



Plan B for Bahrain

What the United States Government Should Do Next

November 2013



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333 Seventh Avenue	805 15 th Street, N.W.
13th Floor	Suite 900
New York, NY 10001-5108	Washington, DC 20005-2212

Tel.: 212.845.5200	Tel: 202.547.5692
Fax: 212.845.5299	Fax: 202.543.5999

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What's At Stake for the United States

Long-term simmering tension in Bahrain, increasingly violent protests, a rise in sectarianism, a relentless government crackdown on dissent, and the ruling family's failure to deliver political reform all raise crucial questions for the U.S. government's role in the country, not least how best to protect the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, anchored in Bahrain. U.S. policy has been inconsistent since widespread protest began in February 2011, and the United States conducts a complicated relationship with the government and people of Bahrain, often appearing conflicted about how to pursue its interests.

While the U.S. government perceives it is fighting bigger regional problems than Bahrain's human rights behavior, its failure to adequately address this issue undermines its influence elsewhere. Bahrain is the true test of U.S. government rhetoric on human rights—will the United States act vigorously to defend the rights of those being repressed by a U.S. ally? Past failure to do so has undermined U.S. leadership. Inconsistency on human rights by the U.S. government has damaged its credibility in Egypt and elsewhere in the world. While parts of the U.S. government see the crisis in Bahrain as a piece of a wider conundrum involving containing Iran and supporting another long-term repressive ally, Saudi Arabia, its muted engagement on Bahrain is cited across the region and beyond as evidence of double standards, and weakens American leadership.

As Bahrain slides towards greater instability it is time for the United States to adopt a more active approach, making clear that there will be serious consequences for the Bahrain regime if it continues to fail to reform, and that the U.S. government is prepared to use its relationships with Bahrain to push for change.

The United States has significant influence on the Bahrain regime, and there are strong military ties between the two countries. A 1991, 10-year defense pact between Bahrain and the United States was renewed in October 2001, and it appears the pact might since have been renewed until 2016. The United States designated Bahrain as a "major non-NATO ally" in March 2002.

The United States has sold Bahrain \$1.4 billion worth of weapons since 2000, and although some are on hold or

are at reduced levels from those planned before the uprising began, arms sales to Bahrain have continued over the last two years. For FY2014 \$10 million was requested in foreign military funding.

Dominating discussions about the relationship is the presence of the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, part of a U.S. naval presence in the country since 1948, ensuring the flow of oil and other shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and serving as a prominent reminder to Iran of U.S. commitment to its interests. There is a large U.S. military base in Bahrain covering over 100 acres, with about 5,000 U.S. personnel.

"Some smaller U.S. ships (e.g., minesweepers) are homeported there, but the Fifth Fleet consists mostly of U.S.-homeported ships that are sent to the region on six-to seven-month deployments," says a 2013 Congressional Research Service report on Bahrain. "Ships operating in the Fifth Fleet at any given time typically include a carrier strike group, an amphibious ready group, and some additional surface combatants, and operate in both the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean/Northern Arabian Sea. In mid-March 2012, the U.S. Navy announced it is doubling its minesweepers in the Gulf to eight, and sending additional mine-hunting helicopters, as tensions escalated over Iran's nuclear program and its threatened reaction to new sanctions."¹

Meanwhile, a \$580 million military construction project is underway, primarily to develop the naval facility, but also to enhance the Sheikh Isa Air Base, where U.S. aircraft (F-16s, F-18s, and P-3 surveillance aircraft) are based.

There are also significant U.S. business interests in Bahrain. U.S.-Bahrain bilateral trade exceeded \$1.9 billion in 2012. While brands such as Starbucks, McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and others have dozens of outlets between them, other U.S. companies also have sizeable interests in Bahrain, including Kraft Foods and Sheraton. Citibank has several banks in the country, Microsoft has substantial Bahrain-government business and American Express's regional headquarters is based in Bahrain. It stands to reason that these equities are undermined as the government crackdown on protestors demanding reform continues and the country appears increasingly volatile.

The Uprising and Crackdown

In early 2011, following demonstrations for reform in Tunisia and Egypt, a large number of demonstrators gathered on February 14, 2011 in Bahrain, the smallest country in the region, and home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet. While most of the protestors were Shiite Muslims, significant numbers of Sunni Muslims joined the protests too. Like in other countries in the region, Bahrain is governed by a ruling elite with much of the population shut out of political participation. As in other countries, many Bahrainis protested their longstanding grievances about a lack of freedom of speech, government corruption, gerrymandered voting districts, discrimination in government employment, and other issues.

The ruling family is from the Sunni minority in the country, and Sunnis hold nearly all key government posts, including those in the security sector. The majority Shia sect claims discrimination in government job allocation and in accessing other government services.

The protests concentrated on the Pearl Roundabout area of the capital Manama and called for elections and democratic reform. The Al Khalifa family has ruled Bahrain since independence from Britain in 1971. Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the world's longest-serving unelected prime minister, has held that post since 1971. His nephew, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, ruler since 1999 (initially as an emir before declaring himself king in 2002), studied at the U.S. Army Command and Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, also studied in the United States at the American University and is reputedly the most reform-minded of the ruling family. In March 2013 he was appointed first deputy prime minister.

The Bahraini government broke up the early 2011 reform protests in a crackdown marked by excessive force, and at least seven people were killed. When security forces withdrew from the Pearl Roundabout on February 18, the pro-democracy demonstrators reclaimed the area, and the protests resumed. Some started to call for more radical reforms, including an end to rule by monarchy. In mid-March the government imposed emergency laws called the State of National Safety to quell the protests, and around 1,000 troops from neighboring countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, arrived in Bahrain to assist the government.

The Bahraini security forces stormed protestors at the Pearl Roundabout area for the second time, and cleared the demonstrators in a large show of force, resulting in several more deaths.

An intense crackdown ensued, involving arbitrary arrests, disappearances, torture, attacks on Shiite religious sites, show trials in military courts, large numbers of people suspended or fired from their jobs, at least four deaths in custody, and a number of other civilian deaths on the street under suspicious circumstances. Many of those perceived to be leading figures in the protests or in the political opposition were rounded up and jailed in the following weeks, and many of them remain in prison today.

Following national and international criticism of how the government of Bahrain reacted to the protests in the first half of 2011, the king of Bahrain commissioned a team of international human rights experts to investigate allegations of violations, and it reported publicly at the end of November 2011. It confirmed what Human Rights First and other international human rights NGOs had reported previously—that thousands of people had been arrested, many of them tortured, and that there had been several deaths in custody. It has been almost two years since the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) issued its report. Despite Bahrain government claims of an Iranian hand guiding the protest movement, the BICI found no evidence to support the often-cited allegation.

To his credit at the time of issuance, King Hamad accepted the report's 26 recommendations and promised to implement them. The government of Bahrain insists it is committed to reform, and points to a police code of conduct introduced in March 2012, the visit of a team from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to Bahrain in December 2012, and the establishment of an ombudsman's office and new National Foundation for Human Rights.

Despite these claims by the government of Bahrain there is a general consensus shared by NGOs, foreign government observers, and the main BICI author Cherif Bassiouni that the implementations of BICI reforms have been inadequate. While the government of Bahrain insists it is carrying out the implementation of the BICI recommendations, there is little evidence of sustained follow-through on the recommendations. The "Latest News" icon on the Bahrain state media website section titled "Implementing the Bahrain Independent Commission

of Inquiry” [sic] appears not to have been updated since March 2012.

Public protests are growing increasingly violent. In recent months, a pattern involving police and a small minority of protestors has emerged, leaving people dead on both sides. Press reports at the end of October 2013 cite the Bahrain authorities saying more than 2,300 police personnel had been injured and nine killed since the protests began in early 2011. There are nearly nightly demonstrations that often end in skirmishes between ill-trained police armed with tear gas and birdshot, and younger protestors with Molotov cocktails.

No senior government figure has been held accountable for last year’s arrests or deaths in custody, and key political leaders remain in jail. Over the last year about a dozen people have been jailed for offenses related to criticizing the king on Twitter, and in September 2013 dozens were sentenced to long prison terms of up to 15 years after an unfair trial for their perceived part in the protests, including human rights defender Naji Fateel. Khalil Marzooq, a leading figure in the opposition Al Wefaq political movement, was arrested in September 2013 on charges of inciting terrorism and his trial is currently under way. Ali Salman, general secretary of Al Wefaq, was charged in November 2013 with insulting the Bahrain authorities through an exhibition about the protest movement.

Other leading opposition and civil society figures have been in jail since March or April of 2011, including Ebrahim Sharif, leader of the secular Waad political group, who is serving a five-year sentence, veteran political activist and leader of the Haq Movement, Hassan Mushaima, who was sentenced to life in prison, and Mohammed al-Mahfooth, head of the Islamic Action Society (Amal), who was sentenced to 10 years in jail.

Leading civil society figures who have been jailed since March or April 2011 include prominent human rights defender Abdulhadi al Khawaja, serving a life sentence, and blogger Abduljalil Singace, also sentenced to life. Mahdi Abu Deeb is the founder and leader of Bahrain Teachers’ Association (BTA), and is serving a five-year sentence. Nabeel Rajab, president of the leading human rights NGO, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), was jailed a year later, in July 2012, and is serving a two-year sentence.

Several of the civil society figures have been recognized internationally for their work. Rajab won the 2011 Ion Ratiu Democracy Award, presented by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the 2011 British Silbury Prize. In 2012 BCHR—founded by Al Khawaja and now headed by Rajab—won the Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Advocacy Award and the Roger N. Baldwin Medal of Liberty, awarded by Human Rights First, and was a runner-up in the Martin Ennals Human Rights Defenders Award. BCHR was also awarded the 2013 Rafto Prize for Human Rights in Norway.

In 2012 Al Khawaja won the Danish newspaper *Politiken*’s annual Freedom Award and was also awarded the Freedom House Freedom Award, shared with daughters Maryam and Zainab. Zainab is also currently in jail for peacefully protesting against the regime.

These figures are among those most commonly cited as political or civil society leaders by protestors. Graffiti of their images are common in some Bahraini neighborhoods, their names chanted and posters of them held by crowds at demonstrations.

A new round of dialogue initiated by the government and involving some opposition parties began in February 2013, although it does not include key opposition figures in prison, has made no progress, and has yet to agree a real agenda. Access to Bahrain for international human rights organizations, including Human Rights First, is routinely denied, as it is to international media.

Sectarian Divisions Deepen

Excessive use of force by police has been an ongoing issue since the onset of the conflict, but promises of real reform in the security sector have not materialized. The police and military are overwhelmingly made up of Sunnis, and need radical reform if they are to gain credibility across society. The proportion of Sunni to Shia in the security forces is not public, although a 2007 study by Staci Strobl titled “The Women’s Police Directorate in Bahrain” noted that only three out of 110 policewomen who responded to a survey identified themselves as Shia.²

The BICI report addressed the issue of underlying sectarian bias: “Sectarian relations in Bahrain are not solely affected by questions of theology. Socio-economic

factors exert an influence as well. For example, many Shia claim to be victims of systematic discrimination on religious grounds. This, they argue, is evident in the limited numbers of Shia who serve in important government agencies, such as the BDF [Bahrain Defence Force], the NSA [National Security Agency] and the police. Discontent among Shia is further heightened by the large number of expatriates who are employed by these agencies, which generates the impression among many that this policy reflects governmental mistrust of Shia who believe that, as Bahraini citizens, they ought to staff these positions.”³

The BICI report recommended “that the GoB [Government of Bahrain] establish urgently, and implement vigorously, a programme for the integration into the security forces of personnel from all the communities in Bahrain.”⁴ The Bahrain government claims that the Interior Ministry has “embarked on a recruitment plan for 500 Bahrainis of both genders and from all sects and from various provinces to work in the police community service, after passing the conditions of employment.”

But a failure to embark on a genuine overhaul of the Bahrain police to reflect the communities it serves leaves many Shia distrustful of the force. In Bahrain’s polarized and highly-charged society, many view the police as a tool of repression rather than a force for stability and the rule of law. Publicly addressing the makeup of police forces is de rigueur in the United States, where the government and local police forces produce statistics on the race of police officers. A radical overhaul of security force representation is not without precedent. In the decade between 2001-2011 the police service in Northern Ireland increased the Catholic representation in its ranks from about 8 percent to 30 percent. This progress also involved a wider package of reforms, a vigorous recruitment process and substantial technical help from the U.S. government.

Fragile Economy

The country’s economy is struggling to recover from the political unrest, and international financial observers are increasingly alarmed at its vulnerability. In a May 2013 analysis of Bahrain’s economy the International Monetary Fund (IMF) determined that “The economic outlook depends on progress on the domestic political front, and is subject to oil price risk. Economic activity improved following the 2011 downturn. However, in the absence of an enduring political solution, private sector investment is

expected to remain weak, implying only moderate non-oil growth, below 4 percent in 2013 and over the medium term. At the same time, Bahrain’s fiscal breakeven price has reached critical levels—\$115 (per barrel of oil) in 2012—rendering Bahrain vulnerable to a sustained decline in oil prices.”⁵ Bahrain is struggling as it needs an oil price of at least \$115 per barrel to break even, whereas current prices are only around \$102 per barrel. Future easing of oil sanctions against Iran would also threaten to drive down the price further.

In September 2013 Moody’s Investors Service lowered Bahrain’s sovereign rating by one notch to a Baa2 rating, just two levels above junk territory, and Moody’s also assigned a negative outlook. Reasons cited for lowering the rating included a dependence on oil revenue, and that continued political and social tensions may dampen confidence and investment in the economy. The ratings firm said the negative outlook reflected Bahrain’s susceptibility to geopolitical instability.

In October 2013, media reports cited Bahrain central bank data as estimating a dramatic drop in the combined assets of wholesale banks in Bahrain from \$156.7 billion at the end of 2010 to \$118.3 billion in August this year.⁶

Bahrain’s continuing political turmoil sees it plummeting in various world ranking tables— from 39th in 2010 to 48th in 2012 in the Human Development Index compiled by the United Nations Development Program; from 20th in 2010 to 42nd in 2013 in the International Finance Corporation/World Bank’s “Ease of Doing Business” ranking of 182 economies; and from 144th out of 178 countries in 2010 to 165th out of 179 countries in 2012 on media freedom, according to the Reporters Without Borders World Freedom Index.

The U.S. Government’s Responses

In a speech in May 2011 President Obama publicly told the Bahrain government, “The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can’t have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail.” This message was right, but it has failed to guide U.S. policy since. The Obama Administration still seems to be struggling to find a

successful strategy to advance this goal. Moreover, the declaration has not been publicly repeated at a senior level since, while subsequent U.S. admonitions have been generally more muted, making it appear as if the administration has actually backed off from that strategy.

Subsequent statements by senior officials have been less helpful. For example, in response to the release of the BICI report in November 2011, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, "Our countries have many shared strategic interests and a relationship that includes decades of working together to defend regional security. In this context, it is essential for Bahrainis themselves to resolve the issues identified in the report and move forward in a way that promotes reform, reconciliation and stability."

In August 2013 the State Department produced a report assessing the implementation of the BICI recommendations by the Bahrain government. The report was required as a result of the FY13 National Defense Authorization Act. The report is emblematic of the confusion of U.S. policy direction, simultaneously noting a general failure to implement most of the recommendations while praising the king of Bahrain for "the commendable progress already underway" on reforms, and citing the appointment of the crown prince as first deputy prime minister as a signal of "...his interest in a long-term reform program...."

Growing Support in Congress

There has been more consistent criticism of the Bahrain regime's failure to reform from the U.S. Congress. Since the uprising there have been two congressional hearings at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in May 2011 on human rights in Bahrain and again in August 2012 on implementation of the BICI. There have also been half a dozen letters from members of Congress expressing concern about various aspects of Bahrain's human rights record, typically supported by more than 20 members with signers from both parties.

An increasing number of members of Congress are openly questioning the suitability of Bahrain to host the fleet. Speaking on February 13, 2013 U.S. Congressman James McGovern (D- Mass) said, "We must be willing to tell the Al Khalifa regime that, if repression of political voices continues to produce social instability, Bahrain will no

longer meet our standards for basing our Fifth Fleet there, and we will actively pursue relocation of our ships." He added, "It is polarization and exclusion that are the real threats to U.S. strategic interests, including the basing of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, because it is polarization and exclusion that threaten stability. If we have learned anything from the last two years, it's that you can't keep a lid on a boiling pot; sooner or later, it will explode. We know that backing autocracies instead of agents for democracy can have dire consequences. Support for autocratic rule in the name of stability is ultimately an unsustainable strategy and a dangerous myth."

On July 22, 2013, Senator Robert P. Casey, Jr. (D-PA) sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Defense asking if there is a contingency basing location for the U.S. Fifth Fleet should instability make its current location in Bahrain untenable. "I fully support efforts to address Bahrain's political unrest before the situation degrades further. However, I am concerned that we apparently have not developed plans for an alternative contingency facility in this strategically critical and dynamic region," Senator Casey wrote to Defense Secretary Hagel.

Yet, despite persistent leadership from members such as Jim McGovern and Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), Congress has not made the push it needs to. While the foreign policy and armed services committees have held several hearings on Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, and other crises, there has yet to be an official hearing on Bahrain and the consequences to U.S. interests.

Instability and Inaction Threaten the Fleet

Frederic Wehrey of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace suggested in a February 2013 report that the U.S.-Bahrain relationship is "a crucial test of the United States' ability to balance the need for political reform with long-standing strategic interests and military partnerships."⁷

He noted that, "in many respects, Bahrain represents a crucial test of Washington's ability to juggle conflicting priorities in the wake of the Arab uprisings, balancing the need for political reform with long-standing strategic interests and military partnerships. For now, the Bahraini regime continues its crackdown and Washington in many ways turns a blind eye. Meanwhile, anti-Americanism is

building among all parties," and proposed that "with these uncertainties in mind, it is prudent for the U.S. military to prepare plans for the gradual relocation of the Fifth Fleet's assets and functions."

As the situation continues to deteriorate, some senior military voices and other analysts unhappy that the United States appears to have so much invested in a volatile political situation have urged a repositioning of the U.S. approach to Bahrain. Retired U.S. Navy Rear Adm. John D. Hutson is a board member of Human Rights First. He visited Bahrain on a Human Rights First fact-finding trip in October 2012. The conventional wisdom that the "United States should not push too hard for democratic reform in Bahrain because the country hosts the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet...is wrong," Hutson said, "It's precisely because of the presence of the 5th Fleet that the U.S. has a particular interest in seeing a peaceful transition to democracy. In Bahrain—indeed, throughout the Middle East—American ideals and interests are aligned," he continued.⁸

"Historically, the U.S. has backed autocracies in the Middle East in the name of stability. But as we know from recent experience, the calm of repression is the false calm of a slowly boiling pot; inevitably it bubbles over, and people put their need to live in freedom and dignity above their fear of reprisal," said Hutson. "From the outset of the crackdown, criticism of the regime from the U.S. government has been muted. American officials have sometimes put pressure on their Bahraini counterparts, but usually behind the scenes, so it's no surprise that activists in Bahrain are frustrated that the U.S. hasn't been more forceful and consistent in its advocacy of democratic reform."⁹

Dennis Blair, former U.S. Director of National Intelligence and commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Command also wrote in February 2013 that "Permanent basing in a repressive Bahrain undermines our support for reform and is vulnerable if instability continues," and that "the growth of democracy and rule of law-based political systems that respect and protect the rights of citizens are in the fundamental long-term U.S. national interest; shorter term military and economic cooperative arrangements should be secondary and supportive."¹⁰ He went so far as to say that "The Fifth Fleet headquarters should be moved back on board a flagship, as it was until 1993. This is an expensive proposition at a time when the defense budget is being reduced, but it is necessary."¹¹

In June 2013 U.S. Navy Commander Richard McDaniel authored a Brookings Institution report entitled *No 'Plan B': U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain*. Commander McDaniel suggested that "the situation in Bahrain could deteriorate very rapidly, leaving the U.S. without a key maritime hub in the Middle East."¹² McDaniel also wrote that failure to have a plan B for the Fifth Fleet "could have disastrous results for the United States' strategic interests."¹³

The U.S. government approach to Bahrain appears to have been ambiguous and inconsistent, arming the regime while making critical statements about its human rights violations. The U.S. administration has not imposed any sanctions on Bahraini officials for human rights abuses, although it has joined with other countries to criticize Bahrain at the United Nations Human Rights Council and criticized the repression in recent State Department country and religious freedom reports.

But, as a September 2013 Brookings paper on U.S. relations with Egypt noted, "If Arab leaders know that the United States will not back up its pro-democracy rhetoric with policy changes that go beyond tinkering around the margins, they are unlikely to take U.S. objections over human rights concerns seriously."

The internal struggle within the U.S. government about what to do in Bahrain is not encouraging a swift and stable transition to democracy. Muted criticism of—and continuing arms sales to—the repressive regime has proved an incoherent and unsuccessful strategy. The United States should adopt a new approach to Bahrain to promote long-term stability and reduce the chances of one day having to decide where it should relocate the Fifth Fleet.

Failure of the Crown Prince Strategy

The U.S. government has backed the crown prince in an effort to encourage reform, but after two years he has failed to deliver. In fact, since his appointment the cabinet—of which the crown prince is a senior member, and whose meetings he sometimes chairs—has taken significant steps to increase the repression. These include draconian measures to limit freedom of expression, an indefinite ban on all public gatherings in the country's capital Manama, and proposals to revoke the citizenship of Bahrainis who

have been convicted of terrorist offenses. The cabinet has also approved measures to criminalize anyone who disrupts public morale online, and endorsed an amendment to Article 214 of the Penal Code, increasing the penalty for offending the king or the country's flag and other national symbols to up to five years in prison.

Since the crown prince's new appointment in March 2013, the Bahrain government has also continued to postpone the planned visit of U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture Juan Mendez, and introduced new rules requiring Bahraini political opposition representatives to tell the government in advance when they plan to meet with foreign embassies—the Ministry for Justice now requires three days' notice in advance of meetings between Bahraini political societies and foreign embassies and governments so a Bahraini government representative can be present at the meeting. Since March 2013 there has also been a de facto ban on international human rights NGOs entering the country, and on many media outlets too.

In May 2013 the Bahrain cabinet approved a parliamentary proposal to, as Information Minister Samira Rajab said, "put an end to the interference of U.S. Ambassador Thomas Krajieski in Bahrain's internal affairs," and in August 2013 relations with the United States were further strained when pro-government Bahrain media gave distorted reports of a meeting between Bahrain parliamentarians and U.S. Ambassador Eileen Donahoe. One paper claimed that Donahoe disputed the accuracy of remarks made by U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay that were critical of Bahrain. "America's Ambassador to the Geneva-based U.N. Human Rights Council, Eileen Donahoe, agreed that her [Pillay's] remarks did not reflect reality," said a front-page story in the *Gulf Daily News*, prompting Donahoe's office to issue a strong response noting "its deep disappointment and concern over gross factual inaccuracies presented in Bahraini press following U.S. Ambassador to the Human Rights Council Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe's meeting with a Bahraini delegation at the Human Rights Council in Geneva The statements attributed to the Ambassador in the Bahrain News Agency and *Gulf Daily News* stories are inaccurate."

Tension increased after President Obama's September 2013 speech to the U.N. General Assembly, where he referred to "efforts to resolve sectarian tensions that continue to surface in places like Iraq, Bahrain and Syria."

Bahraini officials reacted sharply, with the Bahrain ambassador to the United States claiming, "The president's statement does not reflect Bahrain's well known history as a progressive outpost in the Middle East and the progress we have made in responding to the events of February and March 2011," while Bahrain's Minister of the Interior suggested, "Bahrain has never experienced a sectarian tension," and the Foreign Minister claimed that "the King's achievements" have "immunized our country against any sectarian tensions," although, in a March 2011 interview, the Foreign Minister was quoted as saying, "We are suffering from tension between Sunnis and Shiites."

In October 2013 local media reports in Bahrain suggested that General Hugh Shelton, former U.S. military commander and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had said that the Obama Administration had worked to destabilize the regimes of Bahrain and Egypt. Sources cited an interview allegedly given to Fox News where Gen. Shelton was supposed to have stated that the administration's plot was foiled by the king of Bahrain's decision to allow Saudi-sponsored GCC troops in to Bahrain to help crush the uprising in 2011. The U.S. embassy and U.S. Navy in Bahrain both immediately issued statements refuting the reports. "Gen. Shelton confirmed he had never given - and will never give - such a false statement. He also said he had never appeared on Fox News to talk about Bahrain and that it was in 2010 when he last appeared on Fox News to present his autobiography," said the U.S. embassy statement. Gen. Shelton himself went on record to state that "I am dismayed at reports that attribute to me false allegations regarding U.S. government attempts to destabilize the governments of Bahrain and Egypt, I did not make these statements, and they do not reflect my views. Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, the interview never happened."

Relations between the United States and Bahrain have frayed at various times over the last two years, including immediately after the uprisings began. In May 2011, in the early months of the Bahrain pro-democracy protests, the United States pulled its human rights officer, Ludovic Hood, from its Bahrain embassy following weeks of ethnic slurs and threats against him by a pro-government website and newspapers. Hood's photo and address were published, and linked to a wedding photo of him with his "Jewish wife."

Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF), Field Marshal Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmad Al Khalifa was quoted in the local *Gulf News* on February 15, 2012, charging the United States with being one of seven countries applying pressure on Bahrain and accusing 19 NGOs based in the United States of attempting a coup against Bahrain. Bahraini members of parliament have at various times called for U.S. Ambassador Thomas Krajeski to be replaced and for Michael Posner, then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, to be declared a persona non grata in Bahrain.

The failure of the crown prince to deliver reform and the apparent instability of the Bahrain government's alliance with the United States makes a repositioning of the relationship vital. The attacks on U.S. diplomats expose the Bahraini government as an unreliable and volatile partner in a geopolitically hypersensitive area, and the United States should act now to help shape how the situation develops.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since 2011 the United States has devoted considerable diplomatic resources to Bahrain, in a two-fold strategy: 1) encourage the government of Bahrain to fulfill its promises to implement recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report commissioned in 2011 by Bahraini King Hamad; and 2) bolster the crown prince and the "reformist" wing of the monarchy in the hope that it can deliver reform.

This strategy has largely failed, and the United States needs to develop an alternative to support a stable transition to democracy and the rule of law. There is no status quo in Bahrain, and an inflammation of national and regional sectarianism further threatens a peaceful solution to the crisis. Political and economic stability is an illusion, and pro-democracy activists are growing desperate. There will either be reform, or a descent into worsening violence with a sectarian edge that some U.S. officials are already privately comparing to Lebanon and Syria.

The focus of a new strategy should be to publicly seek new partners inside or outside the government who can bring about the required transition, including more public

support for opposition figures inside and outside of jail. Bahrain needs a leadership to walk the country out of its current crisis, one that recognizes that time is running out for a peaceful transition to real democracy and the rule of law. In the absence of such leadership and reform, protestors are increasingly likely to look for succor from Iran.

A second key element of the strategy should be to undermine the creeping sectarianism taking root in Bahrain, with some restaurants and coffee shops being designated as "Sunni" or "Shia." Workplace and school interactions between people from different sects are increasingly strained, and the makeup of the security forces should reflect the communities they serve.

Wholesale reform of the security sector is crucial, including accountability for past violations. The United States can support Bahrain security sector reform through rigorous implementation of the 'Leahy Law,' designed to withhold assistance from any unit of the security forces of a country where there is credible evidence that anyone in that unit has committed a gross violation of human rights.

If the political and human rights situation in Bahrain does not improve, the vital military assets of the Fifth Fleet could become a tool not only for a corrupt regime, but also a symbol of American weakness and hypocrisy. The United States may not be able to control the outcome, but—for its own strategic interests and the good of the Bahraini people—it should do everything it can to persuade the regime to choose the right path.

The government of Bahrain regularly blames Iran as an outside agitator of the protests, and in November 2013 four men were sentenced to life and six others to 15 years in jail on charges of establishing a militant cell linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Claims that Iran is helping to mastermind the protest movement have been made for some years now, with little evidence produced. As the BICI report drily noted, "The evidence presented to the Commission by the GoB on the involvement by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the internal affairs of Bahrain does not establish a discernible link between specific incidents that occurred in Bahrain during February and March 2011 and the Islamic Republic of Iran."¹⁴

The current thaw in U.S.–Iran relations might lessen tensions over possible Iranian involvement, but real fears remain that Iran would be happy to exploit the turbulence in Bahrain. Such intervention appears likely to become a

self-fulfilling prophecy the longer the current impasse continues, with protestors seeing little movement from the regime and few consequences from international governments for the lack of reform. The temptation for protestors to turn to Iran for help is likely to increase.

In developing a new strategy, the U.S. government should publicly inform the Bahraini government that the future of the Fifth Fleet requires political and social stability, which, at a minimum, requires the protection of human rights and their defenders, and there will be consequences to the partnership if the government of Bahrain does not adequately reform to provide that.

The December 2013 Manama Dialogue—an annual forum organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies to exchange views on regional security challenges—offers an immediate opportunity for the U.S. government to press this approach directly at a senior level. The United States should send senior officials from the State Department and the Department of Defense to the regional security summit to make clear, in person, to their Bahraini counterparts that the current situation is untenable and that political prisoners should be immediately released.

New measures could range from incentive to punitive, but the U.S. government cannot accept promises of reform as evidence of reform.

Specifically, the U.S. government should:

- Publicly state U.S. concerns about the deteriorating situation and the potential for large-scale violence, emphasizing that it can be avoided only through reform, not repression.
- Amplify this message via senior officials in State Department and the Department of Defense urging the release of the peaceful opposition figures and other political prisoners, and ask to visit them in prison in the meantime. President Obama should publicly reiterate the call for the release of all peaceful political leaders from jail.
- Publicly announce it will continue to meet Bahraini opposition figures without the presence of a Bahraini government representative, and promptly do so.
- Send senior representatives from the Departments of State and Defense to the Manama Dialogue in December 2013 to press for the release of political prisoners and other essential reforms.
- Defend U.S. officials under attack by the government of Bahrain and its representatives for their advocacy of human rights and reform, including by publicly responding to the attacks and issuing demarches.
- Press to reduce the influence of those responsible for human rights violations inside and outside of the government. It should consider imposing visa bans and freezing assets of those it believes guilty of human rights violations.
- Withhold arms sales and transfers to the police and military, contingent on human rights progress, starting with a request for the current representation levels of Shias in the police and military to be made publicly available with a view to establishing recruitment and promotion targets for underrepresented groups.
- Vigorously implement the Leahy Law governing U.S. military and other security assistance to Bahrain.
- Promote the State Department March 2013 guidelines titled *U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders*¹⁵ to Bahraini civil society, including in Arabic.
- Engage, via the U.S. embassy in Manama, more closely and regularly with a broad range of human rights defenders in Bahrain by calling and visiting them, and visiting their families if they are in jail.
- Publicly call for international media and international human rights organizations to be afforded meaningful access to Bahrain.

Endnotes

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- ³ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," (2011), pp. 22, para. 70.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 423, para. 1722e.
- ⁵ International Monetary Fund, "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2013 Article IV Consultation with the Kingdom of Bahrain," Public Information Notice No. 13/53 (May 15, 2015), http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/2013/pn1353.htm#P23_349.
- ⁶ Mirna Sleiman, "Bahrain in early stages of bank merger wave: central bank," *Reuters*, October 28, 2013, available at <http://issuu.com/kuwaitnews/docs/20131028>
- ⁷ Frederic Wehrey, "The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (February 6, 2013), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/02/06/precarious-ally-bahrain-s-impasse-and-u.s.-policy/fayg#>.
- ⁸ John D. Hutson, "Push for democratic reforms in Bahrain," *The Virginian-Pilot*, November 29, 2013, available at <http://hamptonroads.com/2012/11/push-democratic-reforms-bahrain>
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Dennis Blair, "False trade-off on Bahrain," *The Hill*, February 12, 2013, available at <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/282337-false-trade-off-on-bahrain>
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Richard McDaniel, "No 'Plan B': U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain," The Brookings Institution, (June 2013), pp. 26.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5.
- ¹⁴ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," pp. 387, para. 1584.
- ¹⁵ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Support for Human Rights Defenders," <http://www.humanrights.gov/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Support-for-Human-Rights-Defenders.pdf>.