

Arabian Peninsula Background Notes

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Bahrain: The 1994-1999 Uprising

The latest in a long history of strife between the Bahraini government and its population took place during the period of 1994 to 1999, although some after-effects continued into the first several years of Shaykh Hamad b. ʿIsa’s reign.¹ The causes of the unrest were much the

same as had led to earlier periods of dissension: the refusal of the ruling family to countenance effective political participation in the system, economic deprivation, and systemic government discrimination against the majority Shiʿah population. Leadership of the opposition seemed to revolve around three poles: mainly Shiʿah religious and secular figures in Bahrain; exiles in London who formed the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM); and other exiles in Iran who grouped in the Islamic Front for the

¹ The unrest of the 1990s has been covered in Louay Bahry, “The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May 1997), pp. 42-57; Munira Fakhro, “The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment,” in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds., *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 167-188; Human Rights Watch / Middle East, *Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain* (Washington, June 1997); Joe Stork, “Bahrain’s Crisis Worsens,” *Middle East Report*, No. 204 (July-September 1997), pp. 33-35; Louay Bahry, “The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain,” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Summer 2000), pp. 129-143; Abdul Hadi Khalaf, “The New Amir of Bahrain: Marching Side-Ways,” *Civil Society*, Vol. 9, No. 100 (April 2000), pp. 6-13; David M. Ransom, “Bahrain: New Emir, New Vision,” *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (June-July

2001), pp. 35-36, 71; Naomi Sakr, “Reflections on the Manama Spring: Research Questions Arising from the Promise of Political Liberalization in Bahrain,” *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (November 2001), pp. 229-231; Falah al-Mdaires, “Shi’ism and Political Protest in Bahrain,” *DOMES: Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2002), pp. 20-44; J.E. Peterson, “Bahrain’s First Reforms Under Amir Hamad,” *Asian Affairs* (London), Vol. 33, Part 2 (June 2002), pp. 216,227; and *ibid.*, “The Promise and Reality of Bahraini Reforms” (forthcoming).

This is an *Arabian Peninsula Background Note (APBN)* written by J.E. Peterson

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Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB).²

The 1990s unrest began in early 1994 with an operation by the security forces to close a memorial service at a Shi'ah mosque and continued with a number of demonstrations during the summer. One of those detained was a young Shi'ah cleric named Shaykh 'Ali Salman, who had his passport confiscated.³

In November 1994, several events coalesced to bring matters to a head once again. A second petition with more than 20,000 signatures calling for reinstatement of the elected National Assembly (suspended in 1975) was submitted to the Amir. No action was taken on the petition and there were allegations of retribution against some of the signers.⁴ At

about the same time, stones were thrown at runners in a charity marathon as they passed through a Shi'ah village, allegedly because of their scanty clothing, and a number of youths were arrested. Shortly afterwards, Shaykh 'Ali Salman was arrested as an instigator and an organizer of protests against the earlier arrests, according to the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior, because he had signed the petition according to the shaykh.⁵ Protests erupted over a period of two weeks, spreading throughout the Shi'ah villages and al-Manamah, the capital. The security forces reacted strongly and managed to restore order just in time for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit. But up to four Shi'ah demonstrators and at least one policeman had been killed and the seeds were sown for a long cycle of repression and violence.

This initial explosion set the pattern for the years to come. The security forces, often composed of non-Bahrainis, acted with impunity and severity against demonstrators, arresting and detaining large numbers. The government made the first of many allegations that groups supported from abroad – for which

² Fakhru, "Uprising in Bahrain," pp. 179-180. The BFM's full name is the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement and Fakhru describes it as "mainly a rural Shi'ci movement," remarking that it was not well organized inside Bahrain while much better organized outside. The IFLB, she adds, ran afoul of the Iranian authorities in the early 1980s and its members relocated to Syria, India, and Bahrain; it was accused of plotting to overthrow the Government of Bahrain in 1982 and put 72 members on trial. She also notes the existence of two secular movements: the National Liberation Front, composed of former Marxists, socialists, and Arab nationalists; and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, emerging in 1971 out of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arabian Gulf and, after being crushed in 1973, altering its goal to reforms through democracy. *Ibid.*

³ Fakhru, "Uprising in Bahrain," and Human Rights Watch / Middle East, *Routine Abuse, Routine Denial: Civil Rights and the Political Crisis in Bahrain* (Washington, June 1997). Shaykh 'Ali Salman Ahmad Salman came from a poor Shi'ci family and had received a fellowship to study at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, before pursuing theological studies in Qom, Iran. Interviews in Bahrain, Jan. 2003.

⁴ For an early assessment of the unrest, see Fakhro, "Uprising in Bahrain," pp. 167-188. Details of the events during this period are compiled principally from

wire service reports (Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, and United Press International), as well as periodic reporting from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Economist*, and bulletins of the Bahrain Freedom Movement, except where otherwise noted. The November 1994 petition was followed by another petition in March 1995, signed by 110 prominent citizens from both sects, and then by the women's petition of April 1995, signed by 310 women. Fakhro, "Uprising in Bahrain," p. 185.

⁵ Shaykh 'Ali Salman told news conference in London on 26 January that he had been detained by Bahraini authorities on 5 December 1994 after he helped collect signatures for a petition demanding reinstatement of the National Assembly. He alleged that he was tortured and forced to withdraw his signature from the petition before being given a one-way ticket to Syria via Dubai on 15 January. Reuters, 26 Jan. 1995.

read Iran and the Hizbullah in Lebanon – were behind the unrest. The quickening opposition quickly began to produce leaders, with Shaykh ʿAbd al-Amir al-Jamri as the most prominent figure, closely followed by the younger Shaykh ʿAli Salman.

A new series of pro-democracy demonstrations took place in mid-January 1995, punctuated by the death of one demonstrator and incidents of arson at several video shops, followed by more arrests at a demonstration at the funeral of the deceased demonstrator. There were conflicting numbers of people detained, the opposition charging nearly 2500 while the government claimed only 600. The government sought to defuse the situation on 15 January by expelling three clerics, Shaykhs ʿAli Salman, Hamzah al-Dayri, and Haydar al-Sitri, to Dubai, from where they made their way to London. Another four clerics were expelled to Dubai in the following days. The action sparked more protests in the villages throughout January.

February 1995 was quiet but the situation turned worse in March. A second petition with 110 signatures from prominent citizens representing both sects was presented to the Amir.⁶ ʿId al-Fitr celebrations early in the month saw a return to protests and another policeman was killed in Nuwaydirat village during demonstrations over the arrest of opposition leader ʿAbd al-Wahhab Husayn for giving a speech urging the government to engage in a dialogue. The violence grew worse during the month with the first death of a foreign worker,⁷ the killing of a student during

⁶ Fakhro, “Uprising in Bahrain.”

⁷ A Pakistani shop assistant was burned to death when a fire was set in a video shop in Dayrah. Considerable resentment had been generated by a policy making the importation and employment of foreign workers easy whilst many Shiʿah remained unemployed. More Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Indians were to die later in 1996 when they were barricaded in shops which were

a school protest, and the burning to death of a policemen when a petrol bomb was thrown at his vehicle in the Shiʿah town of Sitrah.

Events in April 1995 continued the downward spiral. A petition calling for democratic rights and signed by 310 women led to the summoning of 92 government employees among the signatories who were threatened with the loss of their jobs unless they renounced their signatures.⁸ The government continued to take a tough stand when Shaykh ʿAbd al-Amir al-Jamri, Hasan Sultan, and Khalil Sultan were arrested in Bani Jamrah village. A first-ever meeting of the Amir, Shaykh ʿIsa b. Salman, with 20 prominent Shiʿah leaders ended inconclusively when they were told that the government would not initiate political reform under pressure. The protests continued to grow and by the end of the month, riot police had stormed the university and the first prison sentences were handed down for those accused of sabotage.

The violence continued over the summer with the death toll reaching 13 civilians and three policemen. Jail terms and one death sentence were handed down in July for the killing of a policeman and a heavy police presence in the Shiʿah villages dampened most protests.

The first glimmerings of a dialogue occurred in August and September. The Minister of the Interior, Shaykh Muhammad b. Khalifah, met with jailed leaders, including Shaykh ʿAbd al-Amir al-Jamri, Shaykh Hasan Sultan, ʿAbd al-Wahhab Husayn, Hasan Mushaymaʿ, and al-Sayyid Ibrahim. In return for a pledge by Shiʿah leaders to end all violence, the government promised that it

then set on fire, burning the occupants to death.

⁸ Fakhro, “Uprising in Bahrain.” Dr. Fakhro, one of the signers, was suspended from Bahrain University when she refused, as were several other prominent women.

would free all detainees by the end of September, allow the deportees to return home, and, at a later stage, to talk to the opposition on other demands. The first batch of 150 detainees was freed on 17 August and others, including ʿAbd al-Wahhab Husayn, were freed in early September. The dialogue then foundered as the opposition demanded that secret reconciliation talks be made public and that a timetable be established to discuss other demands including the restoration of the National Assembly. The government was said to be anxious to maintain national unity to resolve other political and economic problems but it was not ready to meet opposition conditions at that stage. Still, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Amir al-Jamri was released from jail on 25 September and told his supporters that “There is dialogue between the opposition and the government and an opposition initiative ... according to which all detainees would be freed in stages and would be given their passports and allowed to return to their jobs.”⁹

The government also promised to release another 500 prisoners, but only small groups had been freed by late October when Shaykh al-Jamri and six other Shiʿah leaders embarked on a nine-day hunger strike to force the release of the remaining activists. A number were freed in an Amiri pardon to mark national day on 16 December but at least several hundred still remained in detention. As a consequence, protests continued and the last few days of 1995 were marked by protests in al-Diraz and Bani Jamrah, a ban on Shaykh al-Jamri from leaving his house, and explosives set off in al-Manamah on New Year’s Eve.

Clashes between security forces and protesters occurred on successive Fridays in January 1996, prompting the Bahraini authorities to summon Shaykh al-Jamri and other Shiʿah leaders to the Ministry of the

Interior where they were ordered to stop using mosques to spread subversion. The protests spawn a series of violence, including a bomb set off at a prominent hotel and cases of arson and sabotage using gas cylinders. On 22 January, security forces arrested eight opposition leaders for “inciting crimes of riot and sabotage...”: Shaykh ʿAbd al-Amir al-Jamri, ʿAbd al-Wahhab Husayn, Hasan Mushaymaʿ, ʿAli Ahmad Hawrah, Hasan ʿAli Muhammad Sultan, Ibrahim ʿAdnan Nasir al-ʿAlawi Hashim, ʿAli ʿAbdullah Ashur al-Satrawi, and Husayn ʿAli Hasan al-Dayhi. The numbers of detained continue to grow, ranging from the government’s assertion that only 544 were in custody to opposition claims of 2000 arrests. In addition, at least dozens of Bahrainis were expelled from the country. At the same time, the government pressed its charge that Iran was behind the protests and expelled an Iranian diplomat.¹⁰

Despite the government’s tough approach, the violence and hostility continued to grow aggressively in the succeeding months. With alarming frequency, explosions began to rock hotels, cars parked in the capital and elsewhere, shopping centers, car showrooms, restaurants, and small shops near Shiʿah villages. Demonstrations continued to rock many Shiʿah villages with the security forces responding by attacking and arresting demonstrators. The State Security Court, a particular target of the protesters, continued to hand out sentences for

⁹ Quoted by Reuters, 27 Sept. 1995.

¹⁰ The government’s strongest allegations came on 3 June 1996 when it announced the arrest of a “terrorist group” called “The Military Wing of Hizbullah of Bahrain” and claimed that it had been established in 1993 and directed and financed by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Intelligence Service, and its members had been trained in Hizbullah camps in Lebanon. Gulf News Agency, AP, and Reuters 3 June 1996; Reuters 5 June 1996; Reuters 10 June 1996; Reuters 11 June 1996; and *The Economist*, 15 June 1996.

arson and sabotage. In March, Molotov cocktails hurled at a Bangladeshi restaurant in Sitrah killed seven Bangladeshi laborers; the three Bahrainis subsequently sentenced to death for the crime were said to have confessed under torture. A week later, a Bahraini convicted of murdering a policeman was executed, the first execution carried out since 1977. On the 40th day after his death, another wave of arson attacks and demonstrations broke out. Arrests continued to mount, along with allegations that women and children were among those arrested and beaten. A riot broke out in August at the grave of a 19-year-old man said to have been tortured to death.

Arson attacks continued throughout 1997, with a number of Asian laborers dying when they were prevented from leaving shops that had been set on fire. The opposition continued to press claims that detainees were being tortured and that the death while in detention of Shaykh ʿAli Mirza al-Nakkas in June was due to his being tortured; similar claims were made a year later about a 23-year-old Shiʿi. International unease at the allegations, including condemnation of Bahrain by a UN sub-commission, appeared to play a hand in the February 1998 retirement of the long-time Director-General of Public Security, Ian Henderson, to a position as adviser to the Ministry of the Interior. In April 1997, at the insistence of the Bahraini government, Kuwait arrested a number of Bahrainis living there and convicted five of plotting against their

government.

Any chance that a reconciliation could bring an end to the uprising seemed dashed by the government's decision to place eight exiled activists on trial in absentia in November 1997. The State Security Court handed down prison terms of five to 15 years on charges of spying for an unnamed foreign country and seeking to overthrow Al Khalifah rule. Many saw the trial as the work of hard-line Prime Minister and brother of the Amir, Shaykh Khalifah b. Salman, possibly in an effort to undermine the Heir Apparent, Shaykh Hamad b. ʿIsa, who was regarded as relatively more open to dialogue with the opposition.¹¹

The protests and arson attacks continued into 1999 and seemed endless when, on 6 March, Shaykh ʿIsa b. Salman suddenly and unexpectedly passed away. His son and the Heir Apparent, Shaykh Hamad b. ʿIsa, acceded immediately and three days later Shaykh Hamad named his son Salman as Heir Apparent. Shaykh Hamad's accession seemed to promise a new era in Bahraini politics as he soon began to make moves to defuse the tension. The violence desisted after a lag of several months, bringing an end to active unrest.

¹¹ *The Economist*, 6 Dec. 1997. The eight individuals placed on trial were: Mansur al-Jamri, Saʿid al-Shihabi, ʿAli Salman, Hamzah al-Dayri, Haydar al-Sitri, ʿAdil al-Shuʿla, Khalil Sultan and Muhammad al-Saffaf. Reuters, 8 Nov. 1997.