

ISSUE BRIEF

Iran's Long Game in Bahrain

DECEMBER 2017 BILAL Y. SAAB

To many Bahrainis who oppose the policies, and some even the rule, of the al-Khalifa royal family, the mere mention of Iran's interest in the Kingdom and its increased interference during and after the country's 2011 uprising is considered a major distraction and insult to their struggle for economic integration and fair political representation. To the government of Bahrain and its supporters, on the other hand, downplaying Tehran's intentions and designs in Manama is as dishonest as it is irresponsible.

The gap between these two perspectives among Bahrainis, which creates pressures for Washington's Bahrain policy, is not unbridgeable, but it is widening because of the intensifying clash between the government and the opposition in recent years. Currently, there is very little trust between the two sides, which might explain why there is no appetite for a return to dialogue.

Things were not always thus. Even in 2011–2013, in the heat of political battle when confrontations between the protestors and the police were taking place almost daily, reasonable people on both sides agreed on two things: one, the opposition movement—which is predominantly though not exclusively Shia and represented by a substantial segment of the Bahraini population—*has* a set of legitimate demands at the head of which is the country's transition to a constitutional monarchy; and two, Iran *has been* involved in destabilizing acts across the Kingdom in partnership with radical members of the opposition. Those views are not mutually exclusive.

However, the lack of meaningful dialogue since 2014 (and the failure of previous talks), the recent punitive measures by the Bahraini government against the opposition (primarily al-Wefaq), and the heightening of sectarian conflict across the region partly due to boiling tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia have all led to the current stalemate.

The Bahraini opposition is not likely to succeed in forcing its wishes on the government, which controls the guns, derives legitimacy from the largest support base in the country, and enjoys the staunch backing of Washington and London. Neither is the Bahraini government able to continue to ignore the legitimate wishes of the opposition forever, as it has popular roots and a significant following. As trivial as it sounds, the successful resolution of the crisis in Bahrain depends to a large extent on



Pushback: Exposing and Countering Iran is a project of the Middle East Peace and Security Initiative. This series of reports examines the drivers, prospects, and constraints underpinning Iran's efforts to undermine US policy in the Middle East and restructure the regional order to its liking. Drawing on new digital forensic evidence and expert analysis, this effort offers strategic and policy recommendations to address the growing challenge Iran poses to stability in the Middle East.

the desire and ability of the warring parties, especially the government, to implement the compromises to which they agreed several years ago and that serve the long-term national interest. The sooner that Bahrain's ruling elite, especially the conservatives, realize that there is no real security solution to what is essentially a political and economic crisis, the better. The country's ailing economy—which is a central focus of popular discontent and an underlying cause of the 2011 revolt—is a top and urgent priority. However, it will be much harder to fix the economy under conditions of political tumult and societal fragmentation.

This analysis does not center on the domestic crisis in Bahrain *per se*.¹ Rather, it seeks to examine how important external factors—namely Iran's negative influence in Bahrain—impact the country's internal security and path to political development. An attempt is made to provide a clearer strategic picture of Iran's likely objectives and suspected activities in the Gulf Kingdom, analyzing both its likely prospects and constraints through the use of open-source information and a series of interviews by the author with Bahraini officials both in Washington and Manama over the past four years.

What Does Iran Want from Bahrain?

If Iran had its way, it would probably have annexed Bahrain. At least those were the wishes of Iran's rulers in the past, shared today by hotheads in Tehran's parliament and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). But annexation, or any form of direct Iranian control, has not been a realistic contingency since the permanent stationing of US troops in the Gulf region in 1991, unless the Iranians are willing to risk all-out war with a coalition of more powerful adversaries comprised of the United States, the United Kingdom, maybe France, and most countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Iran has memories of the Persian Empire, and has had its eyes on Bahrain since 1820, but the leadership of the Islamic Republic is neither stupid nor suicidal.

This idea carries the assumption that the majority of Bahrain's Shias would welcome their country becoming an Iranian protectorate. Yet, nothing could be further

from the truth, for the Kingdom's Shias long ago declared Bahrain as their final homeland, and many of them do not even relate to Iran's religious teachings that are based on Twelver Shi'ism and the system of *Wilayat al-Faqih*, or rule by the jurisprudent. It is true that there are Bahraini hardliners in the opposition who have allegiances to Iran but their support base is still marginal.

Iran's capacious aspirations in Bahrain have historical roots, but also are informed by ethno-religious and strategic considerations. According to Tehran, continuous Iranian sovereignty over Bahrain stretched from pre-Islamic times to 1783 (with the exception of Portuguese occupation from 1522 to 1602), when the Arab al-Khalifa tribe invaded the archipelago. The al-Khalifas' dominion lasted roughly four decades, after which Britain took control of Bahrain along with several other Arab Gulf islands. Iran protested Britain's occupation in 1820, claiming that Bahrain was part of its territory that extended from Shatt al-Arab to Muscat with all islands and ports in between. A mighty empire with a near global presence, Britain dismissed Iranian Prime Minister Hajji Mirza Aghasi's protest. But that did not stop the Iranians from issuing further complaints in subsequent years, although none of them were resolved in Iran's favor or changed Bahrain's status.

At home, Iran complemented its limited diplomatic strategy with a sustained cultural, educational, and nationalistic campaign to underscore the Persian identity of Bahrain. In 1951, the Iranian Education Ministry started printing and teaching school books suggesting that Bahrain had always been part of Iran. Tehran even had policies targeting Bahrainis visiting Iran for worship, requiring them to enlist in the Iranian army. In 1957, the Iranian parliament famously declared Bahrain to be the fourteenth province of Iran, a statement that rang alarm bells not only in Manama but also in Riyadh and London, prompting the British to vow to protect Bahrain from Iran.

To regulate their regional competition, Iran and Britain held talks in 1965 over the former's maritime borders in the Gulf, and Tehran once again lost the argument of rights to Bahrain; in November 1971, it did manage to extract concessions from London including the tacit permission, or non-objection, to occupy the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa claimed by both Iran and the British-protected islands of Sharjah and Ras Al-Khaimah (the legal dispute between Iran and what then became the United Arab Emirates over

¹ For a modest treatment of this topic, please see Bilal Y. Saab, "Bahrain's Inconvenient Truths," Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, Atlantic Council, July 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Bahrain_s_Inconvenient_Truths_web_0714_1.pdf.



Demonstrators at the Pearl Roundabout in the financial district of Manama during the Arab Spring protests of 2011. Photo credit: Bahrain in Pictures/Wikimedia.

the three strategically significant islands endures to this day).

In the late 1960s, Iran tried to push for a plebiscite in Bahrain to test the pulse of Bahraini co-religionists and check the size of its popular following in the Kingdom, but the move was thoroughly rejected by the Bahraini and British governments. In lieu of a plebiscite, Iran and Britain agreed, following secret negotiations, to ask the United Nations to conduct a survey in Bahrain that would determine once and for all the issue of the country's identity and orientation. The result was undisputed: the overwhelming majority of Bahrainis expressed their wish to keep Bahrain as an Arab entity, independent from Iran. It is unclear whether the outcome was a relief or a disappointment to Iran's Shah, for historians suggest he seemed decreasingly interested in Bahrain, which he perceived as less strategically significant than the islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs. Regardless, the Shah accepted the results (to the chagrin of some hardliners including Admiral Kamal Habibollahi who thought the strategic

loss of Bahrain was avoidable),² and the crushing majority of Iran's parliament endorsed UN Resolution 278 soon after, putting to rest the question of Bahrain's political and legal status.

If Iran can neither credibly claim ownership of Bahrain nor occupy it, the most it can do, absent a dramatic, positive reversal of Iranian fortunes and an unexpected departure of US and British forces from the Kingdom, is try to turn Bahrain into a vassal state that would be sensitive to Iranian national security and strategic interests. In more practical terms, if Iran could turn Bahrain into Lebanon (where pro-Iran Hezbollah has significant autonomous influence and control of the strategic levers of the Lebanese state), Iraq (where several Iraqi politicians and militiamen are under the hefty influence of Tehran), or even Yemen (where the well-equipped Houthis enjoy broad territorial control and some degree of political influence thanks in part

² Roham Alvandi, "Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question, 1968-1970," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (August 2010), Vol. 37, No. 2, 159-177.

to Iranian support), it would be considered as a major success. However, this is easier said than done, because the differences between Bahrain and these three countries are considerable, and what Iran was able to build and sustain in Lebanon and Iraq, and to a much lesser extent in Yemen, cannot so easily be recreated in Bahrain, which has a stronger state with competent security services, a limited pro-Iran domestic support base, and the permanent stationing of large and powerful US and British military forces in the Kingdom that serve as deterrents.

To say that Iran has a destabilizing agenda in Bahrain is correct, but it is incomplete and less than instructive. Iran does not disrupt for the sake of disrupting, and Iran does not benefit much from Bahrain descending into total chaos and becoming a failed state. Acts of Iranian-sponsored sabotage and terrorism in Bahrain over the years have a more *instrumental* function and serve a higher purpose. Though we obviously do not know for certain what Iran's plans for Bahrain are in either the short or long run, its actions appear intended to (from least to most ambitious):

1. Raise the costs of the US and British military presence, ultimately forcing both countries to leave by fomenting enough instability in the Kingdom. This would improve considerably Iran's security interests and geopolitical standing;
2. Build a larger domestic following and a more prominent Shia Islamic society with increased political power and ultimately military autonomy;
3. Topple the Bahraini monarchy and replace it with a Shia theocracy modeled after the Islamic Republic and with deep connections to Tehran.

None of these goals has a high likelihood of occurring. However, the Middle East in recent years has been anything but static. Iran currently has much working in its favor in the region, and no problem pursuing a gradual, long-term strategy in Bahrain. Unlike Iraq and Syria, Bahrain is not, and perhaps never really was, an urgent priority for the Iranian leadership. But, it is assumed that Tehran, and specifically the IRGC, consider Bahrain to be a low-cost strategic opportunity that is worth pursuing.

How Does Iran Exercise Its Influence in Bahrain?

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Tehran's new rulers had no interest in reopening the diplomatic/legal file on Bahrain because they saw it as a dead end. But that did not prevent them from verbally stirring the sovereignty pot at home and using other means to try to impose their preferences on the Kingdom. In the early 1980s, Tehran sought to topple the Bahraini monarchy through militant proxies, including *al-Jabhat al-Islamiyya Li Tahrir al-Bahrain* (the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain), but these ended in failure. This modus operandi—working clandestinely through Bahraini operatives with the support of the IRGC—has not changed, and it underscores how Iran was forced over the years to adjust its expectations vis-à-vis Bahrain. Indeed, Iran rarely gets involved directly in Bahrain (every time it did it got caught). Instead, it prefers to use the proxy playbook, given its practical usefulness, lower risk and visibility, and higher deniability. Iran funds, proselytizes, recruits, trains (in camps on Iranian territory), and arms a variety of actors in the Kingdom.

Since the 2011 uprising, actors inspired by Iran or actively aided by the IRGC have posed an increased security risk to Bahrain. These actors can be listed in two categories: first, clandestine, militant groups that have engaged in acts of terrorism against Bahraini government interests and personnel under the supervision of the IRGC. These groups include Saraya al-Mukhtar, Saraya al-Ashtar, Bahrain Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Saraya al-Karar. Second, members of a more overt though anonymous network of young, poor, and indoctrinated individuals called the "Coalition of February 14 Youth," who have lost faith in both the Bahraini opposition's performance and the prospects of dialogue with the government. The violent actions of this network are considered lower-impact and less technically proficient or tactically sophisticated than previous covert groups. However, it is often hard to determine where the network starts and where it ends, because some of its members (assumed to be the more ambitious, radical, and competent) also play roles in the established militant groups.

Just like it is hard to tell who is whom in the local Shia militant Bahraini universe, it is also unclear who has done what since 2011 and what each actor's capabilities, size, and organizational structures are. The means used by this collection of militant actors, many of

which have been confiscated by the police, range from the rudimentary to the more sophisticated: metal rod projectiles, knives, machetes, Molotov cocktails, highly potent plastic explosives, claymore mines, detonators for various explosive devices, gun silencers (which indicates assassination missions), improvised explosive devices (IEDs), hand grenades, and firearms including AK-47s.

While we do know that violent acts, including the planting of IEDs, have led to the deaths of dozens of Bahraini policemen and innocent civilians (and the injuring of thousands others), we are not sure who precisely is responsible. The same lack of clarity applies to other violent acts, including attacks against the Bahraini security services with Molotov cocktails, weapons smuggling, major assassination attempts against high value targets, and terrorist operations against personnel and symbols of the state, though it is assumed that the last three sets of activities are reserved for the more organized underground groups. Saraya al-Mukhtar is reported to be the most capable of these groups, often using IEDs against police forces. Saraya al-Ashtar has similar modus operandi but seems to be less active both online and on the ground than Saraya al-Mukhtar. Much less is known about Saraya al-Karar, which could be a spinoff of the first two groups, or Bahrain Hezbollah, beyond its alleged linkage to the Lebanese Hezbollah. Kata'ib Hezbollah, on the other hand, has more verifiable links to Iran's Quds force and a sizeable presence in Iraq (30,000 fighters) and Syria (1,000 fighters) with a mission to fight the Islamic State.³ Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has similar ties to al-Quds Force and the Lebanese Hezbollah; its primary deployment is in Iraq with anywhere from 1,000 to 5,000 militants.⁴ In short, not everything that blows up in Bahrain is Iran's fault. And to lump all those who oppose the Bahraini government in the same basket would be a big mistake, for the tools used to combat one threat might not work with another.

Iran does not exercise its influence in Bahrain solely through terrorism and militancy. It pursues a more penetrating and non-kinetic agenda in the Kingdom through local political and religious actors. A contentious case in point is al-Wefaq. Al-Wefaq is

the leading player in the broader Bahraini opposition, though its size and command of the Shia street might have decreased due to its mismanagement of the previous dialogue with the government and inability to measurably improve the lives of its followers (the next parliamentary elections in 2018 will more accurately determine the group's standing).

There is a vigorous debate, at least in the West, about al-Wefaq's links to Tehran. Washington should be wary of definitive conclusions and claims by both the Bahraini government (confirming such ties) and al-Wefaq (denying them) on this issue. While it is incorrect and simplistic to suggest that al-Wefaq is a creation of Iran, part of the group's political and spiritual leadership—Sheikh Ali Salman (who is currently imprisoned in Bahrain) and Sheikh Isa Qasem (whose citizenship was revoked recently by the Bahraini authorities)—are undoubtedly influenced by Tehran's mullahs, and according to the Bahraini government, doing their bidding.

Salman and Qasem say the right things more often than not and rarely miss an opportunity to claim to be peaceful proponents of democracy in Bahrain. Yet there is no shortage of examples from speeches by both individuals that have raised eyebrows over the years. While speech does not equate with actual violence, incitement and the issuing of threats can certainly lead to bloodshed, which has often transpired in the case of these two individuals. A couple of episodes from the 2011 uprising and onward are striking and worth highlighting.

In March 2011, following the takeover of the Pearl Roundabout in Manama by the protest movement, the Bahraini authorities claimed to have intercepted calls between radical members of the Bahraini opposition and IRGC personnel that allegedly discussed the transfer by sea of a large cache of weapons loaded on Iranian naval vessels. This, along with the widespread chaos and insecurity in the country, prompted the Bahraini government to call for the intervention of GCC forces on March 14, 2011. Around the same time, the Bahraini intelligence services also reportedly intercepted calls between Mohamed al-Fadli, an Iranian diplomat working in the Iranian embassy in Manama, and Bahraini opposition hardliners in which the former was suspected of urging the latter to engage in civil disobedience, reject dialogue, and increase their demands. The Bahraini government kicked al-Fadli out of the country on charges of misrepresenting his

3 For more on Kata'ib Hezbollah, please consult Phillip Smyth's blog Jihadology at <http://jihadology.net/category/kataib-hizballah/>.

4 Stanford University, Mapping Militant Organizations, Asa'ib Ahl Al Haq, <https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/143>.

diplomatic post and compromising Bahraini national security. Soon after the Saudi and Emirati forces briefly entered Bahrain, al-Wefaq's Ali Salman stated that he would treat the GCC forces as "occupiers" and ask for the support of Iran should Bahrain's Shia get hurt. This happened after Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani warned the Arab Gulf states against intervening in Bahrain, and Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi mentioned that his country would not stand idly by should "Saudi Arabia intervene in Bahrain." None of this proves, of course, that the positions of Salman and Iranian officials were coordinated, but it does raise questions about the coincidence and similarity of the statements' content.

On January 20, 2012, a time of heightened violence and sectarian tension in the Kingdom, Sheikh Isa Qasem issued a notorious fatwa from the al-Diraz Mosque calling on his supporters to "squash policemen wherever they could find them" since they were "assaulting Shia Bahraini women."⁵ The Bahraini government flatly denied Qasem's claim, saying that there was no evidence to support his political accusations. After Qasem finished his sermon, violent riots erupted across the country, leading to escalation and more specifically, a considerable spike in acts of violence against the police, including Molotov cocktail attacks. Again, while cause and effect are difficult to establish, the correlation between these two events is strong and the time that elapsed extremely short.

The relationship between Iran and al-Wefaq is complex, and merits a more careful and comprehensive examination (al-Wefaq is obviously not *just* Salman and Qasem, it has hundreds of other members and influential figures including Abdullah Al-Ghoraifi with no known loyalties to Iran). But Tehran's ties to other radical Bahraini political groups now outlawed—including *Harakat al-Hurriya Wal Dimokratiyya* or Haq (Liberty and Democracy Movement), *Tayyar al-Wifa' al-Islami* (The Islamic Loyalty Movement), and *Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain* (The Movement of Free Bahrainis, which operates from London)—are clearer. These three groups formed a coalition ahead of the uprising and unified their public calls to overthrow the Bahraini government (several members of Haq including Saeed al-Asboul, Ali Rubeia, and Issa al-Jawdar took issue with the militant speech of Hassan Mushaima, the

secretary general of Haq, at the Pearl Roundabout and resigned as a result).

Haq's external relations are perhaps most controversial. In February 2011, Hassan Mushaima allegedly traveled to Lebanon, and got picked up at the airport by Hassan Haddad, a Bahraini opposition member living in Beirut and with close ties to Hezbollah. Haddad and Mushaima are believed to have proceeded to meet with Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah along with senior party officials and Iranian intelligence representatives in the southern suburbs of Beirut. It was reported (though never confirmed) that the discussion centered on strategies for controlling and sustaining the popular uprising and ultimately toppling the Bahraini monarchy with the help of Hezbollah and Tehran.⁶

Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain is believed to have had an equally controversial role during and soon after the uprising. On October 21, 2012, secretary general of *Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain* Saeed al-Shehabi, along with Abbas al-Omran and Mohamed Kathem al-Shehabi reportedly attended a periodic meeting in Iran called *Mouhafazat al-Bahrain* (the Governorate of Bahrain, suggesting that Bahrain is another province of Iran). Also allegedly present were Hojjat al-Islam Shafi'i, a spiritual representative of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the head of military intelligence of the Iranian province of Ahwaz. The meeting allegedly discussed the role and future of the Bahraini opposition, with al-Shehabi stating that his group was waging a fundamental struggle with "the other" (meaning the government and its support base) over the issue of Bahrain's identity.⁷

Prospects and Constraints of Iran's Reach

The body of evidence surrounding Iranian interference in Bahrain (both circumstantial and direct) is compelling. Over the years, Iranian destabilizing activities in Bahrain have expanded geographically and increased in tactical sophistication, according to the *Washington Post*.⁸ For example, in December 2013, Manama's spy and security agencies, in twin operations, confiscated

5 Tareq al-Amer, *Mou'amarat Wilayat al-Faqih fi al-Bahrain* (Manama: 2013), 92.

6 Tareq al-Amer and Khalid Hajras, *Ab'ad al-Hakika* (Manama: The Publication House of Manama, 2011), 235-265.

7 Tareq al-Amer, *Mou'amarat Wilayat al-Faqih fi al-Bahrain*, 79-82.

8 Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick, "U.S. increasingly sees Iran's hand in the arming of Bahraini militants," *Washington Post*, April 1, 2017 https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-increasingly-sees-irans-hand-in-the-arming-of-bahraini-militants/2017/04/01/be5e61fc-1329-11e7-833c-503e1f6394c9_story.html?utm_term=.acd46fa8b0ae

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a large amount of arms and explosives intended for Bahraini Shia militants on a speedboat from Iraq and in a warehouse in al-Qurrayah. Less than two years later, the Bahraini authorities discovered a bomb-making facility in Dar Kulaib whose main function was to fabricate six-, eight-, and twelve-inch EFP liners—the shaped dishes that give the devices their armor-piercing effect. Then, earlier this year, in what some US intelligence analysts considered a high-level operation, armed gunmen stormed a Bahraini prison, killing a policeman and freeing at least ten Shia prisoners convicted on terror charges. And most recently, on February 10, 2017, three people were killed and nine arrested in security operations by the Bahraini authorities, one of which intercepted escaped terrorism suspects fleeing the country (both operations were reportedly based on information obtained during investigations of the previous month's jailbreak). All of these incidents in recent years point to a trend of escalation.

Yet, the question remains: *to what extent* does Iran's meddling pose a threat to Bahraini national security and to US interests? Equally important, what is the proper political-economic-security balance to combat it? In Washington, many believe that the threat is misdiagnosed and/or inflated by the Bahraini authorities to justify their tardy and partial implementation of necessary reforms. Others, particularly from the US intelligence and defense communities including current and former US Fifth Fleet commanders stationed in Bahrain, acknowledge the seriousness of the threat and caution against relaxed readings.

Any attempt by Washington to assess Iran's impact on Bahrain's security outlook ought to be prefaced by the humble recognition that we will never have a better intelligence picture of the threat spectrum in Bahrain than the Bahrainis themselves. The Bahraini authorities have a strong interest in sharing with Washington what they have against Iran, but like all other sovereign countries, they do not share *everything* for obvious reasons. An equally self-evident truth is that we will never understand Bahrain's politics better than the Bahrainis themselves. So while we can procure our own intelligence on Bahraini developments and come up with our own risk analyses, we are to some extent at the mercy of the Bahraini government in terms of information. And if that is not constraining enough, we have to acknowledge that not everything Manama says is right, and not all the charges leveled against the government by the opposition from Manama, London, or Washington are legitimate either.

That said, it is possible to come up with a set of basic and reasonable conclusions that are informed by facts about what we, and our Bahraini partners, should be worried about most now and moving forward. The instability that resulted from the uprising in 2011 was undoubtedly the most dangerous Bahrain had ever seen in its short history, including the unrest of the early 1980s when Iran was actively trying to uproot the monarchy. Yet, it is fair to say that Iran ultimately failed to fully exploit Bahrain's popular revolt and achieve its objectives. Indeed, for all the talk by some in Manama of a deadly Iranian conspiracy in 2011, things could have been worse, and Iran probably could have gone further. None of this suggests that Iran poses an insignificant threat or has folded its hand in Bahrain. But it does counsel, now that relative security and normalcy have mostly returned to the Kingdom, for a calmer and more rational assessment of the Iranian threat, and certainly, for a comprehensive and sustainable plan to counter it.

Such a plan starts by asking the right questions. If the Islamic regime in Tehran has had almost four decades to develop a more robust clandestine presence in Bahrain, then why has it yet to accomplish its goal? Could it be that such a presence is extremely difficult to create, or that it does exist but is limited or kept meticulously hidden, because pro-Iran agents are waiting for the right moment to pounce? Could the Iranians be playing a long game in Bahrain, waiting for (or pushing) the United States and the United Kingdom to leave in order to dial up their destabilization campaign at a

more opportune moment? It is almost impossible to tell. What is known is that the Bahraini authorities' ability to roundly thwart the efforts of Iran has been an important factor in averting further insecurity. Also, as mentioned before, Iran has a small popular following among Bahraini Shias, which places real constraints on what Tehran is able and unable to do in the Kingdom.

Again, no one is implying that the status quo—almost continuous low-intensity street violence with intermittent higher level IRGC-linked terrorist operations—is tolerable or even acceptable. Imagine how US law enforcement agencies would react if protestors in New York or Washington, for example, were lobbing Molotov cocktails at the police on an almost nightly basis. Yet, this is exactly what Manama has to deal with (although much less frequently these days), regardless of who is *more* at fault. Violence, no matter how legitimate the grievances are, is not the answer, by either side. Furthermore, Bahrain is the size of a quarter of the American state of Rhode Island. Therefore, while the number of casualties since 2011 do not seem particularly alarming (compared to what transpired in other Arab countries over the same turbulent time period), any killing or security incident that takes place in this tiny Kingdom could rattle the entire country.

There are a number of scenarios with varying degrees of probability that could dramatically change the security situation in Bahrain. One must assume that these potential scenarios are on the minds and planning agendas of Bahraini and (hopefully) American officials. Should the economy tank, for example, sparking another uprising, Iran might get luckier or be more effective with its destabilization campaign. Or should Washington and/or London decide, for whatever reason including new strategic priorities, political realities, and/or budget difficulties, to remove or drastically reduce their troops and assets from Bahrain, Iran might feel emboldened and step up its activities in the Kingdom.

Manama can always learn new tricks in counterterrorism and improve its resilience as it plans for the worst, but holistic reform is the Bahraini leadership's most potent tool for long-term security and stability. If Iran preys on Bahrain's political fragility and seeks to deepen societal divisions, maybe the cure to that, while staying vigilant and committed to the counterterrorism mission, is more urgent and determined implementation of wider political and economic reforms. Leaving as little room as possible for Iran to interfere is by far the most effective and strategic approach to keeping Iran at bay.

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