

# The Bahraini Three On St. Helena, 1956–1961

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*Until 1971, Britain remained a presence in the Persian/Arab Gulf, defending the small Shaykhdoms of the region, at the same time, of course, protecting British economic and political interests. It was inevitable, therefore, that as the Shaykhdoms developed and their populations benefited from education, conflicts between competing interests occurred, conflicts that led to perplexing problems for the Rulers of these small states and for the British Government. Such was the case in Bahrain, where in the decade of the 1950s, Bahraini nationalists seeking modernization collided with their Ruler. As a result, three Bahrainis were imprisoned on the British Island of St. Helena. The British role in the exile of the Bahraini three embarrassed Her Majesty's Government and served to illustrate the archaic nature of Britain's role in the Gulf.*

**I**n March 1956, demonstrations and a general strike disrupted the British protected state of Bahrain. On 2 March, the Bahraini public heard news reports stating that Jordan's King Husayn had fired his long serving British military adviser, Lieutenant General John Bagot Glubb (Glubb Pasha). That day, British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd arrived in Bahrain for what was initially planned as a brief visit. At 7:00 p.m. Minister Lloyd and his party landed at the RAF/BOAC airport in Muharraq. The Ruler, Shaykh Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, was present to greet him. Lloyd's entourage consisted of 28 persons,

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among them 13 women. The male members of the group left the airport in a line of cars; the visiting women followed in taxis. The procession traveled from the airport via a road along the sea-front. Crowds lined the route, shouting anti-British slogans. Some in the crowd began to throw sand; others threw rocks. "The mob, though behaving riotously, did not appear particularly menacing."<sup>1</sup>

The male members of the Foreign Secretary's party reached the Royal Palace, where they dined. The Ruler was a perfect host and Foreign Secretary Lloyd had "an agreeable conversation" with him. Shaykh Salman told his British guest that he only wanted relations with the British government, not with any other government.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, concerned about the anti-British protests, the Ruler's British adviser, Sir Charles Belgrave, referred to the dinner as the most trying social function he had ever attended.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, excluded from the dinner, the women in the Foreign Secretary's party had safely arrived at the Residency. However, two buses carrying the British aircrew were severely damaged, and crewmembers, including a stewardess, were injured. Initially the Foreign Secretary and his staff had been scheduled to depart Bahrain for New Delhi at 11:00 p.m. However, it was difficult for authorities to regain control of the road to the airport. Foreign Secretary Lloyd's party did not reach the airport until early 2:00 a.m. But no one informed the women at the Residency that their departure had been delayed. Hence, they left for the airport on schedule. Their taxis had to negotiate streets still lined with jeering crowds; one car had every window broken. "Fortunately again no one was injured, though it must have been an unpleasant experience for the ladies."<sup>4</sup>

According to the Political Residency, Arab nationalists from outside the country contributed to the unrest, but local factors were the major cause of the disturbances. For thirty years the Government had been largely controlled by the Ruler's Adviser, Belgrave. The British Adviser dominated all departments of Government, including education, health, and police. Bahrainis who now enjoyed the benefits of access to health care and education wished to take a larger role in their own government. Adviser Belgrave appeared to be an obstacle to democratization. Thus, for weeks after the Foreign Secretary's departure, demonstrations and strikes continued.<sup>5</sup> Later, Sir Bernard Burrows, who had served as Political Resident in Bahrain from 1953–58, wrote:

From a rather cynical point of view it was perhaps advantageous to us that the presence of Belgrave and the hope that he might be got rid of to some extent acted as a buffer between the anti-foreign elements in the popular movement and the British authorities themselves.<sup>6</sup>

For the previous two years an unofficial political party, the Committee of National Union, had been active in the Shaykhdom. Considering the system in place outmoded, this

1. Letter, Wright-Boycott to Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain, 6 March 1956, FO 371/120545, Public Records Office, Kew, (Hereafter, PRO).

2. Selwyn Lloyd, *Suez 1956*, (New York: Mayflower, 1978), p. 49.

3. Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, (London: Hutchinson, 1960), pp. 219–220.

4. Letter, Wright-Boycott to Commander-in-Chief, Bahrain, 6 March 1956, FO 371/120545, PRO.

5. "Report on Strike & Riots in Bahrain in March 1956," Read, Bahrain 20 March 1956, FO 371/120545, PRO.

6. Bernard Burrows, *Footnotes In The Sand*, (London: Michael Russell, 1990), p. 67.

group and its supporters demanded numerous changes, including the departure of Sir Charles Belgrave.<sup>7</sup> But Shaykh Salman, fiercely loyal to all those who served him, did not want his British adviser to go.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the Ruler's Adviser was eager to remain at his post. According to Sir Charles, the demonstrations were led by opportunists who appealed to the "illiterate element in the population." They were persuasive speakers. Hence, despite all the good that Shaykh Salman had done, the schools he had opened, and hospitals he had built, many Bahrainis were ungrateful. Belgrave claimed that the merchants and the middle classes were afraid to speak out against the Egyptian-supported Committee of National Union, fearing that if the Committee achieved power its members would retaliate against those who had opposed them. Meanwhile, some members of the Ruling Family criticized Shaykh Salman for not taking stronger action against the demonstrators. Belgrave wrote that the Ruler, "poor man," was having a terrible time.<sup>9</sup>

The Secretary of the Committee of National Union, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir was among the leaders of the demonstrations. Al-Bakir was a descendent of Baghdadi Jews who had settled in the Gulf and converted to Islam. Although his parents were Qatari, Al-Bakir was born in Bahrain. In 1948, against the advice of Belgrave, Shaykh Salman granted 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir a Bahraini passport.<sup>10</sup> Sir Charles expressed considerable disdain for Al-Bakir and his Committee. According to the Ruler's Adviser, although a persuasive speaker, Al-Bakir "was a fat, unhealthy, light-complexioned man, unreliable and excitable. He never made a success of any business and he lived a hand-to mouth existence."<sup>11</sup>

Following the March 1956 disturbances, Al-Bakir was asked to leave Bahrain for an extended stay abroad. He departed for Egypt and on 30 March spoke to the Egyptian press. He told reporters that the British had defamed the Bahrain National Movement, calling it Communist, suggesting it was financed by Egyptian and Saudi funds. According to the leader of the Committee of National Union, he was not an exile, but a visitor, who had decided to leave Bahrain on grounds of ill health. His exit visa stipulated that he could return to Bahrain.<sup>12</sup>

While in Egypt, Al-Bakir closely followed Egyptian leader Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir's pan-Arab line; his public speeches were consistently anti-British.<sup>13</sup> However, during private conversations with British officials he praised Bahrain's British connection "as a vital safeguard for the Bahraini people both internally against the inertia of the ruling family, and externally against the ambitions of Saudi Arabia and Iran." Political Agent in Bahrain, Charles Gault, suggested that despite Al-Bakir's "public servility to Egypt," he

7. Minute, Ewart-Biggs, London, 19 March 1956, FO 371/120545, PRO.

8. Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Life And Times of Shaykh Salman Bin Al-Khalifa*, (London: Kegan Paul, 1995), p. 196.

9. Letter, Belgrave to Freddie, Bahrain, 8 March 1956, FO 371/120545, PRO.

10. Despatch 90, Gault to Lloyd, Bahrain, 31 July 1956, FO 371/120548, pp. 1-3.

11. Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, p. 212.

12. Telegram 606, Trevelyan to Foreign Office, Cairo, 30 March 1956, FO 371/120545, PRO.

13. Despatch 90, Gault to Lloyd, Bahrain, 31 July 1956, FO 371/120548, pp. 1-3.

was in fact a moderate and had exercised a restraining influence on the Committee of National Union.<sup>14</sup>

On 24 July 1956, the First Secretary of the Residency in Bahrain, F.F. Henderson, met with one of Al-Bakir's colleagues, 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Shamlan. Belgrave disapproved of meetings between officials at the Residency and Bahrainis who wanted change. Then too, the Ruler's Adviser was unimpressed with Al-Shamlan:

His father, who was of slave origin — not that I have any prejudice against negroes — a difficult cantankerous man, was a court wakil and was sent to prison and banished for sedition in the reign of Shaykh Hamad. The son was embittered against the regime which had punished his father.<sup>15</sup>

At this juncture, Whitehall agreed with the Bahraini opposition's call for Belgrave's departure. Henderson told Shamlan that while Her Majesty's Government was sympathetic to the Committee of National Union's objectives, the British were often distressed by its methods. Now the Committee of National Union wanted the Ruler to provide the date when Belgrave would finally depart Bahrain. If Shaykh Salman did not do so the Committee threatened to call yet another strike. Henderson asked Al-Shamlan to press his colleagues to reconsider their decision. The Bahraini promised "he would do all he could to prevent a strike."<sup>16</sup> On 23 July, the Committee of National Union published a circular attacking Belgrave. Although the circular did not threaten a strike, it claimed the right to do so.<sup>17</sup>

Shaykh Salman was displeased that British officials were willing to remain in contact with members of the Committee of National Union and wrote a letter to Foreign Secretary Lloyd expressing his wrath. The Ruler reviewed the history of Anglo-Bahraini relations and reminded Lloyd that until recently Britain had refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of his Shaykhdom. But now it appeared that the British were providing assistance to a movement led by irresponsible leaders. Shaykh Salman emphasized his support for Belgrave and accused British authorities in Bahrain of trying to placate radicals. Shaykh Salman asked: "Is this the thanks which we deserve for our friendship with Britain?"<sup>18</sup>

Tension between Shaykh Salman and the Committee increased. The Ruler protested that he did only what was best for his people, but, alas, they refused to cooperate with him. Finally, responding to British pressure, Shaykh Salman agreed to permit Belgrave to withdraw. However, he was unwilling to set a date for his Adviser's departure. Political Agent Gault suggested that it was best for Belgrave "to go sooner rather than later." Although Her Majesty's Government recognized Belgrave's service to the Shaykhdom, the British Adviser had served too long.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Belgrave had to leave Bahrain. One

14. Letter, Gault to Lloyd, Bahrain, 31 July 1956, FO 371/120548, PRO.

15. Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, p. 211. Shaykh Hamad, who died in 1942, was Shaykh Salman's father.

16. Minutes of a Conversation, Bahrain, 24 July 1956, FO 371/120548, PRO.

17. Telegram 656, Gault to Foreign Office, Bahrain, 25 July 1956, FO 371/120548, PRO.

18. Letter, Sulman [Salman] to Lloyd, Bahrain, 13 July 1956, FO 371/120548, PRO.

19. Telegram 690, Gault to Foreign Office, Bahrain, 5 August 1956, FO 371/120548, PRO.

British official remarked: "We must not find ourselves in the position of using British troops to fire on Bahrainis because we have failed to keep the Ruler and Belgrave from shuffling out of their undertakings."<sup>20</sup>

On 26 July, Nasir announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal. At the beginning of August, the Committee of National Union circulated flyers calling for meetings to consider grievances and to express support for the Egyptian leader. In September Al-Bakir returned to Bahrain. He was greeted by a crowd of followers, but refused to make a speech. Shaykh Salman was irritated that Al-Bakir had returned. The Ruler considered ordering his arrest. Prior to moving against the leader of the Committee of National Union, Shaykh Salman sought the opinion of Political Resident Bernard Burrows. Advising against precipitate action, Burrows suggested waiting to see what would transpire. After offering his advice, Burrows was concerned that in the event of unrest Shaykh Salman would blame Britain. According to the Political Resident, the Ruler "is already inclined to shuffle out of his responsibilities in this way whenever possible."<sup>21</sup>

In October news of the Suez campaign, the Israeli-Anglo-French attack on Egypt, inflamed Bahrainis. It appeared to the British that every radio in the Shaykhdom "vomited" Cairo's frenzied abuse of Britain. The Committee of National Union called for a strike and for demonstrations. Days of violence followed. Mobs used Molotov cocktails and damaged a substantial amount of property.<sup>22</sup>

On 5 November, after the demonstrators had been subdued, Shaykh Salman ordered the arrest of the leaders of the Committee of National Union. The Ruler now claimed that three of the arrested men, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir, 'Abd al-Aziz Shamlan, and 'Abd al-'Ali 'Aliwat were implicated in an attempt on his life. Shaykh Salman feared that if the three remained in his custody they would continue to be a focus of local discontent. At the same time, the Ruler was concerned that if he banished these men from his territory they would go to Cairo and work against his interests. Calling on the British Government to resolve his dilemma, Shaykh Salman requested that the three Committee leaders be imprisoned outside his territory.<sup>23</sup>

At the end of 1956, Political Resident Burrows explained to Shaykh Salman that it would be easier for Her Majesty's Government to justify taking custody of his prisoners if first these men were convicted of some serious crime. As a result, the Ruler established a special court in the village of Budeya. On 23 December 1956, the three were tried together with two others implicated in a plot against Shaykh Salman. The prisoners were tried by three judges, all members of the Al Khalifa family. They were charged with attempting to assassinate both Shaykh Salman and Sir Charles Belgrave. Quickly, all five were convicted. Two were sentenced to ten years in a Bahraini prison, and the three acknowledged leaders to 14 years in a prison located outside Bahrain.<sup>24</sup> The guilty verdict

20. Minute, Riches, London, 24 July 1956, PRO.

21. Telegram 50, Burrows to Foreign Office, Bahrain, 1 October 1956, FO 371/120549, PRO.

22. Charles Belgrave, Personal Column, pp. 228–231.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 212. According to Belgrave, 'Aliwat was a Shi 'i with little education who had been involved in the scrap metal business, but lost all his capital.

24. Memo, "Bahraini Prisoners On St. Helena," London, 30 September 1960, FO 371/149133.

had been announced five days before the court was even established, but now the British were ready to remove the three prisoners.<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, the nucleus of the Bahraini opposition departed from the country, while the symbol of their discontent, Sir Charles, continued in residence. Only in April 1957, after illness forced his return to England, did Belgrave relinquish his position as Adviser.<sup>26</sup> Using their trial as a fig leaf, at the end of December 1956, the British made the necessary legal arrangements to transfer the three convicted ringleaders to the Island of St. Helena. However, to the dismay of Shaykh Salman the prisoners did not fade away. Instead, once in St. Helena they attracted considerable publicity.

The legal basis for their transfer was the Colonial Prisoners Removal Act, 1869. Among the provisions of that Act was one that stated:

Every prisoner shall, upon his delivery to the person having lawful authority to receive him in the colony to which he is removed, be subject within such colony to the same laws and regulations, and shall be dealt with in all respects in the same manner, as if he had been tried and received the same sentence in such colony as the sentence which had been passed on him in the colony from which he is removed.<sup>27</sup>

On 27 January 1957, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir appealed to the Supreme Court of St. Helena and to the Judicial Committee of the British Privy Council for a writ of *habeas corpus*. Shaykh Salman, who was paying for the cost of keeping these men imprisoned, was unhappy that an appeal had been permitted. Although Whitehall wished to placate the Ruler, British officials explained that their courts were independent, that every prisoner was permitted to hire a lawyer to attempt to secure his release. Shaykh Salman speculated about the source of the funds to pay for legal assistance. The Ruler protested. "It was not in the interests of Her Majesty's Government or himself that these prisoners should return to Bahrain."<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, the British speculated that regardless of how the Judicial Council of the House of Lords ruled, after the decision was announced demonstrations would occur in Bahrain, "joyful if exiles granted habeas corpus, angry if they are not."<sup>29</sup> American Consul General in Dhahran Walter Schwinn later reported to Washington that if the three Bahraini prisoners were released from St. Helena the Ruler would want them delivered to him in chains.<sup>30</sup>

British authorities in Bahrain continued to be concerned that somehow or other even from their St. Helena prison the Bahraini three might cause trouble. British authorities in Bahrain requested that all telegrams sent or received by the prisoners be copied and supplied to their Residency:

25. Bernard Levin, "The Prisoners of St. Helena: Part 3," *The Spectator* (London), 6 January 1961, p. 6.

26. Charles Belgrave, *Personal Column*, pp. 234–235.

27. "Case For The Respondents," Record 43, St. Helena, 1959, FO 371/149129, PRO.

28. Letter, Wiltshire to Beaumont, Bahrain, 14 February 1960, FO 371/fo371/149129, PRO.

29. Telegram 449, Schwinn to Secretary of State, Dhahran, 20 March, 1960, 746D. 00/3–2060, US National Archives, College Park, Maryland, (Hereafter cited as NA).

30. Telegram 449, Schwinn to Secretary of State, Dhahran, 20 March, 1960, 746D. 00/3–2060, NA.

I am sorry to impose this extra trouble on the authorities at St. Helena, who must find the task of looking after these prisoners a pretty ungrateful one, but I feel we should do everything we can to make sure that our main base in the Gulf is not subject to any disturbances.<sup>31</sup>

In June 1960, the Privy Council dismissed the appeal of Al-Bakir. But the issue did not fade away. In Bahrain rejection of the appeal was generally ignored. No public demonstrations took place. One young Bahraini said that the prisoners were hotheads, that a sudden change of regime was unwise.<sup>32</sup> However, after the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council published its decision, an editorial in *The Times* expressed misgivings saying that the case presented a picture of “an alliance between the Ruler of Bahrain and the British Government to contrive special machinery for removing trouble makers quickly from the scene.” In London the American Charge d’ Affaires Grant McClanahan asked the Assistant Head of the Foreign Office’s Arabian Department, Robert Walmsley, if the three Bahrainis on St. Helena had further legal recourse. Walmsley said they did not and that only Shaykh Salman could grant clemency.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the St. Helena Bahrainis continued their efforts to achieve freedom. From prison Al-Bakir wrote that Britain controlled Bahrain’s internal affairs, and that it was ridiculous to believe otherwise. According to Al-Bakir, he and his colleagues remained in prison because they were among the leaders, “who have awakened people of the Arabian Gulf in general and inflamed their feelings to arise [*sic*] their national vigilance.”<sup>34</sup>

On 29 June, two Labour Members asked the House of Commons to secure the release of the detainees. Foreign Secretary Lloyd demurred. Lloyd reminded Parliament that the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council had ruled on the matter, but he suggested that the case be studied yet again. The following day the Liberal *Guardian* newspaper expressed the opinion that the St. Helena three ought to be released. In addition, the *Guardian* stated that the British government should no longer carry out a sentence if the impartiality of the court was in doubt.<sup>35</sup>

Increasingly embarrassed by the entire affair, Britain attempted to convince the Ruler to grant clemency. Shaykh Salman refused. He explained that if the three prisoners had been tried according to the strict letter of Muslim law they would have been immediately executed. He had already exercised clemency in sparing their lives. Now his honor was at stake. If he remitted the sentences “his face would be blackened,” his courts discredited. Such action would endanger Bahrain by encouraging future revolutionaries. Shaykh Salman was unconcerned about negative publicity in foreign newspapers, which he assumed were paid for by his enemies. He was not interested in these newspaper articles any more than in “yapping dogs.” However, as a result of continuing British pressure, he

31. Letter, Given to Walmsley, Bahrain, 31 July 1957, FO 371/126990, PRO.

32. Letter, Mann to Beaumont, Bahrain, 7 June 1960, FO 371, 149131, PRO.

33. Despatch 3501, McClanahan to State Department, London, 8 June 1960, 746D.00/6–860, NA. The quote from *The Times* appears in the cable.

34. Letter, Al Bakar to Chasworth, St. Helena, 30 June 1960, FO 371/149132, PRO.

35. Despatch 107, McClanahan to State Department, London, 14 July 1960, 746D.00/7–1460, NA.

finally agreed to take the St. Helena prisoners back, but insisted that he would put them in prison to complete their sentences.<sup>36</sup>

But on 18 July, Shaykh Salman told Political Resident Sir George Middleton that he had changed his mind about taking the prisoners back. Now he did not want them returned to Bahrain. Sir George speculated that members of the Ruler's family had advised him that the presence of the three men would constitute a security threat. The Ruler had entrusted the three prisoners to the custody of Her Majesty's Government with the understanding that they would serve their sentences outside Bahrain. Any alternative would appear to be a breach of faith with the Ruler, which might undermine security in Bahrain.<sup>37</sup> According to Sir George, Shaykh Salman would be faced with an unpleasant reality:

I feel that we shall have to grasp the nettle and tell him that we intend to release them even so. There will be much gnashing of teeth and bitter words but my guess is that the Ruler will, if we stand firm, finally agree to take them back for once they are in his physical power again he can always deal drastically with them should their followers be tempted to start any trouble. One thing is certain: if he does take them back he will hold *us* responsible for any trouble and expect us to help him stamp on it.<sup>38</sup>

Members of Parliament continued to question the Government, and the British press continued to report on the matter. The Bahraini three remained a source of embarrassment and London now wanted an alternative to keeping them in a British prison. On 19 September, the Governor of St. Helena, Sir R. Alford, visited Whitehall and warned that the three exiled Bahrainis would object to their return to Bahrain. If that was their only alternative they would much prefer to remain on St. Helena. According to the Governor, prison conditions were good; the prisoners had access to all of the books and periodicals in the local library, a powerful short-wave radio, which received Middle Eastern stations. In addition, accompanied by a guard, once a week they were permitted a jeep ride around the Island.<sup>39</sup>

Seeking a solution, Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd wanted Shaykh Salman to grant clemency. Hence, London considered how best to "soften-up" the Ruler. Whitehall hoped to utilize friends of Shaykh Salman to convince him to follow British wishes. Sir Charles Belgrave seemed a likely candidate to approach the Ruler, but in 1960 he had published a memoir documenting his long years as Adviser in Bahrain, and the Political Resident stated "that his usefulness as a 'softener-up' had been impaired."<sup>40</sup>

The St. Helena three continued to raise "their ugly heads." Lawyers for the men now claimed that the ship that took the prisoners from Bahrain to St. Helena sailed from Bahrain at 4:00 a.m. on 28 December 1956. Hence, it was possible that the Prisoners' Removal Order, which the law required to be published prior to the departure of the prisoners, may not yet have been posted on the Political Agency's official notice board.

36. Letter, Middleton to Beaumont, Bahrain, 11 July 1960, FO 371/149132, PRO. All quotations are taken from this letter.

37. Minute, Beaumont, London, 26 July 1960, FO 371/149132, PRO.

38. Letter, Middleton to Foreign Office, Bahrain, 16 September 1960, FO 371/149132, PRO.

39. Letter, Wallmsley to Ford, London, 21 September 1960, FO 371/149132, PRO.

40. Memo, "Bahraini Prisoners On St. Helena," London, 30 September 1960, FO 371/149133.



Charles Gault, who had served as Political Agent in 1956, claimed that he personally posted the Order on the morning of 28 December just before 8:00 a.m.<sup>41</sup>

As a result of growing support for the release of the prisoners, at the end of November 1960, the Secretary of State requested that Political Resident Sir George Middleton inform the Ruler of Bahrain that Britain would no longer hold the men, that the Ruler could commute their sentences to exile or accept their return to his custody. Concerned with British public opinion and confident that even if the three went to Cairo they would do little damage to British interests, Whitehall pressed the Ruler to select the first alternative. However, if the Ruler insisted that the men be returned to him and imprisoned in Bahrain, albeit reluctantly, Her Majesty's Government would comply.<sup>42</sup>

Now it was clear to the Foreign Office that the three prisoners had sailed for St. Helena before the Order was posted. Whitehall informed the lawyers who represented the prisoners.<sup>43</sup> On 15 December, Sir George Middleton called on Shaykh Salman. Sir George explained that Her Majesty's Government was no longer willing to keep the Bahraini prisoners on St. Helena. He suggested that the best solution, "statesmanlike and merciful," would be for Shaykh Salman to commute their sentences to exile. Sir George explained that if the Ruler insisted that the prisoners be returned to his custody the British Government would be severely criticized. Shaykh Salman was not pleased. He declared that hostile states opposed to British-Bahraini friendship were behind the effort to free the prisoners, that these hostile states had distributed large sums to achieve their goal. Sir George emphatically denied that the Members of Parliament who called for release of the prisoners had been bribed. Distressed, the Ruler complained that the British favored other Gulf Rulers; for example, Britain provided military assistance to the Sultan of Oman. Why was Whitehall unwilling to continue to do him the small favor of retaining those prisoners on St. Helena?<sup>44</sup> However, after the meeting Shaykh Salman wrote to Sir George stating that he was prepared to accept the return of the St. Helena three and would imprison them in Bahrain.<sup>45</sup>

When the British Government announced its intention to return the prisoners to Bahrain, many Members of Parliament demanded that the decision be reconsidered.<sup>46</sup> Opposition members claimed that the original trial of the Bahrainis had been unfair. Supporters of the three stated that Britain should never have agreed to imprison the men, and that now the three ought not to be returned to Bahrain. According to their advocates in Parliament, justice would be served only if the St. Helena prisoners were released and granted political asylum.<sup>47</sup>

On 20 December, in the House of Commons, Labour members suggested that if the prisoners were returned to Bahrain they might be tortured or even beheaded. Shaykh Salman resented the speculation that the St. Helena three would suffer if returned to his

41. Letter, Marshall to Ford, London, 7 November 1960, FO 371/149133, PRO.

42. Letter, Foreign Office to Middleton, London, 29 November 1960, FO 371/149133, PRO.

43. Minute, Walker, London, 14 December 1960, FO 371/149133, PRO.

44. Record of a Conversation, Bahrain, 15 December 1960, FO 371/149134, PRO.

45. Letter, Salman to Middleton, Bahrain, 17 December 1960, FO 371/149134, PRO.

46. Telegram, Colonial Secretary to St. Helena, London, 21 December 1960, FO 371/149134, PRO.

47. Draft Telegram, Foreign Office to Bahrain, 21 December, 1960, FO 371/149134, PRO.

jurisdiction. He reminded officials that had he wished to torture the men he would have done it earlier, before they left his custody.<sup>48</sup> When the Lord Privy Seal, visited Bahrain in January 1961 Shaykh Salman “showed great anxiety to secure the vindication of his good name both in the House and outside.”<sup>49</sup>

Discussions continued. On 23 February, *The Times* published an article reporting that, at his own expense, Conservative Member of Parliament William Yates visited Bahrain, where he apologized to the Ruler for a statement he had earlier made in the House claiming that if the St. Helena three were returned to Bahrain they would lose their heads. At the same time, Yates asked the Ruler to show clemency.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, on 13 June 1961, after a successful *habeas corpus* action, the three Bahraini prisoners were released from St. Helena. Upon learning of their release the men drank champagne, praised British justice and (still inside the prison) gave a luncheon attended by the Superintendent of Prisons, where they served Bahraini melons, grown in their tiny prison garden. According to First Secretary at the American Embassy in London, Grant V. McClanahan, the St. Helena three would likely assume a political role.

Through Cairo radio or at Middle East conferences they may become another element attacking ‘imperialism’ and pressing for Arab ‘nationalism’ in the Persian Gulf. If they choose to do so, their experience as detainees on a remote island will probably stand them in good stead as a credential of political soundness on the issues of reform, modernization and nationalism in the Persian Gulf.<sup>51</sup>

Without consulting the Ruler of Bahrain, the three Bahrainis were issued St. Helena passports and arrived in London on 14 July 1961. The released men were entertained at the House of Commons. “They appeared cheerful, fit and well-tailored.” Speaking to the press, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir said that he and his fellows expected compensation from Her Majesty’s Government.<sup>52</sup> Al-Bakir declared that with British support Bahrain continued to be a feudal state. At the same time that he criticized the “tyrannical policy” of the British Government, he expressed his gratitude to the British people.<sup>53</sup>

Shaykh Salman was angry. He considered release of the men a breach of his agreement with the British Government. However, at the end of June 1961 the Ruler’s attention turned away from the three Bahrainis. After Iraq’s attempt to invade the newly independent Amirate of Kuwait, Shaykh Salman focused on cooperating with the British to defend the independence of his Gulf neighbor.<sup>54</sup>

British opinion both in Parliament and in the country supported compensation for the released men. Calling the matter a vital issue that should be decided by the Prime Minister, Britain’s Attorney General “would not accept that the prisoners had got away with it merely because they had been released.” He wanted to appeal the release of the three even

48. Despatch 172, McClelland to State Department, Dhahran, 10 January 1961, 746D./1–1061, NA.

49. “Annual Review Of Bahrain Affairs,” 1961. Wiltshire, Bahrain, 21 September 1961, FO 371/162821, PRO.

50. Despatch 1756, American Embassy to State Department, London, 15 March 1961, 746D. 00/3–1561, NA.

51. Despatch 2426, McClanahan to State Department, London, 26 June 1961, 746D.00/6–2661, NA.

52. Airgram 132, McClanahan to State Department, London, 20 July 1961, 746D.00/7–2061, NA.

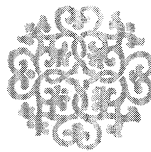
53. *The Times* (London), 15 July 1961, p.5.

54. “Annual Review Of Bahrain Affairs,” 1961. Wiltshire, Bahrain, 21 September 1961, FO 371/162821, PRO.

if there was no possibility of restoring the original penalty. Such an appeal would illustrate that Her Majesty's Government had not acted illegally. Unconcerned about "incurring odium," the Attorney-General also considered it necessary to appeal in order to "to take the temperature of the water in an attempt to settle compensation."<sup>55</sup>

In October, the Foreign Office informed the Political Resident in Bahrain, Sir William Luce, that the government's solicitors were instructed to negotiate compensation with the solicitors representing the three men released from St. Helena. Whitehall was concerned about how Shaykh Salman would respond to news that the St. Helena three would be compensated for their years in prison. Sir William was instructed to explain to the Ruler that paying compensation was the fastest way of disposing of the matter. Further proceedings would only serve to generate additional unfavorable publicity.<sup>56</sup>

Shaykh Salman's dissatisfaction with how Britain handled the St. Helena three had no lasting impact on Bahraini-British relations. On 2 November after the sudden death of his father, the new Ruler of Bahrain, Shaykh 'Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, expressed his wish "to maintain and strengthen the ties of friendship with Britain which his father valued so greatly."<sup>57</sup> Clearly, the episode underscored Britain's limitations. Her Majesty's Government continued to carry out the complex balancing act required to protect British interests, to support traditional rulers and at the same time to encourage modernization. But despite the best of intentions, in the case of the Bahrainis imprisoned on St. Helena, success was not achieved. Neither the British, the Al-Khalifa family, nor Bahrainis seeking change achieved their goals.



55. Record of A Meeting at the Foreign Office, London

56. Letter, Foreign Office to Luce, London, 17 October 1961, FO 371/156750, PRO.

57. Telegram 762, Luce to Foreign Office, Bahrain, 2 November 1961, PRO.