

Report

G20 Countries and the Human Rights Crisis in Bahrain

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Note: This report is the result of an internship that the author carried out with Salam DHR but it represents their work.

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Introduction

“Let us choose a day to start the popular revolution in Bahrain, for there is no dignity without blood, and blood is victorious over the sword. Our people must sacrifice so that the next generation can inherit a future that is better than the present we are living in.” (al-Ahbar, 2011)

The quote above originates from an online political forum called Bahrain Online, and was inspired by the wave of revolutionary sentiment spreading throughout the Arab World in 2011 (Shehabi & Owen Jones, 2015). Galvanized by the waves of unrest in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahraini people took to the streets on 14 February 2011 demanding greater freedom, and many have continued this struggle at great personal peril. It is estimated that, at the peak of Bahraini unrest in 2011, well beyond 150,000 Bahrainis partook in acts of civil disobedience against the government, supported by Bahrain’s recognised opposition parties (ibid). Whilst these protests initially demanded greater freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights, they quickly developed into abolitionist outcries against the monarchy, as resentment for the ruling Al Khalifa royal family intensified. Whilst these events were unfolding, they were watched closely across the world, particularly by those states with vested interests in maintaining the status quo in Bahrain.

As set out below, the G20 is an organisation rooted in economic and financial rather than political coordination. Accordingly, the Group of Twenty (G20) did not collectively respond to the uprising. Every G20 summit report since 2011 has failed to even *acknowledge* the Arab Spring, or human rights as a concept: G20 leaders did not feel as though discussing any aspect of the Arab Spring fell within the remit of the G20’s intended purpose.

It would not be unreasonable, nevertheless, to conclude that some form of cooperation on global, political governance *should* fall within the remit of discussion. In the spirit of multilateralism that the G20 proudly bolsters, should it not be the responsibility of the world’s economic giants to collectively solve – or at least acknowledge - far-reaching and troubling crises? Is it not slightly counter-intuitive that a multilateral organisation, formed with the aim of global cooperation even amongst diametrically opposed states, should shy away from the biggest challenges facing the world? It would seem that whilst such groups have big aspirations, these aspirations often fail to realistically materialise at a policy level. Perhaps this suggests that these groups exist not for the enactment of meaningful change, but instead, for power projection, image and the closer surveillance of other states that are perceived as somewhat ‘rogue’.

Nonetheless, perhaps it could be argued that the G20 is beginning to move in this direction in some ways, albeit not to the extent that one might want. States are still required to make commitments to



ensure that some sort of progress is taking place. Further, as the G20 grows and develops, the organisations that comprise it also become more advanced and robust, allowing for these commitments to be supported and advanced in some ways (G20 Research Group, 2019)

In order to understand the G20 as a whole, it is imperative to delve into the geostrategic, economic and political interests that drive individual G20 members. It is only by looking at things through this perspective that we can truly understand why, overall, virtually nothing has been done by the G20, and its members, to address the human rights crisis in Bahrain since 2011.

For the purposes of detail and specificity, this report will focus predominantly upon the actions and positions of Saudi Arabia and the United States during, and following, the initial uprising in 2011. These two states have been chosen both because they are generally opposite in many ways, but also because they are two economic giants with huge military strength, that were most directly involved with the uprising in Bahrain in some way. However, in order to obtain a more rounded account and understanding of the G20's inaction in Bahrain, we will also briefly overview the motivations and positions taken by other key G20 states, such as the United Kingdom, Brazil and Canada. By evaluating the approach taken by individual governments with regard to international affairs - whether this be multilateral, unilateral or other - we can gain an understanding about how these broad stances impact decisions by G20 states to either involve themselves or remain silent when it comes to sectarian, proxy conflicts like that which Bahrain experienced during the height of the Arab Spring. This can also help us to understand any action taken with regard to the human rights crisis in Bahrain since 2011.

What is the G20?

The G20 was initially founded in 1999 to establish a more inclusive, multilateral response to a series of emerging market debt crises, such as the Asian financial crisis that ensued between 1997 and 1998. However, as an organisation, the G20 only began to assume a truly pivotal role in international financial leadership during the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis (Schirm, 2011). It became the product of an understanding that international economic cooperation required contribution and discussion from more countries than solely those within the G7 and G8, by representing 80% of the world's economic output (ibid). The fundamental and root purpose of the G20 was financial cooperation and problem-solving between nations on a larger scale; earliest forms of the organisation were conducted as meetings between state finance ministers. By utilising the G20 as an international platform, the 2008 financial crisis "led to unprecedented efforts to coordinate national economic policy responses" (ibid). Ever since, the financial coordination function of this organisation has remained, and one might argue that its role has somewhat evolved



over time to deal with broader social and political issues within the economic sphere. Even though this still broadly falls within the remit of economic management, it exemplifies attempts to deal with a broader range of issues within the field.

Despite this cooperation, Martin (2011) reminds us that “there are real differences between [G20] nations”. In many ways, economic cooperation does not truly reflect these differences. Ultimately, when any nation is in the midst of an economic crisis, their priority is always recovery. Accordingly, finding collective solutions to financial issues are less controversial or divisive than social or environmental ones, because far fewer cultural and/or situational differences pertain to economic issues. It is unsurprising, then, that the G20 has a blank record on human rights overall, not least in Bahrain. Cooperation on this front would be extremely difficult; all states have differing conceptions of what human rights mean. This, combined with conflicting geopolitical and strategic interests, makes consensus on the subject virtually impossible to achieve. Nonetheless, complete evasion of the subject is disappointing, particularly when one considers that other financial organisations have attempted to take a stance on divisive social issues. The World Bank and the IMF, for example, often attach numerous social and political conditions to their lending agreements, so as to ensure that positive change, in the eyes of these organisations, comes out of the money that they are lending (The World Bank, 2018). In 2019, for example, the IMF Executive Board expressed greater willingness towards granting Bahrain financial aid, following the announcement of Bahrain’s intention to increase female labour participation (IMF, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, every country is different. Even within a small group of twenty nations, there are vast variations in language, culture, ideals, conceptions of human rights, and more. Arguably, the G20 espouses values of multilateral liberalism, in that it was created as a forum for dialogue and cooperation, particularly for states with significant cultural, ideological and societal differences. This claim, however, is refuted by some. Political scientist John Mearsheimer has written a number of publications on the theory of offensive realism. He argues that “the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power, which means gaining power at the expense of other states” (Mearsheimer, 2014:2). Through the lens of an offensive realist, it is easy to view exclusive organisations like the G20 as elitist, invitation-only clubs, ways of projecting power and influence onto other states by making membership conditional upon metric rankings like GDP. Viewing matters through this lens would provide some explanation for the evasion of human rights advocacy. If the predominant intention is power and influence as Mearsheimer suggests, addressing social and political issues would arguably do nothing to further this aim. However, in a globalised age, it is also widely agreed by many states that the route to gaining power is, in fact, by legitimising one’s own systems of government and societal structures, whilst engaging internationally with mechanisms that enact positive change.

It is difficult, amongst such a varied group of states, to reach a consensus on contentious issues such as human rights. Even with successive international treaties, the notion of 'human rights' itself can be vague and difficult to pin down, making it easy to warp or subvert. Differing conceptions of or approaches to human rights amongst states, ranging from what they include, to whom they should protect, make it virtually impossible for the G20 to reach consensus. Accordingly, the G20's inability to address this subject is disappointing, but altogether unsurprising.

To fill out and contextualise G20 inaction concerning Bahrain and on human rights issues more broadly, the following section of this report examines individual, state, interests and aims of G20 states must be analysed and understood. The following sections of this report attempt to fulfill this.

Saudi Arabia

Medea Benjamin argues that Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is "guided by several overarching and intertwined objectives", including the reduction of Iranian influence, strengthening the House of Saud, maintaining Saudi Arabia's regional influence and more (Benjamin, 2016). It follows then that factors such as these greatly influence the ways in which the Saudis coordinate and enact their regional strategy in the Gulf. The House of Saud felt rather threatened by the course that the Arab Spring was taking amongst neighbouring states in 2011 (Chulov, 2011), not least because this threatened the stability and longevity of the Saudi regime itself. The desperation of the ruling family can be deduced by the sudden introduction of pledges for reform, which, at the time, were described as attempts to "ward off dissent" to the same degree/extent that Bahrain's Al Khalifa royal family had been experiencing (ibid). Despite official proclamations claiming that Saudi troops were moving into Bahrain simply to protect key infrastructure and "restore order", it was clear to all that their true motivations were to quell the unrest (Butler, 2011). Evident too was the sectarian motivation of a powerful Sunni minority once again suppressing the protests of the oppressed Shia majority (ibid). Such observations are supported by scholars such as Madawi Al-Rasheed, who argues that Saudi Arabia frequently wields sectarianism in order to fracture and weaken counter-revolutionary forces.

As one of its long-standing allies, the Saudi state wants to maintain the status quo in Bahrain. Both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), along with Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Regionally, the GCC is an organisation based on economic, political and military cooperation, aimed at strengthening regional economic and military security (Qureshi, 1982). It could be argued that all of its members possess "strong interests in cooperation" with one another, for reasons such as regional security, influence, and more (Martini, et al., 2016). However, it is equally reasonable to argue that the GCC merely represents an economic, political and military giant, in the form of Saudi Arabia, imposing its will on the 5 other smaller

members, allowing its actions to be legitimised through the vehicle of a multilateral forum. United by shared regional threats and interests, the ruling families of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have every reason to closely align policy and display a united front. Considering how politically and geo-strategically volatile the Gulf is, particularly when it comes to Saudi Arabia's turbulent relationship with Iran, it makes reasonable sense that Riyadh would want to enjoy a close, yet mutually-beneficial, relationship with Manama, particularly as a significant part of the Bahraini community is of Persian heritage. Inaction in the face of a revolution that posed a huge threat to this crucial partnership was, evidently, out of the question for Saudi Arabia's ruling family.

Since 2020, Saudi Arabia's intervention into Bahraini affairs has been reflected by a shifting trade relationship between the two nations. Between 2002 and 2003 alone, the trade value of Saudi exports to Bahrain in US Dollars almost doubled, increasing from \$280,508,884 in 2002 to \$426,607,733 in 2003 (UN Comtrade, 2018), reflecting growing Saudi concerns regarding the unpopularity of Bahrain's new Constitution. Similar trends can be observed following the 2011 unrest. Between 2011 and 2018, the US Dollar value of trade has exponentially and gradually increased by a net total of \$606,372,710, according to calculations made using United Nations Comtrade data (ibid). From this data, one can infer that Saudi Arabia is trying to maintain stability in the region, and within its own borders, by propping up the Al Khalifa regime in order to prevent a domino-effect of dissent. This is something that would never be admitted to publicly, of course; but behind every strengthened trading relationship is a strategic and realistic explanation.

Now let us examine Saudi Arabia's role within the G20. Much like the United Kingdom has always been considered the "awkward partner" of the European Union (EU) (George, 1998), one might argue that Saudi Arabia sits fairly uncomfortably amongst other G20 nations. There are a plethora of reasons why this might be the case; differing political ideals and customs, differing cultural norms within different societies and conflicting geopolitical and economic interests could be some examples, to name but a few. As one might imagine, differences such as these can easily provoke outrage and disagreement from other more liberally-inclined G20 governments like the United States, the United Kingdom and France, who do not believe that Saudi Arabia's more controversial political and social customs should unwittingly be legitimised internationally and overlooked through such avenues as the G20.

The early October 2018 extrajudicial murder of journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, at Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul further complicates regional and international relations with Saudi Arabia (McKernan, 2019). A complete set of facts has yet to emerge, but several investigations, including a report by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, have reasonably concluded that there exists "credible evidence" that the murder of Mr Khashoggi was sanctioned at the highest level within Saudi Arabia (Callamard, 2019). At least in





Figure 1, displaying the ‘family photo’ of G20 state leaders in 2018.

part as a result, the Buenos Aires G20 conference, scheduled to take place a month after his death in November 2018, was visibly riddled with tension.

Figure 1 below illustrates the ‘family photo’ of G20 leaders, taken during the November 2018 G20 summit. Having read into the layout of the photograph, the body language of the Crown Prince (pictured on the far, top right), and both his prior, and subsequent, interactions (or lack thereof) with fellow G20 leaders, many political commentators and media outlets have remarked that it appears as though the Crown Prince was “side-lined” by his fellow leaders during the event (Squires & Heath, 2018). Immediately following the capture of this photograph, video footage displays the Crown Prince promptly leaving the stage and exiting the premises, failing to shake hands or meaningfully engage with his G20 counterparts. One can reasonably conclude that the main short-term factor behind this implicit - yet glaringly obvious - behaviour was the international uproar and condemnation surrounding the Khashoggi killing. But, as we have already touched upon, it is evidently clear that disparities run far deeper than this.

Interestingly, Saudi Arabia is due to host the next G20 summit in 2020. Saudi Arabia’s keenness to host could arguably be a wider reflection of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman’s strategy to heighten the global appeal of his nation, in order to attract benefits like investment, attention and tourism. Many have questioned whether this would be appropriate, considering both Saudi Arabia’s record on human rights and recent tensions with regard to the assassination of Mr Khashoggi. In

light of findings featured within her UN report, Agnes Callamard herself has urged world leaders to use the summit as a means of pressuring Saudi Arabia into fully accepting accountability for the killing, arguing that threatening to relocate the summit could prove a powerful, and hugely useful, political tool.

Irrespective of Callamard's suggestions, it remains extremely unlikely that this will happen, or that Saudi Arabia will be meaningfully challenged in any form leading up to, and during, the summit. At the 2019 Global Conference for Media Freedom, which was co-hosted in London by then UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Canadian Foreign Secretary Chrystia Freeland, a question was posed to Hunt and Freeland regarding whether it would be wholly appropriate for Saudi Arabia to host the 2020 G20 conference. In paraphrased terms, Freeland responded by stating that organisations like the G20 are not "values-based" (Freeland, 2019); in her view, as a Canadian politician, they exist as an important forum for multilateral discussion, irrespective of the views, customs and practices of each party (ibid). If anything can be drawn from Freeland's remarks, it is that most – if not all – other G20 nations at least somewhat share this view, which would explain the collective lack of a comprehensive response to the situation in Bahrain.

The United States

Within a report that discusses American strategy within the Middle East, Karl P. Mueller et al. define U.S. strategic interests within the Middle East by specifying that they have always "centred on ensuring the free flow of natural resources and maintaining relationships with key allies and protecting them from external threats, in part to ensure access for U.S. military operations." (Mueller, et al., 2017, p. 2). As the foremost economic and military power on Earth, the US-Bahraini relationship is significant and far-reaching, stretching into areas of trade and military procurement.

When Bahraini citizens initially began taking to the streets in February of 2011, many were hopeful that they would receive direct, unequivocal support from the United States. In small ways, they did. When Bahraini government forces began their harsh crackdown of peaceful protesters soon after they began, then U.S. President Barack Obama issued a press release expressing how "deeply concerned" he was at actions executed by government forces, urging them both to "show restraint" and "respect the rights of their people" (The White House: Office of the Press Secretary, 2011). After it became clear that Manama took no notice of this statement, it was also reported by various news outlets that Obama spoke to King Al Khalifa directly over the phone, urging him personally to show restraint and mercy when restoring order on the streets (Colvin, 2011).

The power of words had virtually no effect at all. One might argue that these statements were empty, aimed only at conveying the exceptionalist image of the U.S. as a beacon of freedom for the world, or a “city upon a hill”, to quote the widely referenced John Winthrop (Winthrop, 1630). This viewpoint is supported by academics Stephen Walt and James Ceaser, who, from a very realist perspective, both allude to the notion that this exceptionalist American ideal is merely a self-serving means by which America can further its interests abroad (Walt, 2011; Ceaser, 2012).

Much like Saudi Arabia has vested interests in maintaining the status quo in Bahrain, the same can be said about the United States. Whilst being interviewed in 2011 by Al Jazeera, Matar Mater, a former Bahraini MP from the opposition Al Wefaq party, was asked about the United States’ position on Bahrain. He argued, in paraphrased terms, that Bahrain is far too strategically important of an ally within the Gulf for the United States to be able to support a revolution there (Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark, 2011).

Considering the importance of oil to America’s economy, it is vital to American geostrategic interests that their oil supply from the Gulf is preserved and free-flowing. Data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration highlights that 16% of American gross imports of oil originate from Persian Gulf countries (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2018), which sheds some light upon how geo-strategically important America’s alliance with Bahrain (and therefore Saudi Arabia) truly is. Securing American internal and external interests, as is the realist way, appears to take priority over issues of governance in distant countries that supply essential commodities as well as provide such a lucrative market for advanced weaponry. As Gamal Selim argues, countries like Bahrain, Tunisia and Egypt were already performing “to the best satisfaction of American interests in the Arab World” prior to the commencement of the Arab Spring (Selim, 2013). From a purely realist and strategic perspective, U.S. officials would have seen no reason to support the change of a status quo that has proven hugely beneficial for them. That is, of course, unless what was on offer seemed to better preserve their interests. But such conditions are hard to foresee during events as tumultuous as uprisings.

Moreover, Bahrain is currently the home of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, representing a crucial component of American strategic security and presence within the Gulf. Not only does the Fleet’s presence alone completely shift the balance of power in the region – a warning of sorts to regional U.S. threats like Iran – but it also ensures American access to key waterways; defends against regional piracy, maintains a secure passage for natural resources, and specifically ensures that the breadth, strength and reach of American influence is not forgotten (Mako, 2012). With the Arab Spring came the fear for American policymakers and strategists that the balance of power in the region would shift to the detriment of U.S. interests.

Ultimately, however, the U.S. would find itself in an incredibly difficult and volatile situation if it did decide to intervene. Considering that Bahrain is a member of the GCC, and that maintaining a fruitful relationship with particularly powerful GCC states, like Saudi Arabia, is to the best of American interests, it would be a huge risk for the United States to intervene more directly in any shape or form, not least because of the huge amount of tension this would cause in the region.

A fundamentally important distinction between the Saudi and American position with regard to Bahrain is that American democratic processes, and administration changes in Washington, make the U.S. more prone to slight shifts in their official position. We can take the agreed sale of American F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain as a recent illustration of this point. Under the Obama administration, the proposed sale of F-16 jets to the Bahraini regime was conditional upon the improvement of human rights within the country. In this regard, Obama's administration at least attempted to make use of U.S. influence in an attempt to leverage negotiations towards a more positive and fruitful resolution in Bahrain (Amnesty International, 2018). However, in March 2018, it was reported that the administration of President Donald Trump approved the sale of F-16 jets to the Kingdom anyway, irrespective of the fact that virtually no progress has been made on the human rights front (ibid). In this sense, we can see that interactions between Bahrain and more democratically-inclined G20 states vary from those that are less-democratically inclined, inevitably because democratic administration changes naturally coincide with slight foreign policy shifts within new administrations. Equally apparent is the notion that democratically-inclined states often undermine the foreign policy of ideologically dissimilar administrations that preceded them, partially for the sake of scoring political points at home.

What of the others?

To gain a more rounded understanding of the G20's inaction since 2011, it is important to touch upon the reactions of other G20 states in some way.

In 2018, using the UN Human Rights Council as a forum, 28 nations condemned ongoing human rights abuses in Bahrain in a collective declaration. This was the first collective condemnation of the situation of its kind, which perhaps created some hope for grassroots human rights defenders that more meaningful action would finally be taken. But, upon delving into the details of this declaration, it is clear that this statement represents yet another hollow, symbolic statement with little meaningful impact. Of all G20 states, only Germany and France signed the declaration, alongside other smaller European Union (EU) member states that are represented overall within the G20 as the EU (UN Human Rights Council, 2012). Notably, G20 states like the United States, the United

Kingdom and Brazil, who were all also members of the Human Rights Council at the time, remained silent on the issue, despite claiming to uphold the same values that the declaration proclaims.

The UK sells, and profits hugely, from military arms sales abroad. According to official government statistics, the value of UK arms exports amounts to £4.8 billion, making the UK the third largest arms exporter in the world (Department for International Trade, 2017). In particular, the UK is known for selling arms to Saudi Arabia and other Middle-Eastern states. Earlier this year, however, the sale of these weapons to the Saudis was deemed illegal by the Civil Division of the UK Court of Appeal, in light of the internationally illegal Saudi use of these weapons in Yemen. Credit for raising this legal challenge can graciously be owed to the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch UK (Royal Courts of Justice, 2019). The relevance of these arms sales to Saudi Arabia, in the grand scheme of the UK's delicate interactions with the Bahraini regime, is clear. With the knowledge that the Saudi regime shares a close relationship with Bahrain's monarchy, and that both are incredibly tied together as mutual members of the GCC, it would be counter to British strategic and economic interests to risk alienating Saudi Arabia in the name of unequivocally supporting change in Bahrain. Whilst trade is not the only motivator behind the UK's inaction, it sheds some light on how much geostrategic interests have factored into G20 state responses to the situation in Bahrain since 2011. Once more, Mearsheimer's realist prophecy of world powers rings true: states are purely motivated by self-interest (Mearsheimer, 2014).

When it comes to the position of Brazil, one is merely presented with more of the same. A report commissioned by The Economist in 2016 highlights that Brazil is the GCC's largest and most important Latin American trading partner, a position that gives it greater leverage within the Gulf relative to its Latin American neighbours. (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016). Since Brazil emerged out of its dictatorship and into democracy in 1985, it has increasingly shown a desire to appear supportive of freedom and human rights abroad through some increasingly assertive foreign policy. But Ted Piccone and Emily Alinikoff point out that this amounts to nothing more than "principled ambiguity" (Piccone & Alinikoff, 2012), in the sense that any support for human rights on a foreign policy level is met with little substance when it comes to offering direct support to pro-democracy protesters. So, whilst Brazil may support the implementation of more democratic processes in Bahrain in principle, this has not translated into meaningful support or change in practice.

In recent years, under the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, however, the need for stronger relations with Gulf states like Saudi Arabia has been emphasised by several government officials. In particular, generals and leading economists have underscored the importance of stronger economic relations between Brazil and the Gulf. As of late, relations between Saudi Arabia and Brazil have grown stronger, particularly following tensions caused by President Bolsonaro's



desire to move the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Boadle, 2019). This is likely to have a negative impact on Brazil's willingness to speak out against Saudi Arabia's human rights infractions in the Gulf, but the true extent of these impacts on the G20 remains to be seen, and will almost certainly become clearer at the Riyadh 2020 summit.

The Canadian government has not made it a point to be fiercely critical of the methods employed by the Bahraini government, and this is likely because Canada habitually takes on a fairly mediatory role on the international stage (Duffy, 1959), something which Chrystia Freeland's remarks about the importance of multilateralism somewhat reflect. In fact, when G8 countries met and considered supplying protesters in the Arab world with financial aid, Canada actively resisted this move, and argued instead that it would direct its support towards pre-existing international financial institutions (Clark, 2011). Further, Canada has supported Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, whilst also actively resisting the suspension of arms sales to the state, all to avoid jeopardizing bilateral relations. Considering the extent to which Canada views multilateralism with credence, this is hardly surprising.

Conclusion

Collectively, the G20 is an economic organisation, and was founded solely with this criterion in mind. There has never been a focus on human rights, because discussion on this front does not, and probably will not, fall within the remit of the G20's intended purpose for the foreseeable future. Considering that the organisation is composed of nations with differing individual values, it would be ambitious to presume that any meaningful cooperation on this front amongst G20 states would be possible. As we examined earlier, this is only more disappointing when one considers that other financial organisations, like the IMF and World Bank, have themselves taken steps to address politically charged issues. This shows that the G20 is capable of this should it ever wish to do it, but that it is, as of yet, far too consumed by internal political divisions to achieve lengths beyond the first few positive steps that it has taken. Regardless, we cannot forget to give it credit where it is due. There are many social and political provisions that the G20 have attempted to address in recent years, such as female empowerment (Chatham House, 2018). These steps do not quite go as far as we would hope for in the Bahraini context, but they do give us hope that, perhaps at some stage, the G20 will reach this level of policy-making.

Ultimately, it appears as though supporting calls for reform, and demands for political change, does not fall enough within the remit of vital interests for G20 states. It seems, in fact, that anything other than maintaining the status quo directly *threatens* the interests of many G20 states in some form. The United States, for example, would geostrategically suffer from the threat that a revolution would



pose to its military assets in Bahrain, much like Saudi Arabia would quiver at the potential domino-effect that a successful Bahraini revolution would cause. This would reasonably explain why more meaningful steps have not been taken since 2011 by G20 states to try and improve the human rights situation in Bahrain.

Unfortunately, it seems apparent that the future of Bahrain will largely be “determined by the government’s interactions with larger powers” (Kinninmont & Sirri, 2014), particularly those within the G20 with greater layers of geopolitical, military and economic muscle. Whilst it is undeniable that various more democratically inclined G20 states have attempted to call out the Bahraini regime for human rights abuses since 2011, these actions have proven to be unfruitful. Accordingly, it seems that durable, substantive advocacy will only really continue to emanate from non-governmental organisations, like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Salam for Democracy and Human Rights. Whilst this is not the optimal scenario, it is probably the best that can be expected, at least for now. As noted above, NGOs have proven successful in winning individual battles on a grassroots level in an attempt to influence states, such as CAAT’s legal challenge against the UK government regarding its military arms sales to Saudi Arabia. If opportunities like this were to arise again to call individual G20 states to account on their foreign policy, then there is hope that more meaningful action can be taken.

In advance of the pending G20 conference in Riyadh, such opportunities have already begun to arise. Many NGOs have been vocal in their disapproval of Saudi Arabia hosting the conference; some have decided to boycott the conference altogether, whilst others have made public statements highlighting that rewarding Saudi Arabia with host privileges tacitly condones the human rights violations that it executes at home and abroad. To date, a recent publication from Transparency International (2020) shows that over 220 civil society organisations internationally have joined a collective movement to boycott the conference. In a collective published statement, these organisations accuse Saudi Arabia of “trying to whitewash its dire human rights record by holding major international events in the country” (Transparency International, 2020). The statement goes on to highlight that these organisations refuse to “give international legitimacy” to these human rights violations, meaning that the civil society segment of the G20 summit will remain absent (ibid). Although we cannot yet comment on the impact of this on the proceedings of the summit, it highlights that only NGOs are willing to advocate for the legitimacy of human rights internationally, free from the constraints of diplomacy and the sensitivities of foreign relations.

Granting Saudi Arabia the privilege of hosting the conference is also in direct contradiction of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all of which are underpinned by human rights principles (UN Development Programme, 2019). All G20 members, along with all EU states, have agreed to work towards the principles listed within the SDGs, yet none of them have taken any meaningful



action against Saudi Arabia's human rights violations. G20 inaction on this subject has been ardently criticised by various UN sub-organisations. In 2019, for example, the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) released a statement condemning G20 evasion of the subject (OHCHR, 2019). In particular, the statement criticises the G20 for publicly aligning itself with the UN's founding values in 2017, whilst simultaneously failing to uphold them amongst its own ranks (ibid). By virtue of the factors and complexities that have been discussed in this report, such inaction from the G20 on human rights continues to appear inevitable for the foreseeable future. For now, it will rest with NGOs to shoulder this burden.

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