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(Doha Institute)

**Assessment Report**

*The Bahrain Situation*

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Against the backdrop of worsening social and political conditions, issues and a protracted tradition of political opposition in Bahrain, the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia have driven young people in this country to emulate the new model of Arab protest. The slogans raised in these protests (February 14) express the demands for national constitutional reform in accordance with 2001 National Action Charter, and the lifting of the security apparatus restrictions on freedoms in the country. As was the case in Egypt, these youth are largely unaffiliated to any of the political currents, they have communicated with one another via the internet, and are composed of both Shiites and Sunnis in equal measure. They have expressed their desire to form a leadership body representing Sunni and Shiite citizens, but their aversion to sectarian quotas characterizing Lebanon and Iraq has made these youth reluctant on this front, preferring to defer to election results to determine the composition of the leadership. Also notable is the strong participation of women.

Shiite opposition movements have shown themselves to be powerful and organized political forces in the popular and democratic mobilizations. The opposition currents in the country — what are commonly known as the “seven organizations” (*al-Wifaq*, *Wa’d*, *al-Minbar al-Taqaaddumi* [Democratic Progressive Tribune], *al-Amal al-Islami* [“Amal”], *al-Tajammu al-Qawmi* [Nationalist Democratic Assembly], *al-Tajammu al-Watani* [National Democratic Assemblage], and *al-Ikha*) — had joined the protest movements from the outset. With the escalations of the protests, the organizational level of the protest arena has witnessed the emergence of two main mindsets.

The first of these is *Jam’iyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiyah* (al-Wifaq National Islamic Society), a grouping that represents the largest political gathering in Bahrain, which has a strong public presence. In the 2006 elections, al-Wifaq won 17 out of 40 seats in the Bahraini parliament. It is headed by Sheikh Ali Salman alongside the religious authority, Ali Qasim. The demands forwarded by al-Wifaq, like those of the February 14 youth, are well known: the adoption of a new constitution, transforming Bahrain into a constitutional monarchy, accountability of the Prime Minister to parliament rather than the king, and the election of politicians who will constitute the highest decision-making authority in country. Parties joining al-Wifaq behind these demands include the Nationalist Democratic Assembly, Amal, and the left-wing parties, such as *Wa’d* and the Democratic Progressive Tribune. These political currents include liberals, Shiites and Sunnis, and men and women, all of whom participated in the latest round of protests under the al-Wifaq banner.

The other block is the “Coalition for a Republic,” formed on March 7, 2011 amidst the latest bout of unrest in Bahrain. As evident in its name, the Coalition calls for the overthrow of the king, the monarchy, and the reign of the Khalifah family, replacing the monarchy with a republic. The Coalition is composed of three Shi’ite movements that have opposed the ruling regime: al-Wafa’ Islamic Current, the Haq movement, and the Bahrain Freedom Movement.

The Bahrain Freedom Movement has not called for the overthrow of the ruling dynasty in the past, when its demands had largely centered on democratization and the liberation of prisoners. The increase in the scope of the political demands was not limited to this movement; it extended to the youth movement more generally. After the bloody events of Thursday, February 17, when

the youths suffered several casualties, the slogans at their protests evolved into demands for the overthrow of the regime and the ruling family. Some of the youths interrupted one of the political opposition speakers in Pearl Square in the middle of a speech on the demand for a “constitutional monarchy”; the situation had moved beyond such a demand.

Distinctive about the protest movement in Bahrain, when compared to its Arab counterparts, has been its call to reformulate the system of governance and citizenship in a country in which a sectarian political arrangement has been established and maintained for a long period of time. These overarching undertakings are being proposed in an atmosphere of distrust between the rulers and the ruled on one hand, and among the citizens themselves on the other. This population of Bahrain does not enjoy the homogeneity that buttressed the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. This description does not mean to undermine the importance of the Bahraini national identity, but to call attention to the fact that identities competing with the unifying Bahraini and Arab identities have been politicized.

This situation of accumulating uncertainty has imposed itself in an atmosphere that places increasing emphasis on sub-identities, which are in turn based on re-identification along unstable sectarian foundations that affirm the antagonism between two main component parts of Bahraini society: Sunnis and Shiites. This antagonism contributed to the enmeshing of the internal component within regional political dynamics, with the external and regional dimensions feeding off one another in a process that extended beyond the populace to the regime itself. The external dimension has manifested with extreme power when compared to the internal dynamics of a small state like Bahrain.

The state of Bahrain’s behavior after its independence in 1971 entrenched Shiite sectarian identification at the expense of the bolstering a unifying Bahraini identity. This behavior was characterized by discrimination between citizens in a system marked by a lack of democracy and foundations for citizenship, and the effects of which were amplified by the rentier nature of the state and its monopoly over petroleum and land resources, which enabled it to bestow and deprive, and, thus, the main culprit with regards to social and other conditions.

Leftism and pan-Arabism were the main characteristic for Bahraini opposition movements—whether Shiite or Sunni—in the period before the 1970s. The state response was persecution and imprisonment, specifically targeting these movements, and when combined with the consequences of the June 1967 war, the movements’ chances for success were undermined. The state dissolved the National Council (parliament) in 1975, and the Sunni and Shiite Islamic movements filled the void in the opposition arena left by leftist movements, a process we can assert was paralleled in many Arab countries, so long as we keep the sectarian distinction in mind with regards to Bahrain.

Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the main Shiite political forces in Bahrain have been divided into two currents: one calling for reforms while maintaining and working within the framework of its Bahraini national identity; the other is more revolutionary in nature, influenced by the Iranian revolution, seeing Bahrain as an extension of Iran, and calls for fundamental change. Shiite revolutionary groupings came together in 1979 under the name of the “Popular Front for

the Liberation of Bahrain.” An important factor working against the adoption of the Iranian political line in the Bahraini popular movement is Shiite self-identification as Arab, a reality that came to the fore in the 1970 “UN-supervised” referendum when the Shiites voted for an independent *Arab* Bahrain. Even on an ethnic level, which plays an important role in the political culture of Gulf States, the vast majority Bahraini Shiites are of Arab origin. The Shiite component of Bahraini society is thus truly Arab Bahraini, not a people imported from Iran or elsewhere. It is notable in this context that many of the most prominent leaders of leftist and pan-Arabist movements in the Gulf were Bahraini Shiites.

Over the years, the political appeal of Shiite opposition in Bahrain has been fueled by the authorities’ discrimination against citizens of Shiite origin, and the absence of a unified concept of equal citizenship. For example, Shiites, who constitute a majority (60-70%) of the population, account for only 17% of those in the highest government positions. Socio-economic factors, such as high unemployment rates (19%) during a time when the country has witnessed significant economic growth, also play an important role in raising social tensions that can easily escalate into sectarian violence, despite Shiite and Sunni youth being equally affected.

This discrimination, coupled with human rights grievances, have led to the increased tension, prompting the government to carry out certain reforms. On February 15, 2001, the National Action Charter, guaranteeing general principles of political reform and democratization, identifying the system of governance as “hereditary constitutional” in which the citizenry is the source of the three branches of government authority, was adopted in a popular referendum. A 98.4% majority voted for the Charter, with 90.3% of Bahrainis voting in the referendum. One of the most important results of this referendum was the announcement of parliamentary elections that were to take place in October 2002. The constitution that was ultimately adopted, however, gave absolute power to the king, a far cry from the principles enshrined in the Charter.

The Bahraini opposition has also intensified its protests around the issues of naturalization and citizenship, both of which have symbolized the government’s discrimination between two types of citizenship. The Bahraini government has granted citizenship to approximately 100,000 Sunni Muslim immigrants, some of whom have been of Arab origins, but the majority of whom were migrant workers from Pakistan and are now eligible for enrollment in the national security service further charging sectarian tension. Bahraini sources outside the country have calculated that naturalized citizens have hailed from twenty-four countries; all of these citizens, however, have been Sunni Muslims.

As for regional relations, Saudi Arabian investments in Bahrain have reached upwards of 700 million Bahraini dinars; registered Saudi ownership in Bahrain is worth over one billion Bahraini dinars; approximately 315 companies are partly owned by Saudi parties and forty-three Saudi companies are registered and operating in Bahrain. In the March 10, 2011 meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the Foreign Ministers of the Council’s member states committed ten billion dollars in financial aid to Bahrain over the coming ten years. At their March 14, 2011 emergency meeting, in Manama (the 30<sup>th</sup> Extraordinary Session), the ministers committed to providing military aid to Bahrain and to oppose any foreign intervention.



In hosting the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, Bahrain is also dependent on the protection of the US in an arrangement that commits the latter to shielding the Bahraini monarchy from any threat, whether external or internal, an arrangement that enrages Islamic movements, whether Sunni or Shiite.

Furthermore, the dangers posed by the crisis of identity and belonging in Bahrain, the absence of democratic reform, and the lack of political will to bring about such reforms have taken the Bahraini regime beyond counting on American military might. The regime has been party to the deepening of economic relations with the signing a free trade agreement with the United States in 2005. This occurred despite the objections of Saudi Arabia to Bahrain entering such an agreement unilaterally, rather than entering the treaty negotiations with Washington as part of a coordinated GCC endeavor.

The Bahraini regime has also taken further steps to ensure US protection, and promote the US policy of normalization with Israel, openly and without reservation. Among these steps was the Bahraini Crown Prince Salman bin Issa's initiative outlined in a July 17, 2009 article published in the *Washington Post* newspaper in which he announced his support for normalization with Israel. The article's publication was preceded by normalization meetings at the Davos World Economic Forum, and a call on Palestinian refugees to define the right of return as "return" to the West Bank and Gaza Strip rather than the lands from which they were expelled in 1948, as well as giving the Jewish minority in Bahrain—no more than thirty-seven individuals—the rights of representation in the Shura Council and the appointment of a Jewish Bahraini to the post of Ambassador to the US. There is, of course, no harm in equal citizenship for Jews in Bahrain, but it is clear that the goal of these steps was to appease the United States and to impress its Zionist lobby. These are all factors that led to increased tension at the popular level, leading a growing number of people to adopt more extreme attitudes against the regime.

Iran has issued several statements implying that Bahrain is part of the Islamic Republic, such as the February 2009 statements of the former head of the Iranian Shura Council, a man considered to be a spokesperson for the regime. The Iranian government later denied that such statements were made, claiming they were misinterpreted. In a speech delivered on Friday, February 11, 2011, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran stated that the Arab revolutions were inspired by the spirit of the Iranian revolution. Such an analysis is of course open to debate. What matters for Bahrain, however, is that in the absence of the possibility of Iranian military intervention, given the presence of the Fifth Fleet and Bahrain's position in Arabian Peninsula, the remaining apparent point of entry for Iranian influence in Bahrain is the new "Coalition for a Republic" which has announced its solidarity with the demands of the youth. The experience of Iraq has shown the ways Iranian influence can penetrate Arab countries. President al-Maliki's comments regarding the situation in Bahrain, as well as the demonstrations by followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, have confirmed concerns over a sectarian Shiite projection of Iranian power. Neither al-Maliki, nor al-Sadr has been known for their democratic position, or for their solidarity with other democratic forces in the region, including Iran.

"Peninsula Shield" forces entered Bahrain on the request of the regime in Manama, citing the Gulf joint-defense agreement that was signed in the Bahraini capital in December 2000. In the

agreement, the six GCC heads of state agreed to the principle of collective defense against any threat faced by any of the signatory states. The formation of the Peninsula Shield forces in November 1982 was intended from the outset as a means of achieving such collective defense. From an Arab perspective, this intervention is not considered international intervention as such a phrase is usually reserved for non-Arab intervention. It is also clear, however, that if the state does not address the causes of protest and discontent, the Arab, Gulf state intervention will not be possible in every future crisis that is generated by the conditions and the nature of the regime.

What remains to be seen now is the question of the street and the youth protests in Bahrain. The question of whether the escalation brought about by government suppression and the entry of “Peninsula Shield” forces may indeed make the protestors move, even if temporarily as a result of anger, to bring their demands in line with those of the Coalition for a Republic, or whether they will maintain the reformists demands around which the protests coalesced at the outset, and which are closer to the demands of the al-Wifaq ideology. In a statement issued on March 20 of this year, the al-Wifaq block signaled its willingness to return to the dialogue called for by the crown prince on the condition that all detainees be released and the “foreign troops” withdrawn from Bahraini territory. It seems that the al-Wifaq block lacks another avenue through which to engage with the state.

Any future reform in Bahrain not only requires sincerity on the part of the regime, but its appreciation of the seriousness of public demands as well because it is not possible for a regime to be in power for a long time against the will of more than half of the population. On the other hand, the opposition must also resolve the question of Arab and Bahraini identification and citizenship, and to relinquish its reliance on a regional non-Arab state. For this, the opposition should also be aware that a Shiite sectarian majority does not have to translate into a political majority if citizenship is homogenized and equal citizenship is indeed achieved. Without playing down the right of citizens to organize themselves, the best path towards democracy is organization based on citizenship rather than sectarian affiliation.