Stratfor, Red Alert

Reports emerged today March 14 that forces from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries will enter Bahrain to help the Bahraini regime quell unrest. The report was published by Bahraini Alyam Newspaper (known for its close links with the ruling al-Khalifa family), and came one day after clashes occurred between Shiite protesters and police in the capital, Manama. Troops from United Arab Emirates are reportedly expected to arrive in Bahrain March 14. Al Arabiya reported that Saudi forces have already entered Bahrain, but these claims have yet to be officially confirmed by the Bahraini regime. The only announcement so far came from Nabil al-Hamar, the former information minister and adviser to the royal family, who has written on Twitter that the Arab forces arrived in Bahrain. An unnamed Saudi official also said on March 14 that more than 1,000 Saudi troops from the Shield of Island entered Bahrain on late March 13, al-Quds reported, citing AFP. Meanwhile, Bahraini State News Agency reported that The Independent Bloc (a parliamentary bloc of the Bahraini parliament) asked Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa to enforce martial law to contain the unrest.

These reports suggest foreign intervention in Bahrain, or at least the possibility that the Bahraini military is taking over the security reins. Such moves mean the regime is getting increasingly concerned with Shiite unrest, which does not seem to be subsiding despite dialogue calls from Bahraini Crown Prince Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa. The ongoing unrest is exacerbated by the split between Bahrain's Shiite movement, which became clearer during protests on March 11. The more hardline faction of the Shiite movement, led by the Wafa and al-Haq blocs, has been increasing the tension on the streets in the hopes of stalling the talks between the Shiite al-Wefaq-led coalition's negotiations with the regime. Military intervention from GCC countries means the situation is increasingly untenable for the regime. The paradox the Bahraini regime faces is that it cannot contain the unrest while trying to kick off talks with al-Wefaq. Al-Wefaq finds itself in a difficult position, since it risks losing ground against hardliners if it appears too close to the regime while Shiite protesters are beaten by the police.

The Bahraini regime has used a military option before. On Feb 17, the military deployed immediately after a police crackdown in Manama's Pearl Roundabout and was able to calm down the situation for a while by encircling the area with tanks. If Bahrain indeed has called Saudi intervention this time, the implication is that the Bahraini military is not confident in its ability to contain the unrest now. Riyadh's decision to send forces to Manama could be taken to this end, since wider spread of Shiite unrest from Bahrain to Saudi Arabia would aggravate the already existing protests among Saudi Arabia's own Shiite population. Saudi military intervention in Bahrain is not unprecedented. Saudi Arabia sent troops to Bahrain in 1994 when Riyadh determined that Shiite unrest threatened the al-Khalifa regime.

Regional implications of the unrest in Bahrain became more obvious when U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates visited Manama on March 12 and urged the Bahraini regime to implement bold reforms. Gates said Iranian interference would become a greater possibility if Bahrain fails to do so. While Bahrain and Saudi Arabia seem to be coordinating to avoid that possibility, it is not without risks. Leader of hardliner al-Haq movement, Hassan Mushaima, who

is believed to be increasing the Shiite unrest in Bahrain by Iranian support, said on Feb. 28 that Saudi intervention in Bahrain would give Iran the same right to intervene as well. A scenario of regional Sunni Arab forces cracking down on Shia would apply pressure on Iran to respond more overtly, but its military ability is limited and it is a very risky option given the U.S. 5th fleet is stationed in Bahrain. As of this writing, there is no sign that Iranian military is taking steps toward that end, however, the situation on the ground could escalate if Shia in Bahrain ramp up demonstrations.

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