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Transcript

The Arab Spring in Bahrain and the Gulf

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Dr Jasim Husain:

My name, as you know, is Jasim Husain. I'm from Bahrain. Bahrain, a country really has been going through lots of changes over the last decades, really. We've been having recurrent crises every now and then. We had in the 1970s, 80s, 90s and certainly the latest one from February 2011.

There are a lot of issues nowadays before the political problem. At the moment really, the opposition, the main opposition group in Bahrain, is calling for a number of changes and issues to be addressed. One issue is that of transforming the country into a constitutional monarchy. They are set on no one particular model, but Malaysia is one example for Bahrain. Possibly even further down the road could be some of the European models.

Bahrain can be an agent of change for the region and has been an agent of change. We were the first country to introduce education and modern administration in the area. So Bahrain can be really something positive for the region as a whole.

Another demand from the opposition is to have a parliament with full authorities and illustration, and accountability for the government. We need to have a parliament that can really make decisions. At the moment, the parliament is really hindered from the presence of the appointed Shura Council. The Shura Council is not allowing the parliament to function properly in the country. This is an appointed body that shares power with the elected one.

Certainly this is really... as over the last five years, we've tried very hard to solve problems. But we could not convince many people of our resource, really. Many will have given us credit for trying, rather than achieving. This has to be addressed.

The other one is the issue of the electoral system. At the moment really, the districts are not fairly represented. We don't have the universal principle of one vote for one person, it's not applied at the moment. We have some districts which are fairly small, others are very large. The district of MP Mutar Mutar, who sadly is now behind bars, his district equals all the districts of the southern government.

We have the southern government has five districts, and one person now has, his area really equals all plus of the whole government. Just last year, my party, we got 63 percent of popular votes. But we only have 45 percent of the seats. So we have a majority of people electing a minority of the representatives in the parliament.

The other thing, there's another demand before the people, is the idea of ending all kinds of discrimination in the country. We have now discrimination based on sectarian, tribal, ethnic, and such really, and this is really undermining Bahrain not just socially, but also socio-economically. Bahrain really can be, has economic advantages being undermined because of this problem.

Another issue before the people is doing away with all kinds of corrupt practices, administration, financial. We have now, some people can get access to large areas of land, even in areas in the sea at the moment because of some grants. And certainly this is not allowing proper use of the resources in the country.

So these are some of the demands of the public that we have now, not just socio-political, but also socio-economic issues now. My society and others have been working very hard to diversify Bahrain's economy away from oil. So much is talked about Bahrain's economy being not dependent on oil, but that's not totally true. At the moment, the oil sector accounts for three quarters of treasury income and exports, and one third of the GDP. So it's still pretty much an oil-driven economy.

We're working very hard, but [name - inaudible] for example has been supporting lots of the projects in the country, including the Bahrain International Circuit and Formula 1 – we have been very much supportive of that over the last weeks which became media really. So really, we have to... these must be addressed in the country so much.

My other observations have to do with the current political crisis that started in mid-February. There were demands for changes in the country, but totally through peaceful means. We tried very hard to find a solution. An offer was made for a dialogue by the Crown Prince. [Name – inaudible] and others really embraced that. There were very private talks behind the scenes. My party, we met the conference three times to find a solution. But sadly, the hardliners in the government couldn't not allow him.

On 13 March, the Crown Prince announced his seven principles. And on 14 March, the decision was made for the entering of GCC troops led by Saudi, which literally changed the whole scene. Certainly the Saudis, by coming to Bahrain they have only caused more problems rather than solutions. They have made the problem much more complicated. Any solution now must satisfy the Saudis as well, and not just the local Bahrainis.

The use of force was totally wrong by the Saudis. There was no need for using force. We had now 30 casualties, four people died while in custody.

Certainly there's no justification for that whatsoever. So we think the crisis in Bahrain is manageable. It can be done. The problem can be gone through peacefully, and you all know that we had the start of the opening of the dialogue, the fresh initiative really just a few days ago on the 2 July. And the opposition again embraced that, led by [name inaudible], we have said we have to find a political solution to that.

There's good news, really, I must say. Just two days ago the Kuwaitis have withdrawn their naval force from Bahrain, which is something really positive. That could really help in overcoming the problems. There is also talk that possibly that today we could see redeployment of Saudi troops from Bahrain. That's again something positive.

Now all this means for tomorrow, tomorrow is the beginning day of dialogue in the country. 5 July is when dialogue, actual guys go in to start. But sadly this dialogue is going to start while one of its members of the dialogue is now behind bars. Abdulhadi al-Khawaja was unjustly put behind bars, although he's now a leading figure... all adding to the complications facing the country.

I will stop at this moment here and certainly we have lots to talk during the discussions. Thank you.

Dr Omar AlShehabi:

Thank you very much for giving me a chance to speak here. I thought I would take a bit more of an analysis approach to this, and I would give a bit more of the topography of the political movements in Bahrain, before the events of 14 February and during the events and also possible indications of what might emerge in the near future.

So before the events happened, the political scene was dominated, we could group them into the established societies, the officially recognised societies, and those movements that were not officially recognised. So on the officially recognised societies parts, we had Al Wefaq, which was the main Shia Islamist party, which Dr Jasim Husain is from. And as well on the opposition side, there were a few secular parties, most notably from them a society called Waad. This was a liberal secular society and both of these were officially recognised parties. As well there were also the Sunni Islamist parties. This basically made up the foremost societies in the country.

But there were also other parties that were not officially recognised, but there were movements that also had quite a significant presence in the street. Probably most notably within them is a group called Haq. Haq is basically a

breakaway group from the official societies. It's a group that when the new constitution was given at the new political system was made in 2001, 2002, they thought this did not aspire to what they wanted or what they thought the Bahraini people wanted. So they rejected the political system and decided not to participate in it, not to give it legitimacy. So they were known as the constitutionalists. At the beginning, they were an amalgamation of, basically from all the groups that entered. So Shia Islamists as well as secularists.

And then also I would like to add to these groups another group that also became significant during the events of 14 February, which I'll go into a bit more later. This is basically the, let's call them the human rights-based societies or activists. So they were human rights organisations. Most notable is the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. It was also officially dissolved and was out of the foremost sphere, but it continued to be active.

Now these were, I guess, before the events happened. Now when the events started in Egypt and Tunisia, there was an online movement. This is where the whole 14 February events started. It started as a campaign online and it mainly started on this forum called Bahrain Online. It's the biggest forum in Bahrain in the opposition circles. So they basically, when the events happened in Egypt they choose the date of 14 February which was the date of the referendum in Bahrain and the date of the new constitution. And as well on Facebook there were groups that were created.

These were anonymous. It was unclear who was behind them. But from reading what they were writing, it looked to be a mix of secularists and Islamists with probably a bit more dominating from the Islamists. But it was unclear what was the group.

Now when the events of 14 February happened, basically the landscape changed quite a bit. The officially recognised society, for example Al Wefaq, at the beginning stayed silent on the matter. It did not address when the call for 14 February happened. Why the secular opposition formally recognised the opposition group, it basically put out a vague statement saying we support the rights for the use to demonstrate, but it did not explicitly endorse it.

The other non-official parties explicitly endorsed the events of 14 February. So when the 14 February happened, the official parties in the opposition were caught a bit on the back foot. They were not the ones who instigated it, and it was unclear who instigated it, to be honest. So it was always this. So it's created a dynamic of quite a few forces moving within the opposition circles.

And it also brought new forces to the fore. So one of them was basically what came to be known as the Pearl Roundabout, which is basically just the people

who were there, the activities who were there. There was no one in control of it, it seemed. There were different messages coming out of it. There were different groups being involved. There was no particularly clear message coming out and it was unclear. It was basically a lot of groups, it seemed, that were involved in this, including the official opposition societies and the non-official and probably people who were not involved in either of them. So this was what came to be called the roundabout and was the focus.

The other group that came out during this was also what was called the Coalition for the Republic. So this included groups like Haq and two small groups, one based here in London and another that's based in Bahrain. They basically declared that they wanted a republic, which caused a split from their previous line, at least with Haq which was usually calling for a constitutional monarchy. This was a new development within them.

And then the other group that became big during this time was what was called [inaudible]. This was a group basically that was largely seen as pro-government, certainly, and it was led by one of the pre-eminent Shiites in the island and it was seen as a counter-movement to what was going on in the roundabout.

So there were these new forces that were coming to the fore, and as well we should not forget the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights became extremely active. It kind of became a symbol of what was going on. They were the most active; they were the most reporting; they were the ones that were most online. If you look at their Twitter accounts, like the head of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights has about 40,000 followers. Which is huge in Bahrain. And basically they became a significant force within.

What is the point of trying to give this kind of topography? We would like to move to what's next, what would come from this. Basically there are, I think, two or three main themes or occurrence that would define how things go. It's unclear where it would go, things are shifting very quickly and no one would dare make predictions. But it's good to see what are the kind of occurrences that are emerging.

One is that now everyone in Bahrain is pretty much politicised. Even the people that were not involved in politics before, everyone now is involved in politics. And this basically gives fertile terrain for new movements, new parties to develop. It's unclear where they would take, but definitely the terrain is there. It's become a cliché to say that the events of the Arab world are youth movements. All, if we look at events across history, most of the movements

have been youth movements, Robespierre was in his 30s in the French Revolution, and many other examples.

The point is, what will this movement take in form? And it's unclear at the moment what would this youth movement take in form, because in Bahrain, two thirds or more are below the age of 30, and this is basically the bulk of the society. It's unclear where this youth are heading. So I think it would be a bit misguided to just focus on what is there at the moment or the historical or the traditional analysis that has dominated over the last 10 years. It needs a new thinking and looking at what would emerge within this terrain.

The other two themes basically that I think will come to play a big role is one that it has become in a way regionalised. Over the last 10 years, Bahraini politics has been very domestic based. The allegiance was domestic, the issues were domestic. Now there are, basically as we know, a lot of other regional forces coming into play and this has reflected on the forces on the ground. We hear from both sides, from all sides actually, that they're reaching out to the outer world and trying to take into account what is going on there.

For example, the opposition societies are now reaching to international organisations, labour movements, Fifa even. So far they have not been able to create very solid links or activities with other Arab countries. It's been much more geared towards the western organisations and the international organisations. We'll see if that changes, but that's something to keep in mind.

And also from the more established societies. There are the pro-government societies, there have been strong calls to make a confederation with the GCC. And obviously the talk has been much more shifted towards about the role of Iran and the role of Saudi, etcetera, and the role of America. So I think this regionalisation of it, it will also have new dynamics that are unclear at the moment. But it's also good to keep in mind.

The third fact on the ground now is that it is very sect-based. Probably the most in the history of Bahrain, in the modern history of Bahrain. Well, according to people who have lived across the last 60 years. So that would also, so the dynamic between these three forces, I think, will give a guidance of what would emerge over the next few years.

It's unclear at the moment. There are lots of forces, there are lots of changes. Really no one even knows yet who started the events of 14 February. That alone indicates to you that the forces are still not clear, and they're still out in the open. All eyes now are on the fact finding committee and the dialogue, but I think we also should keep in mind these other facts when we take a look at it. Thanks.

Robin Lamb:

Thank you very much. I think it's handy to keep the dates of what's happened this year in mind, but I'll spare you a chronological account. If I don't go through the key dates, and if anybody has got a question about them, I can always refer to them.

I've been asked to suggest what the Bahrain Government's line has been this spring, what the British Government's line has been, and then I'd like to make some personal observations from my experience on the continuing contacts that I have maintained with people on both sides in Bahrain, although sadly I've only been able to visit once. Jane didn't mention that my day job these days, I'm retired from the Foreign Office and my day jobs concern Egypt and Libya which are both in similar position in terms of Arab spring, but with very different responses. We have something of a spectrum to observe and they kept me very busy.

Bahrain and what happened in Bahrain, I can start by saying has made me very disappointed and very sad. But let us just summarise very quickly what I think that the Bahrain Government's narrative is. And that is that there were demonstrations; the Crown Prince offered a dialogue; this dialogue was rejected. And it gave way to a state of violence, anarchy, gangs, road blocks, and all of these under overseas direction.

They claim that... they don't refer to the Pearl Roundabout, but the GCC Roundabout which is in fact its official name. It was always referred to as the Pearl Roundabout because the symbol in the middle was of a pearl. They say that the Salmaniya Hospital was politicised and have made some allegations there which was you know they have turned into trials of medical personnel. And they say that the business district was seized.

They introduced a state of national security, they requested GCC support. The police used minimum force. But they were deliberately attacked by demonstrators. Nevertheless, the focus now is on reconciliation and healing, genuine political dialogue and a new political settlement.

The British response, I will just share with you the most recent, which at least gives a spread of all the subjects I think that I've just been through. As recently as the 29 June, the Foreign Secretary William Hague said, 'I'm deeply concerned by the situation in Bahrain. While every government has the right and duty to maintain law and order, the suspension and investigation of political parties, the imprisonment of leading moderate politicians, and alleged mistreatment of detainees and the trial of members of the medical

profession before tribunals containing a military judge were all damaging to Bahrain, and steps in the wrong direction.

'I welcome the King's announcement of a national dialogue from 1 July, and the end of the state of national safety. But we look to Bahrain to match such announcements with concrete actions, to address the legitimate aspirations of the Bahraini people, and to leading figures on both sides in Bahrain to promote successful and peaceful dialogue.'

Now the next day, and this one's much shorter you'll be pleased to know, Alistair Burt responded to the announcement of the new international commission of inquiry by saying, 'It is our hope that this promising and significant step will lead to concrete progress in addressing the recent serious concerns about human rights situation in Bahrain, reiterated by the Foreign Secretary yesterday. We also hope these developments will be complemented by all sides participating in a successful and peaceful commencement of a national dialogue.'

So those are the two lines taken by the two governments. Some personal reflections are that we have of course been here before. If you look back at the records of the former political agency, the British Political Agency in Bahrain, you will see that relations between the ruling family and its Shia population were often troubled and that the British Political Agent would from time to time intervene on the behalf of the Shia when it was felt that they were being overly mistreated. I think modern times will have moved the bar upwards in terms of mistreatment.

Most recently of course, the history of the 1970s and 1990s was a story of escalating confrontation and repression. The British Government did uphold human rights issues in those times, but there was a real sea change perhaps in 1997 when the Labour Government under Mr Blair came in and the new Minister of State at the Foreign Office Derek Fatchett visited Bahrain and essentially laid down a very firm and rather stern line to the Al Khalifa about the new British Government's view on what had been happening.

In the meantime, and I should explain just to remind you that the time we're talking about, the 90s, the state was ruled by Sheikh Isa, perhaps governed by his brother, Sheikh Khalifa who has been Prime Minister since independence and remains so to this day. And even before independence was head of the National Council from about 1968.

Hamad had clearly been observing what had been happening during the 1990s. He had clearly come to a personal conclusion that repression does not work. So when he came to power, a lot of people expected him to be a fairly

authoritarian monarch, but against those expectations he did introduce some reforms and I have to say a more sophisticated approach to managing the difficulties of a country where the ruling family and many others belonged to a minority of Sunni Arabs originating from the Arabian Peninsula, and a Shia majority of the population who are the long-term inhabitants of Bahrain and had been Shia from the very early years of Islam.

So he introduced those reforms and we've heard a bit about them. I won't go into the detail once more. So in 2003 that was the situation. There had been reforms, there had been the first election and there was an elected lower house. There were criticisms of course about the level of power it had, but compared to what it had gone before – and I do not include the 1973 constitution in that – which had clearly not succeeded in managing the political confrontations at the time.

But in 2003, when I went to Bahrain, I asked Jack Straw who was then Foreign Secretary, 'What do you want from me in Bahrain?' And he said, and he used a word which I would not normally use but I'm quoting him, he said, 'Make sure that Bahrain remains a paradigm of Arab democracy.'

So when I arrived in Bahrain, I saw that there was a parliament. But the main opposition party was not in it. It was still an extra-parliamentary position, and that was Al Wefaq in those days. And I made it my job while I was there for three years to encourage them to take part in the process and to explain to them in my view it was in their interest to do so. They did take part in the 2006 and then in the 2010 elections. I don't claim credit. They made their own decision and I'm sure that Ayatollah Sistani's support for that decision was far more influential than mine.

No less, I left feeling, well I was about to leave and I thought things were going in the right direction. Unfortunately, just before I left two things came up. First of all, I began to hear messages that the reform process was not going to be held for another two parliaments. There was not going to be further progress in that period.

Secondly, there was sudden scandal, which has become known as 'Bandargate', after Dr Salah Al Bandar, a British Sudanese citizen, who had worked for the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs, and alleged that there had been a plot led by the Minister for Cabinet Affairs to ferment sectarian division. This obviously was something of a scandal, but in many ways I was more concerned about the lack of predicted continued process on reform. Because it's always been clear to me that when you ride a bicycle, if you don't keep moving, you fall off. And I don't think that reform is different, to be honest.

The lack of reform meant that I'd spent these years getting Al Wefaq to join the parliament and then they were going to receive essentially no small reward. They were not going to be able to have anything that they could show to their constituents as a success from joining the parliamentary process. And that is a judgement that I formed then, not in retrospect. I did say it and I did warn people about sectarianism because I did spend half the year in 2006 as Consulate General in Basra. When I came back I said, 'Whatever you do, do not allow sectarianism to take hold in Bahrain.'

So we come forward to the first response to the assault on the Pearl on 16 February. It was the response that I would have expected in the time that I was there. It was, to express regret, to announce an inquiry to initiate negotiations. And as we've heard, eventually these were developed into seven principles, which would have given the opposition a heck of a lot of what they wanted, including a truly representative parliament, reform of the electoral provinces and so on. Almost everything apart, perhaps from redress for the alleged torture of the 1990s.

There was also, I have to say, some fairly effective public relations by the government. But because of the lack of reform for few years, by that stage I'm afraid that Al Wefaq had lost its authority. A lot of people in the opposition no longer trusted the decision it had made to take part in the parliament. It did not have control of the demonstrators. This was clear, I mean this has just been said, like in other Arab countries this was a youth movement. It was a spontaneous degree of demonstrations, which other organisations tried to capture thereafter.

So it decided not to accept the Crown Prince's offer which is to my mind a heck of a shame, but if it had accepted, I think it is possible that the demonstrations would have continued and it would have been very difficult for the dialogue to have succeeded in such an atmosphere. So instead, what happened was the demonstrations spilled out from the Pearl Roundabout and the point came where they drove the police off the streets for some time. They erected checkpoints, they blockaded the Bahrain Financial Harbour and they prevented traffic passing through the main roads along the access to the island on the coast.

I know there is a lot of dispute over what happened at the Salmaniya Hospital, but I am confident that I've heard from independent observers that it was indeed politicised, although I've no evidence to support the more extreme allegations made by either side. Nevertheless, we had a situation where I would have said, had I been the Ambassador, clearly this has now got to the

point where it is legitimate for the government to restore order. Unfortunately, to my mind it then overcompensated.

Reform does seem to have given way to repression, with the Pearl being cleared and then destroyed, with arrests, human rights violations, alleged. The trials of people for what was mostly, I mean okay there were some trials of people who were found guilty of killing policemen, and that's the sort of trial that one would expect and regard as acceptable, but trials essentially for people that had been expressing points of view is not.

It's the sort of thing that the British Government was challenging. Some of the life sentences for those sorts of offences is over-the-top, to my mind. But why is it? I think a lot of the Sunnis and others in Bahrain were very frightened. And that has turned sadly to a degree of vindictiveness. The Shia now have been victimised ever since that turn.

The rest going forward, I would have thought, is further radicalisation. However, the King I think realises the dangers and it looks to me as if he is trying to engineer a process where that can be, the further deterioration can be forestalled. He announced an early end to the state of national safety. He announced the national dialogue. It looks good on paper. Unfortunately I do think there are two weaknesses in it.

One is that the Crown Prince is not involved. It is being chaired by the Speaker of the Parliament, and not all the comments on Twitter are complimentary about that decision. Also, it is clear that the seven principles are not there. Everything is free to be discussed, but you've got 300 people there. You've got of them only 111 represent political societies. And perhaps you can tell me how many people from Al Wefaq have been invited. Five? Five people. Well, you know.

That is slightly less than persuasive. Unless the dialogue develops, I understand that there will be discussions on four main themes, which are political, social, economic, and human rights, with a subtext on expatriates in Bahrain. They may have smaller numbers to discuss each of those. I heard the number 50. But even so, five Al Wefaq among 50 is a very small proportion of the decision-making. Well, not the decision-making, that's the other problem that people have been pointing out. It makes no decisions. I think Al Wefaq have been pressing for its recommendations to go to a referendum or something like that. Perhaps you can enlighten us.

More positive, I think is the investigatory commission. I think that could prove to be a very important decision by the King. And perhaps the most positive development that we have seen. As I said earlier, it's been welcomed certainly

by the British Government and a lot of other governments are welcoming it as well. It has at the moment apparently a very strong mandate, and I wish it well. Thank you.

Question 1:

My main question is, can you all individually or maybe just one of you expand on Saudi Arabia's role? It seems to be so important and yet it took up very little time.

Question 2:

I was going to ask that same question, but I'll ask the other bit. What is the role of Iran?

Question 3:

Ambassador Walker took away my question, so I'm going to pose another question. I just want to add the role of Iran, especially in view of Mr Mushaima stopping in Beirut, going to Hezbollah-land and having meetings with Hasan Nasrallah because that could shed a better light perhaps. My question is; nobody amongst the speakers has even dared to give us any kind of picture of what might happen. I mean, there is a possibility that the dialogue does not go forward. What then for Bahrain? We know all the geographical possibilities, Saudi Arabia, etcetera, and the GCC. Thank you so much.

Dr Jasim Husain:

With regards to Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia is very important to Bahrain in many respects. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain share oil fields. But I think Saudis should have... I was expecting them to contribute positively in pressing for political reforms, rather than using force, sending troops across the causeway. So they have really forced a violent solution to the problem. Made it much worse, more complicated, much more complicated now. We had fatalities. So Saudi, if it is expected to contribute, but it was the wrong contribution from them.

With regards to Iran, I really subscribe to the comments made by the Obama Administration that Iran was not behind the start of the problem. It was not an Iranian plot, but sure they later on tried to take advantage, through their media empire that they have, especially the Arabic version. But now we have

reached a stage where Saudi and Iran are engaging in another field of cold war between them. Saudi are fighting for influence in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and now another field really of Bahrain. So it is more of a cold war between Tehran and Riyadh, but others between Bahrain and Iran, so much really.

With regards to stopover of Mr Mushaima in Beirut, it's not quite clear. We don't know why did he stop there. We know that he stopped, but we don't know for exactly what purpose. But whatever the case, that stop was not a milestone in the opposition as such. It was just a stop but to be explained. But many people in Bahrain do not believe that he was told to come up with the idea of a republic or... Many things were happening on the ground so fast, especially by the youth. So a very extraordinary stop, but certainly not a milestone as such, really.

As to where we're heading, most likely the dialogue would not solve the problems. We're going to possibly see more continuation of protests, but certainly peaceful protests. Until we find a new formula, the authorities will have to engage with the government versus the opposition, rather than government versus many walks of life in Bahrain as we have now. We have people from all walks of life are represented in the dialogue.

Dr Omar AlShehabi:

Yeah, I'll tie them all together in terms of the 'what next', I guess. I think they all fit together. I mean, I think this regional part will come to play a bigger role and I think that definitely any reform that happens in Bahrain will have to take into account the GCC perspective, and particularly Saudi Arabia. And I think all sides will start to realise this. Again, this is what I was saying before. I think most sides before looked at Bahrain very domestically and did not look at it within the wider region.

Even historically, right, for thousands of years Bahrain's history was always dominated by the Arabian Peninsula, Iran and whatever major power was in the world. So I think basically there will be a shift towards more, it has to have a bigger perspective in terms of any changes or any reform. We cannot look at Bahrain simply as a... and obviously it will include much more Saudi Arabia, I think than Iran, but you'd have to look at the picture overall. Because at the end of the day, it's also part of the GCC and I think... I don't know but I think most Bahrainis see themselves closer to the GCC. And that would be their overall, where they would place themselves.

In terms of what next, it depends on what comes out, I guess, from the dialogue and the fact finding committee. This is just a hunch, I don't know, but I would predict that anything that's less than something like the 1973 constitution, I mean it will take a different form, but in terms of what's inside it, the protests will not continue. I think if something reaches that or beyond, it would be managed. Some would not accept this.

There are groups that would not accept this. But I think the majority, it could be managed by that. But if not, I think the protests will continue. They will probably continue anyway, but I think the majority would settle for something along those lines.

Jane Kinninmont:

Thank you. Can I push you a little bit further on specifically what if any role do you think Iran and/or Hezbollah played during the protests?

Dr Omar AlShehabi:

During the protests, in terms of the actual things on the ground, to be honest I didn't see anything that represented this. In terms of the media, definitely Iran has the news channel Al-Alam. Hezbollah has the channel Al-Manar. And they were definitely used, it was obviously very one-sided. That's very obvious.

In terms of things on the ground, I haven't seen anything, but again, I would expect that again, Iran is a country that has interests and they would try to use it whatever way that benefits them. But I haven't seen anything on the ground.

Robin Lamb:

Obviously the Saudi relationship is a very important one for Bahrain, and very close. I think by and large, it's more like a self managing relationship in the sense from the Bahrain point of view. They do not get daily instructions from Saudi Arabia on what to do. They know from their experience what it is that Saudi Arabia would desire and would find most difficult to accommodate, and they would try and act in accordance with that.

I'm trying to remember the actual instance, but there was clearly one occasion while I was there where they got it slightly wrong, and the Saudi Arabians did cancel some supplementary oil supplies at that time.

On this occasion, I saw the Peninsula Shield Force coming in, more as a demonstration act to Iran than to having any role in the internal policing in Bahrain. That's certainly the official line and I see no evidence that it was otherwise. There are occasionally people who still are but there were some people in balaclavas in the villages talking with Saudi accents. Well, you know, you don't know how to evaluate that sort of story.

So I think the important thing, and clearly the emphasis given by Gulf governments on the role of Iran, I think it was more about Iran than about Bahrain. The Peninsula Shield Force, that is.

In terms of Iran, I agree with others. This has been a long standing internal issue in Bahrain. It doesn't need to be created by an outsider, but Iran clearly has and will take an opportunity to capitalise politically when things go awry there. We could go into the history of Iranian-Bahraini relations, but I won't. So I'll spare you that.

What's going forward? Well, I think as a former professional, I would say we don't discount the dialogue before it's even started. Or indeed the International Commission. If they both fail, then something else will need to be thought of. And I've no doubt that it will be. The question is, how will they be conducted? We don't know that. And I have to say that if there is going to be an effective dialogue then there needs to be some ancillary activity within it to ensure that it produces the sort of result that can diffuse what my colleagues have mentioned.

I'm not going to be prescriptive. In 1973, the constitution as I said before clearly failed in its purpose, in 1975. I think there are a lot of people who would still continue to object to it. The problem is we do have a very polarised country now. And you've only got to read the various points of view that people write, even I'm sad to say some British expatriates who should know better, to see that there are some very, very hard views in the trench now.

And something that had the label 1973 constitution I fear would put us back up in the wrong place. It now needs both sides to actually look for a way to get back from the brink. And that's where they are.

Question 4:

I would like to talk about... First of all I'd like to thank all of you to have the time and come and support Bahrain. We need every single help, media, everything, and fairness. Not only any side-stepping. I'd like to mention one

thing, first of all. To Iran and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain is too small for their fight and we don't need them to be in my country.

Second thing, which I would like to emphasise which nobody brought. I am from the street. I am a Bahraini woman. I am not with any of whatever, Al Wefaq or this, with all respect for these people. I wanted to take, Dr Omar, the Pearl Roundabout, people are the simplest people in Bahrain. And everybody came. Every mother, every father, every child came there so spontaneously because they need a simple decent life. And they needed the reforms that our King promised 10 years ago and they didn't come. They need only dignity, and a dignified life.

All of this, whatever happens, still I will not go because everybody went through it. I don't think there was any need for this extensive force. There was no need for Saudi Arabia to come and hit the way it hit. Nobody mentioned the torture and the people... nobody was safe in Bahrain. We were not feeling safe. I'm a businesswoman and I had such a fear of every child in Bahrain because we don't know what minute anybody will come into the house, with and without interference.

The papers were mixed in Bahrain. And what I as well would like to tell everybody, we felt so let down by the media, by the world that they had a double role. They were showing how much their support to other spring, and in Bahrain nobody even stood beside us to tell us, 'Stop killing the children, stop doing whatever.'

I love my country and I don't want any change of regime. I'm not with the people who say it has to change regime. We wanted a democratic life, a dignified life that people will live. I spoke to so many people in the street. I'm sorry to take this, because it's important. I'm from the street, you should listen. All of them, I said, 'I don't want you to do these things. Don't go into that measure.' They said, 'We only want jobs and housing and things that people from outside took from them.' So please, support Bahrain because Bahrain is so beautiful to be destroyed by whoever.

Question 5:

Mine is actually more of a qualification than it is a question. It's to Robin Lamb. He basically, you made the assertion that the dialogue, the offer of dialogue was rejected by the opposition. It's actually a little bit more complicated than that. The King made an offer of dialogue and the opposition responded by setting out several preconditions to dialogue including the

establishment of a committee to redraft the constitution. And the reason why, their given reason for this was to make sure that it was a substantive dialogue, that really there would be reforms resulting from it.

And the Crown Prince's second offer of dialogue, when he made those seven points which you mentioned, those were essentially confirmation or agreement to the preconditions that the opposition had set out. Once he made those seven points, within hours Saudi troops came across the causeway. So I think that is a really important point to note, because it shows what Jasim Husain said about the internal negotiations going on, and second of all it really depicts the opposition as sort of... a negotiation was going on. It wasn't just that they outright rejected any hope of a negotiation.

Question 6:

Regarding the process before the Crown Prince announced the seven points, thing is that just as Omar said in his briefing, that the political societies were caught in a situation where basically they did not call for those protests. And they were not controlling them. And they needed some kind of a mandate from the street, from the people to go and speak on their behalf.

Now the main point that you had such untrust at that point is that people went through a situation in 2001 where they signed on the national action charter, and those promises did not come to reality in 2002. Mainly the political society set those conditions for dialogue in order to be able to get a mandate from the people so that they can sit on the dialogue table.

The second point is, those seven points of the dialogue, they were announced only after people actually took the streets. My understanding is that those dialogue points were already sent to the Crown Prince probably like two weeks before, 12 days before. Why they were not announced until the people took over the streets?

Question 7:

My question concerns the commission. It looks a very, very powerful body in terms of its membership. It has got very wide terms of reference, very wide powers. It seems almost inconceivable that that body is not going to be very, very critical of the regime, that it won't seek to at least place some of the responsibility at the very highest levels of the regime. I just wonder if you could speculate on what is the political game? How is the government

planning to handle this? They must see it coming. What is the political calculation that you think is behind it?

Question 8:

Something that I find quite striking is how little we know, and I think that that's emerged from your talks, because we find that we don't know who is behind the Bahrain Online, which you mentioned. We don't know who instigated the initial protests. You say that the opposition was taken by surprise, and when you say that the people are now politicised and its fertile ground for new political movements, we don't know in the future if that's going to lead to greater Iranian intervention to exploit the fissures that will emerge in such a vibrant society.

So I feel that we've kind of discussed the symptoms of what has happened in Bahrain, but we don't know underlying causalities.

Question 9:

I just want to mention, I've been arrested twice in 1995 and last August, been tortured severely and because I'm holding British citizenship, I've told the consul over there, British Consul in Bahrain about my situation, and about the others who've been severely tortured and severely humiliated from the Bahraini Government. He has not done anything to my case and he knows that we've been tortured. And he just went and sat on this.

And the second thing is that I want to know, there is some facts happened that there is, the British Government can put more pressure on the human rights matters, but they haven't done much on that.

Dr Jasim Husain:

With regards to the first point about Saudi and Iran, we can't get away with that. Iran and Saudi are big neighbours to Bahrain and we have to live with them forever.

With regards to the point of changing regime, I think it was a very good point. Mainstream opposition has not called for change of regime and is not calling for change of regime. We're looking for negotiation. We need changes within the regime, for Bahrain to become more democratic. Certainly this was made very clear. It remains like that, I think it will remain forever. This is changes

within the system. And Bahrain is qualified to be, to have better administration in terms of education and history and stuff like that.

In regards to the offers, the opposition worked very hard behind the scenes with the Crown Prince, but the time was very short. We were only given three weeks to come up with a solution for a very complicated problem. There was a need to come up with a package that could be marketed to the people on the Roundabout. Unfortunately, some people were then, the hardliners within the regime decided to undermine the Crown Prince. The announcement of the seven points was made on 13 March. On 14 March we had entry of Saudi troops. So it was the hardliners within the regime, but we have some people inside the government... terrible mistake.

About the commission, I think most likely the authorities are going to use the outcome to get rid of some people – some ministers, some officials, others they don't want. The report has mentioned. Most likely, but we're going to see something like that.

As to Iran, I think the longer the problem remains, the more we're going to see the Iranians involved in Bahrain. So the solution is to find a concrete outcome, not just something patching here and there. Something that will satisfy the majority of the people. We cannot satisfy everyone, and I think it was made very clear that tanks cannot bring about security to Bahrain. What we need is stability, and tanks cannot bring stability in Bahrain. So Iran is going to benefit as long as the problem remains as it is, asserting the blame with those who use force in the crackdown.

As to really the last point, I think what is sad is we have people tortured and four died in custody, including two publishers. There was no reason whatsoever for having people dying at the hands of security forces who should be protected and treated rather than being killed.

Dr Omar AlShehabi:

I'll address I guess the points regarding the changes in the different parties that are coming up and who were involved. I agree. That was my point in what I said in terms of who was involved in the Roundabout. It was a lot of people who were not even politicised before and there were many different groups and they had many different demands. So yes, it was a very diverse group.

But also at the same time this addresses the point of what could come next or who could use it. I mean, its possible Iran could use it. It's possible there are

other forces that could use it, and even within there are other alliances that can build. I think looking at it always within what is available now might make us miss what might come. It could be there are movements that become pan-Arab with other groups that are in other countries. It could be movements that become more GCC focussed. It could be movements that are more sect-based, and so they align regionally across sect.

So no one knows really how it will come out at the moment, but I think definitely the regional part will play a bigger role within anything that comes within the next few years.

Robin Lamb:

I'm not sure I'm going to touch on everything because time is running short, but I'm sorry if I over-contracted the negotiations, but I had 10 minutes and the negotiations went on for three weeks to a month. And I did get some feedback from people close to the leadership of Al Wefaq later that they did regret not having picked up the offer at the time. So that's why I said what I did, but no doubt over-condensed.

What else have we got? Can Iran intervene more? I think clearly Bahrain's internal fissures have signalled an opportunity to Iran to get involved, in a way, if it wishes. There are alternatives. Kuwait is not without its sectarian problems. And that's even closer to Iran in many ways. There's also the issue of Iraq, which many, I think, Bahrainis Shia may feel closer to than to Iran. I think that Ayatollah Sistani and others in Iraq are more like than the people in Iran, which may constrain at least their religious ability to infiltrate Bahraini society.

And Bahrain isn't that big a place. And I think any direct interference by Iran could become fairly obvious rather quickly and so I've got a feeling it's more likely to continue to be media-based, which will certainly not be helpful, but will add as usual more heat than light to these sorts of situations.

Somebody mentioned that nobody mentioned torture. I think I did mention it, actually, but again, I did mention rather a lot rather briefly. So it was in there.

The question of the consulate's action, it's always more difficult... and I might repeat, I'm not a British Government representative anymore, but it is always more difficult for the British Government to get involved when there's a dual national. Under international law, a dual national in his country of first nationality does not have the same, or the foreign consulate does not have

the same rights as with a full national. I don't know your case, I don't know what the consul has done with your case.

In terms of whether the British Government has put more pressure, well it has certainly made its position very, very clear and I would have thought very, very critically in public. There is clearly no international appetite for taking more action against Bahrain.

And I might say, I mentioned that I've been doing Libya and we can also see what's happening in Syria. Although there are things to criticise in the way that the situation in Bahrain has been handled, it is not in the same league as Libya or indeed Syria. There is still the possibility for a political solution and accommodation. I hope that the national dialogue can develop in such a way that it can produce real results.

I think you're right that the international commission is going to produce some judgements which will... I don't know quite how to put this, but I would have thought what you said may well be right. That there may be people who can see some writing on the wall internally from the powers that the commission has. And it will be very interesting to see when it's produced what effect it has on the complexion of the Bahraini Government going forward. Thank you.