointed MPs. Parliamentary constituencies were also gerrymandered in a way that diluted Shia votes.<sup>72</sup> This perceived betrayal looms large in opposition consciousness. Initially the opposition boycotted the parliament in protest at its limited powers, but in 2006 Al-Wefaq and a number of other groups decided to take part in elections and make use of the limited political space available. This prompted a split in the opposition. Activists who favoured continuing the boycott formed Haq and later the Coalition for a Republic. This split in the opposition only ended in 2011, when the government's crackdown on protestors prompted Al-Wefaq's 18 MPs to resign from parliament.

There is a general consensus that the reforms of 2002 constituted a marked improvement on the 1990s. Many Bahrainis of all political stripes sympathized with the idea of a gradual, evolutionary approach to political reform. However, by 2006 there was little to suggest that this was progressing in the absence of concerted pressure from the mainstream opposition or the international community. In meetings and presentations, officials talked vaguely of future reforms but focused more on congratulating themselves for the achievements of 2002 than on laying out any sort of timeline for democratization. While power within the royal family appeared to have been shifting gradually away from the conservative prime minister towards the reformist Crown Prince, the latter focused more on economic reform. Meanwhile, the split in the opposition, and the perception that participating in parliament was proving not to be productive, encouraged the more rejectionist opposition factions to organize regular protests, which in turn led security-focused members of the royal family to argue that the government was being too lenient. By 2010, there were clear signs of backsliding on reform, and indications that power within the ruling family was shifting back towards more conservative, security-oriented figures.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Bandargate***

Tensions had also been stoked by the publication in 2006 of an apparent exposé of sectarianism and election-rigging within the government. This attracted more attention than the usual opposition criticism because it was written by a former adviser to the government. The author, Dr Salah Al-Bandar, was a British citizen who was working at that time for the then head of the Central Informatics Organization (CIO), Sheikh Ahmed bin Atiyatullah Al Khalifa – who is now the Minister of the Royal Court for Follow-Up Affairs and is perceived as a key power behind the throne.

<sup>70</sup> Bahraini opposition activists argued at the time that if there was no accountability, the abuses could recur.

<sup>71</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain*, Washington, DC, June 1997.

<sup>72</sup> Kuwait's government tried a similar move in 1990, replacing the then-suspended elected parliament with a less powerful body in which one-third of seats would be appointed. Opposition leaders boycotted the election as unconstitutional. The assembly's term was interrupted by the Iraqi invasion the same year, and in 1992, after the trauma of the war, the fully elected parliament was restored.

<sup>73</sup> This was particularly the case from August 2010, when a number of opposition activists were arrested for alleged involvement in a terrorist plot. Their trial was repeatedly adjourned, amid claims of torture, until they were freed in a confidence-building gesture in February 2011. Several were re-arrested a few weeks later, after the entry of GCC forces to Bahrain, on charges of plotting a coup. From September 2010, residents of villages were reporting random beatings and temporary abductions of young Shia men by the security forces (author interviews, Bahrain, September 2010).

Dr Bandar claimed that a network within the government, coordinated from the CIO, was working to foment sectarian tensions through the media and a series of fake NGOs, as well as helping to rig the parliamentary elections in favour of pro-government Sunni candidates. He documented his claims extensively with what he said were leaked government documents. Rather than denying the allegations, the government quickly deported him and charged him *in absentia* with possessing stolen government documents, which only added to perceptions that the documents were credible. The authorities also issued a gagging order banning local media from reporting on the issue while it was *sub judice*. It appears the case will be permanently *sub judice*, with no attempts to extradite Dr Bandar or to try him *in absentia*.

One of the Bandar report's allegations was that the government was recruiting new citizens from Sunni countries in an attempt to alter the sectarian balance. His claim was given more credence – although not decisively proved – by the 2008 publication of new demographic data showing that more than 70,000 new Bahraini citizens were naturalized between 2001 and 2007. These data also showed that the total population including expatriates was 42% higher than had been stated previously, prompting Al-Wefaq MPs to walk out of parliament in protest at the lack of transparency.<sup>74</sup>

No details have been published as to the criteria used for naturalization (as the king has the legal authority to override the usual requirements for residency and language when granting citizenship) but many Bahrainis have observed an influx of new citizens from Pakistan, Yemen and Balochistan among others. Some Sunni Bahrainis even express hope this has boosted their numbers relative to the Shia population, although there has also been discontent among them over the large-scale immigration.<sup>75</sup>

## Socio-economic issues

Bahrain's limited national resources, particularly energy and land, magnified the controversy over population growth. High population growth contributed to problems such as the overcrowding of hospitals, the shortage of affordable housing and even failure to provide enough municipal services such as refuse collection. Poverty and economic inequality are more visible in Bahrain than in most other Gulf countries. That said, the uprising of 2011 articulated clear political demands and cannot be described simply as motivated by economic issues. As was the case elsewhere in the Arab world, a combination of political and economic grievances was expressed by protestors who perceived them as part of complex problems of injustice and exclusion.

Such grievances include perceived political, sectarian and tribal discrimination in the job market, as well as corruption among senior members of the government and within state companies. The latter has been highlighted by various international investigations into alleged bribery at state-owned Aluminium Bahrain. For instance, in November 2011, the United Kingdom's Serious Fraud Office charged a UK-based Canadian businessman with allegedly paying \$6m in bribes to a senior member of the ruling family who now works as an adviser to the Bahraini prime minister.

There have also been controversies over the use of public land, as opposition activists claim members of the ruling family have appropriated both newly reclaimed and former public lands to develop lucrative real estate projects. Such privileges may be perfectly legal; in March 2011, when opposition activists circulated documents that appeared to show that the prime minister had purchased the land for the high-profile Bahrain Financial Harbour project for a single Bahraini dinar, the prime minister's office responded not by denying it, but by saying the transaction had followed all relevant legal procedures.<sup>76</sup> Opposition activists contrasted this with the shortage of land for affordable housing, which means that 50,000 Bahrainis – nearly 10% of the population – are on social housing waiting lists.

74 I analyse this in more detail in 'Bahrain' in Christopher Davidson, ed., *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2011). See also the Economist Intelligence Unit Country Reports of 2008.

75 In 2011 claims emerged that Bahrain had a Sunni majority. See also Omar Al-Shehabi, 'Demography and Bahrain's Unrest', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 March 2011.

76 Simeon Kerr and Robin Wigglesworth, 'Protestors draw Bahrain closer to a reckoning', *Financial Times*, 7 March 2011.

Another grievance, unemployment, is particularly complex. There are far more jobs than there are Bahraini citizens, but most private-sector jobs are held by low-paid Asian workers who come to Bahrain in a state of enforced bachelorhood, live in labour camps and are willing to accept wages that would not support a Bahraini with a family to feed and private-sector rent to pay. The crown prince endorsed labour-market reforms designed to reduce the wage gap between expatriates and Bahrainis working in the private sector, but these were slowed by resistance from the traditional business elite associated with the prime minister, and they have been suspended since the uprising.

There have long been economically rooted ethnic tensions between poorer Bahrainis and expatriate workers.<sup>77</sup> These have been exacerbated by the large-scale recruitment of Asians into the security forces, from which Shia citizens are almost entirely excluded. A number of Asian expatriates were attacked by mobs at the height of the March 2011 protests, when the government's withdrawal of the police from the streets created an atmosphere of lawlessness that was later used to justify a heavy-handed deployment of security forces.

All this suggests that socio-economic grievances need to be addressed as part of any solution to Bahrain's problems. Unemployment, including graduate unemployment, perceptions of politically motivated discrimination in the job market, shortages of affordable housing, and perceptions of corruption (particularly in the use of public land) all need to be discussed and addressed. At the same time, opposition groups need to be aware of the limits on Bahrain's financial resources and to be honest with their supporters about future expectations as regards public-sector employment, the provision of housing, and subsidies. Unlike some of its neighbours, Bahrain simply cannot afford to offer extensive rentier-state benefits to all its people.

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<sup>77</sup> A thorough analysis can be found in Andrew Gardner, *City of Strangers: Gulf Migration in the Indian Subcontinent* (ILR/Cornell University Press, 2010). See also Laurence Louer, 'The Political Impact of Labour Migration in Bahrain', *City & Society*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (June 2008), pp. 32–53.

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## 4 Arab Awakening versus Iranian–Saudi Cold War: the Regional Context

As the smallest Arab state, with a tradition of openness to trade and migration, Bahrain has always been influenced by regional political currents, and civil society activists like to say that virtually every Arab ideology has found adherents in Bahrain at some stage. The country now finds itself at the intersection of two regional power struggles: the ongoing Iranian–Saudi cold war, which has been intensifying since the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Iran’s presidency in 2005, and the newer trend of the Arab awakenings. Bahrain’s protestors cast themselves as seeking greater representation, inclusion and social justice, in line with the other countries of the Arab Spring, whereas the dominant government narrative suggests this is all a cover for a hidden agenda to install an Iranian-style theocracy.

Bahrain is increasingly becoming a focus for both Iranian and Saudi attempts to project their power in the wider Gulf. Iranian officials, clerics and media outlets like to stress their support for the Bahraini protestors, both because this is seen as a Shia cause popular with the Iranian public, and because of their political differences with the pro-Western Gulf Arab monarchies.<sup>78</sup> For their part, Saudi officials and the media defend Bahrain as a bulwark against perceived Iranian expansionism (exacerbated by an ongoing territorial dispute between Iran and the UAE over three islands in the Gulf).

Iran’s pre-1971 territorial claim to Bahrain was rescinded after the UN judged that Bahrainis preferred to belong to an independent state, on the basis of a detailed survey carried out by a UN official at the time.<sup>79</sup> However, Iran has reacted to Saudi Arabia’s increasing involvement in Bahrain by highlighting its former claims. In May 2012, following speculation that Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were to announce a ‘union’, *Keyhan*, an Iranian newspaper close to the country’s Supreme Leader, called for Iran to annex Bahrain and claimed a majority of Bahraini people would favour this.<sup>80</sup> The response in the Gulf media was predictably angry. There is a high risk that such sabre-rattling will continue in the context of the wider Saudi–Iranian regional rivalry, including in Syria.

### The role of Iran

Bahraini officials and diplomats from other Gulf countries have suggested that Iran masterminded the protests in Bahrain, which Iran itself denies.<sup>81</sup> Most of the Arab governments faced with protests have sought to blame them on foreign interference of one sort or another, but in the case of Bahrain this accusation has been particularly divisive, both within domestic society and internationally, as the GCC and its Western allies have taken very different positions on this issue. However, not all Bahraini officials or ruling-family members share the view that Iran fomented the protests, and some privately acknowledge that there are local issues of civil rights and social exclusion that need to be resolved.

It is striking that, more than a year after the start of the protests, officials have not provided evidence (such as communications, financial links or other intelligence findings) to indicate that Iran was the source of anything other than moral support for the Bahraini opposition. The BICI was mandated by the king to

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78 The political dimension is clear from the fact that Iran is much more quiet about killings of Shia in Pakistan, which it has less desire to alienate. See Chatham House MENA Programme, ‘Future Trends in the GCC’, Workshop Summary, forthcoming.

79 See, for instance, Husain Al-Baharna, ‘The Fact-Finding Mission of the United Nations Secretary-General and the Settlement of the Bahrain-Iran Dispute, May 1970’, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 1973), pp. 541–52.

80 Quoted in *Iran Daily Brief*, ‘Keyhan: Bahrain is a piece torn off of Iran’, 17 May 2012, <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2012/05/17/keyhan-bahrain-is-a-piece-torn-off-of-iran/>, among others.

81 In a Friday sermon in February 2012, Ayatollah Khamenei said that Iran was not involved in the events of Bahrain, and that ‘if we had interfered, the conditions would have been different in Bahrain’. In April 2011, Khamenei’s official website, [khamenei.ir](http://khamenei.ir), said its readers had voted this statement to be his most memorable comment of the year 1390.

look into any role played by foreign actors in the events of 2011, but was shown no evidence of the alleged Iranian role. Its report notes that officials said this evidence could not be shown to them for unspecified security reasons. Yet Western diplomatic sources suggest that no such evidence has been shared even with the intelligence services of allies with whom there is usually close cooperation. Otherwise, Bahraini officials tend to refer to Iranian media coverage of the protests as evidence of ‘interference’. Some have levied the same accusations against the United States and European countries on the grounds that some Western media organizations and NGOs have criticized Bahrain’s government.

It is possible that evidence could emerge that some protestors were linked to Iran. Yet if there was Iranian involvement, it is unlikely to have been a driving force behind such large-scale protests,<sup>82</sup> where there are ample local grievances to explain them. The number of protestors swelled only after the security forces began shooting people. And many protestors are critical of Iran, do not believe in *wilayet-e-faqih*, and aspire to a more rights-based democracy.

Iran’s interests are probably best served by doing nothing that could directly implicate it in Bahrain, which could have costs in terms of retaliation. Indeed, when some Iranian students tried to organize a Gaza-style ‘aid flotilla’ to Bahrain in May 2011, the Iranian authorities stopped them.<sup>83</sup> Rather, Iran can benefit simply by emphasizing – in a partisan and often exaggerated way – abuses in Bahrain as an indication of the failings of the Gulf monarchies that it is so keen to discredit. This has been a point of division between the GCC states and the West. GCC security officials tend to say there is no need of evidence and that Iranian involvement is ‘obvious’. Western officials continue to ask for evidence; some express concern that Bahrain may be giving Iran too much credit for capabilities it does not have.

There is a history of Iranian support for parts of the Bahraini opposition in the 1980s. But Shia political movements in the region have evolved significantly over the past 30 years, and the inadequacies of the Iranian model have become more glaring. Claims that Iran and Hizbollah are behind unrest in Bahrain have been repeated for years without substantiation.<sup>84</sup> The mainstream opposition, led by Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, has been keen to distance itself from Iran and has reason to be suspicious of its political agendas.<sup>85</sup> In terms of transnational links, they are closer to the traditional centre of Shia theology in Najaf, Iraq, a fellow Arab country, than to Qom in Persian Iran. The protests have largely, but not exclusively, comprised members of Bahrain’s Shia population, but this is hardly surprising as they face specific issues of discrimination (see below).

At best, officials point to a few prominent individuals, noting that the London-based leader of the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM), Saeed Shehabi, once worked for a newspaper funded by the Iranian foreign ministry. Another well-known opposition leader, Hassan Mushaima, secretary-general of the pro-republic Haq movement, who was in London when the protests started, visited Beirut in March 2011 and was said to have met with members of Hizbollah before returning to Bahrain.<sup>86</sup> Shehabi counters that the accusations of an Iranian role in Bahrain are unfounded and are used by the government to distract from a long-standing campaign for democracy and human rights. Both activists were sentenced by a military court to life in prison (Shehabi in *absentia*) along with 20 other opposition activists whose cases are now undergoing a prolonged review by a civilian court.

These political leaders also include Ebrahim Sharif, a secular Sunni economist and businessman whose wife, Farida Ghoulam, spent years campaigning for a codified family law<sup>87</sup> that would reduce the power

82 Iran itself has consistently sought to blame its own domestic protests on foreign interference. Clearly there is both moral and financial foreign support for parts of the Iranian opposition, but this is not adequate to explain the large-scale nature of the protests seen in 2009, which also had ample local causes.

83 Reuters, ‘Iran Halts Flotilla Headed to Bahrain’, 18 May 2011.

84 For instance, a Wikileaks cable dated 13 August 2008 notes that the king had related a report that opposition members had been trained by Hizbollah in Syria, but that he had acknowledged that he did not have proof of this. The cable noted that the embassy had heard versions of the same theory in the past but that despite its requests no evidence had been supplied.

85 For instance, various opposition activists have said in interviews with the author that Iran is not genuinely interested in human rights in Bahrain and would always put its own interests first.

86 There are many different stories about this meeting. An Al-Wefaq source interviewed in Manama in September 2011 claimed that Hizbollah advised Mushaima against calling for a republic on the grounds that it was an unrealistic demand.

87 I analyse the family issue in depth in ‘Framing the Family Law: A Case Study of Bahrain’s Identity Politics’, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2011, pp. 53–68.

of the clerics, which hardly fits Shia theocracy; and Ali Abdulemam, a blogger sentenced *in absentia* and now in hiding, who was fiercely critical of the Iranian regime's handling of protests in 2009. Other opposition activists have visited and networked with counterparts in other parts of the Arab world such as Egypt, Tunisia and Palestine. Overall, the mass protests of 2011, which saw tens of thousands on the streets, can be said to have represented a far greater swathe of Bahraini society than any of the individual activists or movements, uniting behind demands for more rights.

### The role of Saudi Arabia

At a time of intensifying regional competition for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia, fears that Iran is fomenting or will profit from the uprising in Bahrain have encouraged a marked intensification of the already close Bahraini–Saudi relationship. Since the entry of (mainly Saudi) GCC forces in March 2011, pictures of the Saudi king have been installed in Bahrain's international airport, the Saudi flag has appeared at many pro-government demonstrations, and some Bahraini Sunnis have been calling for the two countries to unite. A GCC-wide union is now being discussed, though there is very little public clarity as to what this would entail (and whether it would be largely a rebranding exercise, or a step change in political and economic integration). Yet some of the other GCC countries are wary of the possible dominance of Saudi Arabia, by far the largest country in the bloc. Indeed, speculation in the Saudi and Bahraini press suggesting that a union would be announced at the GCC summit in Riyadh in May 2012 proved to be premature. The officials present announced only their intention to study the possibility of a union.

Underpinning Bahrain's political relations with Saudi Arabia is its economic dependence on its larger neighbour. First, in the absence of income tax, the government obtains 70–80% of its revenue from oil, and the bulk of Bahrain's oil production comes from an offshore field, Abu Safa, that is shared with Saudi Arabia but administered by Saudi Aramco. A treaty between the two countries states that Bahrain is entitled to 50% of Abu Safa's output, but according to Bahraini officials it does not stipulate any minimum level for that output – meaning that, in theory, Saudi Arabia could turn the tap off.<sup>88</sup> Second, Saudi Arabia is a key trading partner, investor and source of tourists; 80% of visitors to Bahrain come across the King Fahd Causeway from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain's only land link to the mainland. Third, Bahrain's pitch for international investment is largely predicated on its access to the Saudi market, which is around 20 times the size of Bahrain's GDP.

Bahrain's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia has only increased over the last year as perceptions of instability have deterred tourists and investors alike. Bahrain's carefully crafted image in the West as an oasis of liberalism in the Gulf, emphasized by the slogan of the Economic Development Board, 'Business-friendly Bahrain', has been badly damaged. Plans to make the country a hub for healthcare and education tourism look less plausible after the controversies around the trials of doctors and the expulsions of students. The indebted state airline, Gulf Air, said in May that Saudi Arabia was the only large market it had left after it was compelled to suspend flights to Iran and Iraq for reasons connected to the protests.<sup>89</sup> The largest economic sector, financial services, was already struggling to compete with Dubai for international investment and expatriate talent. However, few banks have left Bahrain. Bankers say there might well have been more capital flight were it not for Saudi support, and Bahrain's credit ratings also take account of the likelihood that Saudi Arabia could bail Bahrain out if necessary.<sup>90</sup> In 2011, the four wealthier GCC members pledged aid packages of \$10bn over ten years both for Bahrain and for Oman, although as of June 2012 it was still unclear when and how this aid would be delivered. Unless

88 Some members of the opposition see this as an extremely good reason not to have a republic.

89 Siraj Wahab, 'Saudi Arabia is the most important market for Gulf Air, says CEO', *Arab News*, 5 May 2012.

90 See, for instance, 'Announcement: Moody's places Bahrain's sovereign ratings on review for possible downgrade', Moody's, 23 February 2011, [http://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-places-Bahrain's-sovereign-ratings-on-review-for-possible-downgrade--PR\\_214568](http://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-places-Bahrain's-sovereign-ratings-on-review-for-possible-downgrade--PR_214568). Moody's Investor Service also cites high levels of GCC government deposits as one of the factors underpinning stability in Bahrain's banking sector. 'Outlook remains negative for Bahrain's banking system', Moody's, 17 April 2012, [http://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-Outlook-remains-negative-for-Bahrain's-banking-system--PR\\_243294](http://www.moody's.com/research/Moodys-Outlook-remains-negative-for-Bahrain's-banking-system--PR_243294).

the country's political problems are resolved, Bahrain's economic future will continue to depend on Saudi handouts. Not only would this be a political constraint, it would also leave Bahrain highly vulnerable to the various fiscal and political risks that Saudi Arabia may face over the longer term.

Saudi Arabia is assumed to have certain red lines regarding Bahrain, especially over the continuity of Al Khalifa rule and royal control over the country's foreign policy. The Saudi interior ministry in particular is seen as a defender of the status quo in Bahrain. Yet perceptions of its interests in Bahrain may vary between different branches of the Saudi government and may evolve over time. Saudi Arabia may not necessarily seek to veto specific constitutional reforms if these are seen as bringing to Bahrain the stability that the status quo is failing to provide. There have been reports that Saudi officials have told the prime minister that they support him, but not necessarily at any price.<sup>91</sup>

Some Bahraini officials point to previous Saudi objections to the establishment of even the weak and partly elected parliament in 2002. However, the Saudi role is not transparent and the spectre of Saudi objections may sometimes be used as a convenient excuse. The ruling family's expectations of external support – against internal challenges as well as external threats – also reduce their incentives to accommodate demands for a greater popular share in power.

While the picture may be more nuanced than is sometimes assumed, there is certainly a widespread perception among the opposition that the real decisions about Bahrain's future will be made in Riyadh, not Manama. This raises the possibility that some opposition activity in the future may focus on Saudi Arabia rather than on Bahrain itself.

### *Egypt*

Bahrain's opposition youth activists have been influenced by and had contacts with their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, including the April 6th movement in Egypt.<sup>92</sup> This is perhaps less appealing for the authorities to highlight than their supposed Iranian links, as Egypt's youth revolutionaries have a more positive international image. The Bahraini youth activists who led the protests had not been born when the Iranian revolution took place. In terms of their timing, methods and goals, their protests seem to have been directly catalysed by today's revolutions, rather than by one thirty years ago. Some were already networking before 2011 with their peers in the Arab world, through social media, bloggers' meet-ups and activists' conferences.

Interviews with February 14th activists, as well as an analysis of social media discussions, suggest that some are drawing encouragement from the determination of the Egyptian revolutionaries to continue what is likely to be a prolonged struggle for a civilian state, and from expressions of opposition to Saudi policies in other countries, especially Egypt and Yemen, where youth democracy activists tend to see Saudi Arabia as a sponsor of counter-revolution. The self-styled revolutionary youth activists of the Arab world may be a minority, and are confronted with many obstacles, but they have proved themselves to be important catalysts for change.

Some see themselves as engaged in a historical, region-wide struggle for political change. According to one activist, 'Bahrain on its own can't change. But betting on Saudi is a losing bet. Whenever they finally come to the [negotiating] table, maybe in four years, the region will look very different.'<sup>93</sup> According to another, 'In five years, change is bound to come to both Saudi Arabia and Iran.' Ultimately, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are authoritarian governments using religion to compete for influence. While each is preoccupied with the other, they may be distracted from the more fundamental challenge that region-wide demands for democracy pose to both their models.

91 Discussed, for instance, at a conference at Wilton Park in the UK in May 2012.

92 Author interviews, Manama and Cairo, 2011. In a discussion in Cairo in June 2011, a prominent member of April 6th said that it had provided 'training' for Bahraini activists. Some Bahraini activists have studied in Cairo and others have moved there as political exiles.

93 Telephone interview, May 2012.



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## 5 Implications for Western Policy

The repression in Bahrain, a Western ally, complicates and hinders the efforts of the United States and United Kingdom to sketch out a new policy towards a Middle East where demands for democracy have become increasingly vocal. Critics have accused them of employing double standards in supporting transitions to elected governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and (in theory) Syria, but not when it comes to the oil-rich Gulf. Meanwhile, Gulf allies, especially in Saudi Arabia, have expressed concern about changes in the Western – and particularly US – positions towards Egypt, and what it might mean for their own alliances. Overall, however, US and UK policy towards the Gulf has hardly changed since the onset of the Arab uprisings.

There is quiet disagreement between Bahrain and its Western allies over how to handle calls for political change, and over assessments of the role of Iran in the protests: Western officials note a lack of evidence for allegations of Iranian involvement. The US and UK have expressed concern that the government's handling of the protests has added to political risks. However, they retain their long-standing diplomatic, political, military and commercial ties with the Al Khalifa rulers, and place a high priority on maintaining a strong alliance with the Al Khalifas' main regional ally, Saudi Arabia.

In Bahrain, the efforts of the US and UK to tread a careful diplomatic line have left them open to criticism both from the Bahraini opposition, who see them as complicit in the crackdown, and from parts of the Bahraini establishment, where there have been allegations that the US plotted with Iran to organize the protests (as counterintuitive as this may seem to Western audiences, it reflects a variety of conspiracy theories about the invasion of Iraq<sup>94</sup>). Shifts within the regime seem to have empowered parts of the security establishment that are deeply suspicious of Western agendas. While the government's external communications focus on blaming Iran, statements intended primarily for the domestic audience have also blamed the United States and other Western countries. For instance, the commander-in-chief of the army, Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, has said that the protests were 'a conspiracy involving Iran with the support of the US'.<sup>95</sup> He also told a local newspaper, *Al-Ayyam*, in February 2012 that 19 American NGOs had been plotting against Bahrain.<sup>96</sup> His views on Western NGOs were enthusiastically echoed in the parliament.<sup>97</sup>

The UK alliance with the Al Khalifa also draws criticism at home, as indicated by the furore in the British media over the 2012 Formula One in Bahrain and over the reception given to the Bahraini king at celebrations marking the British monarch's sixtieth year as head of state.<sup>98</sup> Such media coverage is sometimes seen by Gulf elites as a reflection of British policy (i.e. an underhand attempt to undermine Bahrain), whereas UK policy-makers see it as a constraint on their policy.

Military-to-military relations are an important part of Bahrain's alliances with the US and UK. The country hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet and is a key stopping point for the UK's Royal Navy en route to Afghanistan. The question of arms sales to Bahrain has been subject to internal debate in both the US and

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94 I discuss this in 'Bahrain: Unresolved Divisions', *The Arab Spring: Implications for UK Policy*, Conservative Middle East Council, October 2011, <http://cmec.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CMEC-Arab-Spring.pdf>.

95 Massoud Hennawi, 'Commander in Chief of Bahrain Defence Forces: Egypt is the strategic depth of the Gulf', *Al-Ahram* (Arabic), <http://www.ahram.org.eg/586/2011/07/06/31/87925/219.aspx>, cited in Justin Gengler, 'The other side of radicalization in Bahrain', *Foreign Policy*, 15 July 2011, [http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/15/the\\_other\\_side\\_of\\_radicalization\\_in\\_bahrain](http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/15/the_other_side_of_radicalization_in_bahrain).

96 Quoted in *Gulf News*, 'Bahrain protests a "coup plot", defence chief says', 15 February 2011, <http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-protests-a-coup-plot-defence-chief-says-1.980961>. The army chief also said that five (unspecified) countries and three terrorist organizations had been organizing a media war against Bahrain.

97 Hudhaifa Yussuf, 'MPs calling for a unified Gulf stance towards Western NGOs', *Al-Watan*, 1 April 2012, <http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=HzdlKmR1tw/rgKwe/chGrNOg9sTm/VX51eqaC90ifvCcyliqP+hlae7geBFyfOkV>.

98 See, for example, Rebecca English, 'Kate's curtsy and the Queen's handshake for brutal King of Bahrain', *Daily Mail*, 18 May 2012; and Victoria Murphy, 'Beauty and the beasts: Kate mingles with dictators and despots at Queen's jubilee lunch', *Daily Mirror*, 18 May 2012.

the UK. In 2011, the former held up a planned \$53m arms sale to Bahrain after congressional objections, and the latter cancelled 44 licences to export defence equipment to Bahrain. This drew complaints from the head of the Bahraini army, who said in an interview with local media that he had threatened to cancel all military cooperation with the United Kingdom as a result, and that this had resulted in arms sales being resumed within a fortnight.<sup>99</sup> The UK says it has resumed some arms exports to Bahrain – to a value of over US\$1m in July–September 2011<sup>100</sup> – but not crowd-control equipment such as tear gas. The US said in May 2012 it would resume sales of arms for ‘external defence’ but would exclude crowd-control equipment, including Humvees for security forces. Both countries are mindful that they face commercial competition for the lucrative Gulf defence market not only from European countries, which are required to take human rights into consideration, but from emerging markets including Russia, which announced in 2011 that Bahrain had become a new customer,<sup>101</sup> and Brazil.<sup>102</sup>

The Fifth Fleet base is the main US strategic interest in Bahrain, and the United States has traditionally been concerned that a fully democratic Bahrain might not continue to host the base.<sup>103</sup> However, US analysts have also begun to question the long-term sustainability of the base as a result of the country’s internal political instability.<sup>104</sup> Both US and Saudi sources have suggested that the United States advised against the intervention by GCC forces in 2011. Given Bahrain’s small size, the Al Khalifa family has long sought security protection from larger powers, first formally from the United Kingdom and then tacitly from the United States (like all the GCC states). The GCC intervention may have been intended as a message to the United States as well as to Iran, to signal that Bahrain has other options for protection. Yet this is only true to a degree, as Saudi Arabia itself relies on tacit US security guarantees against external threats. It is probable that Bahrain, like the other GCC states, will continue to need US security protection – and US technology – to deter the potential threats it perceives from Iran.

While maintaining a firm alliance with the Al Khalifa, American officials have been critical of human rights abuses in Bahrain and in 2011 designated Bahrain a human rights abuser before the UN Human Rights Council, a rare step to take with regard to an ally. President Barack Obama has publicly criticized the Bahraini government, calling for it to hold dialogue with Al-Wefaq and saying that meaningful dialogue cannot take place when parts of the peaceful opposition are in prison. America supported the crown prince’s 2011 dialogue initiative and encouraged the BICI investigation, and has also called on the opposition to refrain from violence and to enter dialogue.

By contrast, the United Kingdom has focused more on what diplomats call ‘strong private messaging’, mixed with occasional public statements of concern, and the provision of expertise to help support post-BICI reforms.<sup>105</sup> Following the BICI report, the king was invited to London to meet the British prime minister. The focus on quiet diplomacy reflects the great sensitivity of Bahrain’s government to public criticism, whether international or domestic.

99 See Kinninmont, ‘Bahrain: Unresolved Decisions’. Diplomatic sources in London and the Gulf also confirmed to the author that the Bahraini military threatened to cancel military cooperation with the UK.

100 Richard Norton-Taylor, ‘Bahrain receives military equipment from UK despite violent crackdown’, *Guardian*, 14 February 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/14/bahrain-military-equipment-uk>.

101 Henry Meyer and Ilya Arkipov, ‘Russia strikes first Bahrain arms deal after UK, French bans’, *Bloomberg*, 25 July 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-08-25/russia-strikes-first-bahrain-arms-deal-after-u-k-french-bans.html>.

102 In January 2012 Brazil denied selling tear gas directly to Bahrain after reports that Brazilian tear gas canisters were found in villages. Rasheed Abou-Alsamh, ‘Who will investigate the use of Brazilian tear gas in Bahrain?’, *O Globo*, 9 March 2012 (Portuguese; author’s translation available on his blog, <http://www.rasheedsworld.com/wp/2012/03/who-will-investigate-the-use-of-brazilian-tear-gas-in-bahrain/>).

103 The 1973 parliament questioned the policy towards the US base. Moreover, in December 2007, amid speculation about a possible US attack on Iraq, the elected house of parliament passed a non-binding resolution saying that Bahraini territory should not be used for any such attack.

104 ‘US officials are concerned that the instability in Bahrain could render US use of the naval headquarters facilities untenable, but there are no evident moves to relocate it’ Kenneth Katzman, ‘Bahrain: Reform, Security and US Policy’, Congressional Research Service, 15 April 2012, summary page, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>. See also David Aaron, Frederic Wehrey and Brett Andrew Wallace, ‘The Future of Gulf Security in a Region of Dramatic Change Mutual Equities and Enduring Relationships: Conference Proceedings’, Rand Corporation, January 2012, pp. 9–10, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf\\_proceedings/2011/RAND\\_CF293.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/2011/RAND_CF293.pdf); and Thomas Lippman, ‘The U.S. Dilemma in Bahrain’, Project on Middle East Democracy, 22 September 2011, [http://www.pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/POMED-Policy-Brief\\_Lippman.pdf](http://www.pomed.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/POMED-Policy-Brief_Lippman.pdf).

105 The latter may sometimes be based on a misdiagnosis of the core problem. For instance, focusing on human rights training for the security sector implies that abuses reflected a lack of training, whereas BICI suggested the abuses were consistent with a pattern of training. That said, the UK’s experience in seeking to tackle what a British enquiry called ‘institutional racism’ in the London police, and in security-sector reform bringing Catholics into the police force in Northern Ireland, could be relevant if Bahrain sought to change what might be described as institutional sectarianism in the Bahraini police.

However, problems can arise from the appearance of mixed messaging. Moreover, many Bahrainis do not distinguish between the policy of the UK government and the activities of independent, private-sector British organizations that work in Bahrain. These range from the PR, lobbying and law firms that write official speeches and help the government find ways to discredit the opposition to the media outlets that air critical coverage of Bahrain. In recent months, John Yates, a former senior UK police officer, and John Timoney, formerly head of the Miami police in the US, have both joined the Bahraini police as advisers in their private capacities. Opposition youth activists are increasingly linking them to Bahrain's history of employing colonial security advisers.

EU countries, including France, Germany and Denmark, have also raised political and human rights issues with the Bahraini government. They have fewer commercial and military interests in Bahrain than the UK, making them more free to criticize and to air human rights concerns, but also giving them less leverage over the government. The UK and US could potentially find it useful in future to work more closely with European partners to develop a common set of recommendations for a political solution in Bahrain. Ultimately, allies of the Al Khalifa want the Bahraini monarchy to be sustainable and accepted. While it may be difficult and inconvenient to point out shortcomings to a leadership that has little tolerance for criticism, Bahrain's allies have an interest in helping the ruling family to understand that one of the biggest risks it faces is internal, rather than external, and comes from its own reluctance to reform.

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## 6 Possible Ways Forward

### Three scenarios for Bahrain

Bahrain faces an uncertain future. Three broad scenarios may be identified as the most likely options:

#### ***A contained domestic conflict***

The continuation of the status quo looks likely to bring about a gradual escalation in low-level conflict, which will slowly become more violent, exacerbated by the increasing sectarianization of politics. The absence of reforms and accountability and the ongoing polarization of political narratives between different parts of society constitute long-term security vulnerabilities for a strategically important country.

#### ***A slide into a sectarian proxy conflict***

If Bahrain's national identity continues to fracture, the country will be increasingly at risk of becoming an arena for proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are at odds with each other in several regional theatres. The conditions for further radicalization – both among the opposition and among some of the fervent supporters of the monarchy – appear to be in place. Over the medium term, disaffection, the desire for revenge and the increasing importance of sectarian identities could create entry points for regional state proxies or non-state actors, from the Mahdi Army to Al-Qaeda affiliates. These might seek to gain influence in the GCC if broader regional disputes (for instance over Iran's nuclear programme, control of Iraq or Syria) intensify. The likelihood of the first scenario giving way to this second one will depend largely on decisions taken outside Bahrain.

#### ***A negotiated way out***

Bahrain's political issues can still be resolved within the framework of one of the oldest nation-states in the Arab world, with a long history of religious, ethnic and political diversity – if there is the political will to recognize that the status quo is not bringing the country stability or security over the longer term.

Currently, this scenario seems the least likely, given the entrenched positions of key political players and the marked shift of power within the royal family. However, it remains a possibility. The remainder of this chapter sketches out some broad outlines for a negotiated political solution to Bahrain's political problems.

### Outlines of a solution

A successful political solution would need to:

- Ensure that nationals have a stake in the country's political and economic system, regardless of their political views or religious identity;
- Focus on common interests and building a middle ground, rather than taking actions that push actors towards the extremes;
- Involve genuine power-sharing in response to the clearly expressed demands of much of the population for greater political representation (all the more so since the 2011 crackdown has damaged the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of many);

- Implement meaningful processes of accountability, including, at a minimum, those recommended by the BICI report. Having a fresh political start would also be greatly aided by the retirement of some of the senior officials who have overseen repeated crackdowns in the past;
- Address socio-economic issues such as land reclamation, corruption, naturalization and labour-market discrimination in conjunction with political issues;
- Take account of the genuine fears of a large part of the population – both the anti-uprising factions and some independents – that democratization would empower theocrats or result in the ‘tyranny of the majority’;
- Obtain support from the country’s GCC neighbours, possibly through a conference or dialogue process that involves advice from GCC diplomats and politicians as well as Bahrain’s own factions, but emphasizes Bahrain’s distinct national identity and ability to reach its own political settlement.

Some countries with divided societies, such as Lebanon or Northern Ireland, have opted for confessionally based power-sharing systems. Yet options for reform that are based on sect-based power-sharing or suggestions that the problems could be fixed by appointing a few more unelected Shia to positions of power are likely to be counterproductive. They would entrench the importance of sectarian affiliation, casting religious groups as necessarily being rivals for power, and failing to address genuine demands for institutional reform. Institutions need to be designed to encourage the representation of Bahrain’s political, ethnic and religious diversity without setting quotas that entrench the importance of sectarian identities.

The fundamental problems in Bahrain are political and socio-economic rather than religious. While Shia Bahrainis often seek religious guidance from clerics overseas, especially in Iraq, such transnational connections are scarcely incompatible with political loyalty to the nation-state, nor unique to Shia Islam. If people expect to be treated unfairly on the basis of their sect, they may become more sympathetic to outside powers that reach out to them on the same basis. Over the last year, large swathes of the Shia community have been routinely labelled as traitors and foreign agents by the media (which is by no means a free press).

In this context, fears that the opposition is secretly seeking to install *wilayat-e-faqih* may not be well founded, but they are none the less genuine. Rather than keeping elected institutions weak, there are many options for designing constitutional and legislative checks and balances on majority rule. Bahrain can look at a wide range of electoral systems around the world, such as low-threshold proportional representation that facilitates the representation of small parties in coalition governments, or bicameral parliaments where the chambers are elected in different ways. This should arguably be easier in Bahrain than in many other multi-religious countries as the Sunni population is not a small minority.

As part of a bargain that puts genuine limits on monarchical rule, restrictions could also be put on clerical involvement in politics. For instance, Jean-François Seznec of Georgetown University has suggested in a four-point reform plan that clerics should not lead political parties.<sup>106</sup> As long as this applied equally to Sunni and Shia clerics, it would be possible to gain support from secularists across the political and sectarian divides, including opposition youth. If the government is concerned about an elected parliament making foreign-policy concessions to Iran, it could potentially place limits on the foreign-policy powers of parliament, maintain the foreign ministry in royal family hands, or agree on shared foreign-policy principles with Saudi Arabia; it does not need to rely on the current system of gerrymandering.

Those worried about theocracy should also encourage the government to open up more space for secular groups, including the secular opposition, which has also faced repression and attacks. Since many secularists come from the middle class and the business community, they are particularly likely to fear losing out economically (e.g. in securing government contracts) if they speak out. A bold

106 Jean-François Seznec, 'Is Reconciliation in Bahrain Possible?' The Middle East Institute, 26 March 2012, <http://jfseznec.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Is-Reconciliation-in-Bahrain-Possible.pdf>.

government committed to political openness could send signals that this would not happen. It could discourage newspapers close to senior royals from attacking secularists who call for reforms. It could send senior ministers or royals to eat at restaurants that are targeted by political or sectarian boycotts, and punish the perpetrators of such attacks. All this is conspicuously not happening, however, and it is noteworthy that Wa'ad, a cross-sectarian secular group that has always condemned violence and called for a constitutional monarchy, has had its secretary-general imprisoned for over a year and its offices repeatedly attacked.

Ultimately, the government needs to ensure strong domestic legitimacy with both Sunni and Shia nationals. The emergence of new, mostly Sunni, anti-uprising political factions has been convenient for the authorities in the short term as they initially focused more on denouncing the Shia-led opposition than on calling for their own rights. However, this focus is already beginning to change, reflecting the fact that grievances over a lack of representation and accountability, inequality and corruption are shared by both religious communities. In the longer term, the marked increase in political mobilization across different social sectors presents risks to the government and opportunities for opposition.

Imposing a union with Saudi Arabia at a time when the majority of Bahrainis oppose it is likely to generate further tensions. Most Bahrainis do not want to be ruled either by Iran or by Saudi Arabia. But there is a great risk that if Bahrainis perceive there is only a binary choice between being under the sway of an authoritarian, religious Sunni state and an authoritarian, religious Shia state, they will largely split along sectarian lines, preferring the one that does not threaten to marginalize their religious community.

### ***Negotiating a new social contract***

There is unlikely to be a political consensus in Bahrain in the near future. This makes it all the more urgent for a linked process of political negotiation and reform to begin, in order to offer a way forward for resolving political conflict without violence. The current political fragmentation creates uncertainty and weakens the ability of leaders to negotiate. But it also raises the possibility that unforeseen coalitions of interests may emerge in negotiations that deal with specific issues rather than focusing on identity politics.

The political scene is probably now too fragmented for the situation to be resolved simply by a bilateral deal between the government and Al-Wefaq, or by a trilateral deal between those two and the mostly Sunni Gathering of National Unity, as the government has sometimes suggested in the past. The ability of political groups to sell a settlement to their constituents will ultimately depend on there being a convincing offer on the table. The view that Al-Wefaq can force any agreement on its constituents through religion is misguided, based on a simplistic view of Shiism and an outdated view of the opposition. Such a deal could be spoiled by factions (from February 14th to Sahwat Al Fateh) that are left out. Indeed, some of the voices now loudly condemning dialogue may ultimately just be condemning something that they fear will exclude them. Parties to negotiations would need to be prepared for the likelihood of spoilers and should not allow them to derail the process. The government should concentrate its efforts on reforms to benefit the majority of the people, rather than cracking down on critics, who tend to become more popular when they have been jailed and tortured (the hunger striker Abdulhadi Al Khawaja is a case in point).

All parties should be involved in negotiating a political settlement that lays out an inclusive new social contract between citizens and rulers, and recognizes Bahrain's political and social diversity. A constitutional monarchy is probably still the best way to build common ground, given that many in the Sunni community strongly support Al Khalifa rule (and view republicanism as a threat not only to their interests but to their national identity). However, this could become increasingly difficult to achieve over time if the failure to compromise with the reformist opposition weakens the latter's hand against the revolutionary factions. Bahraini history provides precedents for a social contract between the ruler and the people in the 1973 constitution and the 2001 National Action Charter – even though the failure of the latter highlights a need to focus on implementing reforms. Securing this basis of legitimacy and

developing stronger national institutions is ultimately more important than changing any individual in power, even the world's longest-serving prime minister – although a change of premier would certainly be a striking way to symbolize a fresh start for the country.

A political solution can succeed if it addresses issues of common national interest and if it is based on the concepts of the equal rights and equal dignity of Bahrainis, not on empowering one religious community at the expense of another. For instance, addressing the issue of discrimination in public-sector employment could be done by making recruitment and promotion criteria more transparent and merit-based rather than by setting any kind of sectarian quotas, or compensating for discrimination against Shia in one area by discriminating against Sunnis in another.

Another demand that has emerged from both pro-uprising and anti-uprising factions is for greater 'rule of law', as both see the law and the justice system as being politicized, though they mean this in very different ways. The government needs to address the issue of the remaining political prisoners, both high-profile and less well known. However, the repeated use of royal pardons in the past, a Gulf tradition, has failed to satisfy either the opposition (which would prefer to see people found innocent in a court) or the supporters of the government (who see the government as being too lenient). Rather than using prisoner releases as a political bargaining chip, the authorities can use due process, for instance by swiftly dropping charges relating to political expression and ensuring courts throw out all evidence extracted under torture.

The depth of mistrust limits the value of changes at the rhetorical or even the legal level.<sup>107</sup> Although some reforms will take time and might need to be phased, 'quick wins' coming from rapid, tangible actions by all groups will be needed to build confidence.

### ***Political will***

All this would require a considerable shift in mentality, and there are serious questions about the political will of the Bahraini authorities to change course. It is in the long-term interests of Bahrain's royal family to share power in order to boost its own sustainability. However, some of its powerful members will resist such reforms for fear that their own positions would be threatened. There is a high risk that decision-making will be based on narrow factional interests of this kind.

It remains possible that the government will prefer not to take on the costs of real reform – which would require the royal family to share some of its power – and will instead rely on Saudi support for a political bargain that directs the state's shrinking resources towards a small minority, drawn largely from the Sunni population. But the failure to resolve the crisis in Bahrain is likely to generate political and sectarian tensions in the broader Gulf and Middle East as well as domestically. Putting off reforms is also likely to increase their eventual costs.

State violence will lead to a more violent opposition, as is already beginning to happen. Repressing peaceful opposition increases the risk of violence, and repressing secular opposition encourages politics to move into the mosques.<sup>108</sup> Those who call for a tougher crackdown should bear in mind that the best way to end up with a truly sectarian and violent opposition is to keep repressing it.

Even low-level opposition violence is counterproductive, discrediting the opposition in the eyes of much of the Bahraini public and perhaps legitimizing an ongoing crackdown. The opposition needs to focus more on advocacy and on discussing and addressing some of the fears of Bahrainis who are sceptical of both opposition and government, including fears of theocracy and the tyranny of the majority. The Manama Document offers a starting point. A long-term vision for Bahrain's future will need to take into account the impact of a long-term decline in oil production on the social contract, state services and public-sector employment. Discussing these issues can lead to common ground between groups with different political or religious viewpoints.

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<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, symbolic gestures could be important at this stage. They could include state television airing documentaries about historical opposition figures or covering Shia religious rituals, majalis visits between opposing political leaders, and opposition activists boycotting Iranian television channels.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown and Angela Dalton, 'Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2012.

### ***International actors***

Bahraini officials are keen to emphasize the country's role as part of the broader GCC. For their part, a number of officials in other GCC states have quietly expressed concern about the deterioration of security in Bahrain, and while most of them support Bahraini allegations of Iranian involvement, some also acknowledge the need to address the root causes of the unrest by developing a more inclusive social contract. The GCC states – which all have different approaches to political representation and to relations between different religious groups – could help Bahrain by encouraging the ruling family to focus not only on a narrow and often blunt approach to security, but on the economic and political development it needs to ensure stability.

Third-party mediation by regional players might help to break the current deadlock and could potentially build confidence in the outcomes of a dialogue actually being implemented. Although Qatari and Kuwaiti mediation efforts were rebuffed in 2011, there may now be an opportunity to develop a fresh GCC mediation effort in the context of discussions on greater GCC unity, perhaps with the involvement of the UAE and Oman. Conversely, if the political problems in Bahrain are left to fester, and if GCC unification is seen as being imposed on the country against the wishes of many or most of its nationals, Bahrain could weaken the legitimacy and sustainability of the broader GCC unification project. Given the importance of the broader GCC as a source of financial and security support for the government, and the influence of Saudi Arabia in particular, it could be useful to convene a conference or dialogue that brings together both officials and civil society representatives from across the GCC, including representatives of the Bahraini opposition, to gain an understanding of each actor's goals and red lines, and to avoid the risk of 'Chinese whispers', or incorrect understandings coming from third-hand information or misleading media reports. Although not within Bahraini control, it could potentially be helpful if senior Iraqi *marja'iyya* could express their support for such a process and emphasize Bahrain's Arab identity, a key issue for the GCC.

Bahrain's Western allies could provide Bahrain's rulers with more incentives to reform. Their cautious approach to date does not appear to be having much effect on the government's willingness to compromise or reform. But the current political instability and growing anti-Western conspiracy theories (some propagated by senior officials) imply a number of risks to Western interests in Bahrain.<sup>109</sup> The limited public criticism emanating from the US and especially the UK reflects a desire not to offend a long-standing ally that has proved highly sensitive to criticism – but criticism may be appropriate when counterproductive and unsustainable policies are being pursued. (In their own public sphere, Gulf rulers can easily become accustomed to an atmosphere of near-constant praise that can belie the existence of real problems that they need to address.) While Saudi Arabia has increased its direct security support for the Bahraini government, the US ultimately underwrites the security of both countries, and none of the world's rising powers appear to have the appetite to take on a similar role in Gulf security in the foreseeable future. But the current close military ties may not be sustainable in the long run if they are increasingly opposed by large parts of the Bahraini public. Conversely, the US, UK and EU could offer Bahrain a more secure environment in which to undertake reforms by offering to link enhanced military cooperation to progress on reform.

109 Some of these risk are highlighted by Emile Nakhleh, a former director of the CIA Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program (and author of *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society*), in 'Arab Autocrats Aiding Resurgence of Terrorism', blog post, LobeLog Foreign Policy Blog, 14 May 2012, <http://www.lobelog.com/arab-autocrats-aiding-resurgence-of-terrorism/> (accessed 14 May 2012).



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## 7 Conclusions

The situation in Bahrain is a clear demonstration of a pattern seen elsewhere in the Arab uprisings, whereby the failure to implement reforms increases the eventual costs of compromise. Initially protestors' demands were limited, focusing on constitutional reform. After a violent crackdown, demands escalated sharply, and there is now a significant element of the opposition calling for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

The international community is well aware that the monarchies that have persisted the longest tend to reign rather than to rule. Sharing more power with the people of Bahrain could make the monarchy more sustainable. However, decisions taken now will not necessarily be in the long-term interests of the ruling dynasty. Some of the key decision-makers in the ruling family are likely to resist reforms that could potentially threaten their own personal positions. They will be tempted to rely on external support from Saudi Arabia to bolster their rule. And they will continue to utilize both traditional tribal and modern rentier means to legitimize the monarchy with the part of the population that is deemed to be loyal, combined with coercive security measures against those deemed to be disloyal. This will contribute to a continued polarization of perspectives, as different political communities (which partly overlap with sectarian communities) have very different personal experiences of government action.

If the gradual slide towards violence by parts of the opposition continues, it is only likely to strengthen this narrow and hardline approach to security, and to unite the disparate royal family in support of coercive security measures, as would any involvement of regional actors in support of the opposition. Yet there is a risk that elements of the opposition, who have lost confidence in Western countries' ability to protect their human rights, and who see the Bahraini government as bringing in other regional actors from the GCC, may seek friends wherever they can find them, potentially polarizing the situation further.

The country has experienced a traumatic period during 2011–12. Many Bahrainis with different viewpoints are dissatisfied with the status quo, although they differ on who to blame. The problems in Bahrain can be solved if there is the political will to compromise, reform and share power within the existing state, which is one of the oldest in the Arab world, rather than relying on external support. There is still scope to find common ground between the different elements of Bahraini society in support of a constitutional monarchy, based on equal citizenship and a revitalized social contract.



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