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# Unequal Power, Unequal Reach: Reflecting on Iran-Bahrain Relations

How can Bahrain stop Iran's almost constant meddling in its domestic affairs? Mitchell Belfer thinks Manama should strengthen its alliances with international and regional partners, speed up much-needed political reforms, and develop a media strategy that counters the rhetoric coming out of Tehran.

By Mitchell Belfer for ISN

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Observers and media commentators remain divided over the role that Iran has played in stoking political tensions inside Bahrain. While some are convinced that geostrategic calculations are undoubtedly behind Tehran's encouragement of sectarian violence between Bahrain's Shia and Sunni communities, others think that Manama has exaggerated the extent of Iran's involvement in the Kingdom's political crisis. Either way, this small and sparsely populated Middle Eastern state remains more than capable of keeping Iran's seemingly growing influence over its domestic affairs in check – provided that it sticks to a three-point plan.

## The View from Tehran

Iran's historical and strategic interests in Bahrain predate the emergence of the Islamic Republic. Tehran has never fully accepted the independence of the Kingdom (formally declared in 1971) and continues to maintain that the island state is one of Iran's 14 provinces. Underpinning this sentiment is the fact that approximately 50% of Bahrainis are Shia Muslims, some of which share close sectarian affinities with Iran. Proximity is also an important factor. Given that Bahrain is located close to the sensitive Strait of Hormuz, Tehran is wary of the role that the Kingdom could play in applying pressure on Iran. With its modern port facilities and related infrastructure, Bahrain offers the ideal staging post for international powers seeking to project power throughout the Persian Gulf and safeguard access to its oil and gas reserves.

Adding to Iran's sense of strategic vulnerability are Bahrain's relations with the other Gulf monarchies. With its close military and political ties to the West, Tehran has long viewed Saudi Arabia as a formidable rival and a major obstacle to its own bid for regional hegemony. As part of its attempts to offset the challenge posed by Riyadh, Iran has consistently sought to apply pressure on Bahrain. Tehran's strategies have ranged from shunning bilateral dialogue and confidence-building measures with Manama, to using Bahrain's political crisis to keep the embers of violent sectarianism burning.

## **Party Support**

In the case of the latter, Iran's attempts to manipulate Bahrain's domestic politics might have been aided by its close ties with some of the Kingdom's main opposition parties. These include the al Wefaq bloc, a legitimate Bahraini political organization with a seemingly credible agenda. The al Wefaq bloc's current Secretary General (and original founder) Ali Salman was hand selected for a leadership post by one of Bahrain's leading Shia clerics Issa Qassim. In 1979, Qassim offered his spiritual support to Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership of the Iranian Revolution in return for Tehran's support for his bid to assume religious authority over Bahrain under very similar circumstances.

During the 2011 unrest, Qassim called on his followers to crush Bahrain's security forces, while Ali Salman openly agitated for the demise of the al Khalifa government. Around the same time, the al Wefaq gave orders to its fringe group, the radical Youth of 14 February movement, to launch attacks on public and private properties belonging to the Kingdom's Sunni and expatriate communities. These included the targeted killing of police officers and Shia opposition figures loyal to Manama, as well as car bombings and arson attacks. Speculation also continues to grow over the Youth's links to Hezbollah and Iran's al-Quds Force, ties that are thought to have facilitated arms smuggling networks, military training and financial assistance.

## **Three Steps Forward**

Hard evidence of support for the most radical wing of al Wefaq will undoubtedly add substance to arguments that Iran has helped to turn Bahrain's long-standing political tensions into a low-intensity insurgency. If so, then Manama must show that it is up to the task of countering Tehran's influence over Bahrain's Shia community and address the conditions on the ground that make political dissent such an attractive proposition. It can do so by focussing on three core issues.

To begin, Bahrain must acknowledge that it can only counter the threat posed by Iran by maintaining its alliances with regional and international partners. First and foremost, Manama should look to the security apparatus provided by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly if it can offer assistance along the lines of 2011's Peninsular Shield Force deployment. However, the GCC members are by no means united on the threat posed by Iran, given that Oman and Qatar have far better relations with Tehran than the likes of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

With this firmly in mind, Manama should also look at constructing a second ring of strategic partners to complement – and possibly even replace – its relations with the GCC. Two potential allies stand out. Turkey's status as a frontline NATO member in the battle against the Islamic State – not to mention its general opposition to Iran's nuclear program – undoubtedly offers Bahrain a completely different sense of strategic depth. And then there's Azerbaijan, a predominately Shia but nonetheless secular state that has experienced its fair share of border tensions and diplomatic spats with Iran. Both states could provide Manama with opportunities to build up strategic ties that could place further pressure on Iran's northern and western frontiers. If this occurs, Tehran might then have to revisit and rethink its aspirations for regional hegemony.

To complement what is effectively a strategy of containment, Bahrain must also limit Tehran's ability to agitate inside the country. In this respect, Manama should redouble its efforts to address Bahrain's deep-seated socio-political and economic disparities and construct a deeper sense of national identity. The signs seem encouraging. In the aftermath of the 2011 violence, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), a body which made 26 recommendations on how to reduce the country's domestic tensions through reforms. Since then, however, the Bahraini government has been criticized for slowing down on implementing key reforms and is accused of glossing over human rights issues. Consequently, Manama must do more

and continue to develop a political system that reflects the needs of all citizens, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background. It should also take the bold decision to exclude the al Wefaq and its associates from the reform process. This would send a powerful message to ordinary Bahrainis that the government is not prepared to work with political organizations that receive the type of external support that effectively undercuts the Kingdom's law and order mechanisms.

Finally, Bahrain needs to realize that it is currently losing the information war with Iran. Since the mid-1990s, Tehran has expended tremendous energy and resources on developing a tech-savvy propaganda campaign to flood cyberspace and traditional media with messages that reinforce Iran's regional power aspirations while at the same time debasing the rule and legitimacy of its adversaries. These include multimedia channels with a distinctly Arabic component, such as Al Alam and Al Vefagh. Admittedly, such channels are difficult to counter in an information age. However, Bahrain's practically non-existent counter-propaganda strategy is puzzling and needs to be reversed. Put simply, the Bahraini government needs to do more in terms of projecting its narratives not just for countering Iran, but also for the sake of national identity and cohesiveness.

### **The (Uncertain) Road Ahead**

There's no guarantee that these steps will completely eradicate Iran's strategic interest in Bahrain. They will, however, demonstrate that Manama is prepared to up the ante against Tehran. In addition, this approach undoubtedly reinforces that the Iranian-Bahraini relationship is asymmetrical by nature. Bahrain will never have the military muscle or geopolitical clout to counter Iran's regional aspirations on its own. However, by paying due care and attention to its precarious domestic situation and working in concert with its international and Middle Eastern allies, Manama should be able to weather whatever regional storm that awaits it in the years ahead.

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