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## Middle East and North Africa Programme Roundtable Summary

# The Outlook for Bahrain

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## **THE OUTLOOK FOR BAHRAIN**

This document summarizes discussions that took place at a Middle East and North Africa Programme roundtable in November 2012. One year on from the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, the meeting offered a chance to share ideas on the outlook for the political, economic and human rights situation in Bahrain.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule and the views expressed are those of the participants. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire to those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

### **The Chatham House Rule**

'When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.'

## **Bahrain: One Year after the BICI Report**

One year after the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) presented recommendations to deal with the legacy of the uprising and the grievances that underpinned it, significant political issues remain unaddressed. In the absence of any serious process of political dialogue, the population in Bahrain is increasingly fragmented and violence is gradually escalating; trends toward political and sectarian polarization are becoming increasingly marked. As one participant described it, citizens have started to retreat into 'increasingly separate worlds'. Views of the social and political environment can be very different, according to the community in which people live. Perceptions of state power that emanate from life in a Shia village where protests have become a daily reality may be unrecognizable to those who live in cosmopolitan suburbs of Manama, for example.

Over the last month, political polarization has intensified. In early November, a series of explosions in Manama killed two Asian street cleaners. No group claimed responsibility. This attack drew horror and condemnation from across the political spectrum. However, interpretations of the events were fiercely contested, with many in the opposition questioning the government's accounts of them, asking for an investigation and hinting that the bombs might have been fabricated by the security services. The authorities have arrested alleged suspects and there have been somewhat mixed messages from different officials, some suggesting the attacks were part of an Iranian-Hezbollah conspiracy, some blaming the entirety of the opposition, and others pointing to a radical minority within it.

Despite the polarization of narratives, the universal condemnation of the bomb attacks represents a point of cross-ideological agreement; the situation has not yet deteriorated to a point where society would see it as acceptable to justify violence against civilians. A coalition of opposition groups, including the largest registered opposition society, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, has released a statement affirming their commitment to non-violence and human rights, while the most popular Shia cleric, Sheikh Issa Qassim, has condemned political violence in his Friday sermons. While the United States welcomed the statements, Bahraini officials have questioned their sincerity and there had been no positive policy response; rather, the group's spokesman had recently been arrested and questioned over an interview he had given to a foreign news channel. Some officials have publicly continued to blame Al-Wefaq for attacks on policemen carried out by more radical youth opposition.

A social consensus around nonviolence is a valuable asset for Bahrain, yet risks being lost in an atmosphere of increased political and sectarian polarization. On the Friday after the explosions, the authorities prevented worshippers from entering the village of Diraz to hear the weekly sermon by Sheikh Issa Qassim. Perceptions of discrimination among Bahrain's Shia community were heightened by the fact that a pro-government rally in Manama, organized by a largely Sunni group and held at a major Sunni mosque, was afforded permission to take place on the same day, despite a ban on protests.

Participants also pointed to the government's decision to revoke the nationality of 31 Bahrainis in November. The list included prominent opposition members, including two former MPs from Al-Wefaq and an academic; some have dual nationality and others have been made suddenly stateless, including two who happened to be in the United Kingdom when the news broke. It was noted that some of those affected had first heard the news on Twitter, where it had been leaked by an account known for denouncing opposition activists, suspected by some of belonging to a member of the security services.

### **Implementing the BICI Recommendations**

Participants discussed the impact of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), a commission of international lawyers established by the king to investigate the 2011 uprising and human rights abuses. One year on from its publication in November 2011, progress had been disappointing, it was said, though some participants argued it was too early to judge. A report by the Project on Middle East Democracy, a US pro-democracy NGO, and the Bahrain Human Rights Observatory have concluded that only three out of BICI's 26 recommendations have been fully implemented<sup>1</sup>.

The government and its supporters argue that further reforms are proceeding and that this process will take time. Some of the participants in the workshop said the report's one-year anniversary should be viewed as an initial stage in a longer-term process of change, not as the end of the process. Rather than saying reforms had not been implemented, it could be noted that some had not been implemented yet, it was said. On the other hand, opposition groups argue that given the pressing nature of the issues involved, reforms can and

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<sup>1</sup> Project on Middle East Democracy, 'One Year Later: Assessing Bahrain's Implementation of the BICI Report', <http://pomed.org/blog/2012/11/assessing-bahrains-implementation-of-the-bici-report.html/>

should be initiated as a priority. They also express concern that initial positive steps on the road to reform have been undermined in recent months, describing a pattern of 'one step forward followed by two steps backwards'. The recent ban on all protests, the arrests of four young men for insulting the king on Twitter and the withdrawal of citizenship from prominent activists were all cited as examples.

Participants highlighted the government's failure to act on recommendation 1716, which called for the establishment of impartial mechanisms to hold the security services to account for the death, torture and mistreatment of protesters. Despite BICI's finding that there was systemic and systematic torture in Bahrain in 2011, there have been few transparent attempts to prosecute those who are alleged to have been responsible and no prosecutions at command level. This remains a key grievance for many of those who continue to demonstrate against the government.

## **Media Reform**

Several participants mentioned the importance of the media, both as a source of conflict and as a potential solution. Bahrain's media landscape is growing increasingly polarized as government and opposition-affiliated newspapers, websites and television channels cover events in a partisan and often myopic manner. Regional channels weigh in firmly on one side or the other, with Gulf Arab channels emphasizing the government's narrative while Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese channels favoured the opposition.

Within Bahrain, participants emphasized the need for reform in this area, arguing that media outlets on both sides have been responsible for fanning the flames of sectarianism. Questions were raised over why the government's promised media reforms have not yet borne fruit and it was suggested that the money currently being spent on European media consultants is not achieving the desired results. New press laws are under consideration.

Participants considered ways in which the media could play a constructive role in the dialogue and reconciliation process if the political will was there. Suggestions included resurrecting a youth initiative known as the Bahrain Debate, which included views from across the political system and was praised by all sides, and using national television as a platform for future events.

## Initiating a Political Dialogue

Supporters of both the government and opposition groups emphasized the urgent need for a political dialogue process that facilitates a peaceful resolution to their differences. Both the government and the opposition claim to be ready to start a dialogue. Al-Wefaq has said it is happy for talks to include other political groups, including mostly Sunni opposition groups perceived as being more pro-government, as well as government representatives. However, officials continue to question its sincerity and some accuse it of moral responsibility for violence against police and property committed by more radical youth protestors. The levels of mutual distrust currently make it difficult to move beyond claims and counterclaims that neither side is truly committed to such a process. It was also noted that there are significant divisions within both the government and the opposition camps. The lack of leadership on the issue of dialogue was thought to be likely to contribute to the deepening of such divisions, as leaders were not seen to be making progress.

At present, Bahrain's political landscape is characterized by the politics of polarization with few serious attempts to move beyond this. A successful dialogue process would require long-term commitments from all factions. Participants said that initial discussions could be informal, gradually establishing common principles that can form the basis of a later, more formal process. Other issues could be resolved within this mutual framework of agreement. As one participant put it, 'before the dialogue you need to start a conversation'. This was the case in Northern Ireland where, after years of unpublicized discussions between the government and the Provisional IRA, the Good Friday Agreement was finally signed. Another participant argued Bahrain should stop taking British models, including Northern Ireland, as a benchmark. The country could aspire to more than simply catching up with Western countries that have their own problems and injustices.

Despite the social and political polarization that participants repeatedly referred to, there remains important common ground between Bahrain's competing political factions. For instance, participants seemed to share a consensus on:

- A desire for a united and independent Bahrain.
- A strong national identity and a sense of pride in being Bahraini.
- A sense that Bahrain is a religiously and politically diverse country with a history of tolerance.

- Shared commitment to the findings of the BICI report.
- The need to end hate speech and sectarian stereotyping in the media (including the official media).
- The overriding importance of nonviolence.
- The urgent need for an inclusive political dialogue to resolve differences peacefully.

However, participants disagreed significantly over whether they had confidence in the government's ability or willingness to reform. The government argues that it is reforming and that while there are differences within society over the pace of reform, the country is moving in the right direction. For its part, the opposition does not simply think reform is not happening fast enough; it sees the country as slipping backwards.

Participants noted that the government was not monolithic and that it includes a variety of views on the need for reform. It was noted that Al-Wefaq is supportive of the king and the crown prince. The obstacles to reform, they argue, are emanating from other sections of the government and ruling family. As they see it, powerful elements in the establishment see little reason to compromise and have an interest in resisting greater accountability or greater public influence over the formation of government for fear it will threaten their own positions. It was not clear what would change the dynamics; parts of the opposition would like to see foreign mediation, but the authorities are more resistant to what they sometimes paint as foreign interference.

### **'FUTURE TRENDS IN THE GULF STATES' PROJECT**

Our core research project on the Gulf, 'Future Trends in the Gulf States', aims to research, analyse and anticipate some future scenarios for the political and economic development of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The research has two main tracks: political and economic development, looking at the prospects for the GCC countries to adapt and develop their systems to meet the aspirations of their citizens; and political divisions based on identity politics, assessing the politics of sectarianism and prospects for developing more inclusive national identities. These themes will be explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region - primarily the Arab awakenings and the ongoing tensions between Iran and some of its neighbours.

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