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Iran's Shadow over Unrest in Bahrain

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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For nearly two weeks, the Persian Gulf island state of Bahrain has experienced near-daily disturbances following government arrests of opposition activists from the majority Shiite community. The timing of the arrests seemed geared toward preempting trouble in advance of the scheduled October 23 parliamentary and municipal elections, which minority Sunni parties and candidates are currently projected to win. The street violence and other incidents are of particular concern to the United States because Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and Naval Forces Central Command, whose mission is to "deter and counter disruptive countries" -- a wording likely aimed at Iran, which claimed the island as its territory prior to 1970.

Recent Violence

The most serious incident reported so far was an August 20 attack on an electric power installation. According to an official statement, the resultant outage "affected large areas," although power was reportedly restored within two hours. Other incidents have involved individuals setting tires alight, throwing Molotov cocktails, and attacking a pro-government newspaper editor.

On Tuesday, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa vowed to stamp out the "fire of terrorism" during a visit to a Shiite community where, according to a local newspaper, he urged the inhabitants "to steer their children away from vandalism." Meanwhile, the American embassy has been issuing regular warnings to U.S. citizens, notifying them of planned demonstrations and urging them to avoid even central parts of the capital, Manama, at certain times.

Sectarian Divisions

Bahrain was the first of the ultramodern ministates to emerge in the Gulf region, a product of the area's growing oil revenues, a reputation as a trading and financial center, and a welcoming attitude toward visitors. Like Dubai, Bahrain has also established itself as a popular and expanding tourism destination, particularly for Saudis, who can reach it by driving across a sixteen-mile long causeway.

But the openness of Bahraini society is less of a boon for the country's Shiite majority, many of whom feel politically and economically marginalized. The government seems to regard them as untrustworthy, excluding them from military and police recruitment efforts. Shiites are particularly resentful over the alleged hiring of security forces from abroad, who tend to deal with demonstrators more harshly than native Bahrainis might. These foreign Sunni recruits are also fast-tracked for citizenship, reducing the numerical dominance of Bahraini Shiites.

The October elections will almost certainly see the Shiite Wafaq Party repeat its 2006 feat of emerging as the largest faction, but the parliament will nevertheless be Sunni-dominated -- the electoral districts are drawn in a manner that favors Sunni candidates. In any case, the elected lower house and appointed upper house have only limited influence -- most of the power will remain in the hands of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and

other members of the ruling family, who are entrenched in the most important cabinet positions (e.g., the king's uncle, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, has been prime minister for the past thirty-nine years, a world record).

Iran's "Fourteenth Province"?

From Bahrain's perspective, Iran -- only 150 miles across the Gulf -- represents a constant threat. Tehran formally renounced its long-standing historical claim on the island during the shah's rule, after a UN report found that the majority of Bahrainis favored independence. But politicians in Tehran still sometimes refer to the island as Iran's fourteenth province.

Bahrain is particularly concerned about a nuclear-augmented Iranian hegemony in the region. In 2007, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa directly accused Tehran of developing nuclear weapons. Maintaining a close relationship with Washington and hosting the Fifth Fleet are clear (though unstated) strategies for deterring any hostile intent from Iran. Officially, Manama's stance is more nuanced: last weekend, Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa stated that Bahrain would not allow itself to be used as a staging ground for attacks on Iran or other countries.

Detainees

Among the first activists to be arrested this month was the wheelchair-bound Abduljalil al-Singace, a British-educated engineering professor at the University of Bahrain who had just returned from London after a speaking engagement on human rights. Previously, in October 2008, al-Singace had visited Washington to campaign on the same subject, addressing a meeting chaired by Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA). And in June 2009, he wrote in the *New York Times*: "When President Obama addresses the Muslim world tomorrow [referring to the June 4 Cairo speech], I have one main request: Be careful when you use the words 'change,' 'dream,' and 'democracy.' Those things don't come so easily to us.... It would be good if Mr. Obama vowed to support democracy and human rights. But he should talk about these ideals only if he is willing to help us fulfill them."

According to the official Bahraini news agency, al-Singace and others were accused of belonging to a network that was threatening "Bahrain's stability, civil peace and endangering the lives and property of the innocent [through] incitement to violence and terrorist acts." A lawyer representing several of the detainees indicated that more than sixty people have been arrested over the past ten days and remain in undisclosed locations without access to their families or lawyers.

Although al-Singace and others reject participation in what they regard as Bahrain's flawed political system, their detention has affected the country's mainstream Shiite politics. On August 21, Sheikh Ali Salman, leader of the Shiite parliamentary bloc, warned, "The way the ongoing security campaign has been handled and the rights violation that accompanied it has in one week destroyed ten years of progress in this country." During the 1990s, more than 30 died and 1,000 were arrested in bouts of recurring violence.

Neighbors' Concerns

Bahrain's largest neighbor, Saudi Arabia, likely supports the security crackdown. Riyadh is habitually concerned about Iranian influence among its own Shiite population, which forms a local majority in the oil-rich eastern province along the Gulf coast. In fact, the causeway linking the two countries was built not only to provide a commercial link, but also to permit the swift Saudi reinforcement of Bahrain's security forces.

Bahrain's other close neighbor, Qatar, tends to be less helpful to Manama and more conciliatory to Tehran. For example, it refuses to supply gas to Bahrain, forcing Manama to reluctantly approach Iran on the matter. A simmering territorial dispute over offshore islands was settled in Bahrain's favor in 2001, but difficulties persist; earlier this month, Qatar arrested a group of Bahrainis for allegedly fishing in its waters, and a

proposed causeway joining the two countries was put on hold in June.

Challenges to U.S. Policy

Because Washington's main regional concern is persuading Iran to give up its nuclear weapon ambitions, working with Gulf allies such as Bahrain remains a priority. The U.S. naval facility on the island (the word "base" is officially avoided) is being expanded so that major ships can dock rather than having to anchor offshore. In addition, the airfield on the island of Muharraq, across a narrow strip of water from the capital, has hosted U.S. and other Western military aircraft during regional crises over the past decade. (The field also serves as Bahrain's international airport; the country's main military air base is located to the south.)

Regional analysts and diplomats have depicted the new arrests not as a campaign against a specific insurgent plot, but rather as part of Manama's effort to ensure peaceful elections in October, with the officially desired result. As such, the tactic seems clumsy, potentially provoking another poll boycott by the Wafaq Party (as in 2002) and fomenting greater resentment among the Shiite community.

Manama's instinct appears to involve reminding the Shiite community that, in the words of Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid, it "enjoys great support from His Majesty [the king]," citing key development projects that provide job opportunities for Shiite job seekers. Bahrain no longer exports crude oil, however, so the government's ability to fund such projects might be impaired -- especially in light of this week's announcement by Moody's that the island's sovereign credit rating was being lowered.

Given the current unrest and past outbursts of violent anti-American protests (e.g., in 2002 and 2003), Washington should not take Bahrain's usual tranquility for granted. Going forward, it should offer quiet advice to help Manama calm the ongoing tension and avoid escalation. After all, the latter scenario could turn the island's concerns about Iranian interference into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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