

## The U.S. should stay neutral in the Sunni-Shiite conflict



by Leon Hadar

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Riyadh signaled its intention to maintain stability in the Persian Gulf with the deployment of more than 1,000 Saudi Arabian and 500 United Arab Emirates (UAE) troops to neighboring Bahrain on March 14, under the auspices of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). This intervention is comparable to the numerous deployments of U.S. troops under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS) — Grenada (1983), Panama (1989) and Haiti (1994).

Moreover, protecting Bahrain, which provides the U.S. Fifth Fleet with a base and has the freest economy in the Middle East (according to the 2011 Index of Economic Freedom), seems to be compatible with U.S. interests. Some Americans, who view the uprising in Bahrain as a conflict between the majority Shiite population and the ruling Sunnis, are urging Washington to condemn the Saudi move aimed at silencing the Shiites.

The United States should not oppose the Saudi and GCC military intervention in Bahrain. But Washington should also make it clear that it will not take sides in the conflict between Shiites and Sunnis in Bahrain.

The tensions between the Sunnis and the Shiites have long been a fundamental part of the political realities of the Middle East. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Shiite-led Hizbollah in Lebanon, and the collapse of Sunni rule in Iraq exacerbated that factor. So it's not surprising that Saudi Arabia, with its small Shiite minority, is concerned that the growing influence of Iran, including its allies in Lebanon and Iraq, is energizing Shiites elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.

The strong U.S. ties with Riyadh could create the impression that Washington is encouraging the Saudi-backed efforts to suppress the Shiite insurgency in Bahrain. Those ties could even tempt the United States to intervene directly in the conflict if Iran decides to respond to the Saudi actions.

It is not clear whether it is in America's interest to join the Saudis and its regional allies in trying to check this Shiite ascendancy. Saudi Arabia has never been a full-fledged strategic ally of the U.S., but a client-state that Washington was committed to protect during the Cold War. The post-Cold War U.S. partnership with the Saudis has been portrayed as part of a "war on terrorism." But much of the anti-American terrorism has been driven by Washington's continuing support for Saudi Arabia and the presence of U.S. troops in the region.

Now the Saudis may drag the United States into a new Middle East front in which the Sunni-led regimes are pitted against Iran and its Shiite allies. The irony is that the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the ensuing Freedom Agenda have helped strengthen Iran while empowering the Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon. It is a double standard for the United States to oppose the Shiites in Bahrain obtaining the same political rights enjoyed by Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon, and reflective of the major inconsistencies that seem to dominate U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The notion that the United States needs to ride the "wave of history" sweeping the Arab World and ally with crusaders for democracy reflects wishful thinking and cannot serve as a basis for coherent policy. Sectarian strife will make peaceful political reform especially difficult in economically free Bahrain. There is no compelling policy reason why Washington should place democratization — a process that could lead to the emergence of a Shiite Iran-style regime — at the center of its relationship with the kingdom.

Washington should, however, take steps to "normalize" its relationship with Saudi Arabia by creating a new set of strategic parameters. It must be made clear that American and Saudi interests are not always compatible. It is neither wise nor prudent for the United States to support Saudi regional policies that don't directly benefit U.S. interests.

The United States has no valid interest in encouraging a Shiite ascendancy. But it should also not be seen as impeding that process by trying to preserve Sunni primacy. Further, Washington should not preclude taking steps to pursue a diplomatic dialogue with Tehran and to establish ties with Hizbollah and other Shiite groups — similar to U.S. ties with the Iraqi government that includes members of Muqtadā al-Sadr's movement.

While it's too early to predict which political forces will emerge victorious from the Middle East upheaval, the U.S. should do its best to diversify its portfolio of friends in the region and leave its diplomatic options open. Taking sides in Bahrain and the region's other many ethnic and sectarian conflicts runs contrary to America's best interests.

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