

The Persian Gulf Tinderbox

Written by Toby Jones

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TOBY JONES, MAR 23 2011

Once again, the Persian Gulf is threatening to become a tinderbox and Bahrain is emerging as ground zero. Saudi Arabia, the Gulf's preeminent power, is playing the role of antagonist in chief. Riyadh is unnecessarily provoking a stand-off with its long-time nemesis in Tehran and is leading the region into another potential crisis.

Riyadh and its allies on the Arab side of the Gulf have decided to take a stand against the revolutionary fervor sweeping the Middle East by turning Manama into the frontline of defense for regional autocracies. The kingdom has shrewdly avoided framing its intervention in Bahrain as a defense of the existing political order. Instead, desperate to prevent Bahrain from falling, the Saudis and their collaborators are trying to reshape what is a battle for a democratic future in Bahrain into a cosmic sectarian struggle between Sunnis and Shiites in the Gulf. It is a cynical but predictable move. While it seems Riyadh will succeed in saving Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa, at least for now, it appears equally likely that the cost will be enduring insecurity in the region and a return to the kind of bitter rivalry that shaped the region in the immediate aftermath of Iran's revolution.

Over the last month tens of thousands of pro-democracy protesters in Bahrain have sought to remake the country's crude dictatorship into a more inclusive political order. A little over a week ago, Bahraini security forces initiated a brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators and turned the country into a war-zone. The political opposition was defiant, but it remained peaceful. In mid-March, through sheer numbers, the demonstrators had backed the regime into a corner and seemed poised to score a major political victory.

On March 14 a Saudi Arabian led military contingent stormed into Manama in order to squelch the pro-democracy movement and rescue the Bahraini regime from the tipping point. In doing so, Saudi forces participated in a devastatingly violent crackdown and helped drive the opposition from the streets. At least 15 Bahrainis have been killed so far. Hundreds have been arrested and another 100 are missing. Saudi and Bahraini security forces have seized the country's largest medical clinic, are arresting doctors, and forbidding the treatment of suspected opposition sympathizers. At least one 6 month old girl has died as a result of being denied medical help. Authorities are also systematically imprisoning the country's leading political figures and human rights activists, effectively disappearing the opposition's leadership. Martial law has taken hold, while Bahrain has been turned into a giant military prison.

The crackdown on Bahrain's opposition has been justified largely through the lens of sectarianism and allegations that Shiite Iran is behind events there. The country's demographic make-up lends a veneer of plausibility to claims of sectarian motivations on the part of the opposition. Over 60 percent of the country's indigenous population is Shiite, while the ruling Al Khalifa and their closest allies are Sunni. And the vast majority of the demonstrators hail from Shiite communities, although it is vital to note that a considerable number of Sunnis, including members of one of the country's most important political societies, The National Democratic Action Society, also seek democratic change. Bahrain's Shiites might be justified in using their religious status as a pretext for political mobilization. They have been subject to systematic abuse, political exploitation, and discrimination for decades. Over time, the Al Khalifa have institutionalized anti-Shiism and effectively built a political system based on sectarian apartheid.

In spite of this, the reality is that Bahrain's opposition has exhibited a consistent determination to avoid seeking a sectarian outcome or settling scores against Sunnis. Their demands have been largely secular, namely the creation

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of a constitutional monarchy in which all citizens have equal rights to participate, and end to corruption, and the more equitable distribution of wealth.

Leaders in Riyadh and Manama have deliberately looked askew of the actual political grievances articulated by Bahrain's opposition. Instead they have taken to leveling charges of foreign meddling and a preternatural Shiite irredentism and connections with Iran. Saudi Arabia's Prince Saud al-Faisal remarked the week before the kingdom ordered its military across the causeway connecting his country with Bahrain that "we will not tolerate any interference in our internal affairs by any foreign party...and if we find any foreign interference, we will deal with this decisively." Al-Faisal was speaking of the specter of an uprising in his own country, but the warning proved equally important for the kingdom's closest neighbor.

For their part, Bahrain's leaders have celebrated driving the pro-democracy crowds from the streets as a victorious deliverance from Iranian efforts to topple them. On March 20 King Hamad declared that Saudi Arabia's intervention helped foil foreign machinations against his kingdom. He remarked to his military that "an external plot has been fomented for 20 to 30 years until the ground was ripe for subversive designs ... I here announce the failure of the fomented plot." Hamad's comments were a deliberate obfuscation, intended to distract focus from the real terms of the struggle and to reframe the nature of the political contest.

There is no compelling evidence of Iranian meddling in Bahrain. Bahraini activists have spent far more time in the United States and Europe looking for support in their struggle to gain political rights than in Iran. While Bahrainis did in the past seek counsel and inspiration from Iranian revolutionary politics, those relationships have long since been abandoned.

The consequences of Saudi Arabia's and Bahrain's sectarian gambit are already beginning to take shape and the immediate impact has been to raise the temperature in the region. Iran has responded forcefully to the provocation. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi warned that Saudi Arabia's intervention "can take the region toward a crisis which would be followed by dangerous consequences." Bahrain and Iran have already withdrawn key diplomats and leaders across the Gulf have done little to tone down anxieties.

With the sectarian framing beginning to take hold, and because Bahrain's pro-democracy movement has little leverage and no support from outside powers, most importantly in Europe and the United States, the possibility that they will ultimately turn to Tehran for support is a potential possibility. If that happens, it will not be because they were disposed to do so from the start, rather it will be because Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and their Arab allies in the Gulf left them little choice.

The tragedy of the current course is that it is entirely avoidable. But the autocrats in the Gulf have made clear that they are willing to use any means necessary, even provoking another regional crisis, to cling to power. Avoiding reform, it seems, is desirable no matter the cost.

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