

THE UNLIKELY EMISSARY HOUDA NONOO

THE JEWISH FEMALE AMBASSADOR FROM BAHRAIN
REPRESENTS HER COUNTRY'S PLURALISM
AS SECTARIAN UPRISINGS CHALLENGE THE KINGDOM

BY SARAH BREGER

As the first Jewish ambassador posted abroad by an Arab country and the first female ambassador to the United States from Bahrain, Houda Ezra Ebrahim Nonoo is accustomed to defying expectations. When she hosted her first Bahraini independence day event at the embassy, guests eagerly rushed to greet her husband, assuming he was the Arab country's newly appointed ambassador. They were surprised when the diminutive woman by his side reached out to shake their extended hands instead. "When I walk into a meeting with the male deputy chief of mission, people often think he is the ambassador," says the 46-year-old Nonoo with a laugh, as we sit in her vast office on the second floor of the embassy.

Since her arrival in 2008, Nonoo, slim with shoulder-length auburn hair, has been the public face of Bahrain in the United States. Her appointment sent a message: The Sunni family that rules over the 274-square-mile island nation is determined to distinguish itself from its neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula. Unlike them, the majority-Muslim Bahrain works hard to portray itself as a modern nation where women are welcome in politics and its Jewish and Christian citizens are considered integral to the social fabric.

Nonoo was a wise choice as a diplomat for a country trying to burnish its credentials in the West. "Bahrain made history by appointing a Jewish woman to an ambas-



sadorial post,” says Jason Isaacson, director of government and international affairs at the American Jewish Committee (AJC), who has been on numerous AJC missions to Bahrain. “She is a remarkably talented, energetic, thoughtful representative of that kingdom. She has a business background, a human rights background and a political background.”

As ambassador, Nonoo’s task is to leverage her well-known charm and humor to shepherd her country’s strong relationship with the United States. Lacking the oil resources of its neighbors, the nation of 1.3 million has positioned itself as a strategic friend of the Western world: The country hosts the 4,000-strong U.S. Navy’s 5th

Fleet, allowing the U.S. to keep an eye on nearby Iran. In 2006, Bahrain became the first country on the Arabian Peninsula to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the U.S. The World Bank ranks it second only to Saudi Arabia in ease of doing business in the Middle East.

Bahrain’s reforms began when the current king, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, took power in 1999. A graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, he is a member of the Sunni al-Khalifa family, which has ruled Bahrain since 1783. The king ended the virtual state of emergency that had remained in place since the country’s independence from Britain in 1971.

He disavowed torture, freed political prisoners and invited exiles to return. Under his reign, Bahrain became the first country in the Persian Gulf to hold parliamentary elections and the first to grant women the vote in 2002. In December, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the tiny state a “model partner” and said she was “impressed by the commitment that the government has to the democratic path that Bahrain is walking on.”

That was last year, before thousands of protestors, inspired by the political change unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere in the region, poured into the center of Bahrain’s capital city, Manama, overwhelming Bahrain’s carefully constructed

MARTIN ADOLFSSON

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multicultural image and spotlighting the cleavage between the nation's Sunni elite and its Shiites, who make up 70 percent of the population; before hundreds of heavily armed police officers rushed the square, killing at least seven and wounding hundreds; before news of Bahrain was on the front page of *The New York Times* each morning, and back when Nonoo was best known in Washington circles for her improbable background and her enthusiastic championing of Bahraini moderation.



Houda Nonoo is one of Bahrain's 36 Jews. "We are all cousins," says Nonoo. "We are all related to each other." Of these, a high proportion hold important political positions. One of her cousins is Nancy Khedouri, the Jewish community's historian, who was appointed last year to the Shura Council, Bahrain's upper chamber of parliament. Another cousin, Ibrahim Nonoo, was named to the National Human Rights Authority last May. In last year's elections, Menashe Cohen, also Jewish, served as the head of the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society's election monitoring committee.

The modern Jewish community in Bahrain dates back to the early 1900s. Like Houda's grandfather Ebrahim Nissim Nonoo, other Jews migrated to the island from Iraq as well as from Iran and India. The immigrants carried the *Mizrachi* tradi-

tions of their native lands to Manama and quickly built strongholds of Jewish life: a synagogue, a mikvah and a cemetery.

Ebrahim Nonoo started out in Bahrain as a *zerryattiya*—someone who takes silver and gold strips from discarded clothing and melts them down for re-selling. He went on to establish the Bahrain Banking Company, making his fortune by trading in silver and gold. Other Bahraini Jewish families amassed their wealth in various trades—the Yadgars through textiles, the Khedouris by importing tablecloths and bed linens. Ebrahim Nonoo became a member of the Manama Municipality, the capital's city council; according to his granddaughter, he was the first member of the Nonoo family to enter politics.

The Bahraini Jewish community was prosperous, with a part of town named after it: Al-Mutanabi Road—where all the businesses were closed on Saturdays—was known as *Suq al-yahoud* or the "Jew's market." By 1948 there were an estimated 1,500 Jews in Bahrain, according to Khedouri. The Jews, she says, "got along peacefully with their neighbors and were involved in all aspects of Bahraini life."

That is why the community was shocked when, following the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, rioters tore through the Jewish quarter in Manama, looting houses and destroying property. Scores of Jews were injured, one woman died and the Torah scrolls were stolen from the synagogue. Jews such as Nonoo and Khedouri have said that the perpetrators of these attacks were Muslims from abroad living in Bahrain, not native Bahrainis. Charles Dalrymple Belgrave, the British advisor to Bahraini rulers from 1926 until 1957, confirms this in his memoirs, writing that "the leading Arabs were very shocked...most of them, when possible, had given shelter and protection to their Jewish neighbors."

Still, Bahraini Jews left en masse, some emigrating to Israel, others to England or America. Unlike in most Arab countries, they were allowed to leave with their property, although they were forced to give up

their citizenship. An estimated 500 to 600 Jews remained in Bahrain until riots broke out after the Six-Day War in 1967.

The few who stayed now fly rabbis in from England to perform bar mitzvahs, weddings and services. The synagogue, the only one on the Arabian Peninsula, is still standing but is closed due to the community's small numbers, and services take place in a residential home. The Jewish cemetery is open, and while there is no kosher food available, Houda's sister-in-law—a native Briton who keeps the only strictly kosher home in the community—imports kosher meat from England once a month.

As part of widespread reforms and openness to non-Shiite immigration, King Hamad has actively reached out to Jewish Bahrainis. In 2008 he met with Jewish expatriates in England and New York and told them they could return and regain their citizenship, offering financial incentives for those who might have lost land when they left. He informed an audience of 50 Bahraini Jews in New York, "It's open, it's your country."

Despite these overtures, there are those who believe that the position of Jews is not as secure as is claimed by the government and by Bahrain's Jews themselves. Bahrain's Jews are vulnerable to the news from Israel, which can reflect poorly on the Jewish community. As the husband of one Bahraini expatriate said anonymously, for fear of repercussions, "It's very hard to discern whether the Jewish population there is completely honest when discussing their role on the island and their feelings about Israel," because "the ruling family still lives in this 'alternative reality' that permeates every Arab country," refusing to acknowledge that "the Jewish people have any kind of historic right or spiritual connection to the land of Israel."

Like most Arab countries, with the exception of Jordan and Egypt, Bahrain has no relations with Israel. As a result, in Washington, Nonoo has no contact with Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador whose embassy is just down the block.

Yet Bahrain's ruling class is showing signs of thawing in regard to Israel: The crown prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, 42, a graduate of a U.S. Defense Department high school in Bahrain and American University in Washington DC, has called on Arab governments to increase communications with Israelis. "We need fresh thinking if the Arab Peace Initiative is to have the impact it deserves on the crisis that needlessly impoverishes Palestinians and endangers Israel's security," he wrote in a 2009 op-ed in *The Washington Post*. "This crisis is not a zero-sum game. For one side to win, the other does not have to lose." Last December, King Hamad himself stressed the importance of peace talks. Nonoo is positive that a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict can be found. "I hope so. For the Arab world as a whole, it is on their agenda," she says directly. "I hope it happens."

The reaction within Bahrain to the crown prince's op-ed was decidedly less positive, exposing yet another rift between the ruling faction and popular opinion. "Many Bahrainis have stated privately that the crown prince's piece in the *Post* piece [sic] is not representative of Bahraini public opinion," reported U.S. Ambassador to Bahrain J. Adam Ereli in a diplomatic cable released through WikiLeaks, describing the reaction of people as "viscerally opposed." In 2009, the country's lower parliament voted to penalize Bahrainis with business ties to Israel.

Nonoo is often asked about the nature of her relationship to Israel. For her, Israel is not an existential question of Jewish identity. "I have never visited Israel," she says. "I hold a Bahraini passport and my country has no diplomatic relations with Israel. This is the country I come from. I'm Jewish. I'm not Israeli."



The current demonstrations in Bahrain are not isolated events. Last August, protests erupted in Manama, leading the government to arrest numerous Shiite



Protesters in Manama, Bahrain, March 2011.

political and human rights leaders, and to crack down on press and Internet sites. According to the government, those detained were suspected terrorists and were not held for expressing dissident political views. Facing international criticism, Nonoo defended the government's actions in a letter to *The New York Times*. "Against the backdrop of continuing incidences of violence and public disorder, arrests were made because significant evidence was discovered of a network planning and instigating attacks on public property and inciting violence," she wrote. "Upholding the rule of law requires us to protect the rights of all citizens, including those at risk of violence, and we cannot tolerate illegal activities that seek to undermine our values and endanger lives."

The most recent protests in Pearl Square, the main roundabout in Manama, however, are different. "This is the worst it has ever been here," says Steven Sotloff, an American journalist in Bahrain, who has been covering the turmoil. As in other Arab countries, the demonstrations that began in mid-February were initially coordinated by young people who utilized social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In the wake

of Egypt and Tunisia's success in ousting aging autocrats, the protestors demanded better jobs, more housing and government reforms. Many also demanded an end to the monarchy.

Three days into the protests, after trying to appease Bahraini citizens by offering each family approximately \$2,650, the king sent the army into Pearl Square, where soldiers fired on the unarmed crowd, enraging the demonstrators and eliciting international criticism. The crown prince, whom the king put in charge of sorting out the crisis, pulled the army back and called for negotiations but was unable to diminish the determination of the protestors and crowds, who called for the resignation of the prime minister—the king's uncle, who has held the position for 40 years.

"Bahrain's biggest challenge is overcoming the sectarian issue," says Toby Jones, a professor of Middle East history at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. This divide—which does not exist in Tunisia and Egypt, where the Muslim populations are overwhelmingly Sunni—is exacerbated by the two-tiered parliament created by King Hamad: he appoints the upper house, while the people elect the lower one. In 2002, Shiite leaders boycot-

AZEN MAHDI/EPFL A.MANDOU

ted the elections because gerrymandering ensured a Sunni-majority vote in the lower parliament; before the protests, the Shiite opposition bloc, Wifaq, held only 18 of the lower parliament's 40 seats despite the community's significant size. The Sunni "have an absolute grip on political authority," says Jones. "The legislature is a shadow institution that doesn't really have a lot of power and certainly is not representative of Bahraini society." The Sunni government is also waging a demographic battle, importing Sunnis from other countries, such as Yemen and Pakistan, to serve in the army and police force. These for-

eign nationals can easily obtain citizenship, helping the Sunni elite to change the Sunni-Shiite balance in the population.

Bahrain's leaders have always kept a wary eye on Shiite-run Iran, which views Bahrain as in its sphere of influence—in 2009 a prominent Iranian cleric even called Bahrain a "province" of Iran. Responding in an interview with *The Washington Times*, Nonoo said, "It's a small gulf—we are just 26 miles away from Bushehr [an Iranian nuclear site]. So if Iran becomes nuclear, it will become an issue." Bahrain's Foreign Ministry quickly issued a statement that her remarks were misheard and taken

out of context. But it was recently revealed through WikiLeaks that in a meeting with U.S. General David Petraeus, King Hamad fingered Iran as the source of much of the trouble in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He argued forcefully for taking action to terminate their nuclear program, by whatever means necessary. "That program must be stopped," he said. "The danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it."

Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia shares these concerns about Iran. Bahrain is Saudi Arabia's close ally and in some ways its social pressure valve; connected by a 16-mile causeway, it is where burka-clad women can go to wear jeans and men can go to get a drink, mingle with tourists and watch the Grand Prix. To thwart Iran's influence on Bahrain, the Saudi monarchy helps prop up the Al-Khalifa government with money and oil. The Saudis also provide security, as Saudi troops could easily cross the causeway to quell any unrest.

In an interview last year, Nonoo initially declined to discuss this civil discord, but when pressed, took a hard line, saying the complaints were "taken out of proportion." She downplayed the Sunni-Shiite con-

flict by comparing it to tensions between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews. She also criticized August's protests, saying they are "not peaceful demonstrations if there are Molotov cocktails."

Nonoo says she has never experienced religious prejudice in Bahrain. "I had a normal Jewish upbringing," she says, celebrating Jewish holidays, fasting on Yom Kippur and lighting Shabbat candles. "I was born into Judaism," Nonoo explains with a shrug. "It's no different from growing up like a Jew in America. It's my religion."

At age 14, Nonoo, like many other Bahraini Jews, was packed off to England to attend Jewish school. Together with her younger brother Abraham, she went to Carmel College, Europe's only Jewish boarding school, known to many as the "Jewish Eton," now closed. "She was very serious always," says Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, who was the principal at the time. "She was well-liked and she integrated very well." Nonoo recalls the experience less fondly. "I did not enjoy it. It made me less religious." The Judaism she experienced there was foreign to the one she grew up with: "I never knew anything about the Holocaust until I was 14. I never identified with Israel," she says.

Nonoo stayed in England after leaving school, earning a B.A. in accounting from the City of London University in 1985 and an MBA from the International University of Europe in Watford in 1987. After graduating, she quickly advanced in the financial world, serving as financial director of both *Gourmet* and Jetflair International. She married a British citizen, Salman Idafar, in the late 1980s, and although she visited Bahrain often, she saw her future in England. But when her father died in a car crash in 1993, she, as the eldest, was called home to oversee Gulf Computer Services, one of the family businesses. With her

The Four Children

The Wise, the Simple, the Wicked, and the One Who Does Not Know How to Ask

Of the *Hagaddah's* Four Children,
I was the one who didn't ask.
It's not that I wasn't curious.
But what were the right questions?
Surely not Why did Cousin Rita kill herself?
On this subject my loudmouth family was mute.

Why was this night of Passover different
from all other nights of the year?
To ask questions. The same questions every Passover:
Why do we eat what we eat, dip what we dip,
and gorge ourselves slumped over our chairs?
Not Why was Uncle Al sleeping at Aunt Flossie's one night,
and at his other wife, Tess's, house the next?

Our bellies kvetched at the platters of brisket
sweating under foil.
Jews had survived for five thousand years.
But who, among my starving kin
could survive another minute on a dripping parsley stalk?

Four questions, four children, four cups of wine.
Ten Plagues, which my dopey cousin from the Bronx
pronounced "Plaques," all of us stifling giggles.
I dipped a pinky into my Manischewitz
and flicked ten red droplets, one for each plague,
onto my plate: *Blood. Frogs. Gnats. Flies.*
Murrain. (What was that?) *Boils. Hail. Locusts. Darkness.*
And the last—*Slaying of the first-born*—that was me!
Because I'd accidentally licked my little finger,
dosing myself with all ten plagues at once.

Opposite me at the table sat Cousin Michael the brain
between Cousin Mark the trouble-maker
and Cousin Jerry, the plaque-boy, chicken-dumb.
Cousin Simon was quarantined in his bedroom with mumps.
In the old *Hagaddahs*, the Four Children were always sons.
To taste the sea you only need one gulp,
goes the proverb.
Until next year's Passover, this first-born daughter
will have to hold her tongue.

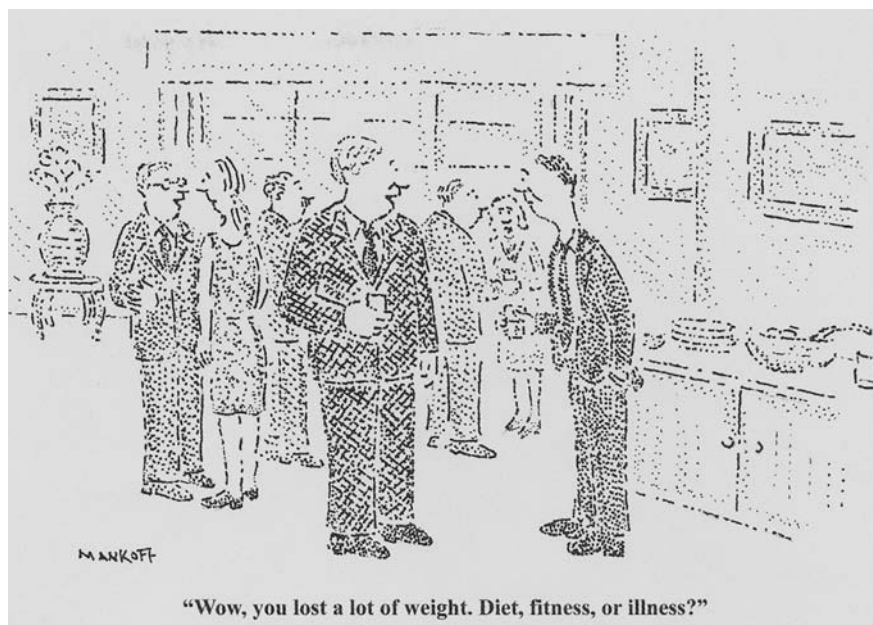
-Jane Shore

husband, she settled into life in Bahrain raising her two sons, Menashe and Ezra, now teenagers.

Upon her return, Nonoo became a champion of women's issues. The first questions Nonoo often gets asked in the U.S. are if women in Bahrain can walk the streets unaccompanied (yes) or drive (and yes). Many are surprised to see her without a headscarf. "Some women totally cover up; some do not—it's their choice," says Nonoo. "My cultural counselor, for example, has six girls in her family. Two dress Western, two wear the hijab and two only show their eyes."

Despite these positives, systemic inequalities still exist for Bahraini women. In 2004, Nonoo founded the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, an organization dedicated to the empowerment of women in Bahrain. She believes that the personal status of women—the issues surrounding marriage and divorce that fall under the sharia code—is one of the most pressing issues in the Muslim world today. The Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society is a watchdog group that focuses on passing unified personal-status legislation to protect women in divorce and child custody cases. The Bahrain campaign, however, is facing resistance from Islamic clerics. "It's very frustrating," Nonoo says, describing efforts to enact a personal status law as "currently at a standstill."

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Bahrain has opened its political system to women. In 2002 it became the first Persian Gulf nation to extend voting rights to them with the support of the king's wife, Sheikha Sabika, who established the Supreme Council on Women to promote women's rights and their full participation in Bahraini society. Even so, there is stiff opposition: In a poll on the issue, 60 percent of Bahraini women opposed their own suffrage, and in 2002, eight women ran for parliament and none were elected. In 2006, 18 women ran, but only one, Latifa Al-Qaoud, was elected, in an uncontested race; in 2010, Al-Qaoud held on to her



seat and remains the only woman elected to Bahrain's parliament.

Overall, appointments made by the king have done more to put women in power than has the popular vote. There are currently 11 women in the Shura Council up from six in 2002. Nonoo, who was drawn into politics through her interest in human rights, was appointed in 2006 by King Hamad to the Shura Council, where she served on the Committee for Finance and Economic Affairs. Her selection as ambassador to the United States came as a complete shock. "The foreign minister said he had good news. I said, 'you're joking.' I didn't know whether to laugh or cry." According to Wikileaks documents, the American Embassy in Bahrain was pleased to hear of the appointment; Ambassador J. Adam Erelis sent a cable to Washington, describing Nonoo as "bright, genuine, and refreshingly direct," adding that she was "a good friend of the United States" and "a strong supporter of human rights and political liberalization." Soon the international press started buzzing about the Arab state's future Jewish woman ambassador. "The headlines were 'Jewish Female,'" says Nonoo. "They forgot I was Bahraini."

"It is a very patriarchal society, so to name a woman—to name a Jewish woman—is remarkable," says Mary Coons, international editor of *Bahrain Telegraph*, calling it "a smart political move on the king's part." (Nonoo is the second of three female Bahraini ambassadors—the first was appointed to France in 2000 and the third to China in 2010.) But skeptics said that the appointment of Nonoo, who had no diplomatic experience, was a savvy play to hammer home the message of Bahrain's comparative tolerance and openness to the West. She gamely admits she was new to diplomacy. "I didn't know what an ambassador did," she says. "I have been on a learning curve since I have been here."

While Nonoo has kept a low profile in Washington's Jewish community—except for an occasional Friday night dinner and holiday service at the Chabad House—she has been an active behind-the-scenes networker. It was she who organized the meeting between King Hamad and Bahraini Jewish expats in the U.S. She was also involved in arranging a dinner at the home of Rabbi Levi Shemtov, director of the Washington office of American Friends of Lubavitch, with the Bahraini foreign minister and

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representatives from Jewish Federations of North America, B'nai B'rith International, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee and other Jewish organizations. Perhaps most significantly, she also invited representatives from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. "Houda has a tremendous amount of clout," says Shemtov. "She is known to be very close to the foreign minister and the king."

Visitors to embassy events, including a Ramadan iftar, have noted Shemtov or other Jews in attendance. "It is very symbolic that Nonoo is Jewish," says Amy Riolo, a culinary expert specializing in Middle Eastern culture and cuisine who attends many events at the embassy. Riolo thinks it harks back to the times when Jews lived in Islamic lands peacefully and respectfully. "She is a symbol that this can happen in modern times, too."



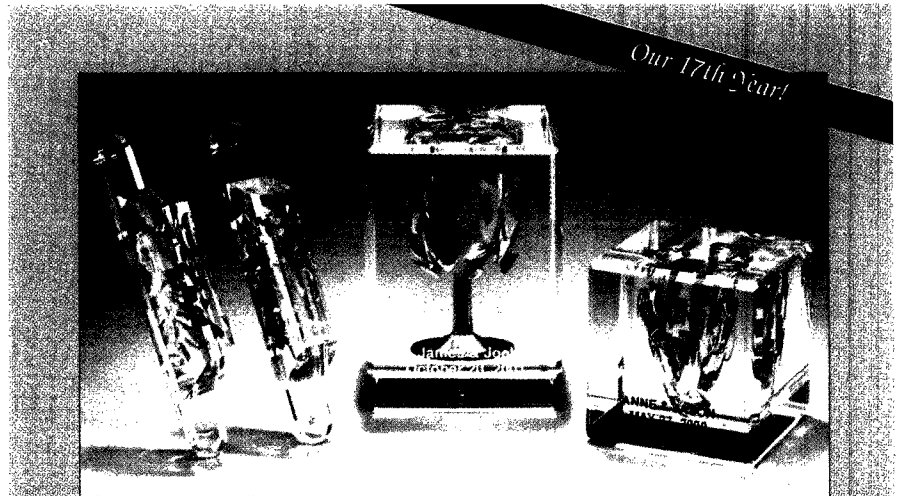
The louder the unrest in Bahrain, the quieter Nonoo has become: She has remained conspicuously silent on recent events, not answering media inquiries or making any public statements. Still, her imprimatur can be seen: According to one journalist in Bahrain, 14 international journalists were detained at the Bahraini airport on February 17th until the State Department leaned on Nonoo, who took immediate action. Soon after, the journalists were greeted by Bahraini government officials, apologies were made, and the journalists were given private rides to their destinations in Bahrain.

The Bahraini Jewish community is remaining tight-lipped as well. While it is clear that the disparities between Sunnis and Shiites can no longer be swept under the rug or papered over by multiculturalism, it is in the interest of the country's Jews to remain loyal to the Sunni government,

stresses Sotloff, adding that even if the Shiites take power, he does not expect the tiny, non-threatening Jewish community to be in danger.

Ambassador Nonoo is not in a position to comment, but her cousin, Shura Council member Nancy Khedouri, has. "We are in full support of His Royal Majesty, our government and our na-

tional defense team, who ensure that peace and stability continue to exist in our precious country, Bahrain," says Khedouri. "Please continue to remember the Bahraini nation in your prayers and that His Royal Majesty and Bahrain will continue to be under the Almighty's protection," Khedouri says, concluding with an emphatic "Amen." ☞

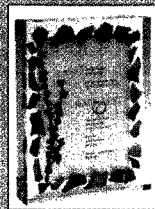


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