



## Progress In The Middle East

(NAPSA)—At a recent high-level conference in Washington, D.C., leading Middle East expert Tom Mattair warned of the challenges of reform in the tiny Gulf kingdom of Bahrain. Dr. Mattair, executive director of the independent Middle East Policy Council, said there was a real risk of strengthening the hand of forces in Bahrain that would use the democratic process to introduce “illiberal, intolerant, anti-democratic” policies and be hostile to the U.S. and Bahrain’s neighbors in the region.

Bahrain’s ruler King Hamad has introduced much reform, Dr. Mattair said. The king has liberalized and diversified the economy, so it is less dependent on oil. The press is relatively free. As the United Nations Development Program noted in a recent report, Bahrain is developing favorably in meeting its Millennium Development Goals.

While this progress is not fast enough for some within the majority Shi’a community, especially the young, it was important to note that being a Shi’a was not a bar to advancement in Bahrain, Dr. Mattair said. Shi’a are well represented in the legal and medical professions, in corporate board rooms and in the appointed Upper Chamber of Parliament. In fact, the oil minister—a powerful post in a Middle Eastern country—is Shi’a.

Unfortunately, there have been suggestions of Iranian involvement in recent street protests there, said Dr. Mattair. Bahrain government officials told Dr. Mattair that some protestors were carrying unusual amounts of Iranian currency. A Saudi analyst found telephone intercepts of Gho-



Photo credit: Bahrain News Agency

**The progressive government of Bahrain has introduced much political and economic reform into the Middle Eastern nation.**

lam Shakuri, the individual implicated in the alleged plot to assassinate Saudi Arabia’s ambassador in Washington and a member of the secret Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, trying to direct opposition in Bahrain. The Wall Street Journal recently reported on Ahmed Chalabri’s “attention-grabbing campaign in support of Bahrain’s opposition movement” and the past allegations by the United States that Chalabri provided classified information to Tehran.

Said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “When Iran claims to support democracy abroad, then kills peaceful protestors in the streets of Tehran, its hypocrisy is breathtaking and plain to the people of the region.” There is no country in the Middle East where the gulf between rulers and ruled is greater than Iran, she added.

In an attempt to find a political solution, the Crown Prince offered major concessions to the protestors. According to a report in the International Herald Tribune, U.S. intelligence had learned of attempts by Iran to influence the opposition bloc to reject the terms offered by the Crown Prince.