Nationalism in Bahrain: From the Rise of Popular Politics to the Arab Spring

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While there is a Bahraini state, containing almost one and a half million people, it is difficult to speak of a "Bahraini nation," let alone a Bahraini nationalism that reflects or anchors a common national identity framework. "Nationalism" is an ideology that involves identification with a "nation." Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner agree that a "nation" is an abstraction that is consciously created and continuously evolving. Benedict Anderson gifted us with the useful expression "imagined community," and contends that this community is based on any number of a common set of features which could include language, culture, religion, territory, ethnicity, and shared history. If we accept Anderson's formulation and apply it to Bahrain, what would be the content of the imagined Bahraini community? The answer to that question depends on who you ask. A major sectarian fault line runs deep and wide through Bahrain and it has prevented the emergence of a sense of collective belonging capable of "imagining" Bahrain as a single national community. As a consequence, there are multiple conceptions of what it means to be quintessentially Bahraini.

Bahrain's population is almost equally divided between foreign nationals (55%) and Bahraini citizens (45%). The majority of Bahraini citizens (about 70%) are Shi'i Arabs of non-tribal heritage while the ruling clique is mainly comprised of Sunni Arabs, most of whom claim Bedouin heritage. The least common denominator between the two largest groups is the Arab identity framework. This perhaps explains why the clearest conception of nationalism to have ever shaped politics in Bahrain is Arab nationalism (*qawmiyya*). Its impact began to be felt in the 1920s as a reaction to sharp forms of British intervention in Bahraini affairs. Anti-colonial Arab nationalism came to a crescendo in the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser, retreated in 1967 and suffered another blow in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, a neighboring Gulf Arab state. Arab nationalism is still felt residually today, for example in popular identification with the Palestinian cause.

State specific nationalism (*wataniyya*) has played a role, but its role has not been a vehicle for unification. Whenever state-specific nationalism is articulated, whether for identity construction or mass mobilization, the effect it has is to highlight or reinforce divisions. For example, official history textbooks and heritage sites highlight the history of pearling and the tradition of falcon hunting, which are markers of Sunni history and culture. The agricultural way of life, vernacular markers, cultural and historical contributions, and of course, religious identification of the Shi'a, are written out of the official story. Likewise the dominant Shi'i conception of national identity—with its emphasis on indigeneity, oppression, and the myth of the idyllic, agricultural Bahraini civilization that was ravaged in the eighteenth century by the invasion of the Al Khalifa Bedouin—has neither fostered national unity nor served as an instrument for change.

What would it take for state-specific nationalism to emerge in Bahrain? What has prevented the emergence of a cross-sectarian Bahraini national consciousness? Have there been any efforts to bridge the sectarian divides in service to a national objective? If so under what conditions has cross-sectarianism emerged? Who or what stimulated it and what was it able to achieve? These questions require reference to some other closely related questions: When and how did nationalism emerge in Bahrain and what path did it take? By identifying and explaining what has been said and done by the main players who are involved in creating and shaping national content, this paper will endeavor to shed light on these inter-related questions.

Bahrain before Nationalism, 1783-1923

When the Al Khalifa tribesmen disembarked at Bahrain in 1783, they came ashore as victors of a war against the hereditary governor of Bushehr for control of an archipelago that was inhabited mostly by Shi'i Arab, non-tribal people—people who called themselves "Baharna" (sing. Bahrani). With the help of allied tribes, the Al Khalifa fended off waves of attacks by Wahhabis, Omanis and Persians and eventually established themselves in Muharraq and Riffa from where they continued to rule over the archipelago. The Al Khalifa laid claim to certain ruling privileges, which included extracting labor, services and crippling taxes from the subjugated Baharna peasants. The Al Khalifa administration was built on a hierarchical patronage system in which tribal allies had preferential status. Tribal allies acquiesced to Al Khalifa family rule and provided defense in times of need in exchange for tribal autonomy and tax-free access to Bahrain's lucrative pearl banks. By 1860, the Al Khalifa also sought out and established a protector-protégé relationship with the British—the most powerful player in the Persian Gulf.[1]

Like the other Gulf Arab shaykhdoms, Bahrain grew up as a pealing center and mercantile community in a port town ruled by a Sunni Arab shaykhly family of Bedouin origin. In spite of waves of migration that brought in a diverse assortment of merchants, financiers, skilled craftsmen and manual labors from around the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, the Shi'i Baharna retained their numerical majority in the population. Since the mid nineteenth century, the Shi'i population has included a small community referred to as '*Ajam* (non-Arab) which traces its roots to Iran. Although the Baharna and the 'Ajams share the same faith, they have historically spoken different languages, gathered around separate places of worship, inhabited different neighborhoods and did not intermarry often.

Bahrain's Sunni population can be divided into three main historical groups. The first group was composed of the Al Khalifa and their tribal allies. The second group was composed of the so-called *Najdis*—merchants who historically took leave of their town or tribal abode in the Arabian interior to pursue business opportunities on the coast. Their Arabian pedigree and Sunni faith enabled them and their progeny to become close associates with the ruling family. The third Sunni group consisted of merchant families

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[1] James Onley, "Britain and the Gulf Shaykhdoms, 1820–1971: The Politics of Protection", Occasional Paper no. 4, Georgetown University, Center for International and Regional Studies (2009) pp. 10-11.

who adopted the name *Hawala*. These were families that claimed Arab heritage and depicted their transfer to the Arab shaykhdoms as a "return" to the land of their forebears after a long sojourn in southern Iran. Hawala were also called ʿAjam, especially in the early days of their migration, because of their strong cultural and linguistic connection to Iran, but over time, many of them were able to appeal to their Sunni faith and Arab heritage to facilitate their acceptance into the dominant group.[2] In contrast with the tribesmen, who did not view commerce as a fitting way of life, the Hawala were the backbone of the region's long distance trade. They were also multi-lingual, better educated and more susceptible to outside ideas. It was this group that introduced anti-colonial nationalism to Bahrain during the heyday of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

The rise of a particularly virulent strain of Iranian nationalism after the First World War and its application to the Persian Gulf by Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941) drew Britain into the kind of interventions in Bahrain that were unparalleled in any of the other Arab shaykhdoms. The challenge posed by Iran to Britain's paramount position in the Persian Gulf was the catalyst for the dramatic British interventions of the 1920s which laid the bureaucratic foundations of the modern nation state. The *casus belli* was Iran's efforts to intervene in sectarian clashes in pursuit of its ambition to realize its claim to sovereignty over Bahrain. The unrest began in 1922 when the Baharna staged a protest against the oppression that they suffered at the hands of the Al Khalifa. The unrest widened along sectarian lines when clashes erupted between Sunni Najdis and Shiʿi Iranian shopkeepers and further escalated when Sunni tribesmen assailed Shiʿi villages in the countryside. The Iranian community in Bahrain sent a steady stream of articles to Iranian newspapers, fueling a campaign for the renewal of Iranian claims to Bahrain. They also appealed directly to Tehran for protection. Rumors surfaced that Tehran was preparing to submit its Bahrain claim to international arbitration. Not wanting to appear weak in the eyes of the Arab shaykhs whom it claimed to protect, and desirous of keeping its activity in Bahrain out of the public eye, the British intervened with a firm hand to effect an improvement in the administration of justice on the island. These interventions included the forcible retirement of the hereditary ruler and the elevation of his son and heir apparent as acting ruler in his stead, the creation of a modern state administration under the aegis of the Government of India, and the introduction of Charles Belgrave (1926-1957) as "adviser" to the acting ruler.

The re-assertion of Iranian claims to Bahrain and the intrusive policies implemented by the British as a means of countering Iranian aspirations were instrumental in the emergence of a new nationalist discourse in Bahrain. Beginning in the 1920s, pan-Arab ideas reached Bahrain through the medium of Egyptian and Iraqi newspapers. The recruitment of teachers from Iraq, Palestine and Cairo contributed to the spread of pan-Arabism and the founding of youth movements and literary clubs. Tribal elites, who had been exposed to the anti-colonial struggle in India and the promotion of Arab nationalism in Cairo, adopted the vocabulary of Arabism as a means of mobilizing against unwanted

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[2] John George Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman, and Central Arabia* 2: Geographical, ed. Birdwood (1915; reprinted, 1986), pp. 754-755; See also Clive Holes, "Dialect and National Identity," in *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*, eds. Paul Dresch and James Piscatori (London: I.B.Taurus, 2005), p. 58.

foreign intrusion that encroached on their traditional, tribal way of life. In October 1923 a group of tribesmen who opposed British interventions that curtailed their tribal privileges, convened in the majles of Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Zayyani and adopted the title, "Bahrain National Congress." Its members were all Sunnis.[3] The congress produced a petition decrying the crimes that the British had committed against the "Arab nation," and demanding that authority be restored to Shaykh 'Isa.[4] A second petition, the so-called "Muharraq document" of 1923, called for the establishment of a national parliament to look after the interests of the people of Bahrain. Viewing this opposition movement as the main threat to his rule and to the stability of Bahrain, the British-supported acting ruler, Shaykh Hamad, requested help in deporting its leaders. The British government was more than willing to oblige.[5] Al-Zayyani and one of his co-organizers were deported to India where they continued to organize opposition against the British.[6] Once in India, al-Zayyani sought to bring a lawsuit against the British but died of natural causes before his goals were realized. In official history, he is celebrated as the father of the Bahraini national movement.[7]

Arab Nationalism and British-led state-building in Bahrain, 1923-1971

The demise of the pearling industry coupled with the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s proved disastrous for the pearl merchants, and many of the prominent Sunni Arab families lost their fortunes and property in these hard times. But the discovery of oil in 1932 and its exploitation by the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) began to provide a new source of income. Young Arab Shi'a migrated to the towns and began to work in the oilfields. They were joined by some of the younger men from the bankrupted Sunni pearling families. Employment in the foreign-owned oil company and the growth of a national labor movement contributed to a growing sense of commonality between Sunnis and Shi'a, but resentment grew up over the employment of foreigners, namely Iranians and Indians. There was a growing assertion that Bahraini citizens, both Sunni and Shi'i, ought to have "rights" over "foreigners" to employment in the local economy. The growing sense of Arabism gave rise to inter-sectarian Arab meetings which were spearheaded by Hawala merchants whose education and travels abroad had exposed them to the discourses of pan-Arabism and nationalism. The result was the 1938 petition

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[3] Muhammad Ghanim Al-Rumaihi, "Social and Political Change in Bahrain since the First World War," PhD thesis (Durham University, 1973), p. 312.
[4] Political Agent Bahrain (Daly) to Political Resident, 17 October 1923, with enclosure, "translation of a petition without date signed by Shaykh 'Isa and the heads of ten tribes including the Al Sada, Al Bu Falasa, Mosallam, Jalahima, Zayyani, Na'im, Manan'a, Al Dawasir, Al Bu 'Ali and Bin Jawdar tribes. India Office Records (IOR)/R/15/1/338, British Library, London.
[5] Political Resident Bushehr (Trevor) to the Foreign and Political Department Simla, 29 October 1923, IOR/R/15/1/338, British Library, London.
[6] Political Resident Bushehr (Trevor) to the Foreign Secretary to the Government of India Delhi, 10 November 1923, IOR/R/15/1/338, British Library, London; See also Rashid Abdul Rahman al-Zayani, *Memories and History* (Manama: Al Ayam Press, 1999), pp. 25-64.
https://issuu.com/alzayaniprofile/docs/memories_and_history, accessed October 7, 2018.
[7] See for example, the official textbook, 'Abdullah and al-'Abidin, *Tariikh al-Bahrayn al-hadith, 1500-2002* [The History of Modern Bahrain, 1500-2002] (Mamlakat al-Bahrayn: Jami'at al-Bahrayn, Markaz al-Dirasat al-Tarikhiyya, 2009).

signed by Sunni, Shi'i and Hindi merchants demanding, among other things, the formation of a legislative committee.[8] Another manifestation of the currency of Arabism was the proliferation of educational, cultural, sports and labor clubs which served as conduits for pan-Arab ideas. A prominent example is Nadi al-'Uruba, founded in 1939 "to unite the people and fight religious sectarianism…with the principles of Arab nationalism."[9]

Fueled by pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism, news from Palestine generated a good deal of unrest in Bahrain. Following the UN's approval of the Partition Plan in 1947, young rioters marching with various Arab flags targeted the Jewish community in Manama which numbered around 600 people. Hawala youth instigated the mob action and they were joined mostly by foreigners.[10] Charles Belgrave, who responded to the scene and engaged in fist fights with the rioters, noted that these youths had failed to recruit many participants from among the Bahraini tribes or the Shi'i Baharna. This narrative was corroborated by Houda Nonoo, a former Bahraini ambassador to the US, who said that after the riots, local Bahraini Arabs sheltered Jews in their houses.[11] But the young Hawala nationalists who were instrumental in stirring up unrest in the name of solidarity with Palestine, would go on to found the first independent local newspaper *Sawt al-Bahrain*, and would also take the lead in organizing the cross-sectarian nationalist uprising of the 1950s.[12]

For the first time in the1950s, popular protest cut across the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Ironically, it was sparked by a sectarian outbreak. Sectarian violence reared its head again in 1953 in the form of clashes that erupted during the annual *'ashura'* procession. Violence spread to a Shi'i village and then to the oil company, BAPCO, where Sunni employees attacked their Shi'i co-workers on company busses. To address these tensions, a group of young Hawala activists, led by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bakir, reached out to reform-minded Shi'i young men and organized a series of public meetings followed by a series of cross-sectarian protests denouncing British interference in Bahrain. In a short time, they managed to channel the sectarian tension into a sustained period of anti-imperialist protest. In his speeches, al-Bakir depicted sectarianism as a tool that was invented by the British in service to their tactics of "divide and rule."[13] Newspaper articles championed Arab solidarity, while calling for an end to colonial rule and the ouster of Charles Belgrave.

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[8] IOR/R/15/1/343: Translation of a memorandum containing demands submitted to His Highness Shaykh Sir Hamad by five merchants of Bahrain dated 19th *Ramadan* 1357- 12th November 1938, The British Library, London.
[9] Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 175.
[10] Belgrave, Personal Diaries, 4 December 1947; Political Resident Bahrain (Hay) to Commonwealth Relations Office London, 5 December 1947, IOR/R/15/6/379, British Library, London; Hamad Abdulla, "Sir Charles Belgrave and the Rise and Fall of Bahrain's National Union Committee," PhD dissertation (University of East Anglia, 2016), p. 13.
[11] Donald Macintyre, "Low profile but welcome: a Jewish outpost in the Gulf," *The Telegraph*, 2 November 2007.
[12] Khouri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, p. 201-202; Abdulla, "Sir Charles Belgrave," p. 13.
[13] Abdulla, "Sir Charles Belgrave," p. 46.

In 1954 this cross-sectarian movement gave rise to a civic organization, *al-Hay'eh al-Ittihad al-Watani* (the Higher Executive Committee) later re-named the National Union Committee. Its members were all Arabs, divided equally between Sunni and Shi'a, united by a sense of "enlightenment" that identified colonialism, tribalism and sectarianism as hindrances to Arab independence in Bahrain. The contest that ensued between the administration and the nationalist movement produced some modest, temporary gains for the Committee, though it failed to produce an elected parliament—a demand which the administration was not prepared to consider. But tension between the ruling shaykh and the Committee increased owing to the controversy over Charles Belgrave. With support and encouragement from Gamal Abdel Nasser, the nationalist Committee demanded his ouster. For the nationalists, Charles Belgrave was the *de facto* ruler and a symbol of British imperial authority in an Arab nation. For the British government, he had become a liability. His arbitrary and illiberal administration of the country's courts, police and finances had turned him into the primary object of nationalist indignation. Finally, responding to pressure from the British government, the ruling shaykh agreed to discharge him, a decision which led to Belgrave's departure in 1957.

Two years after it gained official recognition, the National Union Committee was dissolved when its leaders were arrested and ultimately banished for incitement of anti-British riots during the Suez Crisis and an alleged plot to kill Belgrave and the ruling shaykh.[14] In spite of its brief existence, the National Union Committee marked a turning point. It was the first time that a popular, cross-sectarian reform movement, based on the principles of Arab nationalism rather than sectarian affiliation, managed to negotiate with and receive some concessions from the Bahrain administration. However, its ability to appeal to all segments of the Bahraini population was blunted by the exclusive nature of its political discourse and the superior status that it afforded to Arabs, in a political space which also included ethnic Persians, Indians and Jews. Its transnational orientation and uncompromising commitment to Nasserism eventually also cost the movement some of its Shi'i support.[15] The forced dissolution of the Committee introduced a new era in which popular politics were expressed mainly through the activities of radical, leftist, ethnically exclusive, underground movements.[16] The most influential were the National Liberation Movement linked to the communists in Iran and Iraq, and the Arab Nationalist Movement, linked with its anti-Zionist counterparts in Beirut and Cairo. These groups were instrumental in the violent, anti-British uprising of March 1965, following BAPCO's decision to lay off hundreds of workers.

After Belgrave was dismissed and Arab nationalists were forced underground, there was a tangible effort on the part of the Bahrain administration to promote Bahraini patriotism and Islamic identification as a counterweight to the anti-colonial Nasserism which was rattling the foundations of all of the traditional Gulf regimes. An example is the 1961

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[14] Al-Rumaihi, "Social and Political Change in Bahrain," p. 50; Khouri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, pp.197-214.
[15] Abdulla, "Sir Charles Belgrave," pp. 299-300.
[16] Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain: from ethnic to national and vice versa," The Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, 13-16 August 1998, https://org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html (accessed 12 March 2019).

regulation which required all of Bahrain's schools whether public or private to teach Arabic, history and geography of the Bahrain archipelago and the Islamic religion.[17] Cooperation with the Danish Archaeological Expedition during the 1960s also gave rise to the first heritage museum, whose exhibits traced Bahrain's origins back to antiquity. The British attempted in vain to safeguard their relevance to domestic affairs and make their presence more palatable to the local population by pushing for increased political and economic participation and the absorption of disenfranchised Bahrainis in state institutions such as the police. But the Al Khalifa chose a different course of action that would consolidate their unequivocal control over the country: the growing administrative apparatus was mostly staffed with members of the ruling family and the police forces were peopled by Sunni loyalists. By the time the British announced their intention to withdraw in 1968, the levers of economic and political power were securely in the hands of the Al Khalifa.

Independence, Nationalism, and State Consolidation, 1971-1979

The announcement of British withdrawal led to a period of calm while the Al Khalifa anxiously sought an acceptable formula to provide for Bahrain's security in the post-British era. The most pressing issue was the need to eliminate Iran's longstanding claims to sovereignty over Bahrain. The results of the UN independence survey of 1970, which determined that Bahrainis preferred independence to Iranian control, gave testament to the strength of Arab nationalism in Bahrain on the eve of independence. A special UN representative spent 20 days in Bahrain holding meetings with a cross-section of individual citizens and leaders of societies, organizations, institutions and groups, after which he reported that Bahrainis from all backgrounds were "virtually unanimous in wanting a fully independent sovereign state." "The great majority," he added, specified "that [it] should be an Arab state." This took place while the Al Khalifa of Bahrain, with Saudi encouragement, sought federation with Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras al-Khaimah, Ajman, Fujairah, Umm al-Quwain and Qatar.

From the perspectives of security and Arabism, federation with neighboring Gulf Arab states seemed like a natural ambition for Bahrain. But the other Gulf Arab rulers harbored fears that the inclusion of Bahrain's large, restive population in the proposed federation would give the Al Khalifa a dominant role to play, would create a gateway for Iranian intrusion, and would contribute to the spread of revolutionary ideologies and civil strife of the type that festered in Bahrain. Unable to reach an acceptable agreement with the other shaykhdoms, the Al Khalifa sent a two man delegation to Riyadh to obtain the blessing of Saudi Arabia and afterward, declared independence on 15 August 1971. Today, this date in history is not marked or celebrated. Emir 'Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa, who ruled Bahrain at independence chose to locate Bahrain's national day celebrations on a different date, December 16th, the date that marked the beginning of his personal rule in 1961. In doing so, the ruler ensured that the House of Khalifa would identified as integral to the state and also ensured that its independence would not be remembered or

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[17]Her Majesty's Political Resident in the Persian Gulf by Authority, Supplement to the Persian Gulf Gazette, No. 35, 1 January 1962 (London, H.M. Stationary Office; reprinted by Archive Editions, 1987).

commemorated as the culmination of a hard-fought freedom struggle but rather as *de jure* confirmation of a longstanding *de facto* reality.

Taking a lesson from Kuwait's smooth transition to constitutionalism, Emir 'Isa ratified a constitution which provided for a partially elected parliament. He also pardoned a large number of oppositionists by releasing them from jail or allowing them to return from exile. These developments produced an atmosphere of cautious optimism. In 1973 male Bahraini citizens went to the polls and elected 30 members of parliament who all ran as independent candidates since political parties were not allowed. Many of the candidates associated informally with the so-called "people's bloc" consisting of Sunni and Shi'i nationalists or the so-called "religious bloc" consisting of Shi'i conservatives. The newly elected parliament conflicted with the Emir on a number of policy issues, particularly those that were concerned with civil liberties. Matters came to a head when the parliament refused to ratify the extension of a lease to US naval forces and a state security law sanctioning the arbitrary arrest of political opponents. The main objection to the security law came from the so-called "people's bloc," but the "religious bloc" and the independents were persuaded to support their objection. Prolonged public debates about it eroded the authority of the Emir. The Emir also identified the emerging alliance between religionists and leftists as a threat to his survival. The members of parliament went on summer recess in 1975 never to reconvene. The parliament was dissolved by official decree and the government began a ruthless repression campaign against oppositionists who were viewed as a threat to the state, including some of the members of the dissolved parliament.

It soon became clear that the Al Khalifa preferred a fractured society over a united one. Strengthened by the oil boom of the 70s and early 80s, the ruling family was able to deal with Bahrain's segmented society through the granting of favors and gratuities to variously selected intermediaries, such as the heads of large families, clubs or professional associations, who were expected to deliver the compliance of the group they represented to the Al Khalifa status quo. The politics of benefaction which was based on allegiance to the regime, irrespective of sectarian creed, allowed a limited number of Shi'a to rise to positions of national prominence and wealth. But their position was always tenuous, subject to demonstrations of loyalty and also to sudden shakeups, which were calculated to prevent the emergence of independent centers of power.[18] Thus during the age of progress and prosperity, the Al Khalifa's dual strategy of co-optation and suppression effectively prevented the emergence of a cross-sectarian nationalist movement capable the challenging the status quo.

Islamism, Nationalism and Legitimacy, 1979-2003

The decline of Arab nationalism, the persistence of authoritarianism, and the example of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, brought political Islam to the forefront where it soon outstripped nationalism as the primary ideological challenge to the status quo in Bahrain. The Emir's dissolution of the parliament and harsh crackdown on dissent fostered an

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[18] Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain," 13-16 August 1998, https://org.uib.no/smi/pao/khalaf.html (accessed 12 March 2019).

acute legitimacy deficit from the mid-1970s. This was exacerbated by eruption of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the inquest it promulgated into the legitimacy of monarchical forms of government in Islam, a direct attack on the foundations of the Gulf Arab regimes. Moreover, the Shi'a in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were not immune to Iranian revolutionary propaganda directed toward them. Iran's Islamic Revolution increased the political awareness of the Shi'a and encouraged identification with their co-religionists as a political identity framework.

The Shi'i revolution in Iran was accompanied by the renewal of rhetorical claims to sovereignty over Bahrain. Ayatollah Sadeq Rohani, for example, who was instrumental in the overthrow of the Shah, declared that the Islamic Republic would annex Bahrain and overthrow of the Bahraini government. These messages arising out of the Iranian revolution caused panic in Bahrain and alarm in the other Arab Gulf states. The 1981 failed coup attempt by a Shi'i organization with ties to Iran substantiated the perception in the minds of the Al Khalifa that Iran was capable of using Bahrain's Shi'a majority as a weapon against the Al Khalifa regime.[19] The unique threat that was posed by Iran to the Al Khalifa's survival fostered the distinctive emphasis that Bahrain's official conception of nationalism placed on loyalty, devotion and allegiance. This conception further cast Bahrain's Shi'a, as a fifth-column of Iran, which aimed to use democracy as a Trojan horse by which to seize power in Bahrain.

The sense of insecurity brought on by the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War served as an impetus for the promotion of a unifying *khaliji* (Gulf) identity framework which highlighted the common origins and common social, economic and linguistic features of Gulf Arab states. Whatever remnants of Arabism that had continued to influence public life in Gulf Arab states underwent a beating in 1990 when Kuwait was invaded by its Ba'athist Arab neighbor. Adding to that, the Arab Palestinian leader supported Iraq in its plundering of Kuwait. These events re-enforced a sense of solidarity between the Gulf Arab monarchies and further contributed to the consolidation of the unique *khaliji* identity.

In Bahrain, the 1990s were witness to a rising unemployment rate and a growing gap between the rich and poor which disproportionally affected the Shi'a. This created a situation that was ripe for an uprising. The provocation came in 1994 when an international marathon routed immodestly dressed runners through Shi'i neighborhoods of Manama. Shi'i youths gathered at the sidelines holding banners, shouting slogans and throwing stones. This was the beginning of the so-called "uprising of dignity" in which leftists and liberals would join together with Islamists in demanding the restoration of the 1973 constitution and parliament. But what began as a broad-based uprising underwent a transformation when the regime depicted the uprising as an Iranian plot and the protests assumed a more Shi'i character. An estimated forty people were killed and hundreds, perhaps thousands, were jailed. In spite of Saudi backing and American support for the Al Khalifa regime, the uprising did not die down until Emir 'Isa passed away and his son Hamad ascended the throne. Emir Hamad bin 'Isa Al Khaifa, who would later revise his title to King Hamad, pardoned political oppositionists, allowed exiles to return, and rolled

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[19] 'Ali Hashim, "Thawrat' al-Bahrayn tusri' al-ittifaqiyyat al-difa'a" [The Bahrain 'revolution' speeds defense agreements], *al-Nahar al-'Arabi wal-Duwali* (Paris) No. 243, 28 December 1981, pp. 25–27.

out the National Action Charter which appeared to promise significant reforms. Among these reforms would be a new constitution and parliament. A fresh spirit of national dialogue, enhanced freedom of expression and hopes for democracy filled the air.

The return of opposition figures to Bahrain in 2001 culminated in the establishment of several political societies the most prominent of which was al-Wefaq National Islamic Society. Al-Wefaq, a Shi'i Islamist movement, used religious terminology and imagery to articulate its guiding rationale as a struggle for justice for all the country's citizens. Its leadership, composed of clerics influenced by the teachings of Ayatollah Shaykh 'Isa Ahmed Qassim al-Bahrani, rejected secularism but embraced the advantages of democratization and political participation.[20] The second largest society in this period was the socialist-oriented, Arab nationalist movement, called the Democratic National Action Society and known as al-Wa'ad. Both al-Wefaq and al-Wa'ad took the decision to boycott the parliamentary elections of 2002 after it became clear that the new (or revised) constitution, formulated behind closed doors, provided for yet another rubber stamp parliament. The elections produced an elected body with many Islamist members and a Sunni majority. The concentration of authority in the hands of the ruling family was manifested in the creation of an un-elected upper house of parliament (*majles al-shura*), whose appointed members wielded greater power than those of the lower house (*majles al-nuwwab*). The Islamist composition of the elected body helped the Bahraini government make the case that, in a country with a conservative electorate, too much democracy too soon would produce an Islamist takeover. This was an especially cogent argument in the wake of the events of 11 September 2001.

Shi'i Revival, Nationalism and Identity Politics, 2003--

It was the elections of 2006 that brought Bahrain's largest Shi'i movement, al-Wefaq, into electoral politics. Their about-face is best understood by examining the tectonic shifts that took place in the regional configuration. The conversion of Iraq into a Shi'i state after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 rendered Bahrain the only remaining country in the world in which a Sunni minority ruled over a Shi'i majority. Parallel to this, the expansion of Iranian influence across the region, peaking in 2006, and the emergence of the Arab-Iranian regional cold war which pitted Sunnis against Shi'a, generated profound fears in Sunni halls of power that restive Shi'i populations in the Gulf could be used by Iran to destabilize Gulf Arab states. As part of their survival strategy, Gulf rulers encouraged sectarian suspicions of the Shi'a to secure backing for a possible confrontation with Iran. The Al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain depicted the Bahraini Shi'a as an Iranian fifth column that sought to use democracy as a vehicle to turn Bahrain into another conquest for Shiism and for Iran.

The success of the Shi'a in parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2005 breathed new life into Bahrain's largest Shi'i movement, al-Wefaq, which took the decision to end its boycott, register as a political party (which was now required), and participate in the 2006 parliamentary election. (Members of al-Wefaq who opposed participation migrated to the

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[20] See Elisheva Machlis, "Al-Wefaq and the February 14 uprising: Islam, nationalism and democracy – the Shi'i-Bahraini discourse," *Middle Eastern Studies* 52:6 (2016), pp. 978-995.

underground splinter group, al-Haqq). Gaining an endorsement by the Islamic Scholars Council, the most important Shi'i clerical institution in Bahrain, al-Wefaq won 17 seats in the 40 member elected body. Sunnis, enjoyed a slim majority, but were divided between Islamists and independents. Al-Wa'ad, the largest secular, Arab nationalist party failed to win any seats. Bahrain's voting public is very conservative and religious and this was reflected at the ballot box. Al-Wefaq, the largest Shi'i party presented a national agenda but their ideology was rooted in Shi'i Islam. Al-Menbar and al-Asala, the largest Sunni parties in the 2006 parliament were Islamist and Salafi. With this in view, the government treated the upper house, to which it appointed secular and liberal-minded members, as a check on the Islamist inclinations of the elected lower house.

On 14 February 2011, inspired by the uprisings that toppled autocratic rulers in Tunisia and Egypt, tens of thousands of Bahrainis flocked to Pearl Roundabout to demand a constitutional monarchy. The uprising was lauded by some commentators as a manifestation of Bahraini nationalism. Some of the protesters were Sunni, though most were Shi'a. Initially, the demands of the protestors were not sectarian in nature; they focused on political and civil rights for all the country's citizens. Al-Wefaq called for a constitutional monarchy. After its initial efforts to appease the protestors, the Al Khalifa government dispatched security forces which used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up the demonstrations. The protests intensified in subsequent days and with the help of social media, thousands of protesters arrived to various pre-determined locations around the country. The confrontations between protestors and security forces escalated when crowds began to call for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa. Subsequently, the merger of three Shi'i opposition movements, al-Haqq, al-Wafa and the Bahrain Freedom Movement, and their joint call for the establishment of a "republic" on the ruins of the Al Khalifa monarchy was interpreted by the regime as a plot hatched in Iran. Labeling the uprising as the work of a foreign enemy, the Al Khalifa invited Saudi and Emirati troops to enter via the causeway and militarily impose order, although smaller-scale protests and clashes continued until the Spring of 2014.

By invoking the Iranian threat and calling upon Sunni "brothers" to help to save Bahrain from an Iranian-hatched plot, the Al Khalifa successfully cast doubt on the intentions of the Bahraini Shi'a and induced their Sunni supporters to defect. Sunnis, including liberals and reform-minded Islamists, who had previously supported al-Wefaq in its call for greater political participation, either stayed home or were arrested on charges of treason. Their abandonment of the protests severely weakened al-Wefaq, while the independent oppositionists that coalesced around the title of the 14 February Movement gained the upper hand. At this juncture violence between Sunnis and Shi'a broke out in mixed neighborhoods the uprising assumed a more Shi'i, sectarian character.[21]

The politics of historical "memory," which featured prominently in the 2011 uprising and its aftermath, underscore the absence of a suitable, cross-sectarian national narrative. As casualties multiplied in clashes with the regime and jail cells swelled with influencers and human rights activists, protestors took to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to air their

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[21] Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, Bahrain Independent Commission Report, 23 November 2011, http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf, accessed 18 October 2018.

grievances. The outbreak of sectarian violence gave rise to a surge of interest in the history of the sectarian violence in Bahrain. Books banned by the regime were now being digitized, promoted and shared on social media. Cyber activists loosely associated with the 14 February Movement thrust the officially banned Baharna narrative of history into the public discourse. From their perspective, the contemporary struggle for dignity, freedom and justice was the continuation of a struggle that was begun in 1922 when the oppressed Shi'i Baharna staged a collective protest, closed their shops in the market, refused to pay taxes and presented a list of demands to the ruler. Excerpts about these events were plucked from books and archives, digitized and circulated on different social media platforms. Visual narratives in film format were generated, shared and amplified across the internet.[22] These mediated artifacts of history and memory provided rationale for personal and collective action during the escalating confrontation with the regime, when public protest was liable to culminate in a deadly confrontation with riot police.

The invocation of manifestly sectarian narratives on the part of cyber dissidents was anathema to the goals of al-Wefaq. While the online activists who associated with the 14 February Movement deployed a narrative of history that highlighted the Baharna's quest for justice since 1922, the established opposition drew attention to past examples of "the people's" quest for justice since 1923. The Al-Wefaq Twitter account, for example, identified the "Muharraq document" of 1923 and its demand for a national parliament as the beginning of a people's demand for a constitutional monarchy.[23] For al-Wefaq, it was not significant that the Muharraq document was signed only by Sunni partisans of royal family. What mattered was that they sought power for "the people." Moreover, official history textbooks also identified 1923 as the beginning of the Bahraini national movement. Al-Wefaq made use of the official narrative to highlight the history of both Sunni and Shi'i demands for a representative form of government. They also sought to debunk the notion that the Bahraini opposition deployed sectarian loyalties in pursuit of political goals. The vast majority of the Bahraini protestors, they argued, shunned sectarianism and strove for equal rights and opportunities for all the country's citizens.

Conclusion

Every cross-sectarian social movement since the rise of popular politics in Bahrain has at least partially been motivated by the desire of the people to have a say in the affairs of state. Before independence Sunnis and Shi'a joined forces in the struggle against colonialism. Arab nationalism was mobilized against the tribalism and patronage politics that cemented the privileged position of the ruling clique and perpetuated the marginalized position of the Shi'a. The uprising of the mid 1950s and the labor protests of the mid-1960s tied the fate of Bahrain to the march of Arab nationalism led by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The nationalist movement's major accomplishment was the departure of Charles Belgrave who had become the symbol of unwanted Western, colonial intrusion in the affairs of an Arab state.

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[22] See for example, Nader Kadhim, Twitter Post (Arabic), 2 February 2012, https://bit.ly/2J3Jgnz
[23] Alwefaq Society, Twitter Post (Arabic), 21 October 2011, https://bit.ly/2pcwF8A.

Independence in 1971 was everything but the dawn of state-specific Bahraini nationalism. It was the breakdown of negotiations to federate with its Gulf Arab neighbors. It was a confirmation that Bahrainis viewed themselves as Arab and did not want to be part of Iran. It was the departure of the British. It was the continuation of the Al Khalifa absolute monarchy which had reigned since 1873. Independence was a matter of fact development, procedural and devoid of state-specific national feeling. The anniversary of the momentous occasion is not celebrated, partially because the Al Khalifa do not allow it.

From the perspective of the ruling Al Khalifa family, being Bahraini means, above all else, a commitment to the survival of the Al Khalifa regime. The official conception of Bahraini nationalism involves loyalty and loyalty means standing with the Al Khalifa against the threats and conspiracies of Shi'i-Iran.[24] The Al Khalifa's perception of collusion across the Gulf during the uprising of 2011 was fed by the abundant memories of past interference and reinforced afresh in myriad ways. The actions of some of the oppositionists also fed their paranoia. For example, during the uprising in 2011, one of the prominent opposition leaders, Saeed al-Shehabi, gave interviews to Iranian media and appeared on Iranian TV calling for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa. The Shi'i masses can also unintentionally feed the Al Khalifa's paranoia. To give an example – in 2011, masses of demonstrators marched with portraits of turbaned Shi'i mullahs evoking memories of the protests that brought Ayatollah 'Ali Khomeini to power. Their clerics, such as al-Wefaq's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Shaykh Qassim, are conspicuously linked to Iran by their clerical networks. Shaykh Qassim insisted that the protestor's objectives were not shaped by outsiders, but from the perspective of the Al Khalifa, his transnational network and philosophical viewpoints turned al-Wefaq into a potential Iranian instrument. In June 2016 Shaykh Qassim joined the ranks of the hundreds who were stripped of their Bahraini citizenship on charges of terrorism and sedition. A month later, the high court dissolved the al-Wefaq party on terrorism related charges.

During the 2011 protests al-Wefaq articulated a non-sectarian national platform that was inclusive of both Sunnis and Shi'a—and even inclusive of the Al Khalifa—but its membership wholly Shi'a and its core ideology was Islamist. With Al Khalifa encouragement, Sunnis and liberals came to fear that al-Wefaq was just using the language of democracy as a Trojan horse to introduce an Iranian-style Shi'i theocracy. While al-Wefaq called for a form of representative government that would have retained the monarchy, presumably in a ceremonial role, this relatively moderate national vision was drowned out by a more exclusionary vision. For the Shi'i opinion-leaders that loosely identified with the 14 February Movement, Bahraini cultural identity equates with persecution, oppression, martyrdom, suffering and struggle—all concepts that have special meaning in Shiism and resonate with the Shi'a to the exclusion of the Sunnis.

The 2011 uprising in Bahrain revived the fraught questions of national sovereignty and identity. If we ask the question, do most Bahrainis feel that they are a part of Bahrain?

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[24] See for example, Kingdom of Bahrain, Ministry of Interior, "HE Interior Minister announces 16-member panel to promote national values," 20 March 2018, https://www.policemc.gov.bh/en/news/ministry/80489 (accessed 16 April 2019).

The answer is probably "no." The Shi'a have long complained that they are not trusted enough to be given jobs in the police and security services. They have long been identified with menacing Iran. The violent crackdown on dissent in 2011 focused on Shi'a protestors and included midnight raids in their neighborhoods. In 2014 a law was introduced that allows the government to arbitrarily deprive oppositionists of their citizenship. This has left hundreds of Shi'a stateless. For these reasons and many more, the Shi'a of Bahrain are keenly aware of their outsider status.

The failure of the 2011 uprising was a powerful indicator that sectarian fault lines continue to be an easy target for manipulation by both the Bahraini regime and by regional actors. Iran's history of interference in Bahrain and the ongoing verbal provocations coming from its political leadership and military establishment enabled the Al Khalifa to convincingly portray the 2011 uprising as a foreign plot.[25] The Al Khalifa was able to call into question the loyalty of the Shi'i protestors and in doing so, successfully drove a wedge between the Shi'a opposition and the Sunnis who had initially joined their call for reform. In 2016 the high court dissolved al-Wefaq on the grounds of fostering violence and "terrorism." Parliamentary elections held in November 2018 were widely viewed as a sham and the launch of a state-led national reconciliation process was viewed as dead on arrival.

The failure of the 2011 Bahrain uprising and the events that transpired in its aftermath have underscored the absence of a single national community in Bahrain. Bahrain is a country in which ethno-religious identities continue to serve as more powerful frames of reference and modes of action than nationalism of any variety. In the wake of the uprising, opinion leaders on both sides are asking "How should we define Bahrain's national identity? Indeed, can we even claim one?"[26]

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[25] *Gulf News*, March 20, 2011.

[26] Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, "Notions of Identity in the Bahrain Unrest of 2011," *Turkish Policy*, 5 February 2012; Oppositionist Hasan Moosa Shafaei asks similar questions in his article, "Bahrain: The question of national identity and political reform." Bahrain Monitor, n.d. http://www.bahrainmonitor.org/articles/a-004-01.html (accessed 7 April 2019).