

At Manama Dialogue, Building an Effective Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Should Not Include Uncritical Support for Non-inclusive and Repressive Regimes

From December 5-7, 2014 a senior delegation from the United States will participate in the tenth annual Manama Security Dialogue.

The Manama Dialogue is a high profile multilateral security conference providing an important platform for the United States to present its security policies to key stakeholders in a troubled region. With escalating U.S. military involvement in Iraq and Syria and continuing serious unrest in several other countries in the region, this year's Dialogue will take place at an especially crucial moment.

The United States has set out five lines of operation in its campaign against the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, or ISIL: military; stemming the flow of foreign fighters; disrupting financial support; humanitarian efforts to aid the victims of the conflict; and, delegitimizing ISIL messaging and ideology.

Support from as wide a range of allies as possible, especially from the Arab region, will be essential to the success of global efforts to counter ISIL. However, we are concerned that in forging close operational alliances with Arab states that have resisted popular demands for more inclusive, more representative government and in the process have restricted the basic rights and freedoms of their people, the United States runs the risk of encouraging the spread of the violent extremism that it seeks to counter.

Much of the financial support for violent extremist groups in Syria that have now coalesced in ISIL came from sources in the Arab Gulf region encouraged by regional governments, which saw in the Syrian conflict an opportunity to push back against Iranian influence by supporting an armed revolt against Iran's ally, the regime of Bashar al-Assad. While these governments now see it as in their interest to fight against the radicalism of ISIL, their willingness to exploit sectarian divisions to advance political objectives remains a problem for the United States as it works to build an effective coalition to counter violent extremism at the regional level.

These concerns are especially acute in Bahrain, which will host the Manama Dialogue. The level of repression against non-violent advocates of political reform in Bahrain has been great in recent years, and the government and its backers in Saudi Arabia and other GCC states have stoked sectarian divisions on the island, and in the broader region, in order to discredit the Bahraini opposition and to secure the grip on power of the al-Khalifa monarchy. The Bahrain military, equipped largely by the U.S. government, is almost exclusively made up of recruits from the minority Sunni sect. Having such an unrepresentative security force helps to legitimize sectarianism and fuels popular grievances.

From the early days of the Bahrain protests in 2011 the Bahraini government and its supporters have portrayed opposition protests as a zero-sum game where Shi'ite protesters, backed by Iran, are seeking to take away power from Bahrain's current Sunni ruling elite, thereby undermining the protesters' calls for more representative government and human rights.

Part of the appeal of combatting ISIL that continues to resonate in much of the Arab region is that it is fighting back against spreading Iranian influence and the growing power of Shi'ite Arabs. This sectarian message appeals to disaffected Sunnis in western Iraq and eastern Syria, and to Sunni Arabs across the region.

Heightened sectarianism is one of the major drivers of the type of violent religious extremism epitomized by ISIL. Therefore, it is imperative that a clear message is delivered by the United States at the Dialogue: fueling sectarianism is not an acceptable response to legitimate demands for political reform. In fact, the purposeful political exploitation of sectarian divisions, of which the ongoing political crisis in Bahrain and the war in Syria are prime examples, tends to strengthen and legitimize ISIL ideology in the eyes of its potential supporters.

The high-level U.S. delegation in Bahrain should give public support to those in Bahrain who are suffering repression and persecution because of their non-violent advocacy of political reform and for advancing basic rights and freedoms for all Bahrainis. These courageous activists are the best allies in the fight against violent religious extremism like ISIL. The international community needs these people out of Bahrain's jails and active in public life.

A successful strategy to delegitimize ISIL's message of hate must take into account the circumstances and factors that contribute to its appeal. Uncritical support for repressive and non-inclusive regimes, such as the Bahraini monarchy, will undermine U.S. and global efforts to build an effective international coalition to counter ISIL.

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Additional Resources:

December 2014: [Bahraini Human Rights Activist Maryam Al Khawaja Sentenced in Absentia to One Year in Prison](#)

November 2014: [Human Rights Concerns Threaten Bahrain's Stability After Parliamentary Election](#)

November 2014: [Letter to General John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL](#)