



Bahrain: Interests Behind Repression

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Research Question

Why did the regime in Bahrain ultimately receive more support than its people? Is this reasoning applicable to other Arab Spring movements?

My Hypothesis:

Access to oil and existing sectarian based politics contributed to regional and international interests in favor of the Bahraini regime, despite its brutality and the democratic goals of the protestors.

These factors would be applicable to the estimated success or failure of other Arab Spring uprisings.

Internal Situation in Bahrain

- Bahrain's population is 70% Shiite [1]
- Uprising was a united Sunni-Shia movement [2]
- Regime claimed revolt was sectarian in nature and brutally repressed protests [3]
- Popular demands shifted from call for reform to the downfall of the regime [4]



Pro Sunni-Shia sign on Pearl Roundabout

Persian Gulf Interests

- Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) internally seeks to maintain status quo and current regimes
- Sectarianism influences GCC responses
 - Wish to maintain Sunni superiority in Saudi Arabia [5]
 - Foreign threat of Iran used by GCC to rationalize military intervention in Bahrain
 - Syrian revolt receiving increasing support from Saudi Arabia and GCC [6]

U.S. Foreign Policy

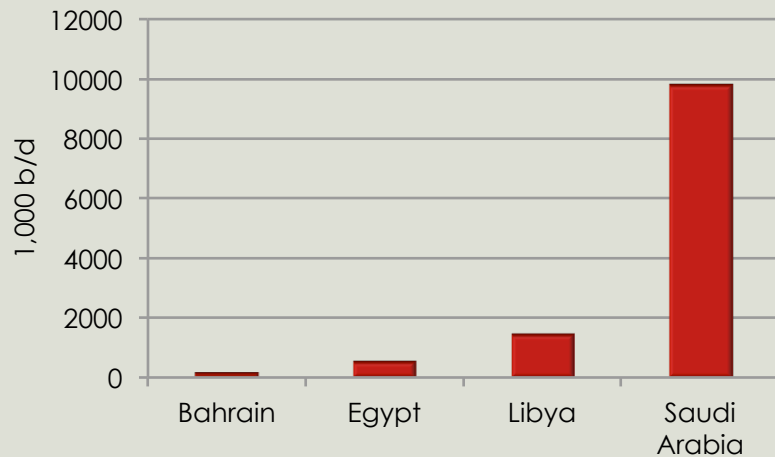
Realism “stresses the primacy of the national interest and national security in foreign policy, and focuses on the acquisition, maintenance, and expansion of power—particularly military power—as the best way to pursue those interests.” [7]

Idealism argues that “morals and values, not state interests, should and do shape individual and state behavior.” [8]

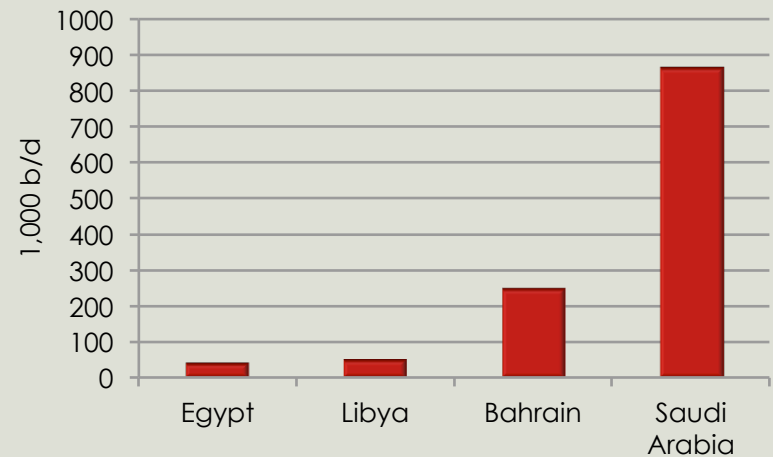
Obama as the “pragmatic idealist.” [9]

Oil on the Market

World Crude Oil Production
in 2012



World Exports of Petroleum
Products in 2012



~ Oil and petroleum data from OPEC reports [10]

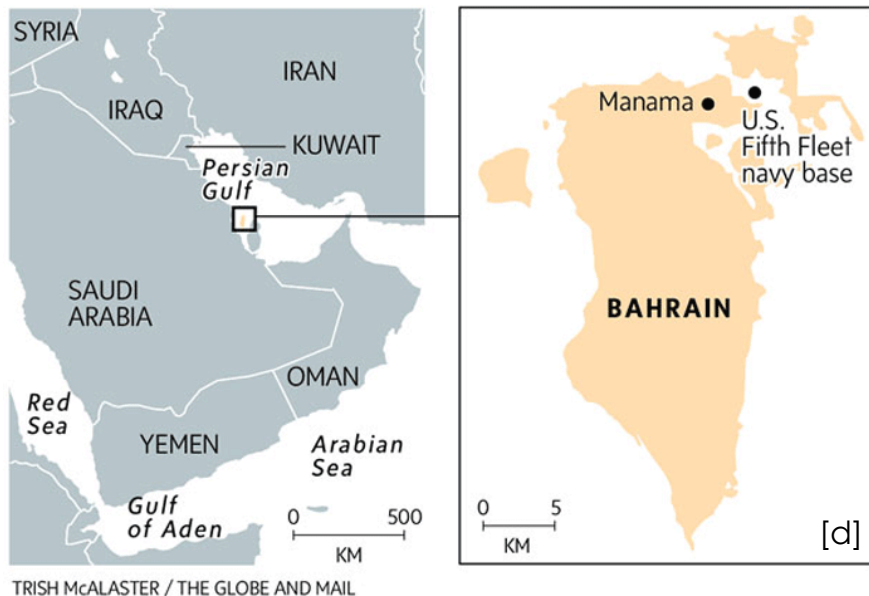
- ▣ Although Bahrain is rather oil poor, it plays a larger role in the refinement of crude oil.[11]

Oil, Sectarianism, and U.S. Interests



- Historical U.S. interests in Middle Eastern oil [12]
 - Oil to European allies
- “Oil denial” policy against Iran [13]

U.S. Military Interest in Bahrain



Bahrain is “pound for pound, man for man, the best ally the United States has anywhere in the world.”

~Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Admiral William Crowe [14]



The Result – Realist Approach

- ▣ Absence of calls for regime change and appeal to democratic values

“Bahrain is a longstanding partner, and we are committed to its security...The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue...”

“President Assad now has a choice: He can lead the transition or get out of the way.”

~Obama's address on the Middle East and North Africa. May 19, 2011 [15]

- ▣ Limited attention given to Bahrain in political rhetoric
- ▣ Continued sale of arms to Bahraini government [16]

Complex Interests in Other Arab Spring Uprisings

- ▣ Factors contributing to international support or condemnation of regimes during the Arab Spring are much more diverse than simply oil and sectarian interests.
- ▣ GCC response
 - ▣ Monarchies vs. republics [17]
- ▣ American response
 - ▣ Quality of relations with existing regime [18]
 - ▣ Anti-terrorism aid [19]
 - ▣ Stability

Conclusions

- ❑ Oil and sectarian politics do play a significant role in guiding regional and American interests in regards to Bahrain, leading to support of the regime.
- ❑ However there are many other factors contributing to those interests, both in Bahrain and throughout the Middle East.
- ❑ There is no single, clear indicator of how to bring about international support for a popular protest movement.
- ❑ The American double standard in response to the Arab Spring threatens to lessen U.S. power as a role model abroad.

References

- [1] James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 128.
- [2] Stephen Zunes, "Bahrain's Arrested Revolution," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 157.
- [3] Zunes, 157.
Gelvin, 138.
- [4] Gelvin, 137.
- [5] Al-Rasheed Madawi, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity & Nationalism*, vol. 11, no. 3 (December 2011): 514-515.
- [6] John Davis, *The Arab Spring and the Arab Thaw* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2013), 174.
- [7] Pierre M. Atlas, "U.S. Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring: Balancing Values and Interests," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2012): 354-355.
- [8] Atlas, 357.
- [9] Atlas 360.
- [10] Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries. *OPEC Annual Statistics Bulletin*. Vienna, 2013, 30 and 54.
- [11] Zunes, 151.
- [12] Yakub Halabi, "US Responses to Major Developments in the Arab-Islamic World: Evaluation of Roles of Ideas," *International Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4 (2006): 340.
- [13] Atlas, 377.
Zunes, 158. (Obama accused Iran of trying to "take advantage of turmoil")
- [14] Zunes, 161.
- [15] Atlas, 362.
- [16] Atlas, 376.
- [17] Davis, 171.
- [18] Atlas, 371.
- [19] Gelvin, 86.

Images

[a] Reuters/Hamad I Mohammed, "A protester waves the Bahraini flag at the Pearl Roundabout in the Bahraini capital Manama, February 15, 2011," photograph, February 15, 2011. *Reuters*. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/15/us-bahrain-protesters-idUSTRE71E3YN20110215> (accessed March 8, 2014).

(Better resolution of picture retrieved from <http://dayevents.ru/baxrejskij-vlasti-snesli-pamyatnik-perl-raundebaut>)

[b] Al Jazeera Staff, "A sign on Pearl Roundabout that reflects the spirit on the ground: "No Sunni, No Shia, Only Bahraini"..." photograph, February 20, 2011. *Al Jazeera*. <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/middle-east/live-blog-bahrain> (accessed March 8, 2014).

[c] "Bahrain Oil Field," photograph, 2014. *Tatweer Petroleum*. <http://tatweerpetroleum.com/en/oilfield/global/oil-field-title.html> (accessed March 11, 2014).

[d] "Sequestration cloud moves over U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain," photograph, 2013. *World Tribune.com*. <http://www.worldtribune.com/2013/03/05/sequestration-cloud-moves-over-u-s-navys-fifth-fleet-in-bahrain/> (accessed March 10, 2014).

[e] "Time to Disband the Bahrain-Based U.S. Fifth Fleet," photograph, 2011. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/06/time-to-disband-the-bahrain-based-us-fifth-fleet/240243/> (accessed March 10, 2014).