STABILITY Coates Ulrichsen, K 2013 Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development,* 2(1): 14, pp. 1-12, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.be

PRACTICE NOTE

Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences

Dr Kristian Coates Ulrichsen*

The uprising in Bahrain that began on 14 February 2011 has been contained but not resolved. While the immediate period of danger to the position of the ruling Al-Khalifa family has passed, positions on all sides have hardened, and there is little prospect of a comprehensive or lasting political settlement to Bahrain's deep-rooted social and economic inequalities. As the Bahraini government has failed to offer meaningful concessions to political reform, it has splintered and radicalised an opposition that is unsure of what to do next, but has also undermined its own constituency of support among the island's Sunni communities. These trajectories have set in motion a radical reconfiguring of the island's political landscape in ways that do not augur well for longer-term prospects for reconciliation and recovery.

Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences

This practice note examines the regional and international dimensions of Bahrain's aborted revolution. It describes how the pro-democracy movement that erupted in early-2011 became entrapped in the crosshairs of regional and international geopolitics. This ensured that the burgeoning social movement in support of peaceful political reform was violently contained as Bahrain's international partners opted to look the other way. Yet this came at a very high price economically and politically, and it shattered social cohesion in a country polarised as never before. Moreover, it shredded the image of 'Business-Friendly Bahrain' that had formed the cornerstone of the country's economic diversification and development programmes. Bahrain's unhappy experience has implications for the ruling families of other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as they also struggle to adapt to greater participatory pressures and societal demands for political freedoms.

The opening section describes the uprising in Bahrain. It demonstrates how the current unrest forms part of a cycle of recurrent periods of contestation and predates the 'Arab Spring' revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. This leads into the second section, which examines how the range of governmental and opposition responses have redrawn the political landscape within the country. The third section explores the regional and international dimensions to the uprising and contextualises it within an upsurge of sectarian rhetoric directed against Iran. This occurred as GCC governments sought to externalise the roots of unrest and discredit oppositional elements within their own societies. It also highlights the very differing reactions from Bahrain's external partners and from international civil society organisations.

* Research Fellow, Department of Government, LSE, UK
k.coates-ulrichsen@lse.ac.uk

The Pearl Roundabout Uprising

Bahrain has a long history of popular opposition to the Al-Khalifa dynasty rooted in policies of unequal and selective development. Periodic outbreaks of major social unrest have alternated with periods of détente in cycles dating back to the 1920s. Sustained and organised campaigns for more rights occurred at regular intervals in 1921–23, 1934–35, 1938, 1947–48, 1953–56, 1965, and 1975, with the 1950s being notable for the creation of a non-sectarian social movement that openly challenged the ruler, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and his longstanding British advisor, Sir Charles Belgrave (Peterson 2001: 587–88). Feelings of popular anger against British policy toward Egypt and the Suez Crisis in 1956, and, subsequently, the appeal of Arab nationalism and socialism, provided a platform around which disparate groups could coalesce. However, after 1979, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and alleged Iranian involvement in an attempted coup attempt in Bahrain in 1981, cast a shadow over such cross-sectarian mobilisation (Alhasan 2011: 603). Under the Shah, the Iranian government had maintained a longstanding territorial claim to Bahrain, and while this was dropped following a United Nations-sponsored fact-finding mission in 1970, periodic statements by Iranian officials reiterating that Bahrain was Iran's 'fourteenth province' caused lingering tensions in Manama. In the 1990s, the longest sustained period of pressure on the Bahraini government culminated in an uprising between 1994 and 1999. It pitted advocates of political and economic reform against a ruling family determined to maintain the status quo and avoid diluting or distributing its power (Fakhro 1997: 167–68).

The longstanding ruler of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa died unexpectedly in March 1999, and was succeeded as Emir by son, Hamad bin Isa. Similar to the case in neighbouring Qatar, the process of generational change of leadership was followed by a programme of tentative political reform. A series of constitutional reforms were launched in November 2000 that promised much but ultimately delivered little of substance. In 2001, the draconian 1974 State Security Law that had provided cover for the suppression of political opposition and massive human rights violations (under the charge of a British national until 1998) was scrapped. Constitutional changes were laid out in a National Action Charter that was overwhelmingly approved by 98 per cent of Bahrainis in a referendum on 14 February 2001. This paved the way for the return of an elected assembly in 2002, twenty-seven years after the suspension of the previous short-lived (two years) parliamentary experiment in 1975. Also as part of the reforms, Bahrain became a constitutional monarchy, with the Emir taking the title of King (Ehteshami and Wright 2007: 919).

However, the initial promise of a unicameral elected legislature was subsequently diluted by the addition of an upper house of royal appointees. Low confidence in the sincerity of the political opening also led to a range of political societies boycotting the 2002 election. The significance of this move should be appreciated in terms of the broad range of political societies involved, which collectively spanned the ideological and religious spectrum. Although most societies subsequently participated in the 2006 and 2010 elections, the former were marred by allegations of systematic fraud and gerrymandering while the latter followed a heavy-handed clampdown on opposition members and human rights activists. During the run-up to the 2010 election, accounts of the arbitrary detention of opposition members and human rights activists, and allegations of torture seemed to herald a return to the repressive measures in place during the 1990s uprising. Meanwhile, socio-economic discontent was bubbling up, propelled by: high levels of unemployment; the inability of economic diversification to generate sufficient jobs or economic opportunities for Bahraini youth; and, popular anger at per-

ceived corruption at the heart of the Government (Davidson and Coates Ulrichsen 2011).

Feelings in Bahrain were running high even before the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt rocked the Arab world. It was in this context of rising tension that Bahraini organisers planned a day of protest on 14 February 2011. The focus of the planned protest aimed at securing greater political participation and accountability, rather than targeting the position of the King or the ruling family in Bahrain. The date was symbolic as it marked the tenth anniversary of the referendum that had approved the National Action Charter in 2001. It also followed in the wake of the popular uprisings that swept away the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. The inspirational sight of largely non-violent demonstrations, defying political suppression and refusing to submit to the security regimes that had kept authoritarian leaders in power for decades, was transformative. Cafes in Manama that usually showed Lebanese music videos were instead filled with images from Tahrir Square in Cairo that transfixed their audiences; the same was happening elsewhere throughout the region. Emboldened protestors voiced their demands ahead of the 14 February day of protest for greater political freedom and equality for all Bahrainis(Lynch 2012: 109–10).

Although initially small in scale and predominantly confined to Shiite villages outside Manama, the demonstrations gathered momentum after Bahraini police killed two protestors on 14 and 15 February. They also migrated to the heart of the capital's Pearl Roundabout, close to the flagship Bahrain Financial Harbour. Ominously for the regime, the demonstrations quickly assumed popular overtones as Sunnis and Shiites alike gathered in unprecedented numbers and chanted slogans such as 'No Shiites, no Sunnis, only Bahrainis.' The rapid mobilisation highlighted how quickly the lack of trust felt by many activists toward the government could assume a more radical stance. By the evening of 16 February, tens of thousands of overwhelmingly young Bahrainis were camped in Pearl Roundabout and shouting 'Down, down Khalifa!' These chants were aimed at the Prime Minister of 41 years, Sheikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, rather than at the ruling family itself, but the dramatic cross-sectarian escalation directly threatened the government's grip on power and domestic legitimacy. It panicked the regime into a violent response, as security forces stormed the roundabout in the middle of the night and opened fire on demonstrators (Coates Ulrichsen 2011a).

As the protests moved into a new post-clampdown phase, the government reacted by sponsoring counter-demonstrations to try to fracture the social movement confronting them. Thousands of pro-government supporters gathered at the Al-Fateh Mosque in Juffair on 21 February (and again on 2 March 2011) to declare their support for the regime. They formed The Gathering of National Unity (TGONU), consisting of a loose umbrella grouping of loyalist Sunni communities spanning a spectrum of Salafist, Muslim Brotherhood, tribal, and urban communities, all loyal to the regime. In response, an estimated 200,000 Bahraini citizens (one in three of all Bahraini citizens) participated in a pro-democracy march to the Pearl Roundabout on 25 February, as two massive columns of protestors converged on the roundabout to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman. This represented a level of societal mobilisation unprecedented in any of the Arab Spring movements in 2011 (Lynch 2012: 110).

With the position of the ruling family clearly in jeopardy, negotiations between the regime's leading modernising figure, the Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and the largest opposition political society, Al-Wefaq, commenced in March. Despite coming close to an agreement based around a set of agreed political reforms (the 'seven principles'), the talks broke down when Al-Wefaq refused to enter a formal dialogue unless the government agreed to a new

constitutional arrangement. Accordingly, the offer of talks was withdrawn, and on 14 March the GCC sent in its Peninsula Shield Force to help restore stability in Bahrain. In reality, this consisted of 1000 men of the Saudi Arabian National Guard and a contingent of 500 military police from the United Arab Emirates. They provided the essential backbone while the Bahrain Defence Force pursued and arrested several thousand people across the country in a prolonged campaign of political repression and retribution (GSN 2011a).

A state of national emergency was declared the following day, 15 March, that lasted until 1 June 2011. There followed a crackdown as the Bahraini government pursued all forms of dissent, detaining doctors and lawyers for treating or representing detainees, suspending opposition political societies and arresting their leaders, and detaining a founder of Bahrain's major independent newspaper Al-Wasat, who subsequently died in custody (BBC 2012). Up to 2000 mostly Shiite public-sector and 2400 private-sector workers were dismissed from their positions for "absenteeism" during the demonstrations. Widespread tactics of intimidation also included the destruction of Shiite shrines and the display by protesters of pictures of prominent Shiite leaders with nooses around their necks. Meanwhile, a relentless propaganda campaign was unleashed on Bahrain TV and through the state media, portraying dissidents as 'traitors' and inciting violence against them (D'Almeida 2011).

Simultaneously, the Bahrain National Guard embarked on a hasty recruitment drive in Pakistan to augment its limited manpower with non-Bahraini personnel with less direct connections to the civilian protestors that they were charged with controlling. Although Bahraini Shiites were already barred from holding senior level positions in the Bahrain Defence Force and the police, this reinforced the sense of exclusivity and partiality in the security services (Gengler 2012a). Meanwhile, the bulldozing of the Pearl Roundabout, with its iconic monument to Gulf unity, on 18 March represented a crude attempt to destroy the symbolic heart of the protest movement. With this act, the authorities hoped to prevent it from becoming an anti-regime equivalent of Cairo's Tahrir Square. However, it highlighted the darkly ironic nature of the emerging counter-revolution, as the Pearl Monument had been erected in 1982 to mark the creation of the GCC. Its six pillars represented each of the GCC members, yet it was destroyed just days after the entry of those same Gulf forces into the kingdom (Farmer 2011).

Martial law was lifted on 1 June 2011, and shortly thereafter, the King convened a National Dialogue and created an ostensibly independent investigation into the springtime unrest. Through these initiatives, the government hoped to begin a process of reconciliation with the opposition. However, their flawed implementation widened the chasm between the Al-Khalifa and their opponents by casting serious doubt on the credibility of the commitment to reform. They also revealed deepening divisions within the ruling family as a hard-line faction emerged around the increasingly powerful bin Ahmed brothers – Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, the head of the Royal Court, and Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, the chief of the Bahrain Defence Force (Cockburn 2011).

Reconfiguring the Political Landscape

The National Dialogue convened on 2 July and ran until 30 July 2011. It began under a cloud following the 22 June decision of the National Safety Court to sentence 13 prominent opposition figures to varying terms of imprisonment. The majority were committed to non-violent protest and many had participated in the aforementioned political liberalisation process that had been launched by the King after the end of the previous bout of internal unrest in 1999. In addition to amounting to 'a who's who of the predominantly Shiite opposition,'

they included the head of the secular-leftist Wa'ad political society, Ibrahim Sharif. Their imprisonment illustrated the gloved-fist nature of the regime's approach, jailing some of its opponents while simultaneously reaching out to others. From the start, the National Dialogue suffered from a credibility gap. Despite winning up to 45 per cent of the vote in the October 2010 parliamentary election, Al-Wefaq was only granted five out of 300 delegates. This was consistent with the overall composition of the dialogue, in which delegates representing all Bahraini opposition societies only constituted 11.67 per cent of total participants. The remaining dialogue members overwhelmingly favoured keeping the regime in its current shape. Moreover, core opposition demands, for redrawing electoral boundaries, greater proportional representation, and creating an elected government were not on the agenda. Neither was any discussion permitted of the nature or extent of the ruling family's power (GSN 2011b).

Al-Wefaq withdrew from the National Dialogue halfway through, its own judgement to participate being called into question by its critics. The dialogue continued, and concluded with a series of recommendations, including one that the Prime Minister (rather than the King) would appoint the government. As the long-serving Prime Minister (in office since 1971) represented one of the key obstacles to reform, this hardly constituted a political concession. Nor did the dialogue come to an agreement over the electoral boundaries, another major opposition grievance. Far from drawing a line under the unrest, the flawed process reinforced existing divisions and signalled that critical issues of political contention were simply not open to debate (Coates Ulrichsen 2011b).

The National Dialogue partially overlapped with the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). This was established by King Hamad on 29 June to 'enquire into the incidents' in February and March and their consequences. Its chair was Egyptian Professor Cherif Bassiouni, who led the UN Security Council commission that investigated war crimes in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The BICI report was published on 23 November. In a televised speech in front of the King, Bassiouni stated that the authorities had used torture and excessive force during its crackdown on protestors. He pinpointed a culture of non-accountability among the security services operating during the state of emergency, and accused unnamed officials of disobeying laws designed to safeguard human rights. Furthermore, he argued that many of the protests did not fall outside the rights of citizens to participate in, and that he had not found evidence of any link to Iranian involvement, contradicting regime narratives that ascribed them to external intervention rather than domestic grievances. The 513-page report painted a detailed picture of abuses of power by the Bahraini security forces and elements of the regime, most damagingly in its finding of 'systematic practice of physical and psychological mistreatment, which in many cases amounted to torture' (BICI 2011: 298).

In response to the BICI report, the King pledged to initiate reforms, and established a national commission to oversee their implementation. Yet the measures that were taken largely failed to address the roots of Bahrain's political and economic inequalities. In addition, they took place against a backdrop of continuing clashes and daily low-level violence between protesters and security forces. Specific reforms included: the revocation of arrest powers from the National Security Apparatus; legislative amendments that expanded the definition of torture and lifted time-limits for the prosecution of cases; pledges to rebuild Shiite houses of worship destroyed by the regime during the crackdown; and, the reinstatement of workers dismissed on grounds of political expression (Coates Ulrichsen and Fakhro 2012).

However, a report published in November 2012 by the Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), entitled 'One Year Later:

Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report,' concluded that 'the Government of Bahrain has fully implemented three of the BICI Report's 26 recommendations. Two other recommendations were impossible for us to properly evaluate due to a lack of available information, and 15 recommendations have only been partially implemented. Finally, the government has made no meaningful progress toward six of the recommendations, which are precisely the most important steps that need to be taken – accountability for officials responsible for torture and severe human rights violations, the release of political prisoners, prevention of sectarian incitement, and the relaxation of censorship and controls on free expression' (POMED 2012: 1).

Tensions in Bahrain have continued to escalate in the absence of meaningful or credible reform initiatives either from the government or the opposition. Continuous announcements of impending reforms have failed to translate into significant action to redress the abuses of power and responsibility identified in the BICI report. Crown Prince Salman – previously the spearhead of Bahrain's reforming elite – remains sidelined by internal struggles for influence within the ruling family. A flight to the extremes has occurred among both loyalist and opposition groups as advocates of compromise and consensus become outflanked by radical elements and advocates of violence over engagement. Another BICI anniversary report, published by *Amnesty International* in November 2012, concluded that 'The legacy of the BICI Report is fading fast, increasingly overshadowed by ongoing impunity for torture, the jailing of activists, and the ban on all protests. In the face of what increasingly appears to be a defunct reform process, those who have championed Bahrain's record on reform must be increasingly forced to challenge the charade' (Amnesty 2012: 36).

Across the political spectrum, radical voices have been empowered while Bahrain's political middle ground has been marginalised. In this environment of mutual mistrust, the convening of a new National Consensus Dialogue in February 2013 and the naming of the Crown Prince as first deputy prime minister in March did little to raise hopes that a political breakthrough might be imminent. The Crown Prince was just one of five deputy prime ministers all subordinate to the continuing power of the Prime Minister, and he did not join the national dialogue, as members of the opposition had wished. Moreover, the dialogue was restricted to discussions over the agenda itself, rather than actual negotiation over issues of substance relating to changes in the structure or balance of power within Bahrain (GSN 2013).

The emergence of radical splinter groups means it is no longer possible to speak of a 'regime-opposition' dichotomy in any case. Elements of the opposition are growing more violent with an increase in bomb attacks carried out by members of the 'February 14' youth movement, while extreme loyalist groups calling on the regime to crush the opposition once and for all have also intensified. Together, these trends are redrawing the political landscape of Bahrain by weakening the moderate wings of the government and the opposition whose leadership is vital to building support for political reform and reconciliation. Of particular interest is the splintering of the Sunni community that hitherto provided the backbone of support for the Al-Khalifa regime. This has fragmented as the initial Gathering of National Unity has largely broken up, though in truth it always identified itself as a 'soft opposition' with reform demands of its own. In its place, rival factions and individual groups have become increasingly vocal critics of government policy and have started to make political demands of their own. Partially borne out of frustration at the government's seeming inability to resolve the issue, groups of vigilante squads have started to take local enforcement of law and order into their own hands (Gengler 2012b).

While the government can no longer rally the 'Sunni street' behind it, the same can be said of the predominantly-Shiite opposition. Al-Wefaq and the established political societies have been damaged by their failure to show substantive results from their decision to engage the regime. They have been outflanked by the shadowy 'February 14', which emerged at the time of the Pearl uprising in 2011. Little is known about 'February 14': one article described them as 'a confederation of loosely organised networks…faceless, secretive, and anonymous,' consisting of 'thousands of supporters [who] have abandoned the failed leadership of the country's better established, but listless, political opposition' (Jones and Shehabi 2012). It is likely that it is 'February 14' which constitutes the vanguard of the protestors who confront security services daily. However, it is unclear whether those who subscribe to its ideology necessarily organise themselves through coordinated networks. Instead, their effectiveness comes from the sporadic, uncoordinated, and unpredictable nature of their tactics, and their capacity to mobilise and coordinate large demonstrations at short notice. Their decentralised nature makes it more difficult for the government to reach out to them, or to prevent individual acts of violence, which have included a bombing in the village of Al-Eker on 9 April 2012 that injured seven policemen and a car bombing ahead of the April 2013 Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix (Toumi 2012, Reuters 2013).

Bahrain's shifting political landscape holds significant lessons for both the domestic legitimacy of the ruling family and for its regional and international partners. The speed with which the initial demonstrations for political reform escalated into calls for regime change among a significant segment of the demonstrators testifies to the low threshold of confidence in the regime's ability to reform itself. Calls for regime change were once the preserve of extremists such as the splinter *Haq* movement, yet they have migrated dangerously close to the mainstream opposition. Having witnessed the previous cycle of revolt (1994–99) and political opening (2001–10) end with the crushing repression in 2011, Bahraini opposition activists will be loath to give the government the benefit of the doubt in future reform initiatives. Nor is it clear that there exists a powerful advocate of reform within the ruling family or the government, as evidenced in the continuing inability to reconvene a new national dialogue organised around commonly-agreed issues.

Regional and International Implications

Developments in Bahrain have a significance that far transcends the islands' shoreline. Its dwindling oil reserves mean that Bahrain functions as a bellwether for charting the speed of the winds of change in the Gulf, as well as the challenges of transitioning to a post-oil future. The country is caught between powerful geopolitical cross-currents that give domestic developments a regional and international dimension. Both the Saudi incursion into Bahrain in 2011, and Riyadh's thwarted attempt to create a Gulf Union in 2012, stem from acknowledgement that it has the most to lose from prolonged or major instability in its eastern neighbour. This is particularly the case when seen through the regional prism of the hegemonic competition for power and influence in the Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iran. From an ideological perspective, the ruling Al-Saud family has twice demonstrated– in the 1990s uprising and again in 2011 – that it is prepared to use force if necessary to support a fellow ruling dynasty in the Gulf. In addition to exercising political and security influence over Bahrain, Saudi Arabia wields economic leverage through the sharing of the Abu Safah oilfield, which generates the majority of Bahrain's fast-depleting oil reserves and revenues (Mills 2012).

This influence notwithstanding, the collateral damage to ruling families throughout the Gulf, were one of their number to

be forced into making major concessions to popular opinion, still less ousted from power, is magnified still further in Saudi Arabia's case. This arises from the fact that Bahrain lies off the coast of its oil-rich Eastern Province with its large Shiite minority. Like their Bahraini counterparts, Shiites in Saudi Arabia have long complained of systematic discrimination and marginalisation at the hands of state authorities (Jones 2006: 213). Worryingly for Saudi officials, the Eastern Province has been at the epicentre of 'the largest and longest protest movement in Saudi Arabia's modern history', replete with declarations of support by Shiite demonstrators for their Bahraini brethren across the water (Matthiesen 2012: 629).

These regional and international dimensions to Bahrain's uprising influenced a very different response to popular calls for change than in other Arab Spring settings. Just five days before Qatar and the UAE rallied support for UN Resolution 1973 authorising the creation of a No-Fly Zone to protect Libyans demonstrating in Benghazi against the Gaddafi dictatorship, these same states formed part of the GCC intervention designed to put an end to protests in Bahrain. Moreover, the international community, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, effectively turned a blind eye to the repressive measures that followed. Indeed, mounting criticism of the Al-Khalifa regime from international civil society and foreign journalists contrasted sharply with muted statements from Bahrain's external partners. Aside from toothless statements urging all parties to commit to a generic reform process, there was little follow-up from foreign governments to ensure implementation and/or monitoring of declaratory commitments to reform. This became clear in a speech made by Secretary Clinton to the National Democratic Institute in Washington, DC, on 8 November 2011, which highlighted the multiple dimensions shaping US policy towards the upheaval in the Arab world. Arguing that 'it would be foolish to take a one-size-fits-all approach,' Clinton went on to state that 'Our choices also reflect other interests in the region with a real impact on Americans' lives – including our fight against al-Qaeda; defense of our allies; and a secure supply of energy…There will be times when not all of our interests align…That is our challenge in a country like Bahrain' (deYoung 2011).

At a time of rising international tension with Iran over its disputed nuclear programme, the United States is hardly going to abandon a key regional ally and the host of its Fifth Fleet. Gerges has noted how the Obama administration 'has consistently measured every Arab uprising by whether it plays into Iran's hands' (Gerges 2012: 110). Gulf rulers know which buttons to push in Washington to get the administration's support, and head off potential criticism of heavy-handed actions. This provides succour to hard-liners within the regime who oppose far-reaching reforms, even if some of them, most notably the Minister of Defence, have suggested (bizarrely) that the uprising was 'by all means a conspiracy involving Iran with the support of the United States.' Indeed, Khalifa bin Ahmed (mentioned earlier in his guise as head of the Bahrain Defence Force) went on to add, in his interview to Egypt's *Al-Ahram* newspaper on 6 July 2011, that 'More important than talking about the differences between the U.S. and Iran' are 'their shared interests in various matters that take aim at the Arab welfare.' His sentiments were repeated by other Bahraini officials and media outlets, which appeared to genuinely believe that US policy was aimed at undermining the Sunni rulers of the Gulf based on an apparent ideological affinity toward Shiism (Gengler 2011).

However odd these feelings may seem, in light of the longstanding US security strategy in the Gulf, they tapped into a deeper streak of rising sectarian rhetoric, as ruling elites across the GCC struggled to respond to the new regional zeitgeist. Immediately after the Bahraini uprising in February-March 2011, a plethora of participatory

pressures and demands for reform hit the Gulf rulers at their most vulnerable point. These included: petitions in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, signed by prominent intellectuals and activists; weekly demonstrations and episodes of violence in Saudi Arabia's restive Eastern Province; deadly clashes between protestors and demonstrators in a normally-placid Oman; and, escalating public protests in Kuwait directed against the unpopular Prime Minister there (Coates Ulrichsen 2011c).

Yet, in response to these pressures, and despite the grassroots calls for change focusing, not on regime change, but on a more equitable distribution of political power, officials in the GCC turned to an old tactic of blaming Iran for meddling in their internal affairs. This externalised the roots of dissent and deflected them from any possible domestic grievances, trapping them into a wider struggle for regional power and influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Thus, in addition to the Bahraini foreign minister's claim that 'We have never seen such a sustained campaign from Iran on Bahrain and the Gulf as we've seen in the past two months,' the foreign minister of the UAE bluntly warned Iran 'to respect the unity and sovereignty of Gulf countries' (Anon. 2011). This tactic served two purposes: first, it enabled the (Sunni) regimes to de-legitimise any (Shiite-led) opposition activity or demand for reform by conflating the issues of Shiite loyalties and Iranian manipulation into one amorphous threat. Second, by portraying demonstrators as disloyal and/or potential extremists, the regimes played a classic divide-and-rule card by hindering the emergence of a unifying cross-sectarian opposition. Both tactics were heavily used in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Gulf in 2011 (Coates Ulrichsen 2011c).

Conclusion: A Delicate Balance

The Arab Spring presents a myriad of challenges to foreign policy-making at a number of interconnected levels. The contagious wave of popular rejection of authoritarian misrule that swept four Arab leaders from power may have ebbed, but the impact of the Arab Spring is ongoing and transformative. The powerful reaffirmation of support for universal values, such as human and political rights and social and economic justice, has demolished any perception of 'regional exceptionalism' in the Middle East. This challenges the cosy inter-relationship that for decades existed between regional strongmen and their political and security partners in the West. It requires that officials both in Western and in regional capitals formulate a new approach that better balances geopolitical and commercial interests with greater concern for human rights and political reform. However, the radicalisation of the initial protests additionally carries a cautionary lesson for regimes as Bahrain's experience demonstrates how rapidly positions can polarise and inflict immense damage on social cohesion.

Domestically within Western states, pressures from parliamentary and advocacy groups to make a principled defence of universal values frequently clash with commercial and strategic interests arising from the benefits accruing from regional and international partnerships and alliances. This is particularly so in the case of the hydrocarbons-rich Gulf States, which are sources of much-needed foreign investment (and concomitant job creation) at a time of economic weakness and austerity in Europe and North America. However, the rise of 'citizen journalism' and public empowerment across the Middle East and North Africa has changed the parameters of policy-making. Together, they constitute powerful new methods of holding governments and officials publicly to account for their actions. This is as true just as much for Western partners as it is for local regimes. Moreover, the instantaneous spread of information and sharing of uncensored, raw footage magnifies manifold the impact and reach of individual events and the reactions to them. The fact that there is

no hiding place in today's interconnected world means that all governments are more vulnerable to public and political opinion than ever before.

Set against this are the structural ties that bind together countries in the inter-state system of alliances and partnerships. The strength of these connections and the sensitivity of countries to perceived external interference in domestic affairs have proved an awkward balancing act in the Arab Spring. Moreover, the conflation of the mobilisation of Shiite communities with Iranian meddling demonstrates also how internal faultlines in the Gulf States intersect with external fissures within the region. This merging of domestic and international pressure is already – at the time of writing in spring 2013 – being replicated in the deteriorating relationship between individual Gulf States and the Muslim Brotherhood. And while Bahrain has proven to be the sharpest clash between 'interests' and 'values' in the Arab Spring thus far, similar tensions may be expected to come to the fore should protests threaten other Gulf monarchies in the future, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

References

Alhasan H T 2011 The role of Iran in the failed coup of 1981: the IFLB in Bahrain. *Middle East Journal* 65 (4): 603–17.

Amnesty 2012 *Bahrain: promises of reform broken, repression unleashed.* Available at http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/bahrain-promises-reform-broken-repression-unleashed-2012-11-21-0 [Accessed 21 November 2012].

Anon 2011 UAE calls on Iran to 'respect' Gulf neighbours. *Saudi Gazette*, 21 April. Available at http://www.nation.com.pk/pakistan-news-newspaper-daily-english-online/international/21-Apr-2011/UAE-calls-for-Iran-to-respect-neighbours [Accessed 24 April 2011].

BBC 2012 Bahrain jails two policemen over Karim Fakhrawi death. *BBC News*, 31 December. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-20874049 [Accessed 11 May 2013].

BICI 2011 *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*. Available at http://www.bici.org.bh/ [Accessed 23 November 2011].

Coates Ulrichsen, K 2011a. Bahrain: evolution or revolution? *Open Democracy*. 1 March. Available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/bahrain-evolution-or-revolution [Accessed 1 April 2013].

Coates Ulrichsen, K 2011b Dark clouds over Bahrain. *Foreign Policy*, 6 September. Available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/09/06/dark_clouds_over_bahrain [Accessed 14 February 2013].

Coates Ulrichsen, K 2011c Gulf States: studious silence falls on the Arab Spring. *Open Democracy*, 25 April. Available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/gulf-states-studious-silence-falls-on-arab-spring [Accessed 28 March 2012].

Coates Ulrichsen, K and **Fakhro, E** 2012 Post-BICI Bahrain: between reform and stagnation. *Open Democracy*, 19 January. Available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen-elham-fakhro/post-bici-bahrain-between-reform-and-stagnation [Accessed 19 February 2013].

Cockburn, P 2011 Power struggle deepens divisions among Bahraini royal family. *Independent*, 27 September. Available at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/power-struggle-deepens-divisions-among-bahraini-royal-family-2361462.html [Accessed 16 December 2011].

D'Almeida, K 2011 Bahrain: McCarthyism in Manama? *IPS News*, 27 April. Available at http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/04/bahrain-mccarthyism-in-manama/ [Accessed 9 May 2012].

Davidson, C M and **Coates Ulrichsen K** 2010 Bahrain on the edge. *Open Democracy*, 19 October. Available at http://www.opendemocracy.net/christopher-davidson-kristian-coates-ulrichsen/bahrain-on-edge [Accessed 6 April 2013].

deYoung, K 2011 In Arab Spring speech, Clinton defends U.S. stance on Syria, Bahrain. *Washington Post*, 8 November. Available at http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-11-07/world/35282777_1_bahrain-state-hillary-rodham-clinton-security-forces [Accessed 4 June 2012].

Ehteshami, A and **Wright, S** 2007 Political change in the Arab oil monarchies: from liberalization to enfranchisement. *International Affairs*, 83(5): 913–32.

Fakhro, M 1997 The uprising in Bahrain: an assessment. In: Sick, G and Potter, L (eds) *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion*. London: Routledge. pp. 167–88.

Farmer, B 2011 Bahrain authorities destroy Pearl Roundabout. *Daily Telegraph*, 18 March. Available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/8390773/Bahrain-authorities-destroy-Pearl-Roundabout.html [Accessed 9 May 2012].

Gengler, J 2012a The (sectarian) politics of public-sector employment in Bahrain. *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*, 27 May. Available at http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/sectarian-politics-of-public-sector.html [Accessed 14 September 2012].

Gengler, J 2012b Bahrain's Sunni awakening. *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 17 January. Available at http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712 [Accessed 21 January 2012].

Gengler, J 2011 The other side of radicalization in Bahrain. *Foreign Policy*, 15 July. Available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/15/the_other_side_of_radicalization_in_bahrain [Accessed 6 June 2012].

Gerges, F A 2012 *Obama and the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

GSN 2011a Saudi Arabian forces bring a temporary halt to Bahrain's unrest, but opposition remains strong. *Gulf States Newsletter*, 35 (897), 25 March.

GSN 2011b Bahrain security court sentences eight prominent Shia activists to life. *Gulf States Newsletter*, 35 (905), 24 June.

GSN 2013 Bahrain's national dialogue edges on as violence marks second anniversary of uprising. *Gulf States Newsletter*, 37 (941), 21 February.

Jones, T C and **Shehabi, A** 2012 Bahrain's revolutionaries. *Foreign Policy*, 2 January. Available at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/02/bahrains_revolutionaries [Accessed 3 January 2012].

Jones, T C, 2006 Rebellion on the Saudi periphery: modernity, marginalisation and the Shi'a uprising of 1979. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38 (2): 213–34.

Lynch, M 2012 *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*. New York: Public Affairs.

Matthiesen, T 2012 A "Saudi Spring?" The shi'a protest movement in the Eastern Province, 2011–2012. *Middle East Journal*, 66 (4): 628–58.

Mills, R 2012 Pioneering Bahrain finds itself reliant on Saudi largesse. *The National*, 1 May. Available at http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/industry-insights/energy/pioneering-bahrain-finds-itself-reliant-on-saudi-largesse [Accessed 4 May 2012].

Peterson, J E 2001 The nature of succession in the Gulf. *Middle East Journal* 55 (4): 580–601.

POMED 2012 Assessing Bahrain's implementation of the BICI report. Available at http://pomed.org/blog/2012/11/assessing-bahrains-implementation-of-the-bici-report.html/ [Accessed 15 November 2012].

Reuters 2013 Bahrain says thwarted attacks, found petrol bombs before F1 race, 23 April. Available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/23/us-bahrain-unrest-idUSBRE93M0D720130423 [Accessed 8 May 2013].

Toumi, H 2012 Bahrain probes bombing that injured seven. *Gulf News*, 10 April. Available at http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-probes-bombing-that-injured-seven-1.1006697 [Accessed 9 March 2013].

How to cite this article: Coates Ulrichsen, K 2013 Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development,* 2(1): 14, pp. 1-12, DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.be

Published: 29 May 2013

]u[*Stability: International Journal of Security & Development* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press

OPEN ACCESS