

Research Paper

Jane Kinninmont and Omar Sirri

Middle East and North Africa Programme | October 2014

---

# Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination



**CHATHAM  
HOUSE**

The Royal Institute of  
International Affairs

---

# Contents

Summary	2
Introduction	3
Political Disputes and Failed Dialogues	7
Bahraini Civil Society, Youth and Informal Political Processes	16
The International Context	28
Conclusions	33
About the Authors	36
Acknowledgments	36

## Summary

- Bahrain's political crisis continues, following the failure of dialogue efforts since 2011. That crisis is not only damaging the country's economy and social fabric; it is also contributing to a deepening of sectarian tensions and an increased risk of violence.
- The failure of the dialogue efforts to date is radicalizing the opposition and weakening the reformist elements within the government. At the same time, tight restrictions on freedom of association, speech and political activity are not silencing the most vocal and radical of the political opposition; rather, they are squeezing out the very moderates with whom the authorities will eventually need to work if they are to reach a sustainable political resolution to the crisis.
- Because of the stalemate, many Bahrainis expect the future of their country to be determined by the government's interactions with larger powers – especially the United States, Iran and Saudi Arabia – adding to the sense of disempowerment among the population. But those countries have many other priorities; and it is unclear whether they have a clear vision for the future of Bahrain.
- Despite the stalling of the formal dialogue, Bahrain's traditionally active civil society could make a valuable contribution to sincere efforts to reach a political resolution – if, that is, it were given the political space to do so. Much work needs to be done on imagining the real possibilities for Bahrain's future – not only the structure of the parliament but also how the country could develop its economy and handle its various economic and security dependencies, as well as determining the nature of its national identity.
- Informal discussions with diverse Bahraini young people suggest there are many options for a political settlement that could provide not only a degree of stability but also at least some measure of meaningful change. A more sustainable approach would be to address the political and socio-economic root causes of community divisions rather than seeking a sectarian power-sharing bargain.
- Regardless of whether they identified themselves as opposition activists, government supporters or neither, these young people expressed the conviction that politics would change and that there would be a greater degree of popular empowerment during their lifetimes.
- By continuing to promote trade, expand their naval bases and lavish praise on minor reforms amid repeated major setbacks, the UK and the US are offering few significant incentives for major reform (or disincentives for continuing with the status quo). In the long term uprisings may well become more violent, vengeful and anti-Western than the peaceful protests of 2011.

## Introduction

Since the uprising of February 2011, no serious progress has been made towards reaching a political resolution to the political crisis in Bahrain – a crisis that belies the common claim that the turbulence of the Arab uprisings did not reach the Gulf. Yet it should be far simpler to meet the challenges in Bahrain than to resolve the conflicts raging in other parts of the region. The country is small, with a population of just over one million (half of whom are citizens and the other half expatriates) and there has been less violence than in many other countries. Bahrain's civil society – traditionally very active, though now weakened through harassment by the authorities and by the polarization of society as a whole – is a valuable source of ideas for dealing with the country's political crisis. Not only does it have better knowledge of local conditions than the foreign governments that might seek to find a settlement; it also has more legitimacy among the local population. At present, however, it cannot play such a role, not least because the authorities are placing heavy restrictions on activities that they deem too political or important; such restrictions include the recent threat to suspend the activities of the country's largest legally recognized opposition group, the Al Wafaq National Islamic Society, and the expulsion of the most senior US human rights official, Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski. At the same time, many locals feel disempowered by what they presume are the machinations of larger international powers in Bahrain.<sup>1</sup>

As conflicts intensify in Bahrain's neighbourhood, various squandered opportunities have generated blame and entrenched cynicism. Violence, though still at a relatively low level, is gradually worsening. The economy is suffering, as continued unrest encourages a brain drain,<sup>2</sup> hampers investment and deters the expatriate talent needed for the country's crucial financial and professional services sectors.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, politically motivated public spending is pushing up the public debt, prompting warnings from the IMF.<sup>4</sup> Sectarian (in this case Sunni/Shia) tensions are more pronounced now than at any time most Bahrainis can remember. Meanwhile, the unresolved crisis in Bahrain continues to contribute to the political and sectarian polarization that is damaging the region. The far worse conflicts in Syria and Iraq mean Bahrain's crisis receives limited international attention today; however, the virulently sectarian character of those regional power struggles should underscore the danger of sectarian rhetoric and divide-and-rule tactics. Such tactics have long been used by authoritarian regimes in the region, including elements of the Bahraini and other Gulf ruling establishments, which have sought to discredit the Shia-led opposition through fear-mongering portrayals of Shia as traitors and Iranian agents.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper uses a broad definition of civil society to refer to citizens' engagement in associational life, whether through formal non-governmental organizations or informally.

<sup>2</sup> Not only are Bahraini Shia increasingly tempted to move abroad; a number of Bahrainis from prominent Sunni tribes have opted to take Qatari nationality and enjoy the ensuing economic benefits – see Gengler, J., 'Bahrain drain: Why the king's Sunni supporters are moving abroad', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 September 2014, at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141963/justin-gengler/bahrain-drain>. Saudi Arabia has openly objected to Qatar's naturalization of Bahrainis, which is one of the issues raised in the July 2014 'Riyadh Agreement', whose aim is to reduce tensions between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

<sup>3</sup> GulfTalent.com, 'Employment and Salary Trends in the Gulf 2014', available on request from their website, at <http://www.gulftalent.com>.

<sup>4</sup> IMF concludes 2014 Article IV Consultation Mission to Bahrain', IMF Press Release No. 14/126, 25 March 2014, at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2014/pr14126.htm>.

Two processes of official political dialogue have failed to achieve results, while the processes themselves have become divisive. Some back-channel talks between the government and officially licensed political societies, including Al Wefaq, were held between January and August 2014, but have petered out. The relatively reformist Crown Prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, has made an attempt to encourage the opposition to participate in the 2014 elections for the lower chamber of parliament by saying that the parliament would discuss five areas of possible reform based on some of the priorities that had been outlined in those talks. However, this proposal did not guarantee any of those reforms, and left out some of the other critical issues. Against this backdrop, it is now anticipated that the 2014 parliamentary elections will proceed without any participation by the opposition, condemning the parliament (whose powers are limited) to another period of virtual irrelevance for a large swathe of the Bahraini population. If institutions and dialogue processes fail to create spaces for conflict resolution, tensions will continue to play out on the streets. The exclusion of much of the country's civil society and youth from the political process, through tight restrictions on political speech and activity, is not simply a peripheral complaint; it is one of the fundamental reasons why the political crisis is continuing and why Bahrain's disaffected young people continue to drive unrest.

**In the search for a resolution of what are fundamentally local disputes, Bahrain has a major asset in the form of its local civil society, which has traditionally been one of the most developed and sophisticated in the Gulf.**

Given this stalemate and Bahrain's small size, there appears to be an increasing sense within both government and opposition circles that Bahrain's political future may be determined largely by the 'Great Game' politics of larger powers. Above all, those powers include the United States, which has its main Gulf naval base in Bahrain and is the main external security guarantor of the Gulf monarchies; the United Kingdom, the former colonial power; Saudi Arabia, which is Bahrain's main economic partner and a key ally of the Bahraini ruling family; and Iran, which ruled Bahrain centuries ago and which likes to style itself as a protector of Shia Muslims. For this reason, all sides in Bahrain are closely watching the tentative rapprochement between Iran and the US, while various factions within the government and the opposition are heavily engaged in lobbying abroad, especially in the US and the UK.

There are various problems with this growing tendency to look to outside powers for a solution to the current crisis. On the one hand, the interests of such powers are different from those of the local players. The US, Iran and Saudi Arabia have many issues at stake between them and will not necessarily prioritize Bahrain's interests, nor even the interests of their allies in Bahrain. Meanwhile, if local actors see international factors, especially their proxy role in the region's conflicts, as the main determinants of the future, the local conflicts are likely to become more entrenched and difficult to solve (Iraq and Lebanon are perhaps exemplars of this scenario).

On the other hand, the key issues at stake in Bahrain are local ones. Resistance to the existing power structure and system of government is very often directly related to the local distribution of employment, property and rents from oil revenues, among other factors. Opposition is concentrated in poorer, predominantly Shia villages on the outskirts of the capital, where many inhabitants feel economically and politically marginalized. The residents of such areas make up a large part of the constituency that is disillusioned with the existing social contract between state and society. This dynamic goes back decades and has often led to mass protests, including during an extended period in the second half of the 1990s (while most of the world heard about unrest in Bahrain only in 2011).

In the search for a resolution of what are fundamentally local disputes, Bahrain has a major asset in the form of its local civil society, which has traditionally been one of the most developed and sophisticated in the Gulf. Bahrain was the first Gulf country to have trade unions, the second (after Saudi Arabia) to have a newspaper and the first to have a formal civil association for women. It had very active social and political clubs in the 1950s and 1960s and has a tradition of active political discussion at its *majalis* (regular social gatherings held in homes, which are also important political gatherings both in Bahrain and in Kuwait, where they are known as *diwanīyat*).<sup>5</sup> Bahrain's civil society has been damaged and divided over the past three years, owing to a combination of government repression and political polarization; even the trade union federation has split into two, one pro-government and the other more oppositionist. Nevertheless Bahrain's civil society could play an important role in resolving the current crisis and putting options on the table – if it were allowed to do so more freely than it is today.

While the uprising and subsequent crackdown have proved socially divisive, many Bahrainis are capable of seeing the political conflict from multiple perspectives and have friends and family across the political divide, albeit usually fewer than formerly. Discussions and interviews with Bahrainis of various political stripes reveal that despite the divisions, there are opportunities for reaching common ground – not least the need to prioritize Bahraini interests over and above those of the regional and international powers, which all too often see the possible political outcomes in Bahrain as a zero-sum game.

Those serious about seeking a political resolution through an effective dialogue and an easing of government restrictions on civil society would be helped by freedom of speech and the media in Bahrain; however, the trend is moving in the other direction. There is a huge proliferation of NGOs in Bahrain – from issue-based societies such as the Bahrain Human Rights Society and the Bahrain Transparency Society to professional associations such as the Bapco and Alba trade union, the Teachers' Association and the Journalists' Association, as well as social groups and charities. But those organizations that have been critical of the authorities have come under severe pressure, including risks to personal safety. Restrictions on criticism are tightening.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, there is tolerance mainly for pro-government groups or, to some extent, for NGOs that work towards social reconciliation in an 'apolitical' way.

The Bahraini authorities, for their part, argue that they are more supportive of NGOs and political groups than are most other Gulf countries. But the bar is not set high. Moreover, Bahrain has a more popular opposition movement than neighbouring states; its existence goes back decades and thus predates the introduction (in 2006) of an NGO law and the subsequent formal recognition of NGOs. Mass movements in Bahrain have repeatedly called for more popular representation and for a genuinely powerful parliament – which the country had, albeit briefly, in the 1970s. Two decades later, a petition to restore the 1973 parliament garnered some 25,000 signatures or about 7 per cent of the citizenry at the time – a substantial number, given the repression of such political expression. Today there remains a substantial core of opposition activists convinced that history is on their side and that the regime is bound eventually either to fall or to be substantially altered. The popularity and long history of such views belie the assumptions often made in the West that the Gulf monarchies

---

<sup>5</sup> This long history counters frequently made assumptions that civil society has weak roots in the region, especially in the Gulf. Criticism that Arab civil society pursues elite and foreign agendas owing to the proliferation of foreign funding, for example in Egypt, is largely unfounded in the case of Bahrain.

<sup>6</sup> Bayoumy, Y., 'Bahrain toughens penalties for insulting king', Reuters, 5 February 2014, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/05/us-bahrain-law-idUSBREA140KX20140205>.

are largely depoliticized and stable or that demands for political participation and human rights are concepts alien to the region.

Since 2011 the preference of the ruling establishment has been either for maintaining the status quo, in the hope that there will be a gradual attrition of opposition morale and demands, or (in the case of the reformist camp within the government) for concluding an elite bargain with Al Wefaq, preferably with the buy-in of pro-government political associations. But such an agreement is unlikely to offer a sustainable resolution, given the fragmentation of all political forces, including the opposition. A wider popular bargain involving civil society could play a far more important role in widening the debate about Bahrain's future, crowdsourcing ideas for solving specific problems and expanding the social base for a future political resolution.

Ultimately, solving the ongoing political crisis will require addressing the problems that continue to shape community divisions. Such an approach would include sharing political power and distributing state resources in a more inclusive way. Much of the authority to introduce those (and other) changes lies in the hands of the government and ruling family, but these (overlapping and internally divided) actors seem to have limited incentives to negotiate reforms that would constrain their own power and place their wealth under greater scrutiny. This is especially true at a time when Western governments are increasingly reliant on traditional Gulf allies in what they see as an ever more unstable region, and less optimistic than they once were about the prospects for political transitions and democratic outcomes elsewhere in the Arab world.

By continuing to promote trade, expand their naval bases and lavish praise on minor reforms amid repeated major setbacks, the UK and the US are offering few significant incentives for major reform – or, put another way, disincentives for continuing with the status quo. But a less restrictive atmosphere will be needed if there is to be progress towards ending the ongoing political crisis in Bahrain. While it may be understandable that domestic political elites will prioritize the safeguarding of their own privileges, it is also clear that the protracted political stalemate in Bahrain is creating security problems, damaging the country's economy and weakening its social fabric. The country's leaders should rethink their stance in the light of the growing violence in the region and the risk that Bahrain will become a pawn of the larger powers. Independent civil society in Bahrain should be seen not as posing a threat to political stability but as paving a way back to it.

---

# Political Disputes and Failed Dialogues

## Bahrain's political disputes

Bahrain's political disputes are essentially local ones over the distribution of power and wealth within the existing nation-state.<sup>7</sup> Key issues of contention have re-emerged in the uprisings throughout the 20th century and thus long predate both the Arab uprisings and the Iranian revolution in 1979. The various opposition groups complain of political and economic marginalization and seek empowerment within the Bahraini nation-state, for example by being able to elect the government, having a more powerful parliament and being free from the fear of police brutality. They also want a greater share of the country's resources, highlighting concerns about high-level corruption that robs the public of land, oil and funding. And they complain of discrimination in the allocation of public-sector jobs, housing and infrastructure, owing to nepotism and a preference for those assumed to be loyal. These opposition groups include Al Wefaq, which is a moderately Shia Islamist group that seeks an elected government under a constitutional monarchy,<sup>8</sup> and the more uncompromising Coalition for a Republic and February 14th Youth Coalition, which have united Islamists and secularists behind the call to establish a republic.

Al Wefaq won 45 per cent of the vote in the last election in which it took part (in 2010). Although it is frequently accused by government hardliners of pursuing a 'foreign' agenda, it appears to be the largest indigenous political movement in Bahrain. It is supported by a broad spectrum of Bahraini Shia who subscribe to various schools of Shia Islam and range from the wealthy to the unemployed. Politically, it has sought to keep its distance from Iran. Its secretary-general, Sheikh Ali Salman, who is in his forties, follows Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani's line of thinking rather than Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Iranian model of clerical rule, and has cited Morocco's Justice and Development party as an example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy. However, Bahrain's most senior Shia cleric, the elderly Sheikh Issa Qassim (sometimes called Ayatollah), who has significant informal influence on the group and its constituents, is thought to be more sympathetic to the Iranian theological-political model of *vilayet-e-faqih*. In practice, Sheikh Issa has generally sought to preserve the role of Bahrain's Shia clerics – notably over the family courts<sup>9</sup> – rather than to expand it; indeed, the more revolutionary opposition activists in Bahrain tend not to number among his followers.

Another critical issue is Bahrain's citizenship policy: the government has naturalized some 90,000 people since the king came to power in 1999 – a huge number given that there are only around half a million nationals of the country.<sup>10</sup> Opposition groups complain that a disproportionately large share of the newly naturalized are Sunni Muslims recruited from abroad to fill the ranks of the army and the police force. Bahrain's naturalization policy contrasts with that of most Gulf states, which have tight restrictions on awarding citizenship in order to preserve the privileges of citizens (citizenship typically

---

<sup>7</sup> These are discussed in detail in Jane Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*, Chatham House MENA Programme Paper, June 2012, at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/pr0612kinninmont.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Wefaq accepts the legitimacy of the king and ruling family, rather than seeking clerical rule, but has sought to protect the traditional power of the religious clerics over Bahrain's family courts. At the same time, it has supported restrictions on alcohol and entertainment for religious and social reasons.

<sup>9</sup> Kinninmont, J., 'Framing the Family Law: A Case Study of Bahrain's Identity Politics', *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 1 (1) (2011): 53–68.

<sup>10</sup> There are no published statistics on the sectarian make-up of the population, but the data on population growth indicate that naturalizations are taking place on a large scale.



entails access to state services and benefits). However, it is alleged that the naturalizations in Bahrain are taking place in order to change the sectarian balance of the country – the presumption being that newly naturalized Sunnis will be more loyal to the ruling family. Certainly, the government has in the past questioned the loyalty of Shia citizens, especially since the Iranian revolution. Moreover, Shia are *de facto* barred from joining the security forces, with a few token exceptions, while the government openly recruits for the military overseas, especially in Pakistan. Meanwhile, in July the law was amended to allow the government to strip citizenship from any Bahraini deemed to have harmed the interests of the country. Most officials deny the existence of any official statistics on the sectarian breakdown but, as noted above, some officials now estimate that the country is ‘half and half’, or 52 per cent Shia.<sup>11</sup> This compares with the commonly cited external estimates that the country has become 60–70 per cent Shia. The difference may reflect the large number of naturalizations carried out in recent years.

There are internal differences within the government and ruling family about the best way to maintain their hold on power and safeguard their economic interests (senior royals are major landowners, hold key government posts and often play a leading role in state-owned enterprises). King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa instituted a wide-ranging programme of reforms after coming to power in 1999. Those reforms, launched in 2001, included a general amnesty for both political prisoners and state officials who had been found guilty of abuses, an overhaul of the police and security forces and the reinstatement of a parliament, which had been dissolved in the 1970s following a three-year experiment. Yet the reforms were controversial because Sheikh Hamad promulgated a new constitution that diluted the power of elected parliamentary deputies relative to appointed ones, and upgraded his own status from that of emir to king. Later his son, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, oversaw the implementation of a programme of economic and labour-market reforms aimed at diversifying the economy. In practice these reforms reduced the economic and business influence of Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the uncle of the king, who has been in office since 1971 and is thus the world’s longest-serving prime minister.

Meanwhile, the continuation in power of Sheikh Khalifa, a key conservative and a long-standing target of opposition ire, was seen by many oppositionists as a sign that Bahrain’s reform era did not constitute a real break with the past. Since 2011, when many protesters called for his resignation, Sheikh Khalifa has strengthened his own position, capitalizing on alliances with other Gulf royals, leading business people (some of whom were displeased with the crown prince’s labour-market reforms for pushing up wages) and senior members of the security establishment, especially the heads of the army and the royal court (who are brothers).

The 2011 uprising was a symptom of the failure of the limited reforms after 2001 to satisfy Bahrain’s diverse political constituencies. Those who wanted greater political opening felt betrayed and complained that every step forward was accompanied by two steps backward. Meanwhile, those in the ruling elite who favoured the status quo saw the uprising as an indication that it had been naïve to institute reforms and that the changes had led only to further instability. Underscoring their view that a tough approach towards security needed to be taken, thousands were arrested, imprisoned or dismissed from their jobs under a three-month ‘state of national safety’.

The government’s supporters range from wealthy supporters of the status quo to the less well-off, who see the status quo as preferable to a putative opposition takeover. The latter fear the opposition has a sectarian Islamist agenda and that they (as Sunnis or as naturalized citizens) would become

---

<sup>11</sup> Private interviews conducted by the authors in London and Manama, 2012–13.

more marginalized or (in the case of naturalized citizens) could even be thrown out of the country altogether. They are represented by groups such as Al Asala, the Salafist political society (under Bahraini law, a society is the closest thing to a political party that is permitted); Al Menbar, which is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood; and the Gathering of National Unity, an umbrella group formed in February 2011 as a reaction against the opposition uprising (also known as the Al Fateh group because its founders first convened at a rally at the Al Fateh mosque in Manama).

The above indicates how Bahrain's political divisions and its identity politics – both sectarian (Sunni/Shia) and ethnic (that is, citizens by birth versus naturalized citizens) – are fuelled by competition for political power and economic resources. At the same time, complicate that competition: community solidarities and perceptions of loyalty and discrimination mean that the ethnic and sectarian divisions do not neatly map onto rich–poor or political insider–outsider divisions. Thus, while much of the opposition is Shia, there are also well-off pro-government Shia. By the same token, Sunnis are to be found among the oppositionists – most prominently Ebrahim Sharif, secretary-general of the secular nationalist political society Wa'ad, who was imprisoned for his role in the 2011 protests. Indeed, in the 1950s and 1960s most of the opposition leaders were urban Sunnis, often educated in Cairo and Beirut and inspired by Arab nationalism.

Identity politics also affect the foreign alliances that Bahrain's contending political factions can forge – whether direct working alliances or coalitions of sympathizers. The regional and international context of Bahrain's domestic political crisis is explored in the final section of this paper.

### Failed dialogues

Since 2011 there have been various efforts to hold a dialogue between members and supporters of the government and members of the opposition. These processes have been designed by the authorities, and the opposition has complained they are rigged, although the formats have varied; none has been successful to date (see Box 1). The failure of these dialogue processes has undermined groups that support political compromise and tended to strengthen the hand of those who are sceptical about the possibility of such compromise. Yet disillusionment with the formal state-sponsored dialogue processes does not translate into a lack of interest in dialogue *per se*. Much could be done at the level of civil society to generate ideas for a political resolution to Bahrain's political crisis – both the crisis in general and specific issues. But the tight restrictions on civil society and the lack of freedom of speech greatly reduce the space for activity of this kind.

**Much could be done at the level of civil society to generate ideas for a political resolution to Bahrain's political crisis – both the crisis in general and specific issues. But the tight restrictions on civil society and the lack of freedom of speech greatly reduce the space for activity of this kind.**

In the summer of 2012 officials began to tell Bahrain's Western allies that they had a plan for a new political dialogue in which sensitive issues, ranging from the structure of the parliament to naturalization policy, would be on the table. That plan took some months to materialize, largely owing to disagreements about who should be represented at the talks. The authorities wanted Al Wefaq to negotiate with the more 'loyalist' or pro-government societies. Those groups included the two main Sunni Islamist societies, Al Asala and Al Menbar, and the Gathering of National Unity. In

this context it should be noted that in contrast with the other Gulf states, Bahrain includes some Sunni Islamists in the government: the minister for foreign affairs, Ghanim Al Buainain, is from Al Asala, while the minister for human rights, Salah Ali, is from Al Menbar. The traditionally pro-government stance of Bahrain's Sunni Islamists has meant they are generally not viewed as a threat by other Gulf governments, which are otherwise anxious about the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region as a whole.

### Box 1: Attempts at dialogue

In February 2011 the crown prince embarked on discussions with Al Wefaq but these stalled when the latter insisted that its demands for a new constitution were non-negotiable. Immediately thereafter, and as other opposition groups escalated their protests, Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) forces entered Bahrain, the protest camp at Pearl Roundabout was cleared by force and mass arrests began – all of which put paid to any continuation of the dialogue during the three-month state of emergency that ensued. In the summer of that year, a month-long formal National Dialogue was held.

However, Al Wefaq was given just five out of the 300 seats for representatives at the talks, while the various less formal and legally unrecognized opposition movements that had played a larger role in starting the protests were excluded altogether (that is, there were no representatives either from the republican groups that the government sees as beyond the pale – Haq, Al Wafa and the Bahrain Freedom Movement – or from the youth movement February 14th). Al Wefaq later walked out of the talks, saying it was impossible to make progress. The NGOs and professionals who had attended the talks called for a number of changes to the constitution to increase somewhat the powers of the parliament, but both the scale of the changes demanded and the lack of involvement of the opposition meant those steps had little impact on the dispute between the government and the opposition, which saw them as too little, too late. In 2012 there were bilateral contacts between Bahrain's licensed political societies and the royal court, which began in the approach to the first anniversary of the uprising but appeared to run out of steam once the Formula One race, a flashpoint for the protests the previous year, was over.

Note: For more detail on this process, see Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*.

For its part, Al Wefaq had been seeking a direct dialogue with the authorities, on the basis that its dispute was with them, not the pro-government groups. Al Wefaq also believed that the pro-government groups were likely to fall into line with whatever the government agreed to – a view that infuriated the pro-government groups. In addition, Al Wefaq wanted international mediation or international guarantees that the results of the dialogue would be implemented; but the authorities have had no interest in such international involvement. At the same time Al Wefaq faced criticism from other opposition activists who were opposed to dialogue while repression was continuing on the streets, as well as from pro-government groups, which blamed it for all clashes between protesters and the police in Bahrain. Unable to secure a direct dialogue with senior royals or senior government ministers, Al Wefaq eventually agreed to participate in a dialogue process that brought together eight representatives of opposition political societies, eight representatives of the more 'loyalist' societies and eight parliamentary deputies each from the lower (elected) and upper (appointed) houses of the legislature (a body that is boycotted by the opposition), along with three lower-level government ministers – for justice, public works and education.

The 'National Consensus Dialogue' began in 2013, with the aim of reaching agreement on a set of principles for a political resolution, which would then be sent to the king for his approval. During a research trip by the authors to Bahrain in May 2013, a recurring theme in discussions with Bahrainis

who held diverging political views was what they perceived (with frustration) as the slow pace of the dialogue and a focus on the dialogue process to the exclusion of everything else. This could be attributed, among other things, to the extreme mistrust between those involved and the lack of clarity about the ground rules – notably that decisions should be reached by ‘consensus’ rather than majority opinion.<sup>12</sup> The methodology for reaching consensus was unclear, while the language on not requiring a majority was seen by the opposition as anti-democratic, although it addressed some of the fears of the government’s supporters.

That said, the dialogue constituted an acknowledgment of the need for a political resolution of the political crisis, whereas the dominant discourse throughout 2012 from the government and pro-government groups had portrayed the opposition as composed of violent traitors who could not participate in such discussions. The empowerment of the crown prince, who was appointed first deputy prime minister in early 2013, and the apparent interest of Saudi Arabia in supporting the dialogue, appeared to contribute to creating an environment more conducive to talks.

But the dialogue was outpaced by events on the street and throughout the region. On the one hand, a gradual rise in violence by a minority of opposition activists, including several (casualty-free) car bombs and an explosion (again casualty-free) outside a mosque in the royal family’s heartland of Riffa, was met with a hardening of tactics by the security forces and the expansion of their powers. During the authors’ visit to Shia villages in May 2013, residents’ accounts of recent arrests were based on narratives that suggested the security forces had arrested people at random. For their part, officials have told the authors that the police had acted with ‘excessive restraint’, because, in their view, their hands were tied by internationally backed reforms of the security forces following the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI). This was a commission of international lawyers appointed by the king to investigate allegations of human rights abuses in the first half of 2011, in the hope of drawing a line under the events of that year and helping to dispel local and international criticism. The BICI’s findings – including that there had been killings and systematic torture of people held in custody – may have come as a surprise to the king, who tends not to be involved in much of the day-to-day business of government.

The implementation of the reforms that the government had promised in response to the BICI recommendations was piecemeal and continued to be contested within government circles; in private discussions, officials still disputed the commission’s findings.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, a call for mass protests in August 2013 (by activists using the name ‘Tamarrod’) did not result in large-scale demonstrations, for two reasons. First, Al Wefaq, keen to build confidence in the dialogue, did not take part in the call for protests; and second, the authorities pre-empted the demonstrations through arrests in many Shia villages. But the authorities could now be confident that the opposition would not be able to repeat the large-scale demonstrations of 2011,<sup>14</sup> as mass arrests and sackings had reduced the numbers willing to take part in street protests and as a degree of fatigue had set in. Thus rather than being rewarded for cooperating in trying to keep the streets calm, Al Wefaq had to witness the authorities interpreting the small scale of the protests as a sign that the opposition was weak.

---

<sup>12</sup> ‘Consensus ... is even more powerful than voting with a crashing majority ... an agreement that all parties can support, accept, live with, or at least, not object [to] ... doesn’t require a majority of opinions’, according to the Bahrain National Consensus Dialogue website, 2013 (see <http://www.nd.bh/en/index.php/dialogue/mechanism>).

<sup>13</sup> For more on Bahrain’s post-BICI environment, see Coates Ulrichsen, K. and Fakhro, E., ‘Post-BICI Bahrain: Between reform and stagnation’, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen-elham-fakhro/post-bici-bahrain-between-reform-and-stagnation>.

<sup>14</sup> Private interviews by the authors with officials in London in October 2013, and in Bahrain in November 2013.

A few weeks later, in September 2013, a senior member of Al Wefaq, Khalil Marzooq, was handed the flag of the more radical opposition February 14th Youth Coalition while he was speaking at a rally, and waved it at the crowd. The authorities, which hold February 14th to be a terrorist group, arrested Marzooq the following day on terrorism-related charges. Al Wefaq responded by boycotting the subsequent sessions of the dialogue. In January 2014, as the opposition boycott continued, the government announced the suspension of the dialogue. Marzooq was eventually acquitted of all charges brought against him, but the damage to the dialogue effort was lasting.

A widening gulf emerged between the expectations of the opposition, which tended to feel that after all the costs and efforts of three years of protests and struggle, there was a need for large-scale action that genuinely redistributed political power, and those of the authorities, who were inclined to think that the opposition had wasted its chance in 2011 and would no longer be offered the concessions which the crown prince had briefly mentioned at that time.<sup>15</sup>

In the run-up to the 2014 elections, the authorities have hoped that Al Wefaq would return to the parliament, in order to bolster that body's credibility, and from January to August there was a series of back-channel discussions involving the crown prince, the royal court and a range of political societies, including Al Wefaq. In September 2014 the crown prince announced that these talks had provided the basis for a new five-point framework for dialogue, consisting of areas of common ground that had been identified.<sup>16</sup> The main points were a commitment to redefining electoral districts to make them more representative; giving parliament the ability to question the prime minister<sup>17</sup> and revising the appointment process for the upper house of parliament (though it was not specified how); new rights of approval for the parliament on the appointment of the cabinet;<sup>18</sup> a commitment to further judicial reform; a commitment to the rule of law; and new codes of conduct for the security forces.<sup>19</sup> The crown prince obtained signatures in support of his initiative from prominent members of society who are generally among his supporters, including from the business community, and said that his discussions with these leading figures had also included a call for active participation in the forthcoming elections.

But these claims of consensus were rejected by Al Wefaq and the broader opposition, who said that the proposed reforms were superficial and left all the real political power in the hands of the executive. This once again illustrated the mismatch of expectations between the two sides. From the point of view of the crown prince and his supporters, this was a framework that should provide the opposition with incentives to re-enter parliament and thereby kick-start an ongoing process of gradual reforms. For the opposition, the offer was unconvincing. In terms of the substance, the five points fell short of the 'seven principles' framework they had agreed with the crown prince in 2011, which had included discussion of naturalization policies, governmental corruption and a fully empowered elected chamber of parliament (which they interpreted as meaning the removal of the upper house). There was no mention of political prisoners or sectarian discrimination, issues that now matter to many of Bahrain's Shia communities more than the constitution and the structure of the parliament. And in terms of the process, Al Wefaq feared that if it ended its boycott of parliament it would be conferring legitimacy on an ineffective body

---

<sup>15</sup> This is a subject that is frequently raised in discussions with officials. For example, a government minister interviewed by the author in London in 2013 commented that '2011 will never happen again'.

<sup>16</sup> Bahrain News Agency, 'Crown Prince Delivers Dialogue Framework', 18 September 2014, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/633493>.

<sup>17</sup> According to the 2002 constitution, parliament can question ministers (Articles 65 and 66), but the elected chamber of parliament is not allowed to raise the issue of confidence in the prime minister (Article 67).

<sup>18</sup> It was not clear exactly what new rights would be involved. According to the statement, these rights would include the ability to reject the government's annual plan; currently (since 2012) the parliament has the right to reject the government's four-year plan.

<sup>19</sup> A new code of conduct for the police had already been introduced in 2012.

through which it would not be able to obtain any political results.<sup>20</sup> It would lose one of the few political cards it had to play, with no guarantee that it would obtain anything in return.

Shortly afterwards, the government drew up new electoral boundaries which Al Wefaq said were likely to give it slightly fewer seats in parliament if it did field candidates. The authorities said the new constituencies reflected demographic changes in recent years, widely interpreted to mean the effects of naturalization. The move may have been intended to demonstrate to Al Wefaq that if it continued to reject the crown prince's offer, it would lose out; however, it was perceived by many in the opposition as an indication that the reform promises were not serious in the first place. All in all, the episode underlined the mismatch of expectations and the deficit of trust.

### The impact of the failures of dialogue

The failure to make progress through the formal political dialogue and elite-level back-channel talks has contributed to political and social polarization in Bahrain and increased the risk of further radicalization of the country's opposition forces. While the opposition blames the government for setting up dialogue processes that are rigged in favour of the authorities – where government supporters dominate and the mechanisms for implementing any decisions are uncertain – the government and its supporters blame the opposition for stalling or sabotaging the dialogue through repeated boycotts and walkouts. On both sides, the advocates of dialogue have come under criticism from within their own camp for appearing to be weak.

The relatively reformist elements within the government and the ruling family – particularly those who are close to the crown prince and have been associated with some of the BICI implementation processes – have become increasingly discouraged. Some of the younger-generation civil servants and ruling family members, who know only the 'reform era' and barely remember the uprising of the 1990s, were shocked by the shootings in 2011; and they suffered a further shock when the BICI report found there had been systematic torture of opposition activists held in custody. Often strongly supportive of the crown prince, they have sought to make a difference at their ministries, working on BICI-related reform projects, despite resistance from other parts of the establishment. But at the same time these mildly reformist elements are angry with the opposition. The gradual rise in violent attacks on the police is taking its toll on this constituency. Often criticized by relatives and colleagues for being naïve about the opposition, its members have no sympathy with opposition boycotts and walkouts. Though frequently Western-educated, they tend to be defensive in the face of criticism from Western NGOs and media organizations, arguing that Bahrain is more democratic, open and free than any other Gulf monarchy (not that the bar is set high, however).

Meanwhile, the conservatives within the ruling family have been strengthened since 2011 – not least because the prime minister and his allies appear to have consolidated their alliance with Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa and Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, the two influential brothers who head the royal court and the army, respectively, and whose branch of the family is nicknamed the 'Khawalid'. Prime Minister Sheikh Khalifa has become increasingly visible, including through personal appearances, as a patron of public events and at business conferences, as well as on the 'We Are All Khalifa' billboards that have proliferated around the capital, Manama.

---

<sup>20</sup> Some of its supporters suggested that participation in the parliament would be worthwhile because it would help build the goodwill needed for a fresh dialogue but that no one should expect meaningful power to be exercised within the parliament in its present form. Discussion with Bahraini opposition activists in London in September 2014.



While there may be a broad range of views on reform within the ruling establishment, it is often unclear who is in which camp and how the reformist elements relate to one another. Some are pragmatists and opportunists whose positions have changed over time; others are ministers who cheered the crackdown in 2011 and then embraced reforms after the BICI process, obtaining international support and gaining access to officials in Western capitals as champions of reform. Still others were initially sympathetic to the opposition but have become embittered, feeling they had been let down by the opposition in 2011.

Contradictory and inconsistent decisions and ‘one step forward, two steps backward’ reforms are suggestive of internal power struggles. At the same time, it is easy to exaggerate splits, and to some extent the perception of splits may be deliberately exploited as a justification for not making more political concessions. As part of a family-based regime, senior royals are not bound together by an ideology – rather they have differing views and are frequently engaged in personal rivalries – but ultimately they share a strong interest in the survival of the dynastic system.

In the opposition camp, Al Wefaq has been criticized by its own constituency for failing to obtain any clear results from the dialogue with the government. Its attempts to build confidence with the government often draw criticism from its own constituents, who see such efforts as signalling weakness. For its part, the authorities react sharply to Al Wefaq statements that are critical of the government or which praise Bahrain’s ‘revolution’. For example, Al Wefaq leader Sheikh Ali has publicly called on protesters not to criticize the king or crown prince, a call that resonated with some activists but was openly mocked by more radical protesters. However, in December 2013 he was arrested and charged with (though not tried for) inciting religious hatred and spreading false information after he had accused the government of carrying out sectarian policies. Indeed, he has often been arrested and interrogated but has not been imprisoned since the 2011 uprising (in the 1990s he served time for his role in the uprising and was subsequently exiled to London), although some other members of Al Wefaq have been sent to jail. More recently, in July 2014, Sheikh Ali was questioned by the authorities about why Al Wefaq had met with the US Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Labour, Tom Malinowski, and what had been discussed at that meeting. Earlier in 2013, he was accused of ‘insulting the Interior Ministry’ after Al Wefaq had organized an exhibition highlighting police abuses that was held in a self-styled ‘revolution museum’ (later destroyed by the police).

[Attacks on police are routinely filmed, and the clips are edited to include heroic music and posted on YouTube by various local village-based groups and self-styled ‘brigades’.](#)

The criminalization of such criticism and the conflation of opposition rhetoric with terrorism and crime weaken the hand of those members of the opposition, such as Sheikh Ali, who are determined to advocate non-violence. Clashes between the police and protesters were routine in Bahrain well before 2011: typically police officers would deploy tear gas to disperse protesters who were hurling stones or burning tyres. In 2011 the BICI found that 35 people had been killed in political violence that occurred during the protests in February and March of that year. Most were protesters and five were police officers (these numbers should be seen in the context of a low-crime, traditionally peaceful country that has a population of just one million). Since 2012 protester violence against the police has gradually increased. In March 2014 three policemen – one Emirati and two Bahraini – were killed in an explosion in the village of Daih amid riots at the funeral of a young man who had died in police detention. Attacks on police are routinely filmed, and the clips are edited to include heroic music and posted on YouTube by various local village-based groups and self-styled ‘brigades’.

While recent protester violence has been targeted mainly against the police, in November 2012 five explosions in the ethnically mixed region of Adliya killed two expatriate workers. Initially, mainstream opposition leaders responded with suspicion and suggested it was a false flag operation carried out by the security services. They rejected the idea that the opposition could be capable of such violence and indicated their deep distrust of the authorities. However, government supporters saw the opposition response as disingenuous and as failing to address their own very real fears. The officially recognized opposition political societies, including Al Wefaq, went on to release a joint declaration of ‘non-violence principles’, which had apparently been in the works for some time but was speeded up in response to the explosions.

There was no positive reaction from the authorities, and the potentially constructive impact of the statement was lost amid a wider security crackdown in which 31 people, including two former Al Wefaq parliamentary deputies, were stripped of their nationality. In fact, it is generally the case in Bahrain that when opposition leaders condemn political violence, there is no positive response from the government. For their part, government representatives suggest that opposition statements condemning violence do not go far enough and are not specific enough. They suggest that such statements are insincere, or they express unhappiness with the tone that Al Wefaq uses – for example, they claim that the political society sends out an intentionally mixed message by stating that both the police and the protesters are to blame for any violence.

Meanwhile, the ‘loyalist’ political societies – that is, those that are more closely aligned with the government than with the opposition, though they seek some reforms – have fragmented since 2011, when they briefly joined forces against the opposition. They have expressed various views on the political dialogue in Bahrain. In 2012 they rejected the idea of dialogue with the opposition while violence was taking place on the street, for which they held Al Wefaq largely responsible and which they saw as a sign of bad faith. But in 2013 representatives of several of the ‘loyalist’ societies took part in the National Consensus Dialogue. Those groups have been deeply troubled by the rapprochement between the US and Iran, and some believe that Al Wefaq walked out of the formal dialogue on Iranian orders. According to one former member of the Gathering of National Unity, many of his peers who became politicized in response to the 2011 uprising are returning to their former state of political apathy – one in which they see political activism as all headache and no progress. Moreover, Sunni Islamists, especially those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its Bahraini offshoot, Al Menbar, are very wary of courting controversy at a time when their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf are facing repression. They value the relationship they have with the Bahraini government, which, viewed in the regional context, is unusually positive.

Among Bahrain’s large educated middle class and its youth are many people who could potentially lead grassroots dialogue efforts and play a constructive role in drawing up a political settlement. But many of Bahrain’s middle class, especially those who are not Islamists and who are young, complain of a lack of representation. They are cynical about the government, suspicious of the religiosity of the main opposition societies and distrustful of direct action and violence. Pessimism about events in the region as a whole is another factor. Arguably, the fact that many such people have no affiliation with existing political groups could be an advantage for embarking on independent and cross-sectarian civil-society initiatives. However, a large number of those who could potentially act as moderate forces, cross-community interlocutors and bridge-builders see little reason to take the risk that comes with involvement in politics and would rather focus on their personal lives, build their careers and, in some cases, plan how to emigrate.



# Bahraini Civil Society, Youth and Informal Political Processes

## Bahraini civil society

Bahrain's civil society has traditionally been seen as one of the strongest and most active among those of the Gulf states. As early as the 1950s, there were calls and attempts to form labour unions and professional associations that would play a constructive role in the country's social and political life. The establishment of the General Trade Union in the 1950s resulted from attempts by young, nationalist-oriented activists – both Sunni and Shia – to challenge the 'evils of the status quo' in the country.<sup>21</sup> More recently, the General Committee for Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU), founded in 2002, sought to consolidate the labour movement to launch more effective actions to strengthen workers' rights. Bahrain's 'thick' civil society has thus meant significant political mobilization by diverse segments of the citizenry. But that process is mapped over existing, politicized cleavages within society; and since the beginning of the 2011 uprising, splits have emerged within formerly unified segments of civil society. For example, divisions within the labour movement were cemented with the establishment of the Bahrain Labour Union Free Federation (BLUFF), which stands in opposition to the GCBTU, highlighting the political and sectarian divisions in the country.<sup>22</sup>

Civil society operates under significant restrictions.<sup>23</sup> The law makes a distinction between 'political societies', which, as noted above, are the closest thing to political parties in the Gulf, and civil-society organizations, which are prohibited from participating in political activities.<sup>24</sup> The Ministry of Social Development, which is responsible for licensing and regulating civil-society organizations, is empowered to examine the minutes of all civil-society organization meetings and to dismiss the board of any such organization. The latter power has been exercised four times since 2010, in the case of the boards of the Bahrain Human Rights Society, the Bahrain Teachers' Society, the Bahrain Medical Society and the Bahrain Lawyers' Society.

Bahraini law criminalizes many forms of political expression, including ones that are regarded in the UK as human and civil rights. For example, it is illegal to 'offend' the king, to 'incite' protests or to 'disseminate false news'<sup>25</sup> – the last of which is often interpreted to mean criticism of the government, the monarch, the security forces or the judiciary.

Since the 2011 uprising, restrictions on political expression have been tightened. Amid the escalation of political violence and the associated fear of terrorism, the authorities have seized the opportunity to clamp down on many forms of political expression, whereby they have been encouraged by their core constituency, which is largely wealthy and Sunni. In July 2013 the pro-government parliament (which, as noted above, has been boycotted by opposition groups since 2011) called for new 'counter-

---

<sup>21</sup> Khalaf, A., 'Contentious politics in Bahrain', at <http://www.org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad, A., 'Politics impede Bahrain's labour movement', at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/01/bahrain-labor-movement-weak-politics.html>.

<sup>23</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, 'the government takes over and dissolves – more or less at will – organizations whose leaders criticize government officials and policies' – see 'Interfere, Restrict, Control: Restrictions on Freedom of Association in Bahrain', 23 June 2013, at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/06/20/interfere-restrict-control>.

<sup>24</sup> US State Department, *Bahrain Human Rights Report 2013*, at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220560.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Article 168 of the Penal Code.

terrorist' measures that greatly increased the powers of the security forces; at the same time it made a rare move to limit the powers of the king – specifically his discretion to pardon 'terrorists'. In February 2014 the penalty for 'any person who offends in public the Monarch of the Kingdom of Bahrain, the flag or the national emblem' was increased to up to seven years' imprisonment. Such vaguely worded laws are typical of authoritarian countries as they allow the authorities to cast a very wide net for possible offenders. For example, the Associated Press reported in May 2013 that a Bahraini citizen had been sentenced to three months in prison for draping a Bahraini flag on his truck during a demonstration in 2011, which prosecutors argued was an 'offence' to the flag. Several young men have been sentenced to a number of years in prison for tweets deemed to have insulted the king.

The authorities have repeatedly stated that if the country's officially recognized political societies can agree to a resolution of the current crisis – one that provides for power-sharing between the various competing factions – the government will implement it. However, Bahrain's opposition groups have called that statement disingenuous, not least because of the limits imposed by the government on 'acceptable' dissent and political speech. There are repeated allegations of the widespread abuse and torture of activists (made by, among others, Al Wefaq, the Bahrain Human Rights Society, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch). In June 2014 the elected municipal council of Manama, a body which was established in the 1920s in the first local elections to be held in the Gulf, was dissolved by the government on the grounds that it had been 'sidetracked' by politics; most of its members belonged to the opposition. And in July 2014 US diplomat Tom Malinowski was ordered to leave Manama after meeting with Al Wefaq.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, also in July 2014, the Justice Ministry dissolved the Shia Ulema Council (a long-established council of senior clerics) on the grounds that it had been serving 'sectarian' and 'political' purposes. It went on to file lawsuits to suspend Al Wefaq for allegedly violating principles of 'democracy' and 'transparency', and the smaller cross-sectarian opposition group Wa'ad for not having replaced its secretary-general, Ebrahim Sharif, one of the few Sunni Bahrainis to have been jailed for his part in the 2011 protests. (At the time of writing these lawsuits were still pending.)

### Grassroots efforts to reach across the sectarian divide

In January 2012 a group of more than 200 Bahraini citizens, led mainly by veteran secularists and leftists working together with younger Bahrainis, launched a civil-society initiative, the 'National Meeting', to build consensus among Bahrain's political groups and ultimately to 'secure a national agreement, to unite Bahrain's various political, social, and economic factions'.<sup>27</sup> Citing the divisions within Bahrain's civil society and the rise of extremist views, they sought to find a way to resolve the political crisis at the local level without external intervention. Their idea was to draw up a list of shared demands through a dialogue with the opposition and loyalist political societies; that list would then be submitted to the government and used as a basis for political reform and social reconciliation.

The 19 founders included Ali Fakhro, a former minister of health from an Arab nationalist political background and a member of one of the leading Sunni merchant families, who headed the initial meeting; veteran leftists such as Ali Rabeea, a former deputy from the Popular Bloc in Bahrain's

---

<sup>26</sup> The legal reason given for Malinowski's expulsion was that Bahrain had passed a law stating that Bahraini political societies were allowed to meet with officials from foreign governments only in the presence of a representative of the Bahraini Foreign Ministry.

<sup>27</sup> The information in this and the following paragraph comes largely from the private archive of Dr Ali Fakhro, one of the founders of the initiative.

first parliament, and former members of the Higher Executive Committee (Jassim Murad) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Persian Gulf; members of the current leftist and nationalist political parties such as Radhi Al Mousawi of Wa'ad and Hassan Madan of the Progressive Tribune; a member of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Jameel al-Alawi; and a journalist for the country's oldest newspaper, *Akhbar al-Khaleej*, whose editor is generally seen as close to the prime minister. Meeting at a traditionally Arab nationalist club, the Uruba Club, the 200 or so participants in the initiative elected a 20-strong committee, whose members were drawn from diverse political and religious backgrounds, to serve as interlocutor with Bahrain's various political societies.

Over the course of several months, the committee met repeatedly with the country's political societies to ask them to identify key demands and to participate in a shared dialogue with other such groups. But the initiative did not develop into a full-fledged dialogue, largely because – as noted above – the leaders of the loyalist political parties refused to enter into a dialogue with the opposition as long as violence was taking place on the streets. The committee continues to meet periodically and to discuss ways of combating sectarianism.

Also in 2012, a group of Bahraini young people held a rare public political debate, the 'Bahrain Debate', at the Alumni Club in the capital. The purpose was to discuss the country's political crisis in an open forum that was streamed live online; the organizers said the 50 tickets for the event sold out in less than 10 minutes. The debate was praised by Bahrainis from across the political spectrum as a rare example of civil-society dialogue, but it has not been repeated since. Describing efforts to hold a similar debate among students at the University of Bahrain the following year, one of the organizers told the author that 'people were not interested ... they were not ready to face the possible pressure'.<sup>28</sup> Another youth civil-society initiative, the Bahrain Foundation for Reconciliation and Social Discourse, headed by Suhail Algosaihi, has organized 'dialogue dinners' aimed at increasing understanding between various social groups, and has also held talks on reconciliation with various individuals.

### Bahraini youth perspectives

Young people make up the majority of the population in Bahrain: two-thirds of nationals are aged under thirty.<sup>29</sup> It was young people who were the driving force behind the uprising of 2011, and it is mainly young people who continue to clash with police on a regular basis. As elsewhere, though, Bahrain's youth is politically and socially diverse and thus cannot be seen as a single monolithic group.

The information in this section of the paper is derived from a series of discussions with Bahraini youth from across the political spectrum, held under the Chatham House Rule and involving between 10 and 30 people at a time. Some of those young people identified themselves with the opposition, others with the government and still others were somewhere between the two on the issue of the protracted political crisis, the key sticking points for the various political groups and possible ways out of the stalemate. Among a number of participants who had previously been cynical about and dismissive of the formal dialogue processes, the meetings demonstrated a desire to debate and, if possible, come to some kind of common understanding on divisive issues. In addition, the authors have carried out dozens of one-on-one interviews with young people active in civil society, politics and government since 2011.

---

<sup>28</sup> Interview by the authors via Skype, August 2014.

<sup>29</sup> As of 2011 (the latest year for which a detailed breakdown is available), there were 243,713 Bahraini nationals under 20 and 350,125 under 30 out of a citizenry of 584,688 – see the Central Informatics Organisation, *Statistical Abstract 2011*, Chapter 3, at <http://www.cio.gov.bh>.

There are sharp divides between young Bahrainis on issues such as the legitimacy of the monarchy and the country's political leadership, over who is ultimately responsible for the political crisis, and on political violence (see below for more details). But a recurring theme is the expectation that they should have more say in how their country is run. Regardless of whether they identified themselves as opposition activists, government supporters or neither, these young people expressed the conviction that politics would change and that there would be a greater degree of popular empowerment during their lifetimes. How this would happen was a source of much dispute. However, the clearly revealed desire for a long-term shift towards such empowerment is striking, especially given that the country's limited oil resources are insufficient to sustain the current level of economic benefits for a population that is growing and becoming more educated.

Regardless of whether they identified themselves as opposition activists, government supporters or neither, these young people expressed the conviction that politics would change and that there would be a greater degree of popular empowerment during their lifetimes.

Young people who are broadly sympathetic to the opposition express a fundamental desire for a redistribution of power. This goes beyond wanting the government to share power with the existing formal opposition, led by Al Wefaq. Rather, it is the desire for a shift in the way in which political power is exercised, regardless of who is exercising that power. This can be seen, for example, in the enthusiasm for human rights concepts. To some extent, depending on whether people think reform is a likely scenario, the debate over the legitimacy of the monarchy or the desire for a republic is secondary. For example, an Al Wefaq activist commented, 'We want reform, we understand the geography of this region,' by which he meant that monarchical systems will continue to be the norm in the Gulf; while a republican activist, asked if such a change were possible in the Gulf, replied, 'Revolution is unlikely but reform is even less likely.' The open platform that was provided by Bahrain's 2011 protests and the ongoing social media debate in the country suggest that oppositionists from the younger generation have a less hierarchical way of thinking than their elders. They assume the right to criticize and disagree with opposition leaders, community elders and religious clerics, some of whom now face routine humorous backchat on Twitter – a significant cultural change from a more deferential past.

Those who broadly identify with the opposition appear to be the majority in Bahrain, which helps explain why electoral boundaries are gerrymandered and the parliament kept weak. But there is a substantial segment of young people who identify themselves as 'pro-government' or 'loyalist'. This is not always because they are entirely satisfied with the authorities but may be because their cynicism about the opposition exceeds their cynicism about the government. Among the concerns they express are fears that empowering the Shia population would empower Islamists and religious clerics. Well-educated pro-government youth from elite families (especially, but not exclusively, from Sunni families) echo the traditional fears of the educated elites about empowering less well-off and educated people. Nevertheless, they tend to say that 'everyone wants change and reform'; they are likely to be exercised in particular about corruption, economic issues such as the shortage of housing and the weakness of the rule of law, but are more confident than the oppositionists that the monarchy could deliver this, or more risk-averse about political change.

Some young people who were initially politicized through their opposition to the 2011 protests have become more ready to criticize the government. This was seen, for example, in the response to the August 2014 arrest of Yacoub Al Slaise, a prominent youth leader who had founded a reformist (and

mostly Sunni) youth political society, the Al Fateh Youth Coalition. He was arrested on charges of ‘insulting the army’ in a tweet claiming that the military had been ordered to vote in a certain way in parliamentary elections. His arrest alarmed a constituency that had otherwise been unconcerned by, or even supportive of, the arrests of opposition activists for comments made on Twitter. A broad range of normally pro-government tweeps took to social media to express support for Al Slaise and make their own criticisms of the government, while a pro-government NGO, Citizens for Bahrain, stated that freedom of speech should be respected. In the event, Al Slaise was released within two days and tweeted his gratitude to the Interior Ministry, which had the immediate effect of relieving the pressure.

### Youth perspectives: areas of consensus ...

The discussions and interviews conducted by Chatham House with young Bahrainis suggest there is broad consensus among the country’s youth on the following principles, among others:

- *Bahrain has an identity and culture that is distinct from those of neighbouring countries and its political model needs to be different from those of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which have different societies and norms.* ‘I want to solve my own problems internally and independently – not in Tehran or Riyadh,’ one participant in the discussions said.<sup>30</sup> Some young people commented that national identity should be strengthened and made more inclusive to combat sectarianism. Several expressed the view that while a political compromise must be based on power-sharing, this should not be along sectarian lines, which would only entrench the community divisions that have increased markedly in recent years. Some quoted their parents as saying they could not remember sectarian hostility ever being as severe as it is now. Arguments about whether the main problem in Bahrain is political (requiring political reform) or sectarian (requiring social reconciliation) eventually led to an agreement that both issues needed to be addressed and were not mutually exclusive.
- *Addressing the socio-economic inequalities that underlie community divisions is vital.* Several young Bahraini economists highlighted unequal access to jobs, pay, scholarships and housing, and the unequal distribution of the benefits of economic growth before the 2011 uprising. While Shia Bahrainis have particular grievances about discrimination (such as exclusion from the security services), they also note the wider issue of economic success being linked to nepotism and political connections. ‘There needs to be more work to improve social mobility, which is neglected in our country. I never even heard of the concept until I went abroad to study,’ said one participant.<sup>31</sup> Young people at the start of their working lives are naturally concerned in particular about the long-term economic outlook, not least given the country’s oil dependence and the fact it has one of the fastest rates of population growth in the world. ‘It will be our generation that determines whether the transition to a post-oil economy succeeds,’ one participant said.<sup>32</sup> But these issues are being neglected by the country’s political leaders, who are focusing on short-term, ‘zero-sum games’. Job and career prospects are dimmer than they should be, and many educated young people – particularly from opposition backgrounds and Shia families – are seeking to move overseas.<sup>33</sup> The country’s long-term development is at serious risk of being neglected. At the same time, some young people are optimistic that

---

<sup>30</sup> Meeting on Bahrain, organized in August 2013 by Beyond Borders Scotland, Chatham House’s MENA Programme and Beyond Conflict.

<sup>31</sup> Meeting, May 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Beyond Borders Scotland meeting, August 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Meeting on ‘Bahrain: Youth Perspectives on the Future’, Chatham House, June 2012.

youth leaders can take a more constructive and long-term approach and perhaps move beyond the traditional zero-sum sectarian and political divides.

- *Bahrain has existing statements of political principles that could help provide the basis for a political resolution*, despite the controversy over the constitution of 2002.<sup>34</sup> Those include:
  - The king's 'national action charter', which, issued when he first came to power and ratified by a referendum, promises a constitutional monarchy;
  - The 'seven principles' that the crown prince agreed to discuss in 2011 – namely, a parliament with full authority, a government that represents the will of the people, 'fair' voting districts, discussion of naturalization policy, combating corruption, protecting public assets and addressing sectarian tensions; and
  - The BICI recommendations on human rights.
- *Youth dissent cannot be ended by an elite deal between political factions*. Such a deal has been the focus of official dialogue efforts to date. There is a high degree of frustration among Bahrain's youth with the current leaders of the various political factions, coupled with a sense that if young people are not represented in formal political processes, they will continue to stage protests and engage in activism. The political scene in Bahrain should not be seen simply as being composed of two or three monolithic political camps, but the potential exists to build cross-cutting coalitions of support for particular issues related to reform. In the meantime, there is a lack of representation of liberals and secularists – both older- and younger-generation.
- *Western governments<sup>35</sup> are seen as powerful actors with influence over the authorities*. Among young people there is cynicism about the intentions of the West. While some hope that Western countries will make a concrete contribution towards, among other things, the push for reform, capacity-building and continued security guarantees, they do not necessarily see these countries as the models to which they aspire. Nor do they see countries such as the US, the UK and France as benign observers; indeed, they are aware both of the colonial past of the UK and France and the modern-day trading interests of all three countries. It is perceived as striking that Western powers continue to prioritize military-defence trade cooperation in their relations with the Gulf. 'Twelve Typhoons are toys we don't need,' said one participant, singling out the UK government's efforts to sell military aircraft to Bahrain.<sup>36</sup> In one meeting, there was much mention of an ill-conceived recent tweet by a former British ambassador, Sir Christopher Meyer, to the effect that British jobs trumped Bahraini human rights;<sup>37</sup> the focus on that comment illustrates the degree to which young Bahrainis observe Western discussions about their country and frequently draw cynical conclusions. In addition, there is extensive criticism of US and UK 'waffling' about human rights and, in particular, UK praise for institutional reforms such as training for the police and Interior Ministry staff that many young Bahrainis do not think will translate into tangible changes on the ground. Some participants perceived regional and international powers as hindering a solution to the crisis and for this reason called for local actors to focus on local issues.

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Discussions about the 'West' usually centre on the US and the UK; sometimes France is included as well, or statements made by EU bodies. There is less awareness of or interest in the policies of other European powers, which are generally seen as less important actors, apart from some awareness of Scandinavian government statements in support of improving human rights in Bahrain.

<sup>36</sup> Farmer, B., 'Britain to sell Typhoon jets to Bahrain, despite human rights record', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 August 2013, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/industry/defence/10233673/Britain-to-sell-Typhoon-jets-to-Bahrain-despite-human-rights-record.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Meyer C., @SirSocks, 9 August 2013.



### ... and issues of contention

The main issues that divided the participants in the discussions and interviews conducted by Chatham House are as follows:

- *The legitimacy of the existing political system.* In the 1990s the opposition had one central demand – namely, the restoration of the parliament. Demands today have escalated and are more diverse. Some oppositionists are demanding the end of the monarchy, seeing the regime as irreparably illegitimate, while many others view reform as a more realistic option. Pro-government young people, who are likely to constitute a substantial minority of the overall youth population, say such a stance is disloyal; many see the king as symbolizing the nation itself. Nevertheless, the possibility of debating the legitimacy of the monarchy is no longer a political taboo; young people today have been exposed to this debate in a way their parents may not have been.
- *Prospects for democracy.* Young people who seek democracy see it as a basic, internationally recognized right – not something that is up for negotiation. Others fear its consequences. A related issue is the role of religion in politics and society: there was much discussion among participants about Al Wefaq’s opposition to a codified family law that would restrict the traditional powers of religious clerics, which young women, in particular, tended to criticize. Government supporters fear the opposition promotes ‘democracy’ in order to mask a more radical Islamist agenda, although it was noted that the Islamist/secularist divide cuts across opposition/pro-government and Sunni/Shia lines.
- *What happened in 2011.* Opinions on this issue remain deeply divided. By now, however, most Bahrainis are familiar with the opposing narratives and no longer as shocked by them as they were previously. Participants argued that in the past, the social media debate was particularly nasty because many people had not encountered opposing beliefs before and did not think it was possible to hold such views.<sup>38</sup> Participants saw social media as having been useful, up to a point, in providing alternative viewpoints, but they expressed some frustration with the limitations of this form of communication and its tendency to facilitate and encourage sound-bites and name-calling. Some had stopped using Twitter for this reason.
- *The use of violence by non-state and state actors.* Many expressed strong frustration over the continued reports of abuse and torture by the state authorities, including the arrests and reported abuse in custody of children (such cases have been publicized by various human rights groups and are often heard about directly in conversations with the children’s relatives or members of their local communities). Such reported incidents give the impression that the government is not interested in real dialogue or rapprochement with the opposition. ‘How can I trust [the government] when torture is still going on?’, asked one participant. There is exasperation that the BICI recommendations that criminal charges be brought against perpetrators of torture remain largely unimplemented.

At the same time, however, some participants expressed concern about opposition activities that threaten citizens in general, such as the blocking of major thoroughfares with burning tyres. Not all young people are sympathetic to youth protest, with pro-government supporters

---

<sup>38</sup> Workshop on ‘The Experience of Parliamentary Politics in the GCC’, Kuwait, May 2012.

among them often arguing that the police are deliberately being provoked: ‘The Ministry of the Interior doesn’t know what else to do except use tear gas.’ Moreover, violence by a minority of opposition activists has been escalating.

Some participants took issue over the comparison of alleged continued torture by the state with tyre-burning. This led to a wider discussion about the legitimacy of the use of force. For example, while some viewed the use of tear gas to disperse protesters as an acceptable common non-lethal tactic, others saw the misuse of such gas – some reports have suggested officers are shooting canisters into people’s homes – as further proof that the government is trying to have it both ways when it comes to the use of violence: while it calls for the opposition to condemn all forms of violence against the state, it abuses its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence in its territory.<sup>39</sup> That viewpoint was stated more forcefully by another participant: ‘What leads to violence is the crackdown on peaceful protesters. Once you attack protesters, violence will lead to violence.’ What constitutes violence and who is responsible for it often leads to an argumentative cul-de-sac and has been a major obstacle to dialogue efforts at the elite level.

Yet some common ground exists on this issue. In a discussion that united people with strongly opposing views on protests,<sup>40</sup> there was agreement that too many people are suffering as a result of the clashes between police and protesters, that tear gas is being used excessively and that children and old people should be better protected from violence. Some participants said that community policing, recruitment of more local (including Shia) police officers and better communications could all help to de-escalate the clashes. Others emphasized that the protests reflect the shortage of effective and credible forums for political dialogue and negotiations.

### Youth perspectives on formal dialogue efforts and beyond

Interested observers and, in particular, younger Bahrainis see the formal efforts at dialogue described above more as forays into political theatre than as genuine attempts at consensus-building. ‘Personally, I don’t think there is a dialogue, but a measure to fill a political vacuum,’ one participant said in a discussion in which young Bahraini nationals in the Gulf took part in May 2013. The same individual went on to say that the dialogue was intended ‘more for the international public than the Bahraini public. It doesn’t involve the major players, including the hardliners in the government and the opposition, but only some elements from here and there. The danger [then] is that we harm the idea of dialogue itself.’

Others took issue with the seemingly vacuous nature of the dialogue discussions, which they saw as symbolizing the deep distrust between the government and opposition:

We don’t see anything from this [debate]. They are not going to the real points, just the rules. Even agreeing on an agenda would show some progress. But each party doesn’t trust the other. The opposition’s previous experience is that the government agrees on something and then does something else. The government still thinks the opposition is orchestrated by Iran from outside. The lack of trust means they need to deliberate the very smallest details.

The attempt to depict oppositionists as stooges working to implement sinister Iranian plots continues to resonate strongly with supporters of the government, and the ‘Iranian threat’ is sometimes instrumentalized to maintain the status quo and justify further crackdowns on opposition figures.

---

<sup>39</sup> See Carlstrom G., ‘In the Kingdom of Tear Gas’, 13 April 2012, at <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero041312>.

<sup>40</sup> Meeting on ‘Bahrain: Youth Perspectives on the Future’, Chatham House, June 2012.



By the same token, opposition groups, such as Al Wefaq, have struggled to avoid the ire of moderate Bahraini youth activists keen to have a resolution of the protracted crisis. ‘The opposition should be a little more flexible. There will always be some sort of compromise at the end. Like on the topic of a referendum. Constitutional amendments could be taken to MPs if there was a new parliament under new electoral districts,’ noted one participant, who went on to argue that the parliament would be the best forum for resolving Bahrain’s political disputes if the body were reformed to be more representative. Critics of the opposition boycott of the parliament have argued that oppositionists should do more to utilize the tools that are available within the system, whereas supporters of the boycott argue that participation would lend apparent legitimacy to institutions that are incapable of bringing about meaningful change.

Discussions with a broad range of Bahraini youth have suggested that focusing solely on negotiations between the government and Al Wefaq is ultimately misguided as it overlooks the existence and importance of groups which believe that political elites – government and opposition alike – do not speak for them or address their issues. A more inclusive process is needed – one that takes into account the important role played by civil-society groups (and associated actors) that fall outside the formal political process and are often explicitly sceptical of formal politics.

During a brainstorming session on the principles of dialogue,<sup>41</sup> a smaller group of young Bahrainis focused on the steps that could be taken to initiate a youth dialogue in Bahrain. The group identified the crown prince’s ‘seven principles’ as a point of departure for dialogue and attempts at a political resolution of the country’s political crisis; and they called in the same context for the full implementation of the BICI recommendations. More open and wide-ranging discussions – such as the Bahrain Debate mentioned above – were seen as a potentially positive development, as was the proposal to set up ‘dialogue centres’ in various parts of the country to gather ideas that could then be relayed to various government agencies. Though presenting various logistical challenges, this kind of distributive consultative process could encourage the airing and sharing of different points of view with the aim of achieving broader understanding and dispelling misconceptions – such as that grievances and differences are related to identity, when in fact they have more to do with the inequality of economic opportunity and power distribution. Public awareness campaigns could explain and promote such processes among the population.

The group reached broad agreement on the following concluding statement:

1. Dialogue should be based on the crown prince’s ‘seven principles’ and on the recommendations of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, both of which are broadly accepted by a range of groups.
2. The Bahrain Debate should be revived and should be broadcast live on Bahrain TV.
3. Dialogue centres should be set up in each area to collect ideas that would be relayed to relevant government agencies by political societies. This could be over a one-, two- or three-month period but a deadline is necessary. The centres would need to be administered by trusted figures ‘with a leg in both camps’. Efforts should be made to bring people from different areas to the dialogue centres to expose people to different points of view.

---

<sup>41</sup> This meeting was organized jointly by the Chatham House MENA Programme, Beyond Borders and the Project on Justice in Times of Transition (since renamed Beyond Conflict). It was held in Scotland in August 2012.

4. Civil-society awareness campaigns would be needed to explain and promote the dialogue centre process.
5. The ‘Youth Parliament’ should be reinstated.
6. Violence – whether tear gas, Molotovs, birdshot or night raids – should stop.
7. Dialogue is needed between political societies to establish a joint list of demands to submit to the government.

It was suggested by some that the efforts made by opposition political societies between 2006 and 2011 to change and influence formal political processes from within the system have ultimately failed to achieve long-lasting and effective results for those who feel disenfranchised. ‘We have a country where the ceiling of demands is very high – it’s no longer 2000, when bringing exiles back seemed so much. You have a higher ceiling on the constitutional level. You have very radical demands about the prime minister, which weren’t there historically,’ said one participant. On the one hand, the reforms the king introduced when he came to power occurred at an important juncture in Bahraini history at which the king was eager to be seen reaching out to all Bahrainis. On the other hand, the opposition sees today’s calls for the resignation of the world’s longest-serving prime minister, after 40 years in power, not so much as ‘radical’ as long overdue. But the wider point is clear: the demands on the government are no longer simply a restoration of the 1973 constitution and parliament; rather, as one participant remarked, there appears to be a ‘mixed bag of demands’ that strike at the heart of the distribution of power and wealth in the country.

The history of political disputes in Bahrain points to a challenging inflection point today. For one thing, the political and economic landscape both in the country and throughout the region has vastly altered since the last wave of protests in the 1990s or the events of the 1970s. Commitments to institutionalize a constitutional monarchy have not been kept. Bahrain has become ever more dependent on the economic (and security) patronage of its neighbour Saudi Arabia, especially since 2011. The region has seen global powers mired in two long-term wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there was popular protest across the Arab world to topple decades-long authoritarian rule in a number of countries, albeit with various degrees of success. The way in which a significant number of Bahraini youth have dismissed the formal dialogue efforts reflects the raising of political expectations in recent years. The inability of any of the political elites to capture those expectations is evident in the failure of dialogue to date.

### Renewing political imagination

In all of the Chatham House-sponsored meetings, frustration was often expressed over the tendency of discussions about Bahrain to go round in circles as the various groups contested the interpretation of Bahrain’s recent history and reiterated their grievances. For those who supported the 2011 uprising, it was a moment when many things seemed possible and ideas about an alternative future for the country could be debated. Since then, opposition discourse has arguably become dominated by old scores, tactics for continuing to put pressure on the government and more immediate concerns about the latest events in the country (be they arrests or rumours about what the authorities will do next).

Less time and space is devoted to imagining the real possibilities for Bahrain’s future – not only a new structure to make the parliament more effective and representative, but also ways to develop the economy, deal with the various economic and security dependencies and determine the nature of

the country's national identity. A number of civil-society and opposition activists interviewed in 2014 argued that three years after the uprising, the opposition needed an 'audit' or review of its activities to identify where and how its approach had gone wrong.

Highlighting the inability of those seeking common ends to consider alternative pathways to achieving their goals, one participant asked, 'Have we run out of political imagination?'<sup>42</sup> Those with influence appear to be fixated on long-standing political strategies and tactics that have borne few positive results. For example, although the debates about the extent to which the BICI recommendations have been implemented are important, they can seem largely academic – involving mainly the intellectual and political elites – and as having no real impact on the lives of many people.

Another participant suggested a 30-day moratorium on the use of tear gas in villages as a confidence-building measure. Others noted that levels of mistrust and disillusionment with political rhetoric – both of the government and of various opposition leaders – had worsened. 'If ministers sat down with Ali Salman and Abdelatif Al Mahmood [leader of The Gathering of National Unity], they wouldn't be able to talk like we are talking, they are too stuck in their ways,' said one.<sup>43</sup> That view prevails, despite examples cited by various participants from Bahrain's history (for example, the cross-sectarian opposition leadership of the 1960s was seen as representing a 'better', more united popular movement). While some participants saw the latest round of talks as a genuine attempt at resolving the political crisis, many others pointed to its lack of progress as proof that it was simply a 'façade' that has produced no real 'output' for people.

**The call for greater political imagination underscores the need to comprehend and imaginatively addresses the root causes of the problems currently manifesting themselves through unrest, and could perhaps help break the stalemate that is political dialogue in Bahrain today.**

Renewing political imagination should be considered an attempt to take seriously the challenges Bahrain faces by prioritizing the need to identify and implement local solutions to local problems wherever possible. For example, an open and honest debate about the state of the country's economy is urgently needed but often lacking; instead, identity politics are instrumentalized as a way of sweeping long-term structural economic challenges under the carpet. Addressing the underlying structural political, economic and social issues might render the myopic 'blame game' over political violence less relevant by addressing its root causes. Labelling political violence as irrational and attributing it to 'terrorists' seeking the anarchic destruction of the state or to inhuman state actors intent on the destruction of a particular religious sect is itself a political tactic that has the effect of negating the grievances that led to violence being seen by many as legitimate.<sup>44</sup> The call for greater political imagination underscores the need to comprehend and imaginatively addresses the root causes of the problems currently manifesting themselves through unrest, and could perhaps help break the stalemate that is political dialogue in Bahrain today.

The fact that Bahrain's political crisis has not been resolved after more than three years should lead those with political power – either in government or in opposition – to become more aware of their

---

<sup>42</sup> Beyond Borders Scotland meeting, August 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Galtung, J., 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3) (1969): 167–9; Gurr, T., 'Psychological Factors in Civil Violence', *World Politics*, 20(2) (1968): 245–78.

failure to improve the situation in the country. The same ultimately holds true for the governments of other states, in the region and in the global (Western) arena, that claim to want Bahrain's political stalemate ended by socio-political reconciliation. Such awareness would provide the space to accept the value of civil-society actors, especially young ones, and the ideas and solutions they are seeking to have implemented.

Today the region is rife with examples – Egypt, Syria, Iraq – of what happens when political imagination is stifled in favour of formal political processes that appear to be in place to protect 'stability'. Yet those countries and the region as a whole are experiencing anything but stability. The perspectives of civil-society actors – not least of the young – offer alternative viewpoints, based on personal experiences, that are of value when it comes to imagining a path towards a political settlement that goes beyond *de facto* sectarian power-sharing in the parliament and recognizes ways in which the country could thrive on its diversity and make the most of its youth.

## The International Context

Bahrain's political crisis cannot be seen in isolation from wider international trends, especially the Arab uprisings, the regional contest for power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the role of Western powers in the Gulf. The initially peaceful uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia were an inspiration for new-generation opposition activists throughout the region and contributed to the ensuing conflict in Syria and resurgent hostilities in Iraq. But the increasingly sectarian bent of both the Syrian and Iranian conflicts and the sectarian narratives of Gulf governments against the Bahraini opposition have all added to fears and social tensions in Bahrain. At the same time, regional conflicts could be a spur for Bahrainis to pull together to avoid increasing hostilities in their own smaller and more peaceful society.

Furthermore, the British colonial legacy and the general awareness that Saudi Arabia, Iran and the US all take a direct interest in Bahrain can at times create the impression among Bahrainis that their country's political future will ultimately be decided in foreign capitals. Thus Bahraini civil-society groups and activists face a specific set of challenges in trying to influence and imagine the future of a country in which larger powers show so much interest.

### **The Arab uprisings, upheavals and insecurity: opportunity (and fear) in transnational civil society**

The Arab uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspired numerous young Bahrainis, including some who had had no previous political involvement, to participate in the protests.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, it is clear in retrospect that the sight of political leaders peacefully stepping down after a few weeks' protest in parts of Tunisia and Egypt encouraged opposition groups to overestimate the potential impact of such protests.

Today's younger-generation activists and civil-society movements are increasingly interconnected with international NGOs, trade unions and campaigners. However, the strong sectarian narrative pushed by other governments in the Arab region against the Bahraini opposition has left both the formal opposition and civil-society groups critical of the government with only a limited number of regional allies.<sup>46</sup> Support within the region for the opposition<sup>47</sup> has come mainly from Shia powers and groups: Iran and Lebanese and Iraqi Shia factions that seek to highlight the plight of Shia in Bahrain and criticize the role of Saudi Arabia there. Such support is double-edged as it appears to many people to have sectarian motivations, especially when the same forces simultaneously back the Syrian regime in its violent repression of the uprising there. Hard-line Bahraini state actors have at times sought to use regional support as proof of a wider conspiracy theory against Bahrain. Meanwhile, the polarizing

---

<sup>45</sup> There were some direct links between influential bloggers from all three countries who met at conferences and read one another's writings, as well as between activists from Bahrain who had studied or visited Cairo and met activists such as the April 6th movement there.

<sup>46</sup> 'We have no friends in the region,' said Dr Munira Fakhro, a Bahraini professor, member of the quasi- non-governmental Supreme Council for Women and activist for the Wa'ad political society, in a meeting in Manama in November 2013.

<sup>47</sup> For the most part this is moral support. Repeated government claims that Iran offered more direct support (or even direction) for the 2011 uprising have not been supported by any publicly available evidence, and even the government's closest Western allies have expressed scepticism about such allegations. More recently, however, Western diplomats have given some credence to Bahraini government suggestions that supplies of explosives may have come from political factions in Iran or Lebanon. Bahraini opposition groups typically say the charges of Iranian direction of the uprising are merely a political smear, though they are divided over whether Iranian moral and media support is useful or counterproductive for their goals.

power of broader regional sectarian dynamics has meant that efforts by Al Wefaq to reach out to the former Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt and the Islamic University of Al Azhar in Cairo have made little headway. However, there are links between civil-society groups, younger-generation activists and bloggers.

The mixed fortunes of the uprisings have done little to encourage political compromise in Bahrain. Above all, the uprising-turned-civil war in Syria has undermined the hopes of many seeking peaceful political change in the region and has provided a crude political opportunity to those wielding state power who are keen to warn against the perils of political upheaval. Videos of extreme violence committed by both Syrian state supporters and those opposing the Assad government have gone viral during the war. The sectarian nature of the conflict and the images that highlight the profound divisions between ethnic and religious communities have given Bahraini activists pause and sparked fear that further descent into political crisis in Bahrain could lead to sectarian violence there too.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly, the renewed escalating violence in Iraq, which is linked to the collapse of Syria, reverberates in Bahrain. Bahraini Shia communities generally feel closer to Iraq than to Iran: most religious Shia hold Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani as their primary *marja'* (point of religious reference or spiritual guide), and many Bahraini families have relatives in Iraq. Views on events in Iraq are highly polarized, including along the lines of political and sectarian identity. Particularly striking is the blame game over the renewed regional presence of Al-Qaeda and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (which now refers to itself simply as the Islamic State or IS). Many Shia and leftists think these groups are being directed and funded by the Gulf countries as part of the latter's regional struggle against Iran (which the Gulf governments strongly deny). This constituency makes little distinction between public and private support or between 'moderate' and 'extremist' elements of the opposition in Syria.

Many Sunnis and conservatives are likewise appalled by the extremism of IS. But they blame Iran, Hizbollah and Iraqi Shia militias in Syria for creating an environment of sectarian armed conflict in which violent sectarian groups have thrived at the expense of the peaceful protesters who started the Syrian uprising. At the same time, the involvement of a small number of Bahraini Salafists in Syria has sparked a divisive debate in Bahrain. Two Bahraini Salafist parliamentary deputies who had been highly critical of Bahrain's opposition movement visited Syria in 2012 to help deliver humanitarian aid to the opposition there; and in 2013 there were reports that five young Bahrainis had been killed in Syria while fighting in support of Jebhat al-Nusra, an Islamist militant group associated with Al-Qaeda.

The regional media tend to contribute to the polarization of public opinion inside Bahrain. Iranian, Lebanese and Gulf television channels offer overwhelmingly partial views of the complex conflicts in the region, portraying their 'own' side as acting only in self-defence and with immense restraint and blaming the 'other' sectarian-political complex for fuelling conflict.

There are Bahraini activists and civil-society groups trying to move beyond the political and sectarian interpretations of how conflicts in the regions have evolved, including NGOs, human rights activists and bloggers whose Syrian counterparts have been killed or tortured and/or imprisoned. But many anti-sectarian activists are deeply demoralized and struggle to see how inclusive projects

---

<sup>48</sup> This view is arguably different from the sentiments associated with the civil war that gripped Iraq in 2006–07 – in part owing to the invasion and occupation of the country by US and UK forces. But the point here is a recognition that a deepening of political conflict could lead to the undesirable situation of more prevalent violence on the ground – something the wider region has experienced abundantly in the past decade.

or shows of solidarity in tiny Bahrain can make much difference when there is so much violence in Syria and Iraq. Even efforts in London in 2011 to organize joint Bahraini and Syrian protest demonstrations that would march on the two countries' neighbouring embassies foundered because of political polarization along sectarian lines. A rare exception was the series of protests in Bahrain against Israel's airstrikes in Gaza in July 2014, which drew cross-sectarian participation.

In general, both in Bahrain and elsewhere in the region, many of the civil-society groups and idealistic young activists who played a key role in protests in 2011 are struggling not only with a loss of morale but also with a sense of powerlessness. This is true especially of those who want to avoid sectarianism and eschew violence but see the region moving in the wrong direction.

### Contending with international interests in Bahrain

Bahrain may be the Arab world's smallest country but it is of huge symbolic and strategic importance for various international players. For the Gulf monarchies, it symbolizes the region's Arab identity and serves as a bulwark against Iran, while the stability of its ruling family stands for the wider resilience of monarchy against revolutionary ideologies. For Iran, it is a key centre of Arab Shi'ism, and its political crisis symbolizes the repressive nature of the Gulf monarchies. For the US and the UK, Bahrain is a long-standing ally and an important financial and naval centre – not least as it hosts the American Fifth Fleet and a British naval base. UK and US leaders have repeatedly called it an example of a reforming monarchy.<sup>49</sup> This means that Bahrain's political crisis has implications for the broader credibility of Western-backed reform processes – and the West's response to it often draws charges of double standards.

As noted above, civil-society groups often express concerns that their country's future will be determined largely by foreign powers. Some believe Bahrain's political crisis will not be resolved until the larger regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran are settled. But focusing too much on the role of these Gulf neighbours tends to lead to binary thinking and an oversimplification of the possible outcomes into a zero-sum game. At the same time, it feeds into a sense that local agency is limited. Indeed, as one Bahraini economist interviewed for this paper said, 'There is a layer in the political process where so much that is unknown to us decides things, and we just base our analysis on what we hear.'

Meanwhile, civil-society groups and opposition activists are themselves often accused of acting as agents for foreign powers – primarily Iran (because of the Bahraini ruling family's deep sense of threat from there) but also the US, various European states or Israel.<sup>50</sup> For their part, opposition groups say they are driven by national aims and are not in favour of an Iranian-style Islamic state of Bahrain. Views of Iran vary within the opposition: some see it in a positive light because it has been publicly sympathetic to their cause, while others regard it more suspiciously and think its sometimes aggressive rhetoric towards the Gulf monarchies has negative repercussions for the Shia populations

---

<sup>49</sup> In 2008 then US President George W. Bush became the first US head of state to visit Bahrain and said it was 'showing the way forward for other nations' – see England, A., 'Democracy disappoints Bahrain', *Financial Times*, 14 January 2008, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/38805176-c243-11dc-8fba-0000779fd2ac.html>. US rhetoric has changed since 2011. However, the UK's praise for reforms, though not unmitigated, continues. A typical example is as follows: 'The government of Bahrain's work to implement its reform programme, particularly in the judicial and security sectors, continue[s] to suggest that the overall trajectory on human rights will be positive' – see 'Country Case Study: Bahrain – Progress on Reform Implementation', part of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's *Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013*, 24 June 2014, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2013>.

<sup>50</sup> *Gulf News*, 'Bahrain protests a "coup plot", defence chief says', 15 February 2012, at <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-protests-a-coup-plot-defence-chief-says-1.980961>.



of those countries. Several young Bahrainis interviewed suggested that if there were a grand regional deal between the US and Iran, the latter would try to advance the interests of the Bahraini opposition as part of that agreement; however, they may have been overestimating Bahrain's importance to Iran.

Claims of direct Iranian involvement in the 2011 uprising, other than moral and rhetorical support, have never been substantiated, but many of the Bahraini government's supporters firmly believed the view expounded by the government and pro-government media that the opposition were traitors. That belief encouraged many people to inform on neighbours, colleagues and former friends, creating social and personal rifts that continue to undermine cross-sectarian cooperation in civil society today.

While the UK and the US were unconvinced by claims of Iranian involvement in the 2011 protests, the UK has suggested there could be an Iranian link to some recent discoveries of explosives. However, most political violence in Bahrain is somewhat amateurish, rather than being the product of sophisticated foreign training or supplies; more than one teenager has blown himself up by accident when preparing crude petrol bombs. Nevertheless, the longer the domestic political situation is allowed to fester without an effective process for finding a political resolution, the more likely it is that some of the country's opposition activists may be tempted to seek help wherever they can find it.

For its part, the Bahraini government depends on the US, the UK and Saudi Arabia to provide security against potential external threats. This suggests the country's Western allies have significant leverage in Bahrain. But they do not want to put their wider Gulf alliances at risk by using that leverage too much. While Bahrain is an ally in its own right, its ruling family is strongly supported by the far more strategically important power of Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the latter made its interest in the security of Al Khalifa rule explicit in 2011, when Saudi troops entered the country as part of the GCC forces under collective defence provisions.

Meanwhile, Bahrain's alliances with the US and particularly the UK have been bolstered by an expansion of those countries' military bases in Bahrain as well as by security agreements, arms sales, transfers of technology and expertise, and strong diplomatic ties. In April 2014 work began on new \$6 million headquarters for the British navy in the Gulf, which are to be based in Bahrain; the Royal Navy commented at the time: 'Nowhere else outside UK home waters is there such a concentration of the Royal Navy around the clock 365 days a year.'<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile the US is doubling the size of its naval base in Bahrain.<sup>52</sup>

Rather than pressing the government to adopt democracy, the US and the UK are seeking to encourage limited reforms (generally 'good governance' improvements) to make the monarchy more sustainable. The UK, in particular, is deeply engaged in capacity-building that supports institutional reforms, such as forensics training for the police<sup>53</sup> to reduce dependence on 'confessions' as evidence and the provision of expertise to prison inspectors.<sup>54</sup>

For their part, most of Bahrain's opposition groups have sought to persuade the government's Western allies to qualify, reduce or remove their support for the regime. Some members of Al Wafaq have made

---

<sup>51</sup> 'UK minister breaks ground on Royal Navy HQ in Bahrain', Royal Navy press release, 28 April 2014, at <http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk/news-and-latest-activity/news/2014/april/28/140428-hq-in-bahrain>.

<sup>52</sup> Simoes, H., 'Bahrain expansion latest signal of continued US presence', *Stars and Stripes* (US Navy newspaper), 13 December 2013, at <http://www.stripes.com/news/bahrain-expansion-latest-signal-of-continued-us-presence-1.257371>.

<sup>53</sup> UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 'Country Case Study: Bahrain', p. 201; and UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, *Human Rights and Democracy Report 2012: Bahrain*, 30 September 2013 (on the UK National Policing Improvement Agency's 2012 visit to Bahrain in response to a request for forensics training), at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2012-bahrain>.

<sup>54</sup> 'Bahrain', part of 'Country Case Study: Bahrain – Progress on Reform Implementation' (on prisons inspectorate training).



tentative efforts to contact Saudi Arabia through non-governmental intermediaries<sup>55</sup> to try to allay Saudi fears that political change in Bahrain could lead to its becoming an Iranian client-state. Beyond the formal opposition, a number of Bahraini NGOs are seeking to lobby Western governments directly. Others are deeply sceptical that those governments have any interest in supporting real reform but nevertheless want to try to influence Western public opinion or take part in international processes such as the regular UN Human Rights Council review in Geneva.

At the same time, other activists and civil society groups, especially leftists and Sunni Islamists, argue that calling for the international community, especially Western governments, to apply pressure exacerbates the long-standing problem of excessive foreign influence. Indeed, a common criticism heard from supporters of the government is that opposition groups and human rights NGOs spend too much time addressing the international media and not enough reaching out to the various groups at home.

---

<sup>55</sup> Suggestions that this could perhaps develop into a more sustained exchange or that Bahraini Shia leaders could be received in Saudi Arabia have not been realized. However, indirect contacts may have helped to encourage Saudi support for the 2013 political dialogue.

## Conclusions

Given that Bahrain's formal dialogue efforts remain at an impasse, the role of civil society and informal discussions is now all the more important. This situation could continue for the foreseeable future, especially as the opposition is now planning to boycott the 2014 parliamentary elections in the absence of any interim political deal. But work can still be done at the grassroots and civil-society level to draw up proposals for ways out of the stalemate.

It is not hard to paint the contours of a possible political compromise. Various constitutional arrangements could be considered to address calls for greater representation and less discrimination, while taking on board the concerns of (largely Sunni) government supporters about security and the role of (Shia) religious clerics. The constitution and the system of political representation are issues of fundamental importance. But they are by no means the only issues. There is a need to go beyond formal politics and look at what is important in day-to-day life – which includes perceptions of economic and social justice relating to jobs, corruption, discrimination and population pressures. The authorities could make some quick wins here by using Gulf aid to fund training, job and enterprise opportunities on a more meritocratic basis than is currently the case. There is some interest among the other Gulf states in aid being used in this way. Ultimately, a more inclusive treatment of Bahrain's citizens is needed to give the state a stronger foundation among its people.

*A less repressed civil society would be a valuable resource when it comes to imagining the possibilities for Bahrain's future – involving not only changes to the structure of the parliament, but also ways to develop the economy, deal with the various economic and security dependencies and determine the nature of the country's national identity.*

Civil-society groups can potentially play an important role here – if they are allowed to debate these issues more openly. The current restrictions on political activity do not prevent Bahrain from having a determined and committed opposition movement that is still able to hold protests frequently. To take one small example, the criminalization of statements regarded as 'insulting the king' has landed people in jail but has not stopped the proliferation of anti-monarchy graffiti (including 'Down with Hamad' or 'Death to Al Khalifa') in Bahrain's Shia villages. However, it has had the effect of dissuading some of the country's moderate and independent voices, particularly those from middle-class and pro-government families who feel they have a lot to lose, from participating in more constructive debates for fear that any criticism could be seen as 'insulting' the monarchy. Indeed, wide-ranging repression tends to produce an opposition dominated by the most committed, ambitious and, often, radical activists, and to make civil society cynical about the prospects of contributing to constructive reform. A less repressed civil society would be a valuable resource when it comes to imagining the possibilities for Bahrain's future – involving not only changes to the structure of the parliament, but also ways to develop the economy, deal with the various economic and security dependencies and determine the nature of the country's national identity.

Some civil-society and independent voices say they feel powerless in the face of what they presume are the machinations of larger regional and international powers – chiefly Saudi Arabia, Iran, the US and the UK. But it is quite possible that these powers do not have any grand designs for Bahrain. Saudi Arabia and Iran may know what they do *not* want to see in Bahrain: for example, Saudi Arabia may fear protracted instability, the fall of a Gulf monarchy or the emergence of an Iranian client-state, while for Iran the main fear may be Saudi occupation or the erosion of the country's Shia majority. But they do not necessarily have either a clear vision of what future they would like for Bahrain or the desire to micro-manage events. Civil society, at least, has the power to put ideas on the table.

The sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria could serve as a spur for Bahrain to repair community relations and address the country's political disputes in order to avoid worst-case scenarios of sectarian violence. Regional developments directly affect the political imagination of Bahraini civil-society actors, whether by kindling the hope of progress towards greater political inclusion (as the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt did for many in the opposition) or by arousing the fear of a catastrophic fall into ethno-sectarian violence and war (an increasingly dominant theme today). But the primary concerns are local<sup>56</sup> – economic opportunity, social and political rights, and the fair distribution of wealth and power. In this sense, Bahrain is an exemplar of the countries engulfed by an 'Arab Spring' discourse that all too often oversimplifies national and regional developments through meta-narratives and sectarian tropes. A return to analysis that prioritizes local actors and interests would help deepen understanding of the current situation in Bahrain and the dynamics within post-Arab uprising states. Ultimately, a sustainable political resolution should focus on protecting Bahraini self-determination as much as possible and preventing the country from being used as a pawn in wider regional contests.

Bahrain's main Western allies should recognize the limitations of the elite power-sharing bargain that they seem to be tacitly seeking. A system of sectarian power-sharing would be counterproductive; it would risk entrenching sectarianism without ensuring greater representation. Saudi Arabia has concerns that political reform in Bahrain could potentially lead either to Lebanon-style parliamentary paralysis or, ultimately, to the country becoming an Iranian client-state; while other Gulf allies have concerns about the empowerment of both Sunni and Shia Islamists. But it is under the conditions of repression since 2011 that sectarian tensions have deepened. A more supportive environment for Bahrain's civil society could help foster social reconciliation as well as political progress. International policy-makers would do well to examine the work of the limited number of civil-society outreach and reconciliation projects that have been tried. Positive lessons can be drawn from initiatives such as the Bahrain Debate and the National Meeting – they show that while the dispute in Bahrain is often oversimplified, there are areas of consensus and common ground that can be fruitfully developed.

Supporting civil society in Bahrain does not have to mean adopting the traditional US or European approaches to capacity-building or sponsoring various civil-society groups. Rather, it is about encouraging the government to open up space for their own citizens to work on a political resolution. The country's allies should make clear that any new formal process of political dialogue will lack credibility if it is held under conditions of tight censorship. Instead of promoting the creation of new civil-society organizations, they should do what they can to discourage the authorities from repressing those that already exist. This is not about imposing so-called 'Western values' of democracy and human rights. It is about respecting the discussions that Bahrainis – and not just those in government – want to have about the values espoused by their own society and the direction in which that society is developing.

---

<sup>56</sup> See Russia Today, 'The World Tomorrow: Nabeel Rajab and Alaa Abd El Fattah', 8 May 2012, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdVoBlABSpc>.

Western opinion matters to the Bahraini government, as is evident from its extensive lobbying in Washington, London and Brussels. While the US and the UK may speak of the importance of political reform in Bahrain, their actions do not signal that reform is a particularly high priority. Above all, the expansion of their naval bases after the 2011 uprising indicates that their long-term alliances have not been much affected by the unrest. Even the expulsion of the US State Department senior official Tom Malinowski in July 2014 has drawn little comment from the US government.<sup>57</sup> Western government rhetoric on political inclusion and reform will continue to have limited weight if it does not appear to have a tangible effect on relations with, or any visible impact in, Bahrain.

As the Middle East faces renewed conflict in Iraq, Syria and Gaza, it has again become fashionable in the West to look for cultural explanations for the continuation of conflict and the absence of democracy – that is, explanations that would conveniently absolve international powers of responsibility for the role they have played in the creation of these ongoing problems. In the case of the Gulf, it is sometimes assumed that there is no indigenous demand for democracy or public participation, that monarchies enjoy a special legitimacy that make them revolution-proof and that the region's wealth will forestall political instability. Moreover, instability elsewhere makes Western leaders loath to offend their traditional allies within the Gulf ruling families by bringing up awkward issues of internal governance – not least since they face increasing competition from Asian powers for Gulf trade and investment. But the failure to address popular grievances is building up instability for the longer term.

Bolstered by support from abroad, particularly from other Gulf states, the authorities in Bahrain have been able to contain the country's protest movement, albeit at a significant cost to its economy and social fabric. In the immediate future, ongoing repression has a radicalizing effect and squeezes out the moderate local voices that could help resolve the political crisis. Restrictions on political expression have been tightening. Harsher punishments for 'insulting' authority figures or 'inciting terrorism' have been justified by the authorities on the grounds that they face radical and violent opposition groups. But such powers are also used to clamp down on non-violent opposition – weakening and deterring the very moderates with whom the authorities will eventually need to work if they are to reach a sustainable political resolution. In the long term, future uprisings may well be violent and vengeful and, indeed, more anti-Western than were the peaceful protests of 2011.

---

<sup>57</sup> Project on Middle Eastern Democracy, '18 Policy Leaders Urge Strong Response to Malinowski Expulsion from Bahrain', letter dated 31 July 2014, at <http://pomed.org/media-posts/18-policy-leaders-urge-strong-response-to-malinowski-expulsion-from-bahrain/>.

### About the Authors

**Jane Kinninmont** is the Deputy Head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, and the director of a research project, 'Future Trends in the GCC'. She has been conducting research on Bahrain, among other Middle Eastern countries, since 2003.

**Omar Sirri** is currently a PhD student in political science at the University of Toronto, Canada. His research interests include ethnographies of political activism in and related to the GCC countries.

### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the many Bahrainis who participated in meetings and interviews for this research, and hope to continue the discussions in future. The paper also draws on valuable meetings that were held jointly with Beyond Borders Scotland and Beyond Conflict (previously the Project on Justice in Times of Transition), and the authors thank both organizations for this collaboration.

#### About the MENA Programme at Chatham House

The Middle East and North Africa Programme, headed by Dr Claire Spencer, undertakes high-profile research and projects on political, economic and security issues affecting the Middle East and North Africa.

[www.chathamhouse.org/mena](http://www.chathamhouse.org/mena)

#### Future trends in the GCC Project

This paper forms part of the MENA Programme's ongoing project on 'Future Trends in the GCC'. The project aims to research, analyse and anticipate some future scenarios for the political and economic development of the GCC states. The research has four main strands:

- **Citizenship and political development:** Looks at citizens' shifting attitudes and political aspirations, particularly those of the under-30s who make up the majority of the GCC's population, exploring the dynamics of reform.
- **Citizenship and the economy:** Explores changing economic realities within the GCC, analysing the potential of GCC countries to reform and diversify their economies and the links between citizens' political and economic expectations.
- **Islamism and post-Islamism in the Gulf:** Considers the diverse aspirations of Islamically inspired movements and their respective trajectories amid regional changes.
- **External 'threats' and internal community relations:** Focuses on the intersections between shifting regional dynamics, transnational movements and community relations within GCC countries.

The project seeks to deepen understanding of these various themes while analysing the prospects for GCC countries to adapt to ongoing changes in the region and develop their systems accordingly. These themes are explored in the context of relevant changes in the wider Middle East region. Engaging with younger-generation scholars, researchers and analysts from the GCC countries is a core element of the project.

[www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/future-trends-gcc-project](http://www.chathamhouse.org/about/structure/mena-programme/future-trends-gcc-project)

---

# Independent thinking since 1920

Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, is an independent policy institute based in London. Our mission is to help build a sustainably secure, prosperous and just world.

Chatham House does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author(s).

© The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2014

Cover image © MOHAMMED AL-SHAIKH/AFP/Getty Images

All Chatham House publications are printed on recycled paper.

---

The Royal Institute of International Affairs  
Chatham House  
10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE  
T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710  
[contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org) [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

Charity Registration Number: 208223