



**SAUDI ARABIA'S INTERVENTION IN BAHRAIN:
A NECESSARY EVIL OR A STRATEGIC BLUNDER?**

By Rachel Bronson

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On March 14, the government in Manama imposed martial law over the tiny island state of Bahrain. Shortly thereafter, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates moved security forces into Bahrain under the auspices of a Peninsula Shield Force (PSF). This show of force constituted a significant step-change in regional politics. It was the first time that Arab forces had crossed an international border to respond to the political turmoil that has rocked the region since December. It was also a surprisingly public show of force from Saudi Arabia, a country that tends to prefer acting in the shadows. The Kingdom is clearly rattled by events in the region, and has lost faith in U.S. efforts to promote dialogue in the absence of brute force. Time will tell whether Saudi Arabia's decision to deploy more than one thousand troops is a necessary evil or a strategic blunder.

Saudi Arabia's deployment is not without reason. Sitting twenty miles off Saudi Arabia's eastern coast, Bahrain is strategically important to Riyadh for economic, sectarian and geopolitical reasons. Bahrain edges on Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, an oil-producing region that accounts for one quarter of the world's proven oil resources. Any unrest there has the potential to spill over into the Kingdom and upend global oil markets. The Eastern Province is also home to most of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a population, a population that equals about 15 percent of Saudi Arabia's total population and 30 percent of the population of the Eastern Province. A radicalized and fraught Bahrain, with a Shi'a population hovering around 70 percent could stoke the fires of dissent in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, and provide sanctuary to disgruntled Saudis. Overlaying the economic and sectarian concerns are geopolitical realities that also feed Saudi anxieties. An unstable Bahrain could easily attract Iranian mischief. Iran has long-standing territorial claims on Bahrain, and the Bahraini Shi'a were inspired by the 1979 Iranian revolution. A more visible Iranian presence in Bahrain would bring Tehran directly on to Saudi Arabia's border. Riyadh clearly calculated that the ruling al-Khalifa's of Bahrain were losing their grip, that the softer line of dialogue peddled by Bahrain's Crown Prince and supported by Washington was proving ineffective, and that protests would continue on indefinitely to Saudi Arabia's detriment and Iran's gain. Following Qaddafi's lead, Saudi Arabia flexed its muscles hoping to put an end to local instability.

Events may prove Riyadh right. But there are at least four reasons to believe that even if a short-term boon, the Saudi force deployment is a medium to longer term strategic blunder. First, it greatly increases the chance of an Iranian-Saudi confrontation. Second, it will likely roil oil markets, something the Saudis try hard to avoid. Third, it will deepen the region's Shi'a-Sunni divide in a way that benefits Iran. Fourth, it will further strain U.S.-Saudi relations.

INCREASING THE CHANCE OF IRANIAN-SAUDI ARABIAN CONFRONTATION

Saudi leaders have been deeply worried about Iran's regional ascendancy since 1979, although its concern has become heightened over the last decade. One very senior Saudi explained it this way: "Iran is a country that feels frustrated because it believes it has been hemmed in. It feels it has been kept away from the leadership role that it deserves. These feelings in such an important country are dangerous." This view is pervasive among members of Saudi Arabia's ruling elite.

For Saudi leaders, Iran is understood to be a revolutionary and revanchist state whose opportunities are improving with time. Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal has argued that the 2003 American invasion of Iraq was a gift to Iran, one that we handed Tehran on a "silver platter." 2006 proved another big win for Iran, when the U.S. supported democratic elections in Palestine

that brought Hamas to power. Not surprising to the Saudis, Iran has capitalized on Hamas' international isolation and used it to increase its influence in the Palestinian territories. Lebanon is a third front where Iranian influence is flourishing. There is thus good reason for the Saudis to be concerned with Iranian activities, and is the reason why Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah called on the U.S. to "cut off the head of the [Iranian] snake."

Over the past decade the Saudis and Iranians have verbally sparred, and they have confronted each other albeit through proxies. The most violent of confrontations occurred in Yemen in 2009, when Saudi Arabia backed the Yemeni government in its suppression of the al-Houthi rebellion, claiming that the rebels were backed by Iran. The rebels responded by taking the fight on to Saudi territory. Although attacks on Saudi territory were significant, the conflict was largely fought from behind the scenes, and in the shadows, where the Saudis have tended to be more comfortable. Hence the surprise to see Saudi forces rolling across Bahrain's causeway so publicly.

With their presence in Bahrain now so-well advertised, Saudi Arabia is vulnerable to charges of intervention and Iranian sabotage. Although Iran is unlikely to deploy forces to meet Arab activity, it will seek local allies and more aggressively strengthen them. Even low level and potentially unintentional events could now lead to a major dust-up. Already, on March 15, Bahrain's largest Shiite Muslim opposition group, Al Wefaq, condemned the government's decision to impose martial law and called for international intervention. Will the Iranians offer aid or military support? Would al-Wefaq accept it? Iran has petitioned the United Nations to examine the intervention. And rumors abound of Saudi soldiers being the target of local attacks. An on-going battle between Saudi Arabia and Iranian-supported Bahraini fighters would easily turn into a nasty, violent and destabilizing conflict, even if Iran does not send overt military assistance.

RATTLING A JITTERY OIL MARKET

Second, the Saudi deployment has the potential to rattle oil markets to a greater degree than the fighting in Libya. The Saudis prefer calm markets with oil at reasonable prices. Although dramatic swings upward add to Saudi Arabia's coffers, it also causes buyers to search for alternative sources of energy. With so much of the world's reserves under its control, Saudi Arabia seeks oil prices below the threshold that will prompt further diversification.

Today, oil markets are jittery because of first and foremost the nuclear meltdown in Japan and then the stalemate in Libya. Libya exports 1.2 million barrels a day and its sweet crude is easier to refine than much of the heavier oil shipping from elsewhere. Still, Saudi Arabia's ability to replace Libyan exports (at least in volume) has calmed the market. But the events in Libya pale in comparison to instability in Bahrain, in ways that could reverberate into the Eastern Province, and to a possible Saudi-Iranian confrontation. If protests continue there, and if Bahrain's oil facilities experience walk-outs or sabotage, we should expect prices to rise, as traders bet against stability, worry about the security of Persian Gulf sea lanes, and anticipate Iranian subversion of Saudi oil fields only miles away. It could be argued that ongoing instability in Bahrain would have agitated market anyway. Until recently, however, it seemed that oil markets were not responding to events in Bahrain with panic. As one oil analyst described it, Bahrain was "a page two or page three" story, until recently.

DEEPENING THE SUNNI-SHI'A DIVIDE

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, and al-Qa'eda attacks on targets in the Kingdom in 2003/4, King Abdullah undertook a set of high profile set of "National Dialogues" with Shi'a leaders. The aim was to shift the internal dialogue away from anti-Shi'a extremism. Sunni-Shi'a relations have had a poor track record inside the Kingdom. Anti-Shi'a policies and attacks go back as far as the founding of Kingdom, and even earlier. For Saudi Shi'a, their systematic marginalization, and the deep prejudice with which their demands have been met are reason for considerable skepticism that the situation will get much better. Still their somewhat regular protests and their 1979 mobilization during Iran's revolution, makes trust building a difficult enterprise. For this reason, King Abdullah's initiative was a welcomed one, as was some increased public spending in Shi'a areas. The King's efforts have not been followed up with much of substance.

Still the King's efforts, and statements he has made at the U.N. and elsewhere, are evidence that he does not view a hardened Shi'a Sunni rift in the Kingdom's interest. And yet, such a divide is exactly what Saudi Arabia's military efforts will further solidify. The GCC has clearly come out in favor of the Sunni-led status quo, and on March 16, Jordan too threw its lot in with the GCC. Iran will of course do everything in its power to cast recent activities as a Sunni onslaught. Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon and Shi'a leaders in Iraq have issued statements against the deployment. Saudi Arabia's mobilization will fuel simmering sectarian fires of the Middle East, and has offered the Iranians a terrific diplomatic victory.

STRAINING U.S.-SAUDI RELATIONS

The Saudi deployment, undertaken one day after U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates traveled to the region and urged reform, marks a new low point in U.S.-Saudi relations. As David Ignatius of the *Washington Post* describes it, today's unwelcomed situation is "the most important U.S.-Saudi disagreement in decades," and it leaves the U.S. with few good options. Washington and Riyadh are now publically squared off on issues of political representation, violence and stability. A

U.S./Saudi diplomatic clash would further challenge shaken oil markets. It would also leave Saudi Arabia exposed internationally, as its primary international partner distances itself. China and Russia remain as possible future partners, in addition of course to local Arab states, but Saudi Arabia has benefited from America's partnership. For the U.S., the risks of a Saudi-U.S. split are also profound. There is no more likely way to create a true clash of civilizations than having the U.S. and Saudi Arabia on opposite sides of a political divide. An antagonized U.S.-Saudi relationship could empower the radicals inside the Kingdom rather than bolster more moderate forces. The Saudis have put at risk some of the considerable gains they have made both internationally and domestically by ensuring a U.S.-Saudi spat.

WHAT TO DO?

The U.S. finds itself in an extremely difficult position in the Gulf. Statements from Secretary Clinton that Bahrain and its Gulf Cooperation Council partners are "on the wrong track," are feeble, but sadly about all the U.S. can offer. Washington's dithering in Libya makes it even harder to influence the Saudis to bring their soldiers home. Over the past weeks, not to mention years, the U.S. has routinely taken action that are at odds with the advice offered by their regional allies, including turning a blind eye to Libya's rebels when key partners in Europe and the Middle East have argued to support them. Since military force is emerging as the only predictable response that both keeps leaders in power, and appears to be sanctioned by the United States, there is little reason for Riyadh to pull back. U.S. efforts to contain Iran have also been limited, further bolstering Saudi calculations that it is time to look out for itself. The problem of course is that if things go awry, which they are likely to do, it risks a broader regional conflict in the heart of oil territory and on the doorsteps of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. The U.S., with Saudi help, has boxed itself into a very dangerous corner and now faces a very daunting choice between three bad options: (1) tacitly backing Riyadh, and hoping that it can quickly shut down dissent in Bahrain, the likelihood of which seems tenuous at best; (2) using all leverage at its disposal to reverse Saudi action, though its leverage is limited and such pressure is likely to be rebuffed; (3) waffling somewhere in the middle, appearing weak, antagonizing Saudi Arabia and energizing Iran while offering little help to the Bahrainis on either side of the conflict. These are unenviable choices. What seems clear, however, is that whichever way events take the region, the U.S. administration should be quickly developing a new plan for how to manage a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Bahrain that will threaten on a daily basis to escalate into major conflict.

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