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I.H.T. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Bahrain Blowback

By GRAHAM E. FULLER | GLOBAL VIEWPOINT

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WASHINGTON — Where's the next place to blow in the Arab revolution? Candidates are many, but there's one whose geopolitical impact vastly exceeds its diminutive size — the island of Bahrain.

This is a place run by an oppressive and corrupt little regime, long coddled by Washington because the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is headquartered there. The future of the base is far from secure if the regime falls.

A few hard facts about the island that should give pause for thought:

First, Bahrain is a Shiite island. You won't see it described that way, but it is — 70 percent of the population, more than the percentage of Shiites in Iraq. And like Iraq under Saddam Hussein, these Arab Shiites have been systematically discriminated against, repressed, and denied meaningful roles by a Sunni tribal government determined to maintain its solid grip on the country. The emergence of real democracy, as in Iraq, will push the country over into the Shiite column — sending shivers down the spines of other Gulf rulers, and especially in Riyadh.

Appearances are deceiving. Go to Bahrain and on the surface you won't feel the same heavy hand that dominates so many other Arab authoritarian states. The island is liberal in its social freedoms. Expats feel at home — you can get a drink, go to nightclubs, go to the beach, party.

But if you look behind the Western and elite-populated high-rises you'll encounter the Shiite ghettos — poor and neglected, with high unemployment, walls smeared with anti-regime graffiti.

Free market? Sure, except the regime imports politically neutered laborers from passive, apolitical states that need the money: Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and other South Asians who won't make waves

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or they're on the next plane out.

The regime also imports its thugs. The ranks of the police are heavily staffed with expat police who often speak no Arabic, have no attachments to the country and who will beat, jail, torture and shoot Bahraini protestors with impunity.

Like other Shiite populations, clerics figure heavily among the leaders. But many are liberal and open, reflecting the culturally open character of the island. Most Bahraini Shiites would look to Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq rather than to Iran for religious guidance.

Typically, however, just like most other tyrants across the region, the al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain will whip up anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian fears to gain Western backing — and they usually get it.

It's not just that the majority is Shiite. From a Saudi perspective, the Bahraini Shiites maintain close family and cultural ties with Shiite families across the water in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Shiite minority, probably even more oppressed, is already restive and would be responsive to Shiite political unrest nearby. This is Riyadh's ultimate nightmare — a further strengthening of Shiite political power in this oil-rich region.

The Sunni minority of Bahrain is in a difficult position. The Sunnis worry about the rise of the Shiite majority that makes up the oppressed class. But liberal Sunnis are also highly discontent with the al-Khalifa regime and seek political reform. Many work with the Shiite leadership to attain secular reforms, but the regime has repressed them as well and fans fear of Shiites to help keep them in line.

There has been relatively little actual blood shed — at least compared to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and other neighboring states — in the decades-long story of Shiite resistance to the authoritarian ruling family. If the al-Khalifa thugs are let loose, that could change quickly. The temperature is rising.

Washington is now faced again with another hard choice — the legacy of shortsighted decisions made over decades: Continue to go with local repressive regimes out of a misguided sense of “American interests”? Hold on to unpopular military bases at all costs — thereby deepening local anger and perhaps giving Iran ultimately a greater voice in events?

Or should it quietly drop support for this repressive regime, allow events to take their course and accept that long-overdue change is coming? How long can we hold on to another ugly status quo? It's really about how bad the change will get the longer we wait.

Graham E. Fuller, former vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, is adjunct professor of history at Simon Fraser University. His latest book is “A World Without Islam.”

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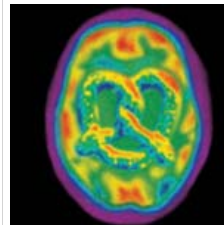
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