

PolicyWatch #1759

Saudi Arabia's Fears for Bahrain

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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On February 16, Bahraini security forces used brute force to clear democracy protestors from Manama's Pearl Square, on orders from a regime seemingly undaunted by international media coverage and the near-instantaneous self-reporting of Twitter-generation demonstrators. Although the relatively small size of the crowds (compared to recent protests in Egypt and Tunisia) facilitated the crackdown, the action is best explained by the regime's long-held mindset regarding dissent. Specifically, the Bahraini ruling elite believe that any political challenge by the island's Shiite majority must be quickly suppressed -- a view backed by the royal family in neighboring Saudi Arabia and violently enforced in Bahrain despite significant Sunni participation in the protests. This Saudi factor, and the looming presence of Iran across the Persian Gulf, elevates the Bahrain crisis to a U.S. policy challenge on par with events in Egypt.

Linked by History and a Causeway

Bahraini Arab Shiites consider themselves the true original inhabitants of Bahrain and surrounding smaller islands. They have close ties to Shiites in Saudi Arabia, who form a local majority in that kingdom's neighboring Eastern Province. Both groups face religious prejudice from their ruling elites, political marginalization, and socioeconomic disadvantage, in part because the Saudi and Bahraini governments have suspected their loyalty since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Yet despite the occasional discovery of domestic plots with confirmed or suspected links to Tehran, Arabic-speaking Saudi and Bahraini Shiites have generally expressed cautious, even wary, attitudes toward their Persian-speaking Iranian coreligionists across the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia tends to adopt a benevolent, big-brother approach to its much smaller neighbor. Although oil was discovered in Bahrain even before Saudi Arabia, the island's reserves are now almost depleted. Today, government revenue is mainly based on proceeds from an offshore Saudi oil field sold on Bahrain's behalf. Culturally speaking, Riyadh tolerates the more liberal social mores permitted in Bahrain, which was joined to the kingdom by a sixteen-mile causeway in 1986. On weekends in particular, Saudi visitors (mostly men) patronize the island's clubs and bars in large numbers.

In terms of political development, Riyadh seems to view Bahrain with near disdain. For example, when current head of state Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa announced a package of constitutional reforms in 2001 as a way of countering several years of simmering Shiite unrest, the Saudis were bemused that he converted himself from ruler to king. Although the reforms reactivated the Bahraini parliament, they essentially perpetuated the sense of Shiite exclusion by gerrymandering electoral districts to ensure that Shiites could never establish a political majority.

So far, Riyadh does not appear to have intervened on the ground during Bahrain's current crisis. Nevertheless, the main strategic purpose of the causeway linking the two countries has never been commercial or diplomatic, but rather strategic: it was built so that the Saudi military could quickly reinforce the Bahraini regime when necessary. Although plans to build the road were originally mooted in the 1960s, when the shah of Iran had yet to give up the longstanding Persian claim to the island, construction did not actually begin until

1981, as Arab states became increasingly concerned that the Khomeini regime sought to spread its revolution to other Shiite communities in the region. According to anecdotes from Bahraini expatriates, prior to the causeway's completion the skies were seemingly full of Saudi helicopters during Shiite religious processions on the island. In the mid-1990s, however, Riyadh was able to deploy national guard troop carriers to the island when bombs were planted in Manama's business quarter.

Going forward, Riyadh's stance on Bahraini dissent can likely be inferred from its reported disappointment with Washington for allowing Hosni Mubarak to be toppled in Egypt. Saudi support for the Mubarak regime reportedly included promises to make up for any withholding of U.S. military and economic aid to Cairo. Other Gulf Cooperation Council member states probably hold similar views (apart from Qatar, the group's traditional maverick and headquarters of the Al-Jazeera television network, which was perceived as encouraging the Egyptian demonstrators).

But Saudi policy could be upset by the geriatric paralysis of top princes. King Abdullah is currently convalescing in Morocco and has not been seen in public since January 22, raising more question marks about his health. Prince Miteb -- one of Abdullah's sons and commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, whose forces train for intervention in Bahrain -- is almost certainly with him in Morocco. In Riyadh, then, decisions are nominally in the hands of Crown Prince Sultan, the defense minister, who reportedly has dementia. The most crucial arbiter of policy is therefore Interior Minister Prince Nayef, who has a reputation for toughness and controls strong paramilitary forces.

U.S. Policy Concerns

Washington currently faces a number of potential Bahraini-Saudi policy challenges. First, the Eastern Province is the center of Saudi Arabia's oil fields, from which 10 percent of the world's oil is produced daily. Although security has improved, oil installations there have previously been targeted by Iranian and al-Qaeda sabotage. If the troubles in Bahrain have a contagion effect in the kingdom, the crisis would quickly escalate from a regional to an international issue.

Second, Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet and the naval elements of Central Command. Currently, American vessels visiting Bahrain are unobtrusively anchored out to sea, but the regime is building jetties that would allow the ships to moor further inshore. More important, the headquarters complex -- which directs operations in support of U.S. forces in the Gulf, Iraq, and Afghanistan, as well as antipiracy efforts off Somalia -- is located next to a Shiite suburb on the island itself, just a few minute's drive from Pearl Square. The Bahraini government has been anxious to maintain this presence, and so far, U.S. withdrawal has not become part of the litany of demands from protestors.

More broadly, U.S. diplomacy has struggled to balance support for allied Arab rulers with popular aspirations for democratic rights. Last year, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made comments in Bahrain supportive of the regime, which has now bloodily suppressed unarmed demonstrators, including women and children. Bahrain's Shiite majority and historical Iranian links make it a special case, but other countries that host crucial low-profile U.S. military facilities (e.g., Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman) could also decide to reduce these connections under certain circumstance. For example, after the September 11 attacks exposed the involvement of numerous Saudis, Riyadh forced the transfer of U.S. military forces in an attempt to outflank growing domestic opposition.

Policy Recommendations

Bahraini activists have called for more large-scale protests, while the regime has banned all such demonstrations and deployed (U.S.-made) tanks and armored vehicles to crucial intersections and government buildings. Accordingly, Washington should press King Hamad to ensure that there is no draconian use of force similar to yesterday's actions in Pearl Square.

In addition, Washington should encourage reform measures, which could offer hope to Bahrainis tired of the paternalistic government that is so at odds with the open and progressive image Manama projects internationally. This includes taking action against corruption, which has become rampant. At least one departing U.S. ambassador told the late Sheikh Isa, King Hamad's father, that he should dismiss the country's prime minister, Sheikh Khalifa (Hamad's uncle). Khalifa's name is synonymous with corruption, and he has held the same title for forty years, making him the world's longest-serving prime minister.

Progress or lack thereof in Bahrain could set the trend for the entire Gulf region. And in neighboring Saudi Arabia, the consequences of political instability would be even greater because of the kingdom's growing leadership vacuum. Washington should therefore press Riyadh to help de-escalate the tension in Manama. This is likely to run counter to the instinctive Saudi view on dealing with instability in Bahrain. In the end, the most serious confrontation Washington faces in seeking a peaceful outcome to the Bahraini domestic showdown may not be with its friends in Manama, but with its friends in Riyadh.

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