



# Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

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## Bahrain's New Security State Breeds Instability

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On September 4th, a Bahrain appeals court upheld the conviction of 20 opposition figures, including eight leading activists sentenced to life terms. The decision marked the latest decisive step away from a political solution to Bahrain's domestic unrest, which has been unrelenting since the crackdown of the Pearl Uprising in March 2011. It is clear that Bahrain's government is unwilling — or unable — to engage its domestic opposition. Having survived a broad popular mobilization for political reform or, for some, revolution, the ruling al-Khalifa family seems content to manage the inevitable fallout of near constant domestic political protests and intermittent international criticism. Those in power have calculated that the protective embrace of Saudi Arabia, whose entry at the head of a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Peninsula Shield Force closed down Bahrain's Arab Spring, will help the monarchy weather any economic and security challenges that arise.

Yet one should not mistake the security of the monarchy for social stability. Divisions in the ruling family and the competition among royal factions are fomenting deep rifts within society. This divide is most apparent in Sunni-Shiite polarization, but divisions are also increasing within each sect. Moreover, the extremists among them are gaining over the moderates in the absence of any political program for reconciliation and reform. The position of the United States in the country is also imperiled as both Sunni and Shiite hardliners fuel resentments against it. The dangers of fragmentation at both the state and societal level are particularly troubling within the regional environment of GCC-Iran tensions and struggle over Syria, enabling the mobilization of Sunni and Shiite networks from the Gulf to the Levant.

### The Pearl Uprising and the deepening sectarian divide

Bahrain's Pearl Uprising of February-March 2011 presented the population with two competing narratives. The youth movements that initiated the protests sought to link them to the Arab popular revolts in Tunisia and Egypt against regime corruption and authoritarianism. The opposition political societies that joined the demonstrations — including the Shiite Islamist al-Wefaq and the secular leftist al-Waad — then worked to harness them to serve their longstanding goals of achieving constitutional and electoral reforms that would empower the popularly elected parliament and enforce accountability on the monarchy. The monarchy countered this challenge by hinting at Iranian designs on the country and stressing that the cleric-led Shiite opposition could not be trusted

### MES Notes

#### MES Lecture Series 2012-13 Upcoming Event

On 26 October 2012 Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University will host a panel on Iran featuring; Karim Sadjapour (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Ray Takeyh (Council on Foreign Relations), and Amin Tarzi (Marine Corps University).

Further information about the MES Lecture Series is available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: [middleeaststudies.mcu](https://www.facebook.com/middleeaststudies.mcu).

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with greater political influence. Their strategy thus relied on playing up sectarian divisions within the population.

The initial protests came in response to an anonymous call posted to Facebook by a previously unknown youth movement. While the date of February 14th was chosen for domestic resonance — as a counterpoint to the 10-year celebration of the National Action Charter reforms initiated by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa — it fortuitously followed directly on the ouster of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, providing genuine momentum to the uprising. People were drawn by the demands for personal dignity and for a political citizenship that transcends social divisions. However, the linkage with the protests in Egypt and Tunisia had another important implication: it raised significantly the expectations of the protestors, setting a precedent of regime change. After the initial brutal response of security forces resulted in deaths, calls for the complete overthrow of the monarchy began to grow. This culminated in the formation of a revolutionary alliance by the more hardline movements al-Haq and al-Wafa, whose leadership had just been released from prison or permitted to return from exile, perhaps in a calculated move by the al-Khalifa family to radicalize the opposition. Their pronouncement of a “Coalition for a Republic” was seized upon by the monarchy as evidence of the opposition’s desire for an “Islamic republic.”

The geography of the protests also played a key role in setting perceptions about the nature of the uprising. The gathering of citizens in the Pearl roundabout — a traffic circle in the center of Manama associated with the nation’s pearl diving history and with the founding of the Gulf Cooperation Council — provided positive associations with Egypt’s Tahrir Square. More importantly, its central location provided a neutral setting, allowing Bahrain’s somewhat segregated communities to come together on national, not sectarian, grounds. Yet two key dynamics worked to undermine this fight for unity.

The first was the counter-protest held at the al-Fatih mosque on February 21st. As opposed to the Pearl roundabout, the al-Fatih mosque had clear sectarian associations, being Bahrain’s largest Sunni mosque and one associated by name with the tribal conquering of the island by the al-Khalifa family. By design, then, the gathering signified the division of the population and *implied* the Shiite character of the Pearl protestors. The leader of the al-Fatih gathering was also important. Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Mahmood is a shariah faculty scholar who had been active in the petitions’ movement pushing for political reform in the 1990s. He was thus ambiguously positioned between staunch support and loyalist reform, and was able to attract citizens fearful of revolution, but also Sunnis disaffected with the nation’s politics who may have considered going to the Pearl roundabout. Al-Mahmood was also linked to al-Azhar, but unaffiliated with the two main Islamist political parties, and so was able to create a broader movement free from the narrow confines of the Islamist party affiliation.

The second weakening of the unity at the Pearl roundabout came at the hands of the opposition itself. The Coalition for the Republic and other supporters chose to expand the protests beyond the roundabout to symbolically resonant sites — the al-Khalifa’s tribal stronghold in Riffa and the Bahrain Financial Harbor. While evocatively highlighting key grievances against privilege and corruption, these moves directly provoked the tribal elite and their business allies. The move away from the circle also provided an opening for a counter mobilization of irregulars bearing sticks and knives, who confronted the protestors directly in an ominous presage of civil — and sectarian — strife.

These confrontations, likely orchestrated by the hardliners in the al-Khalifa family, undermined the talks between al-Wefaq and the other official opposition societies and the ruling family’s leading reformer, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa. The Crown Prince, in a struggle for influence within the ruling family, had proposed entering formal negotiations on seven principles identified as the most important to the opposition. It was at this stage — with the reformists progressing in preparatory talks, and the hardliners clashing in the streets — that the Pearl Uprising was shut down by the arrival of Peninsula Shield Forces led by Saudi Arabia. The protestors were driven from the Pearl roundabout, and a state of emergency was announced.

Since then, the relationship has been on the upswing. The two leaders speak often — at least a dozen times in 2011 alone — and frequently agree on policy. Turkey’s statements in support of the Arab Spring led President Obama to appreciate Turkey, a Muslim NATO member that uniquely satisfies Washington’s quest to find powerful allies that have a majority-Muslim population and are happy to work with the United States.

## **Fracturing within regime and opposition**

The Pearl Uprising and its denouement crystallized the increasing factionalization of the ruling family, amplifying divisions that had first appeared following the succession of King (then Amir) Hamad in 1999 and his implementation of a limited reform program. Many of the new economic institutions promoting labor market

reforms and economic diversification were championed by the King's son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa. These institutions were pro-actively used to co-opt the leadership of the Shiite opposition and to attract a new generation of foreign-educated Bahrainis behind this modernizing project. This institutional base was also used to siphon decisionmaking and political influence from the Prime Minister who opposed the changes. At the same time, a more ideological opposition arose from within the security services and the royal court. Centered on two brothers, Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defense Forces Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa and Royal Court Minister Sheikh Khaled bin Ahmed al-Khalifa, the "Khawaled," as this faction is popularly known, viewed the integration of the Shiite into state institutions as a security threat. Their views rose in influence as sectarian struggle engulfed Iraq, and Shiite political parties rose to power in that neighboring country. A number of programs initiated from within the royal court thus sought to counter Shiite political societies and social organizations, curtailing their influence within the economy and the government. The extensive security crackdown of the past 18 months, accompanied by widespread arrests and the purge of Shiite politicians and professionals, betrays a dramatic expansion of these activities.

These divisions in leadership and policy resulted in a fracturing of the Shiite opposition. The rise of the Khawaled was mirrored by the rise of the "boycott" wing of the opposition, reflecting rising skepticism about the intentions of the al-Khalifa family and the effectiveness of engaging with them. The main Shiite opposition party, al-Wefaq, which embraced a policy of political participation and incremental reform, lost support, especially among the youth who were attracted to the more confrontational tactics of al-Haq, al-Wafa, and the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR). The move to the street, led by the February 14th youth who initiated the Pearl Uprising, flowed naturally from this development.

In the post-uprising environment, al-Wefaq has struggled to keep ahead of these movements which mostly argue for the complete removal of the monarchy through civil disobedience, human rights activism, and street protests. Al-Wefaq's parliamentary bloc resigned their seats in protest of government suppression back in February 2011 and boycotted the elections to replace them which took place the following September. The lack of a formal national platform has, therefore, left al-Wefaq competing with these movements for the street. The success of the government in preventing protests in central Manama has forced protests back into the Shiite villages. This isolation has tended to augment the sectarian nature of the opposition, for while al-Wefaq is exclusively Shiite and cleric-led, it has made its political appeals for constitutional reform across the sectarian divide. In contrast the "sacred defense forces" created in the exclusively Shiite areas have framed their mission in Shiite religious discourse. This fragmentation of street action has also weakened al-Wefaq's ability to enforce peaceful tactics, and protestors are increasingly confronting security forces with burning tires and Molotov cocktails. In the absence of any advancement in political reforms, it is easy to envision a further devolution to the kinds of bomb making explosives allegedly found by the Bahraini Interior Ministry in June 2012.

### **The instrumentalization of Sunni politics**

While the unrelenting pressure on Shiite communities has led to their fragmentation, the new security environment has opened up more space for the proliferation of Sunni movements. State airwaves were thrown open to anti-Shiite rhetoric and public campaigns against individuals associated with the gathering at the Pearl roundabout. Loyalty pledges to the ruling family were distributed in schools and businesses, and popular boycotts of Shiite businesses were undertaken. These campaigns served both to mobilize and to radicalize the broader Sunni public, by enabling those willing to take on Shiite "traitors" and silencing those who disagreed with the course of action chosen by the government.

On the more formal level, the initiative moved from Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi political societies represented in parliament to broader Sunni social movements.<sup>[1]</sup> The popular gathering at the al-Fatih mosque was transformed by Sheikh Abd al-Latif al-Mahmood into a political organization under the name of The Gathering of National Unity (TGONU). In time, however, as this movement showed increasing signs of independence from the government — Sheikh al-Mahmood was famously quoted as saying that the Prime Minister would eventually need to step aside — TGONU was itself outflanked by a new group. The al-Fatih Youth Awakening appears to operate as enforcers for the most hardline Khawaled faction within the ruling family. It has worked to counter any moves towards reconciliation with the political opposition, including a number of campaigns against American diplomats viewed as promoting such moves. They have also played a prominent role in Bahrain's latest campaign — to promote unity with Saudi Arabia.

## Pax Arabia is no Pax Americana

The intervention by the Saudi-led Peninsula Shield Forces effectively ended the political negotiations of the Crown Prince and elevated the Prime Minister and the Khawaled faction over the reformers in the ruling family. The reform strategy initiated by King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and championed by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa sought to broaden the governing coalition and promote international outreach in an effort to lessen economic and political dependence on Saudi Arabia. That direction has now been reversed, with talks taking place between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia for the past several months to enact a more formal confederation between the two countries.

Bahrain has certainly experienced Saudi dominion in the past, but there are reasons to believe that this time the alliance may prove different. Past Saudi relations were managed pragmatically by Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman, who used Saudi patronage to sustain the tribal dominance of the al-Khalifa family through clientalist relations with both Sunni and Shiite merchants. However, today with the more ideological Khawaled cementing the partnership, a more exclusionary and explicitly sectarian policy is taking root. While the exclusion of the Shiite *minority* from the public sphere has been accomplished in Saudi Arabia through instrumentalization of Wahhabi ideology and institutions, the exclusion of a *majority* within Bahrain will likely be much more difficult to sustain.

Recent events do suggest that elements of the ruling family are employing Sunni Islamist movements to counter the mobilization by the Shiite opposition. Closer Saudi relations are, therefore, likely to augment this trend by opening more space for transnational Salafi networks to operate. Indeed, there is already evidence of the penetration of more Wahhabi discourse and thinking in the Khawaled - backed media and within some Islamist groupings. At the same time, a deeper confederation between the two countries may further cement the connection between the Shiite of Bahrain and those of the Eastern province, whose mutual sympathies can already be seen in the chants of “Down, down Hamad” heard in Awamiya, Saudi Arabia, and in al-Wefaq’s condemnation of the Saudi arrest of a prominent activist cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, in July. The extension of this sectarian discord within the Gulf is certainly a troubling development, given its projection in Syria and the escalating sectarian violence in Iraq. The U.S. now faces an arc of instability from the Levant to the Gulf, with weak states wracked by escalating sectarian tensions, often fueled by outside groups and interests.

This trend should be particularly troubling to the United States given the anti-Americanism that has accompanied the radicalization of politics on both sides of the sectarian divide. In Bahrain, opposition movements have held protests condemning specific U.S. policies — most recently to criticize the decision to resume arm sales to the government in May 2012. But while the opposition criticizes the U.S. for doing too little to support their struggles, regime supporters accuse the U.S. of intervening too much. Indeed, the more frequent and more vociferous anti-American rhetoric has come from Sunni detractors who blame the United States for empowering the Shiite in Iraq and fear that Washington will orchestrate a similar fate in Bahrain. It seems likely that Sunni groups are likewise being used by regime factions close to Saudi Arabia in order to weaken their reformist rivals who hold much closer relations with the United States. Indeed, the talk of formalizing the confederation between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain may be directed as much at deterring American mediation in Bahrain as it is at sending a message to Iran.

While Saudi and U.S. concerns about an expansion of Iranian influence must be considered, it is unlikely that stability will be won through policies of exclusion and sectarian radicalization. In the context of the transformational demands of the Arab Spring, state building policies that work to integrate all citizens — perhaps within a political program that respects Saudi red lines on foreign policy — are more likely to bring order to the Gulf.

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### Bahrain’s New Security State Notes:

[1] For two different takes on the new Sunni mobilization, see Justin Gengler, “Bahrain’s Sunni Awakening,” *MERIP*, 17 January 2012 and Hasan Tariq al-Hasan, “Too Big to Succeed: a case of Sunni politics in Bahrain,” *openDemocracy*, 23 July 2012.

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