

PERSPECTIVES

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BAHRAIN, TOO, GOES TO THE POLLS (I)

By John Duke Anthony

=====GulfWire ~ ~Perspectives=====

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Periodically, U.S. Members of Congress, special interest groups, and guests on nationally televised media programs seem to be fixated on shortcomings among the 22 Arab systems of governance. In this light, what happened in Bahrain last week is noteworthy. For the first time in nearly thirty years, Bahrainis voted for a parliament. Despite the significance of this event, many find it strange that, except for two articles in the New York Times on October 27 and 31, American media comment about the election has been so limited. Accordingly, "GulfWire" is pleased to provide a two-part report on Bahrain, one of America's oldest Arab allies. In the report that follows, "GulfWire" Publisher Dr. John Duke Anthony places Bahrain in the setting of its global and regional affairs, on one hand, and its special bilateral relationship with the United States and recent developmental dynamics, on the other. A subsequent report, by Scott David McIntosh, focuses on the parliamentary election itself and its implications for potential future trends within Bahrain.

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By John Duke Anthony

[Washington – November 8, 2002] On October 26, the Kingdom of Bahrain conducted its first nationwide elections for a parliament in more than a quarter of a century. A few days later, run-off polls were held to determine the winners in several of the previous days' close contests. Earlier, this past spring, there were also contests for seats on Bahrain's municipal councils, when women voted and ran as candidates, as they did again last week, for the first time. By all accounts, all three elections went smoothly. Of more than passing interest to many is that the number of voters who went to the polls in Bahrain, as a percentage of those qualified to do so, was comparatively greater than those who cast their ballots earlier this week in elections across the United States. Leaders of two groups identified with the Shi'ah sect of Bahrain's overwhelmingly Islamic population, and two other political associations comprised of both the country's Shi'ah as well as Sunni Muslims, called for a boycott of last week's elections. They expressed dissatisfaction with what they argued were shortcomings on the constitutional and legislative fronts. One complaint centered on the limited nature and extent of powers extended the elected but largely consultative body.

The boycotters took issue with the possibility that a separate assembly, all of whose members would be appointed by the executive branch, and whose main functions would also be consultative, could checkmate the elected parliamentarians' recommendations. Another stated grievance was that the King had amended an earlier constitution by royal decree. Despite the boycott, local and international observers report that over half of the quarter million registered voters turned out for the polls. Candidates, voters, and polling analysts took note of the positive impact that two measures undertaken by King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa in recent months had on the elections. In one, he granted amnesty to and released from prison all of the country's political detainees. In another measure, the king welcomed back to Bahrain numerous expelled and self-exiled dissidents who had taken part in illegal demonstrations and in scattered acts of political violence against the government from the mid-1980s onward.

Hardly an Island unto Itself

A country of 600,000 inhabitants, with a diverse culture and history as old as time itself, Bahrain is a household name to most Arabs and Muslims. It has also long been a byword in the strategic councils of such former world powers as Portugal, the Netherlands, and, more recently, Great Britain. Indeed, barely a generation ago, Bahrain served as the seat of the British Political Residency for the entire Gulf region. Utilizing a network of official British Political Agents in the area from Kuwait to the easternmost tip of what was then South Yemen, the Residency administered the defense and international relations of Oman and nearly a dozen Gulf emirates from 1948 until 1971.

Great Britain did so in most cases through a body of protected-state treaties, which it had concluded with the ruling families of these polities dating, in most cases, from a century earlier. In this way, it succeeded in maintaining a measure of Gulf peace and stability – "pax Britannica" -- unmatched before or since. The American Connection The Arabian archipelago's cultural, historical, and strategic resonance within the Gulf, the broader Islamic world, and among European powers notwithstanding, Bahrain is also no stranger to "GulfWire's" many readers in North America. The reason: its long and close association with four quite different kinds of private sector professionals from the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Canada. Among the earliest and most enduring of these groups have been doctors, nurses, and numerous other health care professionals; pre-collegiate educators; energy company representatives; and managers of international banking and investment. Beginning with a relatively low profile in the early 1900s, these unofficial American ambassadors of goodwill set foot in the country long before the age of oil. They arrived prior to the advent of air-conditioning. They came in advance of the onset of aviation and modern telecommunications and long before the country obtained its full national sovereignty and political independence.

At midpoint in the last century, these early Americans in Bahrain were joined by another, quite different group. For nearly two decades thereafter, the latter, representing the U.S. Navy, were composed, at most, of only a few hundred personnel. Even now, their present day successors, who are officially "home-ported" in Bahrain and number more than a thousand, are not all ashore at the same time -- many are aboard ship and deployed elsewhere in a substantially larger region that is known as the U.S. Central Command's "Area of Responsibility."

Regional Defense's Ascendance

The special American-Bahrain defense relationship's original *raison d'être* was mainly symbolic. Accordingly, the U.S. naval presence for decades was not only quite modest in number but, also, optically, politically, and operationally. For the longest time, the maritime force was limited in size and purpose. In the early 1970s the USS Valcour, an aging seaplane tender, was replaced by a specially configured amphibious vessel, the USS La Salle, as the force flagship. The flagship was joined by one or two small combatant

vessels deployed from the United States for rotational duty in the Gulf and Indian Ocean. The USS La Salle, painted white to mitigate the high temperatures of the Gulf, became the most widely known U.S. unit in the area as it served there through the 1970s and 1980s. Up until 1971, when the British abrogated their historical special treaty relationship whereby they undertook to defend Bahrain and administer its foreign relations, the U.S. Navy's presence was meant to do more than show the American flag in ports throughout the Gulf. The presence was meant primarily to underscore the importance the United States assigned to its national security interests in Bahrain and the broader Arabian Peninsula, Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean regions. In the eyes of many of the Americans who served in Bahrain, U.S. Middle East Force, or MIDEASTFOR, the two terms being interchangeable with the command's official name, seemed to be a project of indeterminate duration and, for significant stretches of time, of uncertain consequence.

Yesteryear's Lens

Through the lens of a clouded rear-view mirror the impact of the naval force's presence over the longer term can be seen much more clearly. Indeed, the value of such an extended presence as far as American and Arab allied defense interests were concerned, and their respective appreciation of its evolving impact on regional and international affairs, would be etched more indelibly only with the passage of time. Illuminating the presence's merits were challenges of global portent that stemmed from developments and trends that the United States and its allies considered to be potentially dangerous to their common interests and foreign policy objectives.

In the earliest days of the Cold War, one widely perceived imperative acknowledged by national leaders in Washington and among their counterparts in the capitals of other NATO powers was the need to deter and, if necessary, defend against the military and geo-political threat posed by the Soviet Union. A second constant in the foreign policy calculus of these same powers was rooted in the likely long-term consequences of what many, even then, foresaw as the gradual setting of the sun on Bahrain and other strategic outposts in Britain's diminishing empire.

Strategic Partnership

In the eyes of some, the initial deployment of American naval forces to Bahrain seems a long time ago. However, to as many others, if not more, it is regarded as a relatively recent phenomenon, which, in comparison to the lengthy stay of Great Britain and other major powers, it certainly is. Whether the retrospective evaluation of the special relationship is long- or short-term, none deny that Bahrain has played an out-sized role in regional and international affairs for quite some time. In any study of the partnership in the context of this bilateral and multi-lateral alliance, there are lessons to be learned. For example, Bahrain illustrates how even the smallest and least economically endowed among the GCC countries has repeatedly employed a range of formidable assets in support of regional peace and stability.

Indeed, Bahrain is a good indicator of how some GCC countries' contributions to regional defense have been and are linked less to the size of their population or territory, or to the nature and extent of their material resources, and far more to other factors. In Bahrain's case, the key factors have been and continue to be a combination of strategic vision, leadership, and constancy of conviction as well as commitment.

Regional Significance

Despite the quite limited extent of its physical domain and the dearth of its fiscal prowess compared to several other GCC states, the tiny archipelago has consistently comprised a critical component in intra-GCC and GCC-allied countries' regional planning and operations.

Several examples illustrate the point. One is that Bahrain serves as the headquarters for the U.S. Fifth

Fleet, whose ranking admiral reports directly to the commander-in-chief of the U.S. Central Command, which has overall responsibility for helping to deter would-be threats to individual GCC countries and, in the event that deterrence should fail, to ensure the GCC region's defense. Another example is how, in previous international military campaigns, such as Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990-91, Bahrain's Shaikh Isa Air Base has been available for Allied Coalition use whenever any U.S. aircraft carrier deployed to the Gulf was out of the region. A third example is the support Bahrain extended to the multinational team tasked by the UN Security Council to oversee and inspect the discovery and destruction of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Fourth, few who lived and worked in the Gulf during the late 1980s are likely to forget a crucial role that Bahrain played during the Iran-Iraq war, when, in May 1987, an Iraqi pilot errantly attacked and nearly sank a US Navy frigate, USS Stark, killing 37 U.S. sailors. The number of Americans who perished would have been higher but for Bahraini helicopter pilots rescuing survivors from the sea.

Allied Coalition Contributions

Two additional cases in point underscore the nature of Bahrain's contributions to regional peacemaking and peacekeeping in recent times. In one of these cases, Bahrain played a pivotal role in "Operation Ernest Will," the 1987-1988 U.S.-led naval re-flagging operation that provided maritime protection for oil tankers and other vessels bound to and from Kuwait that, combined with other internationally concerted actions, helped to bring the Iran-Iraq War to an end.

Second, in "Operations Desert Shield and Storm," Bahrain played a similar role. It facilitated the logistical and other operational requirements of an Allied Coalition of more than 30 countries that combined to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait.

The Alumni...

Lastly, an enduring humanistic component to the defense relationship that is little acknowledged and hard to quantify is the following. For several American leaders, their service in Bahrain later proved to be a stepping-stone to even more illustrious careers. Four among many such officials, all now retired from the U.S. Navy, are former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe, first National Defense University Commandant Rear Admiral Marmaduke Bayne, recent U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs and former U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain Robert Pelletreau, Physicians for Peace President Rear Admiral Harold J. Bernsen, Carter Administration National Security Council official Gary Sick, and former U.S. Naval Academy Superintendent William Taylor.

In addition, these individuals and a succession of other former MIDEASTFOR Commanders-in-Chief – for example, Admirals Addams, Bigley, Katz, Less, Moore, Redd, Taylor, inter al. – are among the stalwarts that founded and have helped sustain the Bahrain-American Friendship Society, a people-to-people association unlike any other that exists between any other GCC country and the United States. Several of these individuals, all of them having become admirals of varying ranks and some of them still on active duty, were present at yet another of the several annual meetings of the Friendship Society last night.

...And Their Reunions

The occasion was an "Iftar," a nightly breaking of the fast of Ramadan, the Muslim month and ritual in which the faithful abstain from food or drink from sunlight to sunset. The event was hosted by the Ambassador of Bahrain to the United States, H.E. Khalifa Ali Al-Khalifa, and attended by serving and retired admirals, former U.S. ambassadors, members of the Arab diplomatic corps, this writer, and others who have lived and worked in Bahrain.

Speaking at the occasion was U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William J. Burns. Secretary Burns, among

other things, testified to the mutual benefit of the two countries' relationship, noting that, "Our partnership of more than fifty years has been an indispensable aid to our shared interests in regional stability." Throughout, these numerous additional components of America's official ties to Bahrain, together with administration of the renowned Department of Defense School in Bahrain for the children of U.S. military and diplomatic personnel, do more than encapsulate the unique and multifaceted human dimensions of the Bahrain-U.S. partnership. In their own way, they have shown and continue to demonstrate how constancy of effort and unity of purpose between friends over time can make a defining difference. As has been the case abundantly in this instance, the relationship has had a positive impact on helping not only to contain as well as terminate conflicts. It has also been essential to the maintenance of regional peace, albeit a peace, or, rather, an absence of war, that is at present one of looming uncertainty, in one of the world's most strategically vital areas.

Beyond Energy

Its defense and early oil producer images notwithstanding, Bahrain is now only occasionally associated with ongoing service in support of the international energy industry. This is despite the fact that what it does in this regard is a matter of no small moment. Indeed, it has helped continuously to ensure the uninterrupted production and export of the region's oil and gas, vital to the engine of the world's material well being.

Of additional economic importance, Bahrain, dating from the early 1970s, was the GCC region's first country to pioneer in launching a hi-tech aluminum industry. Moreover, from the onset of the civil war in Lebanon in the mid-1970s, it quickly became, and to this day has remained, one of the region's most advanced banking and investment centers. On the educational and social fronts, Bahrain remains the site of two modern centers of higher education, Bahrain University and the Arabian Gulf University. Both institutions continue to prepare the coming generation of GCC region leaders in a broad range of administrative and developmental sciences.

Pan-GCC Integration

A highlight among its contributions to regional cooperation and growth was the 1986 joint decision by Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to provide a powerful building block for future GCC integration. Indeed, since then, the two countries have been physically linked through a maritime causeway.

Moreover, since the peaceful and amicable settlement last year of a longstanding territorial dispute with neighboring Qatar, Bahrain and Qatar have been giving serious and favorable consideration to the early construction of an additional causeway that will link their two countries people more closely. To this end, there is also the near-term prospect of Qatar providing Bahrain with substantial amounts of the world's lowest cost gas supplies as a means of providing much-needed energy to Bahrain's power generating and desalination plants.

Parallel with these trends, Bahrain continues to host a pan-GCC commercial arbitration center and is home to Gulf International Bank (GIB). The shareholders of the latter, which consists of the governments of the six GCC countries, selected GIB to be the first bank within the GCC allowed to open branches in all the other member-states.

Lastly, simultaneous to these developments, Bahrain has retained its special niche within the region's aviation and maritime infrastructures. These latter features of modern day Bahrain, despite their modest size and lack of pretension, are not only prized regionally, but are of global significance as well. Not least among the reasons is that these infrastructures make it possible for the United States, co-signatory of Defense Cooperation Agreements with Bahrain and four other GCC countries, to be a more credible ally in support of regional peace and stability. "Credible," "ally," "cooperation," "regional peace and stability" -- all

five are giant strategic and operational concepts. In the present instance, each one is linked directly to real life phenomena. Each one is also intrinsically tied to the imminent prospects for war or peace, prospects likely to be put to the test, and possibly strained, not only in the American-Bahraini relationship, but, also, in the relationships between the United States and many other countries, too, in the coming days, weeks, and months. One can only hope that, on the American side at the highest level, three other phenomena: statesmanship, wisdom, and courage – with the latter being inclusive of the requisite personal, political, and, above all, the moral determination and capacity to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons -- will also be imminently present and, if need be, applied in an instant and on a sustained basis when the time comes.