

**POPULAR PROTESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (III):  
THE BAHRAIN REVOLT**

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## POPULAR PROTESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (III): THE BAHRAIN REVOLT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Manama's crackdown and Saudi Arabia's military intervention are dangerous moves that could stamp out hopes for peaceful transition in Bahrain and turn a mass movement for democratic reform into an armed conflict, while regionalising an internal political struggle. They could also exacerbate sectarian tensions not only in Bahrain or the Gulf but across the region. Along with other member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia purportedly is responding to dual fears: that the takeover would be tantamount to an Iranian one. Both are largely unfounded. It also is concerned protests might inspire similar movements among its own Eastern Province Shiites, oblivious that its involvement is likelier to provoke than deter them. Bahrain's brutal crackdown and Saudi interference fan flames both want to extinguish. The most effective response to the radical regime change threat or greater Iranian influence is not violent suppression of peaceful protests but political reform. Time is running short and trends are in the wrong direction.

The small island kingdom has long been a place of popular ferment, owing in part to its relatively open society – relative, that is, to the low standards set by its immediate neighbours – and in part to the disenfranchisement of its majority-Shiite population by a Sunni monarchy. Intermittent uprisings have resulted in scant progress in broadening the political arena; instead the regime has been accused of importing adherents of Sunni Islam from other regional states, including non-Arab states such as Pakistan, inducting them into the security forces and offering an undetermined number among them Bahraini citizenship. To the extent that such a policy is in place, the predominantly Shiite opposition has rightfully denounced demographic manipulation that is clearly aimed at perpetuating an unequal state of affairs.

Taking their cue from protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, young Bahrainis fed up with politics as usual took to the streets on 14 February and, following a week of skirmishes with security forces, occupied Pearl Square, the heart of the capital. Over the next three weeks their activism was joined by opposition groups, both legal – in the sense of holding an

official license to operate – and illegal. Over time, this medley of opposition groups, emergent political movements and unaffiliated youths extended their control of the streets in both Manama and other towns and villages and developed a set of demands that ranged from political and constitutional reform to outright regime removal. Their protest has been largely non-violent.

The regime initially answered the protests with force, opening fire at demonstrators in Pearl Square and allowing pro-regime thugs to attack them. Responding to pressure, notably from the U.S., it subsequently allowed peaceful protest to take place. A three-week period of behind-the-scenes discussions and continued demonstrations relatively free of violence failed to yield meaningful steps toward change. U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates, visiting Manama on 12 March, criticised the regime for its “baby steps” toward reform.

This apparent stalemate, coupled with increasingly provocative protester tactics and Riyadh's view that protecting the regime was a red line, likely triggered the intervention of Bahrain's partners. On 14 March, invoking a GCC security agreement, an estimated 1,000 Saudi troops crossed the causeway from the Saudi mainland, accompanied by some 500 United Arab Emirates police and some Qatari troops. The next day, dozens of tanks and over 100 army trucks, as well as armoured personnel carriers, also rumbled into Bahrain. Most disappeared into barracks, invisible to Bahraini citizens. But the warning was clear: desist or be made to desist. King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa accompanied this show of force with the announcement of a three-month “state of national safety”, including a partial curfew, a ban on rallies and broad powers for the military. In continued protests that day and next, Bahraini security forces and pro-regime thugs armed with swords and clubs attacked demonstrators throughout the kingdom, killing seven in the first three days and injuring many more. Since then, opposition leaders have been jailed.

Saudi Arabia's intervention led leaders of Bahrain's largest opposition group, al-Wifaq, to state that dialogue would not

be possible as long as foreign forces remain on national soil. It prompted an immediate response from Iran, which called the intervention an unacceptable interference in Bahrain's internal affairs. It put Bahrain's U.S. ally in an awkward position, prompting the secretary of state to characterise the developments as "alarming". It almost certainly further alienated Bahrain's Shiite majority – with many Shiite officials resigning in protest – and, if anything, increased their sympathy for Tehran. It arguably inflamed Saudi Arabia's own Shiite population. In Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, the most senior Shiite religious authority, gave his support to peaceful protest in Bahrain, triggering Shiite demonstrations in solidarity with their Bahraini brethren there, in Kuwait and indeed in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, which has a significant Shiite population. In short, the intervention likely achieved precisely the opposite of what it intended.

The military intervention and Bahrain's subsequent tough line have made peaceful resolution of the country's political crisis immensely more difficult and the regional context significantly tenser. It is unclear how meaningful, peaceful dialogue can be resumed, but it is long overdue and remains absolutely necessary. Given the level of distrust, involvement of a credible third party facilitator appears to be both essential and urgent. The goal would be to work out a plan for gradual but genuine reform toward a constitutional monarchy, with real parliamentary powers and redress of sectarian discrimination. In this context, Saudi Arabia and the other contributing Gulf states should withdraw their security forces and equipment from the island. Protesters should continue to use peaceful means to express their grievances and demands while agreeing to negotiate with the regime.

As for the U.S., anxious about its relationship with Saudi Arabia and the GCC, it nonetheless should understand that repression in Bahrain will do neither it nor its allies any good in the longer term. Bahrain's post-colonial history lends at least some hope to the possibility of dialogue and compromise, as despite its obvious problems the country has also known a degree of pluralism and a vibrant civil society. But the window of opportunity is fast closing.

This report, the third in an ongoing series that analyses the wave of popular protests across North Africa and the Middle East, describes the background and course of the current revolt, as well as key Bahrain players, their interests and positions.

**Brussels, 6 April 2011**

## POPULAR PROTESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST (III): THE BAHRAIN REVOLT

### I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Bahrain, with a population of almost a million and a quarter in 2010, is the smallest of the nations that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and its society is the most complex and stratified among the Gulf states. Just under half the population are Bahraini nationals; the rest are non-Bahraini residents, the vast majority (mostly male) Asian migrant workers.<sup>2</sup> Bahrain experienced rapid population growth over the past decade, particularly among its foreign workforce – indeed, in 2001 its population stood at around 650,000.<sup>3</sup> On an island with limited space and natural resources, such growth put enormous strain on the native population and workforce.

As discussed below, many Shiites are convinced that this population rise is partly due to the naturalisation of mainly Sunni foreigners – and thus at their expense. While a breakdown by religious sects is not officially available, it is commonly believed in Bahrain that 70 per cent of the population is Shiite and 30 per cent Sunni; however, this balance may have shifted as a result of the regime's naturalisation policy.

With its majority-Shiite population,<sup>4</sup> liberal social norms, long history of political opposition and relatively small income

deriving from natural resources,<sup>5</sup> Bahrain stands out as a relative exception among GCC countries. Unlike most other Gulf ruling families, but like the Al-Saud in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, its leadership acquired authority through tribal alliances and conquest. Assisted by tribal allies originally from central Arabia, the Al-Khalifa invaded Bahrain from Qatar in the eighteenth century, overthrew its Persian administration and have ruled the country ever since.

Just below the Al-Khalifa and their Sunni tribal allies on the socio-political ladder are other Sunni Arab families of tribal origin and then the *hawala*, families that migrated to Bahrain over the last century or more from the Iranian coast but claim Sunni and Arab origins. The Al-Baharina, indigenous Shiite Arabs, constitute the fifth and largest tier, with Persians – both Sunni and Shiite – at the bottom of the social and political hierarchy. This is not to say that there is no Shiite elite or that all Shiites support the protesters; some Shiite families have become very wealthy and are among the ruling family's allies, such as the Al-Jishi, Al-Arrayed and others.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This section and the following are largely drawn from Crisis Group Report N°40, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, 6 May 2005.

<sup>2</sup> According to the 2010 Bahraini census, the country had a population of 1,234,571, comprising 568,399 Bahrainis and 666,172 non-Bahrainis. Of the latter group, 562,040 were Asians (433,756 of whom were male). [www.cio.gov.bh/CIO\\_ARA/English/Publications/Census/General%20%20%202011%2002%2006%20-%203.pdf](http://www.cio.gov.bh/CIO_ARA/English/Publications/Census/General%20%20%202011%2002%2006%20-%203.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> [www.cio.gov.bh/cio\\_ara/English/Publications/Statistical%20Abstract/2001/2001-CH02%20Population.pdf](http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_ara/English/Publications/Statistical%20Abstract/2001/2001-CH02%20Population.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Bahrain is one of the oldest centres of Shiite scholarship. See Yusuf bin Ahmad al-Bahrani, *Lu'lu'a al-Bahrain fi al-Ijazat wa Tarajim Rijal al-Hadith* (Najaf, 1966); Ali al-Biladi al-Bahrani, *Anwar al-Badrain fi Tarajim 'Ulama' al-Qatif wa al-Ahsa' wa al-Bahrain* (Beirut, 1991); and Juan Cole, "Rival Empires of Trade and Imami Shiism in Eastern Arabia, 1300-1800", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1987), pp. 177-203.

<sup>5</sup> Until the early 1930s, Bahrain was the regional centre for the pearl trade. Oil was discovered in 1932, before any other Gulf monarchy, but today it no longer is an oil producer on the scale of its neighbours.

<sup>6</sup> On 16 February 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Jawad al-Arrayed, a Shiite, was appointed to head a committee charged with investigating the violence on the preceding two days, including by security forces. In theory, the committee should also investigate the violence that occurred after its establishment, but it has yet to issue any public statement. [www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/447457](http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/447457).

## II. POLITICAL TENSIONS AND MOBILISATION – SOURCES OF GRIEVANCE

Modern education started very early by regional standards, leading to a large educated middle class and fuelling the first leftist organisations, labour movements and trade unions. These increasingly mobilised the population throughout the 1950s and led a popular uprising against the British presence in 1965.<sup>7</sup> In turn, this spawned a highly active associational life. Bahrain probably enjoys the most vibrant and visible civil society of the Arab Gulf states.<sup>8</sup> These groups' successors are still active today.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, facing an opposition displaying sharp class and ideological features, the Al-Khalifa sought to buttress their legitimacy by calling for creation of an assembly tasked with drawing up a constitution pursuant to which a partially elected national assembly with limited legislative powers would come into being. The constitution was promulgated in June 1973, and national elections were held in early December.

The experiment was short-lived. Political activism continued across a broad front, progressive and conservative alike. Labour leaders organised numerous industrial strikes. In addition, sectarian-based economic discrimination and a repressive security apparatus heavily staffed by foreigners deepened grievances. The ruling family issued a wide-ranging State Security Measures Law in 1975 granting the government summary powers to arrest and hold people without trial. The assembly's elected members, divided on many other issues, were united in opposition to these steps, insisting they ought to have been submitted for their approval. In August 1975, Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa formally dissolved the assembly after it failed to ratify the extension of the lease for the U.S. naval units, in effect ending the ephemeral parliamentary system.<sup>9</sup> According to Article 65 of the constitution, elections for

a new assembly should have been held within two months. This did not happen, however, and the constitution was suspended through emergency legislation. As a result, many opposition activists, particularly those who have refused to participate in the political process, still view subsequent governments as operating illegally and have called for a return to the 1973 Constitution.<sup>10</sup>

Clashes and unrest occasionally resumed, most markedly in late 1994 in Shiite villages outside the capital. The root causes were wide-ranging: authoritarianism; the absence of basic civil and political rights; extensive anti-Shiite discrimination; corruption and favouritism within the ruling family and among those closest to it; a repressive and largely foreign-staffed security apparatus; and a stagnant economy. Shiites formed the bulk of protesters, although Sunnis embraced the goal of returning to the 1973 constitution and holding national assembly elections and helped organise pro-reform petitions signed by tens of thousands. Street politics, large demonstrations and skirmishes became the norm, particularly during what has been called the 1994-1998 intifada.

The government responded brutally, detaining thousands of demonstrators and exiling opposition leaders. The next several years saw an escalating cycle of repression and violence, with protesters burning tyres, stoning police, and using cooking gas canisters as makeshift bombs. While violence eventually subsided, it continued at a low level until 1999. The most deadly attack occurred in early March 1997, when five Bangladeshi workers were killed in a restaurant bombing. Security forces, mostly recruited from the Balochi area of Pakistan, with officers from Jordan and other Arab countries, laid siege to villages and raided the homes of reputed activists. Thousands of Bahrainis were arrested and tortured.

The main opposition forces involved in petitions and street protests in the 1990s were the two Shiite Islamist groups, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB, Al-Jabhat al-Islamiya li Tahrir al-Bahrain), and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM, Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain al-Islamiya). Two left-wing groups, the Bahraini National Liberation Front (BNLF, Jabhat al-Tahrir al-Watani al-Bahraniya), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (PFLB, Al-Jabhat al-Shaabiya li Tahrir al-Bahrain), were active as well. Harsh repression led to the imprisonment of many activists; scores of others left the country or were sent into exile.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bahrain was the seat of British power and control in the Gulf until it gained independence in 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (Cambridge, 2009). For more on the nationalist movements, see Ibrahim Khalaf al-'Ubaidi, *Al-Haraka al-Wataniyya fi al-Bahrain 1914-1971*, 2nd ed. (London, 2004); Saeed Khalil Hashim, "The Influence of Iraq on the Nationalist Movements of Kuwait and Bahrain 1920-1961", University of Exeter PhD thesis, 1984; 'Abd ul-Hadi Khalaf, "Labor Movements in Bahrain", *MERIP Reports*, no. 132 (1985), pp. 24-29; Hussain Musa, *Al-Nidal al-Watani al-Dimuqrati al-Hadith li Sha'b al-Bahrain 1920-1981*, 2nd ed. (2007); and Abdallah Mutaiwia, *Safahat min Tarikh al-Haraka al-'Ummaliya al-Bahrainiya* (Beirut, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Fred Lawson, *Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy* (Boulder, 1989), pp. 87-91.

<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> The transformation of these groups is discussed below. See also Louay Bahry, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1997), pp. 42-57; Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite

What dialogue has since taken place between opposition and regime has largely been fruitless. The government detained key opposition interlocutors, such as Sheikh Abd-al-Amir al-Jamri and Abd-al-Wahab Husein, without charge or trial and placed them in solitary confinement. Those who signed reform petitions, whether Shiite or Sunni, faced official retribution ranging from harassment and employment blacklisting to detention and harsh treatment. This generated considerable ill-will that has persisted to this day in many communities, particularly in Shiite areas, where arrest, harassment and torture have been commonplace.

King Hamad, who succeeded his father, Emir Isa, in 1999 (becoming emir and, in 2002, king), sought to defuse tensions. He promulgated a general amnesty, dissolved the State Security Courts, abrogated the State Security Law and promised democratic reforms. This latter pledge was embodied in the Bahrain National Action Charter, a rather vaguely worded program that incorporated amended parts of the (suspended) 1973 constitution and introduced a two-chamber system comprising an elected lower and an appointed upper council.<sup>12</sup> The charter was approved almost unanimously in a referendum held on 14 February 2001; it was no coincidence that the most recent uprising started on the referendum's tenth anniversary. Yet, as further discussed below, and contrary to apparent promises by the king to consult the opposition and other actors in amending the old constitution, he unilaterally promulgated a rewritten one in February 2002 that, in the opposition's eyes, was a significant step backward.

Tensions erupted anew in 2004, when pent-up anger rose to the surface, and demonstrations turned violent. These increasingly took on a sectarian dimension. The Shiite opposition's by and large moderate leadership was challenged by a more militant constituency whose patience was tested by the absence of movement on the regime's part.<sup>13</sup>

It would be misleading to reduce the situation to a pure sectarian divide; historically, many Sunnis have been active in the opposition. But Shiites undoubtedly have been hardest hit by social dislocation and endure, as they have since

the late 1970s, multiple forms and levels of discrimination. This has provided a decidedly sectarian hue to the island's troubles, even though grievances are far broader and broadly shared.

## A. POLITICAL STALEMATE

As described, much of the dissatisfaction revolves around Hamad Al Khalifa's unfulfilled promise of political reform in 2000.<sup>14</sup> Many measures in the first two years of this experiment had placed the country at the cutting edge of regional liberalisation. Reversing a quarter century of authoritarianism, Emir Hamad ended some of the regime's most abusive practices and inaugurated institutional changes that promised a more equitable political contract between state and society. With over 98 per cent approval, Bahraini men and women voted in a February 2001 referendum to support the changes outlined in the National Action Charter. Through his project, the emir sought to distance himself from more conservative-minded regime elements, including but not limited to the prime minister.

In what remains his most forward-leaning reform, Hamad also dissolved the State Security Courts and abrogated the State Security Law that authorised them, thus abolishing key components of the state's repressive machinery and meeting a main demand of political activists. Following their overwhelming support for the 2001 referendum, Bahrainis were assured by the emir, crown prince and other high officials that a "constitutional commission" would propose amendments to – rather than replacement of – the 1973 Constitution, and the new parliament's elected chamber would exercise sole legislative powers. Yet, in February 2002, on the referendum's anniversary, the emir, now king, promulgated (without prior public discussion) what essentially was a rewritten constitution. The furtive nature of his decision and the revelation that the opposition had not been consulted shocked Bahrain's politically active community and revived distrust of the state's intentions. The unilateral decree exacerbated the fault lines that separated the royal family from its critics and suggested power and resources would remain firmly in its hands.

Fuelling cynicism regarding the regime's intent are some of the more significant differences with the 1973 Constitution. Among the principal points of contention: the appointed Consultative Council (upper house of parliament, Majlis al-Shura) can cast the tie-breaking vote in a deadlock with the elected Council of Deputies (lower house of parliament, Majlis al-Nawwab); the new institutional and legal structure ensured that the king and his advisers could not

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Opposition in Bahrain", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 3 (2000), p. 129; Karen Dabrowska, *Bahrain Briefing: The Struggle for Democracy, December 1994-December 1996* (London, 1997); Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment", in Gary Sick and Lawrence Potter (eds.), *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion* (Basingstoke, 1997), pp. 167-188; and Ute Meinel, *Die Intifada im Ölscheitum Bahrain: Hintergründe des Aufbegehrens von 1994-1998* (Münster, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Bahrain National Action Charter, copy provided by Bahrain embassy, London.

<sup>13</sup> On this, see Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> In 2002 the "State of Bahrain" became the "Kingdom of Bahrain", and the emir became king.

be held accountable; and the king has the right to appoint all ministers.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, pursuant to a royal decree, Shura members are appointed from a very narrow base, including the ruling family, senior retired officers, senior clergy, businesspeople, professionals, former ambassadors, ministers and judges.

Although voters agreed in principle to a bicameral legislature in the 2001 referendum, community leaders protested that they had believed the appointed chamber would be both smaller and only consultative. Instead, its structure virtually guaranteed that ultimate decision-making power remained in the palace. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority of the combined houses, rendering change virtually impossible. While power to pass laws rests with both chambers, the cabinet alone has the right to initiate and draft them, and the appointed Shura chamber has in effect veto power over initiatives and decisions by the elected chamber. The king retains the power to rule by decree (*marsoum bi qanoun*), provided such decrees do not violate the constitution; it subsequently has to be approved by both houses to remain in force, but there is no stipulated time limit for such approval to be obtained. Statutory decrees, including the many issued in 2002 prior to the first session of the National Assembly, cannot be amended and remain in force as long as the two chambers do not vote to rescind them.

Other changes from the 1973 version were seen as limiting the power of the elected chamber. Under the earlier constitution, for instance, the government could suspend parliament for two months but then was required to hold new elections. Under the new one, the government can suspend it for four months without elections, and the king has full discretion to postpone elections without any time limit if the government – ie, the cabinet led by his hard-line uncle, Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa – so advises. Likewise, the earlier version mandated creation of an audit bureau subordinate to the National Assembly; the 2002 Constitution removed the requirement that the bureau report to the assembly. By virtue of Legislative Decree no. 16 (July 2002), the king established a Financial Control Bureau reporting directly to him, thereby erasing the legislature's ability to monitor state financial affairs. Nor does the Financial Control Bureau's mandate include review of income and/or expenditures of the palace, royal family, the defence ministry and the interior ministry.

The "constitutional crisis" was not a specifically sectarian issue, as both Sunnis and Shiites found reason for displeasure. Yet, the Shiite community felt particularly ag-

grieved; historically, it has been the most active and united in pressing for political reforms, such as those promised in late 2000. During the 1990s uprising – whose leaders were mainly Shiites – the political discourse of all but the violent fringe focused on demands for political and institutional change. A popular political slogan was "the parliament is the answer". The National Action Charter even prompted celebrations in the Shiite village of Sitra, where the king was famously hoisted and feted on the shoulders of residents. Over time, the National Action Charter and the subsequent reforms were viewed not as an honest response to community demands, but as perfidy, fuelling other tensions that are specifically sectarian in character.

## B. SECTARIAN DISCRIMINATION

As Shiites see it, discrimination is a fact of life and the product of government political will. This conviction is fuelled in particular by the state's poor handling of the issue. High-ranking officials regularly appear to be trying to undermine opposition unity by driving a wedge between Sunnis and Shiites and manipulating sectarian anxieties. The reality of formal and informal discrimination is hard to contest, and it affects a range of issues:

**Institutionalised Discrimination.** The most notable example involves the gerrymandering of parliamentary electoral districts to ensure majority Sunni representation despite their minority status. The Bahraini National Assembly comprises both the Council of Representatives – with 40 elected members – and the Consultative Council, with 40 royally appointed members. As a result of unequal districting, the 2010 elections yielded a majority of elected Sunni parliamentarians – 22, as compared to eighteen Shiites.<sup>16</sup>

**Political Naturalisation.** Shiites are persuaded that the government is pursuing policies to alter the island's demographic balance. These include granting citizenship to non-Bahrainis – mainly Sunnis from around the region – to mitigate Shiite dominance. Exceptional measures appear to have been taken to grant citizenship to Jordanians, Syrians and Yemenis recruited by the security services; demographic impact aside, the heavy presence of foreigners in the military and police has provoked sharp anger from locals who consider them mercenaries. In addition, the government has awarded citizenship to as many as 8,000 Saudis, members of branches of the Dawasir tribe that were once in Bahrain but have long resided in eastern Saudi Arabia.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> For details, see Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., pp. 5-7; and J. E. Peterson, "Bahrain: Reform, Promise and Reality", in Joshua Teitelbaum (ed.), *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf* (New York, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> [www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=290557](http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=290557); [www.nuwab.gov.bh/ServicesCenter/Members/Search.aspx](http://www.nuwab.gov.bh/ServicesCenter/Members/Search.aspx).

<sup>17</sup> See also Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton, 2006), pp. 56-58, 69.



Feelings of discrimination were exacerbated by the so-called Bandargate scandal, unleashed in September 2006 by a report from a former adviser to the cabinet affairs minister, Dr Salah al-Bandar. The report, published by the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development (*Markaz al-Khalij li al-Tanmiya al-Dimuqratiya*), purported to provide documentary evidence of a regime plan to marginalise Shiite political actors and alter the country's sectarian makeup by naturalising (*tajnid*) Sunni foreigners. These allegations have not been verified independently, but most Shiites and many others believe them to be true.<sup>18</sup> While Shiite anger is directed mainly at the naturalised Sunnis, non-Sunni migrant workers, including South-East Asians, also have become the focus of heavy criticism, especially for having taken jobs away from native citizens.<sup>19</sup>

**Government Employment.** When it comes to the state-controlled public sector, the largest employer in Bahrain, Shiites are on the outside looking in. Although this is largely true regardless of rank, it is particularly pronounced at the heights of power, which are dominated by the ruling family, and in most sensitive sectors, like the Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF) and the interior ministry. Almost all Bahrainis concede the existence of discrimination in the various security services, from which Shiites have been systematically excluded at least since the Iranian Revolution.

### C. ECONOMIC COMPLAINTS

Unemployment, high since the 1990s, has been a major factor generating discontent among Shiites, particularly young working-age men. The government reported 16.5 per cent unemployment at the end of 2010,<sup>20</sup> but according to unofficial estimates the true figure could be as much as 30 per cent. Levels of unemployment and underemployment are disproportionately high among Shiites.<sup>21</sup> In recent years, the state took a number of steps, acknowledged even by some critics, who praise the king and crown prince for seeking to address underlying socio-economic problems. Still, causes of dissatisfaction remain, and the economic situation has been steadily worsening. Related problems, again disproportionately affecting the majority Shiite population, are under-employment and low wages.

In poorer, mainly Shiite, villages it is not uncommon for streets to be filled with unemployed or under-employed

young men, many of whom express eagerness to work but are exasperated at being unable to find jobs that pay a living wage or losing them to foreign workers. Compounding the difficulties and frustrations is the almost total absence of a social safety net. There is no effective state-provided insurance and only poor health facilities for residents who cannot afford private care. Meanwhile, housing and real estate costs have escalated dramatically in recent years, turning poor Shiite villages into suburban shanty towns from which residents have little hope of escape.

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<sup>18</sup> The report is available online at: [www.bahrainrights.org/node/528](http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/528).

<sup>19</sup> See Laurence Louër, "The Political Impact of Labor Migration in Bahrain", *City & Society*, 2008, pp. 32-53.

<sup>20</sup> Figure provided by the Bahrain Labour Market Regulatory Authority, [http://blmi.lmra.bh/2010/12/mi\\_dashboard.xml](http://blmi.lmra.bh/2010/12/mi_dashboard.xml).

<sup>21</sup> Steven Wright, "Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain", *CIRS Qatar Occasional Papers*, no. 3 (2010), p. 10.

### III. THE PEARL SQUARE REVOLT

In mid-February 2011, the mass movements for democratic change sweeping the Arab world reached the Gulf, including Bahrain. Inspired by Tunisia and Egypt, young activists called for a “day of rage” in Manama, 14 February,<sup>22</sup> tens of thousands joined. Particularly because protesters limited demands to political and democratic reforms, refraining from directly criticising King Hamad, the harsh response surprised and radicalised many. The security forces’ heavy-handed repression failed to silence them; funeral marches carried the protests into the countryside, mobilising all segments of society. Seven died over four days (14-17 February), but protesters eventually gained control of Pearl Square, where they camped for weeks.<sup>23</sup> The eighteen deputies (MPs) associated with the most powerful legal Shiite opposition group, al-Wifaq, resigned from parliament, strikes were called and government institutions came under daily siege from thousands. Some independent Shiite MPs, at least three Shiite members of the upper house, most Shiite Sharia judges and the Shiite housing minister also resigned.<sup>24</sup>

The bulk of the protesters belonged to the majority Shiite population, but their demands were not sectarian or religious. Instead, demonstrators called for substantive democracy, human rights and improvement in services. As seen, and unlike Shiites in neighbouring Saudi Arabia, Bahraini Shiites do not face religious oppression per se but, like their Arab brethren throughout the wider region, are energised mostly by socio-economic grievances. These are compounded by the type of institutionalised sectarian discrimination described above that forms a critical backdrop to the uprising and means that Shiites are the group with the single largest grievance.

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<sup>22</sup> A loose alliance of youths organised the initial 14 February 2011 demonstrations by summoning people to Manama’s Pearl Square via Facebook. One page called for a “day of rage”, another for a “revolution” on 14 February. As in Egypt in the beginning, the online activists and organisers behind these websites have not revealed their identities. There is no doubt that Bahraini activists are learning from the experiences in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, and at times they have used websites set up by activists in those countries. See Facebook event pages and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°101, *Popular Protest in North Africa and Middle East: Egypt Victorious? (I)*, 24 February 2011.

<sup>23</sup> For an account of the events, see Cortni Kerr and Toby C. Jones, “Revolution Paused in Bahrain”, *Middle East Report Online*, 23 February 2011; and “Bloodied but Unbowed: Unwarranted State Violence Against Bahraini Protesters”, Amnesty International (March 2011).

<sup>24</sup> See [www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/17/141944.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/17/141944.html). The housing minister who resigned was Majid al-Alawi.

Over time, the uprising, regime response and Saudi Arabian intervention appear to have fundamentally altered the landscape. On 16 February, seven legal Shiite Islamist and leftist political opposition groups (parties are still not permitted) announced a nameless alliance that urged followers to take to the streets in support of the “14 February Movement”, the young online activists who first called for the protests.<sup>25</sup> Leaders indicated they were ready to talk with the regime if it put meaningful concessions on the table, including release of all political prisoners and an end to court proceedings against them; an immediate, impartial and independent investigation of the seven protesters’ deaths; objectivity and neutrality in the official media; resignation of the government and a new, interim government; abolition of the 2002 Constitution and elections for an assembly to draft a new constitution, leading to a constitutional monarchy and elected government; amending the electoral system to “ensure just and fair representation of all political and societal components”; and guarantees agreements would be honoured.<sup>26</sup>

This new alliance was challenged by unlicensed political groupings that have considerable street credibility and that rejected any dialogue with the regime. Even as a tactical convergence between the legal and illegal political opposition solidified, momentum clearly shifted to the latter, which largely consists of groups that splintered from legal groups, as well as a new coalition of youths born from the protest movement. The new protest movement could signal an end to the type of party politics that dominated Bahraini opposition politics for the last decade and a return to the street politics of the 1990s.

Opposition demands soon crystallised around a set of issues, including sacking Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who has occupied his post since independence from Britain in 1971. He is widely seen as a key representative of the royal family’s old guard that ran the country before King Hamad’s post-2001 reformist approach. Many protesters accuse him of large-scale corruption and fear that no real change is possible while he remains in office. During the three-week period of discussions led by the crown prince and opposition representatives, the prime minister’s fate reportedly quickly became a stumbling block. For a regime that, over two centuries, has been built not just around a monarch but his family as a whole, this so far has been a red line and a sign that it views such a concession as a first step toward changing its nature.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> [www.alwasatnews.com/3086/news/read/527721/1.html](http://www.alwasatnews.com/3086/news/read/527721/1.html).

<sup>26</sup> *Gulf Daily News*, 24 February 2011, [www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=300342](http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=300342).

<sup>27</sup> Another key protester demand, the release of political prisoners, has largely been met, although some still remain in jail.

It also can be read as an indicator of a split within the royal family over how to run the country and deal with the protests. According to an observer involved in mediation attempts, by putting this demand so publicly upfront as a precondition, the opposition made it more difficult to meet it or its equivalent (eg, a significant dilution of the prime minister's powers) which, allegedly, the crown prince was willing to consider.<sup>28</sup> Another analyst familiar with the Gulf region argued that the king and crown prince simply were unable to oust the prime minister, chiefly due to strong Saudi support.<sup>29</sup> The regime tug-of-war is a possible explanation for its two-faced response during the protests: apologies and offers of dialogue on the one hand, simultaneous, ruthless repression on the other.

Tension between regime camps is nothing new. The crown prince and prime minister publicly clashed most notably in 2008 over economic reform. The crown prince, who also is chairman of the Economic Development Board, made thinly veiled threats against outside interference in the board's work and published an open letter in local papers. The king sided with him and – without naming the prime minister – warned that any minister failing to comply risked his job. Bahrainis viewed this as a clear victory for the crown prince; U.S. diplomats concluded he had established himself as the most powerful figure after the king, replacing the prime minister in the political pecking order.<sup>30</sup> But the crown prince's inability to push through his vision of dialogue with the opposition in February-March 2011 likely suggests a reversal of this trend and left him significantly weakened. A U.S. official said, "the mainstream opposition ultimately was not prepared to accept the crown prince's offer of dialogue. We tried to nudge the process forward, but the crown prince evidently lost his authority within the regime".<sup>31</sup>

The sectarian dimension – as well as its regional ramifications – has been one of the uprising's central features from the outset:

- The regime has sought to portray the 14 February uprising as a distinctively Shiite revolt, inspired by Iran, the power directly across the Gulf. In response, it mobilised Sunni Islamists – and stoked their fears – to stage

public support for the regime in the form of pro-government demonstrations.<sup>32</sup> The unity that characterised the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, therefore, has been absent in Bahrain.

- The army and police are heavily staffed by foreigners, often Sunnis, who exhibit little compassion toward the largely Shiite protesters; as noted, some have received Bahraini citizenship in reward for their services in what Shiites interpret as an attempt to change the country's sectarian balance. Again in sharp contrast to the two North African precedents, this has meant that the army could not play the role of neutral actor, sympathetic to the regime while loyal to the state and stepping in to preserve stability by ousting the leader.
- The regime has been under immense pressure from other Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, not to let the democratic current go too far and particularly to avoid a scenario in which the Shiites would become the dominant political power. As a small Gulf state without the kind of oil revenue available to most of its neighbours, Bahrain is heavily dependent on its neighbours, chiefly Saudi Arabia.<sup>33</sup>
- As the most important force in the GCC federation, Saudi Arabia is Bahrain's key foreign backer, together with the U.S. In the past, Bahrain has sought to avoid being a playing field in the Saudi-Iranian rivalry by resorting to a triangular foreign policy that counterbalances both by boosting ties with Washington.<sup>34</sup> Yet, after Hosni Mubarak's ouster in Egypt, it seems as if the smaller GCC states fear that in times of crisis the U.S. is no longer a reliable partner, and they are there-

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, March 2011.

<sup>29</sup> He claimed that the prime minister might have attempted a coup had the GCC not been called in and the uprising crushed by the security forces. Crisis Group interview, March 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Cable 08MANAMA89 from the U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State, Washington, 13 February 2008, as published by Wikileaks. The cable quotes some Bahrainis as referring to this as a "bloodless coup"; it goes on to comment that "the Prime Minister represents the last of the old lions . . . . [I]t will be interesting to see whether he attempts to reassert himself when he deems the conditions are right".

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2011.

<sup>32</sup> The main such group is the National Unity Gathering (Tajammu' al-Wahda al-Wataniya), see below.

<sup>33</sup> See Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Security Policy of the Gulf States: Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar", *Orient*, vol. 1 (2011), pp. 23-28. Gulf Cooperation Council support for the crackdown on protesters was symbolised in an extraordinary 17 February 2011 GCC foreign ministers meeting in Manama in which member states vowed to support Bahrain financially, politically and militarily, if needed, consistent with GCC security and defence agreements. <http://arabnews.com/middleeast/article269061.ece>. Most of Bahrain's oil production is derived from the shared Abu Safa offshore field, from which Riyadh grants 50 per cent of revenues to Manama. In addition, Bahrain's Sitra refinery, the oldest in the Arab Gulf countries, is directly supplied with Saudi crude oil at discounted prices. A number of Bahraini projects and investments include Saudi shares. According to some accounts, Saudi Arabia provides as much as 45 per cent of the Bahraini budget. See Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> See "Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy", RAND (2009), p. 55.

fore looking for Saudi backing, even if this somewhat undermines their sovereignty.<sup>35</sup>

- In turn, Saudi Arabia perceives any Shiite agitation as a quasi-existential threat: first, as Iranian-inspired and serving Iranian interests; secondly, as a dangerous precedent for its own internal situation. In this respect, Riyadh fears that genuine democracy on its border could embolden its own activists and, more immediately, that the empowerment of Bahraini Shiites could inspire Shiite residents of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, just across the King Fahd Causeway from Bahrain, who constitute roughly half its population.

Many Eastern Province Shiites enjoy kinship ties to Bahraini Shiites, and their political movements in the past often have been integrated with Bahraini networks.<sup>36</sup> Demonstrations in the Eastern Province inspired by events in Bahrain started on 17 February, although participants numbered only in the hundreds. However, after the deployment of Saudi troops to Bahrain, protests drew several thousand in support of the Bahraini people and urging the Saudi regime to withdraw.<sup>37</sup>

More broadly, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait all have conflated perceived external and internal perils under the banner of a "Shiite threat" designed to delegitimise their own Shiite populations' demands for greater political, socio-economic and religious rights.<sup>38</sup>

- Bahrain also is a major U.S. ally, firmly nestled under its security umbrella; the U.S. Fifth Fleet is stationed on the island.<sup>39</sup> This, coupled with Riyadh's (and the UAE's) assertion that Bahrain's stability is a red line, has presented the Obama administration with an acute dilemma, namely how to square its support for democracy movements across the region with its security and

regional interests in the Gulf, a dilemma made all the sharper in the wake of the military intervention in Libya in which GCC countries have participated. Speaking before the latest crackdown, a U.S. official said, "the situation in Bahrain is both complex and sensitive given its regional ramifications. We know how important this is to Saudi Arabia. We have been involved in mediation. The ideal outcome, in our view, would be a gradual transition toward a constitutional monarchy. For the regime, this means no radical, swift rupture; for the opposition, a clear promise of meaningful political reform".<sup>40</sup>

A turning point appeared to be reached on 14 March, when Saudi Arabia dispatched around 1,000 army and national guard troops, the UAE sent 500 police and Qatar sent some troops into Bahrain. Formally, these were brought in under the terms of the Gulf Cooperation Council's Joint Defence Agreement, signed during a 2000 summit in Bahrain. Central to this agreement is a clause stipulating that an external aggression against any one member would be considered an aggression against the GCC as a whole, requiring other members to provide military assistance.<sup>41</sup> Although it would be difficult to depict the current uprising as an external threat, Saudi media in particular has been adamant in stressing that Iran is behind the Bahraini protests. The fact that the GCC intervention occurred in the wake of the crown prince's conciliatory statement and almost immediately after U.S. Defense Secretary Gates – who urged more reforms – had left Manama led some analysts to interpret it as a reaction by hard-line regime elements working with Riyadh.

As of 16 March, the official mission of the Saudi and UAE security forces was to guard strategic sites. While some Bahraini protesters claim that the Saudi army is present at checkpoints and is guarding the Salmaniya Medical Complex, these accounts are difficult to verify.<sup>42</sup> At this writing, the regime and its regional allies seemingly have opted for a course that rules out a negotiated settlement in

<sup>35</sup> Saudi forces briefly crossed the causeway to Bahrain in the mid-1990s during the height of the protests there in order to back the monarchy. They reportedly did not get involved in policing and retreated quickly. Crisis Group telephone interview, Bahraini activist, March 2011; see also *Gulf States Newsletter*, vol. 35, no. 895 (25 February 2011), p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> For background on Saudi Shiites, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°45, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, 19 September 2005; Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London, 2006); Toby Jones, "Embattled in Arabia: Shi'is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia", Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (2009); and Toby Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads", *Middle East Report Online* (6 May 2009).

<sup>37</sup> See coverage of the events on [www.rasid.com](http://www.rasid.com).

<sup>38</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Internal and External Security in the Arab Gulf States", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2009), pp. 39-58.

<sup>39</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy", Congressional Research Service (18 February, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2011.

<sup>41</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council consists of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The ineffectiveness of the joint GCC Peninsula Shield Forces, created in 1986, was proven at the time of Iraq's 1990 Kuwait invasion. They were in effect disbanded in 2005, and there has never been a real integrated GCC military force. In 2006, Saudi Arabia proposed that each state designate certain military units located in its territory as part of the Peninsula Shield Force under unified command. See Christian Koch, "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung International Reports, vol. 11 (2010), pp. 23-35. This appears to have happened in March 2011, when Saudi Arabia and the UAE sent their national guard, army and police units to Bahrain but called them Peninsula Shield Force.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group email communication with protester, March 2011.

the short term. This could portend difficult days for the Bahraini people, instability for the region and a deepening conundrum for the U.S.<sup>43</sup> The chilling calculation seems to be that through naked repression forcing the demonstrators off the streets, the regime can remove the opposition's main bargaining chip: their unremitting presence in the streets and courage in facing off with security forces. On 15 March, King Hamad decreed a three-month state of emergency. Two days later, security forces arrested seven prominent opposition activists and a surgeon working at Salmaniya Medical Complex. In the weeks since, hundreds of protesters, activists, bloggers and doctors have been arrested and their whereabouts remain unknown.<sup>44</sup> The situation in Shiite villages – victims of a heavy security crackdown and with regular reports of clashes – remains extremely tense; more broadly, anti-Shiite discrimination appears to be on the rise.<sup>45</sup>

#### IV. THE SHIITES' RELATIONSHIP WITH IRAN

Hovering over the current struggle for Bahrain's future is the question of the Shiite community's ties to Iran. In the 1960s, Iraqi Shiite Islamist movements began establishing branches in the Gulf, most often through students returning from studies in Najaf who had joined Iraqi parties such as al-Daawa. Bahrain became a centre of activism and, as a majority-Shiite nation, a hub for Shiite networks in the Gulf. Still, although the country periodically suffered sectarian trouble, differences between Shiites and Sunnis did not form a structural part of political dynamics. This changed in the aftermath of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Shiite communities throughout the Gulf, notably in eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, were mobilised and radicalised; in turn, Sunni anxiety was heightened. As a number of Shiite activists – some with close ties to Iran – began to organise, the Bahraini government reacted with a wide-ranging crackdown in the early 1980s.

Fear of Shiite militancy almost certainly was out of proportion to its actual power and appeal, and outside influence was less significant than alleged; still, the regime responded by aligning itself to an unprecedented degree more directly with the Sunni community. Before 1979, the regime had not pursued a specifically sectarian agenda, since it viewed the most serious threat as emanating from radical leftist organisations. Since then, by contrast, government practices – if not stated policy – to a large extent have been geared toward the manipulation of sectarian differences and fears.

The situation worsened in December 1981, after Bahrain foiled an attempt by the Islamic Front, a Shiite organisation (discussed below), to take over police stations, ministries and radio stations. Several hundred members and sympathisers were arrested. The following year, 73 of them were tried and convicted.<sup>46</sup> This also marked a turning point in Saudi policy and shaped the approach of the GCC, which had been formed in May 1981. Alarmed by the involvement of approximately a dozen Saudi Shiite activists, Riyadh denounced the attempted coup as an attack on all GCC states and, in December 1981, signed a security agreement with Bahrain while beefing up security checks in its own Eastern Province.<sup>47</sup> Whether the plot was directed or carried out with the knowledge of all factions

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<sup>43</sup> Asked what his country's plans were for the longer term, an official from the UAE said, "first, to restore calm; then to resume negotiations". Crisis Group interview, March 2011. Prior to the decision to dispatch security forces, another UAE official had made clear that Bahrain's future was a red line and that his country was prepared to endure a crisis with the U.S. for the sake of salvaging the regime. Crisis Group interview, March 2011. A U.S. official said, "we continue to stress there is no military solution. The regime is now promising dialogue but it has become harder given what happened. The opposition is now demanding that the GCC force leave first: that both adds an obstacle but also suggests they are interested in a dialogue. The fact is that we now have to be more active in mediating". Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2011.

<sup>44</sup> See "Bahrain: Investigate Shooting, Arrest of Man Caught Up in Police Sweep", Human Rights Watch (23 March 2011), [www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/20/bahrain-new-arrests-target-doctors-rights-activists](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/20/bahrain-new-arrests-target-doctors-rights-activists); and "Bahrain: New Arrests Target Doctors, Rights Activists", Human Rights Watch (20 March 2011), [www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/23/bahrain-investigate-shooting-arrest-man-caught-police-sweep](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/23/bahrain-investigate-shooting-arrest-man-caught-police-sweep). The main legal opposition party, al-Wifaq, announced on 28 March that, since the crackdown began, some 250 individuals had been arrested, and 44 were missing. See [www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/28/us-bahrain-arrests-idUSTRE72R41B20110328](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/28/us-bahrain-arrests-idUSTRE72R41B20110328). On 31 March, Reuters wrote of 300 arrested <http://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCATRE72U2UY20110331?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, observer, April 2011.

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<sup>46</sup> See Rashid Hammada, *Asifa fawqa Miyah al-Khalij: Qissa Awwal Inqilab Askari fi al-Bahrain 1981* (London, 1990), pp. 377-380.

<sup>47</sup> See Frauke Heard-Bey, *Die arabischen Golfstaaten im Zeichen der islamischen Revolution* (Bonn, 1983), p. 21; Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami* (London, 2003), p. 36; Robin B. Wright, *Sacred Rage: The Crusade Of Modern Islam* (London, 1986), p. 160.

within the Iranian government remains in debate; however, there is broad agreement – including among some Bahrainis involved in the attempt – that the regime’s more hardline wings, and in particular the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), were involved.<sup>48</sup>

Many observers consider this the most serious attempt by Tehran to export its revolution to the island; they also see it as the last time it provided real organisational assistance to that end. Although the Bahraini regime repeatedly has accused Iran of being behind alleged coup attempts, there is little evidence that anything akin to what occurred in 1981 has been repeated.

The persistence of doubts regarding the loyalty of Bahraini Shiites revolves around several factors:

**The possible existence of pro-Iranian networks.** Although the 1981 plotters belonged to the Shirazi networks (discussed below), speculation at the time and since has revolved around the possible existence of pro-Iranian groups and in particular of a local branch of Hizbollah. The name, which today mainly brings to mind the Lebanese Shiite organisation, originally was used to designate networks of pro-Iranian Shiite activists who emerged after the Islamic Revolution in places like the Gulf states, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan; embraced the notion of *wilayat al-faqih* (rule of the jurist); and were referred to as followers of *Khat al-Imam* (“the Imam’s Line”) or the “Hizbollah trend”. Contrary to other Arab Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia,<sup>49</sup> Kuwait and post-2003 Iraq, Bahrain never had a group publicly calling itself Hizbollah and issuing statements in its name.

Whether such an organisation ever existed in Bahrain remains in dispute. During the 1990s, the regime accused Iran of establishing a local branch and, in 1996, arrested an alleged Hizbollah cell whose members “confessed” on state television to reporting directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and to having received training in Iran and Lebanon. But there is reason to suspect that the 1996 trials were designed principally to divert attention from the uprising’s domestic sources and secure Western support for the crackdown.<sup>50</sup>

That is not to say that *Khat al-Imam* networks are absent. Among prominent leaders who follow the “Imam’s line” are Isa Qasem, the spiritual guide of many Bahraini Shiites, as well as Ibrahim al-Ansari, Husein al-Akraf and Abd-al-Wahab Husein.<sup>51</sup> Abd-al-Wahab Husein in particular founded two militant Shiite groups that still remain unlicensed and have been deeply involved in the 2011 street protests – al-Haq and al-Wafa, which he continues to lead to this day (see below).<sup>52</sup> Tellingly, a website that posts biographies of *Khat al-Imam* martyrs recently added those of several Bahraini protesters killed since mid-February 2011; more generally, the website – somewhat akin to an Arabic mouthpiece for Iran’s supreme leader and Arab Hizbollah networks – of late began focusing on Bahrain.<sup>53</sup>

**The transnational structure of Shiism.** Suspicion that Bahrain’s Shiites are beholden to Tehran and questions regarding their loyalty to the state also are grounded in the transnational nature of Shiite religious authority (*marjaeeya*). Because Bahrain has no resident *marjaeaa* (senior Shiite scholar, an authority to be emulated), most of the island’s clergy and congregations look outside for religious leadership and emulate clerics from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.<sup>54</sup> Yet, the fact that many Bahraini Shiites look to Iran

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tine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain”, Human Rights Watch (June 1997). That said, a Bahraini who called himself a former militant told Crisis Group in 2005 that the group had sought to stage bombings in 1995. Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., p. 11.  
<sup>51</sup> Ibrahim al-Ansari is a cleric and activist of Iranian origin, who studied in Najaf in the 1970s and went to Qom after 1979. He still lives in exile in Mashhad in Iran. Husein al-Akraf is a cleric and famous chanter of Muharram elegies, who frequently appears on Shiite television channels. Originally a Daawa supporter, Abd-al-Wahab Husein was one of the most active members of the Shiite opposition in the 1990s. Rather than go into exile, he continued to coordinate activities on the ground and was repeatedly imprisoned in the late 1990s. He was the last political prisoner to be released in the 2001 general amnesty. He subsequently headed the Islamic Enlightenment Society, which has functioned as al-Daawa’s front organisation since 1968. He became a founding member of al-Wifaq and, later, of al-Haq (discussed below). See Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shiite Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York, 2008), p. 206; Ali Qasim Rabiaa, *Lajnat al-arida al-shaabiya fi masar al-nidal al-watani fi al-Bahrain* (Beirut, 2007), pp. 398-404. Abd-al-Wahab Husein was rearrested on 17 March 2011 along with other protest leaders. www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/18/bahrain-protest-leaders-arbitrarily-detained.

<sup>52</sup> See Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, op. cit., pp. 204-208.

<sup>53</sup> See “Shuhadaa al-Bahrain”, www.alwelayah.net.

<sup>54</sup> In Shiism, worshippers declare their support for a senior religious leader, especially one of the grand ayatollahs who make up the collective *marjaeeya*. At times, there is consensus over who is the supreme authority to be emulated, the *marjaeaa al-taqid al-mutlaq*; at other times, multiple contenders coexist. Isa

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<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interviews (conducted by a consultant acting in a different capacity), activist involved in the attempted coup, Manama, 2010.

<sup>49</sup> See Toby Matthiesen, “Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi’a Opposition Group”, *Middle East Journal*, vol. 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 179-197.

<sup>50</sup> See Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Harakat wa-alJjama’at al-siyyasiyya fi al-Bahrain 1937-2002* (Beirut, 2004), p. 107; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi’a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York, 1999), p. 135; Meinel, *Die Intifada im Ölscheichtum Bahrain*, op. cit., pp. 197-211; and “Rou-

or have studied there does not necessarily or automatically suggest the existence of a political relationship.

**Iranian claims.** Bahrain has expressed anxiety over claims emanating from Tehran that it in fact is an Iranian province. An analyst explained: “The island nation was sporadically part of Persia as far back as the sixth century B.C. and, most recently, was part of Iran’s Safavid Empire in the eighteenth century .... Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi ultimately gave up Iran’s historic claim to Bahrain in 1970, shortly before the island nation gained independence from Britain in 1971”.<sup>55</sup> A UN-administered opinion poll conducted in 1970 concluded that the vast majority of Bahrainis, both Sunni and Shiite, wanted Bahrain to remain an independent Arab state.<sup>56</sup> Although Tehran formally accepted this outcome, the issue periodically is raised by Iranian officials, diplomats and journalists, causing considerable Bahraini (and GCC) annoyance.<sup>57</sup>

All in all, as Crisis Group previously described, there is no credible indication of disloyalty or irredentism on the part of Bahrain’s Shiites. Indeed, there is little evidence that the Shiite community’s political objectives have been shaped by outsiders; rather, the focus has remained on resolving domestic challenges through local activism.<sup>58</sup> Shiites have made clear they have no interest in establishing an Iranian-style regime, let alone incorporating the island into a greater Iran. According to a 2008 cable from the U.S. embassy in Manama:

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Qasem is now generally identified as an ayatollah, which suggests he is considered senior enough to be a local *marjeaa*. Crisis Group interviews, Bahraini Shiites, February 2011. On the concept of the *marjeaa* and the notion of emulation, see Linda Walbridge, *The Most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>55</sup> “The Iran Primer”, United States Institute of Peace, at <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/mar/24/iran-warns-gulf-bahrain>. In 1957, Iran’s parliament passed a bill declaring Bahrain to be the country’s fourteenth province.

<sup>56</sup> See [http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case\\_bah.html](http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_bah.html); see also Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power*, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in 2009 the speaker of Iran’s parliament, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, argued that under the Shah, “Bahrain was our 14th province and had a representative at the parliament”. Marc Lynch, “What’s happening in Bahrain (I mean, the 14th province of Iran)”, *Foreign Policy online* blog, 19 February 2009, [http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/02/19/whats\\_happening\\_in\\_bahrain\\_i\\_mean\\_the\\_14th\\_province\\_of\\_iran](http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/02/19/whats_happening_in_bahrain_i_mean_the_14th_province_of_iran). In 2007, Hossein Shariatmadari, editor of the official Iranian newspaper *Keyhan*, wrote in an editorial that Bahrain is an Iranian province and that Bahraini public opinion favoured reunification with Iran. Along with other Iranian media, *Keyhan* has sharply criticised the Bahraini government over the 2011 protests and, in particular, the Saudi intervention. [www.kayhannews.ir](http://www.kayhannews.ir); and [www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/IG19Ak07.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/IG19Ak07.html).

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

Bahraini government officials sometimes privately tell U.S. official visitors that some Shi’a oppositionists are backed by Iran. Each time this claim is raised, we ask the GOB [Government of Bahrain] to share its evidence. To date, we have seen no convincing evidence of Iranian weapons or government money here since at least the mid-1990s, when followers of Ayatollah Shirazi were rounded up and convicted of sedition. (The so-called Shirazis were subsequently pardoned and some now engage in legal politics as the very small Amal party, which has no seats in Parliament.) In post’s [embassy’s] assessment, if the GOB had convincing evidence of more recent Iranian subversion, it would quickly share it with us.<sup>59</sup>

Nor has any direct Iranian involvement in the current Bahraini uprising so far been established, beyond the extended media coverage given in Iran to the protests and Iranian officials’ public comments. Washington’s position has been ambivalent: although the U.S. has never blamed the protests on Iran and has criticised the regime’s handling of them, in early March 2011, U.S. Secretary of State Clinton asserted that Iran was “reaching out to the opposition in Bahrain”.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Defense Secretary Gates both acknowledged that “we had no evidence that suggested that Iran started any of these popular revolutions or demonstrations across the region” and cautioned that “there is clear evidence that as the process is protracted, particularly in Bahrain, the Iranians are looking for ways to exploit it and create problems”.<sup>61</sup> What is clear is that the worsening situation in Bahrain, and in particularly the GCC troop deployment, has exacerbated tensions between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain on the one side, and Iran on the other, prompting a rhetorical escalation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cable from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 5 August 2008, as published by Wikileaks.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted by Agence France-Presse, 3 March 2011.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted by Agence France-Presse, 12 March 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, referred to the dispatch of Saudi troops as a “big mistake”, saying the Bahraini people should have a right to protest. [www.alwelayah.net](http://www.alwelayah.net). President Ahmadinejad said, “this [Saudi] military invasion was a foul and doomed experience. Regional nations hold the U.S. government accountable for such a heinous behaviour”, adding, “learn from the fate of Saddam Hussein [who also used his military to] confront the people of a neighbouring country”. Quoted in “The Iran Primer”, op. cit. In the wake of the GCC decision, King Hamad pointedly said, “I here announce the failure of the fomented subversive plot against security and stability”. Quoted in Associated Press, 21 March 2011. Bahrain and Iran also each expelled diplomats from the other country.

## V. SUNNI ISLAMIST GROUPS (PRO-REGIME)

A key aspect of King Hamad's post-1999 reform project was to allow political associations to be registered and licensed to operate. Many activists were pardoned and – between 2001 and the unilateral promulgation of a new constitution in 2002, a period when belief grew that there would be genuine change – a large number who had been active for decades seized the opportunity to establish political “societies” under new names. In 2005, a law was passed that required all political societies to register in order to remain legal, a move apparently intended to bring remaining unregulated groups into the open. In this context, al-Wifaq and other political societies chose to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections.<sup>63</sup> Critics argued that registration – and electoral participation – signified acceptance of the 2002 Constitution; as a result, splinter groups such as al-Haq and al-Wafaa (see below) refused, signalling their continued rejection of the regime's legitimacy.

To counter the influence of liberals and Shiite Islamists, both of whom demand radical democratic reform, the government purportedly entered into a tactical alliance with Sunni Islamist groupings. The two main such groups, al-Minbar and al-Asala, represent a large portion of the Sunni population; what remains of the Sunni political space is taken up by leftist groups and independents.

On 20 February 2011, members of these two groups founded the Sunni National Unity Gathering (NUG) together with a number of independents.<sup>64</sup> The NUG repeatedly has affirmed the legitimacy of the current political system – with the royal family as its head – and called for a national dialogue without preconditions. At the same time, it has presented a number of demands, some of which echo those made at Pearl Square. These include the release of political prisoners, an end to corruption, liberalisation of the political process, an end to prostitution and the sale of alcohol, and prosecution of those responsible for the killing of protesters in the February 2011 violence.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, they consider the Shiite bid to

increase their power, for example by abolishing the appointed upper house or having a Shiite appointed prime minister, as a red line.

To the extent their demands reflect those of the anti-regime protesters, the NUG's events may have drawn many Sunnis who favour greater democratic reform but who, fearful of the Shiite majority, wished to stay away from the anti-regime protests in Pearl Square. The NUG has made clear that it wishes to be a principal player in any future negotiated settlement. There is every reason to believe the regime will ensure the NUG is at the table, as it has in effect become an all-Sunni pro-regime political gathering that draws support from recently naturalised constituencies.

### A. THE ISLAMIC NATIONAL FORUM (AL-MINBAR AL-WATANI AL-ISLAMI)

Al-Minbar, a pro-government Sunni Islamist group that was established in 2001, is usually considered to be the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain.<sup>66</sup> Many of its members are wealthy academics related to one another. The group enjoys close ties to the regime; according to leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, it is bankrolled by both the Royal Court and Islamic banking sector. Al-Minbar won seven seats in the 2006 parliamentary elections, when it was allied with al-Asala (see below), but only two in 2010.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>63</sup> See Edward Burke, “Bahrain: Reaching a Threshold”, FRIDE working paper 61 (June 2008), pp. 9, 14; Steven Wright, “Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain”, *CIRS Qatar Occasional Papers*, no. 3 (2010), p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> The NUG is headed by a Sunni cleric, Abd-al-Latif Mahmoud, who has addressed pro-regime demonstrators in front of the Al-Fateh Mosque in Manama.

<sup>65</sup> The NUG also established a Facebook page and videos of its speeches at Al-Fateh Mosque, available on YouTube. See also [www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/2873FA12-607C-4BCC-86DD-DF7C7359B954.htm?wbc\\_purpose=Basic\\_Current\\_Current](http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/2873FA12-607C-4BCC-86DD-DF7C7359B954.htm?wbc_purpose=Basic_Current_Current)

[www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/02/139944.html](http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/02/139944.html); [http://albiladpress.com/column\\_inner.php?wid=1121&colid=7107](http://albiladpress.com/column_inner.php?wid=1121&colid=7107); and [http://wn.com/National\\_Unity\\_Gathering\\_in\\_Bahrain\\_March\\_2\\_2011](http://wn.com/National_Unity_Gathering_in_Bahrain_March_2_2011).

<sup>66</sup> In the 1940s, Bahraini students in Cairo and Beirut had founded the Al-Islah (Reform) society and later the Al-Islah Club. Both were active in social and cultural fields, mainly in their stronghold, Al-Muharraq, a largely Sunni island governorate. Al-Islah society has continued as the Muslim Brotherhood's cultural and charitable wing in Bahrain. See its website, [www.eslahhwf.org](http://www.eslahhwf.org).

<sup>67</sup> Cable 09MANAMA592 from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 4 September 2008, as published by Wikileaks. According to unconfirmed reports, one of the king's uncles, Sheikh Isa bin Muhammad Al-Khalifa, a former labour and social affairs minister, heads the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain. Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat wa al-Jama'iyyat al-Siyyasiyya fi al-Bahrain* (Bahrain, 2008), p. 185; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Harakat*, op. cit., pp. 123-127; Baqir Salman al-Najjar, *Al-Harakat al-Islamiya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Beirut, 2007), pp. 30-45; J. E. Peterson, “Bahrain”, op. cit. pp. 157-186. See also the party's website, [www.almenber.org](http://www.almenber.org).



## B. THE ISLAMIC AUTHENTICITY SOCIETY (JAMIAEEYAT AL-ASALA AL-ISLAMIYA)

More socially conservative than al-Minbar, al-Asala represents Bahrain's Salafi trend. The Salafiyya, a movement that originated in the Arab world but is now present in most Sunni communities worldwide, holds that Muslims should emulate the pious forefathers (*al-salaf al-saleh*), the first three generations of Islam, as much as possible in all aspects of life.<sup>68</sup> The Bahraini strand of Salafism is considered close to the fundamentalist Wahhabi doctrines championed by the clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia and adopted as a legitimising tool by the state and the al-Saud.<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group wrote in an earlier report: "A corollary of Wahhabi hegemony over the movement is that it has adopted Wahhabism's sectarian hostility to Shiites",<sup>70</sup> denouncing them as unbelievers. Partly as a result of Saudi funding, it has gained popularity to the detriment of other Sunni schools of thought as well as Sufism.<sup>71</sup>

Bahraini Salafis began building their own political structures in the 1980s. Al-Asala won six seats in the 2002 elections and five in 2006 (although three independent Sunnis also voted with it during parliament's subsequent term). In the 2010 elections, it won only three seats.<sup>72</sup>

In the past, al-Asala criticised government mismanagement and corruption and broadly agreed with Shiite members of parliament on issues of public morality.<sup>73</sup> However, the recent sectarian polarisation has had an impact: the group

backed the 13 March 2011 call by parliament's "independent bloc" (composed of twelve independent members) for the imposition of martial law in order to "restore order".<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005; and Roel Meijer (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> "Since the late 1970s the Salafiyya movement has been closely identified with the severely puritan and backward-looking fundamentalism, based on literalist readings of scripture, of the Wahhabi tradition in Saudi Arabia.... With the massive expansion of Saudi political influence following the oil-price shocks of 1973-1974 and 1980-1981, reinforced by Saudi determination to counter the influence of revolutionary Shiism emanating from the new Islamic Republic of Iran from 1979 onwards, the Salafiyya movement came under Wahhabi hegemony". Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. 10. Crisis Group added: "This is in sharp contrast to the outlook of the original Salafiyya, whose founder (Al-Afghani) was a Shiite and which tended to transcend the Sunni-Shiite division by invoking the Islam of the time of the "venerable ancestors", before the schism".

<sup>71</sup> For an extensive treatment of this issue, see Muhammad A. al-Zekri, "The Religious Encounter between Sufis and Salafis of East Arabia: Issue of Identity", PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2004.

<sup>72</sup> Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit., p. 185; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Harakat*, op. cit., pp. 127-130; and Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain", op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Edward Burke, *Bahrain*, op. cit.

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<sup>74</sup> Al-Asala also threatened to question the interior minister on his inability to maintain peace and order during clashes between pro-democracy protesters and security forces, as well as between rival armed groups. See statement on its website, [www.alasalah-bh.org](http://www.alasalah-bh.org); Bahrain News Agency, 13 March 2011; and <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahraini-mps-call-for-imposing-martial-law-1.776319>.

## VI. THE LEGAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION

The seven most important licensed opposition groups formed a loose coalition after the first two weeks of protests in February 2011 and began to urge their followers to take to the streets. This coalition, comprising al-Wifaq, al-Wa'ad, al-Minbar al-Taqqaddumi, al-Amal, al-Tajamua al-Qawmi, al-Tajamua al-Watani and al-Ikhaa, first participated in the protests on 1 March.<sup>75</sup> The seven groups adopted a common political stance and formulated a set of demands, including a prisoner release, the cabinet's resignation, abolition of the 2002 Constitution, elections for a constituent assembly charged with drafting a new constitution and an investigation into the February 2011 violence. Contrary to the illegal opposition groups, however, the licensed opposition agreed that these were not preconditions for, but rather objectives of, a national dialogue with the crown prince,<sup>76</sup> who had been formally charged with managing the crisis and repeatedly has called for a national dialogue.<sup>77</sup>

The groups, led by al-Wifaq, restated their demands on 19 March; however, in light of the GCC's military intervention, they added that its troops must first leave the country.<sup>78</sup> Since then, their position has been more muddled; al-Wifaq apparently has agreed to hold negotiations without preconditions that would be aimed at ending the crackdown. If correct, the move will appease the regime and its GCC backers, but it would be controversial among the street protesters.<sup>79</sup>

### A. AL-WIFAQ: A PAN-SHIITE POLITICAL GROUPING

The Islamic National Accord Association (Jamia'eyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiya) was founded on 7 November 2001 as an umbrella group comprising different political and religious trends within the Shiite community. Al-

Wifaq (Accord) brought together the two major Shiite Islamist trends (not formal political societies as such) – al-Daawa<sup>80</sup> and Khatt al-Imam – and integrated supporters of different *maraja'ea* (Shiite authorities to be emulated), including followers of the Iranian supreme leaders, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and, subsequently, Ali Khamenei.<sup>81</sup> Some former supporters of the Shirazi networks also threw their support behind al-Wifaq, although the Shirazis maintained their own autonomous structure (see below).

Many exiled al-Wifaq leaders returned from Iran, Syria, Europe and elsewhere after King Hamad inherited the throne in 2001 and launched a reform process that included an amnesty for all political activists involved in the 1990s political unrest. While old Daawa stalwarts such as Isa Qasem, Abdallah al-Ghurayfi and Abd-al-Amir al-Jamri left formal responsibilities in al-Wifaq to younger activists such as Ali Salman, they became its spiritual leaders. Isa Qasem in particular has played an important role during the current protests, calling on followers to hew to a non-violent approach in his Friday sermons.

Because it successfully merged distinct Shiite political forces, al-Wifaq quickly became the most powerful Shiite group. As a pan-Shiite bloc, it seeks to promote its constituents' interests; that said, its platform emphasises the need for democratic and human rights, the equal distribution of wealth and social justice, as well as respect for Islamic ethics.<sup>82</sup> Although it participated in the 2002 municipal elections following the government's unilateral promulgation of a new constitution, it boycotted parliamentary polls later that year. In 2006, al-Wifaq participated in both municipal and parliamentary elections and officially registered as a political society.<sup>83</sup> Of the eighteen candidates it backed for the national legislature's 40 seats, seventeen were elected. Four years later, eighteen of its members were elected to parliament, thus reasserting its status as

<sup>75</sup> [www.ahrarbh20.co.cc/news-news\\_read-345-0.html](http://www.ahrarbh20.co.cc/news-news_read-345-0.html).

<sup>76</sup> [www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/03/us-bahrain-protests-demands-idUSTRE72231420110303](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/03/us-bahrain-protests-demands-idUSTRE72231420110303). On 6 March, it also condemned the turn toward sectarian hatred in various quarters. <http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=5618>.

<sup>77</sup> In a first concession, the government announced on 5 March 2011 that it would create 20,000 new jobs for Bahrainis in the interior ministry, which is heavily dominated by foreigners, but opposition politicians vowed that they would not be bribed. [www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/06/us-bahrain-jobs-idUSTRE72512X20110306](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/06/us-bahrain-jobs-idUSTRE72512X20110306).

<sup>78</sup> See <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011320144855687985.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group email communication, Bahraini journalist, 27 March 2011.

<sup>80</sup> A Bahraini branch of the Islamic Call Party (Hizb al-Daawa al-Islamiya) became active in 1968 and, in 1972, established the Islamic Enlightenment Society. In 1982, Daawa activists Said al-Shihabi and Mansour al-Jamri, the son of Abd-al-Amir al-Jamri and later editor-in-chief of the Bahraini daily *Al-Wasat*, founded the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement in London. The group has reported human rights abuses, publishes a newspaper in Arabic and English and maintains a website ([www.vob.org](http://www.vob.org)). While al-Jamri and others returned to Bahrain in 2001, al-Shihabi, dissatisfied with the 2002 Constitution, remained in London, from where he speaks on the group's behalf. See Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, op. cit., pp. 28, 202.

<sup>81</sup> For more on this, see above; and Sajjad Rizvi, "Shi'ism in Bahrain: Marja'iyya and Politics", *Orient*, no. 4 (2009), pp. 16-24.

<sup>82</sup> See Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit., pp. 171-176.

<sup>83</sup> This prompted defections from al-Wifaq; in particular, a splinter group set up al-Haq. (See below.)

the country's predominant Shiite group.<sup>84</sup> After the first demonstrators were killed in mid-February 2011, these members resigned their seats in protest.<sup>85</sup>

Although al-Wifaq refrained from calling for the 14 February demonstrators, it called on its supporters to take to the streets once protests got underway. Its backing has been crucial, both because of its numerical influence and because it has been careful to urge protesters to remain peaceful, even after the deployment of GCC troops. It even sought – unsuccessfully – to dissuade demonstrators from engaging in some of their more provocative tactics, such as marching toward the royal palace and blocking the financial district. To date, and while many of the protesters have opted for a more confrontational stance, al-Wifaq remains the most powerful Shiite group, particularly thanks to the backing of the Islamic Council of the Ulama (Al-Majlis al-Islami al-Ulamae), which was created in 2004 to reassert the Shiite clerical class' independence.<sup>86</sup>

## B. THE SHIRAZIS (AL-SHIRAZIYOUN)

The Shirazis were alone among the three main Shiite Islamist trends (al-Daawa, Hizbollah and Shirazis) to retain their autonomous structure after 2001. Although the current support base of what locally is known as the Shirazi network is relatively narrow, historically it played an important role in Bahrain and is now seeking to take advantage of the uprising to revive its former influence. Its name derives from what once was the *marjaeeya* of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, who created a secret political organisation, the Movement of the Preaching Vanguard (Harakat al-Risaliyin al-Tilaa) in Karbala (Iraq) around 1968. Initially, its aim was to combat secularisation and promote a return to Islamic values, as well as to fight Saddam Hussein's regime. But, after severe crackdowns, it moved its organisational headquarters to Kuwait in the early 1970s and began recruiting Shiites from other Gulf countries.<sup>87</sup>

After the Iranian revolution, Shirazi leaders relocated to Iran, where they announced the creation of Saudi,<sup>88</sup> Iraqi and Bahraini branches. The latter, led by Hadi al-Mudarrisi, was named the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB, Al-Jabhat al-Islamiya li Tahrir al-Bahrain). Shirazi ideologues regarded armed struggle as a legitimate means to achieve political change, and the Iraq and Bahrain branches formed military wings, whose members trained in Lebanon and Iran.<sup>89</sup> In the aftermath of their failed coup attempt in 1981, most of the Islamic Front's remaining activists (both Bahraini and Saudi nationals) left Bahrain to join Shirazi cadres in Iran.<sup>90</sup> While in exile, the movement became increasingly marginalised, despite regaining some prominence in the 1990s under Sheikh Muhammad al-Mahfouz's leadership.

In 2002, after being allowed to return to Bahrain pursuant to King Hamad's reconciliation program, the Shirazis formed the Islamic Action Society (Jami'aayat al-Amal al-Islami), which they registered as a political society in 2006. However, they failed to capture a single seat in that year's parliamentary elections. They were the only legal Shiite opposition groups to boycott the 2010 elections in response to the prior campaign of arrests.<sup>91</sup> After Muham-

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<sup>88</sup> Although the Saudi branch was officially dissolved in 1993 pursuant to an agreement it reached with the Saudi government, it remains the most powerful Shiite political group among Shiites in the Eastern Province.

<sup>89</sup> See Adil al-Labad, *Al-Inqilab: Bai al-Wahm ala al-Dhat* (Beirut, 2009), p. 153; Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, pp. 222, 233; Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, pp. 125, 179; Adil Ru'uf, *Al-Amal al-Islami fi al-Iraq baina al-Marji'iyya wa al-Hizbiyya: Qiraa Naqdiya li Masira Nisf Qarn (1950-2000)* (Damascus, 2000), pp. 261-265; and Joyce Wiley, *The Islamic movement of Iraqi Shi'as* (Boulder, 1992), p. 54.

<sup>90</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., p. 11; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Harakat*, op. cit.; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *Arab Shi'a*, op. cit., pp. 126, 134; Rashid Hammada, *Asifa fawqa Miyah al-Khalij*, op. cit.; Hammada Ibrahim, *Shi'is*, op. cit., p. 134; Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, p. 160; Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf Policy: From Khomeini to Khatami* (London, 2003), p. 36; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, "Shi'ism and Political Protest in Bahrain", *Domes*, vol. 11, no. 1; R. K. Ramazani, "Shi'ism in the Persian Gulf", in Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie (eds.), *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 30-54, 49-51; R. K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and Response in the Middle East* (Baltimore, 1988), pp. 50-53. For the Iranian Revolution's impact on Bahraini Shiites, see Joseph Kostiner, "Shi'i Unrest in the Gulf", in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (London, 1987), pp. 173-186; Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest", in Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (eds.), *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* (Boulder, 1999), pp. 171-188.

<sup>91</sup> The government forced them to suspend their newsletter in August of that year. See [www.amal-islami.net](http://www.amal-islami.net); and [www.muslimnews.co.uk/news/news.php?article=18931](http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/news/news.php?article=18931).

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<sup>84</sup> See Abbas Mirza al-Mershed, "The Islamic Movement and Its Chances of Developing into a Party: The Case of al-Wefaq National Islamic Society in Bahrain", in Mohammed Zahid Mahjoob Zweiri (ed.), *Returning to Political Parties?* (Beirut, 2010), pp. 175-215; and Research Institute for European and American Studies, *The Victory of Al Wefaq: The Rise of Shiite Politics in Bahrain* (Athens, 2007).

<sup>85</sup> See [www.alwefaq.org](http://www.alwefaq.org).

<sup>86</sup> In a sense, this Council represents al-Wifaq's clerical wing. See Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, op. cit., pp. 289-292; Sajjad Rizvi, "Shi'ism", op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>87</sup> Hammada Ibrahim, *Shi'is*, op. cit., p. 73; Faleh A. Jabar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London, 2003), p. 221.

mad al-Shirazi's death in 2001, their *marja'ee* became Sadeq al-Shirazi and Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi.<sup>92</sup>

During the February 2011 uprising, supporters of the Shirazi trend stepped up their anti-regime criticism. Once protesters began occupying Pearl Square, the Shirazis set up tents and began broadcasting fiery anti-government and anti-monarchy speeches by former Islamic Front leader Hadi al-Mudarrisi. Although the Shirazis were never able to establish themselves as a prominent force in post-Saddam Iraq, they built up a large media network comprising several television stations that they have used to good effect to mobilise followers in Bahrain.<sup>93</sup>

A former Islamic Front cadre, Abd-al-Hadi al-Khawaja, founded the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, which documents and denounces abuses against Shiites. His imprisonment in 2004 sparked demonstrations.<sup>94</sup> The group, which in reality functions as more than a human rights organisation, led a grass-roots campaign to encourage young Bahrainis to take to the streets and has been involved in planning the 2011 demonstrations.<sup>95</sup>

### C. NATIONAL BROTHERHOOD SOCIETY (JAMIAEEYAT AL-IKHA AL-WATANI)

Al-Ikha represents Shiites of Persian descent, generally referred to in the Arab world as *ajam*. While it is focussed on this minority's specific grievances, it also echoes broader demands for political reform and an end to sectarian discrimination.<sup>96</sup> In general – and notably during the protests' early stages – Bahraini Shiites of Persian origin have been reluctant to become involved, fearing they would be singled out and accused of being Iranian agents. In addition,

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<sup>92</sup> The former is a political quietist who lives in Qom (Iran) and refrains from involvement in politics abroad, while the latter continues to propagate the politically active trend of the Shiraziya in Gulf countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and, to a certain extent, Kuwait.

<sup>93</sup> In particular, the Iraq-based Ahl al-Beit television station has focused on Bahrain, broadcasting Hadi al-Mudarrisi's speeches calling for the Bahraini regime's downfall and criticising Saudi Arabia. See [www.ahlulbayt.org](http://www.ahlulbayt.org).

<sup>94</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., p. 3; Katja Niethammer, "Voices in Parliament, Debates in Majalis, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain", *EUI Working Papers* (2006), pp. 20-22.

<sup>95</sup> See Cortni Kerr and Toby C. Jones, "A Revolution", op. cit. The centre was registered with the Bahraini labour and social services ministry in July 2002, but the authorities ordered its closure in November 2004. The centre has been operating without a license since then; its current president is Nabil Rajab. See the centre's website, [www.bahrainrights.org](http://www.bahrainrights.org).

<sup>96</sup> This group is extensively discussed in Crisis Group Report, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, op. cit., p. 15. See also, [www.alekha.com.bh](http://www.alekha.com.bh).

many hail from wealthy merchant families and live in more upscale neighbourhoods than most Arab Shiites.<sup>97</sup> Al-Ikha's involvement in the coalition of the seven opposition groups, however, suggests that Shiites of Persian origin increasingly are willing to participate in the protests.

### D. LEFTIST GROUPS

When, after 2001, leftist groupings failed to form a national coalition, Communists, Baathists and Arab nationalists each established their own separate organisation. In theory, they sought to transcend confessional lines and appeal to Shiites and Sunnis alike, and their officials and cadres indeed include members of both sects. Yet each to some extent has a sectarian identity: whereas the Baath party is predominantly Sunni, the other two are more popular among Shiites.<sup>98</sup>

#### 1. The Promise (Al-Wa'ad)<sup>99</sup>

Registered in 2001, the National Democratic Action (Al-Amal al-Watani al-Dimuqrati), known by its Arabic acronym al-Wa'ad (the Promise), promotes a version of Arab nationalism.<sup>100</sup> Its main support base lies among middle class professionals and the intelligentsia; although enjoying only limited support, its activists are prominent in local and

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<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview (conducted by a consultant operating in a different capacity), Bahraini Shiite activist, February 2011.

<sup>98</sup> See Katja Niethammer, "Bahrain: Alte Konflikte zwischen Schiiten und Sunniten neu artikuliert", in Sigrid Faath (ed.), *Rivalitäten und Konflikt zwischen Sunniten und Schiiten in Nahost* (Berlin, 2010), pp. 155-176, 172.

<sup>99</sup> In 2002, a group split off from al-Wa'ad to create the National Democratic Gathering Society (Al-Tajammua al-Watani al-Dimuqrati), which should not be confused with the National Democratic Gathering mentioned below. The group initially was headed by a Sunni lawyer, Abdullah Hashem, who allied himself with Salafis. This angered other members, both Sunni and Shiite, who harboured little sympathy for Salafism; as a result, they elected a new board and chairman, Fadel Abbas, in March 2007. Hashem founded the National Justice Movement (Harakat al-Adala al-Wataniya), while the National Democratic Gathering Society realigned itself with al-Wa'ad; after the February 2011 protests, it joined the alliance of seven opposition parties. Hashem's al-Adala became a small grouping that attracted radical Sunni elements; in February 2011, he delivered speeches at pro-government rallies outside al-Fateh Mosque. A U.S. cable characterised the group as follows: "Adala is Bahrain's most outspoken supporter of former Guantanamo detainees, and is usually the first to spring to the defense of Bahrainis arrested for alleged links to al-Qaeda". Cable 09MANAMA592 from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 4 September 2008, as published by Wikileaks. See also [www.tjm3.org](http://www.tjm3.org) and [www.3dala.org](http://www.3dala.org).

<sup>100</sup> It is the successor to the Arab Nationalist Popular Front in Bahrain (Al-Jabhat al-Sha'abiya fi al-Bahrain).

international media as well as in human rights groups.<sup>101</sup> As noted, although it enjoys a stronger Shiite constituency, it has sought to overcome sectarian divisions by appealing to Sunnis as well and, to some extent, has succeeded in doing so. The group boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections; in 2006, despite its tactical alliance with al-Wifaq, it was unable to gain a single seat.

Al-Wa'ad was the first opposition group to openly support calls for demonstrations on 14 February 2011, and it actively participated in the protests. Given the legal opposition's somewhat tenuous relationship with the regime, this was a considerable gamble. Yet, as protesters gained in popularity and legitimacy, al-Wa'ad simultaneously gained stature in relation to other, initially more cautious leftist groups.<sup>102</sup> When the regime turned to more repressive measures in March, several of its offices were looted by pro-government mobs, and its leader, Ibrahim Sharif, was arrested.<sup>103</sup>

## 2. Al-Minbar Democratic Progressive Society<sup>104</sup>

The Democratic Progressive Forum Society (Jamia'eyat al-Minbar al-Dimuqrati al-Ta'addumi) was formed in 2002, but its roots date back more than half a century. It was established in 1955 as the National Liberation Front to fight the British occupation. After Bahrain gained independence in 1971, it became a leading force in domestic politics but faced repression after the regime cancelled the 1973 Constitution. Today, al-Minbar is the home of Bahrain's communists, many of whom were forced into exile prior to 2001 but returned after King Hamad's amnesty of activists involved in the 1990s unrest. It has a relatively small – and elderly – membership, though its long years of exile helped bolster its organisational skills. Living abroad also strengthened its ties to other Arab political parties. Al-Minbar won three seats in the 2002 parliament which, four years later, it lost to al-Wifaq.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> See Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit., pp. 176-179.

<sup>102</sup> See the comment by former Popular Front in Bahrain cadre Abd-al-Nabi al-Akri, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/17/bahrain-egypt-political-change?INTCMP=SRCH](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/17/bahrain-egypt-political-change?INTCMP=SRCH); and [www.aldemokrati.org](http://www.aldemokrati.org).

<sup>103</sup> On 13 March, one of its offices was attacked and partly demolished by a mob, an act for which al-Wa'ad holds the government accountable. See [www.alwasatnews.com/3111/news/read/532359/1.html](http://www.alwasatnews.com/3111/news/read/532359/1.html). Another member of the group claimed Sharif was arrested "because the government doesn't want a Sunni voice aligned with the Shia voices, because this has to be sectarian". Quoted in *Global Post*, 30 March 2011.

<sup>104</sup> See [www.altaqadomi.com](http://www.altaqadomi.com).

<sup>105</sup> In a further blow, it lost control of the General Federation of Trade Unions to al-Wifaq in February 2008. See Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit.,

## 3. The Nationalist Democratic Gathering

The Nationalist Democratic Gathering (Al-Tajammua al-Qawmi al-Dimuqrati) succeeded the previously clandestine, pro-Iraqi Baathist organisations.<sup>106</sup> Arguably the smallest of the left-wing groups, its support base is essentially Sunni – all the more so given its continued defence of Saddam Hussein. It failed to capture a single seat in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

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pp. 180-182; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Harakat*, op. cit., pp. 42-46; Abd al-Nabi al-Akri, *Al-Tanzimat al-Yasariya fi al-Jazira wa al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Beirut, 2003), pp. 22-36; Saif bin Ali, *Qadaya al-Taharrur wa al-Dimuqratiya fi al-Bahrain wa al-Khalij* (Beirut, 1980).

<sup>106</sup> For background, see Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit., p. 184; Falah Abdallah al-Mudairis, *Al-Ba'thiyyun fi al-Khalij wa l-Jazira al-Arabiya* (Kuwait, 2002); and [www.al-qawmi.org](http://www.al-qawmi.org).

## VII. UNLICENSED SHIITE ISLAMIST OPPOSITION GROUPS

In addition to the legal opposition, a number of unlicensed – and, therefore, technically illegal – political groupings exist. Their stance toward the government was epitomised by the creation on 8 March 2011 of the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic, which includes al-Haq, al-Wafaa and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM). It has called for the regime's downfall through a peaceful escalation of protests and the establishment of a democratic republic. At a press conference that day, Hasan Mushayma, al-Haq's leader, said that while in principle it could accept a European-style constitutional monarchy – which he described as not very different from a republic – he doubted the regime voluntarily could accept such a radical transformation and thus argued that it likely would be necessary to topple it.<sup>107</sup>

### A. AL-HAQ MOVEMENT FOR LIBERTIES AND DEMOCRACY

The most important unlicensed opposition group probably is the Shiite al-Haq Movement for Liberties and Democracy (Harakat al-Haq li al-Hurriya wa al-Dimuqratiya).<sup>108</sup> In 2005, several al-Wifaq cadres and veterans of the 1990s uprising, including Hasan Mushayma and Abd-al-Wahab Husein, left the association in reaction to its decision to participate in the political process and 2006 parliamentary elections. In November 2005, together with a number of Sunni opposition activists,<sup>109</sup> they formed al-Haq. At its inaugural session, members chose a general secretariat of eleven, with Hasan Mushayma as its secretary general; other prominent figures include Isa al-Jawdar, a Sunni cleric and nationalist activist, and Abd-al-Jalil al-Sinkis,

who became head of its human rights office. While it is predominantly Shiite, and its support base lies chiefly in Shiite villages, it does not claim to be a Shiite movement, and some of its leading members are Sunnis dissatisfied with the slow pace of reforms.

From the outset, al-Haq was more confrontational than al-Wifaq. It urged a boycott of the 2006 and 2010 elections and rejected any form of engagement with the regime. In 2006, it launched a petition drive, gathering tens of thousands of signatures in favour of a UN-organised referendum on the legitimacy of the 2002 Constitution and the need to draft a new one.<sup>110</sup> In the following years, al-Haq increasingly focused on grassroots activism and civil disobedience, urging young supporters to take to the streets; this triggered serious clashes between anti-government protesters and security forces, particularly in Shiite areas.<sup>111</sup> As a result of its stance, it gained a considerable following among Shiites, though also among some Sunnis; in turn, this undermined both al-Wifaq and al-Wa'ad.<sup>112</sup> In particular, tensions grew between al-Wifaq – which has sought to pacify protesters – and al-Haq, whose activists encouraged the youths to come out.<sup>113</sup>

The government routinely has accused al-Haq of involvement in violence. In April 2008, police arrested 30 youths after clashes between protesters and security forces in the village of Kazarkan, during which a vehicle belonging to the National Security Agency was torched and a Pakistani security officer was killed; security forces likewise arrested roughly 35 men in December 2008. The government accused those it detained of having been recruited by al-Haq to foment violence,<sup>114</sup> and government-controlled

<sup>107</sup> See Agence France-Presse, 8 March 2011. A fourth, relatively marginal Shiite Islamist group exists. The Bahraini Salvation Movement (Harakat Khalas al-Bahrainiya) first appeared in October 2007, distributing flyers calling for a protest in Sitra. Some minor skirmishes took place with security forces, which arrested seven. On 20 February 2011, the movement called for the regime's ouster. Its secretary general, Abd-al-Raouf al-Shayeb, lives in exile in London. See [www.aafaq.org/news.aspx?id\\_news=2622](http://www.aafaq.org/news.aspx?id_news=2622); Cable 07MANAMA1033 from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 15 November 2007, as published by Wikileaks; [www.ahrarbh20.co.cc/news-news\\_read-343-0.html](http://www.ahrarbh20.co.cc/news-news_read-343-0.html).

<sup>108</sup> The movement's website, [www.haq-movement.net](http://www.haq-movement.net), has not been updated since the start of the uprising and cannot be accessed. Its old website (until 2008) is at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080430041308/www.haaq.org>.

<sup>109</sup> Among them, Ali Qasim Rabiaa, a former al-Wa'ad member and former member of parliament who wrote a book about the uprising and the 1990s petition movement, *Lajna al-arida al-shaabiya fi masar al-nidal al-watani fi al-Bahrain* (Beirut, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> See Abbas Mirza al-Mirshid and Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, *Al-Tanzimat*, op. cit., pp. 187-189; and Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, op. cit., pp. 255-257.

<sup>111</sup> Unrest intensified after the death of a protester on National Day, 17 December 2007, promptly dubbed Martyr's Day by Shiites.

<sup>112</sup> See Cortni Kerr and Toby C. Jones, "A Revolution", op. cit.

<sup>113</sup> According to a U.S. diplomatic cable, "Pol and Econ FSNs [Foreign Service Nationals] reported separate encounters with Shi'a protesters in the Karbabad area on the evening of December 17. Wifaq members were actively attempting to calm the protesters and convince them to disperse peacefully. Nearby, agitators from the banned Al-Haq movement exhorted the demonstrators to action. Both FSNs heard protesters denouncing Al-Wifaq as 'corrupt' and 'no better than the government'". Cable 07MANAMA1110 from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 18 December 2007, as published by Wikileaks.

<sup>114</sup> Many of those were among the 178 individuals pardoned by King Hamad on 11 April 2009. Several alleged they had been tortured. According to Human Rights Watch, reports of torture in detention became rare between 1999 and late 2007, at which point security forces reverted to previous methods. See "Torture Redux: The Revival of Physical Coercion during Interrogations in Bahrain", Human Rights Watch (February 2010), pp. 1-5.

television broadcasts claimed the organisation was masterminding a violent campaign causing property damage.

At the outset of the February 2011 protests, al-Haq's secretary general, Hasan Mushayma, was in London for medical treatment; cadres from both the movement and another unlicensed group, al-Wafaa (see below), were in jail. Mushayma addressed crowds gathered in Pearl Square via the internet, his speeches projected on a large screen in the middle of the square. Even while abroad, he coordinated activities with the largely London-based Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement.<sup>115</sup> Briefly barred from travelling onward from Beirut on his way back to Bahrain because his name was found on an Interpol wanted list, he finally arrived on 26 February and addressed the protesters in person.<sup>116</sup> There is little doubt that he enjoys a considerable following, as demonstrated by the large crowds that greeted him at the airport; that said, it would be wrong to consider him the revolt's undisputed leader. He was among those arrested in the March crackdown following the GCC military intervention.

## B. AL-WAFAA (LOYALTY) ISLAMIC TREND

In February 2009, Abd-al-Jalil Maqdad, an influential Shiite cleric,<sup>117</sup> and Abd-al-Wahab Husein, a lay activist (see above), founded al-Wafaa Islamic Trend (Tayyar al-Wafaa al-Islami), another Shiite Islamist group. In 2005, displeased with al-Wifaq's decision to participate in the 2006 elections, Maqdad resigned from a Shiite religious council with close ties to the movement; he and Husein then staged a ten-day hunger strike to protest the detention of al-Haq leaders Hasan Mushayma and Muhammad Habib Maqdad. This earned them support not only from al-Haq but also from several al-Wifaq members.<sup>118</sup> The leadership vacuum within al-Haq – which resulted from the wave of arrests that targeted the organisation – was one reason for their decision to found al-Wafaa. Accordingly, there are no serious programmatic or ideological differences between the two groups; some go so far as to argue that al-Wafaa essentially was founded in order to have a second militant organisation that could then ally itself with al-Haq and create the impression of additional support.<sup>119</sup>

In May 2010, al-Wafaa helped organise sit-ins and protests against the naturalisation of foreigners in the village of Sanabis.<sup>120</sup> Together with al-Haq and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement, al-Wafaa urged further protests in Sanabis in July 2010;<sup>121</sup> the three groups issued a joint statement urging a boycott of the 2010 elections.<sup>122</sup> In a way, al-Haq's and al-Wafaa's street politics reflect a realignment of certain lay cadres of the Shiite opposition with the youths (*shabab*) at the heart of the Shiite mourning houses (*maatam/huseiniya*)<sup>123</sup> and mosque networks at the village and neighbourhood level. In this sense, many young opposition activists essentially have turned their backs on Shiite elites and former opposition cadres who, in their eyes, have been compromised by their participation in the political process.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Shiite activist, March 2011.

<sup>116</sup> *The New York Times*, 26 February 2011.

<sup>117</sup> Abd-al-Jalil Maqdad supervises a *Hawza* (Shiite clerical institute of higher learning). He is one of the founders of the Islamic Council of the Ulama (Al-Majlis al-Islami al-Ulamae). See Laurence Louër, *Transnational*, op. cit., pp. 289-292; Sajjad Rizvi, "Shi'ism", op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>118</sup> Cable 09MANAMA609 from U.S. embassy Manama to Secretary of State Washington, 19 October 2009, as published by Wikileaks.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, British academic, London, March 2011.

<sup>120</sup> See [www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=277200](http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=277200).

<sup>121</sup> See [www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3160](http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3160).

<sup>122</sup> See [www.vob.org/en/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=652](http://www.vob.org/en/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=652).

<sup>123</sup> Shiite mourning houses are used to commemorate the life and death of Imam Hussein. They play an important role in building community ties. Since the late nineteenth century, *huseiniyas* and *maatams* in Bahrain have been funded by merchant families from Manama and Shiite villages as a means of fostering patronage networks. Shiite Islamist movements have used them to organise and recruit followers. See Abdallah al-Saif, *Al-maatam fi al-Bahrain: dirasa tawthiqiya* (Bahrain, 1995); Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama Since 1800* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 107; Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State* (Chicago, 1981), pp. 154-160.

<sup>124</sup> Shiite clerics appear to be playing a less important role in grassroots mobilisation today than in the 1990s. For an early discussion, see Laurence Louër, "Les aléas du compromis des élites au Bahreïn", *Maghreb-Machrek*, vol. 177 (Fall 2003), pp. 59-78.

## VIII. YOUTH GROUPS

Bahrain's youth are a key driving force in the current protests. Lacking a formal structure, they formed an unnamed committee that brought together young activists from different political strands shortly after the first protests they had initiated took off. So far, fearing repression, none of the newly formed youth groups has emerged publicly or even appointed a spokesperson. Instead, they have tended to organise protests chiefly via new-media sites and to publish online documentary evidence of police abuse. Some, such as the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, began operating as early as 2005. Similarly to their Egyptian counterparts, they were inspired by Otpor ("Resistance"), a non-partisan Serbian youth movement that, using non-violence, played a major role in the overthrow of Serbian President Slobodan Milošević in October 2000. In 2006, the society's founder, Muhammad al-Maskati, attended a training course with Otpor in Jordan, and the next year the society began issuing statements and reports on human rights and political opposition activities in Bahrain.<sup>125</sup> During the protests these activists have played an important part in conveying information to protesters and to the outside world, using Twitter, Facebook, online forums and other websites.

To date, at least two youth groups have issued online statements. In their first communiqué, on 19 February, the Youth of the 14 February Revolution (Shabab Thawra 14 Febrayer) called for the regime's total removal and vowed daily protests until their demand was met. Claiming that citizens should be able to freely choose their political system, they consistently have refused to negotiate with the regime.<sup>126</sup> On 8 March, the Youth of the 14 February Revolution, together with al-Haq and al-Wafaa, launched a coalition in favour of a transition to a democratic republic. The following day, al-Haq leader Hasan Mushayma told reporters at Pearl Square: "This tripartite coalition adopts the choice of bringing down the existing regime in Bahrain and establishing a democratic republican system".<sup>127</sup>

The second group, the Bahrain 14 February Peaceful Movement, has advocated a constitutional monarchy and pursuit of genuine democratic reforms. It called for and participated in the demonstration that headed toward the king's palace on 11 March in which the bloc of seven legal opposition groups, including al-Wifaq, refused to participate. The group also has appealed for help from the international community. In a letter to President Obama, it asked the administration to treat injured protesters in

the U.S., press the Bahraini government for information on people missing after the 17 February clashes in Pearl Square, bring those responsible for the violence before an international court and stop selling weapons to Bahrain.<sup>128</sup> The letter addressed to the UN Secretary-General went further: it requested the deployment of an international peacekeeping force and issuance of an Interpol "orange alert" for King Hamad and other leading regime figures.<sup>129</sup>

Although youth groups initially were the driving force and remain a very significant constituency, unlicensed (predominantly Shiite) groupings such as al-Haq and al-Wafaa, as well as the Shirazis, apparently have since taken the lead.

<sup>125</sup> See *International Herald Tribune*, 18 March 2011; see also the society's website at <http://byshr.org>.

<sup>126</sup> See [www.noaim.org/showthread.php?t=72386](http://www.noaim.org/showthread.php?t=72386).

<sup>127</sup> See Reuters, 9 March 2011.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group e-mail communication, representative of a Bahraini youth group, 12 March 2011.

<sup>129</sup> See [www.facebook.com/notes/un-protect-bahrain-nation-from-the-king-his-mercenaries/open-letter-to-united-nations-secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-to-protect-people-of/130804070324141](http://www.facebook.com/notes/un-protect-bahrain-nation-from-the-king-his-mercenaries/open-letter-to-united-nations-secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-to-protect-people-of/130804070324141). Interpol issues orange alerts to help countries track down illegal assets or suspects wanted for extradition.



## IX. CONCLUSION

The crackdown in Bahrain and involvement of security forces from Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries represents an ominous turning point in Bahrain and the region. There is still a chance to salvage the situation and initiate a peaceful transition to a more legitimate and representative government. But the regime and its regional allies need to act fast and fundamentally modify their mindset if this is to succeed.

For some time now, the pathway toward a compromise has been clear: the regime needs to put forward far-reaching compromise proposals in order to bring not only the legal opposition, but also the youth movement and the three main unlicensed, predominantly Shiite, groups to the table. So far, the seven legal opposition societies have been willing to engage in a constructive dialogue and to negotiate a gradual transition; others, however, have put forward preconditions that are difficult for the regime to accept, including its removal and the establishment of a democratic republic. But for the regime simply to stall or, worse, resort to violent tactics, is profoundly self-defeating. With each passing day, the legal opposition has been losing control over, and credibility with, the young people in the street. Indeed, the youth groups increasingly see the established seven opposition groups as ineffective at best, opportunists at worst.

Likewise, with each escalation by the regime, particularly the use of riot police and armed gangs – not to mention foreign troops – the non-violent approach to which they have adhered could lose its appeal among some protesters. Already, there are indications that this has started to happen; reports have surfaced that two policemen were killed during the second half of March.<sup>130</sup> Should GCC forces remain in the country, a reversion to clandestine militancy by small groups of radicalised Shiites cannot be ruled out.

Two major obstacles currently stand in the way of substantial reform. One is internal; it concerns apparent divisions within the regime. These are best personified by the contrasting approaches of the king and crown prince, on one hand, and harder-line elements, including the prime minister, on the other. The crown prince's 13 March statement included a number of encouraging elements: he asserted his readiness to hold a meaningful dialogue and presented a list of topics – including many of the opposition's demands – that were open for discussion. Among potential

changes, he referred to an elected parliament with fully vested powers, fairly demarcated electoral constituencies, changes in the naturalisation policy for foreign residents and anti-corruption measures, as well as addressing sectarianism. He also said any agreement resulting from the dialogue could be subject to a popular referendum.<sup>131</sup>

Yet, his words were contradicted – not only immediately after he pronounced them, but beforehand. His announcement came amid fierce clashes between protesters and security forces; after young activists blocked the Financial Harbour and a main avenue, riot police tried to clear the area using tear gas and possibly rubber bullets, causing further injuries. As a result, many protesters stopped trusting the crown prince's promises, doubting that he could implement them even if he wished.<sup>132</sup> Whatever trust remained in his ability to steer events was further undermined by the GCC military intervention on 14 March, just a day after he had appeared to offer substantial concessions.<sup>133</sup>

There were several ways to interpret the fact that the crown prince's proposal did not include the prime minister's removal: as a sign that, as an upfront concession, it was asking too much; as an indication that the ruling family is not willing to substantially loosen its grip on power; or as a signal that the regime's hardline faction has been empowered by recent events and is not willing to cede control. Whatever the case, even before the most recent violent crackdown and wave of arrests, protesters were convinced that pro-government groups roaming the country and armed with swords and sticks were encouraged by regime elements with close ties to the prime minister.<sup>134</sup> That conviction has only been fortified since.

The second, arguably more formidable impediment comes from the outside. GCC countries and Saudi Arabia in particular almost certainly have pressured the king against any far-reaching concessions. Today, they hold most of the cards: their military support makes it far harder to topple the regime or press it toward genuine reform, while their funds can cover the state's expenses if the standoff continues and brings the economy to a standstill. As starkly symbolised by the dispatch of GCC security forces, they see Bahrain as an existential issue and are prepared to go as far as needed – indeed, much farther than has been customary, and notwithstanding U.S. displeasure – to see to it that their way prevails. As a U.S. analyst put it, “the

<sup>130</sup> Reuters quoted a “health official” reporting that two dead policemen on 16 March were run over by cars, [www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/16/us-bahrain-protests-policemen-idUSTRE72F1QL20110316](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/16/us-bahrain-protests-policemen-idUSTRE72F1QL20110316).

<sup>131</sup> Bahrain News Agency, 13 March 2011.

<sup>132</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, protester, March 2011.

<sup>133</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/14/saudi-arabian-troops-enter-bahrain](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/14/saudi-arabian-troops-enter-bahrain).

<sup>134</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, protester, March 2011.

prime minister cornered the crown prince, and Riyadh checkmated Washington".<sup>135</sup>

From Riyadh's vantage point, the cost-benefit calculus appears clear-cut. Bahrain's "fall" to a Shiite-led protest could, it believes, inspire co-religionists in its own Eastern Province, while bolstering Iran's hand at a time of heightened regional instability and competition.

But the gambit is both dangerous and counter-productive. In the short term, the GCC intervention coupled with regime brutality likely will ensure the Bahraini regime's survival. Yet, it will vastly complicate a negotiated solution and potentially could transform a mass appeal for citizens rights and democratic reforms into a far less manageable sectarian conflict. Ripple effects also could spread, and not in the way Saudi Arabia intended: regardless of what happens (an opposition triumph despite Saudi intervention, or a crushing repression with Saudi assistance), Iran could claim victory. Without having to do anything, it would see Sunni-Shiite tensions deepen in Bahrain and, very possibly, in Saudi Arabia and its own influence among co-religionists increase.

In many ways, the entry of GCC troops already has inflamed sectarian tensions in Iraq, Lebanon and other Gulf states. On 18 March, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Sunni cleric, said that Bahrain was not experiencing a popular uprising but rather a sectarian one, thus implicitly giving GCC rulers a de facto green light to crush it. While this might go down well with parts of the Sunni population in the Gulf, it has enraged Shiites across the region. Lebanese Hizbollah's general secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, and the Iranian supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, both condemned the deployment of GCC troops, and Muqtada al-Sadr urged his followers in Iraq to demonstrate in support of their Bahraini brethren.<sup>136</sup> Iraq's prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, went so far as to warn that "the region may be drawn into a sectarian war" as a result of foreign intervention in Bahrain.<sup>137</sup>

The most popular Shiite *marjeaa* among Bahrainis, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who resides in Najaf, issued a statement declaring that Bahrainis have a right to peaceful protest – a comment that was significant both because Sistani hardly ever speaks about political affairs, especially outside of Iraq, and because he carries considerable influence with religiously-minded Shiites, including those

generally not politically active.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, U.S. credibility in the region has suffered a blow, as many will view Washington as either complicit in Riyadh's decision or impotent to stop it.

Given the depths of mutual distrust, it is hard to imagine a breakthrough without the urgent involvement of a credible third party facilitator – something that, for now, the regime adamantly has rejected.<sup>139</sup> The goal should be to resume dialogue and then help the parties work on the outlines of a negotiated settlement that remain clear, even if the path leading there has become increasingly obstructed. Although the unlicensed opposition groups and parts of the youth movement are calling for the regime's downfall, including the end of the monarchy and establishment of a republic, several less far-reaching steps potentially could appease a large number of their supporters and bring them to the negotiating table.

**Immediate Measures.** After the brutal crackdown and escalating violence since mid-March, genuine confidence-building steps are required to lay the foundations for a comprehensive and productive national dialogue. These could restore the situation to where it stood prior to the entry of GCC troops and the Pearl Square crackdown, when a negotiated settlement appeared within reach. Steps include ending martial law; withdrawing riot police and troops from the streets; releasing recently arrested opposition activists; halting inflammatory rhetoric, especially that which has sectarian overtones and casts doubt on Shiite loyalty; and establishing a credible, transparent commission to investigate acts of police and army brutality against protesters as well as possible violence directed at security forces, with the goal of holding perpetrators accountable.<sup>140</sup> In the context of third party facilitation and resumed talks, the GCC should withdraw its forces.

<sup>138</sup> <http://jafarianews.com/en/?p=10499>.

<sup>139</sup> Kuwait – a GCC country with a sizeable Shiite minority – sought to play a mediating role between the regime and the opposition. (As a condition for his country's engagement, the Emir of Kuwait apparently asked the opposition stop insisting that GCC forces first withdraw. Al-Wifaq apparently agreed. See *Al-Wasat*, 27 March 2011.) But Manama has rejected the effort which was controversial within Kuwait. A facilitator – as opposed to a formal mediator – who is neither Sunni nor Shiite likely would have a better chance of being accepted.

<sup>140</sup> This would be in stark contrast with the current strategy of sweeping problems under the carpet, as starkly epitomised by the 18 March destruction of the Pearl monument in order – in the foreign minister's words – "to remove a bad memory". See [www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19bahrain.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/middleeast/19bahrain.html). Prior to becoming the symbol of the protests, the monument was supposed to celebrate the nation's former reliance on pearls as its principal source of income and to represent GCC unity. Inaugurated during the third GCC summit, which was held in Manama in November 1982, it comprised six dhow

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2011.

<sup>136</sup> [www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/15/us-bahrain-iraq-idUSTRE72E4CF20110315](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/15/us-bahrain-iraq-idUSTRE72E4CF20110315); [www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewDesk.nsf/0/8E7965B781435895C2257859005F84FD?OpenDocument](http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewDesk.nsf/0/8E7965B781435895C2257859005F84FD?OpenDocument).

<sup>137</sup> <http://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFLDE72O22V20110325>.

**In the longer term.** Negotiations should revolve around the issues announced by the crown prince on 13 March, the day before the entry of Saudi troops. Specifically, the goal should be to end discriminatory practices against the Shiite community and to deepen political reform by easing manipulation of Bahrain's demographic makeup through political naturalisation of foreigners and extension of voting rights to (mostly Sunni) citizens of other countries, including Saudi Arabia; recruiting Shiites into the Bahraini Defence Forces and domestic security forces in order to diversify their makeup; recruiting more Bahrainis – both Sunni and Shiite – into the private sector, without heightening mistrust of foreign workers; redrawing electoral districts to reflect demographic and sectarian realities more accurately and ending the practice of sectarian-based gerrymandering; enhancing the elected chamber's authority by providing it with genuine power to draft and initiate legislation; ensuring that appointments to high government office – notably in the interior ministry and diplomatic service – are based on merit and appointing persons who are not members of the Al Khalifa family to key ministerial positions; and establishing a broadly inclusive commission designed to move the country closer to a constitutional monarchy.

It will be important for any commitment to be rapidly followed by concrete action. Having witnessed the rise and fall of a previous reform process, Bahrainis need proof of regime seriousness this time.

These would be difficult steps for the regime. But long-term stability will only come at this price, and stability is what the monarchy needs. Bahrain has spent years building a business-friendly reputation as a safe and secure financial haven in the Gulf. What has happened over the past several weeks has done untold damage to that reputation, sending shock waves across the financial sector and causing assets to be moved to Bahrain's competitors, such as Abu Dhabi and Qatar. This is a message that the U.S. in particular needs to convey to Manama, along with a clear warning about the consequences of continued repression.

**The opposition also needs to show flexibility.** It is difficult to imagine a stable and long-term reconciliation as long as the prime minister remains in place with his current authority. Virtually all opposition groups active in the demonstrations agree on this. Yet, to insist on his dismissal as a condition for dialogue has become an obstacle to negotiations, particularly in light of his strengthened position. Either his graceful exit or a meaningful dilution of his powers should instead become objectives of the talks.

Likewise, withdrawal of GCC forces is imperative, but it should not become a precondition for negotiations. In addition, protesters should remain peaceful and resist regime-inspired provocations; refrain from provocative steps, such as marching toward the quarter around the Royal Palace or other predominantly Sunni areas; and avoid sectarian slogans.

Alternatively, should the regime and its backers maintain their repressive measures and persist in viewing protests both from a security perspective and through a sectarian lens, Bahrain faces the risk of protracted conflict and further internationalisation. Regional struggles could be played out via domestic proxies at the expense of national cohesion and state institutions. A generation of young citizens could be radicalised and seek external support for their cause. And ripple effects throughout the region could be dangerous. As an analyst wrote:

Claims of Iranian influence in Arab Shiite communities may eventually become self-fulfilling .... For many years, Bahraini activists have pushed their cause in the halls of power in the United States and Europe. With the United States continuing to back the Al Khalifa and Al Saud regimes, Bahrain's opposition is increasingly being left with little choice but to consider looking across the Gulf for assistance.<sup>141</sup>

There are no easy or cost-free paths. But the course of repression and sectarian polarisation would be the costliest of all. It is time that the regime and its GCC partners realise this – and their international allies help them reach that realisation.

**Brussels, 6 April 2011**

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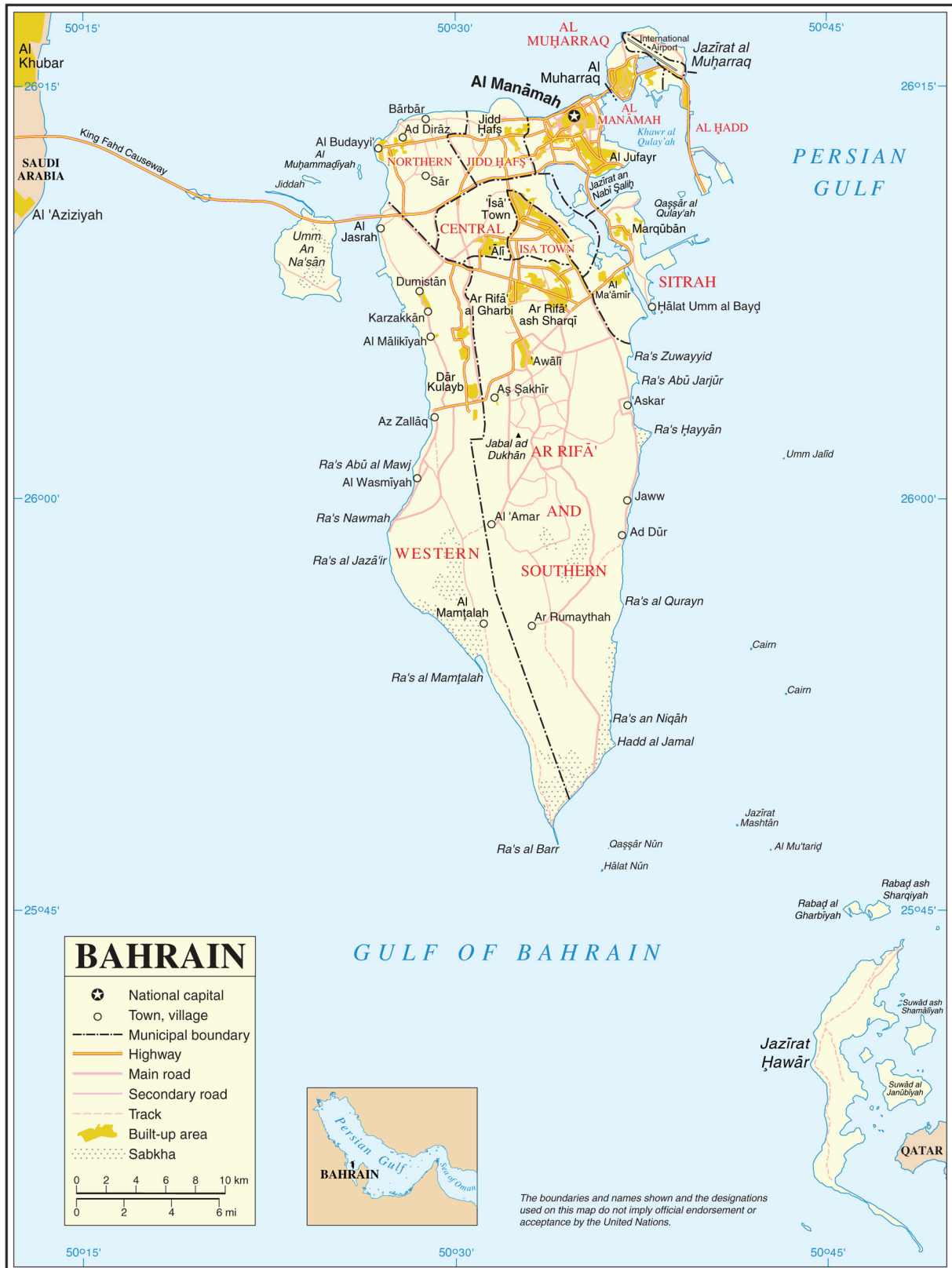
sails, one for each GCC country. In this sense, its destruction four days after a Saudi and UAE intervention endorsed by the GCC was more than slightly ironic. See [www.alwasatnews.com/3116/news/read/532856/1.html](http://www.alwasatnews.com/3116/news/read/532856/1.html).

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<sup>141</sup> Toby C. Jones, "High Anxiety", *Foreign Policy online*, 23 March 2011.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF BAHRAIN



## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates nine regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in fourteen additional locations (Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Bujumbura, Damascus, Dili, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Seoul). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh,

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April 2011

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- Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, Middle East Briefing N°23, 15 May 2008 (also available in Arabic).
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- Egypt's Muslim Brothers: Confrontation or Integration?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°76, 18 June 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011.
- #### *Iraq/Iran/Gulf*
- Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, Middle East Report N°72, 7 February 2008 (also available in Arabic).
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- Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°77, 10 July 2008 (also available in Arabic).
- Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*, Middle East Report N°80, 28 October 2008 (also available in Arabic and Kurdish).
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