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SECURITY ISSUES

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**Background** -- Bahrain's geopolitical circumstances do not inspire a strong sense of comfort or complacency: a small island state with a significant religious fracture among its populace, situated amidst much larger and occasionally acquisitive neighbors within a volatile region that supplies a finite mineral essential to global industrial development. Bahrain's ruling Al-Khalifa family has consequently become particularly sensitive to political or security developments in surrounding countries that could sweep across Bahrain's shores and upend its domestic equilibrium.

1. **Gulf Cooperation Council** -- One strategy that Bahrain has pursued to insulate its potentially vulnerable position has involved championing collective arrangements with other Gulf state monarchies to pool security resources and provide mutual defense support. Bahraini efforts in this direction did not bear fruit during the 1970s, aside from various bilateral agreements. <sup>1</sup> However, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq conflict in 1980 underscored for all Gulf states their vulnerability to the destabilizing forces of war and, in 1981, they created a more institutionalized framework for their joint cooperation: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). <sup>2</sup> The GCC agreement placed formal emphasis on economic cooperation at its inception, but the amount of defense and security interaction rose steadily over the succeeding years. As a result of GCC security cooperation, Bahrain received financial assistance to expand its military and defense facilities (\$1.7 billion in 1982) and engaged in joint training exercises with other members. <sup>3</sup> In 1984, the GCC agreed to create a joint "Peninsula Shield" military force consisting of two brigades, one Saudi and the other a composite unit, to give tangible form to its mutual defense pledges. <sup>4</sup> The GCC defense ties have served as a reassuring security bulwark for Bahrain and GCC collective defense commitments

have evidently been an important insurance policy against external aggression.

*Questions: How critical a role does GCC defense cooperation play in safeguarding Bahrain from external threats? Does GCC defense cooperation rest on a common understanding of the security threats confronting member states? Does this cooperation help foster such a common understanding? What role does the GCC play with regard to security-related disputes (e.g. border issues) among member states? Has NATO or other collective defense organizations served as a model for GCC cooperation? Do member states envisage even greater integration of defense efforts through the GCC, such as integrated command structures, fully interoperable forces, or permanent basing arrangements?*

2. **Relations with the United States** – Bahrain has sought to wrap itself in an additional layer of security against external threats by closely embracing the US in a symbiotic defense relationship. Even before achieving full independence from Great Britain in 1971, Bahrain served as a nerve center for US naval activity in the Gulf; a relationship that ultimately resulted in the basing of the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet headquarters in the capital of Manama. 5 Bahrain and the US signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement in 1991 granting US forces access to Bahraini facilities and pre-positioning rights. 6 The bilateral security relationship has continued to evolve beyond prosaic basing arrangements and reached a new pinnacle in October 2001 when President Bush designated Bahrain a major non-NATO ally. 7 In support of its carefully-cultivated ties with the US, Bahrain has cooperated on criminal investigations and financial monitoring since the terrorist attacks on 9/11. These security cooperation ties have grown in parallel to a robust economic relationship, with the US serving as

Bahrain's major source of imports for nearly two decades. 8 A measure of the bilateral relationship's strength was reflected in Amir Shayk Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa's visit to the White House in February 2003 to discuss the status of efforts to disarm Iraq.

*Questions: Are there liabilities as an Arab nation so closely associated with the US?*

*Does this raise doubts about the ruling family's legitimacy with any segment of the Bahraini people? Is Bahrain concerned about becoming a target of Muslim radicals or serving as a magnet for potential terrorist attacks because of the sizable American military presence in Manama? Are there circumstances under which it would be in Bahrain's interest to scale back its security relationship with the US? Does Bahrain regard the US as reliable security partner that would come to its assistance if Manama was threatened by external forces? Is Bahrain concerned about potential US pressure to democratize its political structures?*

3. **Relations with Iran** – Iran's sporadic meddling in Bahrain's internal affairs has given shape to general Bahraini fears concerning externally-directed mischief. Iran has harbored historical claims to Bahrain, which were officially renounced by the Shah during the 1970s. 9 However, after the Shah's ouster in 1979, Iran indulged the temptation to foment unrest among its Shia brethren in Bahrain and Manama accused Iran of planning and supporting a planned coup attempt in 1981. 10 Bahrain also voiced suspicions of Iranian involvement in domestic unrest during the 1990s. However, with the election of the moderate Mohammed Khatami as president of Iran in 1997, relations between the two countries have improved. 11 Following Saudi Arabia's lead in opening the door to normalized interaction with Iran, Bahrain has re-established full diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial-level with Tehran and agreed recently to

expand bilateral commercial ties. 12 While this bilateral relationship is likely to experience periodic thaws such as the current one, the inherent vulnerability associated with a Shia majority in a Sunni-ruled country will likely engender wariness and unease within the Al-Khalifa ruling family living in the shadow of large Shia populations in Iran and Iraq. *Questions: What are the prospects for sustaining normalized relations with Iran over the medium to long term? Does Bahrain fear a resurgence of Iranian-instigated unrest in Bahrain? What recourse does Manama have if Iran resorts to further destabilizing activity within Bahrain? Does Iran pose a serious conventional military threat to Bahrain? Are there political or security implications for Bahrain if Iran moves toward a more genuine and pluralistic form of democracy? Does the religious affinity of Shia in Bahrain and Iran outweigh any sense of loyalty among Bahraini Shia for the Al-Khalifa ruling family?*

4. **Relations with Iraq/Position on Current Crisis** – The direct threat to Bahrain from Iraq has traditionally paled in comparison to the Iranian challenge looming across the Gulf. This relative perception of danger and risk emanating from the two heavyweights in the Gulf was reinforced by the Iran-Iraq war, where a militant Iran rolled back an initial invasion from Iraq and exported its revolutionary fervor by sowing unrest in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. However, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 inverted the existing threat calculus and Iraq became the chief threat to the Gulf states collectively. In keeping with expectations and pledges under GCC collective defense arrangements, Bahrain sent a small ground contingent to Saudi Arabia to join the Arab task force participating in Operation Desert Storm. 13 Recognizing the inadequacy of pre-Gulf War military preparations to repel an attack,

the Gulf states considered proposals to station Egyptian and Syrian troops on their territory as a more substantial defensive bulwark against Iraqi adventurism, but ultimately opted for a closer relationship to the US as a less risky alternative. 14 While Iraq still represents the most prominent near-term threat to Bahrain and its allies in the Gulf, none of the Arab monarchies, including Bahrain, is anxious for a war launched by the US that will highlight once again the degree to which Arab fortunes are defined by outside powers and could unleash unpredictable domestic protests. Bahrain has already experienced several street demonstrations in the lead-up to a prospective conflict. 15 The situation is particularly acute for Bahrain and its Gulf state neighbors because they must balance commitments to host the US military build up on their soil against the manifest unpopularity within the Arab world of another Gulf war.

The UAE, with backing from Bahrain and Kuwait, floated a proposal at an Arab League summit in early March 2003 for Saddam Hussein to go into exile in order to avert war. The proposal has faltered because of broader Arab distaste for endorsing regime change in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's near certain rejection of such an offer in any case. *Questions: How does Bahrain reconcile its close ties to the US with the uniform unpopularity in the Arab world of a prospective US-initiated war? Does the Arab world and GCC lose credibility in not being able to influence the movement toward war and failing even to agree on a common Arab stance regarding the war? Will the course of the war have any impact on bilateral US-Bahraini relations, particularly if the war is longer and more destructive than currently envisaged? If the war succeeds in installing a new democratic regime in Iraq, will that increase pressure on Bahrain to accelerate its own democratic reform process?*

5. **Other Regional Security Issues** -- While the GCC has served as an important collective security anchor for Bahrain, contentious issues have still arisen between Bahrain and fellow GCC member states, most notably Qatar. Both states have claimed sovereignty over various small islands and other lands situated between them, creating a flashpoint that erupted several times during the 1980s and early 1990s. 16 Qatar submitted this territorial dispute to the International Court of Justice in the Hague in 1991 and, ten years later, the court ruled in favor of the status quo, granting control of the disputed islands to Bahrain and sovereignty over a strip of contested land on the Qatari coast to Qatar. 17 The settlement opened the door to improved relations between the GCC neighbors, including closer economic cooperation. In 2002 the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on the supply of Qatari gas to Bahrain. 18 *Questions: Does the GCC framework provide mediation mechanisms for disputes among members? Is there any added incentive to mute differences with other Gulf states in light of the larger array of threats and challenges in the Gulf? Does economic support provided to Bahrain by its more affluent neighbors limit its ability to pursue a differentiated position on security issues? Are there security or territorial issues over which Bahrain could feel compelled to break with any of its Gulf state partners?*
6. **Perspective on Middle East Peace Process** – Bahrain occupies a relatively moderate position on the Arab political spectrum regarding the conflict with Israel. As a small state with a relatively low profile, Bahrain has hewed closely to Arab League consensus views on Middle East peace and Palestinian rights. 19 In December 1994, Bahrain concurred with a GCC decision to drop secondary and tertiary boycotts against Israel and

has endorsed the Saudi peace proposal calling for Arab recognition of Israel in return for its withdrawal from the occupied territories. 20 *Questions: Are Arab states really prepared to extend de jure recognition to Israel in exchange for Palestinian independence as outlined in the Saudi peace proposal? What resources would Bahrain commit to cementing an Israeli-Palestinian deal? How would settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict be received by the Arab world in general and the Bahraini populace in particular? Would resolution of the conflict put pressure on Arab states to focus more on their own domestic shortcomings in governance and inaugurate internal reform processes? What tangible benefits would Bahrain envisage flowing as a result of an acceptable Arab-Israeli agreement? Does failure to settle this dispute increasingly move the Arab street in a radical direction and thereby threaten the stability of moderate Arab states like Bahrain?*

7. **Military Capabilities/Arms Purchases** – The Arab Gulf states traditionally have among the highest per capita defense expenditure rates in the world as a result of their small population base and deliberate efforts to offset their size disadvantage with a qualitative edge in weapons technology. 21 Ground forces in the Gulf armies have traditionally established as their highest priority protection of the home front from internal challenges and safeguarding of the ruling families. 22 The Bahraini Amir, Shayk Hamad, has strong ties to the military and is expected to integrate members of the military into the government. 23

Bahrain's active armed forces total approximately 9,000 individuals, the vast majority of which serve in the army; these forces are augmented by a roughly equal number of paramilitary personnel. 24 In terms of hardware, Bahrain possesses 106 M-

60A3 tanks and about 340 armored personnel carriers. The air force has 34 combat aircraft and 40 armed helicopters, including F-16 C/Ds and Apaches, while the navy has 16 warships, including a frigate donated by the US. 25 Bahraini emphasis on advanced weaponry, which is intended to maximize the force's deterrent capability, also creates a degree of dependence on foreign maintenance and training staffs to integrate and service the sophisticated technologies embedded in the systems. 26

*Questions: How does Bahrain determine what size its military force should be? Is an expensive, high-tech military the best approach given that such a force will likely be insufficient to repel a determined challenge by a larger neighbor and is much greater than any force needed to maintain internal order? Do Bahraini forces receive sufficient training to serve as a credible deterrent and defense force? Is there any concern that the Bahraini military could someday become a threat to the ruling family or otherwise take actions that destabilize the state? What role do joint military activities with GCC members play in achieving broader integration goals between Bahrain and its neighbors? Does Bahrain restrict service in the military to Sunni Muslims? How does Bahrain see its military forces evolving in the coming years?*

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