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THE TRIANGLE OF CONFLICT:
HOW BAHRAIN'S INTERNAL DIVISIONS INHIBIT RECONCILIATION

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Table of Contents

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Table of Contents | 2 |
| Table of Figures | 3 |
| Acknowledgements | 4 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| Methodology | 7 |
| The Triangle of Conflict | 8 |
| The Government | 9 |
| The Opposition | 16 |
| The Loyalist Opposition | 23 |
| Tearing Social Fabric | 31 |
| The Distrust Dynamic | 33 |
| The Street Dynamic | 36 |
| The Sectarian Dynamic | 41 |
| Repairing the Social Fabric | 46 |
| External Actors | 48 |
| Local Actors | 51 |
| Works Cited | 56 |

Table of Figures

| | |
|---|----|
| Figure 1 - Common "Government vs People" Media Narrative..... | 7 |
| Figure 2 - A More Complicated Government..... | 16 |
| Figure 3 - A More Complicated Opposition..... | 23 |
| Figure 4 - The Triangle of Conflict..... | 31 |
| Figure 5 - Political Actors in Bahrain..... | 31 |

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Introduction

The account of Bahrain's popular uprising is a familiar tale for the majority of Middle East observers. According to the commonly accepted narrative, various opposition parties have been campaigning for greater political participation and human rights in Bahrain for decades. The Shia community, making up the majority of the country's population, has continually expressed its outrage over the unfair distribution of political power and economic opportunities between itself and the ruling Sunni minority. Thus it came as no surprise when the Shia-majority rose once again and occupied Pearl Roundabout in February 2011. Since then, the intensifying crackdowns by the Al Khalifa government, Saudi Arabia's direct involvement, and Iran's meddling have all caused the sectarian tensions to rise and the situation to worsen.

However, the reality on the ground is more complex than this "government versus the people" narrative suggests.¹ Recently, several authors have sought to complicate the picture. Laurence Louër observes "unprecedented" fragmentation across the political spectrum that makes the government versus the people narrative "problematic."² Elizabeth Dickinson explores the growing gap between opposition politicians and the protesters in the street.³ Justin Gengler identifies a "Sunni awakening" of new political groups that "are now daring to articulate reform demands of their own" separate from the

¹ For examples see Al-Aswad, Ali. "Bahrain's government must stop killing its people, and listen to them." *The Guardian*, 4 April 2012. Web. 13 April 2012; Leigh, Karen. "How Bahrain's Government Is Dividing the People." *Time*. 13 Apr. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2012.

<<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2064934,00.html>>; Sadeghi, Shirin. "The Fabrication of Bahrain's Shiite-Sunni Divide." *Huffington Post*. 16 Mar. 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shirin-sadeghi/the-fabrication-of-bahrai_b_836627.html>.

² Louër, Laurence. "Houses Divided: The Splintering of Bahrain's Political Camps." *Sada*. 4 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012.

<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/index.cfm?fa=show&article=47726&solr_hilite=>.

³ Dickinson, Elizabeth. "How Long Can Bahrain's Opposition Hold Out for Dialogue?" *World Affairs*. 19 Apr. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/blog/elizabeth-dickinson/how-long-can-bahrains-opposition-hold-out-dialogue>>.

traditional opposition,⁴ a subject also taken on by Andrew Hammond.⁵ These authors and others have made a significant contribution in coming to a more nuanced understanding of the political situation in Bahrain.

In this paper we will seek to build upon their work by bringing all the pieces together and expanding upon them. In particular, we will examine how the complexity of the situation on the ground affects the prospects for reconciliation in Bahrain. By reconciliation, we mean “restoring broken relationships and learning to live non-violently with radical differences.”⁶ We will argue that reconciliation will require all relevant voices coming together in a political process to find a settlement that will help Bahrain cope with the “radical differences” found in its society. In the first part of the paper, we will determine who those relevant voices are through an examination of the three major camps in Bahraini politics: the government, the opposition, and the loyalist opposition. These three camps form what we call the “triangle of conflict” in which political struggles occur both on a systemic level between the three camps and at a group level between the factions that form those camps. Importantly, these camps do not fall perfectly along sectarian lines.

Unfortunately, in each of the three camps, the moderates most likely to participate in the necessary political process to achieve political reconciliation are losing influence to the hardliners in each camp. Therefore, in the second part of the paper, we will examine three dynamics that drive the conflicts between and within camps and empower hardliners over moderates. First, the distrust dynamic describes how the contested history

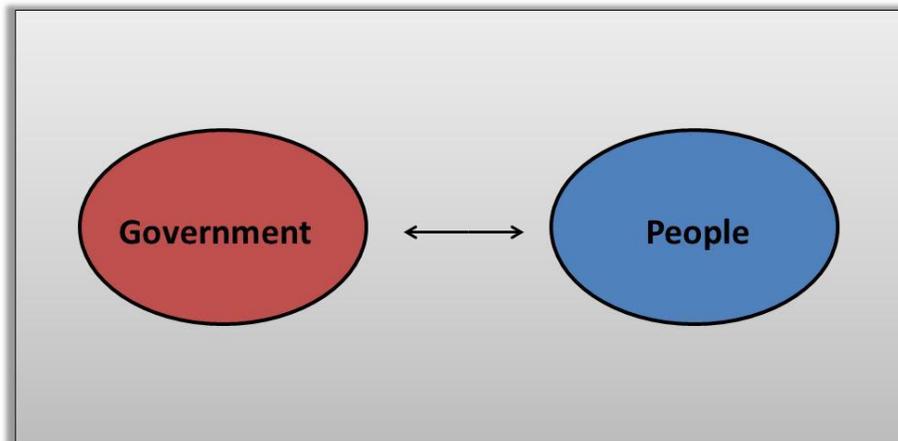
⁴ Gengler, Justin. “Bahrain’s Sunni Awakening.” *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 17 Jan. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712>>.

⁵ Hammond, Andrew. “Sunnis seek own voice in Bahrain’s turmoil.” *Reuters*. 4 Apr. 2012. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/04/us-bahrain-sunnis-idUSBRE8331B220120404>>.

⁶ Ramsbotham, Oliver, Tom Woodhouse and Hugh Miall. *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*. 2nd Edition. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000. Print. 231.

of reform in Bahrain increases suspicions of the intentions of other camps. Second, the street dynamic explores how the continuous cycle of protest, police crackdown, and counter-protest increases anger between camps and increases the risk for violence. Third, the sectarian dynamic builds upon the distrust and anger of the first two dynamics to threaten to turn Bahrain's political conflict into a more pernicious conflict of identity. We will conclude by offering some potential policy recommendations for all the parties involved. If undertaken, these recommendations will help ameliorate some of the key drivers of the conflict. Nonetheless, true political reconciliation is unlikely, and therefore Bahrain will remain a source of instability for the foreseeable future.

Figure 1 - Common "Government vs People" Media Narrative



Methodology

Fifty-four qualitative interviews were conducted between January 27, 2011 and April 2, 2012 with twenty-seven interviews conducted inside Bahrain. Most interviews were conducted individually but some subjects were interviewed in groups. All interviews were conducted in English. There was a conscious effort to speak to representatives of the opposition, the government, and the loyalist opposition. However,

it was more difficult to gain access to Salafi groups, Shia villagers, and illegal opposition groups like al-Haq and February 14. To compensate, we rely on their public statements, interviews with human rights activists who have contact with these groups, and private correspondence with some members of these groups. Finally, gaining access to high-level government officials was difficult, but we spoke with multiple representatives from various government agencies.

Many subjects were reluctant to discuss internal divisions within the groups they represent. Speaking to independent analysts and academics in Bahrain greatly assisted us in overcoming this limitation. To facilitate an open discussion, many interviewees spoke on a condition of anonymity. Lastly, broadcast media does not figure prominently in our analysis due to language and time restrictions. However, a large number of Arabic print media were examined, as well as secondary sources concerning Bahraini media generally. Unless noted otherwise, we are responsible for the translation of all the material originally in Arabic or Farsi.

The Triangle of Conflict

In the following section we will examine the three camps that must be represented in any potential dialogue on the path to reconciliation: the government, the opposition, and the loyalist opposition. Each camp suffers significant schisms between moderates and hardliners, and the hardliners in each camp continue to gain influence as the crisis continues. As a result, the chances for reconciliation grow increasingly slim.

The Government

The Bahraini government can be divided into two large factions: the anti-reform faction led by the Prime Minister and the reform faction led by the Crown Prince. Both factions ultimately strive to ensure the survival of the Al Khalifa ruling family. When faced with security dilemmas, states in the region choose policies that protect regime security above anything else,⁷ and Bahrain is no exception. While all government factions seek regime security, the Prime Minister considers reform as an opening to greater insecurity while the Crown Prince views reform as a source for regime security.

The unelected Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, leads the anti-reform faction. This segment of the government views any concessions as a slippery slope, which may result in further demands by the opposition groups within the country. After 41 years of holding office, the Prime Minister has accumulated significant resentment among the opposition who view him as corrupt, intolerant, and the primary obstacle to real reform in Bahrain.⁸ The Prime Minister represents a segment of the royal family's old guard, which lorded over Bahrain prior to King Hamad's decision to implement major reforms in 2001.⁹

In addition to the Prime Minister, the Royal Court Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed and the head of the Bahrain Defense Force, Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed, complete the anti-reform troika.¹⁰ According to a U.S. official, Sheikh Khalid and Sheikh Khalifa

⁷ Gause, Gregory F. *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Print.

⁸ Anonymous. Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2012.

⁹ International Crisis Group. "Popular Protests in North Africa and Middle East (III): The Bahrain Revolt." *Middle East Report N° 105*. 6 Apr. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/media-releases/2011/mena/the-bahrain-revolt.aspx>>. 4.

¹⁰ Hokayem, Emile. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2012.

are more ideological than the pragmatic Prime Minister.¹¹ For example, Sheikh Khalifa recently disingenuously affirmed “the situation in Bahrain is quite normal,” and dismissed news organizations that report otherwise as the “trumpets of Iran.”¹² This U.S. official further contends that the Prime Minister would not necessarily oppose any potential deal with the opposition, but the other two would reject any deal because of “sectarian beliefs.”¹³ Besides rumors of secret negotiations between the Royal Court Minister and the opposition in February 2012,¹⁴ there is little indication that the rigid position of this faction within the government will be shifting any time soon. Moreover, it is hard to imagine any possible deal with the opposition that would allow the Prime Minister to remain in power, and he therefore represents a significant obstacle in achieving reconciliation.

Meanwhile, the reform faction led by the country’s Crown Prince, Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, has proven its willingness to negotiate with the opposition and has established itself as a moderate and pragmatic player amid the current tensions. The Crown Prince is widely believed to be more concerned about the country’s long-term stability, and he is perhaps the most popular government figure among the people.¹⁵ Many Bahrainis view him as a pragmatic and liberal thinker who is willing to compromise for the greater benefit of the country. However, some experts on the ground believe he is more concerned about the future of the country due to the fact that he will be

¹¹ Anonymous. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.

¹² “Gulf Union need of the hour.” *Daily Tribune*. 14 Mar. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.dt.bh/newsdetails.php?key=301110213450&newsid=130312192209>>.

¹³ Anonymous. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.

¹⁴ Birnbaum, Ben. “Talks may resume in Bahrain” *Washington Times*. 14 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/feb/14/talks-may-resume-in-bahrain>>.

¹⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. 11 Mar. 2012.

inheriting the kingdom following his father's death.¹⁶ Many opposition groups inside the country also believe that, despite his well-intentioned attempts, the Crown Prince does not have the political clout to implement any significant change. For example, one member of the leftist opposition society Wa'ad explained, "The Crown Prince is a good man and he wants to change a lot of things, but we are not sure if he really has the power."¹⁷

The power struggle between the reform and anti-reform camps began with the National Action Charter, a referendum in 2001 which overwhelmingly approved the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. While the Charter was a major blow to the anti-reform camp, they were able to convince King Hamad to unilaterally promulgate a constitution that reneged on several key provisions of the Charter, especially by weakening the parliament. Nonetheless, the following decade witnessed a series of reforms that stripped power away from the Prime Minister.¹⁸ The major thrust of reforms came through the Crown Prince's "Economic Vision 2030," which aimed to make Bahrain independent from petroleum income and foreign labor by diversifying the country's economy and promoting self-sufficiency.¹⁹ This vision posed a triple threat to the Prime Minister. The first threat stemmed from the network of new institutions formed to achieve the Crown Prince's vision. As head of the newly-established Economic Development Board (EDB), the Crown Prince controlled institutions including Tamkeen, tasked with supporting Bahrain's private sector, Mumtalakat, a sovereign wealth fund,

¹⁶ Anonymous. Personal interview. 14 Mar. 2012.

¹⁷ Anonymous. Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2012.

¹⁸ Wright, Steven. "Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain." Center for International and Regional Studies, Georgetown University. 2008. Web. 20 Apr. 2012. <http://qspace.qu.edu.qa/bitstream/handle/10576/10759/No_3_Fixing_the_Kingdom.pdf?sequence=1>. 2.

¹⁹ Government of Bahrain. *Bahrain Economic Development Board*. 2008. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.bahrainedb.com/economic-vision.aspx>>.

and the Labor Market Regulatory Authority (LMRA), dedicated to reforming the labor market. In effect, the Crown Prince ran a de facto cabinet under the Economic Development Board umbrella that directly rivaled the Prime Minister's official cabinet.

Second, the economic reforms that sought to replace cheap foreign labor with more expensive Bahraini labor challenged the bottom lines of the business community, a key pillar of support for the Prime Minister. Third, the attempt to move away from petroleum threatened to undermine the Prime Minister's other key source of support: patronage networks developed through his ties to Saudi Arabia. The economic dependence of Bahrain on Saudi Arabia stems primarily from a treaty between the two countries that stipulates Saudi Arabia as the operator of the shared offshore oil field Abu Safah. Almost 70% of the Bahraini government's revenue and 80% of Bahrain's total oil production is drawn from this oil field,²⁰ but the production is insignificant for Saudi Arabia. As a result, Saudi Arabia can keep the Bahraini government in line by cutting off production at any time,²¹ a weapon they have used in the past.²²

Powers were slowly but surely being taken away from the Prime Minister. Tensions boiled over in 2008 when, in a rare public exchange of letters, the Crown Prince complained to King Hamad about government corruption and "obstacles" hampering the process of economic reforms, implicitly referring to the Prime Minister.²³ Shortly after

²⁰ Galani, Una. "Saudis wouldn't gain much from a union with Bahrain." *Reuters*. 2 May 2012. Web. 3 May 2012. <<http://blogs.reuters.com/breakingviews/2012/05/02/saudis-wouldnt-gain-much-from-a-union-with-bahrain/>>.

²¹ Carlstrom, Gregg. "In the Kingdom of Tear Gas." *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero041312>>.

²² Al-Hasan, Hasan. "Counter-balancing Saudi Arabia: why the US should not abandon Bahrain's reformists." *Open Democracy*. 19 Jan. 2012. Web. 28 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/hasan-tariq-alhasan/counter-balancing-saudi-arabia-why-us-should-not-abandon-bahrain%E2%80%99s-reformists>>.

²³ Kerr, Simeon. "Bahrain Crown Prince cuts lines of patronage." *Financial Times*. 23 Feb. 2008. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-crown-prince-cuts-lines-of-patronage-1.86166>>.

this exchange, the Crown Prince announced that the government would “not spare any minister implicated in corruption,” and the Prime Minister’s son was removed from his position as the head of Bahrain’s Airport Authority.²⁴ Minister of Defense Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa was also removed from his post and the Crown Prince was given the title of Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.²⁵ That same year, King Hamad introduced a new law that increased the number of ministers who reported directly to the EDB from six to sixteen, further enhancing the Crown Prince’s rival cabinet.²⁶

However, the political struggle was far from over and the Prime Minister began to regain strength. By 2010, the EDB “became increasingly unable to work its magic,”²⁷ and reports of sweeping crackdowns on the country’s political and human rights activists began to surface.²⁸ Yet, it was not until the February 14th uprising and subsequent crackdown that the Prime Minister truly gained the upper hand. Divisions within the royal family’s ranks immediately appeared in the form of contradictory messages made by government officials concerning the protests. Despite the Crown Prince’s appearance on television apologizing for the harsh treatment of protesters,²⁹ the brutal repression of prisoners and demonstrators continued. Such opposing messages caused a great level of mistrust within the population and many now question the government’s sincerity in

²⁴ Fadhel, Mohammad. “Bahrain seeks to stamp out corruption.” *Agence France Presse*. 9 Oct. 2007. *LexisNexis*. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

²⁵ Wright. “Fixing the Kingdom.” 2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ Diboll, Mike. “Hard Lessons in Bahrain.” *Financial Times*. 8 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://chronicle.com/article/Hard-Lessons-in-Bahrain/131429/>>.

²⁸ Cambanis, Thanassis. “Crackdown in Bahrain Hints of End to Reforms.” *The New York Times*. 26 Aug. 2010. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/27/world/middleeast/27bahrain.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all>.

²⁹ CNN. “HRH Crown Prince speaks to CNN about national dialogue initiative in Bahrain.” *YouTube*. 19 Feb. 2012. Web. 19 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDoEtUHtUwU>>.

wanting to negotiate in the first place.³⁰ The true crushing blow against the reform faction came with the military intervention of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), causing the collapse of negotiations between the Crown Prince and the opposition and eliminating any possibility for an immediate political solution.

After the GCC intervention, the Crown Prince retreated from public life for several months. He attempted to launch the National Dialogue in July 2011, but the hardline parliament speaker Khalifa al-Dhahrani replaced the Crown Prince as leader of the dialogue, a key factor that led to the opposition's eventual withdrawal.³¹ In another sign of the Crown Prince's weakened position, several of the institutions associated with him have come under pressure. The heads of both the EDB³² and Mumtalakat³³ have been ousted. In addition, the business community associated with the Prime Minister successfully lobbied for a freeze of fees on foreign workers, a key revenue source for Tamkeen.³⁴ A recent attempt by the King to increase the government's share of Tamkeen's revenues from 20% to 50% was also blocked in the Parliament, a power center for the Prime Minister.³⁵ As described by a former high ranking Bahraini government official, the crackdown on the February 14th uprising, coupled with the weakening of the Crown Prince's position, "destroyed" the 2030 vision.³⁶

³⁰ Anonymous. Personal interview. 13 Mar. 2012.

³¹ Carlstrom. "In the Kingdom of Tear Gas."

³² "HM the King issues Royal Order." *Bahrain News Agency*. 13 Mar. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2012. <<http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/498542>>.

³³ Kerr, Simeon. "Head of Bahrain sovereign wealth fund quits." *Financial Times*. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/49c3c454-614f-11e1-a738-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1sSgYPcqD>>.

³⁴ "Extend expat labour fee freeze say Bahrain MPs." *Trade Arabia*. 7 Mar. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.tradearabia.com/news/law_213744.html>.

³⁵ "Bahrain's parliament blocks labour fund plan." *Trade Arabia*. 7 Mar. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2012. <http://www.tradearabia.com/news/law_213744.html>.

³⁶ Anonymous. Personal interview. 1 Mar. 2012.

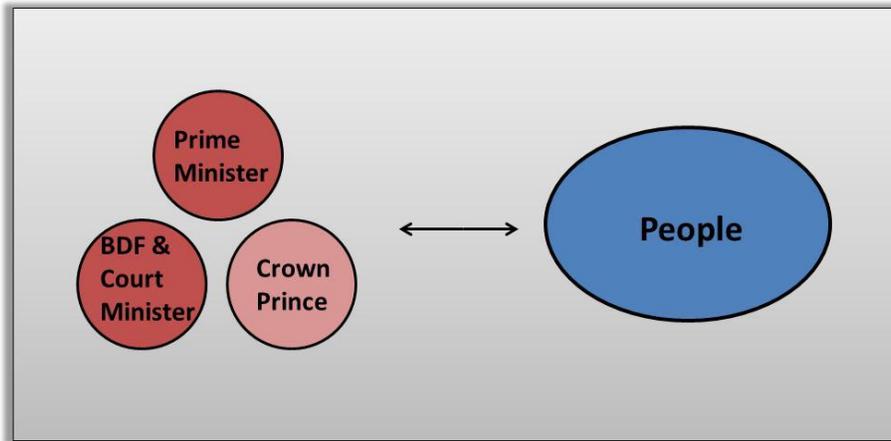
The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), which investigated the human rights violations during the February 14th uprising, provided a small boost to the Crown Prince and other moderates. In a sign of the deepening divides within the government, the Prime Minister conveniently found himself out of the country when the National Commission presented its report on the implementation of the BICI.³⁷ As the protests and crackdowns continue, moderates like the Crown Prince continually lose support, with some Bahrainis accusing him of being too lenient with the protesters and others blaming him for failing to rein in his hardliner family members. In one of his recent visits to a Shia area – a trip very few other officials undertake – the Crown Prince was shouted down by a group of female protesters calling for the downfall of the regime.³⁸

The power struggles within the monarchy are a main contributing factor to the current political deadlock. Not only do the different factions work at cross-purposes, but it is also extremely difficult to negotiate with the government when it is not clear which faction represents it or has the actual authority and power to control the outcome. Moreover, according to one former high-ranking U.S. official, the Crown Prince has said privately he will not continue his struggle with the Prime Minister unless he thinks he can win.³⁹ Thus with the anti-reform camp in the ascendancy and a victory for the Crown Prince doubtful, the government is not likely willing to enter serious negotiations to find a political settlement to the crisis anytime soon.

³⁷ Carlstrom. "In the Kingdom of Tear Gas."

³⁸ "Bahraini Crown Prince confronted by angry protesters." *Al-Akhbar English*. 18 Apr. 2012. Web. 20 Apr. 2012. <<http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/bahraini-crown-prince-confronted-angry-protesters>>.

³⁹ Anonymous. Personal interview. 22 Mar. 2012.

Figure 2 - A More Complicated Government

The Opposition

A wide range of groups with ideologies ranging from leftist, liberal, and Islamist, forms the opposition camp. Importantly, while the majority of the opposition is Shia, many Sunnis belong to this camp as well, including most notably the leftist Wa'ad society. All of these groups share a similar set of political, economic, and social grievances against the government. However, tactics and strategy divide them, with one faction calling for negotiations with the government to achieve a constitutional monarchy and another faction calling for the immediate establishment of a republic. Human rights groups also fall within this camp with different activists falling under each faction. As with the government camp, the moderates within the opposition are losing their influence to hardliners unwilling to enter negotiations.

The entire opposition shares the same broad demands for reform under four general categories. First, the opposition demands greater political participation through an elected and fully-empowered parliament and the end of gerrymandered electoral districts that prevent the opposition from ever gaining a majority of seats.⁴⁰ Second, they seek an

⁴⁰ Dooley, Brian. "Bahrain Should Heed Lessons from Ireland." *Human Rights First*. 29 Sept. 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/2011/09/29/bahrain-should-heed-lessons-from-ireland/>>.

end to discriminatory practices by the government against the Shia, including an end to political naturalization of foreign Sunnis,⁴¹ the greater inclusion of Shia in the security services, the placement of Shia at the highest levels in the government, and the cessation of sectarian incitement on official media.⁴² Third, they strive for economic justice and accountability, including the provision of adequate housing,⁴³ the creation of more jobs, and the fight against corruption. Finally, the entire opposition demands the release of political prisoners, the cessation of all human rights violations, and accountability for human rights violators.

Despite these commonalities, the opposition is broadly divided between pragmatist and idealist factions. The pragmatists believe in promoting democracy while maintaining the monarchy in the country under the slogan “people want reform of the system.”⁴⁴ The views of this faction are best reflected in the Manama Document signed by five political societies, including Wafaq and Wa’ad, on October 12, 2011. The document calls for a constitutional monarchy based on the original platform for the failed negotiations between the Crown Prince and opposition during the February 14th uprising. Their specific demands include an elected government representing the will of the people, fair electoral districts, a unicameral parliament authorized with legislative and

⁴¹ International Crisis Group. “The Bahrain Revolt.” 4.

⁴² Rajab, Nabeel. “Press TV: Nabeel Rajab: Discrimination and sectarian oppression in Bahrain, a systematic reality.” *Bahrain Center for Human Rights*. 23 Feb. 2009. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/2769>>.

⁴³ “Al Khawaja at the Meeting of Human Rights Council: Corruption and Inadequate Housing in Bahrain.” *Bahrain Center for Human Rights*. 12 June 2007. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/1280>>.

⁴⁴ *Manama Document*. Bahrain, 12 Oct. 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.bahrainjdm.org/2011/10/13/manama-document-english/>>.

regulatory powers, an independent judicial system, and the integration of Shia in the country's police and security forces.⁴⁵

The biggest political society in this faction is Wefaq, the country's most influential Shia party. With a historical past stemming from the Iraqi Dawa Party,⁴⁶ Wefaq was founded in November 2001 as an umbrella group encompassing different political and religious ideologies within Shia Islam.⁴⁷ Wefaq's influence stems from both strong domestic support and international recognition. The most important source of legitimacy for Wefaq is the support of the people, partially due to the backing of influential Shia clerics like Ayatollah Isa Qasim, which every other Shia group lacks. Wefaq enjoys an unparalleled ability to mobilize people in the streets due to both its religious support and its unrivaled organizational capacity.⁴⁸ Internationally, Wefaq has found a great level of recognition by governments and non-governmental organizations. In his speech to the United Nations General Assembly, President Barack Obama recognized Wefaq as the "main opposition bloc"⁴⁹ in the country. This recognition has helped provide a measure of support for Wefaq's legal status in the country. According to one Bahraini academic, "The Al Khalifa family knows that if they [dismantle Wefaq] they will open up a Pandora's Box."⁵⁰

As indicated in the Manama Document, the pragmatist faction relies upon peaceful methods to achieve its demands. By exploiting the media, engaging in peaceful

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wefaq currently rejects any institutional connection to Dawa.

⁴⁷ International Crisis Group. "The Bahrain Revolt." 14.

⁴⁸ "Mass pro-democracy protest rocks Bahrain." *Reuters*. 10 Mar. 2012. Web. 18 Apr. 2012. <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/03/09/bahrain-protest-idINDEE8280BU20120309>>.

⁴⁹ Obama, Barack. "Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly." United Nations. 21 Sep. 2011. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/21/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>>.

⁵⁰ Anonymous. Personal interview. 16 Mar. 2012.

rallies, and recording all human rights violations, they are determined to reject the government's "tyranny."⁵¹ Their pragmatism stems from realizing their own limitations and capacity for change in the country. Tolerating a monarchy may not be the most desirable situation, but given Saudi and U.S. support for the government and loyalist opposition resistance, gradual change towards a constitutional monarchy is the best option. A former Wefaq parliamentary member clarified by stating, "Of course, I rather not live under monarchy. What advantage does King Hamad give? [...] But at same time, it's simply not feasible to talk about reform without including the royal family."⁵²

The second idealist faction of the opposition consists of illegal political societies such as Haq and Wafa, as well as the Coalition for February 14 Youth (February 14) which launched the February 14th, 2011 uprising. This idealist faction calls for the downfall of the regime and refuses any dialogue with the government. In a speech during the uprising, the leader of the Haq movement, Hassan Mushaima, argued that the toppling of the monarchy in Bahrain has become necessary due to the "oppressive and corrupt" rule of the Al Khalifa family.⁵³ In competition with the pragmatist opposition's Manama Document calling for a constitutional monarchy, February 14 issued the Lulu Charter in which they call for the "overthrowing of the Al Khalifa tribal regime" and the establishment of popular self-determination in Bahrain.⁵⁴ In contrast to the pragmatists who see the government as a necessary evil for reform, the idealists view the government as an immovable obstacle to reform and refuse any contact with the authorities. The Lulu Charter affirms that the Al Khalifa have lost their "legitimacy and will not be dealt with

⁵¹ *Manama Document*.

⁵² Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2012.

⁵³ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry." 23 Nov. 2011. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIREportEN.pdf>>. 115.

⁵⁴ *Lulu Charter*. Bahrain, 6 Feb. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=364386063591474>.

under any circumstances.”⁵⁵ In addition, they specifically declare their mission to protect the country’s Arabic and Islamic identity in an attempt to refute claims that they are Iranian agents. Unlike the pragmatist faction, the demands of the idealists and the methods to achieve those demands are vague. For example, in the Lulu Charter under a section entitled “field works,” February 14 describes the importance of “strengthening the self-abilities of the youth of the revolution in creating field activities that generate an active pressure that pushes towards overthrowing the regime.” However, no further explanation is provided on what the group exactly means by “field works” or “active pressure.”

Haq is perhaps the most important unlicensed opposition group in the country. In 2005, Wefaq’s decision to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections for the first time led to several idealist members leaving the society. This group of maverick individuals, including Hassan Mushaima, went on to establish Haq as an alternative to Wefaq, which they believed had sold out on their principles.⁵⁶ Despite this split, Wefaq performed well in the 2006 elections, proving that the secular Haq could not compete against the ulama-backed Wefaq.⁵⁷ So in 2009, Abdul Wahab Hussein and Abdul Jalil Maqdad formed a new society, Wafa, with an explicitly religious orientation to compete with Wefaq, even if they still could not match the religious clout of Ayatollah Isa Qasim. With these defections, what had once been internal splits within Wefaq had become formalized into two distinct factions split between pragmatists and idealists. According to a Wefaq Shura council member, the defection of the hardliners from Wefaq allowed the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Anonymous. Personal interview. 16 Mar. 2012.

⁵⁷ Gengler, Justin. “Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan (2011). Web. 14 Apr. 2012. <<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jgengler/docs/diss/Dissertation%20-%20Combined,%20formatted.pdf>>. 105.

society to undergo a transformation by becoming less “Islamist and more Islamic.”⁵⁸ By broadening its base and enjoying an invaluable endorsement by Ayatollah Isa Qasim, Wefaq won all 18 constituencies they contested in the 2010 parliamentary elections, proving their dominance within the opposition before the February 14th uprising.

The February 14, 2011 protests caused many of the debates surrounding political participation to resurface between the pragmatist and the idealist factions. As the pragmatist faction began negotiations with the Crown Prince, the idealist faction declared the establishment of a coalition for a republic in Bahrain, throwing a wrench into the negotiation process and facilitating the government’s decision to allow the GCC troops to enter the country. The Bahraini government constantly accuses the factions of this camp of receiving assistance from Hezbollah and Iran. While no hard evidence has been brought forward,⁵⁹ the government claims Haq’s Mushaima visited Hassan Nasrallah before his return to Bahrain from exile.⁶⁰ Thus, the government has especially focused its crackdown on idealist faction groups like Haq and February 14. With the majority of their leaders currently in prison, this faction tends to be very fragmented and lacks organizational cohesion. In addition, some idealists have been more willing to use violence in what they deem “self-defense” against the police, compared to the pragmatist faction which does not face the same level of brutality from the security services.

Another small but important contingent within the opposition consists of human rights organizations. Despite the fact that some individual activists might fall within certain factions, the human rights groups are not officially affiliated with either the pragmatists or the idealists. This group primarily derives its leverage from the ability to

⁵⁸ Anonymous. Personal interview. 30 Mar. 2012.

⁵⁹ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 387.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

gather international support for the opposition cause through the documentation and broadcast of human rights violations. More importantly, with the majority of political leaders currently in prison, these activists have become de facto political leaders themselves and many hold significant influence in mobilizing the people.⁶¹ In particular, the founder of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja, and its current president, Nabeel Rajab, have tirelessly struggled for the protection of human rights using peaceful methods.⁶² Al-Khawaja in particular has caused a great deal of grief for the government as his prolonged hunger strike in prison demanding the release of all political prisoners threatens to take his life. His death would likely spark a nationwide protest and a massive international outcry.

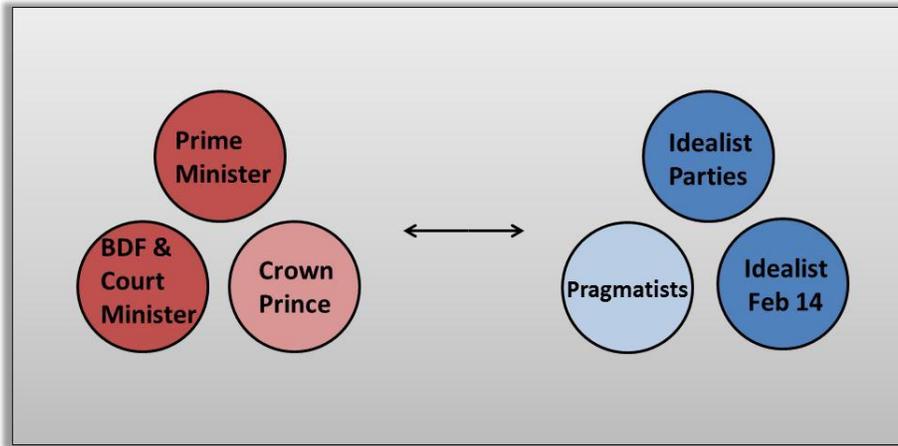
Both the pragmatic and idealist factions contend for the support of the street to gain a source of leverage over the government. The measure of popular support for these groups is notoriously difficult to ascertain. Protesters attend any rally hosted by any group in order to demonstrate against the regime, making it difficult to determine how many true followers each group possesses. Nevertheless, the extended period of unrest in the country is weakening Wefaq's pragmatic position as anger on the street rises. During many Wefaq sponsored protests, the crowd shouts "down with King Hamad" as the Wefaq leaders silently watch, seemingly unable to control the crowd's chants. The ruling family is responding by brutally crushing the nightly protests in the Shia villages and, in turn, this has caused the further radicalization of some of the idealist groups. As a result,

⁶¹ Al-Wadi, Nada. Personal interview. 23 Feb. 2012.

⁶² Humphreys, Adrian. "The Arab Awakening: A Bahraini activist struggles to keep protests alive." *National Post*. 21 Dec. 2011. Web. 20 Apr. 2012.
<<http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/12/21/the-arab-awakening-a-bahraini-activist-struggles-to-keep-protests-alive/>>.

just as with the government camp, the hardliners who refuse negotiations within the opposition camp are gaining influence.

Figure 3 - A More Complicated Opposition



The Loyalist Opposition

The resurgence of a strong, independent Sunni voice represents the greatest challenge to the “government versus the people” narrative and the largest change to the Bahraini political landscape since the February 14th uprising. Joining with some Shia business leaders and non-Muslims, they have formed a loyalist opposition to counter the perceived threat from the opposition and, by default, defend the Al Khalifa regime. In the process, they have asserted their own economic, political, and social demands on the government and thus should not be considered simply a “pro-government” force. Yet divisions between inclusive moderates and more hardline Islamist groups undermine the loyalist opposition’s efficacy and dilute its focus. This new loyalist opposition, in some form, will clearly play an important role in Bahraini politics for years to come. As a result, any reconciliation process must find a way to include the people it represents. However, as the hardline Islamists gain strength, the loyalist opposition’s participation in any dialogue becomes less likely.

Bahrain's Sunni population was not always apolitical and acquiescent. In the 1950's, the greatest threat for the Al Khalifa regime and their British protectors stemmed from Sunni Arab nationalists and their attempts to join forces with the Shia.⁶³ After the inevitable government crackdown, most Sunnis decided to stay out of politics, a trend the government reinforced by channeling rents to the Sunnis and stoking fears of a Shia fifth-column led by revolutionary Iran. The result was a Sunni population intensely suspicious of the Shia-dominated opposition and deeply reliant upon the government to control that perceived threat.

When opposition protesters began to flood the streets on February 14, 2011, most Sunnis looked on with apprehension and waited for the government to control the situation. As the opposition protests grew in both size and scope of demands, so did the fear that the government would cut a deal at the expense of the Sunnis.⁶⁴ With this in mind, they took to the streets themselves on February 21st, with at the least 120,000 people assembling at Bahrain's largest Sunni mosque, Al Fateh.⁶⁵ At the demonstration, the well-known Sunni dissident Sheikh Abdul Latif al-Mahmood announced the establishment of The Gathering of National Unity (TGONU) as a new umbrella group for all individuals who did not feel that they were represented by the opposition protests at Pearl Roundabout. In his remarks, al-Mahmood affirmed the legitimacy of the Al Khalifa regime, urged the opposition to work together to achieve their common demands, and called on the government to undertake reform in order to protect the rights of all

⁶³ Khuri, Fuad I. *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. 197-8.

⁶⁴ Al-Ammadi, Mohammed. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2012.

⁶⁵ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 86.

Bahrainis without ethnic, sectarian, or class-based discrimination.⁶⁶ For the first time in decades, Bahrain's apolitical Sunnis and their allies were being heard loud and clear.

As al-Mahmood hoped, TGONU would serve as the umbrella group for most of the voices that did not fall in line with the opposition. Pre-existing Sunni Islamist political societies, such as the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Minbar and the Salafi Asala, also joined the TGONU umbrella. According to Minbar MP Mohammed al-Ammadi, the Islamist societies wanted to take the lead but understood that they suffered from popular disenchantment in the street due to their previous performance in parliament.⁶⁷ In fact, the previous year's parliamentary elections were a "disaster" for these societies, whose seats fell from fifteen to only five members.⁶⁸ As described below, eventually the Minbar and Asala suffered a falling out with TGONU and left the group.

Despite al-Mahmood's initial conciliatory rhetoric, from the very onset the loyalist opposition sought to counter the opposition's attempts to monopolize the voice of the people. Protesters at Fateh Mosque chanted "We are here" in an attempt to prove that the opposition at Pearl Roundabout did not speak on behalf of all the Bahraini people. As former Sunni MP Ahmed Haji explains, "The opposition does not represent all of Bahrain, perhaps 50% maximum. It is not like the 99% at Occupy Wall Street."⁶⁹ Many participants of the loyalist opposition harbor intense distrust of the traditional opposition, often for sectarian reasons. For example, Sunni columnist Faisal al-Sheikh contends Wefaq's "goal is to remain in this country to strip it of its Arab identity and make it part

⁶⁶ Ibid., 86-7.

⁶⁷ Al-Ammadi, Mohammed. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

⁶⁸ Diwan, Kristin Smith. "Why the Bahrain elections matter." *Foreign Policy*. 1 Dec. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012. <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/12/01/bahrain_elections>.

⁶⁹ Haji, Ahmed. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2012.

of the [Iranian] Supreme Leader's paradise."⁷⁰ Even the more moderate voices within loyalist opposition express concern over the uncertain relationship between the political leadership of Wefaq and the religious authority of Ayatollah Isa Qasim. This distrust only intensified as Bahrain's unrest deepened and, on multiple occasions, various groups of citizens clashed with each other.

This rhetoric has led many opposition supporters and neutral observers to call the loyalist opposition "pro-government."⁷¹ In addition, rumors abound among opposition circles that the government keeps TGONU's leaders on the payroll. Yet, according to one young TGONU member, "the government does not control these groups, and even if it did, the people who go out for their protests are genuine."⁷² To be certain, the loyalist opposition is more "pro-government" than the opposition, and its supporters often refer to themselves as the "Loyal Bahrainis."⁷³ Yet the "pro-government" label misses the crucial fact that the group was primarily born out of the desire to counter the opposition in Pearl Roundabout. In that sense, they are more "anti-opposition" than "pro-government." Even the common chants of "The people want the Prime Minister" by more hardline loyalist opposition members should not be construed as supportive of the government but rather implicitly critical of the Crown Prince and King who have failed to rein in the opposition.

Moreover, the loyalist opposition enumerated demands against the government from the very beginning. For example, at a *majlis* hosted by MP al-Ammadi, a Sunni

⁷⁰ Al-Sheikh, Faisal. "Leave the 'northern paradise' alone!" *Al-Watan*. 6 Mar. 2012. Web. 6 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=ItQwgFU6sFO7G3HixDYUcccM4rI5PeNguD9oRUJTMdA=>>.

⁷¹ For example, see Carlstrom. "In the Kingdom of Tear Gas."

⁷² Anonymous. Personal interview. 27 Mar. 2012.

⁷³ Al-Sheikh, Faisal. "To those who forgot Khalifa bin Salman status." *Al-Watan*. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=vTLSp824BFpHpR4tZzycYbqeVOMf8cHYKonyCi/xpm0=>>.

sheikh gave a speech railing against the “sins” of the government for allowing so much corruption, poverty, wasteful spending, and insecurity in Bahrain, among other complaints.⁷⁴ The loyalist opposition, however, differs with the opposition over the speed and method of achieving reform. According to a young TGONU member, “everyone is for democracy, but they disagree on what reforms and how fast. We agree on the destination, just not the path.”⁷⁵ He continued, “Democracy is more than just a form of government; it is also a culture that has to be developed.”⁷⁶ Yet while reform must be gradual, it is still a necessity according to the loyalist opposition. As columnist Amani Khalifa al-Absi argues, “Reform is the government’s natural and obvious duty.”⁷⁷ With these demands under consideration, it is more appropriate to call TGONU and its affiliates a “loyalist opposition” as opposed to simply “pro-government.”

Despite the broad desire to be heard, to counter the traditional opposition, and to push for gradual reform, the TGONU umbrella quickly fell victim to the reality of organizing a mass group of people with disparate beliefs. According to journalist Abdulla al-Mannai, what TGONU gained in diversity of opinion, it lost in effectiveness as an organization.⁷⁸ Schisms became quickly apparent and, in some cases, irreconcilable. The most significant split came when al-Mahmood decided TGONU should register to become an official political society. Such legal recognition would afford many logistical, financial, and political benefits, but it also meant that Asala and Minbar would by

⁷⁴ Personal observation. 28 Mar. 2012.

⁷⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. 27 Mar 2012.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Al-Absi, Amani Khalifa. “This is the reform we want.” *Al-Watan*. 29 Feb. 2012. Web. 29 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=hTKuf16QKuTrZqrfKgGk1YpdZmZFzOqpcLDo0YLSzTY=>>.

⁷⁸ Al-Mannai, Abdulla. Personal interview. 25 Mar 2012.

definition become competitor societies and therefore would have to leave TGONU. For Minbar MP al-Ammadi, this decision effectively “hijacked” the movement.⁷⁹

Today, the loyalist opposition is fundamentally split between TGONU, which still portrays itself as an inclusive national umbrella, and the Sunni Islamists who, by definition, only represent a portion of Bahrain’s Sunnis and seek a conservative agenda. Importantly, the Sunni Islamists have encouraged the growth of their own popular movements to displace TGONU, including most prominently the Fateh Youth Awakening (*al-Sahwa*). According to MP al-Ammadi, Minbar exercises no control over the Sahwa, though many of the youth are members of the society. Nonetheless, one secular Sunni interviewee called Sahwa the “Minbar Junior Division.”⁸⁰ For its part, the opposition gives a different account as to who pulls Sahwa’s strings. According to their narrative, al-Mahmood fell out with the government after he suggested the Prime Minister could resign after the resolution of the crisis,⁸¹ and therefore the government sought to sideline al-Mahmood with a new group to counter the opposition. As with so many debates in Bahrain, the truth is clouded. Yet, given their high level of grassroots support, the Sahwa clearly represent an important segment of the population, regardless of any possible fealty to other groups or the government.

As the crisis continues, the split between the Islamists and the rest of the loyalist opposition has intensified. For the one year anniversary of the first Fateh protest, al-Mahmood was not even invited to attend the rally. Instead, organizers invited Abdullah

⁷⁹ Al-Ammadi, Mohammed. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

⁸⁰ Anonymous. Personal interview. 27 Mar 2012.

⁸¹ Birnbaum, Ben. “Top Sunni: P.M. should mull quitting after crisis.” *Washington Times*. 18 Aug 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/aug/18/leading-bahraini-sunni-prime-minister-should-resig/>>.

Nafisi, a Kuwaiti notorious for his sectarian ideology and Al-Qaeda sympathies.⁸² This lean towards Islamism has made former supporters uncomfortable. One interviewee explained that she originally supported the loyalist opposition because it represented national unity, Sunni and Shia, secular and Islamist, but now it has unfortunately become dominated by different kinds of Islamists vying for influence.⁸³ Most recently, the Islamists have focused their ire on the liberal Culture Minister, Sheikha Mai bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, over her purported promotion of immodesty. These accusations have deepened the schisms within the loyal opposition. The liberal commentator Sawsan al-Sha'er blasted the Islamists over the controversy, likening them to the opposition protesters who have no "right to speak in the name of all people or impose their views" on others.⁸⁴ The loyalist opposition movement that began with a call for unity is now a divided house. Thus Amani Khalifa al-Absi laments, "What is strange is that we went out to Al Fateh a year ago to make our voice heard and so as not to be marginalized, but today we are, unfortunately, marginalizing each other and even betraying each other."⁸⁵

It is not clear under what conditions the loyalist opposition would enter a potential dialogue, if at all. Many fear that the opposition and the government will come to an agreement that will completely marginalize the loyalist opposition, an eventuality some even view as an existential threat. Thus MP al-Ammadi exclaimed in an interview,

⁸² Al-Zayani, Hesham. "With your gathering and attitude, you shrunk the small even more!!" *Al-Watan*. 24 Feb. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012.
<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=R7hW/YugqQ2Xk1xnYcBkxD+nncVzXIrCMkc5WIHjqUJmoy5OCkbzq6tD5Pfm3e75>>.

⁸³ Anonymous. Personal interview. 23 Mar 2012.

⁸⁴ Al-Sha'er, Sawsan. "The story in a nutshell." *Al-Watan*. 6 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Apr. 2012.
<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=+DHI84KEErXxZbFUO5rGQz7yIMCsUeozNfVw26gCRvw=>>.

⁸⁵ Al-Absi, Amani Khalifa. "A Straightforward Word to the Unity and the Awakening." *Al-Watan*. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 27 Feb. 2012.
<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=Pw3JemBwK+/PdxGL+xFT1pU9+37jC8QnuGHF9sWanrA=>>.

“Thank God Wefaq refused negotiations with the Crown Prince” last year.⁸⁶ With this in mind, Faisal al-Sheikh urges participation in any future dialogue “to prevent any deal to the detriment of the faithful and to make our own demands to the state.”⁸⁷ Others emphatically insist there can be no dialogue until security is restored in the streets.⁸⁸ Two things are clear, however. First, as the more hardline Islamists gain strength within the loyalist opposition, the likelihood for participation in any national dialogue decreases and the chance for the camp to act as a spoiler increases.⁸⁹ Second, despite its internal schisms, this camp represents a significant part of the Bahraini population, and therefore no reconciliation can happen without their participation. As Sawsan al-Sha’er proclaims, “We are here to tell everybody that Bahrain’s fate won’t be laid out without us [...] We have left the spectators’ seats and come down to the field as a major player to become real partners in building the nation.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Al-Ammadi, Mohammed. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

⁸⁷ Al-Sheikh, Faisal. “Why is the National Unity Rally boycotting the dialogue?” *Al-Watan*. 20 Mar. 2012. Web. 20 Mar. 2012.

<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=xWwQ4YiGQW94cxyzRwzvBw3HxBYt58lpQuyRECeVDY=>>.

⁸⁸ Al-Zayani, Hesham. “Shall we sacrifice security for the sake of dialogue?!” *Al-Watan*. 6 Mar. 2012. Web. 6 Mar. 2012.

<www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=FYdh6fAv2jp0EvcLVpf5+0hj911TW5OxknajGNmTNIM=>.

⁸⁹ Seznec, Jean-Francois. “Is Reconciliation in Bahrain Possible?” Middle East Institute. Washington, DC. 15 Feb 2012. Panel Discussion.

⁹⁰ Al-Sha’er, Sawsan. “A year after Al-Fateh... did we learn anything?” *Al-Watan*. 22 Feb. 2012. Web. 25 Feb. 2012.

<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=L+/A7/2/0EL0FvNBba4FuYMrkB0KgPCpcnLoJJjruds91C0NHd009RHXr6jRkPnB>>.

Figure 4 - The Triangle of Conflict

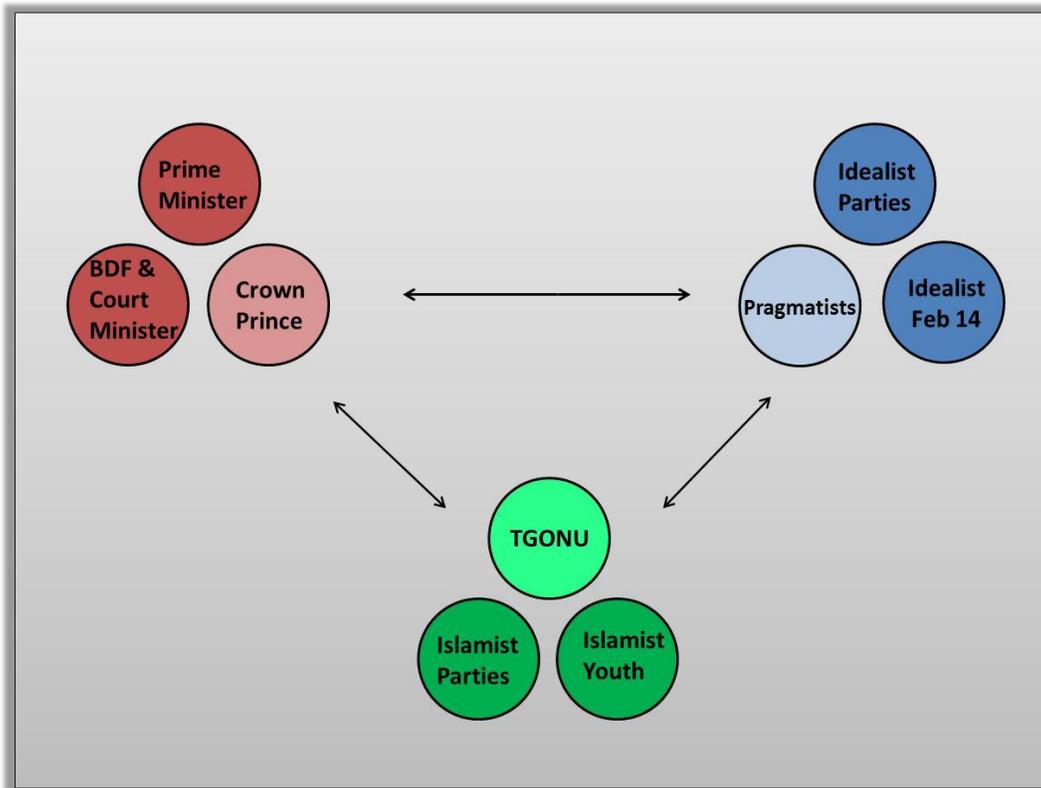


Figure 5 - Political Actors in Bahrain

| Camp | Faction | Members | Goals | Methods | Status |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|---|--|---|--|
| Government | Anti-reform | Prime Minister, Court Minister, Head of Bahrain Defense Force | Regime security | Reform as slippery slope | Ascendant since intervention of GCC |
| | Reform | Crown Prince | Regime security | Reform to avoid collapse of regime | Weakened since collapse of negotiations |
| Opposition | Pragmatists | Wefaq, Wa'ad, other legal societies | Political, economic and social reform | Establishment of real constitutional monarchy | Ascendant but weakening as crisis continues |
| | Idealists | Haq, Wafa, February 14 | Political, economic and social reform | Establishment of a republic | Gaining strength as crisis continues |
| Loyalist Opposition | National Gathering of Unity | Individuals like Abdul Latif al-Mahmood | Gradual reform for national agenda and to be heard | Counter-protests and no dialogue without security and their participation | Fragmented and weakening as crisis continues |
| | Islamists | Minbar, Asala, Sahwa Youth | Gradual reform for Islamist agenda and to be heard | Counter-protests and no dialogue without security and their participation | Strengthening as crisis continues |

Tearing Social Fabric

As we have seen, Bahrain's political landscape is formed by three major groups: the government, the opposition, and the loyalist opposition. In addition, each camp also exhibits significant internal schisms as various factions vie for influence. As a result, Bahrain's political landscape forms a triangle of conflict in which political struggles define the relationships between and within the three camps. Political reconciliation depends upon formulating a process that incorporates voices from all three camps and upon finding a compromise that will provide enough leverage for the moderates to win their internal struggles with their more radical counterparts. In effect, any reconciliation will therefore likely require the Crown Prince, the Gathering of National Unity, and the signatories of the Manama Document to enter a dialogue and find a compromise that they can actually sell to their constituencies. Unfortunately, these moderates are losing their internal struggles against the hardliners in each of their respective camps.

In the following section we will describe three damaging dynamics that drive the schisms between and within the camps, leading to the marginalization of moderates throughout the political spectrum. First, the distrust dynamic leads to a closing of politics as diametrically opposed narratives of Bahrain's contested history of reform saps social trust. Second, the street dynamic stokes anger and leads to further radicalization as politics move to the streets in a never-ending cycle of protest, police crackdown, and counter-protest. Third, the sectarian dynamic threatens to transform Bahrain's political crisis into an irreconcilable crisis of identity and ideology. In combination, these three dynamics further entrench Bahrain's triangle of conflict and, if left unchecked, could very well tear Bahrain's already-weakened social fabric apart.

The Distrust Dynamic

The intense debate over Bahrain's contested reform history has led to a deterioration of trust between the government, the opposition, and the loyalist opposition. This distrust has led to a further polarization of the camps, the disempowerment of moderates within each camp, and the closing off of traditional politics at the negotiation table.

From the official media perspective, the Bahraini government has undertaken a brave reform project, beginning with the National Action Charter and the promulgation of a new constitution ten years ago. Yes, mistakes were made during the uprising last year, but the government has addressed these concerns through a National Dialogue, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, the National Commission to implement the BICI's recommendations, and the passage of several constitutional amendments.⁹¹ As the Prime Minister asked rhetorically, "Why do some people choose not to be fair and accept a crystal-clear reality that the Kingdom is a beacon of reform and democracy?"⁹²

For most fair-minded observers, the "crystal-clear reality" differs significantly from the Prime Minister's version. Brian Dooley from Human Rights First contends, "Some in Bahrain's government may be sincere about reform, but the gap between rhetoric and reality is huge."⁹³ Independent Shia MP Khaled Abdulaal concurs, "The reform was too slow. Not even turtle speed but snail speed."⁹⁴ Many opposition members

⁹¹ Al-A'ali, Mohammed. "A better future for Bahrain." *Gulf Daily News*. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=327829>>.

⁹² "HRH Premier Receives Senior Officials." *Bahrain News Agency*. 19 Feb. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/494881>>.

⁹³ Dooley, Brian. "Tortured Justice." *Foreign Policy*. 22 Mar. 2012. Web. 25 Mar. 2012. <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/03/22/tortured_justice>.

⁹⁴ Abdulaal, Khaled. Personal interview. 24 Mar. 2012.

blame the slowness on the power struggles within the government.⁹⁵ Others like human rights defender Mohammed al-Maskati hold the entire royal family responsible because “you never know which faction within the government is doing what.”⁹⁶ Yet the slowness in reform is not solely a product of power struggles, but as the head of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry Cherif Bassiouni suggests, the lack of capacity within government agencies often undermines reform and attempts at promoting accountability.⁹⁷ Still, Bassiouni criticizes the government for failing to address the underlying causes for the crisis.⁹⁸

Every time the government launches and oversells a superficial reform project, the opposition grows ever more distrustful of the government’s seriousness to ever enact real reforms. Yet at the same time, the loyalist opposition is more inclined to buy into the official narrative spun by state media that reforms have already been undertaken. Thus when the opposition protests for real reform because they do not trust the government to keep its word, the loyalist opposition feels as if the opposition itself cannot be trusted because it consistently asks for ever greater demands.⁹⁹ Moreover, the loyalist opposition and government often accuse the opposition of exaggerating claims of human rights abuses. For example, independent Shia MP Khaled Abdulaal suggested, “Perhaps up to 50% of cases of abuse are made up or exaggerated, but the other 50% are very real.”¹⁰⁰ Regardless of the actual percentage, every unverified report of human rights abuses

⁹⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. 13 Mar 2012.

⁹⁶ Al-Maskati, Mohammed. Personal interview. 27 Mar. 2012.

⁹⁷ Bassiouni, Cherif. “Reflections on the Arab Spring and its Impact on the Legal Order in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Syria.” George Washington University. Washington, DC. 17 Apr. 2012. Lecture.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ For example: Al-Zayani, Hesham. “Bartering to stop terrorism!!” *Al-Watan*. 10 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2012.

<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=DNlocCKjtSEzfdipzOrdsTi8fRf5NXsHzvrgXZve0/0FjasQZFoTyWiev6BiaKht>>.

¹⁰⁰ Abdulaal, Khaled. Personal interview. 24 Mar 2012.

undermines the credibility of the opposition, especially in the eyes of other Bahrainis, and further undermines trust between the camps. The result, according to independent Sunni Ehsan al-Kooheji, is a “huge and scary gap in the way people think.”¹⁰¹ In this way, the distrust dynamic contributes to further polarization between the camps.

The distrust dynamic also leads to the weakening of moderates within each camp who genuinely have good intentions and seek to engage moderates from other camps. For example, the idealist opposition’s call for the establishment of a republic during the February 14th uprising played on all the worst fears of the government and loyalist opposition, contributing to the failure of the dialogue between the Crown Prince and the pragmatist opposition. In another example, the pragmatist opposition reluctantly agreed to participate in a National Dialogue in July 2011, but when it became clear the dialogue was more “media circus” than legitimate negotiation, the pragmatists suffered a major blow in popular support.¹⁰²

Beyond the polarization of camps and the undermining of moderates within camps, the distrust dynamic leads to a closing off of traditional politics. If each camp cannot trust the other to negotiate fairly, then no camp will have any incentive in entering negotiations. Thus, especially since Wefaq’s mass resignation from parliament during the height of the February 14th uprising, Bahraini politics has moved from the negotiation table to the streets – a dangerous development for Bahraini society.

¹⁰¹ Al-Kooheji, Ehsan. Personal interview. 26 Mar. 2012.

¹⁰² Hiltermann, Joost. “The Unfinished February 14 Uprising: What Next for Bahrain?” The Project on Middle East Democracy, the Foreign Policy Initiative and the National Security Network. Dirksen Senate Office Building. Washington, DC. 9 Feb. 2012. Panel Discussion.

The Street Dynamic

The closing of traditional politics due to distrust between camps has led to the proliferation of street politics. This more dangerous kind of politics further polarized the camps as anger rises between them. Moreover, tactical arguments over how to respond to street politics within camps has caused further fragmentation and the empowerment of hardliners over moderates.

From the opposition perspective, street action is the only open path to reform since the mass resignation of Wefaq parliamentarians during the uprising. Their hope of forcing concessions relies upon disruption that places political and economic pressure on the government. If normalcy returns to Bahrain, they will lose the only leverage they hold over the government. On occasion, the opposition disrupts the calm through massive mobilization, such as on March 9th when at least one hundred thousand protesters flooded the streets. The government also occasionally licenses the pragmatist opposition to hold political rallies. Yet the government usually prevents such mass mobilization, especially near Manama. Thus the opposition is left with small, localized protests organized by the idealist faction in the villages or lightning-strike protests in Manama – both of which are quickly broken up by the police. In a different kind of defiance, anti-regime graffiti covers nearly every wall outside of Manama, much of it lazily crossed out by the government in scrawling black lines.

Importantly, opposition members of all affiliations have condemned the use of violence, even if they disagree on the definition of non-violence. For example, Ayatollah Isa Qasim asserts, “The popular movement gains a great deal from its peacefulness [...] This movement must continue in its peacefulness and be 180 degrees away from

violence.”¹⁰³ The President of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights, Mohammed al-Maskati, explained in an interview how his group began training protesters how to resist peacefully and document any human rights violations from the very early days of the sit-in at Pearl Roundabout.¹⁰⁴ Yet some opposition protesters have grown increasingly violent as the crisis continues, especially from the idealist faction. Recent months have seen protesters undertake “operations” with Molotov cocktails as part of a “Holy Defense” (*al-defa’a al-moqadis*) against riot police.¹⁰⁵ Online idealist opposition forums have even hosted threads on military strategies for ambushes styled off of the Viet Cong.¹⁰⁶ Al-Maskati denied that the youth burning tires and fighting the police can be controlled by anyone, even as human rights activists like him try to advise and teach them a better way.¹⁰⁷ One female student supportive of the opposition explained her conflicted feelings about the Holy Defense groups that others share with her: “I am completely anti-violence but it is hard to remain peaceful when your rights are being abused.”¹⁰⁸ Nor can the idealist leaders committed to peaceful methods, such as Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja, help teach the youth a better way while they remain in prison.

Yet the loyalist opposition’s feelings about the Holy Defense groups are anything but conflicted. Generally, the loyalist opposition tends to blame every act of violence and vandalism on the opposition as a whole, not just a strengthening minority of violent protesters. For example, columnist Sawsan al-Sha’er accuses Wefaq of acting like the

¹⁰³ Local issues editor. “قاسم: لا تستجيبوا لأي محاولة تستهدف إشعال حريق طائفي.” *Al-Wasat*. 14 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/3507/news/read/655746/1.html>>.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Maskati, Mohammed. Personal interview. 27 Mar. 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Gengler, Justin. “One Year Later, A Bahrain Transformed.” *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*. 25 Jan. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012. <<http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2012/01/one-year-later-bahrain-transformed.html>>.

¹⁰⁶ Gengler, Justin. “The Anti-National Dialogue.” *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*. 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2012. <<http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2012/02/anti-national-dialogue.html>>.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Maskati, Mohammed. Personal interview. 27 Mar. 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous. Personal interview. 11 Feb 2012.

Irish Republican Army by using violence to enhance its bargaining position.¹⁰⁹ Many take the violence and vandalism on not just a political but also a personal level. Ibrahim, a middle-aged Sunni, drove one of the authors on a tour of the Shia villages.¹¹⁰ At every sign of vandalism and protest – whether graffiti calling for the death of Al Khalifa or scorch marks from Molotov cocktails – he stopped the car, insisted upon taking a picture, and ranted angrily about the destruction the “Shia” are bringing upon his country. Passing by a troop of riot police returning from dispersing a group of protesters, Ibrahim lowered the window and began shouting “Power to you! Power to you!”

Some loyalist opposition members have become exasperated at the police’s inability to restore order. Recently, calls to provide the police with more deadly equipment and the orders to use them have proliferated,¹¹¹ and some concerned citizens have created a society to protect the interests of the police.¹¹² However, others have decided to take matters into their own hands. Recently, a group of youths released a statement threatening to “use guns against all traitors of the nation” if the police do not stop all acts of vandalism.¹¹³ This message is especially ominous given a man in civilian clothing shot and killed an amateur journalist at an opposition protest only two weeks prior. Abdul Latif al-Mahmood pushed back against this dangerous rhetoric during his next Friday sermon, asserting that only the Ministry of Interior, not groups of citizens, is

¹⁰⁹ Al-Sha’er, Sawsan. “Sinn Fein and Al-Wefaq.” *Al-Watan*. 28 Feb. 2012. Web. 28 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=1/nTF+5WbqVjIpspC59ve1MU2EtPTOGUziGaLdlcZWE=>>

¹¹⁰ Ibrahim. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

¹¹¹ Al-Zayani, Hesham. “Why aren’t these measures taken?” *Al-Watan*. 8 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=eQuVi59fGfwpRciHnAttqDWA2Y6eMds4K6YdtQIK19E=>>

¹¹² Al-A’ali, Mohammed. “Group formed to help policeman.” *Gulf Daily News*. 1 Jan. 2012. Web. 25 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=320715>>.

¹¹³ Gengler, Justin. “When Ruling Family Divisions Come to Society: Bahrain’s New Civilian Police.” *Religion and Politics in Bahrain*. 11 Apr. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://bahrainipolitics.blogspot.com/2012/04/when-ruling-family-divisions-come-to.html>>.

responsible for securing the streets.¹¹⁴ Condemnations also came from other loyal oppositionists even as they criticized the opposition for creating the conditions that led to this violent Sunni reaction.¹¹⁵ This episode highlights how street anger widens the schism between the average loyal oppositionist and the individuals who ostensibly lead them, a dynamic that also affects the opposition.

For its part, the government tries to frame itself as a neutral arbitrator above the fray. After a recent round of violence, the Prime Minister declared, “It is impossible for those who care for national interests to choose violence and sabotage.”¹¹⁶ Yet, as Marc Owen Jones argues, there is a “rule of law imbalance” in Bahrain.¹¹⁷ On one hand, the government cannot treat Sunni protesters equally under the law for fear of angering their key source of support. On the other hand, it must act toughly towards the opposition protesters lest the loyal opposition blast the government for being weak on crime. Perhaps the only restraint on this rule of law imbalance is the government’s obsession – especially in the Crown Prince’s faction - over its image in the international arena. Yet for the hardliners of the government who control the coercive apparatus, they will always choose to protect their domestic political support, regardless of the damage it may cause their international reputation. This schism was readily apparent during the recent Formula One race, with the Crown Prince hosting the event in an effort to improve Bahrain’s

¹¹⁴ TGONU. “خطبة الشيخ الدكتور عبداللطيف آل محمود.” *TwitLonger*. 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.twitlonger.com/show/guqtm4>>.

¹¹⁵ Al-Sha’er, Sawsan. “Bahraini Unity: ‘No to Molotov!’” *Al-Watan*. 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=3YQY6AU5WPAiag1RtAlWPs8zjQZILdZ7LPo5JBdWW4E=>>; Al-Absi, Amani Khalifa. “What happened at the Alba roundabout.” *Al-Watan*. 13 Apr. 2012. Web. 13 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=pTwmw+6QJZuV7QTnAL77nLbKvWMq5+Eli6LKyH1KEFM=>>>.

¹¹⁶ “Security Pledge.” *Gulf Daily News*. 15 Apr. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=327993>>.

¹¹⁷ Jones, Marc Owen. “Thugs or groupies? Highlighting Issues of Police Discrimination in Bahrain.” Personal blog. 11 Apr. 2012. Web. 11 Apr. 2012. <<http://marcowenjones.wordpress.com/2012/04/11/thugs-or-groupies-highlighting-issues-of-police-discrimination-in-bahrain/>>.

image and regime hardliners lamenting the unnecessary media attention on the police crackdown in Bahrain.¹¹⁸

Beyond this political calculation from the top, it is important to consider the perspective from the bottom. The average policeman is foreign-born, Sunni, speaks little Arabic, and therefore has little emotional connection to the majority of citizens he is supposed to protect.¹¹⁹ Therefore, compared to the conscript Egyptian military which refrained from shooting fellow Egyptians in Tahrir Square, the Bahraini police face less of a dilemma attacking majority-Shia protesters. Moreover, for over a year the police have faced increasingly violent protesters. Dr. Mohammed al-Muharraqi of the Royal Medical Services writes, “time and again, I have had to operate on Bahraini police who represent 1 in 3 of the maxillofacial injuries in this low-level conflict. They are the dehumanized and demonized actors within this continuing cycle of violence.”¹²⁰ The police have inflicted immeasurable pain upon so many victims of their brutality, but they feel that they too have been victims. They hate the opposition protesters as much as the protesters hate them. As a result, the protesters and police clash on a daily basis not only out of a logic of politics but also a distinct logic of revenge and animosity.

In sum, the opposition must protest or it will be ignored. Yet with every protest, the loyalist opposition grows ever angrier at the opposition, leading to vigilantism. Protest meets counter-protest and the risk of further violence between groups of civilians escalates. Meanwhile, the government under political pressure is both unwilling and

¹¹⁸ For example, see Jomaa, Mohammed Mubarak. “بعد الفورميلا.. إعادة النظر.” *Akhbar al-Khaleej*. 20 Apr. 2012. Web. 28 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.akhbar-alkhaleej.com/12446/article/20424.html>>.

¹¹⁹ Delmar-Morgan, Alex and Tom Wright. “Bahrain’s Foreign Police Add to Tensions.” *Wall Street Journal*. 25 Mar. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2012. <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703784004576220762563363574.html>>.

¹²⁰ Muharraqi, Mohammed. “Obscured Realities of Bahrain’s Arab Spring.” *Middle East Voices*. 9 Apr. 2012. Web. 9 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.middleeastvoices.com/2012/04/viewpoint-obscured-realities-of-bahrains-arab-spring-74587>>.

unable to handle the opposition protests without physical force, leading to an escalation of tactics in the opposition and a renewal of the cycle of violence. Distrust between camps metastasizes into anger. Those who advocate for non-violence and restraint in the opposition, loyal opposition and the government gradually lose more ground to more radical elements. In the words of Wefaq official Khalil al-Marzooq, “The more you oppress us, the more frightening leaders you will see.”¹²¹ Thus the street dynamic not only exacerbates schisms between groups, it also weakens the moderate factions within each group. As one human rights defender fretted, “I am worried moderates like myself will be sidelined if violence continues.”¹²²

The Sectarian Dynamic

The rise of sectarianism in Bahrain threatens to turn today’s primarily political crisis into a more dangerous crisis of identity. This sectarian dynamic, especially when combined with the distrust and street dynamics, increases the polarization between camps and marginalizes moderates within each camp. Moreover, it increases Bahrain’s vulnerability to negative regional influences that stymie reconciliation.

While Bahrain has witnessed a rise in sectarianism over the past year, socio-economic and political divides between sects in Bahrain are not new.¹²³ In fact, the government has traditionally sought to pit Sunni against Shia in order to protect its regime security through two strategies. First, as Justin Gengler argues, by channeling rents to Sunnis at the expense of Shia, the government was not only able to buy loyalty from the Sunnis but to also stir inter-group rivalry between the sects to fragment any

¹²¹ Al-Wefaq (AlwefaqEN). “‘The more you oppress us, the more frightening leaders you will see’, @KhalilAlmarzooq said in #KhawajaStrike solidarity stand in #Alwefaq.” 27 Feb. 2012, 1:25 PM. Tweet. <<https://twitter.com/#!/AlWefaqEN/status/174198541399498752>>.

¹²² Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Jan 2012.

¹²³ Bahgat, Gawdat. “Peace in the Persian Gulf: The Shi’is Dimension.” *Peace and Change* 24.1 (Jan 1999): 76-91. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Nov 2011.

potential opposition.¹²⁴ Second, the government built upon the natural Sunni fear of the Iranian Revolution to discredit any Shia opposition groups as Iranian agents. As Wefaq official Khalil al-Marzooq explained, “After 1979, there was an increase in sectarianism and the government took advantage by turning national demands [for democracy] into sectarian demands.”¹²⁵ Importantly, this sectarian strategy also facilitated closer ties with Saudi Arabia who perceived their regime security in the same terms and undertook similar policies to hold its own Shia population in check. With uprisings now affecting the entire Arab world, the Saudi and Bahraini governments have grown even closer, as evidenced by recent efforts to achieve greater GCC unity and rumors of a future Bahraini-Saudi confederacy.

Given this history of deliberately manufacturing sectarian divides, it is not surprising that the Bahraini and Saudi governments doubled down on their proven sectarian strategies to counter the February 14th uprising. According to Kristin Diwan, “the Saudi and Bahraini leadership [...] unleashed an onslaught of sectarianism”¹²⁶ through the destruction of Shia mosques, police targeting of Shia protesters, firing of Shia workers, calling prisoners sectarian names while torturing them, and silencing Sunni opposition leaders like Ibrahim Sharif who undermined the sectarian narrative. Thus while sectarian policy was not new for Bahrain, it reached an unprecedented level.

Yet sectarianism in Bahrain has not risen solely because of government actions. Rather, the unstable environment caused by the distrust and street dynamics has exacerbated what Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke call the “Sunni problem.”

¹²⁴ Gengler. “Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization .” 36.

¹²⁵ Al-Marzooq, Khalil. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2012.

¹²⁶ Diwan, Kristin. “Bahrain’s unfinished revolution holds lessons for the west.” *Financial Times*. 13 Feb. 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/161fbd80-563a-11e1-8dfa-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1mU6tZ0HS>>.

According to Fuller and Francke, because the disenfranchised Shia have the most to gain from reform and the empowered Sunnis have the most to lose, democracy for Sunnis “becomes part of the ‘Shi’ite agenda’ rather than an absolute good, perceived as little more than a vehicle for the Shi’a to attain power.”¹²⁷ The sectarian bloodletting in Iraq since the fall of Saddam has only heightened these Sunni fears of a purported Shia agenda. As middle-aged Sunni Ibrahim explained, “Sunnis allow pluralism but not the Shia. They treat you like animals. Look at what happened in Iraq.”¹²⁸ Moreover, the failed 1981 coup by Shia radicals with support from Iran does provide some historical precedent for this fear in Bahrain,¹²⁹ even though the BICI found no evidence of Iranian meddling on the ground during the February 14th uprising.¹³⁰

As a result of this “Sunni problem,” Bahraini Shia tend to avoid overtly sectarian language, instead preferring the moral power of democratic rhetoric. In comparison, Sunnis tend to use explicitly sectarian languages to combat what they believe is a sectarian threat stemming from Shia demands for democracy. In response to those who accuse Wefaq of sectarianism, party official Khalil al-Marzooq challenged anyone to “cite a single thing we have done against the Sunnis” and admitted he feels “angry” when the press refers to the opposition as “the Shia opposition.”¹³¹ Yet such arguments fall on deaf ears for most of the loyalist opposition. Sunni columnist Faisal al-Sheikh retorts, “Your fake ‘Sunni-Shiite brotherhood’ slogan is one of the most repugnant slogans

¹²⁷ Fuller, Graham, and Rend Rahim Francke. *The Arab Shi’a: The Forgotten Muslims*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999. Print. 55.

¹²⁸ Ibrahim. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2012.

¹²⁹ Fuller and Francke. *The Arab Shi’a*. 126-7.

¹³⁰ Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry. 387.

¹³¹ Al-Marzooq, Khalil. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012

because it is soaked in lies.”¹³² In a stark example of explicit sectarian language, former Sunni MP Mohammed Khalid frequently refers to Wefaq as “The Party of Gods,” an Arabic play on words that both connects them to Hezbollah in Lebanon and suggests the Shia practice polytheism.¹³³ Citing the example of sectarian violence in Iraq, MP Mohammed al-Ammadi from the Sunni Minbar society expressed his fear of the opposition: “This conflict is not about politics, human rights or anything else but religion. They want to kill us.”¹³⁴ Even if this fear is unfounded, it is very real to Sunnis, and any reconciliation process must address it earnestly.

Admittedly, the opposition has failed to effectively assuage these Sunni fears. Often the opposition simply assumes that logic or commonsense should debunk the Shia agenda narrative, failing to grasp the depth of fear felt by some Sunnis. For example, one human rights activist contended that “Every Arab government in 2011 has said they are the victims of foreign agendas, but it makes the least sense in Bahrain” because Iran does not have the capacity to mobilize “half of the population” in protest.¹³⁵ In another example, at Wefaq’s annual convention, Secretary General Sheikh Ali Salman did not mention Iran once in an hour long speech, likely under the assumption that such conspiracies are not worth addressing.¹³⁶ Yet what is self-evident to the opposition is beyond belief for Sunnis afraid of a Shia agenda.

¹³² Al-Sheikh, Faisal. “Not a single Sunni martyr! Home come?” *Al-Watan*. 10 Apr. 2012. Web. 11 Apr. 2012.

<<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=bqPfEn9oksYovk8rZQ9fHjgJB6p7bV0fsXJUJ2mV73A=>>.

¹³³ Khalid, Mohammed (boammar). “خروج رؤوس الفتنة الصفوية بقيادة حزب اللات جاءت نتيجة العفو ورخاوة القرارات من .” 20 Apr. 2012, 12:39 PM. Tweet.

<<https://twitter.com/#!/boammar/status/193378297558732801>>.

¹³⁴ Al-Ammadi, Mohammed. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

¹³⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Jan. 2012.

¹³⁶ Salman, Ali. “Speech of the Secretary-General of Alwefaq National Islamic Society: Sheikh Ali Salman.” *Al-Wefaq*. 2 April 2012. Web. 13 April 2012.

<<http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=6325>>.

Even though Bahrain's most influential Shia cleric, Ayatollah Isa Qasim, and Wefaq's Secretary General, Sheikh Ali Salman, have unequivocally rejected *velayat-e faghih*,¹³⁷ some Sunnis often latch on to the occasional instance in which members of the opposition act in ways that fuel a sectarian narrative. For example, especially during religious events, some opposition members use explicitly religious language to explain their desire for democracy, sometimes referring to the Al Khalifa as Yazid, the Sunni ruler the Shia tradition holds responsible for the martyrdom of Hussein.¹³⁸ Moreover, some opposition members often appear on Iranian media and consort with foreign figures linked to Iran such as Ahmed Chalabi and Abdul Hamid Dashti.¹³⁹ As one Sunni college student explained, "It feels like a thief sneaking into your house" every time such controversial figures speak in solidarity with the Bahraini uprising.¹⁴⁰ For an opposition desperate for support, it is often only these media sources and individuals that are willing to provide a platform for their perspective. Yet for many Sunnis, these cases only reinforce their preexisting fears of a Shia agenda.

This sectarian dynamic has dampened the possibility for reconciliation in three ways. First, it has increased Bahrain's vulnerability to negative regional influences. As Hussein Ibish contends, there is an emerging hegemonic sectarian narrative in the Middle East that "threatens to rip apart many Arab societies," with each country's sectarian tensions feeding off the others.¹⁴¹ Beyond Iraq, the crisis in Syria has also particularly damaged sectarian relations in Bahrain, as Sunnis blame Shia for not supporting the

¹³⁷ Mershed, Abbas. Personal interview. 2 Apr. 2012.

¹³⁸ Gengler. "Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization." 9.

¹³⁹ Al-Hasan, Hasan. Personal interview. 16 Feb. 2012.

¹⁴⁰ Anonymous. Personal interview. 23 Mar 2012.

¹⁴¹ Ibish, Hussein. "New sectarianism reshaping the Arab world." *Democracy Digest*. 11 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.demdigest.net/blog/2011/10/new-sectarianism-reshaping-the-arab-world/>>.

Syrian people's calls for democracy¹⁴² and Shia blame the Sunnis for not supporting democracy in Bahrain while supporting it in Syria.¹⁴³ Second, the sectarianism feeds off the distrust and anger between camps to enhance the polarization of Bahraini society. Third, the increasing sectarianism further disempowers moderates. Even if moderates do not act in a sectarian fashion, a sectarian conflict can nonetheless be imposed upon them by radicals who do act in such a way. As the sectarian narrative gains salience in Bahrain, it will become more difficult for moderates to move to the center in order to negotiate with moderates from the other camps.

If this trend continues, the virus of sectarianism will continue to spread, and the crisis will shift from a political to a sectarian one, to the detriment of all Bahrainis. Forebodingly, many Bahrainis – both Sunni and Shia – expressed their concern that al-Qaeda inspired militants will take advantage of the surge in sectarianism and instability. As Akhbar al-Khaleej journalist Abdulla al-Mannai warned, “If necessary, the Sunnis will rise up and will do so violently. The Sunni extremists are far more dangerous than any Shia group.”¹⁴⁴ Yet if this sectarianism can be overcome, the avenue for significant political reform could truly open up if all Bahrainis stand together in demanding reform from their government as a unified voice.

Repairing the Social Fabric

The prospect for reconciliation is unlikely and is becoming more remote every day. As one human rights defender expressed, “There is a wall in the way of every

¹⁴² For example, Al-Sheikh, Faisal. “Why do you support the Syrian revolution and refuse to condemn Bahrain?!” *Al-Watan*. 26 Feb. 2012. Web. 26 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=c7AFdxvPpInUEGjRsBkG64XEDVNZf0aSbciZpWJWWC8=>>.

¹⁴³ For example, Husain, Qasim. “قولٌ على قول.” *Al-Wasat*. 5 Mar. 2012. Web. 5 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/3467/news/read/637538/1.html>>.

¹⁴⁴ Al-Mannai, Abdulla. Personal interview. 25 Mar 2012.

possible solution.”¹⁴⁵ The distrust, street, and sectarian dynamics are all pulling the very fabric of Bahraini society apart, simultaneously deepening divides between and within groups. This polarizing environment has decimated Bahrain’s political center. As blogger Suhail al-Gosaibi observes, “We once had a silent majority, but maybe it is a silent minority now.”¹⁴⁶ As a result, the moderates from the government, the opposition, and the loyalist opposition simply do not have the political leverage to join a national dialogue, let alone find a solution that might resolve the crisis. Instead, the triangle of conflict is ever further entrenched.

Some individuals in the government and loyalist opposition believe that a security solution can be found for Bahrain’s political crisis. To be certain, there are plenty areas of Bahrain that are completely safe and secure on any given day. Yet on that same given day, those same areas may be inundated with tear gas and the cries of the injured. Thus al-Wasat newspaper editor Mansour al-Jamri differentiates between temporary security caused by police action and long-term stability “linked to a political solution that cultivates consent or consensus by groups in society.”¹⁴⁷ The future of Bahrain will be fraught with danger until a political settlement can be found. Today, the most imminent risk is that activist Abdul Hadi al-Khawaja will die from his hunger strike in prison. Ala’a Shehabi warns that “Al-Khawaja’s death would put an end once and all for the hopes of Bahrain’s already creaking reform process. His death will make the prospect of genuine peace and reconciliation a distant aspiration.”¹⁴⁸ Even if al-Khawaja does not die, there will always be the next event, the next anniversary, the next protest, the next clash or the

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous. Personal interview. 24 Jan. 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Al-Gosaibi, Suhail. Personal interview. 29 Mar. 2012.

¹⁴⁷ Al-Jamri, Mansour. “المخلصون قادرون على إصلاح بلادهم.” Al-Wasat. 23 Feb. 2012. Web. 23 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/3456/news/read/635267/1.html>>.

¹⁴⁸ Shehabi, Ala’a. “Hunger, heroism, and hope in Bahrain.” *Foreign Policy*. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2012. <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/12/hunger_heroism_and_hope_in_bahrain>.

next death that could be the spark that lights the tinder. If current trends continue, the question is when and not if Bahrain suffers a major escalation.

For those who wish to help avoid this scenario and support the cause of reconciliation, it is essential to first develop a nuanced understanding of the dynamics on the ground. While the narrative of a people demanding rights from the government is morally and rhetorically powerful, it cannot help derive effective policy beyond aspirational prescriptions that “the government should do X and the opposition should do Y.” By accounting for all the relevant actors and dynamics at play, the triangle of conflict model will help us move beyond making such aspirational prescriptions to understanding what can realistically be done to further the cause of reconciliation. Specifically, groups must act to reverse the fragmentation and polarization of Bahrain’s political landscape through building trust, decreasing street violence, and dampening sectarianism. In the following, we will suggest some potential steps that could help mitigate the most damaging effects of the current situation in Bahrain. These recommendations should not be misconstrued as a cure, but rather a salve.

External Actors

While the Bahraini crisis is primarily local, both regional and international actors can take steps to help ameliorate the crisis. If Iran and other regional Shia truly care about democracy in Bahrain, their leaders will have to show more restraint in their public diplomacy. Every comment by an Iranian official, even if not explicitly sectarian, stokes fears of a sectarian Iranian agenda within Bahrain’s Sunni community and thereby undercuts the Bahraini opposition’s attempt to build a political coalition for reform. If Iran truly cares about democracy in Bahrain more than scoring political points in its

greater rivalry against Saudi Arabia, it should stop making inflammatory remarks in public and instead rely on multilateral institutions like the United Nations to push a reform agenda in Bahrain.

As for the United States, it has received contradictory criticism for its policy towards Bahrain, with some accusing the U.S. of not supporting democracy enough and others accusing the U.S. of alienating a key Gulf ally. However, the triangle of conflict suggests the U.S. has pursued the right strategy of seeking to empower moderates from all camps while pushing for a return to a political process. While the strategy has been correct, the implementation has fallen short. For example, by pushing Wefaq to participate in a severely-flawed National Dialogue in July 2011, the U.S. undercut Wefaq's popular support within the opposition. Moving forward, the U.S. must do a better job engaging with all relevant voices that do not advocate violence, especially the loyalist opposition and some opposition idealists. In addition, the U.S. needs to seek a balance through consistent public messaging concerning human rights violations without backing the reform government faction into a corner with too much overt public pressure. The reform faction cares much more deeply for its relationship with the U.S. than the anti-reform faction. If the U.S. turns to this essential source of leverage too often, the effect will be a weakening of the reform faction. Thus the U.S. should reserve public criticism for the most egregious cases of human rights violations. To maintain constant pressure for reform, the U.S. should rely on European allies and multilateral institutions to play the "bad cop" with the Bahraini government. For example, the British government

has warned it might apply a travel ban on Sheikh Nasser, King Hamad's son who the opposition accuses of personally participating in the crackdown.¹⁴⁹

Ultimately, the U.S. will not significantly change its policy without Saudi Arabia changing its position first, given Saudi Arabia's oil reserves and its massive influence in Bahrain. Specifically, Saudi Arabia should push Bahraini government hardliners to enter serious negotiations and halt the Saudi media's sectarian incitement. Such a change is not impossible. Wafaq official Khalil al-Marzooq observed that the "Saudis now feel they want an end to the unrest because they feel burdened by Bahrain."¹⁵⁰ The fear of continued instability seeping into Saudi Arabia's eastern province – the location for the majority of both Saudi's oil and Shia population – may be eclipsing the fear of Iranian meddling and the slippery slope of reform. This suggestion was confirmed by a former high-ranking U.S. official who suggested King Abdullah, a pragmatic leader, has recently been receiving more conciliatory advice on Bahrain.¹⁵¹ In fact, it is no coincidence that the most recent rumors of dialogue originated from the Royal Court Minister who is close to the Saudi government. Yet two months of such rumors have failed to materialize into any progress.

With Saudi Arabia exerting such financial and political influence over the Bahraini government, reconciliation will be difficult without their reluctant acquiescence. The United States must continue to push Saudi Arabia on the Bahrain issue, making the argument that it is in their interests to have the Bahrain government reform now rather than suffer years of future instability and, potentially, the fall of the Al Khalifa regime

¹⁴⁹ Bond, David. "Hague warns of travel bans." *BBC*. 4 May 2012. Web. 5 May 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/davidbond/2012/05/hague_warns_of_travel_bans.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Marzooq, Khalil. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012

¹⁵¹ Anonymous. Personal interview. 22 Feb. 2012.

entirely. At the same time, the U.S. must work to reduce Bahrain's dependence on Saudi Arabia in the case Saudi Arabia fails to change its position. Removing the U.S. Fifth Fleet from Bahrain would only create a vacuum that Saudi influence will inevitably fill.¹⁵² Instead, the U.S. should help Bahrain achieve its Economic Vision 2030 to wean Bahrain off of Saudi dependence, beginning by building upon the 2006 U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement and offering economic incentives in exchange for reform. In addition, while enhanced GCC unification seems highly likely in the near future, the U.S. should help promote ties between Bahrain and other Gulf countries besides Saudi Arabia to help dampen Saudi hegemony over the GCC. For example, the U.S. could help revive the failed plan to build a gas pipeline between Qatar and Kuwait via Bahrain, which was foiled by a Saudi Arabia fearful of losing leverage in Bahrain.¹⁵³

Local Actors

These policy recommendations notwithstanding, the regional environment will not likely significantly improve in the near term, especially as regional sectarianism, the Iranian-Saudi rivalry, and the Iranian nuclear issue all continue to escalate. Thus it is primarily up to local actors within Bahrain to help ameliorate the situation.

Recently, several independent citizen initiatives were established in the months after BICI to help create a platform for moderates of all leanings. The well respected Dr. Ali Fakhro attempted to bring an assembly of independent thinkers to push a dialogue on reform,¹⁵⁴ but his initiative was largely ignored by those in power. Another initiative

¹⁵² Hokayem, Emile. "U.S. Has Few Options to Curb Crackdown in Bahrain." *The Atlantic*. 19 Oct. 2011. Web. 26 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/us-has-few-options-to-curb-crackdown-in-bahrain/246942/>>.

¹⁵³ Fineren, Daniel. "Politics stymie Gulf's hope of sharing Qatari gas." *Reuters*. 7 Mar. 2012. Web. 25 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/07/gulf-gas-idAFL5E8E40CB20120307?edition=af>>.

¹⁵⁴ Reuters. "Worried Bahrainis seek talks as clashes worsen." *Arabian Business*. 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.arabianbusiness.com/worried-bahrainis-seek-talks-as-clashes-worsen-443277.html>>.

called “Bahrain unites us” was also recently established to combat sectarianism.¹⁵⁵ In addition, one group of enterprising Bahrainis established the “Bahrain Debate” to provide a forum for dialogue. Yet as one of the founders Ehsan al-Kooheji admitted, “I doubt this will change the political scene. It is a small initiative.”¹⁵⁶

Ultimately, it will be up to the opposition, loyalist opposition, and the government to come together at the negotiation table. For the opposition, the biggest challenge remains overcoming the significant distrust of its intentions felt by the loyalist opposition and the government. Towards that end, Wefaq has recently taken a more conciliatory tone. In an interview, Wefaq official Khalil al-Marzooq avoided often heard criticisms of the loyalist opposition. Instead he affirmed, “It is good that Sunnis are more willing to engage politically. They oppose the government too, even though they are against us.”¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, in a speech given at the party’s annual convention, Sheikh Ali Salman lamented the “failure” in reaching out to all Bahrainis regardless of sect and announced the party will henceforth compete in elections under a “national list” including Sunnis and women.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, al-Marzooq claims that Wefaq’s internal democratic practices such as the election of the party’s shura council proves the party’s democratic intentions for Bahrain,¹⁵⁹ as well as its suggestion that the first elected Prime Minister be a Sunni.¹⁶⁰

The pragmatist opposition must build upon this outreach. While it cannot control the youth who engage in acts of vandalism and violence, it must do a better job in communicating its disapproval of such tactics and attempt to teach the youth a better way

¹⁵⁵ Mohammed, Saeed. “مواطنون من الطائفتين الكريمتين يلتقون لتأييد مبادرة الوحدة الوطنية.” *Al-Wasat*. 12 Apr. 2012. Web. 16 Apr. 2012. <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/3505/news/read/655347/1.html>>.

¹⁵⁶ Al-Kooheji, Ehsan. Personal interview. 26 Mar 2012.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Marzooq, Khalil. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

¹⁵⁸ Salman. “Speech of the Secretary-General.”

¹⁵⁹ Al-Marzooq, Khalil. Personal interview. 28 Mar 2012.

¹⁶⁰ Birnbaum. “Top Sunni.” *Washington Times*.

to protest against the government. Despite their need for international attention, the opposition should limit its appearances on Iranian media sources and distance themselves from controversial figures associated with Iran who scare Bahraini Sunnis. To date, most of the opposition's outreach has occurred at its own events, which the loyalist opposition does not attend and the Bahraini press does not cover accurately. Therefore, the opposition must search for ways to speak directly with the loyalist opposition. One potential option could be hosting a rally in solidarity with the Syrian people and inviting all Bahrainis to attend. This event would not only give the opposition an opportunity to speak directly to their skeptical counterparts, but it would also undermine the sectarian narrative in Bahrain. Yet as a former Wefaq parliamentarian observed, some Sunnis will fear the opposition no matter what, especially because real interests are at stake.¹⁶¹ In addition, if the pragmatists overcommit to their outreach, they will lose even more support from the street. Therefore, such outreach has significant limitations.

As for the loyalist opposition, it is essential they get their own house in order. As the newest groups to the political scene, no one including the loyalist opposition themselves knows exactly they want and how they will seek to achieve their goals. Former Shia government minister Nazar al-Baharna productively suggests the loyalist opposition must issue their own version of a Manama Document, Lulu Charter, or the Crown Prince's Seven Points in which they outline what they want to achieve out of potential negotiations.¹⁶² More fundamentally, the loyalist opposition must determine under what conditions they will even participate in such a dialogue. So far, the loyalist

¹⁶¹ Anonymous. Personal interview. 30 Mar 2012.

¹⁶² Al-Baharna, Nazar. "Bahrain Political Stalemate: Is there a way forward?" Georgetown University. Washington, DC. 26 Apr. 2012. Lecture.

opposition has made it clear that “security today comes before a political solution.”¹⁶³ Yet they must recognize that negotiations are the only way to return real stability to Bahrain. If nothing else, the loyalist opposition could come to view negotiations as an opportunity to find common interests with the opposition – such as fighting corruption, ending royal family land appropriations, providing jobs, etc. – that they could demand in unison from the government. Unfortunately, sectarianism and fear has prevented such cooperation thus far and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, the majority of the responsibility for this crisis falls with the government and thus it is up to the government to make the largest strides towards reconciliation. Most importantly, the government must fully implement the recommendations of the BICI report. First, the government should end sectarian incitement on state media and allow opposition figures to appear more frequently on such outlets. This move would help build trust between camps and reduce the opposition’s reliance upon Iranian media. Second, the release of political prisoners and the prosecution of human rights violators would provide a major gesture of good faith to the opposition. Third, true police and judicial reform would help slow the cycle of violence as opposition protesters would no longer feel the need to resort to force for the sake of “Holy Defense.” The government claims it is making progress in achieving this goal by hiring foreign advisors, appointing a new head of police, and issuing a new code of police conduct. However, as Kristian Coates Ulrichsen convincingly argues, implementation of reform has been “superficial at best” and a “culture of permissiveness” and a lack of

¹⁶³ Al-Zayani, Hesham. “How long will the state remain silent?” *Al-Watan*. 27 Feb. 2012. Web. 27 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.alwatannews.net/en/post.aspx?id=/yKQA2JBvOiHwCoQw9TMCz+FslJPRID/H2wZlaNj52E=>>>.

accountability persists in the security sector.¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately, the government appears to neither have the capacity nor the political will to undertake such significant steps, especially so long as the anti-reform camp remains dominant over the reformers.

Therefore, the final and perhaps best hope for Bahrain lies with King Hamad. While he has remained largely above the fray, his few direct interventions into the crisis – such as the establishment of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry – have helped to avoid an even greater escalation. If he were to assert himself and unite the Al Khalifa under his banner, he could potentially forge a path towards reconciliation. Admittedly, King Hamad is loath to publicly clash with his older uncle the Prime Minister. Yet the fate of Bahrain is at stake, and the country needs its King.

To unify the Al Khalifa, King Hamad could cite the tragic fate of the Bahraini sea captain Ahmed bin Salman Al Khalifa as a warning to the anti-reform faction.¹⁶⁵ In 1826, Ahmed bin Salman had overtaken the vessel of an infamous pirate who had threatened Bahrain for years. Ahmed bin Salman boarded the pirate's vessel zealous to vanquish his enemy, only to die in a massive explosion when the pirate set fire to the powder magazine on his ship. Similarly, today the Al Khalifa hardliners, in their zeal to defeat threats to the regime, may be oblivious to the powder keg lying below deck. If the government does not change its course now and take the actions necessary to put Bahrain on a path towards reconciliation, the entire country may yet explode like that pirate vessel. Many innocent lives would be lost, and the Al Khalifa could very well suffer a fate similar to their sea captain ancestor two centuries ago.

¹⁶⁴ Ulrichsen, Kristian Coates. "The hollow shell of security reform in Bahrain." *Foreign Policy*. 12Apr. 2012. Web. 12 Apr. 2012.

<http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/12/the_hollow_shell_of_security_reform_in_bahrain>.

¹⁶⁵ Khuri. *Tribe and State*. 25.

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