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Briefing Paper 2/2011

Bahrain: A proxy battle?

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April 2011

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The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island country situated in the Persian Gulf, only a few kilometers from Saudi Arabian shores. Although seventy percent of the population is Shia, the country has been ruled autocratically by the Sunni Al-Khalifa family since the eighteenth century.

Bahrain is a wealthy banking center and also an important American ally. U.S. 5th fleet is based here to ensure the flow of oil through the Hormuz Strait and to protect American interests in the region. Bahrain represents a crucial security interest for Saudi Arabia as well, given its geographical location across from the primary Saudi oil region. On the other hand, there is also considerable Iranian influence. Iran claimed Bahrain was an Iranian province in the past, but the Shah officially renounced the claim in 1971. However, today many Shia clerics in Bahrain have been trained in Iran and every now and then the issue of Iranian influence is raised. Put together, these aspects make Bahrain one of the most volatile countries in the Gulf and at the same time one of the most strategically important.

Bahrain is often considered to be at the forefront of social change and a model for the rest of the region. Minorities and women play a greater role and significant democratic reforms have also taken place. But the Shiites have long argued that they are being discriminated against and treated as second-class citizens. Finally, at the end of February, emboldened by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, more than a hundred thousand protesters poured into the Pearl Square in Manama and began a public uprising. They called for democracy and further reforms. The government first responded by force, killing seven people. But the response has gradually evolved as the government tried to seek national dialogue. It made some concessions, such as releasing 300 political prisoners, firing three cabinet ministers and allowing the opposition leader Hassan Mushaima to return from exile in London. His return posed another challenge for the government, because he might have taken the position of a charismatic leader of the uprising. To prevent this from happening, Mushaima along with several other opposition figures was arrested later on in March.

People enraged by the killings started demanding the government's resignation and the overthrow of the Khalifa family. Many would probably accept a constitutional monarchy in which King Hamad would reign, but not rule. At the same time, some are already calling for the ouster of the king himself. People want a government that would be responsive to the parliament, which should reflect the majority of the population. The problem today is that the seats in parliament are gerrymandered, so that there is a sitting majority of Sunnis. Despite the partial concessions, the protesters refused to be mollified and once again marched to the streets of Manama. On March 13th they blocked the financial district. For government supporters this move was especially worrisome. If the Sunni-Shia sectarianism grew out of control, the financial business would probably move to Dubai and Qatar – Bahrain's biggest competitors. In reaction to this, the police used tear gas and rubber bullets to quell the unrest. Moreover, on March 14th at the request of Bahrain's ruler about 2000 troops from Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates crossed borders under the auspices of Gulf Cooperation Council – a six-nation regional organization of Sunni rulers that has grown anxious over the challenge to the Al-Khalifa regime. Opposition groups denounced this action as an occupation.



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The next day, the King declared a state of emergency. In Manama, 10 000 protesters marched peacefully to denounce the intervention. On the other hand, two protesters had been killed and some 200 wounded in clashes with police in the village of Sitra, a stronghold of antigovernment activists, a few kilometers south of the capital. In the next few days the Bahraini government shifted tactics to forceful repression. First the security forces rolled to the Pearl Square and took it from the protesters who had moved in a month ago. Then, symbolically, the protest movement's monument – the Pearl at the centre of Pearl Square – was torn down on March 18th.

The situation in Bahrain needs to be evaluated in a broader context. The popular uprisings shaking the Arab world have begun to shift the balance of power in the Middle East. These revolts pose a serious challenge to the West's interests, because the regimes they started toppling are those on which the West relies for energy and strategic cooperation. The West struggles to prevent broader instability and protect its interests, but at the same time wants to express support for democratic aspirations of the protesters. That's why the West's reaction remains ambiguous: for example, the United States may encourage Iranians to rise up for democracy, but in the Bahrain's case they remain silent.

Saudi Arabia is particularly worried by the prospect of Bahrain's Shias gaining more power, because it has a substantial Shiite population in the east of the country. Saudis also fear that they are being encircled as a result of developments in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and now Bahrain. But as many analysts note, the unrest in Bahrain is unlikely to lead to the collapse of the regime. Too important interests are at stake. If the regime was to fall, the United States would lose the base of its 5th Fleet, an crucially important strategic point at a time when the containment of Iran belongs to eminent foreign policy goals. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia would not let a Shia-led country emerge only a few kilometers from its shores, which it demonstrated by involving its troops in the violent crackdown of unarmed protesters.

Even though the protesters have maintained their loyalty to Bahrain and the leader of the largest Shiite party Al Wifaq, Khalil Ebrahim al-Marzooq, rejected Iran's type of Islamic government, the fears that a political dispute could be transformed into a sectarian one have been persistent. Iran's influence could play a major role in this regard. Its position is stronger despite protests at home, troubled economy and international pressure on its regime. Not so long ago two of Iran's key enemies were removed by the ousting the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. This year, Iran's ally, Hezbollah, forced the collapse of a pro-Western government of Saad Hariri in Lebanon. What is more, any regime that emerges in Egypt is unlikely to be as hostile to Hamas as Mubarak was – and Hamas is supported by Iran. Through unintended consequences of these events, Iran's regional power has been boosted. Moreover, recent turmoil in the Middle East and Maghreb has taken the focus away from Iran's nuclear program and potentially made it harder to achieve international consensus on sanctions against it.

In the context of these developments, it seems that Bahrain has become the scene of a proxy battle for regional dominance in the world's most oil-rich region. So far, Iran's preference was not to get engaged directly because events were flowing in its direction. But there is a certain possibility that direct conflict could appear if Iran decides to interfere. At the moment, the Saudi military intervention probably further tilted the situation in Iran's favor.



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As a result, Iran, a quintessentially authoritarian regime, will now paradoxically have a chance to support the democratic aspirations of the people. On the contrary, the United States ultimately disappointed the protesters and did not succeed in persuading the rulers to respond peacefully to the demands for change. Many protesters believe that the troops were sent to Bahrain with American approval and see the U.S. as a Saudi accomplice. Consequently, the United States' citizens in Bahrain will probably find themselves surrounded by a hostile population which puts into question the safety of U.S. ships and personnel there.

Furthermore, the relations between USA and Saudi Arabia have chilled to their coldest since 2003. USA abandoned Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and now Saudi Arabia ignored American requests not to send troops to Bahrain. The countries have chosen different approaches. USA tried to encourage reforms, but the rulers chose repression instead. Saudi Arabia believes that democratic reforms would only cause further instability. At the moment, it appears that the biggest loser in this game is the United States, while Iran has seen its influence throughout the region boosted while not having done anything in particular to achieve this favorable position.



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