

The Boldness of Bahrain

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Bahrain is a small Gulf Arab state that first stood out from its neighbors by appointing a Jewish woman, Houda Nonoo, in 2008 as its Ambassador to the United States. When other Arabs objected to this choice, claiming she could not adequately represent Bahraini interests, the ruler, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, dismissed their concerns. Nonoo proved her worth in Washington, and was kept on as ambassador until 2013.

Since then, while it still does not have formal relations with Israel, Bahrain has demonstrated an increasing sympathy with the positions taken by the Israeli government, especially with regard to Iran and Hezbollah. For though the people of Bahrain are 70% Shia, the rulers, the Al Khalifa family, are Sunnis. The Shi'a first erupted in violent protests in 2011, demanding an end to their marginalization, demands which might have led to a democracy, and that in turn, would certainly have

resulted in an overthrow of the Sunni regime. It took a full month to suppress the rioters, and both Pakistani and Saudi troops had to be called in to help the Bahraini police.

Seeing Iran's aggressive hand behind the Shi'a uprising, Bahrain's ruler have become ever more convinced, as has Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, that Iran is a mortal threat and Israel is a most useful ally in the wider war against Iran. In recent years, the ties between Israel and Bahrain have become steadily closer. At the end of 2017, the Bahrainis sent an interfaith delegation to Israel, bringing unbidden a message of peace from King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

In May 2018, the Bahrainis defended large-scale Israeli air raids on Iranian bases in Syria. The foreign minister, Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, tweeted that "as long as Iran breaches the status quo in the region and violates states with its troops and missiles, any state in the region, including Israel, has the right to defend itself by destroying the sources of danger."

When Israel announced that it had found and destroyed Hezbollah tunnels, Bahrain was completely on Israel's side:

"Is Terrorist Hezbollah's digging of the tunnels under Lebanon's border not a flagrant threat to Lebanon's stability, which it shares responsibility for? Who bears responsibility when neighboring countries take upon themselves to eliminate the threat they face?" Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa wrote on his Twitter account, in Arabic.

In November, Bahrain Foreign Minister Khalifa praised Netanyahu for his tweet about Khashoggi's murder:

"Despite the ongoing conflict, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has a clear position on the importance of stability in the region, and the role of Saudi Arabia in ensuring that stability," Khalifa tweeted in response to Netanyahu's reaction to the killing of Khashoggi.

Netanyahu had stated that the murder is “horrendous and it should be duly dealt with,” according to Israel’s i24 News, but that at the same time “it is very important for the stability of the world, for the region and for the world, that Saudi Arabia remain stable.”

In December, the Bahraini Foreign Minister tweeted that “These words are irresponsible,” in reference to the Arab League’s condemnation of Australia’s decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem.

“Australia’s position is without prejudice to official Palestinian demands, the first of which is East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and it does not contradict the Arab Peace Initiative and the Arab League,” he continued.

Bahrain appears to be a stalking-horse for Saudi Arabia, staking out pro-Israeli positions to see what reaction they bring, and letting the Saudis judge for themselves whether they deem it advisable to follow suit.

Bahrain deserves both praise and something more tangible than praise, for its open support of Israel. While Bahrain already hosts an American naval base, the largest American military base in the Middle East is the airbase of Al Udeid, in Qatar. But Qatar has ties to terrorist groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It has also maintained warm relations with Iran, infuriating its Arab neighbors. Last March, the House of Representatives, alarmed at those terrorist ties, was considering a proposal to move the American base from Qatar, with four alternatives under consideration: Al Dhafra in Abu Dhabi, Al Zarqa in eastern Jordan, Arbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Bahrain. For now, the Congressional unhappiness with Qatar seems to have died down, perhaps because of the announcement by Qatar that it would be spending several billion dollars on improvements to the air base. That may keep the Americans in place, at least until the treaty giving the Americans the right, and obligation, to use Al Udeid ends in 2023. But if

some attack by a terrorist group linked to Qatar should occur before then, the Americans should give both Qatar its comeuppance and Bahrain its due, by moving our main airbase from the former to the latter. That might help persuade Bahrain to take one more step in the right direction, and to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. And after that, can Saudi Arabia and the Emirates be far behind?

First published in