

EU foreign policy towards Bahrain in the aftermath of the uprising

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For the past few decades, Bahrain has been the Gulf state with the strongest opposition movement and the highest frequency of street protests. From mid-2010, tensions have escalated after the arrest of dozens of bloggers and human rights and political activists. On 14 February 2011, inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahraini activists descended on the Pearl Roundabout, which remained under their control for nearly one month. In mid-March 2011, after Saudi troops and policemen from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) entered Bahrain to guard key installations and back the government, the Bahraini regime cracked down harshly on protesters. The excessive use of force, which has resulted in the death of a number of protesters and several policemen and migrant workers, led to a radicalisation of demands, from calls for political reform and greater representation to calls to overthrow the regime.⁶⁹ The crackdown was an embarrassment for the European Union (EU) and the United States.⁷⁰ While the US (together with Saudi Arabia) acts as ultimate security guarantor of Bahrain through its Fifth Fleet, the EU has close trade ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Bahrain has very close relations with Britain, its former colonial power.

The Bahraini protests have undermined the long-standing assumption that the Gulf monarchies are immune to popular uprisings because of their oil wealth—the so-called notion of the rentier state that buys off the population's

acquiescence through the distribution of rents from hydrocarbon revenues. One would assume this would lead to a re-think of relations with the GCC and a shift towards a more values-oriented foreign policy. But so far there has been no fundamental change in the EU's policy towards the Gulf. Strategic interests and the economic crisis have made the EU even more reluctant to alienate a key investor and importer of European goods. Some argue that the Arab uprisings have in fact strengthened cooperation between the EU and the GCC in the short-term.⁷¹

After the Bahraini security forces killed protesters in February and then in March 2011, EU and US leaders issued several critical statements.⁷² However, practical repercussions have been negligible, contrasting with the actions taken against the, admittedly more repressive, regimes in Libya and Syria.

One of the reasons for such a timid western response was the pressure exerted by some of Bahrain's allies within the GCC, namely Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The two Gulf monarchies regard the security of Bahrain's ruling family as part and parcel of their own domestic security policies, and quickly sent significant troop detachments to Bahrain to help quell the uprising. Any criticism, or possible sanctions, would have been considered by these two states as an attack on themselves as well.

Security, investment and arms exports

The EU's security and economic relations with GCC States make any change of EU policy towards Bahrain very difficult. The threat to call off major investment projects and government contracts with western companies played a key role in limiting European actions in Bahrain. Several western ambassadors to Bahrain have acknowledged as much and have admitted that their reports about the situation on the ground, particularly since the Pearl Roundabout crackdown, were not taken seriously in their capitals.⁷³ Some EU

member states, such as Britain and France, had a stronger and closer security relationship with the GCC, and with Bahrain in particular, and were therefore seen as less likely to change their policies than other states with more limited strategic interests in the region. Denmark, for example, asked for a stronger condemnation and put forward the idea of sanctions against regime members.⁷⁴

One of the actions that was taken after the crackdown was a temporary halt in arms exports. In 2011 the US suspended arms exports to Bahrain but resumed them in 2012. This set a precedent, which was followed by other countries. While the UK initially revoked some arms exports licenses to Bahrain after the first shooting of protesters,⁷⁵ it also resumed arms sales, including of small arms, from 2012 onwards.⁷⁶ The EU did not categorically ban arms sales to Bahrain. This led to debates in the European Parliament, with one MEP suggesting in May 2011 that perhaps the EU should impose an arms embargo on Bahrain, as it had done towards Syria.⁷⁷

The issue of weapons sales to Bahrain is connected to the broader sale of arms to the other GCC States. EU countries have delivered or plan to deliver a record amount of weapons to Saudi Arabia since the start of the Arab uprisings. This is despite the fact that Saudi troops were present in Bahrain during the crackdown on protesters and could potentially participate in the repression of future protests there. In addition, many of the weapons exported, including German tanks, could be used against the local population in the case of an uprising. A possible future target could be the simmering protest movement in Saudi's eastern province.⁷⁸

Parliamentarians vs. bureaucrats

The Bahraini crisis has highlighted some peculiarities of EU foreign policy-making. It has brought to the fore discrepancies between the interests and policies of the elected institutions (the European Parliament) and the

appointed political institutions and the diplomatic service, at both national and EU levels. The European Parliament has repeatedly criticised both the EU's policy towards Bahrain and the conduct of the Bahraini government. Fact-finding trips by MEPs have highlighted the repression of political freedoms in the country. While European bureaucrats seem to defend the EU's institutional and strategic interests, elected parliamentarians have more leeway to call for a more values-oriented foreign policy and can play on the often-negative image of the Gulf in European public spheres. The European External Action Service (EEAS) has limited its criticism towards Bahrain. While High Representative Catherine Ashton has repeatedly called for dialogue, she has refused to blame the government for the violence and the failure of dialogue. One of her top advisors, the British diplomat Robert Cooper, provoked outrage when he referred to the crackdown by saying that 'accidents happen'.

In January 2013, the European Parliament endorsed a resolution on human rights violations in Bahrain. It criticised the 'lack of an EU response to the ongoing situation in Bahrain' and called for targeted sanctions against individuals responsible for human rights violations and for a ban on exports of tear gas and technologies that allow the tracking of protesters and activists.⁷⁹ Bahrain has become notorious for its 'weaponisation' of tear gas '- using it as a collective punishment in residential areas - and its use of 'spying-software'.⁸⁰ Both of these items allegedly come from EU member states, more specifically from the United Kingdom.⁸¹

In the UK too some members of parliament have voiced strong criticism of the political situation in Bahrain. The announcement of an inquiry by the UK's all-party parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee into relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain led to an extremely harsh response by these countries.⁸² The Committee routinely conducts investigations of the UK's foreign relations, but in this case the Gulf regimes' reaction has given it an unusual amount of publicity and has heightened public interest. Nevertheless, the inquiry in itself

will not impinge on the willingness of the British political, economic and security establishments to continue their close relationship with Bahrain and the GCC as a whole.⁸³

Even the relatively mild criticism of Bahraini government policies since 2011 by the EU and US has been fiercely rejected by the ruling regimes in the Gulf. Another prime example of this was the media campaign against the former British ambassador to Bahrain, Jamie Bowden, who was harshly criticised in pro-government media after meeting with representatives of Bahrain's largest opposition party al-Wefaq during the start of the uprising in 2011.⁸⁴ With 18 out of 40 parliamentary seats at the start of the uprising, al-Wefaq is seen by most stakeholders as key to any political settlement in Bahrain. It favours dialogue with the government; in fact, it is at the moderate end of the opposition. As Bowden's assignment was coming to an end – he had been ambassador to Bahrain since 2006 – he was appointed ambassador to Oman, in an attempt to manage the situation without causing long-lasting damage to UK-Bahrain relations. The new UK ambassador to Bahrain resumed the traditional position of unquestioned support for the Al-Khalifa ruling family. The manner in which the British embassy marked World Press Freedom Day in 2013 was illustrative of such an approach. Two articles by pro-government journalists calling for the censorship of pro-opposition media were published on the embassy's website, causing an uproar on social media and in the British press.⁸⁵ The newly-appointed ambassador also criticised a Human Rights Watch report on Bahrain, stating that its comments about the National Dialogue were 'deeply unhelpful'.⁸⁶

'Dialogue': on going, or not?

When asked about Bahrain, Western officials are quick to point to the National Dialogue and the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) as proof of progress; both are in fact cornerstones of the Bahraini regime's public relations strategy.

The government initiated a 'National Dialogue' in July 2011. While the main legal opposition groups, al-Wefaq and Waad, initially agreed to participate in the initiative, they soon withdrew as they began to see it as a PR exercise from which no results could be expected.⁸⁷ A new National Dialogue was re-started in February 2013, but again fell victim to suspicions from both sides. In fact, the dialogue sessions held since then have never gone beyond the stage of discussing procedural formalities of how the dialogue should be held, who should participate in it and what the agenda should be. Opposition representatives who attended the talks (a coalition whose strongest members are al-Wefaq and Waad) temporarily withdrew for two weeks in May 2013 in protest against repressive government policies.⁸⁸ The National Dialogue does not include the outlawed opposition, which is driving the protests on the ground, and seems to have only limited backing from the hardliners in the royal family. As such, it has very little chance of succeeding. MEPs have demanded that all political opposition groups, including those whose leaders have been jailed, be represented in what should be a truly inclusive dialogue.⁸⁹ A similar view was expressed by US President Obama when commenting on Bahrain: 'The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can't have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail'.⁹⁰ This is not, however, the EU's official position.

The other cornerstone of the Bahraini government's PR strategy was the establishment of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, sponsored by and answerable to the king.⁹¹ The BICI, headed by the Egyptian-American human rights lawyer Cherif Bassiouni, issued a report in November 2011 that outlined human rights abuses, including systematic torture committed by security forces in February and March 2011. A year later the regime published a report stating that Bahrain was on a reform path, that torture had been uprooted, and that the BICI's recommendations had been implemented.⁹² But the reality is that many recommendations have not been implemented, especially

those of a more political nature such as the retrial of all those convicted in military or semi-military courts and under emergency law.⁹³ Instead of starting a process of transitional justice, the BICI has become a symbol of the political stalemate in Bahrain.

Sectarianism at home and abroad

The Bahraini crackdown has exacerbated sectarianism both in Bahrain and in the wider region. Particularly in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, tensions between Sunni and Shia have increased sharply. Saudi Arabia's Shia minority, mainly located in its eastern province, close to Bahrain, was sympathetic to the protesters. In February 2011 they started protesting in solidarity with their Bahraini counterparts and against the discriminatory policies of the Saudi state. Many commentators speculated that Saudi Arabia's decision to send troops to Bahrain was an attempt to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia will defend the GCC monarchies against internal and external threats, and was also intended as a show of strength vis-à-vis Iran. But it was also motivated by fears of a Shia uprising within Saudi Arabia, to serve as a dissuasive measure. In fact, the largest Saudi Shia protests started only after the entry of Saudi troops into Bahrain.⁹⁴ The intervention thus backfired, and helped to encourage rather than quell Shia protests. By coupling the Saudi entry into Bahrain with a sectarian rhetoric, the Saudi and Bahraini royal families created a 'sectarian Gulf', and rallied their Sunni populations 'around the flag'.⁹⁵

Since late 2011, sectarian tensions have moved to a new arena, the Syrian crisis. Although Bahrain has been relegated to the sidelines, it keeps looming in the shadow of larger regional conflicts. The more violent the Syrian civil war gets, and the more it is framed in sectarian terms, the stronger the implications for Bahrain. There have been reports of Bahraini jihadists that have died in Syria, and part of Bahrain's Sunni community is convinced that they are involved in a regional civil war.

While there have been no reports yet of Gulf Shia going to fight in Syria to defend the Assad regime, their loyalties are quite pronounced in private conversations and on social media.⁹⁶

By joining forces with the Gulf States to ‘manage’ the Arab uprisings (mainly in Yemen and Syria), the US and the EU have implicitly condoned the sectarianism used by the Bahraini and Saudi governments to subdue protesters. The West has been complicit in creating a sectarian Gulf, which is in line with its strategic goal of keeping the Gulf monarchies in power to help counter Iran.

But the EU should work towards easing sectarian tensions in the region and to prevent sectarian identity entrepreneurs on both sides from framing issues within the context of a sectarian regional war. This is increasingly the case, particularly since Hasan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah, acknowledged the deployment of his fighters in Syria and Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the popular Qatar-based Islamic scholar, in May 2013 urged all able Sunni men to join the fight in Syria.

Revolutionaries in Bahrain are gaining in strength vis-à-vis pro-dialogue groups like al-Wefaq, and are becoming more violent. On 29 May 2013, a bomb detonated in the Shia village of Bani Jamra, injuring seven police officers.⁹⁷ In the medium-term it cannot be ruled out that Western expatriates, particularly British citizens, might be targeted for their government’s alliance with the Bahraini royal family.

In its relations with Bahrain, the EU should take into account both interests and values. A more balanced foreign policy should acknowledge the wave of people power that has swept the region since the start of the Arab uprisings. The EU should not limit itself to maintaining good relations with the ruling regimes, but should call attention to human rights and political reform, and should engage with civil society and non-violent opposition groups.

Several European Parliament resolutions provide recommendations that, if implemented, could lead to sustainable stability in Bahrain. A long-term solution would also need to include the full implementation of the BICI recommendations such as a retrial of all those convicted in military or semi-military courts and under emergency law and the persecution of those responsible for human rights abuses and violence, from both the protestors' and the government's side. Without such measures and meaningful political reforms to transform Bahrain into a genuine constitutional monarchy, the country is set for years of potentially violent civil strife. And this can neither be in the interest of the EU nor of the GCC.