

THE PRECARIOUS ALLY
Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy

Frederic Wehrey

MIDDLE EAST | FEBRUARY 2013

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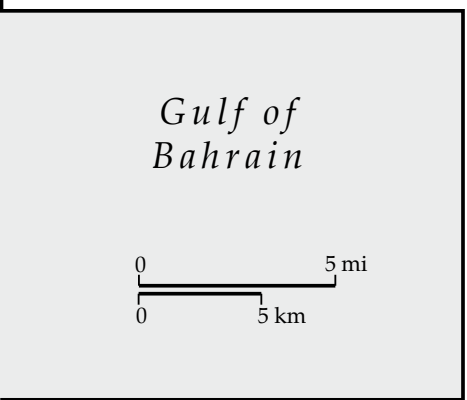
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Summary

Bahrain is wracked by simmering violence and social divisions, and the government appears unwilling to enact substantial political reforms. The three main Bahraini political forces—the Shia opposition, Sunni Islamists, and the ruling Sunni Al Khalifa family—are paralyzed by internal fissures with more militant idealists overtaking pragmatists. This is a crucial test of the United States’ ability to balance the need for political reform with long-standing strategic interests and military partnerships.

Dynamics Behind the Impasse

- Unable to produce meaningful reforms through dialogue or political participation, the mainstream Shia opposition represented by Al Wefaq is losing popular support.
- The youth are rising up. The February 14 Youth Coalition—a leaderless network formed in the early days of Bahrain’s uprising—is winning over some of Al Wefaq’s supporters. It has rejected dialogue with the regime, called for the creation of a republic, and confronted security forces with sporadic violence.
- A hardline faction of the Al Khalifa family, led by the royal court minister and the commander of the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF), is drowning out more moderate voices.
- Class-based Sunni anger with the regime is rising. Hardline royal factions have attempted to co-opt this dissent and redirect it against the Shia—a losing strategy that is stoking sectarianism in Bahraini society.
- Anti-Americanism is growing among both hardline Sunni Islamists and rejectionist Shia elements. This anti-Americanism coupled with the entrenched regime’s apparent intent to ignore calls for deep reform risks damaging American legitimacy and jeopardizing U.S. assets and people.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

Rethink the long-standing U.S. defense relationship with Bahrain.

The relationship may soon become a liability given the stalemate on reform, endemic violence, and mounting anti-Americanism.

Develop contingency plans with a long view. The U.S. Navy should prepare plans for the gradual relocation of the Fifth Fleet's assets and functions away from Bahrain to potentially use as leverage to shift regime behavior. Washington should also seek to promote attitudinal change within the BDF through officer exchanges, training, and security cooperation as political shifts in Bahrain may be a generational effort.

Supplement backroom diplomacy with more specific public demands for reform. Given the regime's sensitivity to its image abroad, public criticism by senior U.S. officials can help spur change.

Use economic and multilateral leverage wisely. Criticism by multilateral forums has produced some positive shifts in policy. More specific, targeted financial sanctions against regime officials implicated in human rights violations may send an even stronger message.

Introduction

Two years after the uprising that shook its foundations, Bahrain is a broken country, wracked by simmering violence and social polarization. Its Sunni-dominated government shows little willingness to implement substantial reforms and its young citizens—both Sunni and Shia—are becoming increasingly radicalized. Its once-vibrant economy is stagnant. As of early 2013, over 100 people have been killed in violence related to the uprising.

Successive efforts to resolve the impasse have failed, largely due to deep divisions within the country's three main camps. Within the royal family, a hardline faction has come to dominate the government's response, framing the crisis as a security problem rather than a symptom of a broader political malaise that requires sweeping reforms. Among the opposition similar splits have arisen between an institutionalized current that is receptive to dialogue and advocates gradual change within the context of the monarchy, and more youthful, rejectionist networks who employ confrontational street tactics and demand the end of the monarchy. The Sunni Islamist field has witnessed similar fissures, between loyalists and a more genuine opposition. Underpinning all of these dynamics is a creeping sectarianism at the societal level and disturbing levels of anti-Americanism.

As the crisis persists, troubling questions have arisen about the deleterious effects of America's strategic relationship with Bahrain, which has long been a central pillar in U.S. power projection in the Gulf. Most crucially, Bahrain serves as the seat of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, and it hosts a number of U.S. air and special operations capabilities. But increasingly, the United States finds itself in the undesirable position of maintaining close ties with a repressive regime that has skillfully avoided meaningful reforms while engaging in a concerted public relations campaign to burnish its image.

Ultimately, breaking through Bahrain's impasse is not just a matter of promoting human rights but mitigating potential security challenges to U.S. assets and people and—eventually, perhaps—forestalling a violent challenge to the monarchy. Backed by robust Saudi financial and military support, the Bahraini regime may be able to hobble through the current crisis, withstanding extraordinary pressure from both its own citizenry and the international community. But the status quo is not sustainable indefinitely. With the likely fall of the Alawite-dominated government in Syria, Bahrain's Al Khalifa family will

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soon be the only sectarian minority in the Middle East ruling over a majority that has little-to-no say in its government. Recent history suggests that, absent sweeping structural changes, the outcome for such an arrangement will not be peaceful.

Moving forward, the United States must find more creative ways to push for deep structural reforms. In many respects, though, its options are limited because of an array of factors beyond its control: intransigent and fragmented domestic actors, mounting anti-Americanism, and the prevalence of Saudi influence over the country's domestic decisionmaking. That said, key areas to explore include linking continued military assistance to specific reforms, more forceful and public engagement with key leaders, and using multilateral forums to sanction regime infractions. The goal of all of these efforts should be raising the economic and political costs for hardliners who would block reforms while communicating support to pragmatists.

Evolution of a Crisis

Distinguished by nepotism, a lack of transparency, and corruption, the rule of the Sunni Al Khalifa family in Bahrain has long been vulnerable to political unrest and violence. Much of the kingdom's opposition has historically been led by the country's 70 percent Shia population, which has long suffered from economic deprivation, unemployment, and discrimination in the public sector. Unsurprisingly, a long-standing regime strategy has been to portray the opposition as sectarian—denigrating the Shia as proxies of Iran—in an attempt to weaken and fracture it.

But dissent in Bahrain is not solely a matter of sectarian marginalization. Many Shia grievances focus on housing shortages, the corruption of the royal family, abuses of the judiciary, and, perhaps most importantly, a parliament that lacks full legislative and oversight authority. Lower-class Sunnis and liberal activists share these complaints, giving opposition politics in Bahrain a strong class-based flavor.

Underpinning much of the dissent in Bahrain is a profound sense of disappointment with the royal family's failure to enact reforms that were promised at the turn of the century. Following his accession to the throne, then emir

Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa introduced the National Action Charter in 2001, which called for, among other reforms, the creation of a constitutional monarchy and a bicameral legislative structure comprised of an elected parliament (the National Assembly).

By 2002, however, these promised reforms had either stalled or evaporated, fueling new levels of cynicism and resentment. Moreover, the emir, having designated himself king, unilaterally revised the 1973 constitution,

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subordinating the elected parliament to an appointed Majlis al-Shura and depriving the parliament of the ability to formally introduce new legislation or exert financial oversight over government ministries.

The opposition's view, then and now, is that the parliament is a purely cosmetic institution—a powerless “debating society,” as one activist put it in an interview with the author in 2006. This frustration, combined with the regime's policy of gerrymandering designed to ensure Sunni dominance, spurred a widespread Shia and leftist boycott of the 2002 parliamentary and municipal elections. The result was a National Assembly dominated disproportionately by Sunni Islamist groups.

The mainstream Shia opposition society, Al Wefaq, finally entered parliament in 2006. (Since political parties are technically illegal in Bahrain, political gatherings are known as “societies.”) At the same time, a splinter group of Al Wefaq, the Harakat Haqq al-Hurriyat wa al-Dimuqratiyya (the Movement for the Right of Liberty and Democracy), or Haq, rejected electoral participation and called for a continued boycott. Haq and its supporters on the street formed an important, militant counterpoint to Al Wefaq's participatory stance. At rallies and speeches, Haq routinely criticized Al Wefaq for having been duped by the government.

Increasingly, a younger generation of activists became convinced that participation in the regime's “dialogue” and quasi-democratic structures like the parliament was an exercise in futility. Frustrated with the failure of the older cadre of Al Wefaq to deliver any meaningful reforms, as well as the regime's failed promises, this youthful cohort proved highly susceptible to the wave of protests spreading throughout the region in 2011.

Shortly after the revolts began in Tunisia and Egypt, groups of young, loosely organized youth established Facebook pages exhorting followers to mobilize against the Bahraini regime on February 14, 2011. The calls for demonstrations were largely nonsectarian in outlook; most demanded peaceful reforms and refrained from directly criticizing King Hamad or calling for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa. A few did, however, call for “revolution” and the “fall of the regime” (*isqat al-nidham*). Secret negotiations between the royals and the opposition began with the king summoning Al Wefaq leader Sheikh Ali Salman for talks. But the two sides could not reach an agreement.

Protesters took to the streets, and on February 16, Al Wefaq joined with other Shia Islamist societies and leftist groups in forming an alliance that called for increased support for youth activists. The moderate cadre of Al Wefaq's leadership also entered into intense negotiations with the crown prince's office. But the negotiations went nowhere, and the longer the impasse persisted, the more that hardliners within both the opposition and the ruling family gained the upper hand.

New Sunni opposition groups were also formed during this period of unrest. The most prominent was the umbrella group known as the Tajammu'

al-Wahda al-Wataniya (National Unity Gathering). The coalition included two Sunni Islamist parliamentary groups—the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated al-Minbar society and the Salafi al-Asala society—as well as one nonparliamentary group, the Jam'iyat al-Shura al-Islamiyya.

The ruling family took action quickly. On the morning of February 17, 2011, Bahraini security forces closed in on Pearl Roundabout where demonstrators had gathered. At least four protesters were killed immediately; others died later. In a press statement, the foreign minister invoked the specter of a “sectarian abyss” in defending the move.

In response, Al Wefaq pulled its eighteen members out of the Bahraini parliament and adopted increasingly maximalist positions. Slogans circulating on the street gradually shifted from “reform” to a rejection of dialogue to “toppling” the regime. Three unlicensed Shia Islamist societies formed the al-Tahaluf min Ajl Jumhuriya (Alliance for a Republic), which called for the ouster of the Al Khalifa and the creation of a democratic republic.¹ The Alliance lent its support to the February 14 Youth Coalition—a leaderless network of youth activists formed along neighborhood lines and adept at using social media for coordinating protests—not the licensed Shia societies like Al Wefaq, which it viewed as compromised.²

Under pressure from U.S. officials, the crown prince extended an offer to discuss most of the opposition's demands in a public dialogue and to put the outcome of these talks before a popular referendum. On March 13, he issued a statement outlining “seven principles” to guide future dialogue, but Al Wefaq never formally responded to the offer—a delay that some attribute to its efforts to build consensus among a diverse set of opposition demands.

Just after the crown prince issued the principles, protesters aligned with the Alliance for a Republic blockaded Manama's financial district. For the prime minister, regime hardliners, and their supporters in Riyadh, this provocation—combined with Al Wefaq's prevarication on dialogue—was a bridge too far. On March 14, acting on the authority of the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC's) Peninsula Shield Force, Saudi armored columns, along with a small contingent of Emirati soldiers, crossed the King Fahd Causeway and entered Bahrain.

The intervention had far-reaching effects on the domestic balance of power in Bahrain. It fatally undermined the pro-reform elements in the Bahraini royal court, led by the crown prince. And it created an even starker polarization of Bahraini politics. It undermined Al Wefaq's legitimacy by showing that the society's conciliatory approach of dialogue during the early stages of the uprising had yielded nothing. Those Sunnis who had joined the protests were frightened by the prospect that Iran might weigh in on the side of the Shia and by the specter of Al Wefaq's withdrawal from politics. The Bahraini government was able to exploit these fears to split and divide the opposition.

The Deep Roots of Discord

Among the country's three main political actors—the Shia opposition, the Sunni Islamists, and the royal family—there is increasing division and dissolution. In each camp, pragmatic currents come under pressure by a newer, more confrontational cadre of idealists who, at times, have played a spoiler role. As a result of this fracturing, none of the camps is currently willing or able to enter into sustained, sincere negotiations with the others. All sides are now engaged in an intense round of mutual delegitimization.

The Fracturing of the Shia Opposition

A new rift has developed between younger activists and the clerical leadership; class and generational differences are now the main fissures affecting Bahraini Shia activism. Increasingly, the Shia opposition has been infused with a more populist, youthful orientation—one that rejects participation in government-sponsored dialogue.

This new trend is embodied by the February 14 Youth Coalition. Ideologically, the coalition has ties to the more rejectionist currents of the Bahraini Shia movement: Haq, al-Wafa, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, and the Bahraini Freedom Movement. But it is not monolithic, neither in its geographic roots nor in its sources of political inspiration. Some elements look to the London-based leadership of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, as a member of the February 14 Youth Coalition explained in February 2012. Others have ties to the Najaf-based Bahraini opposition. On the street, highly autonomous, secretive networks, usually organized by neighborhood, town, or village mount demonstrations and increasingly brazen assaults on police stations.³ What binds them together is a generational cohesion—they tend to be in their teens and twenties—as well as their demand for an abolition of the monarchy and the creation of a democratic republic.

The movement frames itself as an “internal counterrevolution” opposing the leadership of Al Wefaq and its disappointing engagement with the regime that, since the 2006 parliamentary elections, has yielded little in the way of tangible improvements for Bahrain's Shia.⁴ In interviews, youth activists speak of Ali Salman as having forfeited the revolutionary credentials he won during his role as a leader of the mid-1990s intifada and his subsequent imprisonment. “Al Wefaq has become ‘the domesticated opposition’ [*al-ma'rada al-muddajna*],” a youth activist lamented to the author in October 2012.

The intransigence of the February 14 Youth Coalition may have certain benefits for Al Wefaq in its dealings with the regime, but it also ties the Shia opposition's hands. On the one hand, the presence of a more strident opposition group enables a sort of “good cop, bad cop” dynamic within the

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opposition—“We tell the regime, ‘Deal with us,’” noted one Al Wefaq official; “We are the ones calling for peaceful reform and a constitutional monarchy, while the youth and the Alliance [for a Republic] are calling for the downfall of the family,” in the words of a youth activist. On the other hand, Al Wefaq is less able to deliver in any negotiation with the government because it does not control these currents.

The coalition’s tactics on the street have also become more and more brazen and confrontational, with reports of crude improvised explosive devices. “Before, we used to see the youth throw Molotov cocktails and run. Now they throw them and stand their ground,” observed one Western diplomat in Manama in September 2012. Despite these signs, the development of a full-blown urban insurgency is unlikely, given the small size of the archipelago, the effectiveness of the domestic intelligence services, and the difficulty of smuggling arms.

That said, escalation in the level of violence is likely and needs to be taken seriously. Improvised explosive devices have become increasingly sophisticated, unnerving the security forces. These tactics are also becoming a concern to diplomatic personnel and the U.S. Navy, which has issued warnings to its staff and their families about no-go areas because of the violence.

The tactics have a broader impact on the conflict as well. Youth-driven violence has already been used by the regime to tar and discredit the opposition as a whole. It is also exposing significant limits in the ability of Shia clerical authorities to control events on the ground.

Increasingly, the more youthful forces on the Shia political scene are challenging the traditional influence of Shia clerics. Despite their apparent dominance, Shia clerical authority in Bahrain has always been subject to a give-and-take process of debate and consensus building between the clerics, the political leadership of Al Wefaq, and its constituents. But since the Pearl

Roundabout uprising, loosely organized youth forces have acquired greater prominence, partly through the use of social-networking technology.

These new actors continue to venerate and respect Isa al-Qasim, the leading cleric associated with Al Wefaq who has played a key role in some of the society’s major strategic and political decisions, and have come to his defense

when he has been criticized by the regime and its supporters. But for political and strategic guidance, they defer to nonclerical leaders of the Shia rejectionist current, such as Hassan Mushayma (Haq), Abd al-Wahhab Husayn (al-Wafa), and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja (Bahrain Center for Human Rights)—all currently imprisoned. According to one prominent activist in the February 14 Youth Coalition, “I don’t like the clerics; they belittle the February 14 movement as just kids. These clerics say that ‘we [the clerics] own the streets.’ But actually, the February 14 [Coalition] does.”

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In tandem with this challenge from the street, there are internal shifts under way within Al Wefaq that have weakened the role of clerics. Increasingly, Al Wefaq's second-tier leadership is drawn from secular activists, as is its parliamentary representation. In 2006, for example, there were five Shia clerics in the Bahraini parliament; in 2010 there were only two (Hassan Isa and Hassan Sultan). Similarly, the most likely candidates to succeed Ali Salman as the secretary general of Al Wefaq—Khalil Marzuq or Abd al-Jalil Khalil—are both nonclerics, as an al-Wifaq official explained to the author in February 2012.

Taken in sum, these developments further erode the role of Isa al-Qasim, whose influence over Al Wefaq stems in large measure from his personal relationship with Ali Salman. Already, there are growing signs of divergence between the two. For example, in February 2012, al-Qasim called for attacks against Bahraini security personnel, exhorting his listeners to “smash the mercenaries (security forces) wherever you find them,” while Ali Salman was simultaneously trying to adopt a more conciliatory, peaceful tone, according to an interview with an Al Wefaq official.

This dissonance undermined Al Wefaq's negotiating strategy while playing into the hands of regime hardliners who have attempted to portray al-Qasim as the mouthpiece for Al Wefaq. As a result, some within Al Wefaq have been trying to restrict the public profile of clerics in the society's activities. According to one Al Wefaq official, interviewed in March 2012, “We are trying to minimize the role of clerics in our agendas at rallies. We preferred that clerics not be involved.”

The Fracturing and Entrenchment of the Sunni Opposition

A similar dynamic of fracturing has been at work in the Sunni opposition, producing a number of more youthful, militant groups. These groups have opposed the National Unity Gathering's proximity to the regime in particular.

The Gathering has long been the subject of controversy and confusion, with many observers—especially oppositionists—alleging that it is simply a government-sponsored counterweight to the Shia, an “opposition to the opposition,” as one activist charged in an interview in September 2012. But such characterization obscures the Gathering's very real roots in growing Sunni disenchantment with the government. Certainly, the Gathering framed itself as a loyal opposition; unlike the more radical members of the Shia opposition, it never called for the downfall of the monarchy. But it also embodied the frustrations of lower-class Sunnis, particularly in the mixed Sunni-Shia Manama suburb of Muharraq, with corruption, housing shortages, and cuts in government subsidies, as the Gathering's secretary general, Abd al-Latif Mahmud (a prominent Sunni cleric who was once imprisoned for his activism), explained to the author in September 2012.

According to interviews with Bahraini academics and members of the Gathering, the most significant of these groups has been the Sahwat al-Fatih

(the Fatih Awakening—a reference to the mosque in Manama where the group holds rallies), which broke off from the Gathering in late 2011. Its leadership is composed of conservative ex-parliamentarians from al-Minbar, Muhammad Khalid Ibrahim and Nasser Fadala. Some have characterized the Sahwat al-Fatih as the youth wing of al-Minbar. But interviews conducted in September 2012 suggest that this composition does not translate into control by al-Minbar over the group's strategies and tactics. In its manifestos and protests, the Sahwat al-Fatih criticized the Gathering's leadership for being too cautious, too close to the regime, and too friendly to the opposition. The charge was echoed by a Sunni liberal mediator between the Gathering and Al Wefaq, who noted in a September 2012 interview that “the Gathering is getting softer toward Al Wefaq.”

Like the February 14 Youth Coalition, the Sahwat al-Fatih took to the streets, advocating a form of vigilantism to confront and counter Shia protests. In its rhetoric and web presence, it was highly critical of U.S. policy in Bahrain, believing that Washington is conspiring with Tehran to hand over the kingdom to Al Wefaq. The group also reached out to like-minded Sunni figures and groups across the Gulf; it hosted the radical Kuwaiti professor and al-Qaeda sympathizer Abdallah al-Nafisi to speak at a rally at the al-Fatih mosque—long the epicenter of Sunni activism—on the anniversary of the February 14 uprising.⁵ By late 2012, the Sahwat al-Fatih had disbanded—but the underlying roots of Sunni youth anger remain.

Some outside observers and Bahraini actors have attributed the fracturing of the Sunni Islamist camp to deliberate regime policies—an attempt to prevent the Gathering from growing too strong by inducing defections within its ranks. According to this narrative, the prime minister and the royal court minister subsidized the Gathering as a means to counterbalance the Shia. When the Gathering began to act more independently, like a “real opposition,” regime hardliners reportedly induced the creation of Sahwat al-Fatih as a further offshoot, one that would be more pliable to their aims.

Given the shadowy nature of royal politics, this claim is unlikely to be definitively substantiated. At first glance, it seems to impart too much omnipotence to the regime over the country's Sunni political field. That said, it is likely that hardline regime elements attempted to co-opt Sunni rage and harness the rancor toward the Shia. This is even more likely in light of the emerging divisions in the royal family.

A House Divided: The Rise of the al-Khawalid

The ruling Al Khalifa have been divided between a moderate, pro-reform camp led by the crown prince and a reactionary faction led by the prime minister, with the king falling somewhere in between. But since late 2011, this rather simplistic dichotomy has been complicated by the rise of a more conservative faction that wields even greater power than the prime minister: the

royal court minister, Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, and the commander of the Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF), Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa. Sharing blood ties—the two are brothers, part of the so-called “al-Khawalid” branch of the Al Khalifa—and a common ideological outlook, the two figures have advocated an uncompromising line toward Shia-led dissent.

At its core, the division reflects a difference of approaches to addressing the country’s crisis. The faction led by the al-Khawalid prefers to see it through a security lens, while the crown prince’s camp recognizes the need for dialogue and graduated, calibrated reforms.

For the al-Khawalid faction, sectarianism has been an especially useful tactic; it delegitimizes the institutionalized Shia opposition while forestalling the emergence of a truly broad-based, grassroots movement. In this effort, the al-Khawalid are aided by their close association with Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi figures, as well as their oversight of the state’s principal institutions of political and social control. The royal court minister bankrolls the main state-owned daily, *al-Watan*, giving him a powerful platform to denigrate Al Wefaq as a proxy of Hezbollah and Iran. For his part, Field Marshal Al Khalifa heads the country’s armed forces, which, although doctrinally assigned the role of external defense, have an important auxiliary role in keeping public order at home.⁶

In tandem with the rise of the al-Khawalid, the crown prince has seen his influence steadily decline since mid-2011, epitomized by the dismantling of many of his economic projects that were intended to liberalize the Bahraini market and attract investment. The king has been similarly overshadowed.⁷

In early 2012, royal divisions were thrown into even sharper relief by renewed discussions of a political and military union between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. A political and military merger of the Gulf Arab states, beyond the parameters of the GCC, was first mentioned by Saudi King Abdallah during the GCC summit on December 19, 2011. Starting in early 2012, the idea of union—specifically between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—reverberated across the Bahraini political field, animating the Sunni Islamists, disheartening the Shia opposition, and exposing rifts within the royal family.

Predictably, the scheme stirred expressions of support from outspoken Sunni critics of the Shia. At al-Fatih Mosque, Sunni Islamists held weekly gatherings in support of union. Among regime voices, the al-Khawalid were some of the most supportive of the scheme. “Unity is the lifeline for us all, not only officials. It will serve us all,” noted the commander of the BDF.⁸ His allies within the security establishment echoed this endorsement; the Chief of Public Security Tariq al-Hassan compared Saudi-Bahraini union to a “NATO-like” entity.⁹ In contrast, the king and crown prince were more circumspect and muted, highlighting their sensitivity to a union’s detrimental effect on dialogue and reform as a means of dealing with the opposition.

Critics of a union argued that it would not only marginalize the Shia as a demographic group but also provide regime hardliners a useful pretext for

avoiding reforms. “They [the hardliners] could just say: ‘Sorry it is out of our hands now; the Saudis are calling the shots,’” noted one Bahraini academic in an interview in February 2012. The Shia February 14 Youth Coalition denounced the move, while Al Wefaq and Isa al-Qasim argued that any decision on union should be made through a popular referendum, citing the precedent of the vote on the country’s independence.¹⁰ In a statement to al-Watan, Ali Salman threatened to “burn the region” if union went through.¹¹

Why Dialogue Has Failed Repeatedly

Given the severity of Bahrain’s crisis, a crucial first step is dialogue between the opposition and the regime. But dialogue has repeatedly failed because of a fundamental asymmetry between the two sides and sharp disagreements over the scope and terms of negotiation and who should have a seat at the table. The issue of outside mediation has been especially contentious: the regime has repeatedly rejected it as harmful meddling in the country’s affairs, while opposition figures argue it is an absolute necessity to redress the stark imbalance between the two sides. Most importantly, dialogue has floundered because of the deep divisions in each camp. More radical, hardline actors in all three cur-

rents have exerted pressure on pragmatists or attempted to sabotage dialogue.

These dynamics were evident during the secret talks in the run-up to the protests. The king exhorted Ali Salman to call off the planned demonstrations, while the Al Wefaq leader pressed the king for a formal announcement of reform that would stipulate that the prime minister would

be elected from outside the royal family. Implicit in this demand was the dismissal of the current prime minister, who is a longtime foe of the Shia and political liberals. Deploying a long-standing argument, the king stated that the GCC states—Saudi Arabia in particular—would not countenance the removal of the prime minister.

The sides became more polarized as the conflict wore on, which became evident during Al Wefaq’s intense informal negotiations with the crown prince’s office. According to one Al Wefaq official present at the meetings, the crown prince had stated that he had “extracted authority” to enter into negotiations. But to what end was unclear. Some observers argued that his mandate all along was to simply end the protests, not negotiate real structural reforms or make concessions. Others asserted that he was in fact handed real authority by the king, initially, but was gradually overtaken by hardliners.

Regardless of which version is accurate, the longer the impasse persisted the more that hardliners within both the opposition and the ruling family gained the upper hand. For its part, Al Wefaq adopted a more unyielding line in negotiations to keep the increasingly impatient youth groups on board.¹²

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The crown prince’s “seven principles,” which included establishing a parliament with full authority and fair voting districts, tracked closely with Al Wefaq’s demands. But Al Wefaq held fast to its position, contending that the current government had to resign and elections had to be scheduled for the constituent assembly.¹³

Here divisions within the Shia opposition came into play. Al Wefaq’s maximalist demand sprang from the need to fend off increasingly radical Shia voices and to keep the support of the Pearl Roundabout demonstrators. Anything less and it feared it would lose control.

The king also unilaterally announced a “national consensus” dialogue between the government and the opposition. Unlike the informal talks between the crown prince and Al Wefaq, the new outreach was rooted in a fundamental asymmetry. The dialogue took place after the government, backed by Saudi and Emirati troops, had mounted a broad-based campaign of arrest, detentions, and alleged torture, effectively degrading the scale and strength of the protests. Moreover, the royal family dictated the terms of the dialogue—with Saudi guidance and little input from the opposition. The topics ranged from “governance” to “electoral system” to “women’s and children’s rights.” There was no mention of a popular referendum, and any recommendations resulting from the deliberations would have to be approved by the king.¹⁴

From the opposition’s perspective, the most onerous aspect of the dialogue was the regime’s screening and vetting of its participants. Over 320 individuals took part, but of these, only 25 represented the opposition societies. Each society was asked to send five representatives—Al Wefaq ultimately only sent four, since its fifth nominee was imprisoned.

Al Wefaq’s participation startled many observers. A possible explanation was last-minute pressure from the United States and the belief that participation—and then a theatrical, public withdrawal—would help strengthen the society’s bona fides with the increasingly impatient Shia street.¹⁵ Al Wefaq’s ally, the liberal Sunni-dominated National Democratic Action Society (al-Wad) also participated, despite the fact that its license had been revoked in March and its chairman, Ibrahim Sharif, had been arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.¹⁶

An especially contentious issue was the presence in the dialogue of many “oppositionists” who were in fact government loyalists. These included the National Unity Gathering led by Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Mahmud and representatives from the major Sunni Islamist groupings, al-Asala and al-Minbar.¹⁷ Most problematically from the Shia perspective, the pro-government delegation included Adil Flayfil, a former Bahraini intelligence officer accused of abuses during the government’s crackdown on the mid-1990s intifada. Added to these provocations, the slate of 25 oppositionists could only vote on recommendations and Al Wefaq in particular felt ill-suited to represent its constituents.¹⁸

Less than three weeks after the dialogue commenced, Al Wefaq pulled out. In a letter to the chairman of the dialogue, Al Wefaq's delegates cited the government's non-negotiable preconditions and the regime's unwillingness to hold "fair" and "transparent" elections. According to a source present at the meetings, the trigger for the walkout was a highly inflammatory reference to the Shia as rejectionists (*rawafidh*) by Jassim al-Saidi, a hardline Salafi politician.¹⁹ In a subsequent interview with Al Jazeera, Ali Salman elaborated on the deeper roots of Al Wefaq's rejection of the dialogue. The society's representation in the sessions was limited to 1.6 percent of the participants, yet Al Wefaq, he claimed, represented 60 percent of the Bahraini population.²⁰

Al Wefaq's withdrawal quickly triggered a cascade of similar walkouts by its like-minded allies. Three of the leading liberal opposition groups—the National Democratic Assembly, the National Democratic Action Society, and the Progressive Democratic Tribune Association—launched similar critiques of the sessions and announced their withdrawal.²¹ Throughout 2011 and 2012, these complaints would resurface continually. According to a September 2012 interview with one senior official in Al Wefaq:

The government is trying to dilute the dialogue. It is not serious. It brings everyone to the table, especially the NUG [the Gathering], which is basically a remote control for the regime. We tell the government, if you are going to bring the NUG, then bring [Haq leader Hassan] Mushayma and 'Abd al-Wahhab Husayn—they are the people. If they are not part of the dialogue, you will have a problem.

When the dialogue finally concluded in late July, the government had agreed to expand the legislative and oversight powers of the parliament, according to a statement by the official news agency, BNA. Yet Al Wefaq was unconvinced, and its delegates subsequently lambasted the outcome as fraudulent, since the sessions had been stacked with government loyalists or phony "oppositionists." "The dialogue is clearly theater, the goal of which was to market a particular dish," noted the Al Wefaq official Hadi al-Musawi in a news conference. "What came out of the official media on the dialogue exposes lies and deceit."²²

Predictably, the government's Sunni supporters seized on the withdrawals and Al Wefaq's rejection of the results as evidence of the opposition's intransigence and, even more ominously, its deference to foreign powers, that is, Iran. The Salafi society al-Asala was especially vocal on this point. Its spokesman claimed that Al Wefaq had taken orders directly from Iran, citing the fact that the Shia Islamist group pulled out of the dialogue two days after the head of Iran's powerful Guardian Council had stated in his Friday sermon that dialogue was pointless and called for an "Islamic occupation of Bahrain."²³ Other Sunni actors were similarly critical. In an interview with al-Arabiya, the leader of the National Unity Gathering condemned Al Wefaq for trying to "exacerbate the crisis" for self-serving ends.²⁴

In October 2011, Al Wefaq issued its Manama Document, which specified its vision for parliament with legislative and oversight powers, an independent judiciary, the drawing of equitable voting districts, and an end to discrimination against the Shia. The document would later become a reference point for Al Wefaq's subsequent negotiations, but pro-government commentators and the royals seized on it as evidence of Al Wefaq's perfidy against the state. The tone of attacks against Al Wefaq became more strident and violent. Even the crown prince, normally a voice of moderation toward Al Wefaq, became more and more rigid.²⁵

The country became increasingly polarized and parties moved further away from a negotiated settlement of differences. There was mounting evidence that sectarianism was seeping deeper into Bahraini society—in some cases with the tacit encouragement of regime hardliners. In December 2011, rioting wracked Muharraq after Sunni citizens assaulted a Shia Ashura procession whose participants were allegedly shouting political slogans. In the wake of the chaos, hardline Sunnis voiced support for the assault, while the royal court minister and prime minister criticized the Shia for being deliberately provocative.²⁶ The minister of interior appeared to take a more evenhanded view; in the aftermath of the rioting, he called for an investigation into Sunni assaults on the Shia Ashura procession.²⁷

By the middle of 2012, regime hardliners seemed to be claiming a new “normalcy” in Bahrain's domestic affairs. Bahrain's successful hosting of the Formula One Grand Prix no doubt buoyed this sentiment—the regime had long anticipated the automobile race and its attendant throngs of foreign spectators as a showcase for Bahrain's recovery from the 2011 unrest.

Encouraged, hardliners took a number of steps to further consolidate control. They appointed as minister for information Samira Rajab, a polarizing figure whose anti-Shia statements have aroused the ire of the opposition.²⁸ Concurrently, regime hardliners began an unprecedented crackdown on opposition activity, arresting prominent activists and passing legislation that increased the punishment for assaults on security forces. On the streets, opposition sources and outside nongovernmental organizations cited increasingly forceful tactics by security forces, such as the use of bird pellet shotguns at close range, the forcible breaching of homes, and firing tear gas directly at protesters.²⁹

On January 22, King Hamad announced a new round of dialogue, directing his minister of justice to invite representatives from the country's political societies. Although they welcome the talks in principle, officials from Al Wefaq registered long-standing concerns that the new round of talks would follow the diluted composition and narrow scope of the failed national dialogue of 2011. Previously, Al Wefaq had privately dismissed talks led by the justice minister as a “dialogue about dialogue,” pointing out the minister's affiliation with the hardline al-Khawalid branch of the royal family. In this latest round, Al Wefaq asked for representation from the royal family—namely,

the crown prince—arguing that the government should be a direct party to the talks rather than a mere “facilitator.”

Elsewhere, there were signs of opposition to the impending dialogue from both regime hardliners and, on the street, from the Shia youth movements. On January 22, for example, the BDF spokesman commented on Twitter that the dialogue initiative was a “dialogue of donkeys” and a prelude to a Shia coup in Bahrain.³⁰ For their part, the February 14 Youth Coalition and other rejectionist bodies announced forthcoming demonstrations and sit-ins, rejecting out of hand any dialogue with the regime. In response to this pressure, Al Wefaq announced its own demonstrations.³¹

The Dilemma of the U.S.-Bahraini Defense Relationship

As the camps splinter within Bahrain, the United States is in many ways caught in the middle—and its policies in Bahrain have attracted the ire of all three sides. At the center of the furor is America’s long-standing defense relationship with Bahrain. Sunni Islamists, royal hardliners, and even senior officials in the BDF accuse the United States of blithely abandoning the island to Iran and the Shia, while some Shia oppositionists from the February 14 Youth Coalition accuse the United States of backing the crackdown. Given this tension and the failure of other policy options, a chorus of voices in Washington has argued that America’s long-standing defense relationship with Bahrain needs to be recalibrated to pressure the regime to reform and break the stalemate.

Key to the debate is Bahrain’s hosting of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet Headquarters. Once dubbed the “busiest sixty acres in the world,” the Fifth Fleet serves as a nerve center for America’s maritime presence in the Gulf, making it a crucial (but not irreplaceable) pillar in the containment of Iran.³² Additionally, Bahrain has hosted U.S. Air Force aircraft and personnel at Isa Air Base—an arrangement that proved especially valuable during the 1991 Gulf War, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

In appreciation of this cooperation, President George W. Bush conferred the status of “Major Non-NATO Ally” on Bahrain in 2001, giving it expedited access to U.S. defense assistance and training. More recently, the BDF has increasingly taken on a number of new counterpiracy and counterterrorism roles with U.S. assistance. On the counterterrorism front, Bahraini intelligence officials have proved to be valuable partners in the U.S. struggle against al-Qaeda.

Arguments for leveraging the defense relationship fall into three general categories: steadfastness toward a critical ally that has hosted a U.S. naval presence for over sixty years; a complete halt to all forms of defense assistance, to

include preparations to relocate the U.S. Fifth Fleet; and imposing conditionality on defense assistance, that is, linking arms transfers to specific improvements on reform. The third option—conditionality—was tried in late 2011 and early 2012 but failed due to scope and timing of the effort and poorly communicated goals.

A Failed Past Attempt

In fall 2011, concerns about the Bahraini government's abuses prompted the passage of a resolution in the U.S. Congress to delay the planned sale of \$53 million worth of arms, including 44 HUMVEEs and several hundred TOW missiles. A State Department press release on January 27, 2012, indicated that a portion of the sale was in fact proceeding, using a clause that allowed military equipment under \$1 million to be sold without congressional approval. In the release, the State Department cited "initial steps" by the Bahraini government in implementing the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) and stated that a portion of the equipment—composed of nonlethal spare parts and upgrades to F-16 engines—was being used to "reinforce reforms in Bahrain." Not included in the release, the State Department emphasized, were HUMVEES, TOW missiles, and munitions used by Ministry of Interior forces for crowd control, such as teargas canisters and stun grenades. Yet the entire strategy was counterproductive for a number of important reasons.

Withholding crowd-control items was an attempt to limit the symbolic damage to U.S. legitimacy caused by the regime's crackdown. But such restrictions had a negligible effect on the street. The regime was able to circumvent U.S. restrictions by purchasing small arms munitions from Brazil and China. Most significantly, the regime bought the Turkish-made Otokar "Cobra" light armored vehicle as a substitute for the HUMVEE; the vehicles were deployed on the streets of Manama in time for the one-year anniversary of the February 14 uprising, according to February 14 Youth Coalition activists.

Many Bahraini elites and BDF officers believed the attempts to impose conditionality on arms transfers were a form of "political theater" or a game being waged by U.S. congressmen for personal, parochial aims. There was the sense among many that the Bahraini defense establishment could simply "weather the storm." At the working level, Bahraini officers believe the relationship is as solid as ever and has suffered no ill effects. In interviews in February 2012, BDF and Royal Bahraini Air Force officers saw no disruption to ongoing International Military Education and Training, Foreign Military Financing, and Foreign Military Sales programs.

At the same time, the "pause" in arms sales engendered a current of distrust within the BDF. Many in the BDF wondered why the institution was being punished when the overwhelming majority of abuses and deaths were caused by the regime's internal security forces—the National Security Agency

and the Ministry of Interior's police forces.³³ Other officers appeared shocked and offended by the high level of criticism from the United States, citing not only Bahrain's hosting of the Fifth Fleet but its contribution of police trainers to Afghanistan. One BDF officer asked sarcastically in a March 2012 interview, "Are we still a Major Non-NATO ally?" In addition, several BDF officers emphasized in interviews that although the country is committed to the United States as a security provider, this current exclusiveness should not be taken for granted. "Bahrain is highly adaptable and we can go elsewhere for arms," noted one officer.

The backlash was not simply confined to the level of rhetoric—there were a number of instances of explicit retaliation by the BDF. In March, for example, Field Marshal Al Khalifa denied the United States permission to station a squadron of military aircraft on Bahraini soil; the United States was forced to relocate the planes to another Gulf country. Besides demonstrating Bahrain's very real ability to retaliate, the episode also illustrates the power of the field marshal over the king, who had initially welcomed the aircraft.

Moreover, the timing of the eventual release of the arms in May 2012 proved counterproductive. Ostensibly, the release was intended to shore up the more moderate, pro-reform crown prince against the hardliners—the State Department announced the release approval during a visit by the crown prince to Washington in May 2012. Yet the crown prince had been steadily stripped of significant authority since the Saudi intervention in Bahrain and diplomatic support from Washington was unlikely to restore it. The conservative royal faction interpreted the transfer as a "win" and a sign of normalcy in U.S.-Bahraini relations. Finally, the release came at precisely the moment when the regime was beginning a renewed media and judicial crackdown on dissent and was imbued with newfound confidence after successfully holding the Formula One race.

Because of poor timing, the resumption sent the wrong signal that the U.S.-Bahraini relationship was back to "business as usual," which was clear in telephone interviews with U.S. Central Command and National Security Council officials in May 2012 as well as interviews with Bahraini oppositionists in Washington, DC, in August.

For the opposition, specifically Al Wefaq, the arms release was a disheartening blow, confirming that Washington, in the words of one activist, "carries a large carrot and a small stick" in its dealings with the regime. It also undercut Al Wefaq's strategy of engaging with the regime, lending further credence to more militant voices from the rejectionist camp and empowering the February 14 Youth Coalition. For many of these street activists, the distinction between the United States withholding crowd-control munitions and selling spare parts was lost; as far as they were concerned, the United States was deeply implicated in the government's crackdown. A strong theme of anti-Americanism has since crept into the movement's rhetoric and actions.

Toward a New Approach

In many respects, Bahrain represents a crucial test of Washington's ability to juggle conflicting priorities in the wake of the Arab uprisings, balancing the need for political reform with long-standing strategic interests and military partnerships. For now, the Bahraini regime continues its crackdown and Washington in many ways turns a blind eye. Meanwhile, anti-Americanism is building among all parties.

Moving forward, the U.S. approach to Bahrain needs to be guided by a degree of modesty about what the United States can and cannot accomplish. Much of Bahrain's internal policy is shaped by intra-royal dynamics that are largely opaque to outsiders and cannot be manipulated from outside. "It is impossible for the U.S. to use a 1,000 mile screwdriver from Washington to affect meaningful changes of behavior in this regime," noted one U.S. embassy official.

Among the most important of the buffers against U.S. influence is the powerful sway of Saudi Arabia over Bahraini domestic policies. While Riyadh recognizes that a degree of reform in Bahrain is necessary to release pressure, it is wary that too much opening will not only destabilize the country and possibly lead to the end of the monarchy, but that moves toward reform could reverberate among Saudi Arabia's own frustrated Shia population in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province, as well as among liberals and Sunni Islamists. That said, progressive and moderate factions of the Saudi royalty allegedly differ in their opinions of what to do in Bahrain.

For now, however, the Bahrain portfolio remains squarely in the hands of the Ministry of Interior, which historically has been one of the more hardline Saudi institutions. The late minister of interior, Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, reportedly had a close personal relationship with the Bahraini prime minister. It remains to be seen what changes, if any, his son and successor will bring about in the bilateral relationship.

In November 2011, the United States thought it had a powerful policy tool at its disposal when a sweeping inquiry into the conduct of both government forces and the opposition—the BICI—issued its report. But the resulting recommendations were only partially implemented and the report itself became the subject of polarizing debate.

The BICI's report was highly critical of the government's conduct in early 2011, citing the "use of unnecessary and excessive force, terror-inspiring behavior, and unnecessary damage to property." The report went on to criticize the government's systematic policy of arbitrary detentions, denial of medical care, and torture. It found no evidence of a link between Iran and the protesters, nor did it attribute any abuses to the Saudi and GCC troops present in the country. The BICI report, along with other critics of the Al Khalifa, argued that the continued marginalization of the Bahraini Shia and the stalling of political reform

were radicalizing larger segments of the Shia populace. The opposition was also criticized for intransigence and a number of tactical missteps.

The government took some steps to implement the report's recommendations. Many steps, however, were criticized by both opposition and outside parties, such as the United States, as hollow and token measures. Trials of security officials involved in abuses were confined to the lower ranks, and oversight bodies that had been recommended by the BICI lacked real authority.

By late 2012, the BICI report was the subject of wildly varying accounts of compliance, with the regime arguing that it had fully implemented eighteen of the 26 recommended reforms, while outside observers argued that far fewer had actually been accomplished. "The regime has created the shells of institutions and reforms recommended by the BICI but it needs to breathe life into them," noted one Western diplomat in a September 2012 interview.

Complicating matters further is the issue of reform pacing. A common argument among regime defenders is that transforming the monarchy into a more democratic system cannot happen overnight and that rapid political changes could be destabilizing for all. According to this narrative, the unelected Majlis al-Shura acts as a "brake" against an immature and frequently cantankerous parliament that, if left unchecked, would enact conservative social legislation that would scare away foreign investment.

While there is undoubtedly merit to the argument of sequencing reforms, too often it is used to obfuscate and reject demands for meaningful change. For the opposition, the glacial pace of the regime's progress is a perennial source of frustration; an old saying used to describe tribal Arab leadership has acquired new currency among activists: "One day for a sheikh is a year" (*yawm shaykh, sana*).

With these challenges in mind, there are still a number of policy tools the United States can employ: leveraging the defense relationship, continuing key leader engagements, and sanctioning the regime through economic measures and in multilateral forums.

Leveraging the Defense Relationship

The use of U.S. defense assistance to Bahrain to promote reform is but one lever of many, and there are many complications to consider when taking this approach.

First, the head of the BDF is firmly entrenched in the hardliners' camp, being related by blood to the figure who many activists and outside observers regard as the architect of the regime's crackdown—the royal court minister. This tie obviously limits the degree to which the BDF as an institution can act as a proponent for reform, at least in the near-to-mid term.

That said, there is purportedly a younger cohort of field- and company-grade officers, many of whom have passed through U.S. professional military education, who are more favorably disposed to reform. According to interviews,

some of these officers were stung by the inclusion of the BDF in the BICI report, which implicated the institution in the deaths of two protesters. This cadre believes that BDF involvement in internal policing during the crisis had sullied the institution's morale and reputation—by doctrine and training, the BDF focuses on the external defense of the kingdom but was ordered by royal decree to augment the Ministry of Interior and National Security Agency forces during the uprising.³⁴ Taken in sum, these sentiments suggest that promoting attitudinal change within the BDF through officer exchanges, International Military Education and Training (IMET), and broader security cooperation activities to bring about meaningful political shifts in Bahrain may be a long-term, generational effort—real results may only occur when this younger cadre comes to the fore.

Second, if conditionality is attached to arms sales, it should target those high-end defense items over which the United States has a monopoly and that the Bahraini military cannot buy elsewhere. The most notable example is the F-16—an item that accrues enormous prestige, both to the BDF as an institution and to Bahrain as member of the GCC. The United States must link any halt in transfers to defined, clearly communicated benchmarks for reform.

Finally, some voices, both in the United States and in Bahrain, have called for the relocation of the Fifth Fleet as a means to compel the regime to reform. There are several obstacles to doing so. For one, the U.S. Navy has no current plans for relocating the base, either as a form of pressure or to reduce the vulnerability of U.S. assets and personnel. “There is no plan B,” noted one U.S. naval official. “It would take an Iranian missile to pry the Fifth Fleet loose from Bahrain,” quipped another during an interview in November.

Logistically, moving the base presents a number of difficult but not insurmountable challenges. The command and control functions of the base could be moved offshore to a carrier battle group or a special-purpose C4I ship like the U.S.S. *Mount Whitney*. But this is a temporary fix and will inevitably encounter problems with bandwidth and sustainability. And it does not solve the broader problem of where to relocate the base's docking and refurbishment facilities. Within the Gulf, only the port of Jebel Ali in Dubai approximates the capacity of Bahrain. Yet even here, the U.S. Navy has concerns about the port's ability to handle large vessels. There are further uncertainties about the Emirati government's willingness to host additional U.S. forces on its soil. Unlike Bahrain, the Emirati government is flush with cash with which to purchase U.S. defense items; it does not use the hosting of U.S. forces as the basis for its transactional defense relationship with the United States.

Aside from these technical difficulties, there are broader considerations about how a move to relocate will affect the political balance of power inside Bahrain. On this issue, few opposition figures interviewed by the author recommended moving the Fifth Fleet as a form of pressure over the Al Khalifa. Were this to happen, they believed, it would bolster the position of hardliners

within the royal family and result in Saudi Arabia filling the security vacuum—which would be even more disastrous for real reform. Given the opacity of the royal family, it is unclear if this will actually be the case—or if using the Fifth Fleet as leverage might actually send the clearest signal yet that America will no longer countenance the regime's current path. With these uncertainties in mind, it is prudent for the U.S. military to prepare plans for the gradual relocation of the Fifth Fleet's assets and functions.

Key Leader Engagement

Outside of the defense realm, key leader engagements remain an important pillar of compelling the regime to reform. Although much of this engagement should properly occur in private, there are times for public criticism and, when warranted, praise. Both opposition activists and U.S. embassy personnel pointed to the regime's sensitivity to public criticism from high-level U.S. officials. In many cases, these statements resulted in actual policy changes, such as the Bahraini judiciary's rescinding of a ban on Al Wefaq after Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman singled it out in public.

That said, there are limits to this approach. For instance, the United States pressured Manama to lift the sentences of Shia medics who treated protesters in 2011, but in a subsequent hearing a court upheld their convictions.

In its communications with the regime, U.S. officials should emphasize the following reforms: public sector discrimination, punitive measures against high-ranking officials implicated in the security crackdown of 2011, an end to the prosecution of political activists for exercising their right to assembly and free speech, and, most importantly, the enactment of a constitution that returns legislative and oversight power to the parliament.

Economic and Multilateral Pressure

In addition, the United States should find ways to use economic leverage to break the impasse. A key stakeholder group in Bahrain that has been negatively impacted by Bahrain's crisis is the country's once-thriving merchant community, which includes both Sunnis and Shia. With the right mix of incentives and pressure, economic concerns can temper sectarian divisions and political intransigence, potentially advancing reform. One step in this direction was the December 2012 U.S. Department of Labor report that highlighted Bahrain's violation of its free trade agreement with the United States because of the government's policy of dismissing trade union leaders. More targeted measures would send an even stronger signal, such as freezing the assets of senior Bahraini officials involved in abuses identified in the BICI report.

In addition, the United States should support the efforts of multilateral forums to highlight Bahrain's human rights abuses. For example, in June 2011, Washington designated Bahrain as a country requiring attention from

the United Nations Human Rights Council, placing it on par with Zimbabwe, Belarus, and North Korea.³⁵ Bahrain's very public accession to such a disreputable club reportedly stung more reform-minded members of the regime, who have long sought to portray Bahrain as a beacon of liberalism and free trade. More recently, on January 17, 2013, the European Parliament called for EU sanctions against Bahraini officials involved in human rights abuses.

But the ascendant hardline faction led by the al-Khawalid has adopted a siege-like mentality and may be markedly less susceptible to outside pressures and incentives. In addition, Saudi support and GCC solidarity provide a degree of insulation from Western diplomatic and economic pressure.

The United States should support the efforts of multilateral forums to highlight Bahrain's human rights abuses.

Conclusion

It is tempting to let the momentum of previous U.S. policies define America's future relationship with Bahrain. But, increasingly, this approach no longer matches realities on the ground. While the United States must be rightfully mindful of its limited influence over the opaque workings of the royal family—as well as Saudi Arabia's domineering role—there is still more it can do to encourage reform. Ultimately, though, Bahrainis themselves must agree upon the parameters for this reform through dialogue and negotiation. Yet so far, a vicious cycle of mutual delegitimization has prevented this dialogue from occurring. A crucial first step, therefore, is for the monarchy to end its portrayal of the Shia opposition as illegitimate proxies of Iran.

Although the United States faces no shortage of crises in the Arab world, its policy toward Bahrain deserves significant rethinking and recalibration. Those who contend that U.S. concerns over human rights and democracy promotion should take a backseat to hardnosed realism and strategic imperatives will soon find their arguments overtaken by Bahrain's steady but inexorable descent. After two years of stalemate and worsening tensions, meaningful political reforms in Bahrain have themselves become strategic imperatives for the United States—crucial measures to stave off further destabilization that could one day put American interests and people at risk.

Notes

- 1 The Alliance's statement of its position was posted to various websites in mid-April. See www.fajrbh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=18614. The Alliance's Facebook page can be found at www.facebook.com/RepublicAlliance.
- 2 Al-Tahaluf min Ajl al-Jumhuriya, "Bayan al-Mawaqif (Statement of Principles), April 15, 2011, www.fajrbh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=18614.
- 3 Laurence Louer, "Houses Divided: The Splintering of Bahrain's Political Camps," Sada, April 4, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/04/04/houses-divided-splintering-of-bahrain-s-political-camps/a6ej>.
- 4 According to several Shia interlocutors interviewed in February 2012, Al Wefaq's only success during its parliamentary tenure was investigating government corruption.
- 5 In March 2012, signs outside the al-Asala headquarters in Muharraq bore images of Al Wefaq leaders with nooses around their necks. Author's observation, Muharraq, Bahrain, March 2012.
- 6 Husayn al-Harbi, "Al-Mushir Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa lil-Ra'i: Na'am Hunaka Mu'amara li-Qalb Nidham al-Hukm... wa Laysa Li-Mu'arada Sila bi-al-Rabi' al-'Arabi" (Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa to al-Rai: Yes, there is a Conspiracy to Overthrow the Ruling System ... And There is No Connection Between the Opposition and the Arab Uprising), *Al-Rai* (Kuwait), March 11, 2011.
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- 13 "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," presented in Manama, Bahrain on November 23, 2011, 165–66, www.bici.org.bh/BICireportEN.pdf 50.
- 14 International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII): Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform*, 18–19.
- 15 "Proposal to Expand Powers of Bahrain Parliament 'Lies': Shiite Group," Reuters, July 26, 2011.
- 16 According to one activist, the arrest of Ibrahim al-Sharif had a chilling effect on Sunni participation in the protests. "The arrest of Ibrahim was a signal to the Sunnis. They are saying to everyone: 'Nobody is safe. We will go after you. You have to pick your sides.'" Personal interview with an activist from the February 14 Youth Coalition, Sitra, Bahrain, February 28, 2012.
- 17 "National Dialogue," July 18, 2011, www.nd.bh/en/index.php/the-dialogue/participants-list.
- 18 "Proposal to Expand Powers of Bahraini Parliament 'Lies': Shiite Group."
- 19 Sandeep Singh Grewal, "Dialogue Drama," *Gulf Daily News*, July 13, 2011.
- 20 "Fariq al-Hiwar Ra'anna al-Hiwar Lan Yuntij Hallan Siyassiyann lil Azma fi al-Bahrayn" (The Negotiating Team Believes that Dialogue Will Not Produce a Political Solution to the Crisis in Bahrain), Al Wafaq Facebook posting, July 17, 2011; www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150318246303072&set=pu.203200448071&type. Also, "Bahrain Shiite Opposition Pulls Out of Talks," Agence France-Presse, July 17, 2011.
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- 32 U.S. Navy Fifth Fleet, "Accomplishing the Mission," www.cusnc.navy.mil/command/accomplish.html.
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- 35 "Statement by the Delegation of the United States of America Delivered by Ambassador Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe," Human Rights Council, 17th Session Geneva, June 15, 2011, <http://geneva.usmission.gov/2011/06/15/item-4-general-debate-on-human-rights-situations-requiring-council-attention>.

About the Author

Frederic Wehrey is a senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research focuses on political reform and security issues in the Arab Gulf states, Libya, and U.S. policy in the Middle East more broadly.

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