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**BAHRAIN–IRAN RELATIONS IN MODERN TIMES**

by

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September 2014

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**BAHRAIN-IRAN RELATIONS IN MODERN TIMES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Persian Gulf region is the single largest source of fossil fuels in the world, which emphasizes its importance as the most strategically important waterway in the world. A bridge between East and West, the region facilitates contact between nations by providing energy and power through oil and gas exports to the industrial world at large. Countries bordering the shores of the Persian Gulf therefore play a vital role in maintaining balance of power and world peace through bilateral relations and beyond.

Bahrain's journey until the middle of twentieth century has been more adventurous due to its small size and strategic central location, which served as an invitation to foreign powers, rulers and regional empires to exercise their own influence whenever they chose to do so. Oil-rich Iran, with the stature of an empire on the other hand, has been more stable throughout.

The differences between these two countries lies in ethnic makeup of the two nations, which is the bone of contention between the two neighbors. This thesis explores relationship and interaction between modern-day Kingdom of Bahrain and Islamic Republic of Iran, two vitally important countries, by tracing their background and cultural ties through the pages of history.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the context of Bahrain-Iran relations it would be appropriate to review the body politics of both countries with a perspective encompassing their past history, with emphasis on major events of the past 300 years that lead up to the present times.

The Islands of Bahrain constitute an archipelago of 33 islands with an area of only 687 square kilometers that are located off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia in the middle south of the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup> The word Bahrain, meaning “Two Seas,” refers to the unique fresh water springs that sprout within the salt-water seabed surrounding its coasts. As far back as 2000 BC, the area remained an important staging post, attracting regional traders, foreigners and settlers to its abundant fresh waters, friendly shores, fertile date groves and coastal hatcheries of natural pearls. Civilizations flourished and for centuries it was ruled by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, and Persians and finally by Muslim Arabs, who continue to be the rulers until today.



Figure 1. The Persian Gulf<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and Its Heritage* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Persian Gulf,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Persian\\_Gulf\\_map.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Persian_Gulf_map.png), accessed November 20, 2011.

Geographically Bahrain occupies a strategic location within the Persian Gulf but due to its small size, in the past, its neighbors like Iran and even other larger tribes of eastern Saudi Arabia have sought to control the island.

Since the propagation of Islam as a religion within and beyond the Arabian peninsula some 1400 years ago, the tribes in Bahrain were among the first to embrace Islam, which to date is the religion of the state. In comparison to Iran, it is tiny on every scale, literally a dot when viewed on the worlds map, yet it is a sovereign state and an independent country in every respect with its individual identity within the comity of United Nations of the world.

On the other hand, Iran occupies Persian Gulf and presently encompasses largest territory amongst mideastern countries. With a population of 69 million people and covering an area of 1.6 million square kilometers it is a goliath of a country in comparison with Bahrain.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2. Map of Middle East<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Ervand Ibrahim, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5–6.

<sup>4</sup>“Middle East,” [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/historic\\_periods.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/historic_periods.php), accessed Nov 20, 2011.

Once a major empire and civilization within itself, the rich history of Persia as it was once called, dates back to 2500 BC. It started with the Elamite Empire and continued through Median and Achamaemenid empires up to Sassnid Empire, when, in 642 AD, the Islamic forces in times of Caliph Omar Bin Alkhitab conquered Iran and laid the foundations of the Muslim era, which through subsequent rulers, dynasties and revolutions continue until today.

## **B. GREAT ISLAMIC DIVIDE**

In order to grasp the nature of conflict as it presently exists between Iran and Bahrain in particular and Iran and between its erstwhile Arabian neighbor countries in general, it would be helpful to understand and trace the history of the “Great Islamic Divide” that lies at the very heart of the conflict and seeds of which were sown in very early stages of Islamic rule in the Arabian peninsula.

This dichotomy refers back to the division of the religion of Islam into its two main sects, namely Sunnis and Shias that resulted following soon after the death of Prophet Mohammed in 632 AD. The minority group of followers, favoring the succession of Ali Bin Abi Talib (Prophet Mohammed’s first cousin) as the rightful Caliph, became to be known as “Shias” (Derived from the Arabic phrase “Shi’at ‘Ali,” which literally means “Party of Ali”). They believed that the political and spiritual leadership of all Muslims was the sole responsibility of Prophet Mohammed’s very own family and as such Ali and his male successors (later referred to as Imams by the Shias) were the rightful Caliphs to rule and guide all Muslims. However, in practice, this did not happen as the belief was in contrast with the thinking professed by the majority of Sunni followers who did not believe that the Prophet had selected Ali to serve in that role.<sup>5</sup> This conflict of ideas resulted in separating the two sects in two distinct groups, such that with the passage of time, Shias perpetrated the doctrine of Twelve Imams or “Twelver” as commonly known, as the fundamental doctrine of their branch of Islam, now well known as Shia’ism. Over centuries their numbers increased, through migrations and conquests they adopted new homelands and territories. Today, Shi’as currently constitute

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<sup>5</sup> Ardisher Nausheed, *Current Affairs-Iran and Neighbors* (New York: Pegasus 2005), 74–75.

approximately 15% of the global Muslim population of 1.5 billion. These days most Shia Muslims live in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

Iran constitutes the largest majority of Shia Muslims with 80% of its population, while Bahrain's Shia population hovers in the range of 65–70 percent.<sup>7</sup>

It is also interesting to note that Iran was not always the bastion of the Shia branch of Islam. Prior to the advent of Safavid Empire (1502–1736), Sunnis were predominant amongst Iran's populace.<sup>8</sup> Bahrain has never been ruled by Iran, but Iran has long held claims to the allegiance of Bahrain's Shi'ite majority. There is a complicated history to this relationship. Since the present day minority Sunni tribe of Al-Khalifa came into prominence in 1783, they had been paying tributes and protection monies to Iranian coastal chiefs/governors. This practice ceased somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century just as the British influence grew in the Arabian Gulf.<sup>9</sup>

A detailed study of the modern history of both countries will follow. This history will illustrate the obvious contrast in the leadership and governance pattern based on opposite scales of Islamic jurisprudence. It will also summarize the different experiences of each state and analyze the roots of the dispute between both states. Each is skeptical of other's approach, be it politics, economic relations or efforts at furthering bilateral ties. It is for this reason that Bahrain, with its tiny size and with zero depth of defense, considers itself to be venerable and no match for Iran, should it (Iran) decide to opt for hostilities aimed against Bahrain. It is for this reason alone that Bahrain is hugely dependent upon its western allies in the region for providing safeguards for the preservation of its territorial integrity. The formulation of a group of Arabian countries saddling the Persian Gulf region into an economic and military alliance called the Gulf Consultative Council

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<sup>6</sup> Iran Chamber Society, "History of Iran: Islamic conquest," [http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic\\_conquest/islamic\\_conquest.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/history/islamic_conquest/islamic_conquest.php), accessed Aug 16, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Blanchard, "Islam: Sunnis and Shi'ites" CRS Report RS21745 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 2006), <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/78715.pdf>, accessed July 5, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Monica Gronke, *Iran: A Short History: From Islamization to the Present* (New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2008), 90.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Issawi, *Economic History of Iran, 1800–1914* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971), 38–40.

or GCC, was the direct result of joint fears emanating from Iran's hostile perspective as viewed immediately after the 1979 AD Iranian revolution.<sup>10</sup>

### C. BONE OF CONTENTION AND RESULTING FEARS

With its majority Shia population, Bahrain's minority Sunni rulers are constantly under pressure and fearful of a situation where present-day Iran could stir up civil disturbances through covert activities perpetrated through its Shia sympathizers within Bahrain. Indeed this has been the pattern during the past thirty years ever since the fall of Shah of Iran's regime in 1979 AD. For example in 1981 AD, coup attempts by Shia dissidents (later squashed by Bahraini authorities) and again serious civil disturbances in 1996 AD, which led to the arrest of a number of Shia dissident leaders who were subsequently exiled. Such disturbances, though at a reduced scale, are still continuing sporadically, keeping Bahrain's expatriate security services at full alert.<sup>11</sup>

This backdrop plus Iran's growing military capability, notwithstanding its relentless pursuit of achieving indigenous nuclear capability, presents a real challenge and is a source of concern not only for Bahrain but also for Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (U.A.E), and Saudi Arabia which all are wary of Iran's current policies. In recent times the situation has been further complicated due to a regular barrage of what is often termed as "irresponsible statements" of Iran's leaders, by the world leaders or media in general. For example President Ahmadinejad (The current fire brand President of Iran)'s call for Israel to be "wiped off the map" in a 27 October 2005 speech in Tehran was viewed as irrational by many world leaders.<sup>12</sup>

In the past 100 years, Iran's repeated territorial claims on Bahrain have been repudiated by regional powers and even by United Nations. The latest of these claims came in July 2007 AD, where an editorial published in Iran's influential *Kayhan* daily and calling Bahrain "a province of Iran," sparked considerable tension within the region.

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<sup>10</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 105–108.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of Middle East* (UK: Manchester United Press, 2003), 194.

<sup>12</sup> Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, "Israel must be wiped off the Map: Speech" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud\\_Ahmadinejad\\_and\\_Israel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahmoud_Ahmadinejad_and_Israel), accessed July 16, 2011.

“The Public demand in Bahrain is the reunification of this province with its motherland, the Islamic Iran,” wrote<sup>13</sup> its author Mr. Hassan Shariatmadari, who at that time was the advisor to the supreme leader Ali Khamenei. The Iranian foreign office did say that such a statement was not the official policy and was an individual’s view-point only, yet the damage was done, raising doubts and discontent amongst Bahraini leadership. From Bahrain’s perspective, such a scenario poses a problem of insecurity and an agonizing anxiety and fear for its administration with concern that the Shia majority population in Bahrain can be targeted and influenced by Iran’s Shia clerical authority to rise at any time in reprisal to certain Governmental policy that they may not like. To mitigate such feelings and improve relations all around Bahrain (since 2002 AD referred to as Kingdom of Bahrain, and led by its sovereign King Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa) has started a reform program, which is aimed at providing economic incentives, concessions and compromises including the release and return of Shia political detainees from exile. As a result there has been improvement in the political circumstances of the Shia population in Bahrain.

#### **D. HYPOTHESIS**

The main hypothesis of this thesis is that Iran will not succeed in its claims in annexing Bahrain, yet the probability of causing security damage is real and does exist. The dangers to Bahrain would become more acute if Iran acquires nuclear weapons. In this eventuality, Iran could conceivably attempt to coerce Bahrain to compromise on its independence and cooperate with Iran at the expense of its normal policy preferences. Close proximity of the Iranian nuclear reactor at Bushair on the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf is therefore considered a source of threat to the environment.<sup>14</sup> Iran so far is continuing to stake a hardened approach in negotiations on this issue with U.N. and other Western countries and has threatened to retaliate against the Gulf States if they allowed United States or any other western country to use their territory as a base for strike against Iranian nuclear facilities. This is a matter of serious concern as Bahrain already

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan D. Halevi, *Iran’s Renewed Threats Take Over the Gulf Arab States* (Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, 2007) vol. 7, no. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Khlopkov, Anton, *Iran Breakthrough for the Russian Nuclear Industry*, Moscow Defense Brief (Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2010), 19.

hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and has been doing so for the past 60 years. In an ensuing regional conflict Bahrain will be in direct line of fire and quite vulnerable to Iranian military reaction. In all probability, should this scenario really gets enacted, the majority Shia population in Bahrain will not stay calm and the Sunni led Bahraini government will then face internal and external threats that it might find hard to cope with.

Consequently, Bahrain and the rest of Gulf States are more or less forced by Iran not to support any military option against it, despite the threat to regional peace. Regardless, on its part, Bahrain will continue to search for effective strategies that can be implemented to maintain its sovereignty and territorial integrity against one of the largest and most powerful states in the Persian Gulf region.

The ensuing chapters summarize the modern historical make up of Bahrain and Iran (Presently referred to as Islamic Republic of Iran since its 1979 AD revolution), leading up to the modern times of 21st century where both countries being responsible members of the international community will have to find ways to live peacefully for the sake of future generations and prosperity.

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## **II. MODERN BAHRAIN: THE JOURNEY**

### **A. A BRIEF SURVEY**

In recent times Persian Gulf region has emerged as the single largest source of fossil fuels for the world, which emphasizes its importance as the most strategic waterway in the world. A bridge between East and West, the Persian Gulf facilitates contact between Asia, Africa, Europe and Americas by providing energy and power through oil and gas exports to the industrial world at large. It is for this reason alone that today, countries bordering the shores of Persian Gulf, play such vital role in maintaining a balance of power and world peace through bilateral relations and beyond.

The Persian Gulf abounds in islands and one of the most important of them are the Islands of Bahrain lying between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the west and northwest, Persian Gulf waters in the north, Qatar and Iran in the east. Bahrain occupies a central spot within the Gulf region. Throughout history, this strategic location accentuated by its abundant sweet water sources, variety of agricultural food and lucrative pearl- banks attracted maritime travelers and sailors to stop by and replenish their hordes. This was also the reason, which led invaders and colonists to impose their will and fight for its control since earliest of time.

### **B. ISLAMIC RULE**

At the time of advent of Islam in 7<sup>th</sup> century, Bahrain was rich in agricultural wealth, with fertile soil and plentiful water resources located along its coast. It was called the Province of Bahrain, and the Arab residents were descendants of the Arab tribe Bani Abd Al-Qais. This larger Bahrain comprised three regional areas: Hajar (present day Al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia), Al-Khatt (present day Al-Qatif in Saudi Arabia) and Awal (present day Bahrain). As noted by Al-Blezeri and others, the population comprised mostly of Arab tribes who embraced the nascent religion during the life of Prophet Mohammed itself.<sup>15</sup> The area substantiated and grew in influence during the periods of

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<sup>15</sup> Al Blazerri, *Futooh Al Buldan* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2002), 106–107.

Caliph Omar Bin Alkhitab and remained a base for Islamic eastern conquests during the periods of reign of Abbassid and Omayyad Caliphates.

The beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> Century AD witnessed a rebellion of the Messianic Ismailia sect, which actually originated in Kufa (In present day Iraq) through what was termed as the “Revolution of Qaramita.” They took over the city of Hajr, Bahrain’s capital at that time, with an aim to create a utopian society through plunder and loot. They practiced repression and carried out a brutal massacre of pilgrim caravans returning from Mecca on regular basis. Some scholars have termed this period as “Century of Terrorism”<sup>16</sup> as the Qamartians remained the most dominant power in the Persian Gulf controlling the coast of Oman and even collected tribute from Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad. In 976 AD they were, however, defeated in a battle by the Abbasids and gradually their power waned and Bahrain broke away in 1058 AD under the leadership of Abd Al-Buhlul who reestablished orthodox Islam on the Islands.<sup>17</sup> This period was then followed by the ascendancy to power of the Ayuni state in Bahrain which was established 1074 AD and continued until 1238 AD.<sup>18</sup> After the Ayunis, Bahrain had two sets of rulers who each lasted about 150 years: first the Bani Afsoor and then the Bani Al-Jabur. This was a period of chronic instability with local disputes allowing various Persian-based Arab Kingdoms based in Qais, Qishm and Hormuz to involve themselves in Bahrain’s affairs.<sup>19</sup>

### C. THE PORTUGUESE INVASION

The 15<sup>th</sup> century AD was marked by several major events, which brought about great changes in the history of the world. In the east, the Ottoman Turks won sweeping victories on the soil of Anatolia while they also conquered Constantinople in 1453 AD. In the West, the Arab rule ended in Spain, while 1492 AD saw the discovery of Americas

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Juburi, Juburi, *History of Islamic Philosophy – With view of Greek philosophy and early history of Islam* (New York: Bright Pen, 2004), 172.

<sup>17</sup> John Joseph Saunders, *History of medieval Islam* (New York: Taylor & Francis Course Content Delivery, 1978), 130.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford Boswort, *The New Islamic Dynasties: A Genealogical and Chronological Manual* (UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 95.

<sup>19</sup> Curtis E. Larson, *Life and Land Use on the Bahrain Islands: The Geo-archaeology of an Ancient Society* (Illinois: University Of Chicago Press, 1984), 66.

through Christopher Columbus. In 1498 AD Vasco De Gama of Portugal undertook a voyage along the western coast of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope towards India. This voyage marked the entry of Europeans into waters east of Africa and Indian Ocean threatening the Persian Gulf and Red Sea trade routes, which were otherwise secured by the Islamic states within the region. The Portuguese spearheaded this new Colonial onslaught.<sup>20</sup> Considering themselves as soldiers of the Crusades, they began by colonizing western Indian coastal areas such as Goa and Kutch, and once established, they successfully launched various invasions into the Persian Gulf and Red sea port regions to establish control on these lucrative maritime trade routes.<sup>21</sup> The Kingdom of Harmuz was their first target.

The Portuguese had a distinct advantage over their Arab adversaries as they had under their belt a regular naval force which was well equipped—especially with artillery—and so it was easy for them to defeat and force the Kingdom of Harmuz to recognize the authority of the Portuguese crown. By 1521 AD, Bahrain, due to its strategic location in the center of the Persian Gulf, was also the focus of Portuguese attention as they prepared another naval expedition to destroy the opposition of Bahrain by occupying it and liquidating the state of Al-Jabur which had become a threat to their influence through the popular reputation that the Bahraini King Muqrin Al-Jaboor enjoyed. The Portuguese however had an overwhelming superiority in firepower, and though the Bahraini forces provided a stiff resistance, they could not match the invaders, who were then able to establish their control over the island. The island of Bahrain was thus occupied and pillaged and its ships were set on fire.<sup>22</sup> In this manner the Portuguese through cruel treatments and terror tactics continued to be the undisputed rulers of these waters for first three decades of the sixteenth century.

The Portuguese rule though, did not last very long. The people of the Persian Gulf region were resolved to end the plunder of their own wealth and control over their

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<sup>20</sup> Ahmed Al Anani, *The Portuguese in Bahrain and Surrounding Areas* (Manama: Al Watheeqa no. 1, 1984), 77.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> Nawaithama Al Sairafi, *The Portuguese Influence in the Arabian Gulf* (Riyadh, 1983), 111.

traditional trade. In 1602 AD, a Bahraini stabbed the Portuguese governor in Bahrain and declared himself the ruler. Soon after, the people of Bahrain stormed the fort and over-ran the garrison; the Portuguese era in Bahrain was thus drawing to its close. By 1622 AD they had even lost Hurmuz and were soon chased out of every port in the Persian Gulf.<sup>23</sup> This was also the period in which the Ottomans were exercising their authority and control over Egypt, Baghdad and southwards.

#### **D. BRITISH INFLUENCE**

The second half of the sixteenth century saw British attempts to influence the ever-lucrative trade routes of the Persian Gulf by coaxing the Persian rulers with concessions and offers of concessionary bilateral trade pacts. In 1598 AD, the British delegation to the court of Shah Abbas of Persia, offered to recognize the Persian army on modern basis and to work on the establishment of a closer relationship with the Christian West. This was an attempt to widen the gulf between the Ottomans and the Persians to serve their own future imperialist ambitions and to help them to act against the Portuguese, whose power and influence was on the decline. This enabled British authorities to obtain special trade facilities as the common hatred against the Portuguese helped the development of relations and gave it a sense of purpose. An Anglo-Persian alliance thus resulted in the establishment of British Agencies in Shiraz and Isfahan and elsewhere. The British East India Company, which had been earlier established in Surat, India in 1609 AD there by began to exert its influence in matters of the Persian Gulf region as a whole and this influence gained momentum and lasted for next couple of centuries.

#### **E. RISE OF AL-KHALIFAS IN ZUBARA AND BAHRAIN**

With the exit of the Portuguese at the beginning of the third decade of the seventeenth century, some Arab tribes ruling the eastern coast of the Persian Gulf ruled Bahrain. Occasionally they paid tribute to Persia (Modern day Iran). The best known of these tribes was Al-Madhkur, which ruled Bahrain in the middle of the eighteenth century

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<sup>23</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 23.

until the siege of Zubara. This was a town situated in the north western part of modern day Qatar, which was ruled by Sheikh Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa of the Al-Utoob tribe. Sheikh Nasr Al-Madhkur, who was the ruler of Bahrain and Bushire at that time attempted a full-scale invasion of Zubara and besieged the town in 1783 AD. The siege however failed and the battle was lost decisively. Following the defeat and flight of Sheikh Nasr Al-Madhkur to Bushire in Iran, Sheikh Ahmed Bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa turned his attention towards Bahrain and conquered it in 1783 AD. He became to be known as Ahmed Al-Fateh—“the Conqueror.”<sup>24</sup> This event marked the beginning of an era of Al-Atoobs in Bahrain.

The Al-Khalifa family continues to rule Bahrain until the present day.

#### **F. BRITISH PROTECTION TREATIES**

Bahrain enjoyed a spell of relative peace and stability after its liberation by Sheikh Ahmed Al-Fateh, and the people of Bahrain welcomed the new administration. Nevertheless, it attracted the attention of its greedy neighboring powers, which were eager to establish control over it in view of the importance of its location, abundant water resources and wealth derived especially from its pearl-banks.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Omanis invaded Bahrain and while a twelve-year-old child governed it, the Omani ruler Sayyid Sultan promoted his son, Salim, as governor in the Arad Fort.<sup>25</sup>

The rulers of Bahrain, however, were not strong enough to continuously repel the offensive measures adopted by their neighbors. As such, in order to rule peacefully and be assured of continuity of rule, they had no choice except to enter into a protective treaty with the British, which had become highly influential and militarily strong in the region. To consolidate their position, the Rulers then signed the 1861 AD Perpetual Truce of Peace and Friendship, which was revised in 1892 AD and later in 1951 AD.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage*, (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 31.

<sup>25</sup> Abdul Hadi Al-Taz, *An Unpublished Document about Bahrain* (Manama: Al Watheeqa no. 4), 108–112.

<sup>26</sup> James Onlay, *The Politics of Protection in the Gulf* (UK: Exeter University, 2004), 44.

Effectively these “treaties” implied that the rulers of Bahrain had to get prior permission of British Government before entering into relationships with any foreign government. In return Bahrain’s territorial integrity was ensured from all aggression by sea or through land attack. More importantly the British promised to support the rule of the Al-Khalifa in Bahrain, securing its unstable position as rulers of the country.<sup>27</sup>

#### **G. BAHRAIN IN THE NINETEENTH TO TWENTIETH CENTURY**

With such assurance of peace, sea trade flourished and by the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century and Bahrain became an important trading center in the Persian Gulf. This led to prosperity, socio-economic changes and developments that laid the foundations of transforming Bahrain from a mere trading center into a modern state. The process involved a large migration of Persian families into Bahrain and attracted many Indian merchants who also set up businesses there. Consequently, Bahrain became the center of a web of trade routes across the regional countries and the Indian sub-continent.<sup>28</sup> In particular, due to increased trade with India, sub-continental cultural influence had a marked effect. According to Exeter University’s James Onley “In these and countless other ways, eastern Arabia’s ports and people were as much a part of the Indian Ocean world as they were a part of the Arab world.”<sup>29</sup>

Bahrain went through major social reforms under the de facto rule of Charles Belgrave, who was the resident British advisor. Al-Hiddaya Boys School, the first modern school in the region, opened in 1919 AD, while the first girl’s school in the Persian Gulf opened in 1928 AD. Earlier a missionary hospital was established in 1903 AD, while other reforms included the abolition of slavery.

Bahrain was also the first to discover oil in the Persian Gulf, with the first oil well sunk on its soil in 1932 AD. The first oil refinery was subsequently established leading to the collapse of the pearl diving industry, which hitherto had been the main source of income in Bahrain. The oil industry on the other hand attracted hordes of laborers from

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>28</sup> Nelida Fucearo, *Persians and the Space in the City of Bahrain (1863-1893), Transnational Connections and Arab Gulf*, ed. Madawi Al-Rasheed (New York: Routledge, 2005), 39.

<sup>29</sup> James Onley, *The Politics of Protection in the Gulf* (UK: Exeter University, 2004), 78.

the surrounding countries that led to the emergence of a strong working class, which was to have important repercussions for the development of Bahraini society over the coming years.

Bahrain fought on the side of the Allies during the Second World War and was mentioned in dispatches in late 1942 AD.

## **H. INDEPENDENCE AND AFTERMATH**

After World War II, Bahrain became the center for British administration of the lower Persian Gulf. As trade and downstream industries flourished in the 1950s, a number of labor unions were formed which associated themselves with the leftist nationalistic movement that called for political reforms and an end to British hegemony in running the affairs of the country. They were also motivated by the Pan-Arab deterrence led by Egypt against the British and French invasion during the 1956 AD Suez Canal crisis. The British however retaliated with a heavy hand and managed to quell the uprising by declaring it illegal. Clashes ensued and a number of union leaders were arrested, imprisoned or deported.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the seeds of discord were firmly laid.

Yet another uprising called Intifada March stemmed in March 1965 AD against the continued presence of the British in Bahrain. It started with layoffs of large number of Bahraini staff at Bahrain Petroleum Company. This sparked a major riot in which several Bahraini protesters died. Judging from these changing tides, in 1968 AD, the British government in U.K then decided to end the treaty with the Persian Gulf sheikdoms. By mid-1971 AD, however, the nine sheikdoms still had not agreed on the terms of union. Accordingly, Bahrain sought independence as a separate entity declaring independence on August 15, 1971, and becoming formally independent as the State of Bahrain on December 16, 1971.<sup>31</sup>

After the 1973 AD Arab-Israeli war the price of crude oil sky-rocketed. While Bahrain's own reserves were being depleted, the high oil price meant there was massive

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<sup>30</sup> Mariam Joyce, "The Bahrain Three on St. Helena, 1956–1961" *Middle East Journal*, vol. 54 (2000), 613–623,

<sup>31</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 37.

capitalization in the Kingdom's neighbors. The Kingdom itself was able to exploit this new to attract massive investment thanks to the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 AD. Beirut had long been the financial center of the Arab world, but the outbreak of hostilities in the country had an immediate impact on the banking industry. Bahrain offered a new location at the center of the booming Persian Gulf with a large educated workforce, which well versed in fiscal regulations and commercial traits. As growth surged, the middle class benefitted, thereby giving Bahrain a very different outlook and an independent class structure that was so much in variation from its tribal dominated neighbors. Overall Indians dominated the expatriate workforce and with opportunities galore their number, along with other third world country's immigrants, who were also attracted by better salaries than at home, surged. This massive migration impacted the very bases of Bahrain's demographics for years to come.

Bahrain elected its first National Assembly in 1973 AD. A constitution was written and promulgated but the government soon ran into political stalemate, as it did not ratify the sponsored law. On the contrary arrest and detention of the people (for up to three years) was allowed. This led to public outcry and crises and in 1975 AD the Amir dissolved the National Assembly itself.

## **I. IMPACT OF IRANIAN REVOLUTION**

The massively popular Iranian revolution, which overthrew a regime protected by a lavishly financed army and security services in the neighboring Iran in 1979 AD had profound implications for Bahrain's social and political development. There were numerous factors that had caused Bahrain to be more liberal than its neighbors, but all of these were challenged by religious fundamentalism. Its pluralist traditions were to a large extent a result of the complex confessional and demographic makeup of the state, which required Shias, Sunnis, Southern Persians and other minority faiths to live and work together harmoniously, without prejudice, and to encourage and boost country's dependence on trade.



The majority of conservative Shias in Bahrain were overawed by the Iranian revolution.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand the political earthquake represented by Shah of Iran's unceremonious demise provided an excellent opportunity to Imam Khomeini and his clerics in Iran to influence their co-religionists in Bahrain as prime agents to export the revolution.

In 1981 AD, an Iranian front organization, the Islamic Front for the liberation of Bahrain attempted a coup d'état with a plan involving the assassination of Bahrain's leadership and an Islamist uprising.<sup>33</sup> The aim was to install a clerical leadership with an Iraqi as supreme leader, but the coup was detected after a tip off from a friendly intelligence source. The failed coup along with the outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War led to the formation of the GCC which Bahrain joined with Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and the Saudi Arabia. The regional uncertainty was further heightened when Iraq invaded Kuwait followed by the 1991 AD Gulf war.

## **J. THE NERVOUS NINETIES**

The concentrated power of the Combined Allied Forces, led by United States of America, successfully ejected Saddam Hussein's army from Iraq in 1991 AD. Bahrain played a key supporting role by providing the use of its naval and air bases as launch pads against Iraq. The uncertainties created by the war, however, led to a collapse in the price of oil. The ensuing frustration combined with political stalemate erupted in an unusual uprising, which was specifically Islamist in the sense that it began by the stoning of female competitors in a marathon race wearing "inappropriate clothing." This was followed by petitions put up by a group led by Shiite Islamist leader asking for the restoration of the constitution and the 1975 AD National Assembly. The Amir, however, again took a firm stand and arrested the movement's leaders. The unrest and confrontation continued for a number of years resulting into numerous civil disturbance rallies, riots and strict counter-measures that were adopted by the security forces. A total

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<sup>32</sup> Takeyh Ray, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in The Iranian Republic* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, LLC, 2006), 4–7

<sup>33</sup> *Persian Gulf States, Table of Contents*, U.S Library of Congress, 1999, [http://countrystudies.us/persian\\_gulf\\_states/99.htm](http://countrystudies.us/persian_gulf_states/99.htm), accessed June 23, 2011.

of 40 people died due to the resulting violence between the both sides.<sup>34</sup> The situation was somewhat calmed when in 1999 AD the Amir of Bahrain died and his son, Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa took charge.

### **K. KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

In 2003, AD Bahrain declared itself a Kingdom and Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa became its King.<sup>35</sup> From the very beginning King Hamad adopted a reconciliatory attitude by easing the tension through release of political dissidents from prison and promised fair elections including woman franchise and promising a return to constitutional rule. The move brought an end to political violence, but did not initially bring about reconciliation between the government and most of the opposition groups, because the Shia population perceived the changes largely as superficial. Relations however improved with neighboring Qatar after the International Court of Justice in Hague resolved the border dispute over the possession of Hawar Islands. A “friendship bridge” linking the two countries is planned to be build.<sup>36</sup> When completed it would be the longest bridge of its kind in the world.

Although Bahrain opposed the invasion of Iraq during the second Gulf War in 2003 AD, it remains strongly allied with United States and other western powers on matters of military cooperation and support including signing a Free Trade Agreement with the United States in 2004 AD. Concurrently, as an important member of the GCC, Bahrain has been noted to adhere to the cardinal goal of the Council in the achievement of security and stability within the region through mutual cooperation and support on all important economic, social and defense related issues.

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<sup>34</sup> Munira A. Fakhro, *The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment* (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1997) 167–168

<sup>35</sup> The Estimate: Political and Security Intelligence Analysis of the Islamic World and its Neighbors, 15, no. 4, 2002

<sup>36</sup> John Falby, “Qatar-Bahrain Friendship Bridge to begin construction next year” *Newlaunches.com*, 23 Oct. 2011, [http://www.newlaunches.com/archives/qatarbahrain\\_friendship\\_bridge](http://www.newlaunches.com/archives/qatarbahrain_friendship_bridge) (accessed 23 May 2012).

### **III. IRAN: FROM MONARCHY TO THEOCRACY**

#### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Iran's pre-Islamic history spans 1300-plus years and at one time covered three million square miles of territory.<sup>37</sup> Ruled by a host of Dynasties, Empires, and Caliphates through centuries, the history of what represents the territories of present day Shi'ite Islamic rule in Iran begins largely from the period of Safavid rule beginning in 1502 AD. It took firm roots as its monarchs established Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of the empire thus marking an important and impressive turning point in the history of Islam as a whole. In post Islamic Revolution period up to the present times, governance in Iran is closely monitored and overseen by a string of religious scholars who ensure that edicts of Shi'ite Islam are strictly enforced in all walks of life with self-awareness of Iran-hood acting as a bridge to modern Iran. Significance of such a strict hard line Islamic rule is felt in Sunni led Arabian States across the Persian Gulf as they feel threatened of Iranian expansionist designs as manifested by the formulation and establishment of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) organization, Iran's own nuclear ambitions, over the years its blanket material support to Hezbollah Shiite group in Lebanon, not to mention the instigation of Shi'ite Coup d'états and revolts in Bahrain, are but a few examples which will be in focus in subsequent chapters.

#### **B. CONSOLIDATION OF SHIA'ISM**

It was during the Safavid rule that Shi'ism took firm roots. Its founder monarch Shah Ismail was a very intolerant Shi'ite ruler who carried out no less than complete destruction of Sunni Islam and was very successful in eradicating all its traces in areas that came fully under his control. For example he brutally enforced ritual cursing of the first three caliphs, Abu Buaker, Omar and Othman as usurpers, disbanded Sunni

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<sup>37</sup> Sheda Vessghi, 'The other Iran Story: Re-engineering the nation's cultural DNA', *World Tribune News*, WorldTribune.com (June, 2009).

practices, seized their assets and faced Sunni Ulema in with the choice of conversion, death or exile. He even imported Shi'ite scholars from abroad to replace them.<sup>38</sup>

The complete predominance of Twelver Shi'ism in present day Iran is largely Shah Ismail's doing as this split, though present for some centuries, hardened into manifesting two separate entities within the body politic of mainstream Islam. Consequently, Shia and Sunni cultures moved in different directions along geographical lines as Ottoman Empire, with its roots in Turkey, became the bastion of Sunni rule in the north, while Iran solidified its base for Shi'ite Islam under Safavid rule.

### C. HISTORICAL OUTCOME OF SAFAVID'S CONVERSION POLICY

The policy of forced conversion to Shi'ite Islam had following historical outcomes:

- The process of forcefully converting large masses of Sunni population to Shi'ism continued throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century under different Safavid monarchs/ruler or Sultans as they were sometimes titled. From then on Shi'ite Islam became the state religion of Iran, while small Sunni minority within Iran was reduced to living along the borders with their Sunni co-nationals next door.<sup>39</sup>
- The experience created a clear line of political demarcation and even though doctrinal differences had long been known, the hostility between the followers of two sects continued to brew to new levels.
- The advent of Safavid power effectively signaled the end of Sunni Islam in Iran and most importantly, Shi'ite theologians came to dominate the religious establishments<sup>40</sup> within the state.
- Use of Shi'ism to exert control resulted in annexation of large areas of the country, but was followed by prolonged conflict between Sunni and Shia population even after the fall of Safavids.<sup>41</sup> Iran gradually became isolated, surrounded by a sea of Sunni dominated countries/States.

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<sup>38</sup>John Malcolm, *The History of Persia* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1829), 438.

<sup>39</sup>Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (New York: Brown, 1994), 191.

<sup>40</sup>Afshia Molavi, *The Soul of Iran: A Nation's Journey to Freedom* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 170.

<sup>41</sup>Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots & Results of Revolution* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 11.

#### D. QAJAR DYNASTY

The history of modern day Iran though could be traced back from late 18<sup>th</sup> /19<sup>th</sup> century Qajar dynasty period, where autocratic monarch one after the other perpetuated despotic rule by claiming monopoly over the means of violence, taxation and adjudication. They ruled supreme by holding power to appoint and dismiss officials, courtiers, judges, tribal chiefs, all the way down to village chiefs and ward headmen. The monarchs claimed to own all property treating the country as their private estate by ruling through local notables, landed aristocracy, even clerics leaders and influential merchants in dealing with their subjects. As a result they lacked centralized power structure and had few viable government institutions worthy of the name.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century period different Qajar monarchs continued with their all-out efforts to consolidate Shi'ism by favoring and supporting the annual ritualistic ceremonies in the month of Muharram which commemorated<sup>43</sup> the martyrdom of Imam Hussain through official backing and finances. They patronized theological centers in the cities of Najaf (In Iraq), Mashed, Isfahan and Qom to promote Shi'ite teachings through scholars whose followers later on played an important role in shaping the destiny of 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran. After establishing their dynasty on firm footings and securing borders, the Qajars settled in the capital Tehran and in due course merged into the urban population.

Amongst the Qajar monarchs Nasiruddin Shah was the ablest and most influential and during his reign from 1847 AD to 1896 AD he introduced large-scale reforms in all sectors of Iranian society. His greatest contribution was the establishment of Dar-al Funoon,<sup>44</sup> the first modern university in Iran which produced a new cadre of administrators and scholars who were well acquainted with western techniques (through French and Russian instructors as well as Iranians) who taught different languages and such diverse subjects as Medicine, Law, Engineering and Law.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibrahim Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 9.

In that period the British Empire was at its zenith and was extending its control and influence over the Persian Gulf region with use of its naval might. The discovery of oil in 1908 AD by the British in Khuzestan gave birth to intense renewed interest in the region as Imperial Russia in north of Iran started expanding its borders with conquest of present day Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, thereby severing historic Iranian ties with the cities of Samarkand and Bokhara. In the tussle, Nasiruddin Shah could not prevent Britain and Russia from encroaching into regions of traditional Iranian influence as evident from subsequent events.

## E. CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION

After Nasiruddin Shah's assassination in 1896 AD, Iran was ruled by ineffective and weak monarchs who brought financial ruin to the State due to their extravagant life style and expenses leading to heavy borrowing particularly from Russia.

By this time four distinct classes<sup>45</sup> had emerged within the Iranian social fabric. These were:

- **Clerics:** The powerful religious scholars of Shi'ite Islam who impacted the life of ordinary citizens, particularly the illiterate peasants scattered over the country.
- **Bazaris or Merchants:** Tradesmen, small business operators, mechanics and laborers who were gaining increasingly in strength and numbers in urban areas, bonding into a strong and economically better off educated middle class.
- **Upper Middle Class:** Western Educated Intellectuals and enlightened scholars who were critical of the corrupt administration and advocated further reforms through their teachings and writings.
- **Landed Notables:** The feudal lords who owned whole villages and vast areas of land and treated peasants as their serf. They often retained their own armies.

The weak and ineffective Qajar rulers could not respond to the increasing protests and civil unrest led by the religious establishments, the Bazaris and other class of people

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<sup>45</sup> Ahmed Ashraf, *Social Hierarchy in the Qajar Era* (Kitab-e-Aagoh, 1981), vol. 1, 71–75.

who all craved for constitutional reforms. The incumbent ruler Muzaffaruddin Shah was thus forced to pass a decree promising a constitution that provided strict limitations on royal power, and establishment of an elected parliament or Majlis. He signed the constitution in 1906 AD and died soon after. This constitutional revolution marked the beginning of the end of medieval period in Iran as well as sounded the death toll for Qajar dynasty.

Hopes for an outright constitutional rule however were not realized due to continued internal instability and turmoil caused as result of sustained Russian and British intervention to divide Iran into respective spheres of influence. The occupation of Iran during World War I by Russia, British and Ottoman troops was a blow from which last of the weakened Qajar ruler Ahmed Shah never recovered. In 1921 AD a successful coup d'état by General Reza Shah, a Cossack garrison commander deposed Ahmed Shah and took control over Tehran. Within a short time he established himself as most powerful person in the country by suppressing rebellions and establishing order. In 1925 AD a specially convened constitutional assembly named Reza Shah, who had earlier adopted the surname Pahlavi, as the new Shah of Iran.

## **F. PAHLAVI ERA**

Reza Shah had the vision and ambition to carry out deep and far reaching reforms to modernize Iran and the hallmark of his era was guided towards building a strong centralized State. He had come to power in a vast country that had little presence outside the capital Tehran. As such, with help of foreign advisors and consultants, he embarked upon building a strong centralized infrastructure, planned and developed bureaucracy, established industrial units and factories and built a vast railroad network. He laid special emphasis upon modernization and build-up of his military/armed forces, health care and taxation systems to name a few. Over and above he maintained strict discipline and was highly successful in these endeavors. Historians are unanimous in crediting him for transforming Iran into an urbanized country where a professional middle class and an industrial middle class emerged as a strong body of people in Iran. Following two tables illustrate the efforts and the results in some of the sectors.

<b>Revenue</b>	<b>1925-1926</b>	<b>1940-1941</b>
Total	245	3,613
Direct Tax	34	75
Road Tax	20	85
Indirect Tax Total	36	180
Customs	91	298
Expenditures	245	4,333
<b>Major Ministries</b>		
War	94	565
Finance	30	265
Education	7	194
Industries	-	992
Agricultural	-	121
Roads	-	1,092
Imbalance	-	71

Table 1. Iran's Government Budgets, 1925–1926 and 1940–41 (in million Qan Rials; from Nowruzi, 1948).

	<b>1923-1924</b>	<b>1940-1941</b>
<i>Pupils in Kindergartens</i>	0	1,500
<i>Primary Schools</i>	83	2,336
<i>Pupils in Primary Schools</i>	7,000	210,000
<i>Secondary Schools</i>	85	241
<i>Pupils in Secondary Schools</i>	5,000	21,000

Table 2. Iran's Expansion of Public Education, 1923–1924 and 1940–1941 (from Ervand, 2008).



As a constitutional monarch Reza Shah ruled with an iron fist but his strong secular policies caused dissatisfaction amongst some groups particularly the clergy who were opposed his reforms.

In 1941 AD, during the Second World War, British and Soviet Armies invaded Iran and forced Reza Shah Pahlavi to abdicate in favor of his eldest son Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>46</sup> This happened because Reza Shah favored neutrality and supported German national technicians who by and large were employed in Iranian oil sector, a stance that was not acceptable to British –Russian Alliance.

Towards end of the Second World War, as Soviet Allied forces withdrew, Iran's political system became increasingly open. Political parties flourished and in 1944 AD the Parliament election was the most competitive election in more than 20 years. At that time patriotic feelings were high and there was a popular demand for nationalization of country's oil fields along with curtailing the share of Anglo Iranian Oil Company, which was owned by British Government and hitherto the sole agency for producing and marketing Iranian Oil.

In early fifties Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, the young monarch who was eventually overthrown by the 1979 AD Islamic Revolution, successfully warded off his generals and nobles who tried to gain control of the armed forces. Consolidating power after the now "infamous" 1953 AD CIA led coup, which deposed the popular nationalistic government of Premier Mohammed Mussadaq, he ruled much like his father by utilizing country's oil revenues to expand and consolidate his power base.<sup>47</sup> With USA's assistance and advice, he spent heavily to build up and expand his armed forces and internal security network through purchase of mostly U.S. arms and military hardware and consultancy. In 1963 AD he also launched a series of reform programs called "White Revolution" (So called because it was bloodless).<sup>48</sup> This was yet another ambitious development program to modernize Iran through extensive land and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibrahim Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>48</sup> *Time*, "Iran: The White Revolution," 87, no.6 (1996), 124.

administrative reforms involving abolishment of feudalism, introducing massive literacy drive, boosting industrialization and infrastructure on a large scale. For the first time women in Iran gained the right to vote, to run for an elected office and to serve as a lawyer or a judge.<sup>49</sup> It was Shah's attempt to introduce reforms from above and also to preserve traditional power patterns with an aim to transform Iran into a global economic and industrial powerhouse.

The end result was an all-round improvement heralded by significant industrial revolution during the period of reforms. Yet, overall things did not go exactly as intended. The reforms resulted in quadrupling the combined size of the classes that had posed most challenges to the monarchy in the past, i.e., the intelligentsia and the working class. During the Seventies resentment towards monarch and monarchy in general grew as political parties, trade unions led by the strong Bazaris, professional associations and independent minded news media were all banned or their activities heavily curtailed. At the same time rampant large-scale corruption within Iranian government official channels aggravated the situation further. Resentment and anger towards monarch's failed/stalled reforms simply united the populace against his government. Consequently, their loyalty to clergy increased, leading on to the rising popularity of the exiled cleric Ruhollah Khomeini, who was an outspoken political enemy of the Mohammed Reza Shah and through the years had been calling for outright overthrow of his regime. The "Iranian Revolution," famously referred to as the "Islamic Revolution" of 1979 was the result. As Ervand Ibrahmian points out in his book "A History of Modern Iran," "The White Revolution had been designed to preempt a Red Revolution; instead it paved way for an Islamic Revolution."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> White Revolution, Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Revolution), accessed February 9, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Ibrahim Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 139–140

## **G. ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND THE AFTERMATH**

The Islamic Revolution of Iran relegated the entire institution of Iranian monarchy to the dustbin of history in one clean sweep. Its charismatic leader, cleric Syed Ruhollah Khomeini had entered active politics in 1963 AD when he denounced Mohammed Reza Shah for granting capitulations to American military advisors.

Deported, he spent next sixteen years in Najaf, Iraq, developing a new interpretation of Shi'ite Islam. In his book titled "Velayat-e- Faqeh, Hukumat-e-Islami,"<sup>51</sup> he propounded that senior religious clerics specializing in Islamic Law had the ultimate authority to rule the Islamic state. He came to this novel conclusion from conventional Shi'ite premises: that God had sent the Prophets and Imams to guide the community to the right path in line with Islamic jurisprudence, the Sharia Laws and that in the absence of Twelfth Imam, his deputies in the world, the senior religious clerics, became the guardians of Sharia Law and their authority was above man made laws and challenges.

The general population in Iran could not believe that they had gotten rid of their pompous monarchy with such swiftness and abundance. So they hailed the Islamic Revolution as a Devine intervention and greeted Imam Khomeini as Commander of the Revolution, Founder of Islamic Republic, Supreme Leader of Islamic Republic and most potent of all, Imam of the Muslim world. Strangely though, this was a title that Shias in the past had reserved for the Twelve Sacred Imams only.

The newly formed Islamic Republic had much to contend with in its very early stages. The Iran–Iraq war of the decade was looming large as Sunni Muslim dominated regime of Saddam Hussain in neighboring Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980 AD to take advantage of the revolutionary chaos with an attempt to destroy the "Islamic Revolution" in its infancy.<sup>52</sup> It was not to be; the war dragged on for eight long years taking a heavy economic and human toll, which killed hundreds of thousands of soldiers

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<sup>51</sup>Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Jurist's Guardianship: Islamic Government* (Tehran: The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works, 1978), 64.

<sup>52</sup>Efraim Karsh, *The IRAN–IRAQ War, 1980–1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 72.

and civilian population on both sides. Battle weary and bruised, Islamic Republic of Iran did survive but the long war also provided an opportunity for the regime to strengthen its revolutionary ardor and revolutionary groups such as Revolutionary Guards at the expense of whatever opposition it faced from within.<sup>53</sup> While enormously costly and destructive, the Iran–Iraq war helped drive for national unity and inhibited fractious debate and dispute in Iran.<sup>54</sup>

## **H. SIGNIFICANCE OF IRANIAN REVOLUTION**

An important offshoot of Islamic Revolution had to do with the Iranian revolutionary's desire and call for the overthrow of numerous Arab monarchies in the surrounding Persian Gulf region. They covertly advocated replacement of such regimes with Islamic Republics, much to the consternation of smaller Sunni-run Arab neighbors such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other Gulf states notably Bahrain. Most of these States were monarchies with sizeable Shi'ite population. Formulation of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a political and economic union comprising Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain, whose leaders met in Jeddah in 1981 AD to pen down a cooperative support charter, was the direct consequence of fears emanating from Iranian type of Revolution taking roots in their own territories through exploitation of sympathetic Shi'ite population residing therein.

Mutual security and military cooperation formed part and parcel of GCC charter and acts as an active covenant of its practical policies well into the present times.

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<sup>53</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), 88.

<sup>54</sup> Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The IRAN–IRAQ Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.

## **IV. FORMATION OF GCC, REGIONAL WARS AND CONFRONTATION**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

The 1979 AD Islamic Revolution was not solely, and perhaps not primarily a religious revolution.<sup>55</sup> Economic slump and middle class disillusionment with corruption and oppression of a regime many had previously supported were important factors, as was the natural dislike of the unequal relationship with the U.S.<sup>56</sup> But importantly; the revolution drew great strength from its Shia form. It blended cohesion and a sense of unity, motivation and common purpose to other social elements that were not even perceived as religious. It generated group solidarity amongst Revolutionary Guards and their own experience of war with Iraq that followed the events created a strong bond of loyalty and trust within its ranks that is noticeable and sustained by the present day hardliners in President Ahmadinejad's government. However, in the context of Bahrain-Iran relations three events taking place in quick succession after the Islamic Revolution are important from point of their long-term effect down the years. These are: establishment of the Gulf Co-operation Council, The Iran-Iraq War and the failed coup attempt in Bahrain 1981. These events need to be synopsisized for purpose of clarity and information.

### **B. ESTABLISHMENT OF GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL**

The dramatic eruption of the Islamic Revolution in neighboring Iran followed by sudden invasion of Afghanistan<sup>57</sup> by the Soviet Union sent alarm bells ringing in all Sunni Arab capitals of countries surrounding the Persian Gulf region. The conservative monarchy of Saudi Arabia in particular was most concerned and in order to safeguard the stability and security of the region, it took the lead in fostering support from other Arab countries to establish a commonwealth of Arab Gulf so as to defend their common

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<sup>55</sup> Abrahamian Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 155.

<sup>56</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Empire of the Mind-A History from Zoroaster to the Present Day* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 266.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Kechichian, *Third World Quarterly* (1985), 7, no. 4, 853-881.

resources and industrial base. Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Bahrain joined in and on 25<sup>th</sup> May, 1981, in a joint meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia established the Cooperation Council of the Arab Gulf States or Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>58</sup>

Since its inception GCC has made concerted efforts to cooperate in all fields, including security and unified regional defense policies. The adoption of such regional security/ defense measures and protecting their independence and political systems, remains its major goal. The raising of a combined “Peninsula Shield” force by the member states for the purpose of immediately intervening if any state was subjected to aggression coupled with safeguarding strategic oil routes in the Gulf is the cornerstone of such Military strategy. In addition GCC has actively adopted a political, economic and social strategy as well, which can be summarized as follows:<sup>59</sup>

#### 1. Political Strategy

- strengthening coordination and integration among the GCC states
- following a more balanced policy between the super powers
- to strengthen Arab solidarity and making the necessary amendments to the Charter of the Leagues of the Arab states to introduce the principle of majority decisions
- organizing responses to hostile propaganda claims

#### 2. Economic Strategy

- diversification of sources of income and a progressive reduction in the total reliance of oil
- to achieve a common currency and unified custom tariff for all member states
- strengthening the industrial sector and making it effective
- provision of reserves for future generations
- revision of the distribution of income and wealth

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<sup>58</sup> Abdullah Al Ishal, *Al-Itar al-Qaumi wal Siyasi li-majlis al-Taawanal-Khali* (Riyadh: The Legal and Political Framework of the Gulf Cooperation council, 1983), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York,; Kegan Paul International, 1994), 132–133.

- dealing with the effects of wide disparities in wealth and income among the GCC states
  - achieving food and oil security
3. Social Strategy
- strengthening the internal fronts within the GCC states
  - bringing about desirable social development through means adjusted to the program of development in the GCC states as follows:
    - strengthening the value of individual participation in the development of society
    - strengthening the concept of public service in the society
    - emphasizing the value of work, production and innovation
    - active participation of women in social life
  - rectifying faulty concepts of identity on the basis of country, region and nation
  - organizing the employment of foreign manpower and taking measure to rectify its effects
  - providing training to create skills and expertise<sup>60</sup>

Summit meetings headed by the Rulers of GCC states, as well as side meetings between Defense, Interior and Foreign Ministers are regularly held in rotation in GCC capitals to continuously update the Charter in view of perceived threats and ever changing political scenarios.<sup>61</sup>

### **C. GCC CHALLENGES AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR STANCE**

Iranian nuclear ambitions and its perceived threat of developing nuclear capabilities in military terms is definitely in the forefront of challenges faced by the GCC states, particularly from Bahrain's point of view, which considers itself vulnerable due to its small size and yet being the nearest to Iran's major nuclear facility at Bushair.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York,: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 131.

<sup>61</sup> Robin Allen, *Gulf Cooperation Council-Theory or Practice?* (U.A.E: Middle East Economic Digest, 1983), 27, no. 43,12.

<sup>62</sup> Sepehr Zabih, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War* (New York: Rutledge, 1988), 210.

However, such relations cannot be limited to the nuclear issue alone. The concerns of GCC states<sup>63</sup> have also arisen out of some rash and extreme statements coming from Iranian government officials such as from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in January 2005 who was quoted as saying “The foundation of world’s arrogance will collapse and the flag of Islam will be raised very soon.”<sup>64</sup>

Understandably, the GCC views Iranian nuclear crises in the overall context of policies and attitudes of the Iranians towards the Gulf region and the wider Arab world. Iran is an Islamic state in the neighborhood of Arab world and the basis of interstate relationships therefore rests upon good neighborliness, respect for each other’s sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs. Much of the problem however lies with confrontational nature of Iranian policies with little regard for Arab sensitivities. Surprisingly, much of this perceived hostility stems from internal conflicts and political wrangling within the Iranian state.

One of the reasons of instability in the area could also be attributed to negative implications of U.S. diplomacy in Iraq, which has resulted in favoring Iran.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand the aggressive nuclear policy adopted by Iran has similar destabilizing effect on the security of the Arab world. In addition, Iran controls the main centers of power within the state of Iraq and dominates its political process and decision making apparatus. Iran also influences the political and security scenario in Lebanon and Palestinian politics, not to mention the rejection of any possible peaceful solution with regard to its occupation of the three UAE Islands, which remains a disputed issue.<sup>66</sup>

Iran’s nuclear program is another source of grave concern for its gulf neighbors that can lead to military confrontation as Iran under Ahmadinejad is taking the position which is similar to the one adopted by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which led to a catastrophic war in the Gulf. It is for this reason that the western powers were able to

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<sup>63</sup> Abdulaziz O. Sager, *GCC Summit: Prospects and Challenges*, 2007, Arab News, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/306058> (accessed on February 15, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 69.

<sup>65</sup> Ibrahim Ervand, *Empire Strikes Back: Iran in U.S. sights* (New York: New Press, 2004), 96.

<sup>66</sup> Geoffrey Kemp, *Iran’s Strategic Environment and Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, D.C.: Nixon Centre, 2001), 101.



adopt the UN Security Council resolutions 1737 and 1747, which censured Iran to suspend all uranium reprocessing activities on its territory.<sup>67</sup> Despite repeated calls these resolutions have been ignored and Iran continued with the enrichment process and at the same time raised the level of political and military rhetoric. It is important to note that a clampdown on Iranian enrichment activity is no longer a European or American demand; instead it has the requisite backing of the International community which has conferred much wider credence. Consequently, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) will continue to impose more and more severe economic and diplomatic sanctions against Iran. On the other hand, the Arab states are not particularly happy with these UNSC resolutions, which are seemingly logical and acceptable, but alone would not stop Iran from pursuing its nuclear ambitions. Iran's plea of pursuing the nuclear program for peaceful purposes has not gained wider acceptance and GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait) have already announced their own intentions of launching peaceful nuclear programs which could come into effect within the next decade.

The hegemonic ambitions of Iran and the heightened sectarian tensions in the region are only a few examples from numerous threats facing GCC states. The challenges facing them are numerous and in order to secure their common vital interests they must work out a unified contingency plan in case a war breaks out over the Iran nuclear issue.

#### **D. IRAN–IRAQ WAR**

Lasting eight years (also referred to as the “Longest war of the twentieth century”) and costing billions of dollars and hundreds and thousands of casualties, the conflict is a remarkable story of power politics and political hypocrisy.<sup>68</sup> It was a multifaceted war that was started with Iraq's territorial claims in Shat al Arab and other border areas, coupled with each side's attempt to change the recognized and existing borders.<sup>69</sup> In effect Saddam Hussein launched his invasion at a time when Iran, soon after

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<sup>67</sup> Alireza Jafarzadeh, ‘The Iran Threat: President Ahmadinejad and the Coming Nuclear Crises’ (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), vol. 14, no. 4, 208.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Cordtsman & Abraham Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Vol. II: The IRAN–IRAQ War* (Colorado: WestView Press, 1990), 23.

<sup>69</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 148.

the advent of Islamic Revolution, appeared weak. His goal was to gain control over the Shatt al Arab waterway and some of the Iranian oilfields. He also feared the Iranian religious/revolutionary propaganda in 1979/1980, (apparently directed at starting a revolution amongst Iraqi Shi's)<sup>70</sup> and destroying his regime, and that left him little choice. However, he miscalculated Iran's resolute stand as it did not capitulate, instead, in a robust counterattack, it was able to capture significant segments of Iraqi territory.<sup>71</sup>

The war continued through mid-eighties and just when it seemed that Iran was gaining militarily, the United played its double handed role and sided with Iraq, a role which, in effect, kept Iraq from being defeated.<sup>72</sup> Throughout this crucial period, U.S. intelligence sources provided regular communication on Iranian troop movements which enabled Iraq to plan effective defense or prepare for counter-attack as the case may be. Secondly, Iraqi troops often resorted to the use of poison gas in combat which gave them an upper hand; while Iranians had no defense against it.<sup>73</sup> This heinous act was a direct violation of a number of major international treaties and was conducted with full knowledge and implicit approval of United States, which considered Iranian victory as contrary to its own interests.

The Iran–Iraq war was the longest declared war of the twentieth century, lasting eight years and ending right where it started. The political machinations among all the nations in that area were extensive, and they were very complex in the background of shifting and partial alliances among the Muslim nations, detailing why each nation adopted the policies that they did. However, with hindsight, it is difficult to brush aside the colossal and tragic loss that both countries suffered in terms of human lives. Exact casualty figures perhaps may never be known, though estimates suggest more than one and a half million war and war-related casualties, perhaps as many as a million people died, lots more wounded, and millions made refugees. Iran acknowledged that nearly

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<sup>70</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Iran: Empire of the Mind: A History of the Zoroaster to the Present Day* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 272.

<sup>71</sup> Farhang Ragaee, *The Iran Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1993), 28.

<sup>72</sup> Ibrahim Ervand, *A History of Modern Iran* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 171.

<sup>73</sup> Efraim Karsh, *The IRAN–IRAQ War, 1980–1988* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2002), 76.

300,000 people died in the war; estimates of the Iraqi dead range from 160,000 to 240,000. Iraq suffered an estimated 375,000 casualties and another 60,000 were taken prisoner by the Iranians. Iran's losses included more than 1 million people killed or maimed.<sup>74</sup> It was truly a catastrophe of mega proportions and it is an irony that internationally this longest war of the twentieth century has not received the attention that it deserves.

The war finally came to an end when United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution 598 was accepted by Iran on 20 August 1988. A cease-fire followed but when it was over, none of the conditions that existed at its beginning were resolved and remained virtually unchanged.

#### **E. ATTEMPTED COUP IN BAHRAIN, 1981**

Within two years of the Islamic Revolution, Iran mischievously interfered in the domestic policies of Bahrain by stirring up and perpetrating a dramatic coup attempt against the ruling Al-Khalifa family through a Shia resistance group who were inspired by the Iranian Revolution and called themselves 'The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain.' The plan involved a small group of Bahraini militants, who were to be assisted by their Iranian counterparts with an aim to assassinate the emirate's leadership (Bahrain in 1981 was still an Emirate and later was proclaimed a Kingdom in 2002). Their objective was to stir up general public outrage and popular uprising of the majority Shia population in Bahrain, preempting government fallout, which was to be then replaced by a theocratic government on similar lines as in Iran. They had even named an Iranian based Iraqi cleric, Hojjatol-Islam Kamal Haidari, who was to have been put in power as Supreme Leader of theocratic government in Bahrain.<sup>75</sup>

The attempted coup failed in its objective because security personnel of a neighboring emirate spotted a suspicious party of young men who had come from Iran and were transiting to Bahrain. Their arrest revealed substantial caches of ammunition and communication equipment. Detailed plans of sabotaging and taking over important

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>75</sup>Raymond Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of Middle East* (U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2003), 194.

infrastructure such as T.V/Radio station, international airport and assassinating important Bahraini government officials were also revealed.

The fiasco led to a steep downturn in relations between the states of the newly formed GCC and Iran. Iran was also blamed for creating tensions in the Persian Gulf Arab societies between Sunnis and Shias. All those who were arrested were sentenced to heavy prison terms. The coup highlighted the underlying dissention between Sunni-Shia population of Bahrain in clear terms and manifested again through regular on again off again kind of Shia led civil disturbances throughout the nineties. The political prisoners were however amnestied by King Hamad Al-Khalifa in 2001 AD as part of political reforms.

#### **F. INTERIM YEARS: POST-KHOMEINI ERA**

In late eighties the world was experiencing some very dramatic changes on the political and social front. The protracted Afghan war had come to an end, Soviets were on the run, the Soviet Union break up was on the cards, Berlin Wall was crumbling, Iraq suddenly found itself in an 80 Billion dollars debt, Imam Khomeini had passed away leaving the World Powers to wonder as to which way the radicalized Iran would go, and amongst all this hoopla, Mr. Saddam Husain calmly decided to fill up his depleted coffers by deciding to rob the mideastern gold mine, the tiny sheikhdom of Kuwait, through a well-planned military invasion on August the second, 1990. Initially the world took little notice of this Iraqi adventure thinking it to be insignificant of their attention. However, this misconception was soon put to rest when they noticed that Iraqi forces, through sudden and rapid advance, were very close to threatening the Saudi Arabian rich and vast oil resources located on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia. The resultant “First Gulf War,” as it is now referred to, and led by the only Super power left in the world arena, the United States of America, helped and assisted by coalition of 32 international military forces, joined hands to push back Iraqi military forces to its borders through swift and decisive land and air battles. Of course Iraqi military was no match against the might of coalition forces; they were quickly desecrated but it was a job half-done considering that the scepter of Saddam Husain’s hard core dictatorship continued to haunt other middle-east countries right through to the dawn of the twenty first century until the “Second Gulf

War” in 2003 AD. Ironically, this time United States was the invader, which had a trumped up mandate of cleansing the region from the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraqi regime, a charge that was sanctified by United Nations to legitimize the 2003 invasion of Kuwait. And while all this happened Israel, the possessor of an undeclared amount of nuclear arsenal under its belt, idly stood by watching gleefully the demise of its biggest threat in the person of Saddam Husain at the hands of its own erstwhile enemy, the people of Iraq.

The cost in human life in Iraq was and is enormous, as it continues to bleed even eight years after Saddam’s departure from the scene. All for the sake of ensuring the free flow of mideastern oil that fuels the economic powerhouse of the combined West. Just for record Saudi Arabia purchased arms worth 80 Billion Dollars from United States alone during the first eight years after the end of First Gulf War.<sup>76</sup> In one order of 5 billion dollars, UAE bought 500 Leclerc tanks from France in mid-nineties.<sup>77</sup> (These tanks would be out of commission by now). There are numerous other examples of massive defense equipment/weapon system purchases by most countries in the region throughout the nineties and until to date. Latest being President Obama administration’s order where it is expected to formerly notify U.S. Congress of a record setting arms sale worth 60 Billion Dollars to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>78</sup> The deal is expected to benefit the U.S. defense industry significantly and includes 84 F-15E fighters and almost 200 helicopters, including Apaches and Black Hawks. The sale also is a sign of the seriousness of the military threat that the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf perceive from Islamic Republic of Iran. Wars can also be very profitable indeed.

On the Iranian side, death of Khomeini as the Imam and charismatic leader of the Islamic revolution in June of 1989 did not mean the end of the revolution, but only the beginning of a protracted struggle amongst the followers of the revolution over his heritage. In the post revolution period his main contribution was that he was the architect

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<sup>76</sup> Frahan Marzooki, *Middle East Journal* (New York: Spring 2000), vol. 53, no. 5, 512.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>78</sup> American Online (AOL) News, “U.S. Plans \$60 Billion in Arms Sale to Saudi Arabia,” <http://www.aolnews.com/2010/09>, accessed May 12, 2011.

of the present system of collective rule by clerical councils, thereby setting the parameters of Iran's subsequent constitutional policies which are firmly practiced even until the present times. He emphasized that "*Government must observe the divine Law and this is not possible without the supervision of the clergy.*"<sup>79</sup> He enthused his colleagues and subordinates with this dictum and they in turn took this legacy and consolidated the state into Shi'ite theocracy through major transformation of the legal system based on a written constitution.

The sequence of moderate governments that followed under President Rafsanjani (1989 AD–1997 AD) and some democratic reforms under President Khatami (1997 AD–2005) was followed by an unforeseen spectacular reversal that surprised everyone outside Iran. The hard liners returned to capture the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) in national elections of 2005 AD. President Ahmadinejad, the new incumbent (2005 AD–Present) revived the revolutionary outlook of the old. Coupled with aggressive policy and a clandestine nuclear program, his political regime has proved resilient and internationally defiant despite protestations of younger half of the population.

#### **G. BAHRAIN DURING THE NINETIES AND BEYOND**

Iraq's sweep into Kuwait in August 1990 and the possibility of its forces continuing down the gulf coast to seize other oil-rich Arab states presented a frightening scenario for smallest of the Gulf States like Bahrain. However, soon after the liberation of Kuwait in March 1992, Bahrain stepped up its efforts in building up its armed forces with western arms suppliers as did most other GCC states. During the following years it received generous economic support from richer GCC member states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. On the political front, however, it was unable to restrict the majority Shi'a opposition factions, who, in December 1994<sup>80</sup> had started a campaign for the restoration of the 1973 AD constitution through civil disturbances. This led to a swift crackdown by the governmental agencies and a period of uncertainty followed. The incident however

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<sup>79</sup> Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini, Iran under his Successors* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 20.

<sup>80</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates and Oman* (New York: Holt Publications, 1997), 121.

emphasized the frail relationship that Bahrain had with its eastern neighbor across the gulf as it once again blamed Iran for providing covert support to Shi'a militant groups within Bahrain. Although there were some retributions in the following years, whereby most of the arrested Shi'a leaders were granted amnesty and release from prison terms by the Amir of Bahrain Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa in 1997 AD, however, the actual turn of events took place years after his death in the early part of the new millennium by the present ruler of Bahrain, his son, Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al-Khalifa.

The true nature of Bahrain-Iran relationship projected into the first decade of the twenty first century and beyond will be the focus of attention in the last two chapters of this thesis that follow.

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## **V. BAHRAIN–IRAN RELATIONS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

In the context of Bahrain-Iran relations with each other and with regional countries in the Persian Gulf, we have already covered the historical and political perspective until the end of century in relative details in the foregoing chapters. Moving ahead, in this chapter of the thesis, we shall discuss their strengths, weaknesses and aspirations for progress and stability as the two countries power ahead in the twenty first century, by focusing and analyzing the core issue of the dispute, i.e., the ethnic divide that has split the region into two power blocks.

In conclusion, foreign relations between the two countries will be analyzed in the backdrop of the prevailing political atmosphere in the spring/summer of 2011 AD.

### **B. BAHRAIN’S OUTLOOK, PROGRESS IN LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

Often referred to as “The Pearl of the Gulf,” Bahrain is an island abundant with underground aquifers that provide life-sustaining water continues to be quite popular amongst tourists.<sup>81</sup> It is listed as the second most attractive tourist location in the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> In 1994 its total population was around 568,000, reaching 600,000 people in 1997.<sup>83</sup> Expatriate workers and technocrats from Iran, Oman, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Philippines and other countries constituted about a third of these figures while the Shiite Muslims constituted the majority (about 60 percent).<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, in February 2011, AFP, on their website reported that according to the official statistics office, the number of foreigners living in the tiny Gulf Kingdom of Bahrain overtook the number of local nationals for the first time. This was in accordance to a census carried out in April, 2010 which indicated that out of Bahrain’s 1.234 Million inhabitants, about 54% were

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<sup>81</sup> Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa, *First Light, Modern Bahrain and its Heritage* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1994), 2.

<sup>82</sup> *Mid East Travels* (Beirut: Arab Publications, 2004), 15.

<sup>83</sup> Ministry of Social and Cultural Affairs, *Statistical Gazette* (Bahrain: Government Office, 1998), 6.

<sup>84</sup> Bahrain government has, to date, never published any official count or figures of the Shi’ites population in the country. However, most reporting agencies denote the figure to be in the range of 60% to 70%.

foreigners, while only 568,399, or 46% were nationals. They went on and added that, “At 562,040, Asians nationals made up 84.3% of the foreign residents and 45.5% of the total population of the country.”<sup>85</sup>

The above analysis is interesting and points towards the basis of the most recent discord between the majorities Shi’a local population who repeatedly accuse Sunni led government of giving citizenship to Sunni foreigners to tip the sectarian balance of power in Bahrain.

As recorded earlier, Bahrain started its oil production as far back as 1932 AD and resultant oil revenues brought in economic prosperity, giving it a distinct advantage over other Arab Gulf states to start with. In this context Bahrain is the most socially advanced country in the region. Bahrain’s oil reserves have currently been reduced to a level where they are just about sufficient to fulfill its domestic demand. It however possess significant amount of natural gas reserves and its petroleum refining industry is well placed to sustain economic development and comfortable living standards for its citizens due to the Saudi crude availability, which is locally processed and refined.<sup>86</sup> According to a 1996 survey the oil and gas reserves amounted to an estimated 65% of its national revenue which was found to be the lowest percentage amongst all Arab Gulf states, thus indicating the need for Bahrain’s economic diversification. Consequently, it drove Bahrain to prepare for a time when oil reserves would be insufficient and therefore felt the need to invest extensively in human resources including development of training and educational programs.<sup>87</sup>

Bahrainis found this experiment to be quite challenging as they became more and more involved in the education sector as well as other sectors of their economy. This immensely benefitted the women work force as they were able to find employment in engineering commerce, civil service, finance, banking and other administrative

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<sup>85</sup> *Middle East Journal* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, 1998),15, no. 3, 213.

<sup>86</sup> Encyclopedia, Bahrain, Encyclopedia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Bahrain.aspx#3-1G2:3409700025-full>, accessed February 20, 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Hamad Khamis Al Kaabi, ‘Economic Progress and Development of Infra –structure in GGC Countries’ (Riyadh: Al Arabi Magazine Press,) no. 248, 17.

assignments.<sup>88</sup> They also benefitted from law of liberal maternity leave which was enforced strictly. The leadership of Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought in rapid changes through political reforms and abolishment of censorship. He took a further major step in releasing all political prisoners which was followed by declaration of a ‘charter’ for national unity government through a national parliament, thereby foreseeing Bahrain as a liberal democratic entity in times to come. An overwhelming majority of Bahraini people backed and approved this charter by 98.4% while voter turnout was reported to be 90%.<sup>89</sup> He thus envisioned to launch a new era in Bahrain’s history with a hope that it would increase domestic stability and eventually lead to a decrease in the control of the ruling Al Khalifa family.

In years that followed, Bahrain experienced a period of relative calm. Helped by the economic boom that prevailed in the region, it focused on developing its infrastructure by launching mega government and private sector projects. On the politico-economic front Bahrain continued to play a major role in providing United States with the necessary logistical support during and after its military venture into Iraq in 2003 AD and beyond. However, worldwide economic meltdown in the fall of 2008 AD affected Bahrain economically perhaps a trifle more than other countries in the region, mainly because of its heavy dependence on earnings through the banking sector. It was slowly getting back on its feet when the events following “Arab Spring” uprising of late 2010 AD jolted the very base of Bahrain government with majority Shi’as, taking a cue from Tunisia and Egypt, thought it opportune to stage wide ranges of protests to cash on the sentimental wave of pro-democracy movements sweeping the North African region.<sup>90</sup> Unlike Tunisia and Egypt they, however, failed to dislodge the sitting government or its leaders who were at the helm of affairs. This also does not mean that there is peace

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<sup>88</sup> Hamad Khamis Al Kaabi, ‘Economic Progress and Development of Infra –structure in GCC Countries’ (Riyadh: Al Arabi Magazine Press,) no. 248, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Bahrain: Evolution or Revolution*, 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/kristian-coates-ulrichsen/bahrain-evolution-or-revolution>, accessed June 4, 2011.

<sup>90</sup> The ‘Arab Spring’ refers to the pro-democracy uprisings presently sweeping the Middle East and North African region.

within. Far from it and this is where the role of Iran and its relations with Bahrain, and the underlying discord of ethnic dissention come into play.

We shall review these after a brief survey of Iranian progress and achievements into the twenty first century.

### **C. IRANIAN PROGRESS**

The emergence and consolidation of the present system of collective rule by clerical councils and the peaceful transition to dual leadership by the Ayatollah as the supreme guide and the subordinate president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in short, forms the crux of Iranian pattern of governance. In this context the general elections of 2005 AD provided a watershed moment in the history of Modern Iran and needs to be looked into with a bit of detailed scrutiny to get the flavor of Iranian politics as they stand today.

The 2005 AD elections gave President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a landslide victory over his opponent Mir Hussein Mussavi.<sup>91</sup> It was a political earthquake which had its effects felt in the western capitals as they were expecting a continuation of the moderate policies followed by President Khatami, and were hoping for a return of the gradual democracy with which they hoped to bind well as they did in the good old pre-Islamic Revolution days of the Shah. It was not to be. Mussavi was convinced that only through widespread fraud could Ahmadinejad win a two to one victory. During the ensuing wave of protests the Islamic regime's security forces opened fire and several demonstrators were killed.<sup>92</sup> Was this a repetition of the mass protest movement that toppled the Shah 30 years earlier? Not an easy question to answer as a positive answer would mean that Iranians would be faced with the dynamics of another revolution, *against* the Islamic revolutionary regime this time, a theocratic regime, that was (and continues to be so until to date) led by Khomeini's successor, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the true holder of power in the country.

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<sup>91</sup> John Danszewski, "Hard-Liner Wins Decisively in Iran Presidential Election." Los Angeles Times June 25, 2005, <http://articles.latimes.com/2005/jun/25/world/fg-iranelect25> (accessed Feb. 10, 2012)

<sup>92</sup>Syed Amir Arjumand, *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 72–73.

The situation in Iran resembled a cauldron, but there was no way to predict the course of events as both the Islamic regime and the opposition were confronted with enormous dilemmas. The first question that was to be answered was whether the opposition represented a reform movement or, was it a revolutionary force bent upon overthrowing the Islamic government? The point to note was that the leader of the protest movement, who challenged Ahmadinejad and galvanized the masses, in urban centers especially, was not someone who could be considered an opponent of the Islamic character of the regime. Mir Hussein Mussavi was (and is) among the dedicated leaders of the Islamic revolution and served it with commitment as Prime Minister from 1981–1989.<sup>93</sup> In fact during his tenure as Premier, the regime faced the challenge of the Mujahedin Khalq, an Islamo-Marxist opposition group that had a fall out with Khomeini and started a violent campaign against his regime. Among others, the Mujahedin assassinated a key figure of the revolution, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, whose close associate was Mussavi. With Khomeini's blessings, a resolute Premier Mussavi, confronted ruthlessly the Mujahedin Khalq and neutralized their role in Iran.<sup>94</sup> In other words, it could be concluded that Mussavi, a true child of the Islamic revolution, did not aim at overthrowing the Islamic regime but at reforming it. *This would sum up what the 2005AD anti-Ahmadinejad protests were about.*

An important point to note was that going by the available statistics, over 65% of the Iranian population was under 30 years old, meaning that they were born after the Islamic revolution of 1979 AD.<sup>95</sup> This young lot was faced with a deteriorating economic situation where students had no future, and above all they yearned for more freedom as they got choked under the repressive rule of the theocratic regime. Moreover, women, who later played an important role in the above mentioned protest movement of 2005AD, continued to yearn for a more open society<sup>96</sup> that would allow them to escape the

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<sup>93</sup>Alex Altman, 'World Section: Iran's Challenger, Mir Hussain Mousavi', Time Magazine, 2009, <http://www.time.com/world/article/0,8599,1904194,00.htm>, accessed December 10, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid

<sup>95</sup> Population of Iran, Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran>, accessed May 13, 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Munira A. Fakhro, *The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1997), 15

“morality police” roaming the streets and harassing them if their hair was not completely covered by a scarf, if they would wear lipstick, if they were to hold hands with their boyfriend, etc., etc. This younger generation seemed tired of the continuous confrontation with the West and would be happy to see their leaders open a dialogue with the United States, based on mutual respect.

This “reform movement” however could not be sustained in the form of mass protests and did fizzle away in the face of a strong government backed police/militia force. The change that occurred was that now the protesters all over had a new tool they did not possess a few years ago. They used the Internet, Twitter, YouTube, Face book, and cell phones to organize protests, something that was difficult for the regime to control.<sup>97</sup>

In the final analysis the regime did score a decisive victory over the opposition movement. Yet, while it was able to suppress mass protests, it did so at considerable expense to its credibility and moral authority. The brutal methods employed by the government against protesters, were reminiscent of the methods used by the Shah to suppress opposition to his regime. The brutality of the Shah’s secret police (SAVAK) was a contributing factor to the 1979 AD Islamic revolution. Several veterans of this revolution including some Ayatollahs, among them senior Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, openly criticized the Ahmadinejad government as following the Shah’s footsteps. Nothing could be more detrimental to the legitimacy of the Islamic regime than to be seen by a very substantial sector of society as being as oppressive as or even more oppressive than the Shah’s. The fact that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei came down positively on the side of Ahmadinejad and pronounced him President who won in “fair elections,” raised the stake for the Islamic establishment. By siding with Ahmadinejad and approving the crushing of the opposition by force, the Supreme Leader raised questions over Ayatollah Khomeini’s carefully crafted role in the constitution of the highest office of Supreme Leader known as “Vilayat-e Faqih” or the rule by the theologian jurist. This rule, a form of rule by a Muslim “philosopher king” representing

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<sup>97</sup>This “Social media” factor played an important role in amassing of “Dissident Protests” during the Shi’a uprising in Bahrain in 2011.

God's will on earth, was supposed to be infallible. As such, this rule should be wise as well as one that stayed above the usual fray of politics to serve as the ultimate arbiter in case of crisis. By siding openly against the opposition and sanctioning the use of force that included the killing of protesters, mass arrests, torture and show-trials, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, in 2005 AD was viewed by many Iranians not as a just ruler but as the leader of a dictatorial regime. This struck at the heart of the moral authority of the Islamic regime which was being openly questioned.<sup>98</sup>

The United States administration took a stand in condemning the brutal suppression of the opposition and pursued with other western allies, a series of sanctions against Iran.<sup>99</sup> These sanctions were contemplated with regard to Iran's nuclear program and ambition to become a nuclear power, not unlike Pakistan. The prospect, an Iran possessing an atomic bomb, was quite sobering and forced the Obama administration not to close the window of future contacts with Iran. This delicate diplomatic dance by Washington was aimed at finding a way out of the impasse so that Iran abandoned to produce a nuclear bomb.

*Alas, the story of 2005 elections was re-enacted, with same players and the same audience, in the next Iranian general elections that were held in 2009. Ahmadinejad was re-elected and all protestations were once again put aside by Khamenei, the Supreme Leader.*<sup>100</sup>

However, this does not mean that the Islamic regime do not have popular support, far from that. Much to the consternation of the Western powers that be, the Iranians seem to be consolidating their unique form of government through a well-planned and controlled religious bias that the moderates within find hard to deal with. Saddam's (its erstwhile enemy No. 1) exit from the scene, American Forces' gradual pullout and the formation of a Shia led coalition government in Iraq (aided and abetted by Iran) have all

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Collins, Iran's 2005 and 2009 Presidential Election: Curious Results [http://electiondefensealliance.org/eda-blogs/michael\\_collins/080709/Iranian-election-anomalies](http://electiondefensealliance.org/eda-blogs/michael_collins/080709/Iranian-election-anomalies) (accessed 23 Nov. 2011)

<sup>99</sup> Steven Weisman, *U.S. Pursues Tactic of Financial Isolation*, *New York Times*, 2006.

<sup>100</sup> Aljazeera Online, "In Depth," Time Line: Iran after the Elections, <http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/iran/2009/11/200911411259869709.html> (accessed 23 Nov. 2011)

been watched gleefully by the Iranian Government. Bahrain's uprising and protests by Shi'a populace is also something that Iranians would back and support so as to broaden their own Shi'a base within the region.

At the same time as the economic woes of the only super power in the region, the Americans, continue to mount, Iranians leadership has deftly managed to keep its nuclear enrichment program on course towards the ultimate production of a nuclear weapon. It is *not* Iran's stated goal, but it is what the experts and the science gurus, who have the inner knowledge of what it takes to make the nuclear device, are clear in their minds about: *that Iran is only bidding away in time.*<sup>101</sup> They know that time is on the side of Iranians and it is with this trepidation that Western powers are confronted with, and exactly what withholds them from going in for an all-out military option. Iran's leaders are aware of this trepidation as they continue with their cat and mouse tactics with the International Atomic Energy Commission's experts who, despite years of negotiations, have yet to come out with a categorical statement that Iran is on a definite path towards making of a nuclear device. It may be a dilemma for them but looking from the Iranian perspective, it is an achievement which does their leaders proud.

In the final analysis, both the domestic situation in Iran as well as its drive to become a nuclear power is not amenable to making predictions to what the future holds in this strategically located country. Whatever the future course of events might be, one thing is certain. Iran, an influential oil producer for oil hungry world market, and an economic power house in the Persian Gulf, was and is a pivotal country whose actions effect not just regional balances but have repercussions well beyond the Persian Gulf.

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<sup>101</sup> Breitbart, 'World Powers, Arabs Share Concern on Iran's Nuclear Program' (2008) [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=081216195127.wa5m7ros&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=081216195127.wa5m7ros&show_article=1), accessed July 22, 2011.



#### D. REGIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Let us now review and analyze the underlying regional ethnic/sectarian issue of Shia-Sunni divide which takes strength from the demographic layout of the Shi'a population in the region.

The following interactive map and Table depicts the comparison of percentage of Shi'a population vs. the Sunni Muslim population in various countries of the world.<sup>102</sup>



Figure 3. Interactive Map Illustrating Shia Muslims Distribution in the Middle East (from Pew Research Center, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Pew Research Center, 'Mapping the Global Muslim Population' (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life Press, 2009).

<b>Country</b>	<b>Estimated Shia Population (2009) M-Million</b>	<b>Approximate Percentage of Muslim Population (Shia)</b>	<b>Approximate Percentage of World Shia Population</b>
<b>Iran</b>	66 – 70 M	90–95%	37–40%
<b>Pakistan</b>	17–26 M	10–15	10–15
<b>India</b>	16–24 M	10–15	9–14
<b>Iraq</b>	19 -22 M	65–70	11–12
<b>Turkey</b>	7–11 M	10–15	4–6
<b>Yemen</b>	8–10 M	35–40	~5
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	5–7 M	65–75	3–4
<b>Afghanistan</b>	3–4 M	10–15	~2
<b>Syria</b>	3–4 M	15–20	~2
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2–4 M	10–15	1–2
<b>Nigeria</b>	<4 M	<5	<2
<b>Lebanon</b>	1–2 M	45–55	<1
<b>Tanzania</b>	<2 M	<10	<1
<b>Kuwait</b>	500,000–700,000	20–25	<1
<b>Germany</b>	400,000–600,000	10–15	<1
<b>Bahrain</b>	400,000–500,000	65–75	<1
<b>Tajikistan</b>	~400,000	~7	<1
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	300,000–400,000	~10	<1
<b>United States</b>	200,000–400,000	10–15	<1
<b>Oman</b>	100,000–300,000	5–10	<1
<b>United Kingdom</b>	100,000–300,000	10–15	<1
<b>Bulgaria</b>	~100,000	10–15	<1
<b>Qatar</b>	~100,000	~10	<1
<b>World Total</b>	154–200 M	10–13	100

Table 3. Countries with More than 100,000 Shia Muslims (from Pew Research Center, 2009).

A few things stand out:

1. More than a third of Shia Muslims in the world live in Iran with absolute 90–95% majority.
2. Approximately 42% of the remaining world Shi'a population resides in countries spanning from India to Turkey.
3. Highest percentages of Shi'as outside Iran, when compared with the Sunni population, live in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.
4. "Shi'as predominate where there is oil in Iran, Iraq and in the oil rich areas of Eastern Saudi Arabia as well," and "*they constitute 80% of the native population of the oil-rich Persian Gulf region,*" notes Yitzhak Nakash, author *The Shi'as of Iraq*.<sup>103</sup>

The above analysis reveals an undeniable Iranian influence, support or footprint in the sociological mindset of countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon and Yemen who have all experienced or are continuing to experience a fair amount of unrest. From Bahrain's perspective, the recent events have clearly drawn up lines between the two sects who now view everything through the narrowed down vision of ethnicity. This narrow vision has a long history and while we have touched upon this subject in the foregoing chapters, it would be worthwhile to refresh our thoughts with some details.

#### **E. THE UNBRIDGEABLE SUNNI-SHIA CLEAVAGE IN ISLAM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

Recently Bahrain has been experiencing anti-government demonstrations on ethnic issues which are primarily related to the age old ideological discord between Shia and Sunni schools of Islam. Looking at the history, the seeds of Shia faith in Islam were sown soon after the demise of Prophet Muhammad when his successor was required to be chosen. This happened because the Prophet had neither appointed a successor nor had laid down procedures for choosing one after his death.<sup>104</sup>

Notably, the Arab society is based on tribal structure where there is always an element of rivalry and tussle for authority and such trends co-existed before and after the

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<sup>103</sup> Mike Shuster, "The origins of Shia-Sunni Split," 2007, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7332087>, accessed April 13, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Saeed Qureshi, "Bahrain In The Light of Sunni-Shia Conflict: Producing Iran's Desirable Results?," 2011, [http://www.esinislam.com/Articles201102/WritersArticles\\_SaeedQureshi\\_0220.htm](http://www.esinislam.com/Articles201102/WritersArticles_SaeedQureshi_0220.htm), accessed February 15, 2013

advent of Islam. Prophet Muhammad belonged to the Banu Hashim side of Quraish tribe but the three caliphs who succeeded him belonged to other tribes yet there was no major dispute over their choice, which was limited to a vote from the notables in accordance with the tribal practices of those times. This led to the selection of Abu Bakr Siddique as his successor. The dissention however came from a small number of loyalists who were of the opinion that the succession to the Holy Prophet was an undeniable right of the blood relations only and therefore Ali Ibn Abe Talib (Prophet's cousin, a close confidant and son in law) did oppose the choice of the three caliphs on the premise that the Prophet during his lifetime had indicated that Ali would be his successor.<sup>105</sup>

With the assassination of Othman, the third caliph of Islam, the caliphate was ultimately passed to Ali (656 AD). At the same time the Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula and the surrounding areas of Syria and Iraq had already been divided in supporting the clan of Ali or the family of Prophet, and those who were from other tribes. This is evident as the five year period of Ali's caliphate (656 -661 AD) was largely consumed in fighting with the Omayyad governor of Syria, Amir Muawiyah which led to thousands of Muslims being killed from both sides.<sup>106</sup> The massacre of Prophets Family in Karbala by Omayyad caliph Yazid was the proverbial last straw on the camel's back that divided the Muslim nation into two separate blocs. This division is highlighted because Sunni's believe in the four successors of the prophet but the Shias instead disregard the first three caliphs and only believe in Ali Ibn Abe Talib as the true successor of the Prophet.

Downstream of the ideological beliefs there are many sub-sects and denominations within the two major schools of Islamic thought. Consequently, the selection of the true successor resulted in dividing the ranks of Islam. While the Sunnis believe in the principle of elective office the Shias continue to emphasize the belief that that prophets succession comes only through his blood line. The crux of the Shias faith is visualized in the belief that God and his prophet had designated Ali Ibn Abe Talib as the

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<sup>105</sup> Sahih Muslim, *Kitab al-Imara* (New York: The Book of Leadership), 1, 4–6.

<sup>106</sup> Ismaili Online, "Ismaili History 336 Ali Bin Abu Talib", <http://www.ismaili.net/histoire/history03/history336.html> (accessed 15 Jan. 2012)

only legitimate successor, thereby relegating the rule of the first three prophets as illegitimate. This division has witnessed in history the buildup of a mutual mistrust by both groups whenever they perceived a chance, and Shias being in minority (around 15% of the overall Muslim population) have been at the receiving end. The rift is so pronounced (though never stated in loud and clear terms) that each sect does not even consider the other as Muslims. History bears witness that Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Iran have all been facing the wrath of Sunni-Shia rivalry which continues even to this day and countless Muslims from both sides in these areas have laid their life due to the ever increasing bigotry and sectarian hatred. Saddam Husain's dictatorial rule in Iraq (1979 AD- 2003 AD) over the majority Shia population of Iraq was repressive to say the least. However, since May 2006, the tables have turned and the Sunni's are now at the receiving end and being discriminated, at times even tortured by the Shia majority government of Nouri al Maliki.<sup>107</sup> The American forces, after their occupation of Iraq in 2003, were unable to stop the buildup of animosity between the two sects and despite a flare up against the occupation forces the bloody clashes have continued on daily basis. This sectarian vendetta has now spread through Lebanon and even Pakistan where hundreds of Shias and Sunni's have since died as a result of inter sect clashes.<sup>108</sup>

#### **F. RIVAL POLITICAL BLOCS**

Saudi Arabia, the citadel of Sunni faith, and its people are predominantly Sunnis and on the other hand 90% of Iran's population practices Shia faith. As a result there are two arch rivals within the Muslim world: one considered as a leader of Sunnis and the other leading the Shias. Regrettably this deep rooted ideological rift between Sunni Arabs and Shias of Iran has led to the creation of two strong political blocks within the region led by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, reviving the age old rivalry into modern times. It is precisely for this reason that the orthodox regime of Saudi Arabia has quietly supported Israel in relation to Iran, the latter being viewed as bigger threat to Arabs'

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<sup>107</sup> Alireza Jafarzadeh, *The Iranian Threat* (Palgrave MacMillan: New York 2008), 217.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

predominance in the Middle East region.<sup>109</sup> So much so that Iran's recent nuclear ambitions and the ensuing controversy have lately made the Saudi King Abdullah to call upon United States to '*crush the snake's head.*' It is therefore difficult to imagine that an ideological harmony can be brought about between these sects whose followers are ever ready to lay down their lives than compromise on their beliefs.

Viewed in this historical background Bahrain seems to have become the focal point of Shia Sunni rivalry in the region and the Shia uprising from nowhere against the Al Khalifa ruling family in February 2011 is a testament to this reality. Iran on its part would like to fuel greater polarization and not let this golden opportunity slip through without extracting maximum benefit from it in the form of greater leverage and rights for Shias that would inevitably lead to weakening of Sunni dominance as well as Saudi influence in the region. Reports of unrest and protests from Shia population in the eastern provinces of Saudi appear to be a link in the same chain. Whether such major political changes would prove detrimental to the American military presence in Bahrain is yet to be seen once the protests and riots successfully subside as has happened in Tunisia and Egypt.

#### **G. POIGNANT GROUND REALITIES: DEDUCTIONS**

Based upon above analysis and foregone discussion it would be plausible to deduce the following ground realities with regards to Iran and Bahrain's respective positions in the Persian Gulf:

1. The 1979 AD Islamic Revolution in Iran laid firm foundation of a viable Shi'a theocratic regime that shows no signs of regression in pursuit of uniquely independent and aggressive policies well into the twenty first century.
2. In consequence, due to its dominant size and Geographic's and its inherent economics strength with fourth largest oil reserves in the world under its belt, not to mention its indigenous military prowess with credible nuclear ambitions and missile technology, Iran will continue to play a major role

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<sup>109</sup> Torgeir E. Fjærtøft, *Do Israel, Iran and Saudi Arabia heed Sun Tzu?*, <http://gulfunit.wordpress.com/2011/10/31/do-israel-iran-and-saudi-arabia-heed-sun-tzu/> (accessed 22 Dec. 2011)

in shaping the political future of the Persian Gulf region for a long time to come.

3. Other than speculations (and that too mostly by the western ‘democracies’ and press) there are no indications to assume that Bahrain’s Sunni led government, and the rule of King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa which has full backing of GCC, both economically and militarily as has been seen during the most recent disturbances on its soil, will be cowed down or capitulate as in case of Tunisia and Egypt. The King’s rule will remain broadly secure and this is primarily due to the role that Saudi Arabia (the other dominant Sunni power house in the region), which sees Bahrain as buffer zone, plays and would not like to think about any such precedence to be established in its own backyard for the sake of the survival of its own Kingdom/ “House of Saud.”
4. Bahrain’s position is aptly portrayed in a recent report<sup>110</sup> by Reuters which stated that, “*Bahrain is seen as a fault line of tensions between Shi’ite power Iran and Sunni Gulf Arab countries wary of protests spreading to their own Shi’ite minorities.*”

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<sup>110</sup>Ahlul Bayt News Agency, *Bahrain Opposition Threatens to Leave Reform Talks*, <http://abna.ir/data.asp?lang=3&Id=253131>, accessed July 16, 2011.

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## VI. CONCLUSION: FUTURE OF BAHRAIN–IRAN RELATIONS, THE WAY FORWARD

As neighbors, Bahrain and Iran have a long relationship centered largely around bilateral trade, though basic tourism and necessary regional cooperation also play a part. Since the international community and the United States in particular began condemning Iran for its secretive nuclear enrichment program, Bahrain's relations with the Islamic Republic have become increasingly strained. This important factor has complicated the regional demographics and is viewed in Bahrain with a lot of concern. "*While [the Iranians] don't have the bomb yet, they are developing it,*" said Sheikh Salman Bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, the Bahraini Crown Prince. It remains to be seen how the situation pans out in the future.<sup>111</sup>

On the economic front Bahrain has a growing but limited trade relationship with Iran. Despite Iran's size and proximity, it is not one of Bahrain's top-20 trading partners. According to published Ministry of Finance figures for 2007 AD, it accounts for less than 1% of Bahrain's total trade.<sup>112</sup> Bahrain did show a lot of interest in importing Iranian gas, (1 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day for next 25 years) but these negotiations have not been finalized until to date owing to frictions caused as a result of protests of an Iranian official's claim that Iran had sovereignty over Bahrain, and of late due to the Shi'a uprising of February-March 2011 time frame, which has again soured the relations.<sup>113</sup> It is therefore safe to assume that it would be a while before trade talks can resume. Be that as it may the Bahrain-Iran trade relationship primarily consists of Bahraini exports of petroleum and mining products and professional and financial services. Imports from Iran are minimal and that too largely in food products.

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<sup>111</sup> Breitbart, "World Powers, Arabs Share Concern on Iran's Nuclear Program" (2008) [http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=081216195127.wa5m7ros&show\\_article=1](http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=081216195127.wa5m7ros&show_article=1), accessed July 22, 2011.

<sup>112</sup>*The Guardian*, "U.S Embassy Cables: The Documents," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/series/us-embassy-cables-the-documents>, accessed July 11, 2011.

<sup>113</sup>MENAFN News, "Bahrain to resume gas talks with Iran" (2009), [https://www.menafn.com/qn\\_news\\_story\\_s.asp?StoryId=1093278454](https://www.menafn.com/qn_news_story_s.asp?StoryId=1093278454), accessed July 23, 2011.

Bearing all this in mind, and in conclusion to our thesis, we can say that Bahrain's Sunni rulers view Iran with deep suspicion. As far as they are concerned, the secure umbrella of GCC, predominant support of Saudi Arabia and the support of United States, with its existing military presence on its soil in the shape of fifth fleet, would continue to be three key factors that would play important role in keeping Iran's aggressive policies in check. Security being the main concern, Bahrain government is well aware that if Iran became embroiled in a regional armed conflict, its (Bahrain's) indigenous majority Shi'a population would be sympathetic and will have a soft corner for Iran, and worryingly mindful that the resulting street demonstrations will adversely affect the historical links between the two countries. But, it is a dilemma that has firm roots in the centuries old conflict of ethnicity and suspicion and to date no one has found a permanent solution to bridge this gap. Abdullah Hashim, a Sunni National Unity Assembly spokesman to AFP, as reported on Yahoo News and Politics on May 31, 2011, recently remarked, *"The call to topple the regime [By Shi'a activists] has opened a deep rift in Bahraini society that will take tens of years to heal."*

With this backdrop Bahrain will continue to perform the difficult balancing act where diplomacy will play its role as they make occasional gestures to placate their large and touchy neighbor; and so, at this point in time, the remark that "Bahrain-Iran relations will remain turbulent and continue to ride rough waters well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century," seems appropriate.

Both nations therefore need to refer to the age-old axiom: **"To exist, one has to coexist."**

There is no choice.

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