

The U.S. Dilemma in Bahrain

by Thomas W. Lippman

SUMMARY

As headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and a frontline state in the regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain is among the most important Arab countries to U.S. strategic interests.

Bahrain's strategic value for the U.S. has increased significantly over time, and was solidified with the signing of a long-term bilateral Cooperative Defense Agreement in 1991.

The unrest that erupted in Bahrain this spring is rooted in long-standing tensions between the Sunni monarchy and a fundamentally disenfranchised Shi'a majority.

Given the strategic partnership and the desire to avoid inflaming tensions with Saudi Arabia, the U.S. has been relatively muted in responding to the crackdown in Bahrain—a position that could prove untenable if the Bahraini government does not seek meaningful reform.

The U.S. should press the Bahraini government to pursue significant reforms and uphold human rights standards by sending a high-level official to Bahrain to raise concerns both publicly and privately, exploring options for moving the Fifth Fleet, and conducting a thorough investigation into the dismissal of Bahraini workers.

Of the Arab countries in which political unrest has erupted over the past ten months, tiny Bahrain is among the most important to U.S. strategic interests, at least in the short to medium term. With a population of about 1.2 million and a land area smaller than El Paso, Texas, the island state in the Persian Gulf is dwarfed by its closest neighbor, Saudi Arabia, and by major Arab states much better known to Americans, such as Egypt and Iraq. Yet its strategic importance is disproportionate to its size. It is a front-line state in the regional contest for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran; and as headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, it is a vital center of U.S. military operations in the Gulf. Since 2002, Bahrain has held the exalted status of "non-NATO ally," an official designation by Washington that puts it in the same category as Japan, Australia and Israel. And it is one of four Arab countries with which the United States has signed a Free Trade Agreement.

Yet, the strategic partnership now puts the United States in the uncomfortable position of supporting a regime that has drawn worldwide criticism for the brutality of its crackdown on citizens who rose up in peaceful protest last spring. President Obama and his senior national security officials have walked a thin line for months, saying little of substance, in their effort to protect U.S. interests without openly embracing a government that has emerged as indiscriminately violent and as hostile to the religion of most of its subjects.

The Obama administration has limited leverage and few options that would not jeopardize the military relationship. But if the regime in Bahrain is unable over the next year or so to find a solution that will assuage the grievances of its population and bring about meaningful political reform, Washington may have to reduce its ties to a country that will become more trouble than it is worth.

BAHRAIN'S INCREASING STRATEGIC VALUE

Ever since World War II made the United States into a global strategic power and international guardian of a vast network of economic and political interests, this country has found it necessary to align itself with rulers and regimes that were odious in terms of human rights but perceived as important for strategic reasons. Whatever the issue of the moment, expediency has prevailed.

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When Britain withdrew from the Gulf in 1971, Bahrain became independent and declined to join with the other small sheikhdoms that became the United Arab Emirates. The island was already in decline as an oil producer, but it developed modest regional significance as a finance and transport hub. Given the imperatives of the Cold War struggle for influence in the region, the United States, which had extensive oil interests in Saudi Arabia and an anti-Soviet strategic partner in Iran, was virtually compelled to take on the role formerly filled by the British as regional security guarantor. At the time, Bahrain itself was of minimal importance to Washington. The island provided a nominal homeport for U.S. naval activity in the region, but only a few small ships were based there and the operation could easily have been moved.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 shifted the strategic balance in the Gulf, aligning the United States and Saudi Arabia in opposition to Iranian regional ambitions. The events in Iran also revived religious tensions that had been held in check for centuries, pitting Shi'a Muslims, who predominate in Iran, against their historic rival Sunni Muslims, who predominate in all countries on the Arab side of the Gulf—except Bahrain. There, the population is about 70 percent Shi'a, but the ruling al-Khalifa dynasty and most of the military and business leadership are Sunni, an anomaly that is at the root of the current conflict.

Bahrain's value to Washington was vastly increased by Operation Desert Storm, the 1991 campaign to drive Saddam Hussein's occupying Iraqi army out of Kuwait. Bahrain participated in the U.S.-led coalition by hosting U.S. troops and combat aircraft. Subsequently, the U.S. naval presence in Manama was upgraded to a full-service base and headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, which includes a carrier battle group. The relationship was further enhanced by Bahrain's support for, and participation in, the war in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001. In 2002, President George W. Bush proclaimed Bahrain a "major non-NATO ally," facilitating extensive Bahraini arms purchases. At present, about 2,300 members of the U.S. armed forces are based there, and construction began in 2010 on a \$580 million expansion of U.S. Naval facilities.

THE BILATERAL DEFENSE AGREEMENT

The legal basis for these arrangements is a 10-year bilateral Cooperative Defense Agreement, first signed in October 1991 and renewed in October 2001. Under that schedule, it would have been up for renewal next month.

This would have been an embarrassing moment to renew military relations with a regime that drew worldwide criticism in February and March for the repressive tactics it used to quell a domestic uprising. Indeed, human rights groups are now excoriating the U.S. government for a recently proposed arms sale to Bahrain worth an estimated \$53 million. As for the broader defense pact, however, the Obama administration evaded the need to negotiate a renewal because in 2001 President Bush and the Bahraini regime secretly added five years to the defense pact's term, extending its expiration date to October 2016. The contents of the agreement, and the fact that it was renewed in secret, are classified, and for that reason no one in the U.S. government has discussed them publicly.

From a security perspective, it is just as well that the Obama administration does not have to decide now whether to renew the pact. This is hardly a propitious moment to disrupt a crucial strategic arrangement in the Gulf: The United States is withdrawing from Iraq, Yemen is in turmoil, Saudi Arabia seems disillusioned with U.S. policy, the perceived threat from Iran is unabated, and new tensions may be developing between Iraq and Kuwait. However, a continuation of the strategic relationship could become untenable if Bahrain descends into mass violence or if public sentiment turns against the U.S. presence and American personnel are endangered. The Pentagon does not want to move its military facilities out of Bahrain because it would be expensive even if another host country could be found, but it may be left with no choice given the current turmoil.

BAHRAIN'S UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Much of Bahrain's history in the past two decades has consisted of unsuccessful efforts by the Sunni monarchy to pacify a restive Shi'a population that is fundamentally disenfranchised. When King Hamad came to power in 1999, he initially sought to put an end to the violence and sectarian tension that had characterized much of the 1990s by releasing political prisoners, expanding freedoms for the press and civil society, abolishing the most repressive aspects of the security apparatus, and encouraging dialogue with the opposition to help draft a new constitution that would devolve authority to an elected parliament. These efforts gained overwhelming support from most Bahrainis who yearned for more political and civil liberties, and particularly from Shi'a who faced systemic discrimination in the political, economic, and social spheres.

Despite initial expectations, however, the resulting 2002 constitution failed to deliver on the King's promises, dashing hopes and creating deep mistrust between the ruling family and the political opposition. Tensions were exacerbated when an alleged government report was leaked in 2006 detailing a plan to weaken the Shi'a community politically and alter the country's demographics through the systematic naturalization of Sunni expatriate workers. Nonetheless, the main opposition society, al-Wefaq, still chose to work within the system, participating in parliamentary elections in both 2006 and 2010 despite flagrant gerrymandering of electoral districts and other electoral improprieties. But with ultimate power still in the hands of the King and the regime's increasing intolerance for dissent, many Bahrainis grew to see the street rather than the political arena as the best avenue for demanding change. The pro-democracy uprising that erupted in February 2011 must be understood within this context.

While protests were largely peaceful, they were brutally crushed by Bahraini security forces with help from Saudi Arabian troops and Emirati police officers. Since February, more than 40 people have been killed—including at least four from torture in prison—and more than 1,400 people have been arrested. Victims of the crackdown include internationally respected human rights activists and their relatives, prominent national athletes who may have attended the protests, and numerous medical

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professionals who had treated injured protestors and witnessed the brutality used by security forces. In addition to the arrests, more than 40 Shi’a mosques have been demolished and an estimated 2,500 Shi’a employees have been fired from their jobs. Moreover, with the independence of the country’s main opposition newspaper compromised, state media has been able to conduct a propaganda war against the Shi’a community.

The few promising measures announced by the government have failed to meet expectations. In early July, King Hamad created a National Dialogue, ostensibly to debate political reforms with the legal opposition. However, negotiations were led by hardline Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman instead of the more reform-minded crown prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa. Moreover, the opposition was granted only 35 out of 300 delegates and fundamental issues such as electoral redistricting and a new constitution were not discussed, prompting al-Wefaq to quickly withdraw from the dialogue. Similarly, hopes were high for the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), established by the King in June to investigate abuses committed during the protests and led by an internationally respected group of human rights scholars and jurists, but it has lost credibility following controversial remarks by its chairman, Cherif Bassiouni.

The government’s response to the protest movement has further polarized an already divided society, significantly reducing the prospects of a political solution and threatening the long-term stability of the country. Since the emergency law was lifted on June 1, there have been daily skirmishes between protestors and security forces in Shi’a villages. In this climate of heightened tension and volatility, politically-charged events like parliamentary by-elections—boycotted by the opposition—and the resumption of trials for opposition activists and medical workers could easily erupt into large-scale violence.

THE MUTED U.S. RESPONSE

In stark contrast to its rhetorical support of other democracy movements in the region, the U.S. response to events in Bahrain has been relatively muted. This is partly because of the strategic defense relationship, but also because the U.S. seeks to avoid inflaming tensions with Saudi Arabia, still unhappy with what it viewed as U.S. abandonment of longtime Egyptian ally Hosni Mubarak. In his May 19 speech, President Obama upbraided Bahrain for the incarceration of opposition members and the destruction of Shi’a mosques, but the administration has since been conspicuously silent. On July 2, the White House issued a statement welcoming the National Dialogue and the BICI while failing to mention that 21 prominent opposition leaders and human rights activists had just one week prior been sentenced in military courts to unduly long prison sentences—eight for life. And despite the clear failure of the National Dialogue and diminishing hopes for the BICI, on September 21—in the first government statements on Bahrain since July—both President Obama and the nominee for U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain,

Thomas Krajeski, presented an overly optimistic view of the situation in remarks to the UN General Assembly and in a Senate confirmation hearing, respectively.

Similarly, there has been no high-level visit to Bahrain since Michael Posner, the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor visited in June. By contrast, earlier in the year Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman visited the country five times between February and March in an effort to broker a negotiated settlement between the crown prince and al-Wefaq. Now that the moderate and westernized crown prince, with whom the U.S. forged a strong relationship in the hopes that he would accelerate reforms in the country, has been effectively sidelined by the prime minister and his coterie of hardliners, the Obama administration may feel that it has little leverage. Nonetheless, the U.S. does wield influence over the Bahraini leadership and could help prevent the situation from escalating. After the State Department publicly chided Manama in April for its decision to dismantle al-Wefaq, the Bahrain government swiftly reversed course.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- *The Obama administration should send a high-level official to Bahrain in the coming weeks, and during the visit, he or she should make a public statement addressing Bahrain's human rights violations.* Frequent visits in the spring, including by Assistant Secretary Posner in June, were important in demonstrating to the Bahraini government that despite their attempts to present a return to normalcy through the lifting of the emergency law and other conciliatory gestures, the United States continued to watch the human rights situation closely and would raise these issues publicly. Similar visits must be made frequently in order to have an impact. This is important particularly because Bahrain has cultivated an image as a regional business hub and takes its international reputation seriously.
- *The White House and Department of State should continue to raise concerns with both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in private discussions.* The U.S. should press the Bahraini regime to seek meaningful political reform and urge the king to shepherd the prime minister into retirement—a gesture that would signal to the population that progress is possible. U.S. officials should also seek gestures from a reluctant Saudi Arabia, beyond those few already given, which would legitimize Shiism in that country, putting pressure on the Bahraini regime to do the same.
- *While the United States may be reluctant to single out Bahrain for its human rights violations in public statements given the strategic relationship, the administration should not deliberately avoid mentioning Bahrain when talking broadly about regional developments, particularly in international forums.* Such an omission does not go unnoticed and lends credence to claims that the U.S. only prioritizes democracy and human rights in countries where there aren't other interests at stake.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas W. Lippman is an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute and former Middle East bureau chief of the Washington Post. His book "Saudi Arabia on the Edge," will be published in January.

ABOUT POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

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- ***The Defense Department should explore and develop alternative locations for Fifth Fleet headquarters, and let the Bahraini government know, discreetly, that this activity is taking place.*** Bahrain does not want the U.S. Navy to depart, and activity such as this could nudge the regime in a positive direction. Conversely, if Bahrain relapses into violence, it will be necessary to have alternatives in place for U.S. military forces.
- ***The State Department and Congress should provide sufficient support to the Department of Labor to be able to conduct a thorough and credible investigation into the dismissal of workers and the crackdown on trade unions in Bahrain.*** In April, a complaint was filed with the Office of Trade and Labor Affairs of the Department of Labor concerning the Bahraini government's violation of Chapter 15 of the U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement, which stipulates that both governments must uphold internationally recognized labor rights. An investigation by the Labor Department is an important opportunity for the U.S. to leverage its close relationship with the Bahraini government to advance human rights. The U.S. Embassy in Manama needs to ensure that any investigators are given proper access and protection to conduct their investigation in Bahrain without interference. Moreover, Congress should provide oversight through the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and the House Committee on Education and the Workforce to guarantee that this report is being conducted thoroughly.
- ***Members of Congress should privately press Bahraini officials either directly or indirectly through the State Department to release prisoners and improve prison conditions.*** Several members of Congress have already had some success by following up on individual cases through private diplomacy, and this approach should be continued.
- ***Members of Congress should support the Medical Neutrality Protection Act of 2011 that was introduced by Congressman Jim McDermott (D-WA) at the end of July.*** The bill would require the Secretary of State to maintain and regularly update a list of countries that violate medical neutrality. Violating countries would be disqualified from certain military assistance, and their government officials would be prohibited from obtaining visas for travel to the United States. In addition, the bill calls for the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on the Protection and Promotion of Medical Neutrality. The legislation does not explicitly mention Bahrain, but it offers an important avenue for discussing the takeover of Sulaymaniya hospital by Bahraini security forces and the ongoing trial of medical professionals in the broader context of civil unrest in the region and globally.