



INSS Insight No. 329, April 25, 2012

The Battle for Bahrain Continues

Yoel Guzansky

More than a year after the "Arab spring" came to Bahrain, the fire has still not died down. Although recent days were essentially no different from those that preceded it, the Formula One Grand Prix held in the kingdom brought the uprising back to the headlines, with the royal family seeking to use the race to demonstrate business as usual, and the Shiite opposition exploiting it to win people over to its cause.

The popular uprising in Bahrain began soon after the start of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, but in recent months, as a result of events in Syria, media attention has turned elsewhere. Meantime, however, the protest of the Shiite majority – estimated to constitute some 70 percent of the population – against the Sunni royal family has continued on a low flame. Demonstrations take place every week, generally in Shiite villages outside the capital, Manama, and not infrequently, they deteriorate into serious violence. Thus far, the regime has acknowledged the deaths of twenty people, while the opposition claims that eighty have been killed.

Bahrain's territory is 760 square kilometers. Its neighbor Qatar is located to the southeast, while Saudi Arabia, connected to Bahrain via the King Fahd Bridge built in the mid 1980s, is to the west. Bahrain's population is slightly over 1 million, about half of whom are foreign workers. Bahrain was the first state in the Gulf to discover oil, but because of the depletion of its reserves over the years, its main revenues come from profits from a Saudi oil field and its role as a banking and commercial center. Tourism and the hosting of US bases also provide the royal family with a major source of income. Yet since the outbreak of protests in Bahrain in February 2011, a great deal of capital has been removed from the country and many businesses have relocated, in particular to Doha and Dubai, because of fears about the regime's stability.

The Iranian revolution did not leave a significant mark on Bahrain, partly because Bahraini Shiites are far from being a homogeneous group politically – some are of Arab origin and others identify mainly with the Iraqi religious establishment in Najaf. However, the royal family, the House of Khalifa, makes frequent reference to the Iranian threat and accusations of a Shiite plot in order to reject fundamental reforms in the government. For

their part, the Shiites have accused the House of Khalifa of establishing an apparatus for apartheid and systematic discrimination.

Human rights organizations in the West and the February 14 Youth Movement, whose members last year clashed repeatedly with security forces, held three “days of rage” during the Grand Prix in protest at the decision to hold the race in spite of “the suppression of human rights in the country.” (Last year the event was not held because of the security situation.) The opposition did not attempt to prevent the Grand Prix – it has no power to do so – but it did exploit the event in order to draw attention to its demands: a constitutional monarchy, fair elections, separation of powers, and an equal distribution of resources.

Hamad bin Isa, who early in the previous decade rose from emir to king, announced his intention to implement changes in the constitution of 2002 in accordance with the principles laid down by the “national dialogue” and the commission of inquiry that he appointed. He noted that the changes would bring about greater balance between the executive branch and the legislative branch; and would also apply to appointments of members of the upper house of parliament (who will be appointed by him), parliament's role in determining the annual budget, and more. The opposition claims that these measures are lacking in substance.

The royal house is not monolithic – there are those, such as Khalifa bin Salman, the king's uncle and the prime minister for the past forty-one years, who object to reforms, while others, such as Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, are apparently seeking to promote national reconciliation. In the opposition as well there are those who will be content with political reforms, while others want the king removed.

Bahrain's proximity to Iran and its delicate ethnic balance make it an attractive target for Iranian intervention. There have been periods of tension between Iran and Bahrain since the Islamic Revolution, in particular concerning Tehran's support for Shiite opposition groups, attempts at subversion, and territorial claims, all of which continually feed suspicions about Iran's intentions. In the wake of the violence in Bahrain in the spring of 2011, military forces from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were sent to the island (Kuwait sent ships to secure Bahrain's ports). Some of the troops remained on the island even after the emergency situation ended in June 2011. Iran, for its part, continues to attack the Saudi “occupation” and to undermine Bahrain's sovereignty and the legitimacy of the internal reconciliation process that Bahrain's crown prince is promoting.

The Iranian media continues to incite against the royal house, and Iran has even sent a “humanitarian” aid flotilla with about 200 Iranian Shites, which accomplished little, fearful of a conflict with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces. Last November, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain accused the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force of operating a terror cell that intended to blow up the King Fahd Bridge and the Saudi embassy in Bahrain. The

motive for these acts and others was apparently the entry of forces under the GCC flag, which aided Bahrain in containing the protest.

The instability in Bahrain once again highlights the depth of the Sunni-Shiite/Arab-Iranian conflict on both sides of the Gulf. The fear of Iran has led the Bahraini royal family to worsen its treatment of its Shiite subjects and give citizenship to as many Sunnis as possible in an attempt to balance the ratio between the ethnic groups. The West too fears that free elections in Bahrain would produce a pro-Iranian parliament that would oppose US forces remaining on the island and would fall in line with Iranian policy. This explains the administration's relatively weak reaction to the oppressive measures of the Bahraini regime. In US eyes, al-Khalifa, though he may be problematic, is aligned with the "right" side.

Notwithstanding Bahrain's small size, it has great importance. Because of its strategic location, it plays a significant role in the struggle with Iran, hosting US military installations, including the Fifth Fleet's base. Continued protests are liable to drive a wedge between the United States, whose presence on the island to a large extent depends on the regime's stability, and the royal family. Even now, the export of American weapons, some of which might be used to suppress demonstrations, are criticized in Congress, and since the start of the unrest in Bahrain the extent of deals has declined. Furthermore, because of the unrest some of the US embassy's activities have been transferred to less sensitive areas, and if the situation in the country deteriorates, this is liable to threaten the continued presence of the Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain as well.

In an attempt to assuage Western criticism somewhat, in June 2011 the king appointed an independent commission of inquiry, headed by a leading international jurist, Egyptian Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni. In November 2011 the commission published its conclusions, which were rife with unprecedented criticism. It was determined that the security forces, most of them Sunnis "imported" from countries such as Pakistan, Iraq, Jordan, and Yemen, made "excessive use of force" and that human rights violations were systematic and intentional. In spite of the criticism, implementation of the recommendations has been delayed.

The protest in Bahrain is enjoying a second wind courtesy of the Arab spring, but its roots are deep and draw from Sunni-Shiite tension and the fear of Iran. Thus far, the king's attempts to bring about stability through the granting of greater political freedom has only whetted the appetite of the opposition and made the protests stronger and more frequent. There are signs that the protest is showing the trappings of an insurgency. Thus, for example, in the demonstrations, which were generally non-violent, there is increasing use of Molotov cocktails and even improvised explosive devices by Shiites against the security forces.

The stability of Bahrain is not guaranteed. Its current weakness plays into the hands of Iran, which wants to be seen as an actor with influence on the island. Iran will likely continue to exploit the complex relations of the Bahraini royal house with the Shiites in order to signal that it has the ability to undermine Bahrain's stability in the event that it is attacked.

