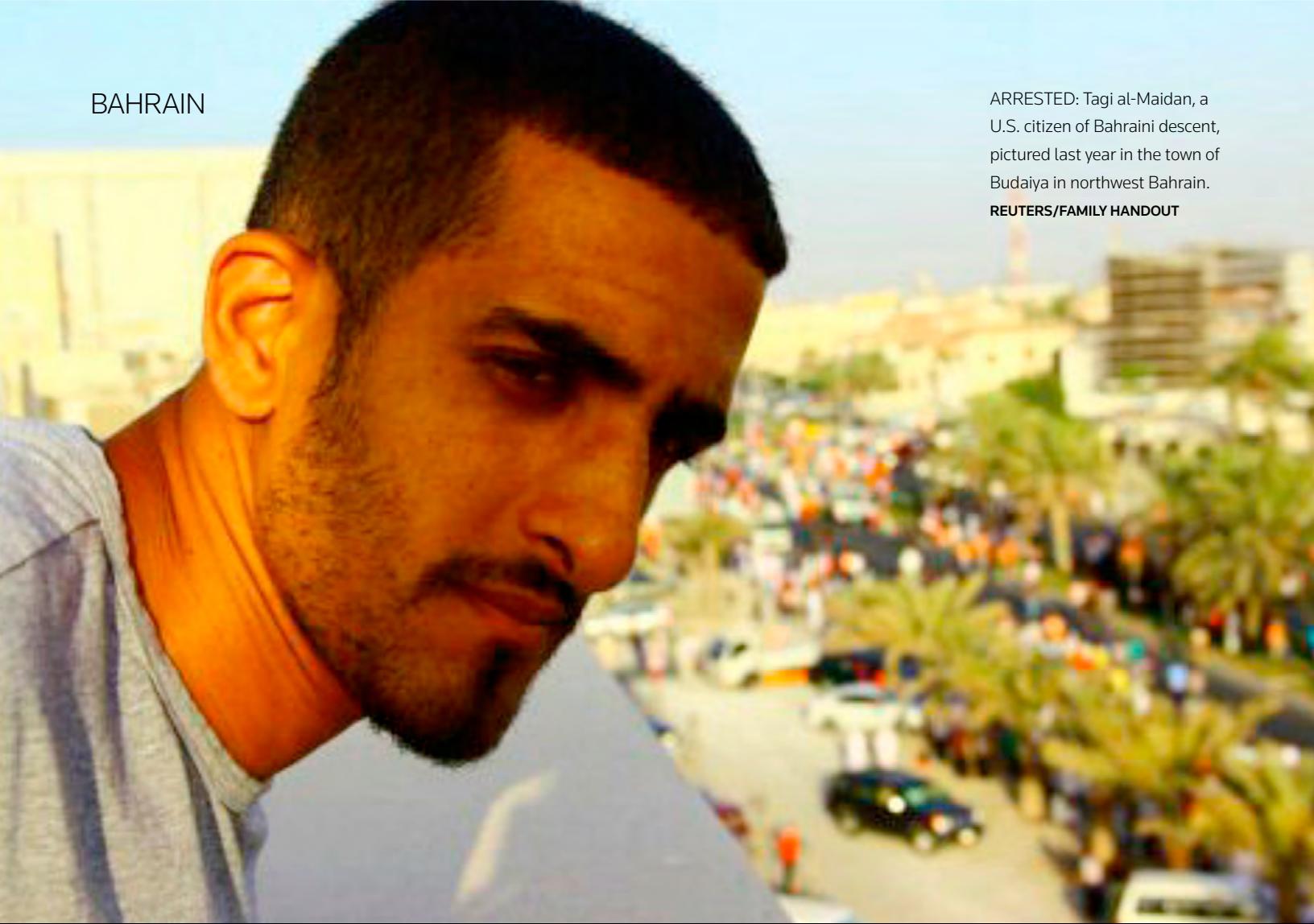


BAHRAIN

ARRESTED: Tagi al-Maidan, a U.S. citizen of Bahraini descent, pictured last year in the town of Budaiya in northwest Bahrain.  
REUTERS/FAMILY HANDOUT



The case of a U.S. citizen jailed amid popular protests against Bahrain's government highlights the ethical challenges Washington faces in region

# In Bahrain, a U.S. prisoner's dilemma

BY YARA BAYOUMY  
DUBAI, AUGUST 12, 2013

## BAHRAIN A U.S. PRISONER'S DILEMMA

**A**mina al-Maidan was asleep in her family's apartment in the Gulf state of Bahrain last October when masked policemen arrived at about 2am searching for her son, Tagi.

"They didn't show me any papers or arrest warrants," said Maidan, a Shi'ite Muslim who lives in the village of Sanabis. "They didn't know what he was wanted for. It all happened so fast. I was thinking is this real or not. Am I dreaming?"

The police woke Tagi al-Maidan with a kick. "Get up! Come with us!" one officer shouted.

The young man was blindfolded, cuffed and driven to an undisclosed location where, he says, he was ordered to stand on one leg for four hours. He says he was beaten repeatedly as threats were made to rape his mother and sisters until he confessed, falsely he says, to attending a memorial for a dead protester and throwing a stone at a burning police vehicle.

His alleged crimes, according to the government, include damaging a police car and attempted murder during a disturbance related to Shi'ite demands for change in Bahrain, a country long ruled by its Sunni Muslim minority. If convicted, he could face 15 years in jail.

Bahrain denies allegations of torture in the incident. Still, Maidan's case is similar to those of some other Shi'ite Bahraini youths whom local and international rights groups say have been arbitrarily arrested and jailed since 2011 for alleged offences against Bahrain's security forces. But it differs in one crucial respect: Maidan is an American national.

His predicament throws a spotlight on the complex relationship between the United States and the small Gulf nation of 1.25 million citizens, around half of whom are expatriates. Bahrain is a U.S. ally in a volatile region and has long provided a base for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet; but at the same it faces criticism over its record on human rights which the United States champions.



CIVIL UNREST: A man runs for cover after a petrol bomb explodes at a protest in Bahrain last year.

REUTERS/HAMAD I MOHAMMED

“ After four hours of interrogation ... I signed papers even though I had no idea what had been written on them

Tagi al-Maidan

U.S. national jailed in Bahrain

Referring to human rights and security in the Gulf, a U.S. Congressional report last year said: "Bahrain in particular presents Washington with a difficult policy challenge."

Bahrain has been ruled since 1783 by the Al-Khalifa family, which follows the Sunni



CRACKDOWN: Police detain an unidentified anti-government demonstrator in Bahrain in 2012. REUTERS/AHMED JADALLAH

strand of Islam. About 60 percent of the population – Bahrainis disagree on the exact figure – are Shi'ites. They want constitutional reform and more power and, inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions, began protesting in the capital, Manama, in Feb. 2011.

The government cracked down forcefully on the unrest then. But more than two years on, and with "national dialogue" talks taking place, lower-level unrest persists, with further anti-government protests expected in the next few days.

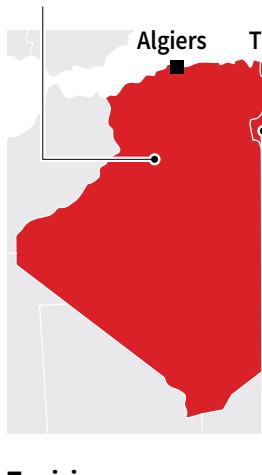
A cat-and-mouse game takes place across the patchwork of Shi'ite villages every night. Youths block roads, security forces move in, and the two trade volleys of Molotov cocktails, tear gas and birdshot. Arrests, arbitrary or otherwise, fuel more anger among the disenfranchised youth.

Hundreds of people have been seized this year during night-time raids, according to Human Rights Watch; they include activists "who have made credible allegations of torture that are consistent with previous instances of documented torture," said Nicholas McGeehan, a Gulf researcher at Human Rights Watch.

# Impact of the Arab Spring

## Algeria

Unrest started in 2011. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, president since 1999, remains in power



## Tunisia

President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali toppled January 2011

Source: Reuters

## Syria

Protests against President Bashar al Assad began in 2011, civil war continues



## Libya

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi killed October 2011

## Egypt

President Hosni Mubarak ousted February 2011

## Bahrain

Protests began in February 2011 with Shi'ite majority seeking reform from ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa monarchy



Bahrain rejects such allegations. When asked to comment about Maidan's account of his treatment, the office of the Bahraini government's spokeswoman told Reuters in a statement that it has a "zero-tolerance" policy towards torture.

Critics accuse the United States of downplaying human rights abuses in Bahrain because of its military and security interest there. The dilemma is similar to that in Egypt, where annual U.S. aid of \$1.3 billion to Egypt's armed forces sits uncomfortably with the military's recent overthrow of the democratically-elected Islamist President Mohamed Mursi.

In jail since October, Maidan answered questions posed to him by Reuters through his family and a family friend, who delivered a transcript of his answers. He denies the charges against him; and he, his family and a U.S. based advocacy group that supports human rights in Bahrain say Washington has done little to help him.

A U.S. State Department official said the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain has been providing "appropriate consular services" to Maidan. The family says a designated consular officer has seen Maidan several times and has attended his court hearings.

The State Department official said Washington has emphasised the importance of Bahrain's commitment to "transparent judicial proceedings in accordance with universal human rights and due process."

## "SECRET SOURCES"

Maidan was born in Connecticut in the United States in 1988 where his Saudi father studied for a Masters degree in public health at Yale University. His mother is a Bahraini, but because Maidan was born on American soil he is a U.S. national.

His parents divorced a few years later and Amina returned with her children to Bahrain. Maidan, with only a U.S. passport,

could not attend a state university and private colleges were too expensive. He applied several times for work at the U.S. embassy and at the naval base, which hosts thousands of U.S. personnel, but was not offered anything.

Instead he undertook a number of odd jobs, including working at a petrol station and setting up internet connections for a telecoms company.

The family has stayed away from the protests of the past two years, according to Amina. That includes a memorial service that took place on October 5, 2012, for a Shi'ite man who had been jailed after the Feb. 2011 uprising and later died in hospital. The memorial march turned violent and police used water cannon and teargas to disperse protesters. One water cannon vehicle caught fire when protesters threw petrol bombs and stones.

Maidan says he was not at the march but at home, an assertion supported by his close

friend, Hussein Traif, who says he asked Maidan to pick him up from the memorial procession, but that Maidan said he did not want to leave home while the situation was tense.

Less than two days later, the police came for Maidan. The Bahraini government says he was involved in "setting a police vehicle ablaze (at the memorial service) while the policemen were still inside and then proceeded to attack the policemen on the ground resulting in the injury of three officers."

The government say the crimes threatened Bahrain's national security, and Maidan faces charges of attempted murder, intentionally setting ablaze a police vehicle, damaging a police car, illegal gathering and possession of explosives. According to a Bahrain Public Prosecution document, a security officer said his proof Maidan attended the memorial service stems from eight "secret sources" that have not been disclosed.

Maidan and his mother say he was forced to confess to being at the event.

"After four hours of interrogation I confessed to everything, I signed papers even though I had no idea what had been written on them," Maidan told Reuters through his family. "Out of fear of more beatings, I urinated on myself, and they forced me after signing to speak in front of a camera after making me memorise what to say."

The Bahraini government said in a statement that its "secret sources" form only part of the evidence against Maidan, and that "all interrogations and interviews take place in a designated room that is fitted with audio and video recording equipment."

Soon after Maidan was taken away, his mother contacted the U.S. embassy in Bahrain for help, partly because she was concerned about her son's medical condition. Maidan has stomach ulcers and suffers from scoliosis, an abnormal curvature of the spine. His mother says requests for specialist medical treatment have been denied; Reuters was unable to verify that claim.



BIRTH RIGHT: Tagi al-Maidan pictured as a baby with his mother and a friend in Connecticut; as a five-year-old; and in his passport photograph. By being born in Connecticut Maidan was automatically a U.S. citizen. **REUTERS/FAMILY HANDOUTS**

The U.S. State Department official said: "The consular section has continued to be in contact with the relevant Government of Bahrain authorities, and has repeatedly emphasised to the (government) that Mr. Al Maidan should receive appropriate medical care and food to meet his particular health needs."

The Bahraini government told Reuters that Maidan receives proper care while in prison, including health care.

### MISSED OPPORTUNITY

After the initial uprising, in which at least 35 people were killed, Bahrain's government commissioned the prominent Egyptian-American jurist Cherif Bassiouni to lead an independent inquiry into the violence.

His report, published in Nov. 2011 and

known as the Bassiouni Report, said arrests in the wake of riots showed a pattern of behaviour "designed to inspire terror in the arrested persons." The report said authorities had used widespread and excessive force, including torture to extract confessions.

The Bahraini government says it has taken steps to address the problems by dismissing those responsible and introducing cameras at police stations.

Despite U.S. Congressional criticism of alleged abuses, Washington has approved some military sales to Bahrain. A U.S. State Department fact sheet dated Aug. 28, 2012, stated that military sales to Bahrain since 2000 have totalled \$1.4 billion.

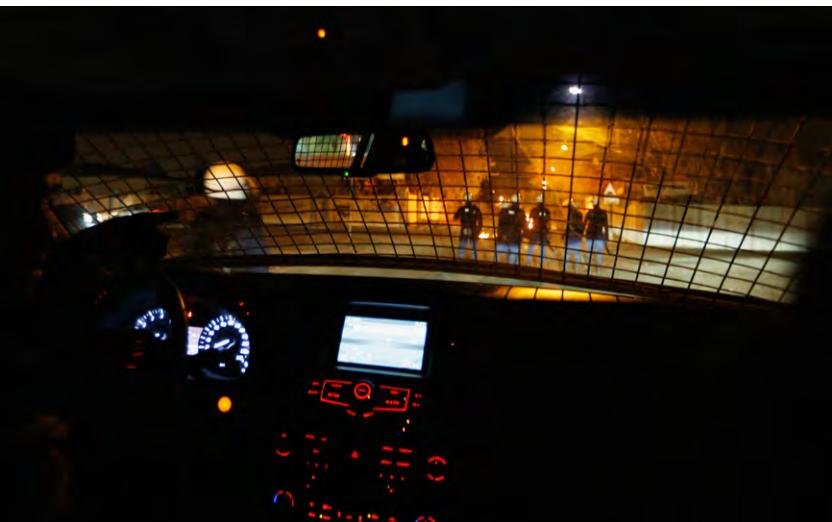
A former U.S. government official said the fact that the U.S. signed a military

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## BAHRAIN A U.S. PRISONER'S DILEMMA



PERSISTENT PROTESTS: A woman gives a victory salute amid a sea of national flags as members of Bahrain's Shi'ite majority demonstrate against the Sunni-dominated government in 2012. Below right, a protester confronts a policeman in 2011. Below left, riot police, seen through the grill of a police vehicle, during anti-government protests in the village of Diraz in April 2013. **REUTERS/HAMAD I MOHAMMED**



package last year tended to communicate “business as usual.” He added: “That was perhaps a missed opportunity where the United States could have applied some subtle pressure to get the (Bahraini) monarchy more responsive.”

Kenneth Katzman, a Middle East expert at the Congressional Research Service and author of a paper on Bahrain published in April, told Reuters the United States is “basically ... on the side of the government, of the regime” and that U.S. officials do not think the Shi’ite majority have the right to topple the government or call for their demands using violence.

Instead, U.S. officials want a compromise so that “there’s no disruption to the close security relationship”, said Katzman.

Another U.S. State Department official praised Bahrain’s King Hamad for showing “significant leadership” in initiating the Bassiouni commission and noted that Crown Prince Salman, seen as a figure with a more reformist mindset, had been appointed Bahrain’s First Deputy Prime Minister. The move signalled Bahrain’s commitment to a “long-term reform programme,” said the official.

But so far talks between the Shi’ite opposition and the government have made little progress. Mutual distrust has stymied any breakthrough. On one side, the Shi’ite opposition insist on a representative of the king being present at the talks; on the other, the government continues to push the message that Iran, a majority Shi’ite nation, and Hezbollah, the Shi’ite Islamist group based in Lebanon, are fomenting the unrest in Bahrain.

The opposition, Iran and Hezbollah deny that charge. The Bassiouni Report did not find any discernible link between Iran and the protests of early 2011.

Nevertheless, Washington and London view Bahrain partly through the prism of Iran, which is pursuing a programme



DYNASTIC RULER: A security guard stands in front of a portrait of Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa. Members of the al-Khalifa family have ruled the country since 1783. **REUTERS/HAMAD I MOHAMMED**

of nuclear development. Iran says it is for peaceful purposes, the West suspects it is to develop weapons. Amid such tensions, the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain is a vital asset.

On a patrol with anti-riot forces in Bahrain earlier this year, Reuters journalists witnessed a snapshot of the near-daily clashes that continue to rock the streets. Police drove along main thoroughfares clearing roadblocks set up by angry Shi’ite youths. While police tackled barricades and burning tyres, youths often hurled insults and petrol bombs. The police responded with teargas. On other occasions they have sometimes used birdshot.

Recently, youths have targeted police patrols, and there have been attacks on a Bahraini lawmaker’s house as well as on a mosque in a district where many members of Bahrain’s royal family live.

“Tamarrod” (Rebel) youths, who have taken inspiration from a similar protest movement in Egypt that led to the military overthrow of Islamist President Mohamed Mursi last month, have called for anti-government protests in Bahrain on Aug. 14.

Authorities have warned that anyone joining the demonstrations would face the force of law and have toughened penalties against what they consider “terrorist crimes,” in moves Human Rights Watch has said would effectively create “a new state of emergency”.

Meanwhile, Maidan said the U.S. has not done enough to make it clear he is entitled to the rights of a U.S. citizen. He told Reuters he has lost more than 15 kilograms while in prison and has occasionally been restricted to drinking one bottle of water a day. “The embassy has not shown everyone the legal rights I have and the fact that I’m innocent until proven guilty and should have all rights,” he said.

The Bahraini government told Reuters that Maidan “enjoys all privileges, rights and care that all the inmates receive without any exception.” A verdict in his case is expected in September.

*Additional reporting by William Maclean in Dubai and Lesley Wroughton in Washington*

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