Bahrain is wracked by simmering violence and social divisions, and the government appears unwilling to enact substantial political reforms. The three main Bahraini political forces—the Shia opposition, Sunni Islamists, and the ruling Sunni Al Khalifa family—are paralyzed by internal fissures with more militant idealists overtaking pragmatists. This is a crucial test of the United States’ ability to balance the need for political reform with long-standing strategic interests and military partnerships.

Dynamics Behind the Impasse

- Unable to produce meaningful reforms through dialogue or political participation, the mainstream Shia opposition represented by Al Wefaq is losing popular support.
- The youth are rising up. The February 14 Youth Coalition—a leaderless network formed in the early days of Bahrain’s uprising—is winning over some of Al Wefaq’s supporters. It has rejected dialogue with the regime, called for the creation of a republic, and confronted security forces with sporadic violence.
- A hardline faction of the Al Khalifa family, led by the royal court minister and the commander of the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF), is drowning out more moderate voices.
- Class-based Sunni anger with the regime is rising. Hardline royal factions have attempted to co-opt this dissent and redirect it against the Shia—a losing strategy that is stoking sectarianism in Bahraini society.
- Anti-Americanism is growing among both hardline Sunni Islamists and rejectionist Shia elements. This anti-Americanism coupled with the entrenched regime’s apparent intent to ignore calls for deep reform risks damaging American legitimacy and jeopardizing U.S. assets and people.

Policy Recommendations for the United States

Rethink the long-standing U.S. defense relationship with Bahrain. The relationship may soon become a liability given the stalemate on reform, endemic violence, and mounting anti-Americanism.

Develop contingency plans with a long view. The U.S. Navy should prepare plans for the gradual relocation of the Fifth Fleet’s assets and functions away from Bahrain to potentially use as leverage to shift regime behavior. Washington should also seek to promote attitudinal change within the BDF through officer exchanges, training, and security cooperation as political shifts in Bahrain may be a generational effort.

Supplement backroom diplomacy with more specific public demands for reform. Given the regime’s sensitivity to its image abroad, public criticism by senior U.S. officials can help spur change.

Use economic and multilateral leverage wisely. Criticism by multilateral forums has produced some positive shifts in policy. More specific, targeted financial sanctions against regime officials implicated in human rights violations may send an even stronger message.

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