

M. Phil Dissertation

**Power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Bahrain
1981 to 2011**

Muriel Anne POTHERAT



Centre for West Asian Studies
School of International Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi 110067



Centre for West Asian Studies
School of International Studies
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
New Delhi - 110067

Phone : +91-11-2670 4379
Mobile : +91 98 18 77 83 15
Email : cwas.jnu@gmail.com

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**Power Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Bahrain, 1981 – 2011**” submitted by me in partial fulfillments of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Master of Philosophy** is my own work. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Muriel Potherat', is written above the name.

Muriel Potherat

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.K. Ramakrishnan', is written above the name.

Professor A.K. Ramakrishnan
Chairperson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.K. Pasha', is written above the name.
Supervisor

Professor A. K. Pasha
Supervisor

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All errors found in this dissertation are my responsibility.

Introduction

Political History of Bahrain

Bahrain, 'the Pearl of the Gulf', is an archipelago of thirty three islands located on the Western shores of the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia lies to the West and is connected to Bahrain by the 16-mile long King Fahd Causeway. Qatar is to the Southeast across the Gulf of Bahrain. The country counts a population of approximately 1.2 million with seventy percent of Shia and thirty percent of Sunni Muslims living mainly in the three biggest islands, namely Bahrain (whose capital is Manama), Muharraq and Sitrah. Despite its Shia majority, the country has been ruled for more than two centuries by a Sunni family, the Al Khalifa. This family was originally from Nadj, in the central region of the Arabian Peninsula, but moved to Bahrain and started to rule the country in 1783 in the aftermath of a successful onslaught of the islands thanks to the support of a Kuwaiti naval fleet and bedouin clans from Zubarah, Qatar.

The country has a long history of struggle for political participation. The Bahrainis started with the first election held in 1919 and continued throughout the whole twentieth century with the intention first to distance themselves from the British power and later on, to reform the legislative and executive powers of the country. This struggle trend has been accentuated a little while after the independence of Bahrain in 1971 and is still topical to date.

Soon after Bahrain's independence, elections were held to choose a constitutive assembly which worked on a constitution that came into effect on 6th December 1973.

According to it, a National Assembly composed of thirty elected members (directly with universal suffrage) and fourteen ministers of the Cabinet (nominated by the Amir) was assigned some legislative powers. However, the supreme legislative authority would remain in the hands of the Amir Isa Bin Sulman Al Khalifa. The latter did not want to share power and this National Assembly was, in his view, only a consultative body. In 1974, he promulgated the State Security Law which enabled the government to arrest and imprison individuals without trial for a period of up to three years for crimes relating to state security. He then set up the State Security Courts adding to the conditions conducive to the practice of arbitrary arrest and torture. A conflict between the elected members of the National Assembly and the Cabinet rapidly arose on four issues. Firstly, the Cabinet did not want to recognize the trade unions. Then, the National Assembly was not allowed to discuss and take action on the inflation issue experienced by the country. Furthermore, the elected members refused to accept the State Security Courts and lastly, they were not in favor of extending the lease for the American Fifth Fleet. These different sources of contention led the Amir to dissolve the National Assembly and suspend forty articles of the constitution in 1975. Following that episode, no new elections were held for the National Assembly which remained dissolved till 2002.¹

Since 1975, public petitions and mass demonstrations have repeatedly requested the Al Khalifa to restore the National Assembly and hold new elections. The Bahraini population wanted the constitutional monarchy proposed in the initial 1973 constitution. It was keen to have a major role for the Al Khalifa but if it was a negotiated one only. The Amir responded to that demand by the use of the State Security Law. He and his security forces proceeded to crackdown on all the protests, and resorted to arbitrary detention of several thousands persons, abuse and torture of prisoners, deportation of alleged ringleaders, and tightened restrictions on all forms of meetings and public expression.²

1_ http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitution_of_the_State_of_Bahrain_%281973%29, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

2 'Unfair' trial of Bahrain Shias', 23 September 2009, *BBC News*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7959043.stm; 'Bahrain accuses Shia activists of 'terror campaign'', 05 September 2010, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11190726>;

The protracted political crisis faced by Bahrainis since 1975 was not a conflict of Sunnis versus Shias contrary to what could be thought. All the opponents to the regime were subject to this repression. However, it has taken gradually a confessional coloration for different motives. One of them is the economic discrimination faced by the Shias of Bahrain. The Al Khalifa family has been following the British example of dividing the population to better rule. Bahrain's political, social and economic system operates by offering privileges and 'wasta' (power, influence) to some, at the expense of the rights of others. The government maintains a separation between Bahrain's communal groups (Baharna, Arab, Howala, Ajam, Asians) and discourages citizens from associating with each other on a national basis. It is for this reason that the Shias are economically discriminated for instance. They are represented in the country's commercial elite and in certain government departments, but the top ranks of the government, the security services and the armed forces are exclusively controlled by the Al Khalifa and families close to them, all Sunnis. Thus, due to the difficulty of the Shias to access good ranking jobs, unemployment and poverty were high.³ Their distress was in many cases at the inception of their sectarian accusations.

During the following decade, the Al Khalifa continued to monopolize political power, imprison and exile opposition activists, religious and leftists. The Gulf war of 1991 to liberate Kuwait, the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the political developments in Kuwait encouraged Bahraini activists to raise again the issue of elections and their own parliament. In September 1994, a petition calling for a restored elected parliament, the release of political prisoners and permission for exiles to return, started to circulate and was rapidly signed by twenty five thousand people.⁴ It is at this occasion that the Shia cleric Ali Salman, very popular for his sermons, was arrested on 5th December 1994 by the authorities and expelled from Bahrain. His taking into custody

'Bahrain's Shia face tough election battle', 21 October 2010, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11599054>; 'Bahrain opens coup plot trial against Shia activists', 28 October 2010, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11641894>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

3 Joe, Stork (1997), 'Bahrain's crisis worsens', *Middle East Report, The Arabian Peninsula*, No. 204, July-September, p34.

4 Joe, Stork, 'Bahrain Regime Stages Confessions, Rejects Compromise', *MERIP*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer200/bahrain-regime-stages-confessions-rejects-compromise>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

has been a major cause of the demonstrations that took place in December 1994. His expulsion also showed that the Al Khalifa was not ready to dialogue about the demands raised in the petitions. Another petition endorsed by twenty working women and signed by two hundred more was sent to the Amir, 'calling on him to initiate a national dialogue, to restore democratic rights and to ensure that the rights of those held in custody are respected'.⁵ The response of the government did not give any more hope. The ruling family was supported by the US Clinton administration which stated that 'the United States fully support(ed) (their) government and the sovereignty and safety of Bahrain's territories'.⁶

During the December 1994 demonstrations, many Shia clerics and community leaders were put in jail, including Shaikh Abd al Amir al Jamri, one of the most influential Shia activists. The government engaged him in several months of jailhouse negotiations and released him in September 1995 on the basis of an informal understanding that the government would take steps to meet the demands of the protesters. This verbal agreement diminished sharply the number of protests. However, the government denied that there had been any understanding shortly after. Therefore, the situation once again deteriorated with street violence and massive arrests resuming. The Al Khalifa's strategy to negotiate only with Shaikh Abd al Amir al Jamri was meeting their 'divide and rule' action plan by further identifying the opposition as essentially Shia.

With the death of the Amir Isa bin Sulman Al Khalifa in March 1999, hopes resurfaced for the Bahrainis as his successor and son, Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, was considered a proponent of reform and accommodation with Bahrain's Shia majority. As soon as he came to power, he opted for the title 'King' instead of 'Amir'⁷ and held a referendum on 14th February 2002 on a new 'National Action Charter'(constitution).

⁵ 'Bahrain, a human rights crisis', UNHCR, 01 September 1995, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a9984.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

⁶ Joe Stork (1996), 'Bahrain regime stages confessions, Rejects compromise', *Middle East Report*, Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the politics of difference, No. 200, July- September, p46.

⁷ 'The Persian Gulf States: Post-War Issues for U.S. Policy, 2003', Congressional Research Service, Report for Congress, 14 July 2003, CRS 9, <http://www.fas.org/man/crs/RL31533.pdf>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

According to this Charter, a Council of Representatives is elected and a Shura Council appointed with forty seats each (together called 'National Assembly').⁸ With the implementation of the new bicameral system and constitutional monarchy under which the Amir became a King, the latter intended to show that he was willing to respond to his people's demands. However, this parliament is only a partial check on government power. The King makes all cabinet appointments and thus still exercises direct rule through the Prime Minister. The Assembly does not have similar entitlements. There are fields where the elected body of the National Assembly has some power but in such case, the Shura Council has the tools to limit the influence of the Council of Representatives. In addition to that, because the King and the country's elite are Sunnis, the system tends to favor the Sunnis over the Shias.

Elections have been held every four years since 2002. Formal political parties are banned but factions compete as 'political societies' which serve as the functional equivalent of parties for elections purposes. The first elections under the Charter were held on 9th May 2002 at the municipal level. Shia opposition 'political societies' such as the Al Wifaq National Islamic Society (also named the Islamic National Accord Association) led by Shaikh Ali al Salman, and the National Democratic Action Society were initially not sure to participate. Finally, a council composed of twenty three Sunnis and twenty seven Shias was elected by fifty one percent of Bahraini voters. On 24th October 2002, were held the parliamentary elections but many groups including al Wifaq boycotted them on the grounds that setting the Council of Representatives and the Shura Council at the same size dilutes the popular will. This 2002 boycott in the end helped the Sunnis.⁹

Sectarian tensions escalated again in the run-up to the November 2006 parliamentary and municipal elections. The strife was aggravated by the obvious close ties of the al Khalifa with the US. For these elections, concluding that boycotting the

⁸ <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country.LEGAL,,LEGISLATION,BHR,4562d8cf2,48b54f262,0.html> [accessed on 01 March 2012]

⁹ J.E., Peterson, (2010), 'Bahrain: reform - promise and reality', in Teitelbaum, Joshua ed. *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf*, New York, Columbia University Press.

elections was a dead-end road, two Shia opposition blocs, Al Wifaq and the Democratic Action Association, participated and raised a voter turnout to seventy two percent. On the other hand, the hard-liner Shi'ite opposition faction, Al Haq (Movement of Freedom and Democracy) led by the cleric Hassan Mushaima, boycotted them. The opposition camp led by Al Wifaq finally won seventeen seats, virtually all those it contested.¹⁰ The National Democratic Action Society did not get any seat, the Sunni Islamist groups al Asalah and Islamic Platform gained respectively seven and five seats. The Shias were thus the largest single bloc in the Council of Representatives but it was short of a majority.¹¹

Heightened political tumult continued in between national elections. On 26th January 2009, the government arrested three leading Shias, including Hassan Mushaima and Abdul Jalil Al Sangaece, member of the al Haq group. They were tried in March 2009 along with other activists and finally pardoned and released in April 2009. Al Sangaece has visited the US different times to stress the human rights situation in Bahrain and Mushaima subsequently went into exile in Europe.

The resentment over the 2006 elections and the still unfulfilled demand of Bahrain's Shias for greater political power and an end to the economic discrimination, carried over to the 2010 elections. Numerous arrests and trials of Shias had occurred in the months preceding the 23rd October elections.¹² On 4th September 2010, twenty three Shia leaders were arrested on charge of attempting a violent overthrow of the government. They were among one hundred sixty arrested Shias between August and September, under a 2006 anti-terrorism law that gives the government broad arrest and prosecution powers.¹³ Among those detained was Al Sangaece, arrested upon his return from abroad. The arrests followed other clampdowns apparently aimed at tightening

10 'Bahraini Shiites ahead in elections', CNN, 26 November 2006, <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/11/26/bahrain.elections.reut/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

11 Peterson, op. cit., p168.

12 'Bahrain opens coup plot trial against Shia activists', 28 October 2011, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11641894>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

13 'Bahrain accuses Shia activists of 'terror campaign'', 05 September 2011, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11190726>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

government control in the media. Authorities have suspended popular websites that carried citizen journalism and commentary on political affairs and among others, the website of the famous independent AlWasat newspapers.¹⁴ For the elections themselves, Shia opponents accused the government of drawing district boundaries so as to prevent the election of a Shia majority. Al Wifaq, still by far the most prominent Shia political society, registered candidates. Al Haq again boycotted. The tensions over the 2010 elections were certainly a catalyst for the major unrest that emerged in February 2011. It is interesting to notice that despite this violent crackdown, Al Wifaq stayed in the electoral competition and then increased its number of seats to eighteen, still short of a majority though. Surprisingly, the Sunni Islamist factions saw dramatic reductions in their seats from 2006: Minbar (Muslim Brotherhood) decreased to two seats from seven and Asala decreased to three seats from seven as well.

If revolutionary examples abroad and efforts of the Al Khalifa to divide Bahraini people has led to sporadic sectarian strife in the opposition camp, the latter remains nevertheless driven by the same common denominator which is their economic difficulties. Moreover, except in rare recent cases where it has demanded complete downfall of the regime and the establishment of a democratic republic, the quest of the Bahraini population has traditionally been to obtain a real constitutional monarchy but so far, in vain.¹⁵

Bahrain has been a very strategic country in the Persian Gulf for centuries. From the 18th century till the 1970's, Britain showed keen interest in this country to secure, firstly, a safe trading access from its Indian colony to its Empire and, secondly, the production and refining of oil in Bahrain. With that in mind, Britain interfered significantly in the domestic politics of Bahrain and made the Khalifas sign several agreements turning Bahrain into a Protectorate. Thanks to British help for instance, the

14 'Bahrain crackdown sets back relations, warns Shia leader', 23 August 2010, *The Peninsula*, <http://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/middle-east/124191-bahrain-crackdown-sets-back-relations-warns-shia-leader.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

15 'Calls for end to Bahrain monarchy', 09 March 2011, *Al Jazeera*, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113924218214336.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Al Khalifa's arrival in the country ended a century of domination by Persian settlers. Britain also rescued Bahrain from the Qatari ruling family (Al Thani) attacks and claims from the Ottoman Empire in the end of the 19th century. The Al Khalifas received political protection from Britain until they gave independence to Bahrain in 1971.

Two factors still make it strategic nowadays for the United States as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The first element is the Fifth Fleet of the US which supports all naval operations in the US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility and which is located on the Bahraini territory since 1945. The ambit of the US Fifth Fleet encompasses about 7.5 million square miles including the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, parts of the Indian Ocean as well as twenty five countries with among others Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia. After strategic changes, the US Fifth Fleet was reestablished on 1st July 1995 in the Central Command area of responsibility as a second responsibility of Commander, the US Naval Forces Central Command. About four thousand five hundred US military and civilian staff work at the port and base in Bahrain, located at Juffairare, about five miles southeast of the capital Manama. With aircraft carriers, destroyers and other ships, the US Fifth Fleet protects the GCC regimes as well as the shipping lanes in the Persian Gulf and indirectly American oil investments in the region. Bahrain is a 'major non-NATO ally' and therefore of great concern to the US and the West, especially if the political situation was deteriorating.¹⁶

The second element that gives extra importance to Bahrain is its Shia population. To date, it is unclear how many percent of Shias live in Bahrain as waves of political naturalizations of Sunnis such as Pakistanis, Jordanians, Syrians, and Yemenis have

16 Adrian, Bloomfield, 'Bahrain hints at Iranian involvement in plot to overthrow government', *The Telegraph*, 06 September 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/7983095/Bahrain-hints-at-Iranian-involvement-in-plot-to-overthrow-government.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

been operated in the recent years.¹⁷ However, there is no doubt that the Shia Muslims of Bahrain still represent the majority of the population of the country.

Shi'ism is primarily associated to Iran in the mind of laymen but fourteen million Shias are scattered across Arab and overwhelmingly Sunni states which are Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and Saudi Arabia among other countries. Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke call them 'the forgotten Muslims'.¹⁸ Strategically, except the Shias of Lebanon, the Shia population of the Arab world lies at the heart of the large oil-producing area of the Gulf region but it has remained largely unknown for many of the Western governments as they are excluded from a policy voice everywhere except in Iran. The Shias are in majority in Bahrain but constitute a minority of fifteen percent in Saudi Arabia, living mainly in the oil-rich Al Hasa Eastern Province. If part of the population of Bahrain migrated originally from Iran, they were mainly Sunnis. Shia Muslims came earlier from Saudi Arabia so they have closer ties with their Saudi brethren. In these two countries, Shias have faced decades of discrimination from their respective autocratic regimes. As developed above, they are discriminated in Bahrain due to the 'divide and rule' policy practiced by the ruling family. They became marginalized and suffer from their poor socioeconomic conditions and of a widespread suspicion among Sunni officials regarding their national loyalty and ties to co-religionists in Iraq and Iran.¹⁹ With a Sunni ruling family in cooperation with the Wahhabi Ulema, the Saudi Shias face discrimination like in Bahrain. Because of strong historical linkages, a similar monarchic regime and alliance with the US, many of the problems faced by Bahrain are echoed on a broader scale in Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Therefore, the latter fears to see its Shia minority influenced by its brethren in Bahrain and the

17 According to the leader National Democratic Action Society, Ebrahim Sharif, approximately sixty thousand people have been naturalized since 2001, all of whom are assumed to be Sunnis. For further information, see Justin J., Gengler (2011), 'Ethnic Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf', <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jgengler/docs/diss/Dissertation%20-%20Combined,%20formatted.pdf>, or Marina, Ottaway, and Amr, Hamzawy, 'Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World', 28 January 2011, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://edoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/HALCoRe_derivate_00004912/CEIP_OttawayHamzawy_Outlook_Jan11_ProtestMovements.pdf, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

18 Graham E., Fuller, and Rend Rahim, Francke (1999), *The Arab Shi'a, the Forgotten Muslims*, New York: St Martin's Press.

19 'Bahrain's sectarian challenge', *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, n°40, 6 May 2005.

20 Azra Banafsheh, Keynoush (2007), *The Iranian-Saudi Arabian Relationship: From Ideological Confrontation to Pragmatic Accommodation*, Thesis, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, US, p136.

ruling family toppled there. A more democratic system in Bahrain would naturally increase the Shia's political potency which could generate an emboldening template for Saudi Arabia's Shia minority and subsequently challenge the autocratic regime which has been rejecting the sharing of power for decades.²¹

Because of these Shia ties, Bahraini and Saudi kings have continuously felt threatened by the influence of Iran in Bahrain and therefore in Saudi Arabia as well. They may be right to think so as Iran has always considered Bahrain an asset in its quest to be a regional power. Bahrain became independent from the British Empire in 1971 but due to alleged confessional ties, Iran never recognized it and continues to see Bahrain as its '14th province'. It is only due to the result of a referendum undertaken by the United Nations at the request of Iran and Britain on 30th March 1970, that Iran accepted Bahrain as an independent country with complete sovereignty and freedom of choosing relations with other nations.²² From 1971 to 1979, Iran and Bahrain remained close allies of the US. However, since the Islamic revolution, Iran has been watching carefully or trying to influence domestic events of Bahrain through its possible participation in the 1981 coup against the Bahraini government or in the 1994-1996 uprisings of the Bahrainis in opposition to their authorities. The rationale behind Iranian's attitude towards Bahrain is that in case the Sunni elite could be toppled, it could be replaced partially or even totally by Shias. That would destabilize the Saudi regime due to the potential unrest coming from the Shia minority in the oil rich al Hasa and Qatif areas. Furthermore, with Saudi Arabia maintaining tight bonds with the US, Iran would gain leverage to indirectly threaten the US. In case the Saudi regime was undermined, the new political actors could be more reluctant to collaborate with the US and the latter would lose one of its main proxies in the region.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are major actors in the Gulf region since they are regional powers. Iran has become a regional power in West Asia in the early twenty-first century due to different factors. The original architect of Iran's rise to be a regional power was

21 Caryle, Murphy, 'Bahrain key in Sunni/Shia divide', *Global Post*, 26 February 2011, <http://mobile.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/middle-east/saudi-arabia/110226/bahrain-protests-sunni-shia>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

22 http://web.mit.edu/cascon/cases/case_bah.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

the Shah who was overthrown by the 1979 revolution. He had imagined Iran as the most powerful state in the Persian Gulf region. To achieve this goal, he implemented a massive military build-up, a nuclear power program, the mobilization of the country's rising oil income, and multiple other reforms to make Iran a modern and powerful country. What had been for the Shah an ambition built on nationalism was for his successors a parallel ambition built on an Islamist ideology. The government's ambition was one factor of Iran's rise, but its objective situation was another one. Iran, due to its huge size with a large population exceeding the number of people in all the Arab states of the Gulf combined, and rising oil revenues after the 1990s, it is trying to play the 'Shia card' in order to encourage Shia populations to follow the Iranian Islamic revolutionary path but also and more pragmatically, to extend its sphere of influence throughout West Asia. To reach this goal, Iran uses its membership and its weight in international organizations such as the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), or the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) but also attempts to or interferes in the domestic affairs of many West Asian countries.²³

As for Saudi Arabia, it is a 'regional status quo power'.²⁴ Contrary to Iran which cultivates expansionary dreams especially under Khomeini with his intention to export his Islamic revolution, Saudi Arabia is more driven by a policy of containment. Its regional power has arose a long time ago with the discovery of oil on its territory and its close bonds with the US. It works on the same fronts than Iran but it is through the defensive rather than the offensive angle. It started for instance to support Sunni jihadists in Lebanon only to counter balance the increasing power of the Iran-backed Hezbollah. Without the existence of the latter, the Saudi interference there would have been very unlikely. Similarly in Iraq since 2003, Iran would not have worked hard at backing Shia militancy, the Saudis would have not supported Sunni militias there.

23 Michel, Makinsky (2012), 'L'Iran et les pays du Golf Persique: une crise de confiance dans une région ébranlée', in *L'Iran et les grands acteurs régionaux et globaux*, edited by Michel Makinsky, March, Paris, Editions l'Harmattan, p36; Frederic M., Wehrey (2009), *Saudi-Iranian relations since the fall of Saddam: rivalry, cooperation, and implications for US policy*, Washington DC, Rand Corporation, National Security Research Division, p20, p73.

24 Ibid, p. ix.

It is precisely for this reason that the struggle between these two countries comes into the picture. Iran seeks to gain more influence than it already possesses and Saudi Arabia is scared to loose some and therefore takes steps to avoid this situation. Bahrain represents one of the cockpits for power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran as both countries have core interests there. The Shias ruled over by the Al Khalifa, have long suffered due to political exclusion, unemployment, housing shortages and cultural discrimination. The presence of the US Fifth Fleet is a further complication in the bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran has traditionally held the Al Saud responsible for hosting US forces in the Gulf and thus sees Bahrain's Al Khalifa as acting under Saudi influence, if not direction. These dynamics have made Bahrain an attractive arena for Iranian retaliation or subversion that has been at least partly aimed at Saudi Arabia. From the Saudi angle, the Shia threat, as explained earlier, makes Bahrain a necessary point of focus. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran try to or influence Bahraini domestic politics and maximize their respective position relative to the other one but also vis-à-vis important external players.

The approach taken in most studies done on Bahrain in relation to Iran or Saudi Arabia has been bilateral only. On the other hand, in its interactions with both Iran and Saudi Arabia and especially since the 2011 unrest in many West Asian countries, Bahrain has not been yet the focal point of a thorough analysis. There is a paucity of literature that marries the interests and issues of Saudi Arabia, Iran and Bahrain. Frederic M. Wehrey is almost the only one to address the Bahrain concern in connection with these two powers.²⁵ An in-depth study on the subject has never been carried out except in a fragmented manner, and hence without the benefit of an overview of all the implications and generated outcomes. There is therefore a clear knowledge gap which must be filled in order to get a better understanding of the current dynamics and strategic position of Bahrain in the Gulf region. This dissertation makes a modest attempt in this direction.

25 Wehrey (2009), op. cit.

This dissertation will attempt to relate the power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia to the Shia issue and the Bahraini situation. For that purpose, it will firstly try to examine carefully Iran's ambitions of expanding its power influence over West Asia, Saudi Arabia's desire to maintain the status quo in the region and their respective interests in Bahrain. It will study the political difficulties faced by Bahrain in the last thirty years with special focus on the last decade. It will expose the causes, the outcomes as well as the role of external actors such as the US. It will then analyze the mutual challenges between the two powers through organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the OPEC or the OIC. Lastly, it will try to assess the potential consequences of the 2011 political crisis on the population of Bahrain, the Al Khalifa and at the regional level since this crisis may disturb the regional power balance between Iran or Saudi Arabia.

The timeframe of this study will start in 1981 for two reasons. Firstly, the Shia claims in Bahrain remained quite discreet until the Islamic revolution of Iran. Secondly, 1981 marks the formation of the GCC to counter Khomeini's ambition to have all the monarchs of the Gulf region toppled and replaced by an Islamic republic. It also marks the first possible concrete involvement of Iran in the domestic affairs of Bahrain through its participation in the coup organized against the Al Khalifa family. The timeframe of this study will end in 2011, as it witnessed major political unrest and significant changes in West Asia that directly affect Bahrain.

Research Questions

- Why Bahrain has become the cockpit for power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia and what are the core interests of these two states in Bahrain?
- Is US presence in Bahrain contributing to the conflictual relationship with Iran and more cooperation with Saudi Arabia?
- To what extent Al Khalifa's political decisions vis-à-vis the Bahraini Shias are taken under the influence of Saudi Arabia and Iran?

Hypotheses

- The Al Khalifa family with Saudi support has been discriminating the Shias not only to ensure its leadership but to contain Iran's influence
- Reluctance of the Al Khalifa family to share real power with the Shia community results in recurrent unrest and high domestic instability
- Bahrain is a platform where Iran and Saudi Arabia can exert their power and maximize their respective position relative to the other one

Research Methods

The proposed study will be both analytical and descriptive and as in any research work, it will attempt to discuss the phenomena and address the main outcomes. Data for this study will be based on the accessible primary as well as secondary sources. The primary sources will include reports which have been published by the governments of Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia and different international organizations and institutions. Interviews of some of the leaders of the Bahraini opposition movements abroad have been included as well in the primary sources data. Secondary sources will comprise books but especially recent articles, periodicals, newspapers and websites in English and possibly in Persian.

Chapterization

Chapter I. Saudi Role in Bahraini Domestic Politics from 1981 to 2011

Saudi Arabia has been particularly keen to exert some influence over Bahraini domestic politics because of interconnected core interests that have surfaced in Bahrain throughout the last decades. Chapter One will start by examining the core interests of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain. Mainly due to the historical linkages between the Saudi and Bahraini Shia communities, it is very likely that a political incident in Bahrain involving

its Shias people would have some direct or indirect repercussions on the Shia community of Saudi Arabia. As the latter inhabits the strategic Saudi oil reserves area and that, moreover, the Shia population works in the oil fields, it can exert a threatening and considerable lever vis-à-vis the Saudi royal family. This Shia component put in relation with the political stability of Saudi Arabia is one of the core interests of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain. The second great interest which is tightly connected to the one above is Bahrain itself which is a cockpit for power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Iran especially since 1979 has adopted a foreign policy which is driven by Islam and aimed at increasing its influence. To answer Iran's growing ambitions, Saudi Arabia has been forced to develop a foreign policy aiming at containing Iran. Bahrain represents one of the platforms where Iran and Saudi Arabia can win or loose influence towards each other. The *Hajj* pilgrimage in Mecca, regional organizations, the Iranian nuclear issue, Iraq, Lebanon, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Yemen or Syria are the other major arenas of power struggle between these two regional powers. This chapter will analyze Saudi tools of influence in Bahrain through economic, political, military and religious channels. Saudi Arabia has enhanced substantially its economic links with the heavyweights of Bahraini industry, whether it is private or governmental, in the past decades. It has also considerably increased its influence at the political and military levels through international organizations such as the GCC, the OPEC, the OIC. In the religious field, the voice of the Saudi Wahhabi Ulema also influences the Bahraini government in its political decisions.

Chapter II. Iranian Role in Bahrain from 1981 to 2011

Although the Bahraini Shia community has never felt any specific affinity with Iran, the latter has always tried hard to keep Bahrain close to Iran. Chapter Two will attempt to analyze the core interests of Iran in Bahrain. For that purpose, it will discuss Khomeini's *velâyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) in comparison with the traditional interpretation of Shi'ism and its implementation in Iran through the Islamic revolution. It will then analyze Khomeini's ideology of spreading the Islamic revolution throughout the *Umma* and relate it to its more pragmatic goal which consists of the expansion of

Iran's influence in West Asia in order to confront the challenges from the US, and its allies. Bahrain, being a Muslim country and composed of a Shia majority represents a perfect potential partner for the implementation of this grand strategy. For Iran, Bahrain represents also a worrisome issue as its links with Saudi Arabia are very tight, and according to it, lack of attention in its direction could make Iran loose ground in the face of Saudi Arabia in their struggle for power over the West Asian region. Chapter Two will examine the platforms of power struggle through the Iranian angle. It will also analyze in detail the tools of influence used by Iran to try to or exert control over Bahraini affairs. Unlike Saudi Arabia which has developed a wide panel of tools for influence or interference in the Bahraini affairs, Iran could not manage to do that well. Despite the Iranian efforts, the economic interaction between the two countries is finally limited mainly because of the international sanctions imposed on Iran but also because of the fear of the Bahraini Sunni monarch to fall under the scope of influence of Iran. The real influence exerted by Iran in Bahrain has been through its concrete support of non-state actors in Bahrain or its Islamic rhetoric.

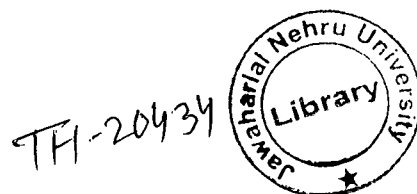
Chapter III. The Power Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia and 2011 Uprising in Bahrain

In 2011, Bahrain saw a rapid deterioration of the political situation with an increase of oppression, repression and suppression of the population and especially the Shia people. The protests were a continuation of the unrest that had shaken the country for almost forty years and a new development triggered by the events happening in the other countries. Those events, especially the success of Tunisian, Yemeni and Egyptian protesters in bringing down their presidents, changed the nature of the confrontation in Bahrain. This chapter will study the 2011 unrest, the grievances especially related to the discrimination of Shias as well as the poor socio-economic conditions, lack of governmental accountability and transparency, freedom, respect for rule of law and genuine democracy for the people. It will then examine the response of the government and the effects generated by those answers on the population such as the increase of sectarian tensions due to the 'divide and rule' policy of the al Khalifa. It will examine the

role played by the US on the ruling family's decisions. It will then make a correlation between it and the power struggle between Saudi and Iranian authorities. A focus will be made on the Iranian attitude and expectations followed by the Saudi counter or anticipatory reactions. Lastly, it will attempt to demonstrate that the degree of influence both countries have exerted on Bahrain during the 2011 uprisings is a reflection of their respective power balance and objectives on the international stage to date. It will highlight as well the elements that should encourage the Saudi-Iranian relationship to take a more positive turn.

Conclusion

The last chapter will put the hypotheses as outlined throughout this study to test, based on the findings of the three chapters. It will assess the potential outcomes of the current crisis for the Shia and Sunni communities of Bahrain, the Al Khalifa but as well as at the regional level, for Iran and Saudi Arabia.



Chapter I

Saudi Arabian Role in Bahraini Domestic Politics

from 1981 to 2011

Saudi Arabia has been playing a significant role in Bahraini domestic politics because of interconnected core interests that have surfaced in Bahrain throughout the last decades. This first chapter will study these core interests, especially the Shia component in relation to the political stability of Saudi Arabia as well as the reasons why Bahrain has emerged as a cockpit for power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This chapter will then analyze the Saudi tools of influence in Bahrain through the economic, political, military and religious channels.

I.I Saudi Arabia's Core Interests in Bahrain

Saudi Arabia has developed close links with Bahrain for two reasons. Firstly, the majority of Bahraini population is Shia which originally comes from Saudi Arabia. Ties between this community and their Saudi Shia brethren, though in minority, are hence close. Therefore, any attempt to overthrow the Sunni ruling family of Bahrain could have strong repercussions on the political stability of Saudi Arabia. Secondly, due to its Shia component, Bahrain has become the cockpit for power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Given these parameters, Saudi Arabia has been keeping a close watch on Bahraini domestic politics.

The Shia Component in Relation to the Political Stability of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's approximately two million Shias represent around fifteen percent of the total population.²⁶ Most of them live and work in the Eastern Province of the country, which they dominate demographically. This area also contains very large oil fields and extensive processing and refining facilities, hence most of the Shias from the locality are employed by the ARAMCO oil company. A limited number of Shias live in the Eastern Province's capital and largest city, Dammam, whereas the great majority resides in the two oases areas, Qatif and al Hasa. Smaller Shia communities also exist in Mecca and Medina and a sizable Ismaili community (second largest Shia community believing in seven Imams only) of roughly one hundred thousand people in the province of Najran in the region close to the Yemeni border.

Historically, despite a Sunni majority in the country, the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia has been an important Shia cultural and religious center for centuries. However, an increasing partnership between the al Saud family and powerful Wahhabi leaders gradually brought some changes. Wahhabism was promoting perpetual conquest and shaping the ways the conquered communities should be treated. According to the Saudi-Wahhabi alliance, the control of Mecca and Medina as well as the holy sites were essential objectives to guarantee the enduring success of their political and religious reforms. They instructed the shutting down of Shia institutions such as mosques and community centers, and the suppression of their cultural life including the ban of their religious *Ashura* mourning commemoration for the martyrdom of Husayn Ibn Ali. The Shias became victims of cultural, legal, economic and political oppression and discrimination from the government as they were gradually considered as a form of deviant, distinct heretics or 'polytheists' because of

²⁶ There are no reliable census data for Saudi Arabia. The kingdom's indigenous population is estimated at around 17 millions. Estimates for the Shia population range from 10 to 15 percent. This figure refers to the 'Twelvers' , who are the majority of Shias and believe in the twelfth Imam, their supreme spiritual guide on earth and direct descendant of the prophet, went into occultation in the ninth century. See 'July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report - Saudi Arabia', UNHCR, 13 September 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/topic.464db4f52,46a719552,4e734c6cc,0,...html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

their veneration of Saints.²⁷ 'They are the only Shias in the Muslim world who are formally denied the status of Muslims.'²⁸ Unlike their Bahraini and Kuwaiti co-religionists, maintaining a vivid religious life was very difficult for the Saudi Shias due to the state sponsored Wahhabi ideology.²⁹ Moreover, Wahhabism's inclusion within the political and religious structures of Saudi Arabia, ensured anti-Shi'ism feelings to spread all over the country rapidly.

In the 1960s, attempts by the Iranian philosopher Ali Shariati to present a progressivist interpretation of Islam became source of concern for the Saudi leaders for whom progressivism was equal to heresy. Then came the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The desire of Khomeini to export his Islamic revolution and republican system abroad, combined with his indirect encouragement of the Saudi Shias to topple their government through his strong criticism of the Saudi behavior with regards to the *Hajj* augmented the anxiety of the Saudi elite.³⁰ Laurence Louer states that 'transnational Shia politics' exist and that the Iranian revolution defined the present landscape of Shia Islamic activism in the Gulf monarchies but the reality might not be that straightforward.³¹ Partly galvanized by the example of their Shia brethren in Iran but mainly because of their own strong grievances against their authorities, Saudi popular anger gave way to mass protest in al Hasa and Qatif in 1979, and subsequently heavy handed reactions from the Saudi government over its Shia people.³² It is unclear whether or not Iran was involved in this so called '*Intifada* of Muharram 1400' but the al Saud thought so.³³ In parallel, an armed attack and takeover of the Grand Mosque of Mecca was operated on 20th November 1979 by an Islamist team led by Juhaiman Ibn Muhammad Ibn Saif al Otaibi. This seizure shocked Muslims as many pilgrims were taken hostage and Saudi and French security forces killed. The

27 Jacob, Goldberg (1986), 'The Shi'i minority in Saudi Arabia', in *Shi'ism and social protest*, eds Juan, R.I. Cole, and Nickie R., Keddie, New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, p183.

28 Graham E., Fuller, and Rend Rahim, Francke (1999), *op.cit.*, p183.

29 Laurence, Louer (2008), *Transnational Shia politics: religious and political networks in the Gulf*, London: Hurst and Company, p143.

30 Ibrahim A., Karawan (1992), 'Monarchs, Mullas and Marshals: Islamic regimes?', *Annals, AAPSS*, 524, November, p106.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Madawi, Al Rasheed (2002), *A History of Saudi Arabia*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

33 David, Rigoulet-Roze (2009), 'Les Chiïtes de la province Saoudienne du Hasa: une minorité "nationale" stratégique au coeur des enjeux ethno-confessionnels régionaux', *La Découverte*, No. 33, p117.

dissidents thought that Mohammed Abdullah al-Qahtani, one of the insurgent leaders, was the Mahdi (redeemer of Islam) and called on Muslims to obey him. Juhaiman charged that the Saud family had become steeped in corruption, ostentation, and imitation of the West, echoing the rhetoric of the Ayatollah Khomeini's diatribes against the Shah in Iran. It is interesting to note that the Islamic revolution fostered a much greater size of popular protests in Saudi Arabia than in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia usually adopts a quietist behavior towards politics as it lacks a culture of popular demonstrations to articulate political demands. However, these 1979 incidents mark a turning point in the history of political mobilization of Saudi Shias, as well as in the history of power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia in correlation with the Saudi policy of oppression of its Shia community.

Saudi Arabia is haunted since that time by the possibility of fifth column or Iran-backed Shia operations on its territory. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is worried about the strong domestic repercussions that could produce Shia uprisings or even the toppling of the Sunni government in Bahrain. That is why the Saudi Shias have been subject to sectarian policies and discrimination for decades and the Saudi authorities operate a tight surveillance of the domestic politics of Bahrain.³⁴

Politics in Saudi Arabian Shia communities emerged in the 1960s and 1970s with clerical leaders such as Hassan al Saffar and Tawfiq al-Sayf. Hassan al Saffar studied in Qom in Iran and took courses with Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husseini al-Shirazi. In alignment with his professor, he agreed with the idea that the clergy should assume political positions but he did not approve the concept of absolute power that Khomeini has reserved for a single individual in his vision of *velayat-e-faqih*, the role of the juris consult.³⁵ At the end of the 1970s, al Saffar began in Saudi Arabia a concerted campaign to build up local networks and support through his newly created grass-roots political organization called Shia Reform Movement (re-branded later on as the Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, OIR). In 1979, different acts such as the

34 Toby, Jones (2009), 'Embattled in Arabia - Shi'is and the politics of confrontation in Saudi Arabia', Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, 3 June, pp. 8-11.

35 Ibid, p13.

observance of the *Muharram*, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and *Ashura* commemorations, took place in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia whereas they were in direct opposition to the Saudi state's ban on public rituals. Despite severe quelling from the authorities and multiple killings of Shias, al Saffar and his Shia Reform Movement benefited from it and hence embraced revolutionary politics with sporadic demands for independence.³⁶

However, the confrontational phase of political Shi'ism lasted less than a decade. In the late 1980s, al Saffar moderated his message and started to stress the need for human rights, political pluralism, equal citizenship for all Saudis and religious tolerance. Furthermore, although inspiring, the example of Iran was of little relevance and violence was unlikely to achieve concessions from the Saudi government on religious, political or social issues. From that time, most Saudi Shias sided with al Saffar and shifted to a two-track approach in which they both expressed grievances and sought improved relations with their government.

Following two petitions given to the King in May 1991 and September 1992, some efforts to reconcile were made by King Fahd in 1993 since he invited four Shia leaders and supporters of al Saffar to Jeddah to discuss their grievances.³⁷ Following the rapprochement with the Shias, political prisoners were released, passports restored to those in exile, and more importantly, Shias were assured that their fundamental social and religious issues would be addressed. However, this *détente* initiative brought very mixed results. Furthermore, many Saudi Shias did not welcome positively the moderate turn taken by al Saffar and his OIR. A small section formed an alternative political organization called the 'Hezbollah in the Hijaz' or 'Saudi Hezbollah' who was following the *Marja'iyya* of Khomeini rather than the *Shiraziyya* theory adopted by al Saffar. Therefore, they embraced the principle of *Velayat-e-Faqih* and were backed by Iran.³⁸ While no evidence of the Iranian role has been established, it has been claimed that Iran

36 Toby, Jones (2006), 'Rebellion on the Saudi periphery : modernity, marginalization, and the Shia uprising of 1979, *International Journal of Middle East studies*, 38, pp. 213-233.

37 Ondrej, Beranek (2009), 'Divided We Survive: A Landscape of Fragmentation in Saudi Arabia', Crown Centre for Middle East Studies, January, No. 33, p2.

38 Toby, Jones (2009), *op.cit.*, p20.

backed the Saudi Hezbollah in its 25 June 1996 attack against an American military compound in al Khobar which killed nineteen and wounded three hundred fifty people.³⁹ This terrorist attack was for the Saudi authorities the proof that the Shia militancy was still threatening the country.

Throughout the 1990s, Al Saffar and his political movement kept close ties with the *Shiraziyya* network. When al Shirazi died in 2001, most Saudi Shias turned to Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf. There was hence no more link with Iran. Nothing evolved in the Shia politics until 2003, year during which a call for wide-ranging reforms to the kingdom's political system began to emerge. The reform lobby included a mix of Sunnis and Shias from all over the country. A petition was submitted to then Crown Prince Abdullah, demanding an 'end to corruption, expanded opportunities for Saudis to play a more direct role in shaping policy, and religious tolerance'.⁴⁰ Approximately four hundred fifty Shias took advantage of this initial petition to sign a separate one asking King Abdullah to 'help them secure relief from the various social and institutional pressures that had rendered them an embattled community for much of the twentieth century'.⁴¹ Although it was evident that the results sought by the reform lobby would be superficial, King Abdullah created the same year a National Dialogue that brought religious leaders from different faiths together including the cleric al Saffar. The conference aimed at promoting Islamic unity and protection against the fragmentation of Saudi Arabia along sectarian lines. As a proof of his willingness to better integrate the Shia community within the national frame, Abdullah also partially ended the ban on the open observance of *Ashura* in the Eastern Province.⁴²

It is difficult to assess the impact of this tentative sectarian rapprochement but anti-Shi'ism remained very much present across the country. King Abdullah made a few attempts to promote more tolerance between the faith communities but it is a policy of ambivalence as he has not taken any concrete step in this field beyond his verbal

39 Ibid, p5.

40 International Crisis group, 'Can Saudi Arabia reform itself?', *Middle East Report*, No. 28, 14 July 2008.

41 Toby, Jones (2011), 'Saudi Arabia's not so new anti Shi'ism', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, MER242, p1.

42 Ibid, p1.

encouragements. In parallel, the Wahhabi Ulema have extensive powers within the Saudi political system, is very active in the opposite direction with the regular release of anti-Shi'ism Fatwas and the use of its religious police (*Mutaw'a*) over the Shias whenever it considers it necessary. Some of the key anti-Shi'i treatises include Ibrahim Sulayman al-Jabhan's book *Removing the darkness and awakening to the danger of Shi'ism to Muslims and Islam* or a series of popular volumes frequently cited by the Saudi Wahhabi clerics but written by the Pakistani author Ishan Ilahi Zahir *The Shia and the Sunna, The Shia and the Quran*, and *The Shia and the Prophet's family*.⁴³

The rise of al Qaida after 9/11 led the Saudi authorities to adopt a very aggressive policy towards the terrorists on their territory but simultaneously, towards al Saffar's reformist movement. The 2003 US invasion of Iraq deepened the sectarian tensions and further marginalized the Shias from national politics. In 2005, Shia voices emerged mainly from the religious scholar Sheikh Nimr al Nimr who stated that the Saudi Shias would have to fight to achieve a substantial decrease of discrimination. In 2006, the summer war between Hezbollah and Israel revived cross-sectarian hostilities as some Shias took to the streets in Qatif and Safwa to protest in support of Hezbollah. Later in the same year, violence between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq worsened, which led to the release of new anti-Shi'ism Fatwas by the prominent clerics Abd al Rahman al Barrak and Abdallah Bin Jibrin and hence further repression of Shias in Saudi Arabia.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, King Abdullah opened the interfaith conference in July 2008 in Madrid, Spain, following a meeting in Mecca where representatives of the various trends of Islam discussed the Islamic tradition and religious legitimacy of engaging in dialogue.⁴⁵ The Madrid program was followed by an interfaith meeting at the United

43 Ishan Ilahi Zahir, *Ash-Shi'a Was Sunna*, Idara Tarjumaan Al-Sunnah, Pakistan, 21st edition, 1983; *Ash-Shi'ah wal-Qur'an*, Idara Tarjumaan Al-Sunnah, Pakistan, 1984; *Ash-Shi'a Wa-Al il Bayt*, Idara Tarjumaan Al-Sunnah, Pakistan, 1985; Toby, Jones (2009), 'Embattled in Arabia - Shi'is and the politics of confrontation in Saudi Arabia', Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, 3 June.

44 Emile A. Nakhleh (2009), *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America's Relations With the Muslim World*, Princeton University Press, p29.

45 'Looser rein, uncertain gain - A human rights assessment of five years of King Abdullah's reforms in Saudi Arabia', Human Rights Watch, 2010, p38 ; 'Recommendations and closing statement', The Mecca appeal for Interfaith Dialogue, *The Muslim World League*, 6 June 2008, <http://www.themwl.org/Bodies/Decisions/default.aspx?d=1&did=309&l=AR>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Nations General Assembly reiterating the Madrid message of necessity of 'mutual respect'.⁴⁶

These programs to restore interfaith tolerance in Saudi Arabia did not prevent clashes in the recent years. The hopes of reconciliation developed by Saudi Shias in the early twenty first century have vanished. In February 2009, a series of violent confrontations between Shia pilgrims and Saudi security forces, including members of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), occurred in Medina. Shias gathered on 24 February at the Baqi' cemetery, one of Islam's holiest sites, to commemorate the anniversary of the Prophet's death.⁴⁷ However, as rituals performed by Shia pilgrims did not match Wahhabi teachings, the Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef said that these pilgrims had defied Wahhabi norms.⁴⁸ The assembled security forces attacked the pilgrims and at least one of them was stabbed by a Sunni. These attacks outraged the Shias in the Eastern Province who then indulged themselves in a wave of riots against the Saudi authorities and an escalation of sectarian violence. Several new organizations emerged as a result of that episode : the Free Men of Qatif and a group of anonymous religious scholars calling for 'civil disobedience and public demonstration in the face of official oppression'.⁴⁹ The Medina incidents also awoke dormant organizations like the Saudi Hezbollah which had disappeared at the time of the government crackdown that came in the aftermath of the al-Khobar bombings. After more than ten years of silence, the Saudi Hezbollah issued a rare statement of condemnation. However, the most popular symbol of defense of Saudi Shia rights during these 2009 incidents was Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. He warned the Saudi authorities that he and his followers would fight for secession if they would not modify their supportive attitude towards anti-Shi'ism extremism. He delivered a 'dignity

46 The World Conference on Dialogue, 'The Madrid Declaration', *Muslim World League*, 16-18 July 2008, <http://www.world-dialogue.org/Madrid/english/events/final.htm>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

47 Toby, Matthiesen (2009), 'The Shia of Saudi Arabia at a crossroads', *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 6 May.

48 'Saudi Denies Shiites Targeted in Sunni Kingdom', *Agence France Presse*, 14 March 2009, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gbrlMzkiKn8mBw6WD3pBftAUhDlq>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

49 Toby, Jones (2009), *op. cit.*, p25.

speech' in which he highlighted that '(their) dignity (was) more precious than the unity of this land'.⁵⁰

Whereas Al Saffar and his lenient reform movement were seen for more than two decades as the only channel by which a rapprochement between the Saudi Shia community and the Saudi government could be possible, the 2009 episode marks a turn towards more radicalism. The rationale behind it lies in the fact that Al Saffar could never deliver real political gains for the Shias. It is unlikely however that Nimr al-Nimr and the Shias claiming that they will go for secession, truly believe in it. In 2011, additional protests and arrests by the Saudi forces of Shias in the Eastern Province took place and Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr reproached this time to the Shia protesters the fact that they used guns.⁵¹

In a nutshell, the attitude of the Saudi regime towards its Shia people is equivocal as King Abdullah initiated in the last decade a few attempts of interfaith dialogue involving both Sunni and Shia clerics while the Saudi Wahhabi Ulema was pursuing its strong anti-Shi'ism policy. If it is not the only reason, it is very likely that King Abdullah organized these interfaith events to make the Western world believe that he is a moderate Arab leader. In reality, fearing the regional foe Iran's spreading power and the potential change of political regime in Bahrain, the Saudi authorities ensure that they keep high the level of repression over their Shia population within their borders as well as the level of surveillance over the domestic politics of Bahrain.

Bahrain as a Cockpit for Power Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia and Iran have had a tumultuous relationship given their many sources of competition. They are the two geographically largest and most powerful Islamic states in the Persian Gulf, have the first and third biggest oil reserves in the

⁵⁰ Toby, Matthiesen (2009), op. cit.

⁵¹ 'Saudi Response to Increasing Violence in Eastern Province', *Stratfor*, 17 January 2012, <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/saudi-response-increasing-violence-eastern-province>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

world, and have competed for influence in the region and in their relations with the US. As noted by Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, Saudi Arabia was unwilling to be a 'junior in the local system' and unable to be an 'equal partner'.⁵² Of course, the religious factor with the Iranian Islamic revolution, the interfaith tensions around the *Hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca or the rise of the Shia power in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein are feeding the rivalry between the two powers. Bahrain is one of the platforms of power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran due to its Shia factor. Saudi Arabia favors the status quo and hence, is keen to keep the al Khalifa monarch in place in Bahrain and Iran would be very pleased to see the Sunni ruling family toppled and replaced by a government with more Shias if not integrally Shia.

The establishment of the mullah-led regime in Iran in 1979 represents a milestone in the history of the Saudi-Iranian relationship. For the rulers in Riyadh, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini was a threat to the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia as Iran was encouraging the Shia minority living in the Eastern Province as well as all the Islamists of the region, to follow the Iranian resistance path. Iran was also disturbing the al Saud's confidence about the reliability of support from the US and challenging Saudi's claim to Islamic leadership. The 1980s mark the emergence of multiple frictions between the two including at the time and place of the *Hajj*. The pilgrimage is the unique moment of the Muslim year when the different conceptions of Islam can express themselves in front of hundreds of thousands of people coming from all the *Umma*, and gathered in a small space. Whereas Saudi Wahhabi clerics defend a vision of the religion that refuses to challenge the legitimacy of the rulers or encourage their overthrow, the religious authority in Iran has the ambition to diffuse a 'revolutionary Islam' and is anti-monarchical, universalist, anti-imperialist.⁵³ The Saudis argued that the *Hajj* should remain a spiritual and religious event while Khomeini was viewing it as an 'Islamic congress' designed for political and social as well as religious issues.⁵⁴

52 Shahram, Chubin, and Charles, Tripp (1996), 'Iran - Saudi Arabia relations and regional order', *Adelphi Paper*, Vol. 204, London : International Institute for International Studies, Oxford University Press.

53 Yann, Richard (1991), *L'Islam chi'ite: croyances et idéologies*, Paris, Fayard.

54 Adam, Tarock (1997), 'Iran and its Persian Gulf Neighbors', in *Iran's Foreign Policy Since 1990: Pragmatism Supersedes Islamic Ideology*, ed. Adam Tarock, New York : Nova Scotia Publishers Inc.

The first and immediate manifestation of this threat appears with the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 followed shortly after by a Shia uprising in the Eastern Province.⁵⁵ After an observation round, the situation starts to deteriorate in 1981 with Iranian pilgrims carrying Khomeini's portrait and spreading propaganda against the Saudi government in the holy places. The Saudi security forces answer by use of violence, which leads to the death of one pilgrim. In the aftermath of that incident, Iranian authorities denounce the Saudi government as unfit to control the holy cities and call for the administration of Mecca and Medina by an international Muslim council. Iran's audacious move is bolstered by its fresh advancement in its war against Iraq. On the external front, Saudi Arabia backed by the region's monarchies strongly support Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran started in 1980. As Iran is striving for an increased influence among the Arab states, it represents a great danger for the preservation of the ruling families of the Gulf and their power. Saudi Arabia takes advantage of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to form in 1981 and take the lead of the GCC, a regional collective security and economic organization, with the Gulf oil monarchies and shaykhdoms of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which would ensure, among other objectives, to keep both Iraq and Iran at bay.

A calmer period is felt though between 1983 and 1985 with the Saudis permitting continued rallies provided the Iranian pilgrims refrain from criticizing the Saudi government. In 1985, Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al Faisal, visits Iran so that the two countries arrive at an understanding about the *Hajj* issue. However, Ayatollah Montazeri publicly declares in parallel that Wahhabis are mercenaries, and that Iran's government must refrain from negotiating with them.⁵⁶ A serious degradation happens in 1986 with the arrest of more than a hundred Iranian pilgrims who try to import in the kingdom arms and weapons. This incident was driven from the Iranian side by the Guardians of the Revolution. 1987 witnesses an even more dramatic turn with the organization by Shia pilgrims of a demonstration in Medina on 27 July and the blockade

55 Toby, Jones (2006), *op. cit.*

56 Henner, Furtig, and Anoushiravan, Ehteshami (2002), *Iran's Rivalry with Saudi Arabia between the Gulf Wars*, Reading : Ithaca Press, p41.

of one of the main roads leading to the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Unable to refrain with pacific means the crowd of fifty to sixty thousands people, the Saudi forces panic and use arms which lead to more than four hundred casualties.⁵⁷ The Saudi government accuses the pilgrims of acting like barbarians and criminal gangs, and calls Khomeini a 'Satan'.⁵⁸ For the next couple of years, the relationship between the two states oscillate between intransigence and conciliation, looking for a *modus vivendi* but they cannot reach it. Khomeini wants to increase the annual number of pilgrims from Iran while the Saudis cut quotas for all countries, reducing the number of Iranian pilgrims from one hundred fifty thousand to forty five thousand⁵⁹ and Khomeini even boycotts the pilgrimage.⁶⁰ Finally, political relations between Tehran and Riyadh completely cease after Shias are accused of setting off explosions near the Grand Mosque in 1989.⁶¹

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990 and the US-led Gulf war to liberate Kuwait encouraged a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Soon diplomatic ties were renewed. On the occasion of *Hajj* in 1995, Saudi Arabia puts in place a sort of code of conduct which will set the relations between the two countries concerning the *Hajj* pilgrimage. Although Tehran was frequently accusing Riyadh of mistreating Iranian pilgrims, cutting quotas for them or denying them the right to hold anti-American political rallies, the pilgrimage has also become with the years a venue for dialogue and symbolic *détente*. Iranian president Ahmadinejad's presence in Mecca on 17 December 2007 at the invitation of King Abdullah illustrates this new trend. With Rafsanjani's visit in June 2008, Saudi authorities allowed Iranian female pilgrims to visit the Baqi cemetery in Medina for the first time.⁶²

57 John, Kifner, '400 die as Iranian marchers battle Saudi police in Mecca embassies smashed in Tehran', *New York Times*, 02 August 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/02/world/400-die-iranian-marchers-battle-saudi-police-mecca-embassies-smashed-teheran.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

58 Jacob, Goldberg (1990), 'Saudi Arabia and the Iranian Revolution: The Religious Dimension' in *The Iranian Revolution and the Muslim World*, ed. David Menashri, New Haven: Westview Press.

59 Ibid.

60 Martin, Kramer (2009), *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival: The Politics of Ideas in the Middle East*, New Jersey : Transactions Publishers, p177.

61 Adam, Tarock (1997), op. cit.

62 Wehrey, op. cit., p42.

Under the first years of the Iranian Presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Saudi-Iran relations remain lukewarm but they evolve in a positive direction when the then Crown Prince Abdullah replaces King Fahd as de facto ruler in 1995 and controls the day-to-day affairs of the Kingdom. Even though none of the main issues which are source of contention between the two countries are resolved, a new relationship emerges. This phenomenon shows the Iranian Islamic ideology is less important in the interplay between the two countries than their social, economic and political problems. These factors also encourage the GCC to resolve its differences with Iran.⁶³ However, because of inside power struggle in its government, Iran's foreign policy keeps swinging back and forth between the interests of the politicians driven by pragmatism and the radicals, therefore highlighting a gap between the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. This lack of clarity in the stances taken by Iran reflects on the country's relations with the Arab states. After Rafsanjani who is an influential figure in building and expanding Iran's relations with the Arab Gulf states, comes the President Mohammad Khatami. He is welcomed as well positively by the Saudi elite as he believes in empowering Iranian society and improving relations with Iran's neighbors based on the principles of non-interference and good neighborliness.

Under Khatami, Gulf leaders participate in the eighth Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit Meeting from 9th to 15th December 1997 in Tehran. Crown Prince Abdullah meets with the Supreme leader Ali Khamenei and Rafsanjani as well as with Khatami. The rhetoric used by Iran against Israel and the US within the OIC, is usually very tough in order to overshadow its more cautious Arab counterparts. Interestingly, both Abdullah and Khatami share this time similar views as they think that the Islamic *Umma* had lost its place in world affairs and should regain it, they oppose US hegemony in the Islamic world, and they are challenged to bring internal reforms to their respective countries. At the end of the OIC summit, Khatami promises a dovish foreign policy and advocates a more balanced relationship with the West.⁶⁴ The OIC Communique reflects a larger consensus among member states.⁶⁵

63 David, Menashri (2001), *Post Revolutionary Politics in Iran: Religion, Society and Power*, London: Frank Cass Publishers, p101 and 245.

64 Wehrey, op. cit., p43.

65 <http://www.saudiembassy.net/archive/1997/statements/page0.aspx>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

In February 1998, the former President Rafsanjani visits Saudi Arabia. He helps at improving relations between the two countries through statements he makes and steps he takes in relevance with main issues such as the OPEC oil production quotas, the resumption of direct flights between Tehran and Jeddah, the expansion of trade ties opening the Saudi market to the Iranian labor force, his control over potential subversive activities against the Arab countries or even the Khobar Tower incident. Rafsanjani's trip is followed by the signature of agreements in the areas of power generation, investments and expanding commercial, technical, scientific, cultural and sports ties. On 3rd May 1999, an agreement is signed on the exchange of military attaches and on 20th January 2000, the two countries conclude a memorandum of understanding (MoU). This MoU establishes cooperation in the areas of navigation, port development, consulate affairs and promotes commerce, joint investments and coordination of stances in international and regional organizations.⁶⁶ Finally on 17th April 2001, a security accord comes into force to consolidate joint cooperation efforts to fight drug trafficking, terrorism, and illegal immigration. In brief, Iranian-Saudi relations take a significant path towards normalization during Rafsanjani, Khatami and their counterpart Abdullah.

Iraq

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement did not last long. Their 'love-hate relationship' reaches a new peak with the fall of Saddam Hussein due to the US invasion of Iraq in combination with the election of the more radical Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 24th June 2005. It causes shifts in the regional power balance and potentially a new regional set up. Therefore, Saudi Arabia is back to the state of fear and proactive caution vis-à-vis its biggest regional foe, Iran. Whereas Iran and Saudi Arabia improved simultaneously their respective relations with Iraq in 1997/99, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and fall of Saddam Hussein brings them back against each other on the Iraqi territory. The overthrow of the Iraqi President and the following years of

⁶⁶ 'Iran, Saudi Arabia sign MoU on commercial cooperation', *Kuwait News Agency*, 20 January 2000, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=1054330&language=en>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

sectarian violence accentuate their underlying conflict of interests. Saudi Arabia feels threatened by the emergence of a Shia pole in Iraq, phenomenon which is confirmed since the 2010 election of the Shia Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki. This Shia pole is also strengthened by the support of Iran to several Iraqi Shia political movements. Iran seeks an international recognition and an expansion of its sphere of influence over the West Asian region. Thus, as Iraq is experiencing a great deal of instability, it represents the ideal platform for Iran's consolidation of regional power. Furthermore, as the US' attitude was ambiguous regarding its withdrawal and the post-withdrawal period in Iraq, Saudi Arabia fears that this American departure leads to a new diplomatic initiative from their side towards Iran, acknowledging in the end Iranian primacy there.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding that Saudi Arabia kept the tone of neutrality to avoid any US change of policy that would play against them in Iraq, it urged the US at different occasions not to withdraw precipitously. Moreover, if it did not officially send troops in Iraq during the war, Saudi Arabia has most likely played an active role in supporting Sunni groups there against Shia militias.⁶⁸ It is also believed that the Sunni insurgency has been financially backed by private Saudi individuals or institutions.⁶⁹ In association with these expeditions, although not officially emphasized by the Saudi authorities, strong anti-Shia feelings resurfaced in the public opinion. Empowerment of the Iraqi Shias and the bloody escalation of Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq have intensified animosity around West Asia including Saudi Arabia. The February 2009 incident related to the Baqi cemetery in Saudi Arabia and the ensuing sectarian tensions is a good illustration of this increased hostility.

Nuclear Issue

In parallel to the Iraq issue, one of the other major sources of concern for Saudi Arabia is the possibility of Iran becoming a nuclear power. The most likely victims of a

67 Gregory F. Gause (2007), 'Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the regional power balance and the sectarian question', *Strategic Insights*, Vol. VI., Issue 2, March.

68 Hassan M. Fattah, 'Bickering Saudis struggle for an answer to Iran's rising influence in the Middle East', *New York Times*, 22 December 2006,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/22/world/middleeast/22saudi.html?pagewanted=all>,

[accessed on 01 March 2012]

69 The Iraq Study Group Report, December 2006, 25.

nuclear Iran are not the US or Israel but Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states. They are located geographically nearby Iran. Moreover, none of them possesses the nuclear capabilities that could enable them to deter an Iranian threat or attack. On the public scene, Saudi Arabia remains silent about the nuclear proliferation in Iran but as it faces a growing concern about its security, it took a few discreet steps in the direction of nuclearization in the past decade. Saudi Arabia signed for instance in 2003 with Pakistan a 'secret agreement on nuclear cooperation'. King Abdullah and President Pervez Musharraf 'agreed to exchange Saudi oil for Pakistani 'know how and expertise'.⁷⁰ The request made by King Abdullah to the US to 'cut off the head of the snake' of Iran before it is too late leaves no doubt about the Saudi feelings towards Iran and its nuclear program.⁷¹ Because of the many Ahmadinejad's stances taken against Israel, the Kingdom reinforced its position on the nuclear question by militating in favor of increased international sanctions against Iran to deter the latter from pursuing its nuclear military program.⁷² However, Saudi Arabia is also very much opposed to a US military intervention in Iran as the ensuing chaos would lead to a drastic increase of oil prices and on a long term basis, a weakened economy worldwide as well as in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia with the other GCC states proposed to provide Iran in 2007 with enriched uranium through a multinational consortium in order for Iran to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes.⁷³ That said, to ensure readiness in the event of a war with Iran, the American President Barack Obama was discussing with King Abdullah on 29th June 2010 plans to curb Iran's nuclear program and possibly strengthen the Kingdom's defensive position vis-à-vis Iran by a potential agreement on the purchase of seventy two F15 Eagle tactical fighters.⁷⁴ on 29th December, the US was willing to sell for thirty

70 James A., Russell (2005), 'Saudi Arabia in the 21st century: a new security dilemma', *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XII, No. 3, Fall, p68.

71 Michael, Busch, 'Wikileaks II : Saudi Arabia on Iran 'Cut off the head of the snake'', 29 November 2010, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, http://www.fpif.org/blog/wikileaks_ii_saudi_arabia_on_iran_-_cut_off_the_head_of_the_snake, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

72 'Move Israel to Europe, Iran Leader Suggests', *New York Times*, 09 December 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/09/international/middleeast/09iran.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

73 Aftab Kamal, Pasha (2009), 'Iran nuclear program : regional responses', in *Iran and Post 9/11 world order, reflections on Iranian nuclear program*, ed. Anwar Alam, New Delhi, New Century Publications, p 145.

74 Richard Javad, Heydarian, 'Iran-Saudi Relations: Rising Tensions and Growing Rivalry', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 6 August 2010, http://www.fpif.org/articles/iran-saudi_relations_rising_tensions_and_growing_rivalry, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

billion dollars worth F15 fighters to Saudi Arabia.⁷⁵ Moreover, if Iran is able to militarize its nuclear program despite being a signatory to the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), this treaty would lose its *raison d'être*. Saudi Arabia would hence feel under no legal or moral obligation to adhere to the treaty's principles and would feel free to go down the nuclear path.

Israel

Saudi Arabia also attempts to work in concert with its reliable enemy, Israel, to counter Iran's ambitions. Within this context and in order to get rid of one political tool that Iran could exploit in dealing with Lebanon and the Palestinians, Saudi Arabia participated actively in the peace process initiatives related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. By apprehension of Iran's unpredictable foreign policy and because of its relative dependency on the US, Saudi Arabia has agreed recently to allow Israel to use a narrow corridor of its airspace in the north of the country to shorten the distance for a bombing run on Iran.⁷⁶

OPEC

The rivalry between the two competitors materializes also within organizations such as the OPEC or the GCC as mentioned earlier. As US sanctions have restricted the Iranian oil production and impeded foreign investments, Saudi Arabia is the winner of the competition for preeminence in the global energy market. It has become the leading member of the OPEC, a position which was held by Iran until 1979. Iran is now the second biggest producer within the OPEC after Saudi Arabia.⁷⁷ The OPEC influence on the oil market is obvious as it determines production quotas and prices. The Arabs used the 'oil weapon' against the West in 1973 for instance. Although Iran and Saudi Arabia often disagreed on oil strategy within the OPEC, they have not openly split on the issue.

75 'US sells \$30bn in F15 jets to Saudi Arabia', *BBC News*, 29 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16358068>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

76 Heydarian, *op. cit.*

77 'Iran asks OPEC states not to raise oil output', *France 24*, 04 February 2012,

<http://www.france24.com/en/20120204-iran-asks-opec-states-not-raise-oil-output>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Sometimes, interests of the countries converge to avoid a fall in oil prices like for instance in September 2011 with the Saudi decision to reduce its daily oil production in order to resist against the decrease of the barrel price.⁷⁸ However, Iran with Venezuela often challenge the OPEC and hence Saudi Arabia over issues such as oil production quotas to increase their respective revenues. It happened no later than in December 2011.⁷⁹ Even more recently, Iran threatened to close the key global oil passageway, the Strait of Hormuz, because of the EU sanctions on Iran especially the European oil embargo against them. This initiative could have disastrous repercussions on the buyers but also the OPEC members starting with Saudi Arabia.⁸⁰ Iraq holds the presidency of OPEC, which could lead to the emergence of a new Iraqi oil pole inside OPEC. Iraq would be in competition with Saudi Arabia with the ability to create a counter-power in the hydrocarbon field. It is very likely that this move would indirectly benefit Iran as well. To prevent any rise of power of Iran within OPEC, Saudi Arabia has taken some measures such as providing energy counter-offers to Iran's major partners like China and India for instance.⁸¹

GCC

The GCC is another arena for power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia since the latter created this organization for the main purpose of containing the Islamic republic of Iran. However, as the GCC states lack unity on Iran and are relatively inclined towards dialogue with the latter, Riyadh had to opt for a more accommodating approach. The only question on which Saudi Arabia keeps a very strict line of policy through the GCC is in case of Shia agitations in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain or Kuwait.⁸² As Iran could take advantage of some activism to influence these

78 'Saudi Opposition to Iran Fades on \$100 Oil Goal', *Bloomberg*, 30 Octobre 2011.

79 'Venezuela urges OPEC nations to cut excess oil output', *AFP*, 14 December 2011, <http://interamericansecuritywatch.com/venezuela-urges-opec-nations-to-cut-excess-oil-output/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

80 'UK Warns Iran Over Strait Of Hormuz Threat', *Huffington Post*, 05 January 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/01/05/uk-warns-iran-over-strait_n_1186686.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

81 Florian, Neuhof, 'Saudi oil weakens Iran's hand in China', *The National*, 22 December 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/industry-insights/energy/saudi-oil-weakens-irans-hand-in-china>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

82 Wehrey, op. cit., p97.

Shia communities, Saudi Arabia watches carefully and interferes if needed. The military intervention of Saudi Arabia and the GCC States in Bahrain in 2011 due to the popular protests against the al Khalifa government should be seen in this context.⁸³

Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

On the Palestinian front, Saudi Arabia struggles to maintain the balance between the demands of the US, its Arab brethren as well as the more radical Iran. The Saudis are strong supporters of Palestinian national rights and critic regularly Israel's stances. However, many including Iran consider Saudi Arabia as moderate. Among other initiatives, Saudi Arabia proposed the Fahd plan in 1981 recognizing the right of all States to live in peace which meant implicitly that it was offering the recognition of Israel. This plan was vehemently criticized by Iran and denounced as a betrayal of Arab-Palestinian interests. In 2002, Saudi Arabia launched what came to be known as the Arab Peace Initiative (API) which not only agreed to recognize Israel's existence and its right to live in peace but expressed a willingness to establish full, normal relations with Israel. Maintaining very close links with the US, Saudi Arabia cannot afford to be radically opposed to the peaceful existence of Israel. For Saudi Arabia, the API was a political tool that could be used to curtail Iran's growing political and military power across West Asia since the US invasion of Iraq. If Iranian stances towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were relatively dovish under Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies, the election of Ahmadinejad in 2005 led to a strong step back in this area.

Lebanon

The assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, the Cedar revolution⁸⁴ as well as the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon have opened an additional

83 Ethan, Bronner, and Michael, Slackman, 'Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest', *New York Times*, 14 March 2011,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html?pagewanted=all>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

84 Chain of demonstrations in Lebanon resulting from the assassination of Hariri. The primary goals of the original activists were the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon and the replacement of a government heavily influenced by Syrian interests with more independent leadership, the establishment

chapter of confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and an increased intervention by each side as these incidents mark a tremendous shift in the regional balance of power in favor of Iran. 'Iranian and Saudi-backed factions were almost using Lebanon's political landscape as a platform for their proxy wars'.⁸⁵ By solidifying its alliance with Hezbollah, Iran under Ahmadinejad seeks to extend its sphere of influence, this time in the Levant region. Saudi Arabia has increased support to the country's Salafi factions who represent a 'strategic depth' against Iranian power.⁸⁶ It is very unlikely that this country would have interfered in Lebanese affairs if it was not to counter-balance Iran's presence there. Saudi backing of Fouad Siniora's government both politically and financially in an effort to undermine pro-Syrian and pro-Iranian forces showed the Saudi tacit support to Israel in its war against Hezbollah and indirectly Iran. That was the first Arab country to do so. Nowadays, Saudi Arabia recognizes only the pro-Hariri March 14 movement and ignores the Lebanese opposition led by the Hezbollah.⁸⁷ This state is of course concerned with the scope of influence of Hezbollah and indirectly of Iran over Lebanon. The challenge of the government's sovereignty provoked in 2008 by the controversial Iran-backed Hezbollah's communication and phone network was one of these frightening elements for Saudi Arabia.

Syria

In connection with Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, there is Syria which raises as well concerns for Saudi Arabia as it 'acts as Iran's conduit into Levantine affairs'.⁸⁸ The 2011 unrest in Syria and its potential significant repercussion on the Saudi-Iranian balance of power will be analyzed in the third chapter of dissertation.

of an international commission to investigate the assassination of Hariri, the resignation of security officials to ensure the success of the plan, and the organization of free parliamentary elections.

85 Heydarian, op. cit.

86 Michael, Scheuer, 'Lebanon: Last stop on a jihad highway', *Asia Times*, 23 December 2008, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JL23Ak01.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

87 Wehrey, op. cit., p84.

88 Wehrey, op cit. p77.

Yemen

Yemen is a similar site for power struggle and growing fissures between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran has been accused by both the Saudi and Yemeni governments of backing with funding, training, and material aid the Houthi rebels who live in the Sa'ada province in the northern part of Yemen. The charges against Iran have not been proven and may be based on the fact that the rebels are Shias⁸⁹ but this Shia element has surely been a decisive factor in the Saudi military intervention on the Yemeni territory in 2009. The presence of hostile forces based there and the particularly porous border that Yemen shares with Saudi Arabia were the other factors. The latter launched unprecedented military aerial raids on the Shia Houthi rebels and this was strongly condemned by Iran.⁹⁰

Bahrain

Finally, Bahrain is of course one of the cockpits for power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for historical and sectarian motives. The presence of the US Fifth Fleet on the Bahraini territory is an additional threat for Iran as its biggest enemy ends up having a military base just a few miles away from the Iranian border. Saudi Arabia has always been uncomfortable with the growing influence of Iran over the Bahraini Shia community through the faith affiliation. One could wonder though if the Shia component is an effective tool of influence for Iran in Bahrain. It is believed that, except in rare occasions such as the Iran-backed coup of 1981 organized against the Bahraini government, the Shias of Bahrain maintain no politico-religious ties with Iran. The way the Shia population reacted to the 2006 elections demonstrates it. After boycott by al Wifaq of the 2002 elections, its leaders wanted to encourage the Shia community to go back to the polls. For that purpose, they thought that the verbal support of a religious authority would help. Interestingly, these leaders did not address their request to a

89 'Yemen's War: Pity those caught in the Middle', *The Economist*, 21 November 2009, p. 49.

90 Mai, Yamani, 'Saudi Arabia goes to war', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2009,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/nov/23/saudi-arabia-yemen-houthi-war>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

religious leader based in Iran but to Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq, Najaf.⁹¹ Moreover and in compliance with the quietist characteristic of Shi'ism applied outside Iran, many Shias interviewed in Bahrain at that occasion, claimed that in 'concrete political matters, the *marja* is entitled to give an opinion but not a religious binding ruling'.⁹² In other words, the Shias of Bahrain do not feel bound by the recommendation of any established religious authority in the political field. These two elements show that the Shias in Bahrain are not and do not want to be influenced by Iran via their faith. Saudi Arabia interferes in the domestic politics of Bahrain by imaginary fear of Iran's domination over the Bahraini Shia community but except in the event of strong financial and material support exactly in the direction looked at by the Bahraini Shias, there are low chances for these Shias to follow the Iranian instructions. On the contrary, on many occasions, they even try to distinguish themselves from Iran's claims of similarity.

Shia Element

The Shia element however cannot be neglected by Saudi Arabia. Even though solely an ideology in many cases, it can still be a source of inspiration at least for a certain period of time. The Iranian Islamic revolution for instance has generated vivid reactions in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia, al Saffar and his political organization embraced shortly after 1979 revolutionary objectives with a clear confessional coloration and sporadically called for secession throughout the following decade. As for the Bahraini Shias, they indulged themselves into powerful demonstrations, organized a coup against their monarch with possible help from Iran in 1981, and finally moderated their stance to join their Sunni brethren in their claim for a constitutional monarchy. Besides, despite the fact that the Shias of Bahrain are not politically connected to the Saudi Shias but only by religious channels, the model of reaction given by one community can inspire people facing the same problems in the other country. This is why Saudi Arabia fears so much a change of regime in Bahrain. As the Shias inside their borders suffer from as much political, economic, socio-cultural

91 Louer, op. cit., p289.

92 Louer, op. cit., p293.

discrimination as their Shias brethren in Bahrain, there are relatively good chances for them to be inspired by the initiatives of the Bahraini Shias and repeat them. Although not in relation specifically with the Shia communities, the Arab spring in 2011 illustrates well this idea. The models of Tunisia and Egypt have been followed by mass protests in countries where the populations were suffering from the same poor economic conditions and lack of freedom. The next sub chapter will highlight the tools of influence used by Saudi Arabia to attempt to or control the domestic politics of Bahrain in order to keep its own country stable.

I.II Saudi Tools of Influence over Bahrain

As seen above, Saudi Arabia has been looking for influence in Bahrain above all to ensure that its al Khalifa Sunni ruler will remain in power but also to maintain the status quo in terms of power balance in the face of Iran's attempts to dominate further in the West Asian region. Anecdotally, there is an additional and much older reason though which dates back to the formation period of Saudi Arabia. In the early 20th century, when King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud and his men tried to conquer the Hasa, the 'Trucial Coast', Kuwait, parts of Iraq, Transjordan or Yemen, the British army stopped them. Ibn Saud was left ultimately with no alternative but to sign with London a number of treaties by which he recognized the borders imposed by the British. Due to Great Britain, the Arabian Peninsula did not become entirely Saudi. Thus, having a certain level of influence over Bahraini domestic affairs marks an important achievement that Saudi rulers have sought a long time ago. The tools Saudi Arabia uses to attempt to or influence in Bahrain are varied. They are in the economic, political, military and religious areas.

Economic Dependence

Bahrain suffers from a combination of high expectations, rapid population growth and falling oil revenues, hence a potentially-explosive combination. In the 1970s, the rapid inflow of oil wealth led all the Gulf states to create extensive welfare

systems. Governments provided health care, education, and other services for free to all citizens, and any citizen with an advanced degree could find a job in the public sector. With the fall of the price of oil in the 1980s, Gulf citizens saw government subsidies decline and high paying jobs evaporate. In parallel, rapid population growth created a large and restive youth population generating therefore tremendous economic pressure as well as pressure on governments to expand education, medical care, and social services at breakneck speed.

With the second largest reserves of oil in the world, the Saudi Arabian petroleum sector accounts for roughly forty five percent of budget revenues, fifty five percent of GDP, and ninety percent of export earnings. Bahrain is in a slightly different situation as it possesses much less oil and hence had to diversify its sources of income. Its economy has expanded into banking, heavy industries, retail and tourism. However, oil still plays a key role with Saudi Arabia being Bahrain's main trading partner. Petroleum and natural gas, the only significant natural resources in Bahrain, dominate the economy. Hydrocarbons provide the foundation for two major Bahraini industries: refining and aluminium smelting. Petroleum production and refining account for more than sixty percent of Bahrain export receipts, and seventy percent of government revenues.⁹³ Bahrain and Saudi Arabia share the 300 000 bbl/day of production of the Abu Safah offshore field. Thus, Bahrain receives a large portion of the net output and revenues from it. They use a sixty-year old crude pipeline system of four small submarine pipelines carrying Arabian Light crude from the Abu Safah and Dammam fields to Bahrain. Reportedly, this aging pipeline will be decommissioned after the construction of the 'New Arabia' pipeline, a 71-mile, 350 000-450 000 bbl/d capacity feed running between Abqaiq and Bahrain's refinery at Sitra. Saudi Arabia provides Bahrain with most of the crude for refinery operation via pipeline.

In addition to this dependence in the petrol production and crude import sectors, Saudi companies or government possess a great deal of shares in many Bahraini industries. The Bahrain National Gas Company (BANAGAS), operating a gas

⁹³ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

liquefaction plant that utilizes gas piped directly from Bahrain's oilfields, was owned until recently at 12.5 percent by the Saudi Arab Petroleum Investments Corporation (APICORP).⁹⁴ The Gulf Petrochemical Industries Company is a joint venture of institutions including the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), itself owned by the Saudi Arabian government at seventy percent.⁹⁵ The plant produces ammonia and methanol for export. Aluminum Bahrain (also called ALBA), one of the worldwide largest aluminum smelters with an annual production of about 860,000 tons, is also owned at twenty percent by SABIC.⁹⁶

In parallel of its heavy industry, Bahrain is a financial hub (representing one quarter of its GDP) with a great deal of Islamic banks but in this sector of activities as well, Saudi Arabia can exert significant economic influence thanks to its shares. Saudi Arabia owns in totality banks such as the International Banking Corporation (TIBC) through the Saudi Ahmad Hamad al Gasaibi and Brothers, the Awal bank through the Saudi Saad Group, the Gulf International Bank at ninety seven point five percent through the Saudi Arabia Public Investments Fund or the Bahraini Saudi Bank for instance.⁹⁷

Another illustration of the growing economic ties between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and indirectly dependence of the former on the latter lies with the Bahraini airline company Gulf Air, owned at one hundred percent by the government. Saudi Arabia offers nowadays to Gulf Air the possibility to increase air connections in the kingdom to cities normally not served by international carriers.⁹⁸ Gulf Air is keen to

94 'Apicorp Divests 12.5% 'Stake' In Banagas', *Arab Times*, 25 October 2011, <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/NewsDetails/tabid/96/smld/414/ArticleID/175427/reftab/96/Default.aspx>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

95 <http://www.icis.com/v2/companies/9146153/sabic/structure.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

96 'Bahrain specialism in aluminium', Bahrain Economic development Board', <http://www.bahrainedb.com/aluminium-bahrain.aspx>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

97 'Deutsche Bank, AlGosaibi unit battle in NY court', *Reuters*, 23 September 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/09/23/algosaibi-deutschebank-idUSN2340288020090923>; 'State of the GCC banking system', *International Financing Review*, <http://www.ifre.com/state-of-the-gcc-banking-system/610387.article>; Gulf International Bank, <http://careers.gibonline.com/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

98 Jasim, Ali, 'Saudi-Bahraini economic ties hit new high', 12 February 2012, *Gulf News*, <http://gulfnews.com/business/opinion/saudi-bahraini-economic-ties-hit-new-high-1.979104>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

further grow in Saudi Arabia as it would compensate the losses faced in Iran and Iraq due to Bahrain's decision to indefinitely suspend its activities there. Thus, Saudi Arabia is becoming a key regional market for Gulf Air.⁹⁹

In the transport field as well, Bahrain just started to work on a 90km Saudi-Bahrain rail project which will cost \$4.2 billion and be funded by the two governments and private investors.¹⁰⁰ This project will constitute an additional ground connection to the existing 25km King Fahd Causeway linking Saudi Arabian territory to Bahrain and will further benefit Saudi Arabia in its attempt to exert some control over Bahrain. Construction work for this project will begin in 2014 and will be completed by 2017.¹⁰¹

Another significant project linking the two countries is on going in the media sector. Sheikh Fawaz bin Mohammed Al Khalifa, president of the Bahraini Information Affairs Authority (IAA), recently told that an agreement has been reached in December 2011 to base in Manama the Saudi Rotana Media Group and Alarab, a twenty four-hour news television channel fully founded by the Saudi Prince Al Waleed Bin Talal.¹⁰²

According to Wikileaks, although not officially allowed, Saudi riyals circulate widely in Bahrain alongside the Bahraini dinar.¹⁰³ Most retailers and service providers accept riyals to settle accounts. As a result, the Central Bank of Bahrain has only a loose control over the actual currency used in circulation. Not directed by the Saudi authorities, this circulation of riyals has yet the potential to weaken the autonomy of Bahrain's economy.

99 Ibid.

100 Andrew, Hammond, 'Bahrain bankers relieved, eye infrastructure projects', *Reuters*, 19 February 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/19/bahrain-banks-idUSL5E8DJ0CP20120219>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

101 'Proposed 90km KSA-Bahrain railway to cost \$4.2bn', *Construction Week Online*, 17 February 2012, <http://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-15690-proposed-90km-ksa-bahrain-railway-to-cost-42bn/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

102 Ed, Attwood, 'Prince Alwaleed to base new Arabic TV channel in Bahrain', 28 December 2011, *Arabian Business*, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/prince-alwaleed-base-new-arabic-tv-channel-in-bahrain-437170.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

103 *The Telegraph*, 18 February 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/wikileaks-files/bahrain-wikileaks-cables/8334565/DESPITE-ECONOMIC-DIVERSIFICATION-BAHRAIN-SHARES-OIL-BASED-INFLATION-PRESSURES-WITH-GCC.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Political Interference

The attempts of or political interference of Saudi Arabia in the Bahraini domestic policies mainly happen through the GCC. This organization is a good channel to keep an eye on Bahrain as Saudi Arabia is 'the heavyweight in the GCC'.¹⁰⁴ On paper, the six founding members are equal but in reality, the GCC structure materializes the Saudi influence over its neighbors which was effectively opposed by the British at the time Abdelaziz Ibn Saud was building his kingdom. Thus, the GCC is the means with which Saudi Arabia can dominate these Gulf 'vassals' including Bahrain. The situation evolved though with 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq by American forces thanks to the sponsorship and protection of the US. The smaller sheikhdoms are freer than before from the Saudi trusteeship. The boycott of the 2005 GCC summit by Saudi Arabia because of the signature of a Free Trade Agreement between Bahrain and the US substantiates this gradual change. However, recent external factors such as the fall of Saddam Hussein and withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, the rise of Iran, as well as the danger of facing new Arab Spring revolts in the remaining West Asian monarchies led in 2011 the GCC states to rethink the organization and take steps to cooperate more closely. The drive for stronger political ties between Riyadh and its Gulf capitals, analyzed thoroughly in the third chapter of this dissertation, is a key foreign policy objective that GCC summits regularly discusses.¹⁰⁵ However, strengthened cooperation also implies a stricter compliance with the decisions of the GCC and hence of Saudi Arabia. This political change will probably reinforce the growing influence of Saudi Arabia over Bahrain.

104 'Monarchy Club to Extend Saudi Influence', *Arabia Today*, 12 May 2011, <http://arabia2day.com/local/monarchy-club-to-extend-saudi-influence/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

105 'GCC summit issues final communique', *Khaleej Times*, 20 December 2011, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/DisplayArticle09.asp?xfile=data/middleeast/2011/December/middleeast_December559.xml§ion=middleeast, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Military Means

As GCC countries are importing most of their military equipment from outside, no dependence can be noticed between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in this area. Both the countries are mainly relying on the US given their respective close relationship with them. Not later than in December 2011, Saudi Arabia bought for thirty billion dollars of F-15 jets fighters from the US.¹⁰⁶ As for Bahrain, it is reported that some US military equipment has been sold as well to Bahrain in January 2012,¹⁰⁷ which is surprising given the recent unrest in the country and following crackdowns made on the Bahraini population by the al Khalifa. The rationale behind these sales is partly coming from the American fear of a growing Iranian influence throughout the region. Iran's latest threat to close the Strait of Hormuz after the EU escalated sanctions against them, show how fragile the balance of power is in West Asia.¹⁰⁸ It is in this context that the US does not hesitate to supply arms to its allies in the region.

If Saudi Arabia does not provide Bahrain with military equipment, on the other hand, they already intervened two times on a military basis on the Bahraini territory and this constitutes an obvious interference in Bahraini domestic affairs. They firstly sent troops to Bahrain in 1994 at the time of large scale demonstrations and petitions for restoring the parliament were taking place.¹⁰⁹ By fear of losing control over its neighbor, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily in Bahrain. The agitations gradually ceased but it is difficult to assess how far the Saudi intervention played a role in it. Similarly, one month after the Bahrainis took to the streets in the beginning of 2011, one thousand troops from Saudi Arabia and other GCC states entered Bahrain.¹¹⁰ These countries

106 'US sells \$30bn in F-15 jets to Saudi Arabia', 29 December 2011, *BBC News*,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-16358068>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

107 Donna, Cassatta, 'U.S. moves ahead with military sales to Bahrain', 30 January 2012, *Associated Press*, <http://www.armytimes.com/news/2012/01/ap-us-moves-ahead-with-military-sales-to-bahrain-013012/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

108 Ian, Traynor, and Nick, Hopkins, 'Iran oil sanctions spark war of words between Tehran and Washington', 23 January 2012, *The Guardian*,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/23/sanctions-spark-war-words-tehran-washington>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

109 George, Friedman, 'Saudi troops storm into Bahrain', *Stratfor*, 14 March 2011.

110 'Gulf states send forces to Bahrain following protests', *BBC News*, 14 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12729786>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

responded shortly to the King's request since they are frightened to face the same threat on their own territory.

Role of Wahhabi Ulema

Although in different proportions, Bahrain is inhabited by similar sources of worry towards the Shia component than Saudi Arabia. The Shias constitute the majority of the Bahraini population, whereas they are in minority in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, with the epicenter of Sunni Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and a very predominant political role given to the Wahhabi establishment, the statements of the latter have an influence beyond the Saudi borders. The Wahhabi establishment supervises entirely the running of the judicial system. All judges (over 700) are Wahhabi, and the minister of justice is a senior member of the Wahhabi hierarchy. The establishment keeps under control the judicial power but also 'the Council of Senior Ulema, the General Committee for Issuing Fatwas, Da'wa and Irshad, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the Supreme headquarters for the Council for International Supervision of Mosques, and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prohibition of Vice. The Wahhabis control as well all religious education, (...) the Ministry of *Hajj*, the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*)'. In addition, they influence the 'Ministry of Finance through the control of the religious tax department (*Zakat*), magazines, radios stations and websites'.¹¹¹ The security incidents such as the attempted coup d'etat in 2007 that Saudi Arabia faced from inside strengthened the position of the Wahhabi clerical establishment.¹¹² In May 2007, the religious police (*Mutaw'a*) launched for instance 'an aggressive offense, raiding houses and locking up individuals for days, with some tortured and others beaten to death'.¹¹³ King Abdullah has almost no lever to limit the increasing power of the clerical establishment.

Due to the growing clout of the Saudi Wahhabi Ulema, the ruling Sunni family of Bahrain are under the influence of the discourse of the Saudi Wahhabi clerics, which is

111 Mai, Yamani (2008), 'The two faces of Saudi Arabia', *Survival*, 50, 1, pp. 143-156.

112Ibid, p.150.

113Ibid, p.150.

particularly discriminatory vis-à-vis Shias. People of this community are usually considered persons of dubious faith and therefore as a substandard class of citizens. As Human Rights Watch reports in 2009,

'State discrimination against the Shias stems from the official Wahhabi creed and is manifest in the state's religiously infused education system, state sponsorship of official religious worship, and a judiciary which draws its legitimacy from Sunni Wahhabism. It is this umbrella of religiously legitimized or religion-infused state institutions under which prominent Islamic thinkers and clerics, often state officials, continue to propagate incitement to hostility against the Shia'.¹¹⁴

This policy of discrimination has been going on for decades and is still omnipresent in Saudi Arabia. Sefr al Hawali, a prominent Saudi Wahhabi cleric, has alerted Muslims in the region of the perceived danger of the 'Shia Arc' (*al Qaws al Rafidi*) in 1991 following the Shia *Intifada* in southern Iraq.¹¹⁵ The former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Abd al-Aziz bin Baz, stated in 1993 that the Shia Ramadhan festival of Qarqi'un was a heretical 'innovation'.¹¹⁶ In 2008, twenty two Saudi senior Wahhabi clerics, including Abdullah bin Jibrin, Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, and Nasir al-'Umar, issued an anti-Shia statement in which they called the Shia sect 'an evil among the sects of the Islamic nation, and the greatest enemy and deceivers of the Sunni people'. They also accused the Shias of abusing Sunnis under their control, 'If they [Shi'a] have a country, they humiliate and exert control in their rule over Sunnis', and specifically mentioned conditions in Iran and Iraq. 'They sow strife, corruption and destruction among Muslims and destabilize security in Muslim countries (...) such as Yemen'.¹¹⁷ Of the twenty two signatories, eleven are current government officials and six are former government officials. The Saudi government tolerates such initiative, sometimes by silencing its critics. Saudi Arabia arrested the Shia cleric Shaikh Tawfiq al-'Amir in June

114 'Saudi Arabia Denied Dignity Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens', Human Rights Watch, 2009.

115 Sefr, al-Hawali (1991), 'Kissinger's promise and the American aims in the Gulf, Riyadh', al Saudi'a.

116 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, The General Presidency of the Department for Scientific Research, Fatwas, Missionary Activity, and Guidance of the General Secretariat of the Council of Senior Religious Scholars, "Fatwa No 15532," May 15, 1993.

117 Donna, Abu Nasr, 'Saudi Clerics Criticize Shiites for Destabilizing', *Associated Press*, 01 June, 2008 ; The statement of 22 Saudi Wahhabi clerics can be found at <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=9770&Itemid=33>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

2008, after he gave a sermon against the statement signed by the twenty two prominent Saudi clerics.¹¹⁸ Around this time, an inter-faith dialogue conference held by King Abdullah was taking place in Mecca with five hundred Islamic scholars, academics, and the Mecca-based Muslim World League (MWL). The aim of the initiative was to represent Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah in the West as forces of moderation in the Islamic world. However, the interdiction for the Saudi Shia minority to attend the conference undermined the legitimacy of the conference. The arrest of eight Shia clergy and community elders in the Eastern Province of the country during the intra-faith conference accentuated as well this loss of credibility.¹¹⁹

In 2008 moreover, the Wahhabi cleric, Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'd, promulgated a Fatwa which stated that it was prohibited to sell properties to Shias as 'therein lies assistance to the [Shia] in bringing out their corrupt religion and their bad creed'.¹²⁰ In 2009, Shaikh 'Adil al-Kalbani, the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, a holy site of all creeds, referred to the Shia religious scholars as 'unbelievers'.¹²¹ The repercussion of such religious pronouncements can be noticed at local levels inside Saudi Arabia. An illustration of this denial of religious freedom for the Shias lies for instance in the action taken by a local education official in the Eastern Province, Ahmad Bil- Ghanaim, the educational director in the eastern region of Ahsa, who issued a directive in 2007 demanding all schools to ban all Qarqi'un celebrations.¹²² It is obvious that the Bahraini government takes advantage of this anti-Shia discourse in Saudi Arabia to duplicate it in Bahrain with severe discriminatory operations. The way Bahraini Shias have been treated in 2011 by their authorities is one among multiple examples of intolerance enforced against them by their government in the last decades.

118 'Shaikh Tawfiq al-' Amir Calls on the Government to Take Our Rights From Them', Al-Ahsa Cultural Forum, 15 June 2008, <http://www.alhsa.com/forum/showthread.php?t=93328>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

119 'Closure of Shi'a Mosques and Arrest of Shi'a Clergy in Saudi Arabia', *RajaNews*, 7 June, 2008.

120 Human Rights Watch email communication with Jamila, an Eastern Province Sunni, 22 October 2008.

121 4 May 2009, *BBC Arabic television*.

122 Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Ministry of Education, (280) Ahsa' Governorate Education Administration (Boys), Administration for Islamic Awareness, 'Circular to All Units, Administrations, Divisions, Centers for Educational Supervision, Schools, and Institutes, No 34/27166', 25 September 2007.

In sum, Saudi Arabia has been in a state of confrontation mode with Iran since 1979. The power struggle between these two countries manifests itself not only in organizations like the OIC, the GCC or the OPEC but also in many countries of the West Asian region. Iran seeks to expand its sphere of influence over the West Asian region whereas Saudi Arabia solely intends to maintain the current status quo, and for that purpose, tries to contain Iranian ambitions. As analyzed in this first chapter, the platforms of reciprocal challenge and counter-power initiatives between the two are Iraq, Israel and Palestine, Lebanon in connection with Syria, Yemen and of course Bahrain. Morocco, Jordan and Egypt could also be added to the list since the 2011 developments. Whereas they are not located in the Gulf region and they will not always share identical interests, Morocco and Jordan have been invited by the GCC to join their six-member organization.¹²³ It is not clear whether this invitation will materialize or not as it came in the middle of the 2011 West Asian turmoil. However, one rationale behind this invitation could be the wish of the GCC and more particularly Saudi Arabia to contain any threat coming from a non-Arab and non-monarchic country such as Iran for example. Depending on the political developments following the 2011 overthrow of president Hosni Mubarak, Egypt could also become a lever for influence in the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Egypt has sometimes played a significant role in opposing the expansion of Iranian influence in West Asia.

Iran believes it can use the 'Shia card' to influence the domestic politics of these above-listed countries. It is the case in Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Kuwait where Twelver Shia communities live, in Syria with non mainstream Twelvers, the Alawis, and finally in Yemen with the Zaidi also called Fivers Shias. It is not clear whether or not the Shia component is an effective tool of influence beyond Iranian borders and more generally, if transnational faith affiliation can prevail over national parameters. However, it cannot be denied that ideology can galvanize in some cases populations who nurture accumulated grievances against their government. This is the rationale behind the Saudi interest in the domestic affairs of Bahrain.

¹²³ 'Amid turmoil, GCC extends invitation to Jordan and Morocco', *Middle East Policy Council*, 16 May 2011, <http://www.mepc.org/amid-turmoil-gcc-extends-invitation-jordan-and-morocco>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Chapter II

Iranian Role in Bahraini Affairs from 1981 to 2011

Unlike Saudi Arabia which started looking more closely at Bahraini domestic affairs only when its political stability was threatened due to external actors, Iran has sought influence over Bahrain for a long time. As already mentioned, Bahrain has been perceived for many decades by Iran as its '14th province'. This feeling comes from the Shia faith affiliation since the majority of Bahraini population is Shia. Yet, the scholar Laurence Louer reminds that :

'Contrary to a widespread idea that tends to see the Shia presence there (in Bahrain) as a result of Iranian influence, its population embraced Shiism from the beginning of the quarrel over Mohammad's succession when several Eastern Arabian tribes, among whom the Abd al-Qays of which the Baharna claim descent, espoused Ali's cause.'¹²⁴

In other words, most of the Bahrainis who converted to Shi'ism did it much earlier than in Iran and solely because of their close connections with Arabia. The feeling of the Bahraini Shia community to share an identity with the Saudi Shias is strengthened by the fact that they have a vested interest in doing so. According to Louer, Bahraini Shias often claim that their country still has huge oil reserves whereas it is not the case anymore. When asked about the location of these oil wells, Shias direct the attention of their interlocutor at offshore fields actually located in Saudi territorial waters. Nevertheless, they would not go to the point of adopting an irredentist attitude. Louer

¹²⁴ Louer, *op. cit.*, p13.

states that when questioned in 2003 about an American idea of separating the Saudi Eastern Province and joining with Bahrain to constitute a Shia emirate, the Bahraini Shias said that US plan would have more negative than positive repercussions.¹²⁵

Thus, the Bahraini Shia community has never felt any specific affinity with Iran. On the other hand, the latter has always considered Bahrain as part of it or close to it because of this Shia factor.¹²⁶ Iran's attention towards Bahrain has increased drastically with the fall of the Shah and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran's 'grand strategy' of foreign policy.¹²⁷ This chapter will analyze the core interests of Iran in Bahrain. For that purpose, it will discuss the Iranian willingness to spread its Islamic revolution but also to expand its influence throughout West Asia and how it sees Bahrain as potential partner in this grand strategy. It will then study the tools of influence used by Iran to try to or exert control over Bahraini affairs.

II.I Iran's Core Interests in Bahrain

Since the fall of the Shah and coming to power of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran has been nurturing the dream of increasing its sphere of influence over West Asia in order to counter the hegemonic behavior of the US and its allies. To achieve this goal, Iran has been using religion as a tool that will mobilize supporters throughout the *Umma*.

Iranian Ambition to Spread its Islamic Revolution

Shi'ism is the official religion of Iran since 1501 and Iran is the largest centre of Shia Islam throughout the world. As seen earlier, there are different branches of Shi'ism. The Twelvers represent the widest branch and they believe in the cult of the Twelve Imams that succeeded Prophet Mohammad. Ninety percent of the population of Iran is

125 Louer, op. cit., p32.

126 'Bahrain rejects Iran comments on sovereignty', *Today's Zaman*, 23 February 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=167742>; Semira N., Nikou, 'Iran Warns Gulf on Bahrain', The United States Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer*, 24 March 2011, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/mar/24/iran-warns-gulf-bahrain>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

127 Pierre, Pahlavi (2008), 'The place of Shi'ism in Iranian grand strategy', *Défense Nationale et Sécurité Collective*, August/September.

Shia who follows the Twelvers' faith. The two other major Shia sects are those who believe only in Seven Imams, the Ismailis, and in Five Imams, the Zaidis. The Twelvers believe that the *Mahdi* (the Twelfth Imam) has not passed away but disappeared and that he will return to deliver justice and truth once cruelty and tyranny will reach their climax. This is called the theory of occultation. It enables the eschatological efficiency of the absent Imams not to be challenged whereas their physical presence could disturb the political stability of the locality by their stances. It gives also a lot of flexibility to the theology as combined with the principle of interpretation (*Ijتهاد*), it can evolve according to the social changes. Shi'ism is not about an externalized but a personal and introvert faith. Moreover, the Shias are free vis-à-vis the temporal power in place since the sovereign is impenetrable. The Twelfth Imam is present but occulted, hence any absolute conceit to authority on the people is illegitimate given the fact that the one who takes power, seizes the only existing authority, the authority of the *Mahdi*.¹²⁸

However, this concept of Imamate gave rise to different interpretations and hence to abuses and misuses. Thus, it is due to and within this wide latitude of interpretation that Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini divorced the *Marja'yyia* theory, and introduced his idea of *velâyat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist) that enabled him to attract millions of followers and attain power in 1979. A book gathering his thoughts on the Islamic government or the authority of the *faqih* circulated in the 1970s but did not find many readers.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the politicized religious feeling that arose at that time around Khomeini as an antidote against the Westernization of Reza Shah Pahlavi made him think that 'Islam could constitute a collective answer to the current challenge and that the clergy was in the best position to avoid any compromise with the impious State to govern the place'.¹³⁰ The efforts of different religious thinkers and reformers such as Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleqani or Ali Shariati with his theory of guided democracy, gave some support to Khomeini's views.¹³¹

128 Richard, op. cit., pp. 14-65.

129 See the book H. Halgar, *Islam and revolution. Writings and declarations of Imam Khomeini*, Berkeley, Mizan Press, 1981.

130 Richard, op. cit., p109.

131 Mohammad, Ibrahim Mir (2008), *Sociology of Religions: Perspectives of Ali Shariati*, New Delhi, PHI Learning, p172.

Khomeini belongs to the fundamentalist school, which on the issue of the Imamate, promotes an active role for the Ulemas in the social and political spheres and claim representation on the behalf of the *Mahdi* in order to palliate the occultation.¹³² For them, the Imamate did not stop after the Twelfth Imam, hence they should implement Islam everywhere in the daily life of people. Khomeini's *velâyat-e faqih*

'aims to bring the state as a whole under control of a qualified jurist. In fact, *velâyat-e faqih*, particularly in its absolutist version, is the continuation of the theory of the Imamate, and gives the governing jurist the same authority as the Prophet or the Imams in managing Islamic society.'¹³³

The incumbent Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei or Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi are the current prominent figures of this fundamentalist interpretation.

At the time of the Islamic revolution though, Khomeini's interpretation of the Imamate concept was not endorsed unanimously since two other schools of thought, the traditionalists and the modern reformists, were defending a different approach. The traditionalists, represented by Ayatollah Ali al Sistani (Najaf, Iraq), Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani, Ayatollah Yousef Sanei or Seyyed Hossein Nasr, are reluctant to get directly involved in politics as no one until the return of the *Mahdi* should have the authority to implement an Islamic political system and execute the *Sharia* law. During that period, the *Umma* has to accept the temporal power as well as the fact that religion should be separated from the political system. Ali Sistani advocated for instance after the fall of Saddam Hussein the establishment of a 'democratic Iraqi polity' without asking for the implementation of an Islamic state based on *Sharia*.¹³⁴

The religious modernists inspired by Islamic thinkers of the nineteen and twentieth centuries such as Jamal al Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Muhammad

132 Adel, Hashemi-Najafabadi (2011), 'The Shi'i concept of Imamate and leadership in contemporary Iran : the case of religious modernists', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 40 (4), September, p480.

133 Hashemi-Najafabadi, op. cit., p481.

134 Babak, Rahimi (2007), 'Ayatollah Sistani and the democratization of Post-Ba'athist Iraq', *Washington : United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report 187, June, p8.

Iqbal or Ali Abdel Raziq, are the other main opponents to the fundamentalists' views. Bazargan and Shariati are the early religious modernists of contemporary Iran but ironically and as highlighted earlier, their thoughts benefited Khomeini's revolution as they were vigorously promoting the concept of *Ijtihad* on fundamental principles of Islamic thought. They are followed by reformers like Ahmad Kasravi, former President Mohammad Khatami or even Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri for some parts of his analysis. Their objective is to mitigate the rigidity of Islamic indoctrination, and to reunite Islamic theology with the modern concepts of human rights and democracy. Religious modernists are against any intermediary between God and the people, and against state religion, which means that they insist significantly on the independence between state and religion. They are hence ardent critics of the concept of Imamate as applied in the *velâyat-e faqih* of Khomeini.¹³⁵

Although existing during the 1979 revolution, critics of Khomeini's interpretation of Shi'ism like the traditionalist Hojjatieh society remained discreet.¹³⁶ To gain massive support from the Iranian population, Khomeini exploited different elements. Above all, he used his strong charisma to deliver multiple revolutionary speeches. He then used very judiciously the media to convey widely his message. Cassettes of his speeches circulated extensively throughout the country, and the regular information provided by the international radio BBC to the population about the revolution did help Khomeini's démarche.¹³⁷ Moreover, he made profit of the only point on which the Iranian society was united, its strong antipathy towards the Pahlavi regime. As the latter was associated to the US in the mind of laymen, it was then easy to relate it to the hegemonic and exploitive aims of the US and condemn both.

Thanks to this argumentation, Khomeini gained wide support and trust from the Iranian population. His *velâyat-e faqih* was finally perceived as a clear implementation of

135 Hashemi-Najafabadi, op. cit. , p483.

136 Mohebat, Ahdiyyih, 'Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi', *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2008, Vol. 14, No. 4, <http://www.meforum.org/1985/ahmadinejad-and-the-mahdi>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

137 Farhad, Khosrokhavar (2004), 'The Islamic revolution in Iran : retrospect after a quarter of a century', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 76, February, p71.

the theory of the Imamate.¹³⁸ The principle of theocratic clerical power was systematized and this *velâyat-e faqih* became the basis of the constitution of the Islamic republic in 1979. Principles One, Four and Twelve of the constitution indicate that the daily life should be regulated by laws which are based on Islamic rules and standards, and that the goal of political activity shall be the realization of an Islamic vision. More than being based on Islam, the constitution organizes the legislative, executive and judiciary powers in such a way that the Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini at that time, retains supreme authority. The people vote for a parliament and the president but the last word remains with the Supreme Leader. The latter is appointed by an elected body of eighty three clerics (the Assembly of Experts) who can dismiss him only in very rare cases. Among other prerogatives, the Leader can terminate the mandate of the president, appoint and dismiss the head of the judiciary, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (*pasdaran*), the media and the military.¹³⁹

Once Khomeini became the Iranian Supreme Leader, he developed an even more elaborate argumentation to campaign abroad and be able to reach the *Umma* of West Asia. He used ideological arguments such as the Islamic revolution in combination with anti-US or anti-West propaganda, played with Muslim ties or even Shia ties in case the two first means would not find any echo. Although ideological, the end objective of Khomeini was also solidly rooted in pragmatism. He was trying to expand Iranian influence over West Asia in order to stand stronger in front of the US' power and possibly even defy it. The US have always represented the 'Enemy of God' for Iran and unlike for the rest of its foreign policy which is very much driven by pragmatism, Iran's attitude towards the US does not only rely on rational grounds.¹⁴⁰ Influenced by Marxism, it makes a distinction between the *Mostakberin* (possessors) and the *Mostazafin* (dispossessed) with the US and most of the Western powers being possessors

138 Hashemi-Najafabadi, op. cit., p483.

139 Constitution of Iran, op. cit.

140 Marvin, Zonis (1985), 'The rule of the clerics in the Islamic republic of Iran', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 482, p97; Pahlavi, op. cit., p59 ; and Shireen T., Hunter (1988), 'Iran and the spread of revolutionary Islam', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2, *Islam & Politics*, April, p732.

and the majority of the Third World nations, the dispossessed.¹⁴¹ That said, the governments of the Third World countries which are more or less under the control of the possessors are 'lackeys of the so-called global arrogance' and hence, should be included in the possessors' category.¹⁴² The Preamble as well as article 152 of the Iranian constitution implicitly refer to the US and the Western powers with the words 'Imperialism', 'World Imperialism', 'the arrogant' and display the mistrust that Iran has developed towards the US and its allies :

'The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity (...) non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers (...).'¹⁴³

Serving a pragmatic foreign policy, the extensive use by Khomeini of the 'Islamic revolution' argument was indirectly legitimized by the constitution itself in its Principle 11 and article 152. The Principle 11 states that :

'(...) all Muslims form a single nation, and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran has the duty of formulating its general policies with a view to cultivating the friendship and unity of all Muslim peoples, and it must constantly strive to bring about the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Islamic world.'

The Article 152 affirms that 'The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon (...) the defence of the rights of all Muslims (...)'

Khomeini started to address his revolutionary message to the *Umma* without any Sunni-Shia distinction as his intention was to gain the support of as many Muslims as possible to lead a powerful bloc vis-à-vis the US. Khomeini's support to the Palestinians' cause is an illustration of this strategy as Palestinians are not Shias but Sunnis. Similarly, to be considered as a defender of the entire insulted Muslim

141 Fahrang, Rajaei (1983), *Islamic Values and World View: Khomeyni on Man, the State and International Politics*, Boston : University Press of America.

142 Hunter, op. cit., p734.

143 Constitution of Iran (1979, modified 1989)

<http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

community, Khomeini released a Fatwa condemning Salman Rushdie to death in 1989. When his strategy was not working with the *Umma*, Khomeini was turning more specifically to the Shias communities of the Gulf and other Arab countries. That is how he ended up putting a great deal of pressure on the Shia people of Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia but also Syria and Lebanon. Khomeini said for the first time in 1981 in an address to the pilgrims of the *Hajj* :

'At this sacred pilgrimage gathering, the Muslims must exchange their views concerning the basic problems of Islam and the special problems of each Muslim country. The people of each country should, in effect, present a report concerning their own state to the Muslims of the world, and thus all will come to know what their Muslims brothers are suffering at the hands of imperialism and its agents'.¹⁴⁴

This message was repeated by Khomeini throughout the next two decades, it also demonstrates the willingness of Khomeini to touch the whole *Umma* through the intermediary of his Shia pilgrims. By discussing the problems of the Muslim countries, they might realize the negative interference of the US, Israel and other Western powers in those countries and eventually, the oppressed Muslims may take concrete steps to get rid of these imperialist policies and governments. As Pierre Pahlavi highlights,

'140 million of the faithful (Shias) form an almost uninterrupted necklace of Shia communities from the shores of the Mediterranean to the valley of the Ganges ; the Shia world constitutes a pool of influence which in their time Safavids, Kadjars and Pahlevis never hesitated to exploit'.¹⁴⁵

With the Islamic revolution, Iran sees itself as the 'Shia champion (which) gives an ideal excuse to serve its political interests and weigh heavily in regional affairs'.¹⁴⁶

To achieve his grand strategy of expanding Iran's power over West Asia, Khomeini used a variety of means and channels. He tried to create great cooperative links with the *Umma*, revolutionary Islamic governments or even Muslim militant

144 Emmanuel, Sivan, and Menachem, Friedman, *Religious Radicalism and Politics in the Middle East*, new York, Suny Press, 1990, p182.

145 Pahlavi, op. cit., p52.

146 Ibid, p52.

groups despite its commitment in the Article 153 of the Iranian constitution not to interfere in the internal affairs of other states. Although the degree and nature varied from one region to another, Iran tried to maintain contact and exert influence over Muslim groups of West Asia through official or semi-official revolutionary organizations. Iran's assistance and influence takes different shapes but it starts usually with the distribution of political propaganda material, some financial support and military training.¹⁴⁷

One of the first militant groups abroad which has been supported by Iran is the Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁴⁸ The Israeli invasion of 1982 gave the opportunity for Iran to establish a foothold in Lebanon and indirectly keep an eye on the political evolution of the country. Nowadays, Hezbollah occupies a pivotal position within the government, which strengthens the influence of Iran. Some Shia movements in Afghanistan such as the Nasr Party, the Hezb-i-Wahdat Party or informal partners like the Astaneh Qods Razavi Foundation of Mashad have received help from Iran after the fall of the Taliban.¹⁴⁹ Iran maintained close ties in Iraq with the leader of Al Dawa movement, Muhammad Baqer al Sadr, later on his son in law, Moqtada al Sadr and his Mahdi army (*Jaysh al Mahdi*) until 2008, the Promised Day Brigade, as well as with the Supreme Assembly of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI also called Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI) headed by Ayatollah Mohamad Baqir Al Hakim, the AAH league of the Righteous (*Asaib al Haq*) or Party of God Brigade (*Kata'ib Hezbollah*).¹⁵⁰ The Iranians have supplied these groups with sophisticated weapons including rocket assisted exploding projectiles, which Iraqis used for attacks on US troops.¹⁵¹ Some

147 Hunter, op. cit., p743.

148 Anthony H., Cordesman, 'Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 July 2006, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/060715_hezbollah.pdf, Ilan, Berman, 'Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere', American Foreign Policy Council, 07 July 2011, <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Berman.pdf>, Keith A., Petty, 'Veiled impunity : Iran's use of non state armed groups', *Denver Journal of International law and Policy*, Vol. 36, 2008, <http://www.law.du.edu/documents/djilp/36No2/Veiled-Impunity-Iran-Use-of-Non-State-Armed-Groups-Keith-A-Petty.pdf> [accessed on 01 March 2012]

149 Samuel, Chan, 'Breaking the Impasse in Afghanistan: Problems with Neighbours, Brothers and Guests', *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Nov/Dec 2008, Vol. 6, No.4, p113.

150 Andrew W., Terrill (2011), 'The Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the future of the Middle East security', US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, December, p49.

151 Michael S., Schmidt, and Jack, Healy, 'Shiite militias claims responsibility for attack in Baghdad', *New York Times*, 11 June 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/11/world/middleeast/11iraq.html>

military training was also given by the revolutionary guards and several of the members of these groups have even taken part in the war against Iraq. In Syria, Iran has fostered an increased economic dependence of the Alawi regime. Moreover, the Guardians of the Revolution exercise a growing dominance (including inside the Syrian army) to the point of 'excluding any argument'.¹⁵² Iran's influence has also been significant with Islamic movements in Kuwait and Bahrain but only through the Shia angle and mainly in the beginning of the 1980s. It was the case with the militant Iranian Shia clerics Hojat al Islam in Kuwait and Hojat al Islam Mudarassi in Bahrain and the support in Bahrain of the movement called Islamic Front for Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB or *al Jabha al Islamiyya il Tharir al Bahrain*) which organized a coup d'etat that aimed at toppling the monarch. In Saudi Arabia on the other hand, the influence has been less than in other Gulf states because the ties between the Shia communities of the two are not as strong as with the remaining Gulf countries. More surprisingly and for the reason evoked earlier, Iran has also given some financial support, equipment and military training to non-Shia movements such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Ansar al Islam in Iraq which was promoting Saudi Wahhabism and the Kosovo Liberation Army. Attacks with the help of the local Islamist groups might have been conducted by regime elements such as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) or the Iranian Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC). For that purpose, these two entities might have used the Iranian diplomatic missions.¹⁵³

At home, Khomeini and his successor utilized different channels to spread their Islamic revolution. They used primarily the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance with many materials including magazines, newsletters, books distributed to Islamic movements and university students in Muslim countries. It is believed that they asked also for the help of institutions under their authority such as the Council for Culture and Islamic Relations (OCRI), the Bureau of World Liberalization Movements or semi-official revolutionary organizations like the Association of Militant Ulema. Another channel was the Press TV, Al Alam and Al Kawthar international satellite TV stations,

[accessed on 01 March 2012]

¹⁵² Pahlavi, op. cit., p55.

¹⁵³ John, Brennan (2008), 'The conundrum of Iran : strengthening moderates without acquiescing to belligerence', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political Social Science*, 618, July, p171.

and finally the local branches of the *pasdaran* such as the al Quds brigades and the Qarargah Ramezan in Iraq.¹⁵⁴ However, lacking of evidence in this field, it is difficult to verify if, when and how Khomeini and his successors used these different channels.

Many tools have been exploited by the Supreme Leader to export his Islamic revolution but history shows that this ideology was also serving a pragmatic purpose which was the expansion of Iran's power in West Asia. Iran's alliance with Syria is a good manifestation of the pragmatism on which Iranian foreign policy is based. When the Islamic revolution triumphed in Iran, Syrian revolutionary groups thought they would get the help of Iran to establish an Islamic government in Syria which follows Iran's model. Instead, Iran required Syrian cooperation in its war against Iraq.¹⁵⁵ Iran does not hesitate either to drop Islam in favor of the Non Aligned Movement. It is especially the stance adopted more recently by Ahmadinejad, understanding inside his country that he could not seduce his voters through religion. Similarly, on the international front, Iran would be happy to become the symbol of anti-imperialism and resistance against the US and the West. Ahmadinejad said during a meeting with the Speaker of India's Lok Sabha Parliament in November 2011 that 'independent countries should stand up to imperialists from the start' and 'highlighted the role of the Non-Aligned Movement in improving the current status of the world in front of the colonialist countries'¹⁵⁶ An additional example of Iran's pragmatic foreign policy lies in the Islands of Abu Musa, Greater and Lesser Tunb. They have been occupied by Iran since 1971. Iran uses different arguments to justify its occupation but the true rationale behind it is relevant to its strategic location in the Gulf and more specifically in the Strait of Hormuz. These islands dominate its entrance and the lanes through which Iran's oil is exported. Therefore, it is important for Iran to keep the islands under its control so as to safeguard its national security.¹⁵⁷ There is no need to add that no faith element is involved in this matter.

154 Pahlavi, op. cit., p54.

155 Shireen T., Hunter (1988), *The politics of Islamic Revivalism*, Bloomington : Indiana University Press.

156 'Nato, imperialist tool of domination', 05 November 2011,

<http://hardons-blog.blogspot.in/2011/11/nato-imperialist-tool-of-domination.html>,

[accessed on 01 March 2012]

157 Mohamad Abdullah, al Roken (2001), 'Dimensions of the UAE-Iran Dispute over Three Islands', Document submitted by the Government of Abu Dhabi, Global Development Network, p189.

Thus, because of the assertiveness of Khomeini's message towards the Muslims and the fear generated by Iran's expansive goal, countries such as Saudi Arabia or Bahrain started to take steps to prevent any further concrete interference from the latter. The 1979 revolution marked a turning point in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Iran. This is also the time at which the real power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran started and Bahrain became its cockpit.

The Bahraini Shias in Iran's Strategy for Expansion of its Influence Abroad

Under the Shah, Iran was already elevated to the status of the 'Police of the Persian Gulf'.¹⁵⁸ Khomeini's takeover gave a further boost to the Iranian expansive ambitions. This Iranian foreign policy led Muslim countries to react and Saudi Arabia was the boldest in its answers. As Khomeini nurtured a deep antipathy for the al Saud, he frequently attacked verbally the Saudi kingdom. He declared for instance that the Saudi rulers, 'these vile and ungodly Wahhabis, are like daggers which have always pierced the heart of the Muslims from the back,' and announced that Mecca was in the hands of 'a band of heretics'.¹⁵⁹ This series of attacks from Khomeini envenomed further the tensions. The rationale behind Khomeini's feelings is triple: Saudi Arabia is a monarchy, it declared unilaterally that it would be the guardian of the Muslim holy sites of Mecca and Medina and finally, Saudi Arabia is in the possessors camp given its very strong ties with the US.

Hajj

Inside Saudi Arabia, religion and the *Hajj* are of course one of the major sources of quarrel between the two countries. In 1984, Khomeini defied the Saudi monarch by calling for a shared sovereignty over the holy sites as well as for the 'unity of all Shiites'

158 Heydarian, op. cit.

159 Martin, Kramer, 'Khomeini's Messengers in Mecca Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival', <http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Hajj.htm>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

and made references to the 'damnation awaiting the House of Saud in his will'.¹⁶⁰ Whereas Khomeini was calling his Shias pilgrims for peaceful discussions at the eve of the 1987 *Hajj*, he encouraged the Shias to take revenge against the Saudis in the aftermath of the 1987 incident in Mecca.¹⁶¹ Under the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Khatami, relations evolved towards a rapprochement. Both figures attempted several initiatives in favor of better relations with Saudi Arabia in the trade, scientific, cultural fields.¹⁶² Saudi affinity with the US is however worrying Iran. Among many incidents, the undertaking in 2006 of the Gulf Security Dialogue (GSD) within the GCC and under the supervision of the US did not please Iran. The six themes studied within this GSD were related to the defense, regional and national security, counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation and engagement on Iraq. Experts like Michael Knights claim that the rapid improvement achieved by some of the GCC states in this field are the result of this GSD. Most likely as well, the progress of Iran in terms of ballistic missiles or the navy since then, is there to demonstrate to the super and regional powers that Iran has the military capacity to appropriately defend itself.¹⁶³ Iran adopts the same attitude in the nuclear field, here as well, to be able to stand strong in front of the US and its close allies in West Asia, Israel and Saudi Arabia. In January 2010, Iran accused Saudi Arabia to be complicit in the apprehension of the Iranian nuclear scientist Shahram Amiri while he visited Saudi Arabia on a pilgrimage to Mecca one year earlier.¹⁶⁴ In August 2010, when it was discussed whether Israel would attack Iran or not, Iran claimed that Israel was coordinating with Saudi Arabia to launch a 'surgical strike' against Iranian nuclear plants. Iran also reproached to Saudi Arabia its ideological and material support to Iran's main domestic terrorist group, Jundullah.¹⁶⁵ The revelation in October 2011 of an Iranian plot in association with one member of the drugs cartel of Mexico to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in the US, Adel Al Jubeir, gave rise to many discussions as it is

160 J., Covarrubias, and T., Lansford (2007), *Strategic interests in the Middle East*, London : Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

161 Kramer, op. cit.

162 'Iran, Saudi Arabia sign MoU on commercial cooperation', *Kuwait News Agency*, 20 January 2000, <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=1054330&language=en>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

163 Michel, Makinsky (2011), 'Iran et ses voisins du Sud: une relation sous tension', *Outre Terre*, No. 28, p430 and Makinsky (2012), op. cit., p10.

164 'Iran says nuclear scientist killed in bomb blast,' *Los Angeles Times*, 12 January 2010.

165 Heydarian, op. cit.

not clear who in Iran was involved and whether the Guide validated this act or not.¹⁶⁶ However, it could be a sign from Iran that following the alleged involvement of Saudi Arabia in different cases, Iran was keen to display its strength.

Shias in Saudi Arabia

Outside the *Hajj* sphere, Iran did not interfere much in the domestic politics of Saudi Arabia especially because it does not have close ties with the Shia community in Qatif. It is therefore difficult for Iran to influence some movements or communities if not through state-to-state relations. However, one incident happened in Saudi Arabia which could be linked to Iran and needs to be highlighted : the Khobar bombing in 1996. An explosion took place outside a US army compound killing nineteen people and injuring four hundred. The Iran Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) was signed by the US two months later. Saudi Arabia did not officially blame Iran but transferred the responsibility of the attacks on the Shias of its Eastern Province. Analysts suggested later that the Khobar attack could have been organized by al Qaida rather than Iran.¹⁶⁷ Till date, it has not been found out who supervised this terrorist operation. Saudi Arabia and Iran did not reach an agreement on the facts of the case, which show their reciprocal mistrust. However, the visit shortly after by Rafsanjani to Saudi Arabia calmed down the rising tensions.¹⁶⁸

Iraq

When it comes to platforms of power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iraq represents one of the most salient ones. With the complete withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq in December 2011, the change of regime there is favoring the Shias since the incumbent government is led by a Shia, the Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki. It marks a significant and positive change for Iran as it becomes easier for them to exert

166 Makinsky (2012), op. cit. p28.

167 'Al Qaeda is now suspected in 1996 bombing of barracks', *New York Times*, 14 May 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/14/world/al-qaeda-is-now-suspected-in-1996-bombing-of-barracks.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

168 Keynoush, op. cit., p143.

some influence along sectarian lines. Moreover, the group Asaib Ahl al-Haq backed by Iran and especially the Quds force, which is well known for its multiple organized attacks on US troops since the US invasion of Iraq, has announced at the time of complete withdrawal of the US that it would give up its weapons and join the political process. This recent step will lead to an increase in Iran's direct influence in Iraq. On the economic side, Iran is also anticipating the future with the US by developing with Iraq joint oil fields. Trade between them now stands at nearly eight billion dollar per year.¹⁶⁹ In fact, one of Iran's biggest concerns is the position that the US is going to occupy in Iraq and indirectly the role that Saudi Arabia will play there as a proxy of the US. Because of the 9/11 attacks and the potential involvement of al Qaida in it, the last decade witnessed developments in the Saudi-US relationship. Both of them have reassessed their mutual cooperation and Saudi Arabia is looking for alternate partners to better balance the US unilateral decisions in Iraq or Lebanon for instance.¹⁷⁰ Thus, Iraq is crucial for Iran but also for Saudi Arabia. The instability and the threat of a civil war there could be a good opportunity for both of them to strengthen their ties if they can overcome the sporadic diplomatic incidents of the past years as well as the chronic tensions.

Nuclear Issue

The nuclear issue is another serious bone of contention in the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Despite its repeated opposition to acquisition of nuclear weapons, it is very likely that Iran seeks to develop nuclear weapons. Under the Shah, Iran's nuclear program started with the support, encouragement and participation of the US, France, Germany and Britain but the situation changed with the Islamic revolution as Western powers mistrusted the Khomeini's government.¹⁷¹ Since the end of the 1970s, Iran has built mainly in cooperation with Russia, the Bushehr

169 Mohsen, Milani, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off The Growing Rivalry Between Tehran and Riyadh', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 october 2011,

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136409/mohsen-m-milani/iran-and-saudi-arabia-square-off?page=show>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

170 Keynoush, op. cit., p239-241.

171 'Blasts from the Past: Western Support for Iran's Nuclear program', *Iran Affairs*, 30 May 2006, http://www.iranaffairs.com/iran_affairs/2006/05/blasts_from_the.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

nuclear power plant, the Natanz enrichment plant, the nuclear technology centre of Isfahan, the Arak heavy water plant, the Parchin military complex as well as other smaller nuclear facilities. However, because of multiple international sanctions and embargos in the past six years, possible sabotage operations (Stuxnet worm virus), killings of Iranian scientists (Shahram Amiri, Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan), it is believed that Iran has enormous difficulties to achieve positive steps towards its nuclearization. Tensions escalated again in November 2011, with new findings by the IAEA about the Parchin site, subsequent tougher sanctions by the US and Europe, and a threat from Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. In retaliation, Iran vowed to block the Strait of Hormuz at the end of 2011.¹⁷² That initiative would be of course very damaging for the buyers of oil but also for Saudi Arabia and the surrounding countries. Given the power struggle inside the Iranian political structure, it is difficult to predict what is the real action plan of Iran regarding this issue.

OPEC

Iran used the OPEC and the OIC to exert some pressure on the Gulf or Arab countries. Within the OPEC, whereas Saudi Arabia put some efforts into keeping oil prices moderate to ensure that Western countries do not start looking for alternative energy sources, Iran is more concerned about the short-term future of the world oil market, and hence tries to maximize profits within that timeframe. High oil revenues in the near-term can help Iran buy off the growing frustrated youth population with subsidies.¹⁷³ Furthermore, a rising Iraq with large oil reserves as well as a promising production level increases the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in their respective capacity to influence their powerful new partner within the OPEC. Iran is well aware of Iraq's potential in this field. That is why it strongly supports in parallel some of the Iraqi Shia politicians and the Shia militants groups.

172 'Iran threatens to block Strait of Hormuz oil route', *BBC News*, 28 December 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16344102>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

173 See for further explanations on this issue Keith, Crane, Rollie, Lal, and Jeffrey, Martini (2008), *Iran's Political, Demographic, and Economic Vulnerabilities*, Santa Monica, California: RAND.

An additional source of contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia lies in the Russian foreign investment done in Iranian energy infrastructure. Lacking Western investments because of the extensive sanctions, Russians fill the vacuum in Iran.¹⁷⁴ These investments increase the threat that Iran represents for Saudi Arabia in terms of power of influence over the region :

'Russia has a keen interest in seeing Iran's oil profits sustained because this gives Iran the foreign exchange it needs to purchase advanced Russian conventional weapons, thus keeping the Russian defense industry capable and viable. A strong Russian-Iranian oil partnership would strengthen the already developing political-military links between the two states, intensifying Saudi concern about Iran's ambitions and power projection capabilities in the Gulf.'¹⁷⁵

Iran also adopted within the OIC towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the US a more aggressive approach than its Arab interlocutors during the last decade.¹⁷⁶

Egypt

Egypt for decades on the side of Saudi Arabia saw a radical change in its political system with the overthrow of its president Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring of 2011. This change represented a danger for Saudi Arabia since an autocratic leader, similar to King Abdullah, was toppled. Contrary to what it could claim, this regime change could raise some concerns as well for Iran. Hosni Mubarak has on several occasions helped in containing Iran's expansion of power in West Asia, the two countries are hence foes. Furthermore, Egypt has adopted a moderate position towards Israel, signed a peace agreement with it in 1979, and has taken decisions at different occasions against the interests of Islamic militant groups of the Occupied territories,

174 'Iran, Russia focus on deeper energy ties', *UPI*, 13 September 2011,

http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Resources/2011/09/13/Iran-Russia-focus-on-deeper-energy-ties/UPI-28741315912058/, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

175 Wehrey, op. cit., p102.

176 Richard Javad, Heydarian 'Iran-Saudi rivalry deepens', *Asia Times Online*, 11 August 2010,

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/LH11Ak01.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

such as Hamas. The recent ousting of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011 appeared initially in favor of Iran as the latter thought there was scope for an Islamic movement to takeover. That is what happened but the new governmental coalition led by the Muslim Brotherhood may not work to the advantage of Iran despite what the latter could have claimed at that time. Although intending to put in place an Islamist regime in Egypt, there is very less chances that the Muslim Brotherhood opt for a political system which is similar to Iran. Furthermore, it might be reluctant to choose the path of reconciliation with Iran as many Egyptians and neighboring countries would not endorse it.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

The case of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict is captivating as it is the exact manifestation of Iran's quest for influence. Iran has supported the Palestinian cause led by Yasser Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the Hamas and even the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ). The particularity of this support is that all these organizations are Sunni based, with no Shia component. By siding with them, Iran has been demonstrating since the beginning that it looks for some support from the entire *Umma* without making any distinction. A support involving Sunnis would better help Iranian ambitions of expansion and challenge of the US power and its allies. Iran has become the leading financial patron for Hamas and the Palestinian owned-freighter *Karine A* incident is one example of their close links.¹⁷⁷ Partly given the recurrent threats of strike by Israel and sanctions imposed by the US on Iran, the latter cultivates strong anti-US feelings and does not fear to use a bolder approach when it comes to the Palestinian issue.¹⁷⁸ Khatami confirmed though during the 1997 OIC conference held in

177 Terrill, op. cit., p36.

178 'Israel threat to attack Iran is not a bluff, deputy FM says', *Haaretz*, 06 November 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/israel-threat-to-attack-iran-is-not-a-bluff-deputy-fm-says-1.4639>;

Stephen M, Welt, 'Mainstreaming war with Iran', *Foreign Policy*,

http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/08/11/mainstreaming_war_with_iran; 'Netanyahu presses U.S. for military threat on Iran', *Reuters*, 08 November 2010,

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/08/us-usa-israel-idUSTRE6A61FS20101108>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]; US sanctions with the 1996 Iran and Lybia Sanction Act followed by a succession of UNSC sanctions against the Ahmadinejad government including the Resolutions 1737 (December 2006), 1747 (March 2007), 1803 (March 2008), and 1929 (June 2010).

Tehran, the Iranian support for the Middle East Peace Process based on the principles of the Madrid Conference which Iran had earlier rejected. However, Iran has taken a significant step back with Ahmadinejad in power who adopts more strident stances vis-à-vis Israel. Ahmadinejad has been accused at different occasions of saying that Israel should be 'wiped off the map'.¹⁷⁹

Lebanon

Lebanon is definitely where Iran finds its most loyal supporters within West Asia. Historically, Lebanese Shias who were poor and a dominated minority, started to be looked after with the arrival in the 1960s of the Iranian-Lebanese Seyyed Musâ Sadr. The latter, with Iranian funds, helped at the progressive uplifting of the local Shia population. Musâ Sadr created in 1974 the Movement of the Deprived (*Harakat al-mahrumin*) to defend the rights of the Lebanese Shia community. He went then further by associating the local Shia grievances to the Palestinian resistance and creating the group Amal, a militia that would help the Lebanese army in case of an Israeli attack.¹⁸⁰ In 1982, Shia Hezbollah emerged and received some support from Iran's new government following Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon. Within ten years after its formation, Hezbollah became a formidable force in national and international politics. Hezbollah's leaders masterminded covert operations inside Lebanon by taking Western hostages and bombing the US Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in 1983. It is also well known that Iran has been financially supporting Hezbollah and supplying it with arms and training. It has been stressed again at the occasion of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon border war involving Hezbollah.¹⁸¹ Iran has made substantial political and military commitments to the country since 1982 whereas Saudi Arabia stepped in only at the time Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, a close ally of Riyadh, got assassinated. Saudi policy towards Lebanon has focused since 2005 on trying to isolate Syria from Iran and keep it weak. Lebanon's Hezbollah-dominated government since the toppling of the Saad

179 Nazila, Fathi, 'Wipe Israel 'off the map' Iranian says', *New York Times*, 27 October 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/26/world/africa/26iht-iran.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

180 Richard, op. cit., pp. 162-167.

181 Elaine, Sciolino, 'Iran backs Hezbollah in Lebanon', *New York Times*, 18 July 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/18/world/africa/18iht-iran.2232363.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Hariri's coalition beginning of 2011 is another proof of the growing influence of Iran in West Asia. Despite these sources of competition, Saudi Arabia and Iran have frequently found more interesting ways to manage their rivalry in ways that avoid the escalation of conflict.

Syria

Syria has been the closest Arab ally of Iran for decades due in large part to its confessional ties with the President Bashar al Assad, member of the Alawi Shia minority. Although the Alawi community comprises only around ten percent of the Syrian population, the regime has been in power for forty years. Syria was among the two only Arab states which supported Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. Their alignment was based on their respective antipathy for Saddam Hussein and later on, on the strategy to adopt to confront Israel. But the turn taken by the Assad government in 2011 and 2012 vis-à-vis its population generates anxiety for Iran as it is unclear whether or not Assad is going to remain in power. In the event Assad is overthrown, Iran would lose its dearest friend in the region.

Kuwait

Kuwait is another state where the Shia component constitutes the main reason why Iran puts it under its tight surveillance but until recently there is no proof of sectarian tensions. Fears exist though as recently, Kuwaiti leaders have displayed concerns about Iranian sleeper agents 'whom the Iranians could activate to perform acts of sabotage in any future conflict involving Kuwait or US military bases there'.¹⁸² In 2011, the Kuwaiti government arrested and sometimes sentenced to death individuals believed to be members of an Iranian espionage and covert action ring but there is no evidence of such network.¹⁸³ The Iranians have denied the fact that they were spying in Kuwait and accused the US to encourage Kuwait for putting the blame on Iran.¹⁸⁴

182 'Kuwaitis, Iranians among sleeper cells' members', *Kuwait Times*, 24 August 2010.

183 'Kuwait court tries alleged Iran spy cell', *Khaleej Times*, 13 October 2010 ; 'Death for three Iran spies in Kuwait', *Gulf Times*, 30 March 2011.

184 'Ahmadinejad denies spy rings in Kuwait', *Kuwait Times*, 5 April 2011.

Bahrain

Finally, Bahrain represents a similar source of tension than Kuwait for Iran and Saudi Arabia but the case is even more sensitive as the Shia community of Bahrain maintains close historical ties with its brethren in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. From the Iranian side, Khomeini might have thought that the Shias of the Gulf countries and hence of Bahrain would follow the Iranian path because of their faith affiliation. The next part will focus on the type of tools of influence used by Iran to feed its expansionist goal in Bahrain.

II.II Iranian Tools of Influence in Bahrain

The ideological and pragmatic rationale behind Iran's attitude towards West Asia and Bahrain in particular during the last thirty years, has been looked at earlier. Committed to the goals of the Islamic revolution and very much opposed to the hegemonic behavior of the US and its allies, Iran has developed an ambitious foreign policy over West Asia. This part will now examine the tools used by Iran to exert influence over Bahrain. Saudi Arabia exploited economic, political, military and even religious mediums to interfere in Bahraini domestic politics. The room to maneuver for Iran is much more circumscribed due to a particularly suspicious international environment. Its interaction with Bahrain is minor in the economic field and non-existent in the military area as the pressure or reaction from the big powers would be immediate. On the other hand, Iran is making good use of its area of expertise : the support of non-state actors and the Islamic rhetoric.

Influence through Concrete Support of Non-state Actors or Islamic Rhetoric

Iran has always tried to maintain close links with Bahrain even though the Shias from Iran and living in Bahrain are very less. Shi'ism was declared the official religion

of Bahrain by Abbas I of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1602.¹⁸⁵ For most of the next two centuries, Iranian rulers retained control of the archipelago. Persia intermittently ruled Bahrain from 1602 to 1783, and was afterwards replaced by the Sunni al Khalifas supported by Britain. Iran attempted again to exert its authority in Bahrain during the twentieth century and, its parliament passed for instance a bill in November 1957 declaring Bahrain the '14th province' of Iran with two empty seats allocated for its representatives.¹⁸⁶ The territorial claim of Iran over Bahrain has been relinquished in 1970 following a UN referendum which determined that Bahrainis overwhelmingly desired independence and subsequently, Bahrain became independent on 14th August 1971. After the 1979 revolution, Iran had still difficulties to recognize it. A revealing illustration of the mindset of some Iranian politicians is the claim made by Nateq Nuri, advisor to Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in 2009 that 'Bahrain was the fourteenth province of Iran until 1970'.¹⁸⁷

The 1979 revolution marked a turning point in Iran's attitude towards Bahrain. Khomeini started to promote his Islamic revolution abroad. Associated to it, he conveyed through his broadcasting messengers that 'monarchy and Islam are mutually exclusive' and he called 'for the overthrow of the Saudi dynasty in the name of Islam'.¹⁸⁸ He was possibly assuming that the Shias communities of the Gulf states would be more receptive to his message because of their faith affiliation and therefore would stand up more radically against their monarch. This threat bred a harsh backlash from the Bahraini Sunni ruling family towards its people since the regime in place was an absolute monarchy.

185 Juan R. I., Cole (1987), 'Rival Empires of Trade and Imami Shiism in Eastern Arabia, 1300-1800', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, May, p186.

186 'Bahrain's journey from kingdom to province', 17 March 2011, <http://www.meed.com/countries/bahrain/bahrain-journey-from-kingdom-to-province/3090822.article>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

187 'Bahrain rejects Iran comments on sovereignty', *Today's Zeman*, 23 February 2009, <http://www.todayzaman.com/tz-web/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=167742>; Semira N., Nikou, 'Iran Warns Gulf on Bahrain', The United States Institute of Peace, *The Iran Primer*, 24 March 2011, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/mar/24/iran-warns-gulf-bahrain>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

188 William, Quandt (1985), 'Saudi Views of the Iranian Revolution', in *Iran since the Revolution*, ed. Barry Rosen, Boulder, Social Science Monographs, pp. 53-57; Monte, Palmer (2007), *The Politics of the Middle East*, Wadsworth Publishing, 2nd ed, p192.

It is clear that the Iranian Islamic revolution empowered the Shias against a government that was expressing strong sectarian animus vis-a-vis them. The government could sense it and that is why they drove for instance two representatives of Iran-based clerics, Hadi al Mudarrisi and Sadegh Ruhani, out of Bahrain in 1980 for allegedly fomenting anti-government activities. Al Mudarrisi represents the Marja of Grand Ayatollah Imam Muhammad bin Mahdi al Husayni al Shirazi but has no link with Khomeini contrary to what is often reported.¹⁸⁹ After being expelled from Bahrain, Al Mudarrisi founded from Iran the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) which was promoting a change of regime for an Islamic state. The movement is still based in Iran.¹⁹⁰ The IFBL was not looking for a restoration of the 1973 constitution because the latter did not involve enough Islamic terms but did not manage to distinguish itself from other opposition movements because of lack of a clear-cut political program.¹⁹¹ With its headquarters in Tehran, the movement was much better organized abroad than inside Bahrain.

IFBL has been accused of backing a plot organized in Bahrain in 1981 to topple the al Khalifa. A team of Shia Bahrainis trained by Iran was supposed to attack telecommunications services and Bahrain's airport, and assassinate key members of the al Khalifa government. It was also programmed that Iran would send its troops and establish a new regime following the Iranian model.¹⁹² The consequence of it was substantial since seventy three people were arrested by the government on charges of plotting to overthrow the regime, most of them belonging to the IFLB. The infrastructure of the movement got badly damaged by the authorities' crackdown. It initiated an influx of accusations against citizens allegedly involved with international terrorist organizations or extremist groups tied to Iran's government.¹⁹³ Members of Bahrain's Shia community were systematically targeted in peaceful protests and the

189 'Bahrain's sectarian challenge', *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, n°40, 6 May 2005, p11.

190 Ibid, p2.

191 Fuller and Francke, *op. cit.*, p135.

192 Mitchell A., Belfer, 'Iran's Bahraini ambitions', *Wall Street Journal*, 06 October 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204612504576608852457881450.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

193 'Bahrain's journey from kingdom to province', 17 March 2011, <http://www.meed.com/countries/bahrain/bahrains-journey-from-kingdom-to-province/3090822.article>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

brutality with which authorities sought to quell uprisings was characterized by the repeated use of live ammunition to disperse crowds, and the killing of unarmed civilians. Unemployment among the Shias soared, while they were watching a large foreign workforce drafted for employment. Shia clerics also began facing dismissal due to the contents of their sermons. The potency of the reaction of the al Khalifa most likely came from its fear to see Iran becoming too influential vis-à-vis the Shias of its country. The creation of the GCC as well as the support given by Saudi Arabia and the GCC to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war were also a firm response to this Bahraini incident.

The ensuing decade was more or less calmer with suspicion but no concrete trace of Iranian involvement in terrorism in Bahrain or the other Gulf states. In 1994 though, clashes and unrest started again in Shia villages outside the capital, Manama. The causes of the unrest were identical to earlier periods of dissension: absence of basic civil and political rights, autocracy, corruption and favoritism within the ruling family, economic discrimination, and constant government intolerance against the Shia population. The opposition was composed of three poles : Shia religious leaders backed by secular influential Bahraini individuals, exiles in Britain who formed the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM), but also Bahrainis relocated in Iran, Syria, and India who were part of the IFLB.¹⁹⁴

A petition was signed by three hundred prominent individuals followed by a bigger one signed this time by twenty five thousand people including Shias and Sunnis. However, due to the branding of the petition by the government as Shia and the fact that the growing economic discontent was Shia, this event took a confessional coloration.¹⁹⁵ Mainly because of the arrest and expulsion from Bahrain of the Shia cleric Ali Salman at the occasion of these petitions, demonstrations grew at an incredible pace and scale. After a few false attempts from the government to negotiate with some jailed Shia clerics in order to diminish the number of protests, the situation again deteriorated, street violence and massive arrests resumed. The Bahraini government

194 Munira, Fakhro, 'The uprising in Bahrain: an assessment,' in Gary G., Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds., *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, pp. 167-188.

195 Stork (1997), op. cit., p. 34.

made the first of many allegations that groups supported from abroad, more particularly Iran and Lebanon, were behind the unrest. Among others, it attributed the political crisis to the Iranian support of a group called 'Hezbollah Bahrain'.¹⁹⁶ By calling this group 'Hezbollah', the Bahraini government was referring to Shias maintaining close ties with Iran and who were engaging in terrorist acts against the authorities. 'In June 1996, fifty one Bahrainis were arrested and charged with plotting against the government. They were accused of being members of 'Hezbollah', trained and armed in an Iran-backed plot. (...) Several of these figures were in fact educated in Qom (...) and are revolutionary firebrands'.¹⁹⁷ It has never made clear that Iranians were concretely involved in these protests. Some Shia clerics even stated that there was no 'Hezbollah' organization as such in Bahrain even though they admitted the existence of several individuals promoting violence.¹⁹⁸ Shia and liberal witnesses from that period also tended to minimize the extent of the incident, claiming that the weapons stocks found were far too small to start a beginning of rebellion against the authorities. The possibility of involvement of Iran should not be excluded but if not, the latter could also have influenced Bahraini Shias through its efficient Islamic rhetoric.

No further major incident of Shia rebellion in connection with Iran marked the years that succeeded this 1994-1996 episode. On the other hand, the 2011 Arab Spring unleashed new demonstrations from opposition movements and hence fostered an additional unrest in Bahrain's history. Nothing official surfaced but one wonders here again if Iran tried to back some of these opposition movements. Major and crucial differences of interpretation arise among leading Shia clerics on the key issue of state power and leadership and on whether or not the Shia Arabs are bound by Iran. The Arab identity of the Bahraini Shias outweighs their religious affiliation in many political contexts. Therefore, except in the two cases mentioned above, the Iranian ability to influence the Shia people in Bahrain is questionable. The 2011 uprising evidences this assertion. An in-depth analysis of the ins and outs of this 2011 unrest will be done in the third chapter. However, it is important here to look at the stance of Iran with regards to

196 Joe, Stork (1996), *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46

197 Fuller and Francke, *op. cit.*, p135.

198 *Ibid*, p135.

the unrest and its possible intervention in Bahrain. In fact, it is debatable how far Iran wanted to influence the Bahraini Shia community and how much they succeeded in attempting to do so. A confusion appears about the message that Iran intended to convey towards Bahrain. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the uprising in Bahrain, claimed that there was no difference between the events in Bahrain and in other Arab countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia or Libya and no difference neither between Sunnis and Shias.¹⁹⁹ He then strongly criticized Saudi Arabia for its military intervention in Bahrain whereas Ahmadinejad was trying to call for regional unity.²⁰⁰ Meanwhile, the Brigadier general and commander of the *Basij*, Mohammad Reza Naqdi, stated that Iran should support the Shias of Bahrain by 'playing a direct role on this scene'. Naqdi's comments were published on Fars News, a semi-official site with ties to the IRGC.²⁰¹ In the end, it appears that Iran did not interfere in Bahraini affairs more than through oral statements but there was no unity in the message conveyed by Iran regarding this unrest so it is difficult to have a clear idea of Iran's intentions or actions.

In sum, Iran did not manage to impede that much Bahraini affairs except in the beginning of the 1980s. However, it is clear that its constant threat indirectly guided the attitude of the Al Khalifa in their way to deal with their Shia population and in that sense, one can say that the Al Khalifa has been influenced by Iran's discourses. In the aftermath of the 1981 incident as well as the 1994-1996 uprisings, part of the population that was targeted by governmental crackdowns was the Shias. As an illustration, Ahmad al Shamlan, a well known Sunni dissident lawyer and leader of the petition movement in 1994, was jailed several times but only for a short period of time. On the contrary, al Jamri, a famous Shia cleric part of the movement and behaving similarly to

199 'Bahrain uprising will be victorious: leader', *Tehran Times*, 29 November 2011, <http://www.tehrantimes.com/index.php/politics/2145-bahraains-uprising-will-surely-reach-fruiton-leader->, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

200 'Ahmadinejad calls for regional unity', *News 24*, 18 April 2011, <http://www.news24.com/World/News/Iran-calls-for-regional-unity-20110418>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

201 Genieve, Abdo, 'Shia in Bahrain: repression and regression', *Al Jazeera*, 01 May 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/04/20114301242374870.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

al Shamlan, was kept in jail for four years.²⁰² The heavy oppression and discrimination over the Shias of Bahrain was thus reinforced since the 1994 petition movement. This governmental fear of unmanageable protests and Iranian's interference is still evident since, in April 2011, Bahrain submitted a report to the United Nations claiming that Lebanese Hezbollah trained Bahraini opposition members in camps located in Lebanon and Iran.²⁰³ In July 2011 Bahrain's high criminal court sentenced two Iranians and one Bahraini citizen working as diplomats in the Iranian embassy in Kuwait to ten years in prison for spying on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).²⁰⁴

Economic Interaction with Limited Influence

Iran looks for strong economic relations with Bahrain as a means to indirectly exert some influence over Bahraini politics. In June 2010, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, announced during an Iran-Bahrain High Commission meeting that his government was ready to provide the financial infrastructure and facilities to enable Bahrain to attract investment from neighboring countries. He also affirmed that Bahraini investors could increase their direct investment in Iran.²⁰⁵ Also, the Iranian ambassador to Bahrain, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, announced in August 2010 that the United States sanctions against his country would not have any repercussion on its bilateral gas deal with Bahrain.²⁰⁶ Those two statements from Iranian officials the same year show clear willingness from the Iranian side to keep these economic ties with Bahrain.

However, given these growing diplomatic tensions with Iran as well as a lack of trust developed between the al Khalifa and Iran during the last four decades, the

202 Fuller and Francke, op. cit., p128.

203 'Bahrain Sees Hezbollah Plot in Protest', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 2011,

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703907004576279121469543918.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

204 'Bahrain jails three for spying for Iran: report', *Gulf News*, 06 July 2011,

<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-jails-three-for-spying-for-iran-report-1.833932>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

205 'Mottaki: Iran ready to provide facilities for foreign investors', *IRIB*, 30 June 2010,

<http://english.irib.ir/news/political/item/62777-mottaki-iran-ready-to-p...>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

206 'Iran gas exports to Bahrain still on', *Press TV*, 2 August 2010,

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/137198.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

economic interaction between the two countries remains minor. A report in 2011 estimated trade between the two states to five billion dollars annually.²⁰⁷ Iran and Bahrain started to negotiate the trade of Iranian natural gas exports to Bahrain in 2008, but Bahrain finally suspended the deal in 2011.²⁰⁸

Interestingly, Bahrain's foreign minister reaffirmed during the Manama Dialogue (regional security summit) held in Bahrain in 2010, his government's support for the development of a peaceful Iranian nuclear program and opposition to sanctions strategies as practiced by the US, the UN and EU. As a possible solution, Sheikh Khalid offered at this occasion to create an international civilian nuclear-fuel bank.²⁰⁹

Bahrain and Iran share membership in several international and regional forums, including the Non-Aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference but the influence of the latter on the former is difficult to assess.

To conclude, Iran assumed that Bahrain would maintain close ties with Iran due to the fact that the majority of the Bahraini population is Shia. It also felt that the destiny of the Bahraini Shias would be similar to the Lebanese Shias' one who have developed close ties with Iran. These ties rely on the initial extensive work achieved by Musâ Sadr for the Shia community, pursued by the multiple social and development projects undertaken under Amal and later on, Hezbollah. Moreover, the political and religious links between Iranian and Hezbollah leaders are very strong. Therefore, an outside pressure from the US, Israel or elsewhere would not affect these ties. Iran thought the same would happen in Bahrain. Different Shia clerics came from Iran, were following a *Marja* of an Iranian Ayatollah or have pursued their theological education in Iran. Hadi al Mudarassi and Sadegh Ruhani, who were allegedly involved in the 1981

207 'Bahrain traders call for boycott of Iran trade', *The Daily Star*, 3 May 2011, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/May/03/Bahrain-traders-call-for-boycott-of-Iran-trade.ashx#axzz1S5dm3gCX>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

208 'Bahrain to press on with Iran gas deal', *Financial Times*, 24 October 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d590232a-a162-11dd-82fd-000077b07658.html#axzz1RvTNGCJK>, 'Iran-Bahrain gas project off again', *The National*, 23 May 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/iran-bahrain-gas-project-off-again>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

209 'Khalid al-Khalifa, First Plenary Session - Sheikh Khalid Al Halifa', *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 4 December 2010, <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-iiss-regional-security-summit/manama-dialogue-2010/plenary-sessions-and-speeches/first-plenary-session/sh-khalid-al-khalifa/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

coup, were followers of the *Marja* of Grand Ayatollah Imam Muhammad bin Mahdi al Husayni al Shirazi, based in Qom. Ali Salman, the leader of the Al Wafaq movement, and Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Ahmed Qassim, the Al Wafaq spiritual leader, have both studied in Qom as well. However, except in the beginning of the 1980s, none of the Bahraini religious leaders show any spiritual affiliation with Iran. They mainly follow Ali Sistani in Iraq or Sheikh Fadlallah in Lebanon. They also remind when occasion arises, that they maintain no link with Iran. Ali Salman had clearly stated for instance during the 2011 protests that he was reluctant to get any help coming from Iran. On 30th March 2011, he asked Saudi Arabia and Iran to stop their interference with Bahrain's internal affairs.²¹⁰

Thus, Iran failed in its attempt to get the Bahraini Shias under its control and hence influence them through Islam. The only way for Iran maybe to achieve its ideological and pragmatic goals is through the support of Islamic militant groups such as Hezbollah or Hamas. Iran has a record of direct and indirect involvement in attacks and other operations aiming at undermining the authority of a government in order to match its revolutionary Islamic agenda. It is believed that Iran has been involved in the blowing up of a van filled with explosives in front of the US embassy in Beirut killing fifty eight Americans and Lebanese in 1983, the bombing by the Islamic Jihad of the American Marines headquarters and French army barracks in Beirut in 1983 killing two hundred ninety nine servicemen, but also the mining of the American frigate, the USS Samuel B. Roberts in 1988, and the bombing of the Israeli embassy in 1992 with twenty nine casualties or the attack of a Jewish community centre in 1994 making eighty five casualties in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The capture of ninety hostages in the American embassy in 1979 during four hundred forty four days or the hijacking of the TWA flight 847 holding thirty nine Americans hostages for weeks in 1985 are additional examples. Thus, Iran used this same method in Bahrain in 1981 with the backing of the *coup d'état* against the government and possibly in 1994-1996 if it effectively supported the

210 'Bahrain Shia leader says Saudi force must go', *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113301394489875.html>; 'Bahrain's Shiite opposition leader demands Saudi-led troops leave Gulf island', *Washington Post*, 30 March 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/bahrain-shiite-opposition-leader-demands-saudi-led-troops-leave-gulf-island/2011/03/30/AFnyQG2B_story.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

opposition movements with propaganda and equipment as it is sporadically claimed. On the other hand, if Khomeini's Islamic revolution has inspired or galvanized the Shia people in their protests in Bahrain in the early 1980s or mid-1990s, that is all that Iran could accomplish there. Interestingly, if Ahmadinejad's rhetoric is extremely provocative and aggressive, and if it still gives a lot of support to organizations such as Hezbollah or Hamas, one should recognize that the Iranian regime's more recent attacks' record is difficult to understand. Except the alleged attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in the US, the use of terrorism by Iran over the past decade is limited as compared to what has been done in the first twenty years. The other tools of Iranian influence such as in the economic, political or military fields are circumscribed if not absent.

With the arrival of the Arab Spring protests that affected most of the West Asian states in 2011, the center of gravity as well as the dynamics of international relations has evolved. It is therefore necessary to dedicate the next chapter to the study of the outcomes and repercussions generated by this wave of uprisings in West Asia and of course in Bahrain. A special focus will be made on Saudi Arabia and Iran in their mutual power struggle in relation with Bahrain.

Chapter III

The Power Struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the 2011 Uprising in Bahrain

From the 'Pearl of the Gulf', Bahrain progressively has become the 'island of fears and tears'.²¹¹ The four last decades witnessed a degradation of the political situation in Bahrain with a significant increase of oppression, repression and suppression over its population and more particularly its Shia people. The 2011 uprisings in many of the Arab countries fostered the Bahraini population to take to the streets but the protests were a continuation of the unrest that had shaken the country for almost forty years and a new development triggered by the events happening in the other countries. Those events, especially the success of Tunisian, Yemeni, Libyan and Egyptian protesters in bringing down their presidents, changed the nature of the confrontation in Bahrain.

This chapter will peruse chronologically the 2011 unrest in Bahrain, the grievances of the society and the answers given by the government which is so reluctant to share power. It will then put into correlation with the more than topical power struggle between Saudi and Iranian authorities. Lastly, this chapter will attempt to demonstrate that the degree of influence both countries have exerted in Bahrain during the 2011 uprisings is a reflection of their respective position power and objectives on the international stage to date.

²¹¹ Aftab Kamal, Pasha, *India, Bahrain, and Qatar: political, economic, and strategic dimensions*, New Delhi, Gyan Sagar Publications, 1999.

III.I 2011 Political Unrest, Demands of the Bahrainis and the al Khalifa response

The 2011 turmoil has been punctuated by heterogeneous demands coming from the population as some groups asked for a constitutional set up without the removal of the monarch while others came up with the more radical demand of a complete change of regime. The Al Khalifa family, which also faces strong internal divisions, firstly showed some willingness to open a dialogue but then stepped back and took harsh measures against its people. The threat represented by Iran's potential influence as well as the strong backing of the Saudis, encouraged the al Khalifa in this harsh reaction.

Heterogeneous Demands of the Bahrainis

The Bahraini youth led a “day of rage” on 14th February 2011, on the anniversary of the 2002 Charter.²¹² Many gathered at the Pearl roundabout in Manama. Transition to a constitutional monarchy was at the top of the list of demands. However there were multiple reasons to protest among both the Shia and Sunni communities.

According to the Bahrain Economic Quarterly report of 2011, the poorest forty percent of the Bahraini population became poorer mainly between 1995 till date.²¹³ Their share of the total annual income dropped from 19.6 to 18.1 percent. The report stresses as well that the social aid scheme of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Rights did not manage to cover a sizable part of Bahraini families which earns less than approximately \$1228 per month and that falls below the country's poverty line. The youth faces up to 38 percent of unemployment according to a World Bank report of 2005.²¹⁴ Another study highlights between 2004 and 2014, one thousand hundred Bahrainis who will enter the labor market will compete for forty thousand positions

212 '2011-02-05 February 14 is Revolution Day in Bahrain', 14 February 2011, <http://wlccentral.org/node/1222>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

213 <http://www.bahrainedb.com/quarterly-review.aspx>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

214 Hasan Tariq Alhasan, 'The socio-economic foundations of Bahrain's political crisis', *Open Democracy*, 20 February 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/hasan-tariq-alhasan/socio-economic-foundations-of-bahrain's-political-crisis>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

only.²¹⁵ Of the eighty four thousand new private sector jobs created between 1990 and 2002, more than sixty seven thousand were paying very less and foreign workers were occupying over eighty percent of these positions.²¹⁶ 'About fifty three percent of Bahraini workers earn less than two hundred Bahraini Dinars (BD) per month, well below the three hundred fifty BD required by a family of two as determined by the Bahraini Minister of Labour. Families depending on unemployed, under-employed, or underpaid breadwinners, or without a breadwinner, reportedly account for approximately half the population'.²¹⁷

These in-depth problems are experienced by both Sunni and Shia communities but disproportionately by the Shias. For them, discrimination is a fact of life and further stimulated by the poor way interior affairs are handled by the government. Firstly, the implementation of political reforms which initially aim to break up the old authoritarian structures, ends up fueling an institutionalized discrimination. The manipulation of the parliamentary electoral districts to ensure a better representation for the Sunnis than for the Shias is a perfect illustration of this problem. Another usual practice is to give Bahraini citizenship to non-Bahrainis, mainly Sunni Jordanians, Syrians, Yemenis, Indians, Pakistanis but also a great deal of Saudis, in order to alter the balance of the demography and decrease the Shia ratio. A third source of discrimination takes place in relation with government employment, government being the biggest employer in Bahrain. Shias are not allowed to compete and it is particularly true in the highest positions of public service jobs as those are occupied or under the control of the ruling family. It is also the case in more sensitive sectors such as the Bahrain Defence Forces (BDF) from which Shias have been excluded since the 1979 Islamic revolution, as well as the Ministry of Interior.²¹⁸ Shias also suffer from segregation given the fact that some areas are reserved for the royal family or the Sunnis. Riffa, a large residential area for instance, is occupied in its western part by the royal family and in its eastern part by

215 'Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market', Crown Prince's Court and the Economic Development Board, 23 September 2004, p4.

216 'Reforming Bahrain's Labour Market', op. cit., p3.

217 'Bahrain's sectarian challenge', op. cit., p9.

218 'Discrimination in Bahrain: The Unwritten Law', Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, December 2003, p.10.

Sunnis. 'Shias are not only forbidden from living in the area, but are also not permitted to own land there'.²¹⁹ Furthermore, it can be observed through historical records that some Shia villages did not benefit the same treatment than cities like Muharraq and Manama in terms of modernization of facilities and infrastructures. This statement is still valid nowadays.

However, the Sunni community also faces difficult socio-economic conditions. The Sunni-led National Unity Gathering movement that emerged with the 2011 uprisings called for a strengthened fight against the rampant corruption and for an improvement of their living standards. Bahrain suffers from grave socio-economic conditions or inequalities and the al Khalifa did not change much the labor pattern despite the several labor reforms they put in place in the last forty years.

Thus, grievances of the Bahraini population are numerous and that is why they did not hesitate to take to the streets when they witnessed their brethren protesting in Tunisia, Yemen, Libya or Egypt. It was endorsed by the moderate National Alliance (six political associations) including Al Wifaq and another key member Al Wa'ad that comprises liberal Sunnis working for reform. On 18th February 2011, members of parliament from the Al Wifaq movement which had eighteen of the forty seats in the Council of Representatives resigned from their positions in protest.²²⁰ The National Alliance called for the abolition of the 2002 constitution, the election of a new constituent assembly to draft a constitution, and the election of a parliament with 'full legislative powers'.

The National Alliance and the moderate wing of the ruling family represented by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa, the king's son, attempted to open a dialogue. Consultations between the two parts started in reality once the Crown Prince

219 'Bahrain's sectarian challenge', op. cit., p8.

220 'Bahrain unrest: Shia opposition rejects talks', *BBC News*, 19 February 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-middle-east-12513606>; 'Major Shia party withdraws from Bahrain government', *Irish Times*, 18 February 2011, <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2011/0218/1224290141267.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

got informed through Facebook and online forums that a mass demonstration would take place on the 14th February. Sheikh Ali Salman, the leader of al Wifaq, took advantage of the planned protests to persuade the Crown Prince to take compromising steps in order to avoid a scenario identical to what happened in Tunisia or Egypt a little earlier. Among other reforms, Ali Salman proposed that future prime ministers would not be members of the royal family but elected and thus accountable.²²¹ However, the Crown Prince was already highly criticized from inside the royal family and especially the prime minister (uncle of the King), for promising too many reforms. No preemptive reform could be made by the al Khalifa so the 14th February demonstrations could not be stopped. Yet, it is believed that Salman bin Hamad al Khalifa and the al Wifaq had constructive negotiations during the ensuing weeks and that they were close to an agreement. The Crown Prince was even confident enough to give an interview to Bahrain state television and call for a national dialogue imploring the involvement of all parties. At this occasion, the King stated :

'Following the genuine and honest initiative taken by His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa and which emanated from the heart of every loyal and sincere Bahraini citizen and which he announced on Bahrain Television this evening, and based on our trust in young people, we have assigned him to start a dialogue with all parties and sections in our beloved Bahrain and without exception'.²²²

These words highlight that this dialogue came at the initiative of the Crown Prince but the latter was getting the support of his father.

However, after three weeks of peaceful demonstrations, the negotiating parties started to face the rise of more hard-line voices within the al Khalifa, the protesters and the Sunni community. On 8th March, the Shia Al Wafa'a, Al Haq and Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM) organizations that had rejected political participation under the 2002 constitution, created the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic which was advocating a radical agenda: they were demanding for the removal of the al Khalifa and

221 'Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', Middle East/North Africa Report No. 111, International Crisis Group, 28 July 2011, p9.

222 *Bahrain News Agency*, 18 February 2011.

the establishment of a democratic republic.²²³ A key player in the coalition's formation and call for a republic was Hassan Mushaima who was unexpectedly allowed to return to Bahrain after the outbreak of protests and became the group's most significant public face. On 13th March, the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic organized a march in front of the royal palace and erected barricades outside the Bahrain Financial District complex. The call for a republic was an open challenge to the Bahraini ruling family and to all other GCC rulers. With the exception of Kuwait, most GCC monarchs want to remain total rulers or most power remains firmly in their hands. By calling openly for a republic, the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic crossed a red line since republic means the overthrow of the ruling family. From that point, the crisis worsened, pro-al Khalifa protesters and armed vigilant groups emerged. The opposition calls them death squads or mercenaries.

The demand for republic was so shocking that even the National Alliance refused to take part in the march. Undoubtedly, these claims would sabotage the opposition efforts and undermine their talks with the Crown Prince. The hard-liners of the royal family capitalized on this radical stance and reasserted control within the ruling family. Numerous members from the Sunni community of Bahrain analyzed this call for a republic as a sign of the real intention of the opponents to the regime. To keep the support of its protesters though, al Wifaq had to modify its strategy and set up more ambitious demands at the risk of not being invited anymore for talks by the Crown Prince. It did a lot to ensure that cross-communal harmony would not be altered but it might have lacked of leadership vis-à-vis the King's uncle's influence. One al Wifaq official said :

'One of our mistakes might have been that we were too soft with the masses. We should have led them. [Al-Wifaq leader] Ali Salman pushed very hard to get the roads opened [on 13 March] and confine the protests to the Pearl roundabout, but the youths were divided, and he failed'.²²⁴

223 'Calls for end to Bahrain monarchy', *Al Jazeera*, 09 March 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113924218214336.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

224 'Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', op. cit., p13.

In the middle of March 2011, the Crown Prince was still keen to engage in a broader dialogue but had to face the growing pressure from the prime minister, his Saudi and other Gulf states allies, asking to end the protests quickly and preserve the authority of the ruling family. Gradually hence, the Crown Prince and the more conciliatory wing of the ruling family pulled back from talks, arguing that protests should end and order restored before talks could take place. Following that, in Sunni areas, local groups armed themselves in order to defend the neighborhoods while in the Shia localities, checkpoints were put in place to prevent entry of security forces. In response, the ruling family took a series of decisive, harsh and very ruthless measures to crush the protest movement.

Al Khalifa Response Influenced by Saudi Arabia and Iran's Attitudes

According to the the hard-liners of the royal family, the constitutional assembly demanded by the National Alliance was already posing a significant threat for the monarchy as a fair representation would lead to a wider participation of Shias in the political system and possibly converting the monarchy to a republic based on *Sharia* law and the concept of *velâyat-e faqih*. The direct call for a republic and the fact that Iran might have a great deal of influence over Hassan Mushaima and its Haq movement, gave more ground to these hard-liners to rapidly move towards heavy suppression of the protests.²²⁵ The prime minister used this opportunity to give an answer to his own grievances and concretize his ambitions. He managed to convince the King to follow him. He then contacted his Saudi friends who were sharing his fear with regards to the developments in Tunisia and Egypt as well as the absence of US' help in their direction and possible influence of Iran over the Bahraini Shia population.

225 'Bahrain and the Battle Between Iran and Saudi Arabia', *Stratfor*, 08 March 2011, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110307-bahrain-and-battle-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia?utm_source=GWeekly&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=110308&utm_content=readmore&elq=e42b7c849d154e64838f4bb7648e8ed6, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

On the monarch's invitation, one thousand troops with armored support from Saudi Arabia entered Bahrain via the King Fahd Causeway on 14th March 2011.²²⁶ The other GCC states deployed the Peninsula Shield Force troops and the UAE sent approximately five hundred police officers. These countries responded at short notice to the King's request since they themselves feared a similar threat to their own regime. Bahrain imposed martial law the same day ensued by a three-months state of emergency.²²⁷ On 17th March, Bahrain arrested several top opposition activists including Hassan Mushaima and Abdul Jalil Al Sangaee, who were the strongest advocates of a democratic republic for Bahrain. On 2nd May, Bahraini government even announced that it would destroy numerous Shia mosques and shrines.²²⁸ The Al Khalifa also tried to prove that some Shias maintained links 'with the Lebanese Hezbollah, that they were receiving guidance for civil disobedience in addition to military training in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon'. They added that the 'protesters called for an 'Islamic republic' rather than a 'democratic republic'. On that point, the regime has offered no corroboration.²²⁹ That would mark the beginning of a long period of heavy crackdowns over the Bahraini population with a manifest focus on the Shias. The sudden destruction of Shia mosques, prayer houses (*huseiniya*) and meeting places under the pretext that they were built without license is one manifestation of the governmental bias. It smacked of retaliation from the government as these spots had existed for years and the new measures were taken without any possibility for the Shia community to make any recourse against it. The fear generated by Iran and the unconditional support of Saudi Arabia, are evident factors that helped the Bahraini government to adopt such repressive attitude towards its people. As highlighted by the International Crisis Group,

226 'Gulf states send forces to Bahrain following protests', *BBC News*,

14 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12729786>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

227 'Bahrain declares martial law as protesters clash with troops', *The Guardian*, 15 March 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/15/bahrain-martial-law-protesters-troops>; 'In Bahrain, forces move against protesters in capital', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 2011, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-bahrain-flashpoint-20110316.0,1785627.story>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

228 'Arrests follow deadly Bahrain crackdown', *Al Jazeera*, 17 March 2011,

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/201131733318735470.html>, ; Genieve, Abdo,

'Shia in Bahrain: Repression and regression', *Al Jazeera*, 01 May 2011,

<http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/04/20114301242374870.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

229 'Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', op. cit., p3.

'Before the crackdown, Bahraini security forces were accused of using excessive force, beating, torturing and in some cases killing peaceful demonstrators. Following the GCC troops' arrival, these security forces came down on protesters and opposition leaders even harder and, in one official's words, 'cleaned up' the Pearl roundabout'.²³⁰

The 'divide and rule' policy was clearly perceived by the Bahraini people. Therefore, leaders of different Bahraini movements initially took strong stances against any potential sectarian divide. Among others, the Wifaq movement along with six other opposition groups agreed with the pro-government Sunni National Unity movement on the importance of working against sectarian tensions. Slogans calling for Sunni-Shia unity, such as 'no Sunni, no Shiite, unity, Bahraini unity', were also frequently chanted at anti-regime marches and rallies.²³¹ Moreover, it appears that the Sunni Muslims joined the demonstrations (through their own political associations) on the grounds that the grievances were not only about the discrimination of Shias but also about the lack of governmental accountability and transparency, the massive corruption within the Al Khalifa, high inflation rate and other economic difficulties as seen earlier. It is probably why if Iran showed some support to the oppressed population of Bahrain by various operations in Iran and abroad, the Secretary General of the Al Wifaq movement, Ali Salman, had clearly stated that he was reluctant to get any help coming from Iran.²³² On 30th March 2011, he asked Saudi Arabia and Iran to stop their interference with Bahrain's internal affairs.²³³ Another incident showed how the moderate voices of the opposition

230 'Popular protest in Nort Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', op. cit., p4.

231 'Calls for end to Bahrain monarchy', *Al Jazeera*, 09 March 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113924218214336.html>, 'Bahraini Sunni clerics warn against sectarian strife', *Middle East Online*, 10 March 2011, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=44839>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

232 'Bahrain Opposition Wants Help From U.S., Not Iran', *News Max*, 01 April 2011, <http://www.newsmax.com/KenTimmerman/Bahrain-SheikhAliSalman-SaudiArabia-Iran/2011/04/01/id/391468>; 'Iran protesters stone Saudi consulate : report', *France 24*, 19 March 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110319-iran-protesters-stone-saudi-consulate-report>; 'Iran escalates diplomatic row with Bahrain', *UPI*, 20 March 2011, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2011/03/20/Iran-escalates-diplomatic-row-with-Bahrain/UPI-81421300644104/, Report: Iran recalls ambassador from Bahrain over protest crackdown', *Haaretz*, 16 March 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/international/report-iran-recalls-ambassador-from-bahrain-over-protest-crackdown-1.349635>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

233 'Bahrain Shia leader says Saudi force must go', *Al Jazeera*, 30 March 2011,

feel concerned about communal harmony. When the plot of an alleged Iran-linked terror cell planning to attack the Saudi embassy and the King Fahd causeway was uncovered in 2011, it embarrassed a lot the Shia opposition in Bahrain because it involved Ali Mushaima, the son of Hassan Mushaima, leader of the Haq movement and himself arrested by the Bahraini regime during the February protests and accused of planning an overthrow of the regime during the protests.²³⁴ However, it is not to say that there were no sectarian elements within both the anti-government camp and the pro-government rallies. Some Sunnis preferred to side with the Al Khalifa for fear of being discriminated in case the Shias would take the lead of the legislative and executive powers of Bahrain. Nevertheless, at this point in time, there was a broader call for less economic disparity and more rights, which has to some extent managed to cut through the sectarian divide.

Communal harmony has been difficult to maintain among the opposition though. Few positive initiatives have been taken such as the lift of the state of emergency, the release of medical workers who treated injured protesters during the uprisings, the governmental lift of the ban on the largest opposition party, the Wa'ad, as well as the new call for a National Dialogue by the King.²³⁵ However, the crackdown on the demonstrations, indiscriminate arrests, detention of tens of people and strong restrictions on all forms of meetings and public expression have taken place till the end of 2011. The Iran-backed incident of 1981 and the possible Iranian influence behind the 1994-1996 uprisings, added to the revival of Iran's revolutionary rhetoric with the

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/20113301394489875.html>; 'Bahrain's Shiite opposition leader demands Saudi-led troops leave Gulf island', *Washington Post*, 30 March 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/bahrain-shiite-opposition-leader-demands-saudi-led-troops-leave-gulf-island/2011/03/30/AFnyQG2B_story.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

234 'Bahraini terror suspects have links with Iran: prosecutor', *Xinhua*, 24 November 2011, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-11/14/c_131244429.htm; Eman, Ragab, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia face off in Bahrain', *Al Ahram*, December 2011, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1075/op6.htm>,

'Lara el Gibaly, and David, Jolly, '8 Bahrain Activists Get Life Sentences', *New York Times*, 22 June 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/23/world/middleeast/23bahrain.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

235 J. David, Goodman, 'Bahrain Orders New Trials for Medical Workers', *New York Times*, 05 October 2011, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/bahrain-orders-new-trials-for-medical-workers/>; 'Bahrain to lift ban on opposition party', *Lincoln Tribune*, 18 June 2011, <http://lincolntribune.com/?p=14392>; Reed, Stevenson, 'Bahrain begins national dialogue after upheaval', *Reuters*, 02 July 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/02/us-bahrain-dialogue-idUSTRE7610U720110702>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

president Ahmadinejad, is a combination that might feed further the suspicion of the Bahraini Sunni ruler to see the hand of Iran behind Shia opposition activities.

The anxiety of the Bahraini authorities vis-à-vis the potential interference of Iran is perceptible through its reactions during the 2011 upheaval. In response to Iranian Foreign Ministry criticism over the presence of Saudi troops in Bahrain, the al Khalifa recalled its ambassador to Iran in March 2011, stating Iranian comments were a 'blatant interference' in Bahraini domestic affairs.²³⁶ In a report sent to the United Nations in April, 'Bahrain's government claims that Iranian-backed Hezbollah has been training opposition figures at its camps in Lebanon and Iran in an effort to destabilize the Khalifa monarchy'.²³⁷ Similarly, Bahrain announced in May that its bilateral deal with Iran to import natural gas was put on hold because of Iran's meddling. The Bahraini Foreign Minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed al Khalifa stated that 'the repeated provocative statements from Tehran would no doubt be an obstacle to any agreement between the two parties'.²³⁸ In July, Bahrain's high criminal court sentenced three persons working in the Iranian embassy in Kuwait to ten years of imprisonment for spying for the IRGC.²³⁹

Thus, under the pretext of representing a risk for the regime because of possible ties with Iran, many discriminatory measures have been implemented against the Shias. Twenty one opposition figures were tried by a special security court, among which eight Shia pro-democracy activists were sentenced to life imprisonment in June 2011.²⁴⁰ Similarly, the Bahraini authorities have claimed that an alleged Iran-linked terror cell

236 'Manama recalls ambassador to Iran, alleging 'blatant interference', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 March 2011, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/babylonbeyond/2011/03/bahrain-iran-diplomacy-ambassador-recall-.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

237 Elise, Labott, 'Bahrain government accuses Hezbollah of aiding opposition groups', *CNN*, 25 April 2011, http://articles.cnn.com/2011-04-25/world/bahrain.hezbollah_1_wefaq-hezbollah-camps-hassan-nasrallah?s=PM:WORLD, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

238 'Iran-Bahrain gas project off again', *The National*, 23 May 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/business/energy/iran-bahrain-gas-project-off-again>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

239 'Bahrain jails three for spying for Iran: report', *Daily Times*, 7 July 2011, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2011%5C07%5C07%5Cstory_7-7-2011_pg4_5, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

240 'Bahrain unrest: Eight Shia activists sentenced to life', *BBC News*, 22 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13872206>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

had contacts with Tehran's Revolutionary Guard and planned attacks against high-profile sites, including the Saudi embassy and the Gulf causeway linking Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The allegations from Bahrain's public prosecutor seek to strengthen charges of ties between the suspected Bahraini Shia underground group and Iran. The accusations of links to the Revolutionary Guard, which is closely tied to Iran's ruling clerics, draw parallels with US claims about an elite unit of the guard which was involved in a foiled plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Iran has denied the charges but this type of accusations constitutes an ideal pretext for the Bahraini government to employ brutal methods as well as to indulge into sectarian violence.²⁴¹

Due to mounting domestic pressure as well as coming from the US to re-engage with the opposition, a National Dialogue began on 2nd July 2011 under the chairmanship of the speaker of the parliament, Khalifa bin Ahmed al Dhahrani. It involved approximately three hundred interlocutors from political movements, NGOs, the parliament, the government, the municipalities, the trade unions, the business community and the media. Within the National Alliance coalition, not all the seven societies could join. The Islamic Action society could not be represented as all its leaders were in jail. The National Democratic Gathering rejected the offer of participation on the basis that governmental abuses and repression should stop before dialogue could start. Al Wifaq sent four members, one being as well in prison. However, the al Wifaq participation came as a surprise since they first claimed that they would not join until the harsh measures stop. Not willing to slow down the dialogue process, they finally accepted the invitation but at the last minute.

Among the main promised changes, the parliament will now have the power to reject the government. Thus, under the new dispensation, the members of parliament will have the right to reject the entire government or its four-year work plan. Finally, the King will choose the prime minister who will select his ministers, whereas so far the

241 'Bahrain says terror suspects linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/14/bahrain-terror-iran-revolutionary-guard>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

monarch was appointing the prime minister and the ministers. The National Dialogue spokesman, Eisa Abdul Rahman, asserted that these changes represented 'a radical shift in the balance of power, between the democratically elected parliament and the executive branch, in a new commitment by Bahrain to concrete reforms'. In reality, the only major change is the transfer of responsibility from the King to his prime minister but this does not give more political representation and participation to the Bahrainis. It only meant the strengthening the hands of the present Prime Minister who is adopting a hardline approach towards political reforms. Since then, a follow up of the decisions taken during the National Dialogue has been initiated, which can be found on a website created for that purpose.²⁴²

This National Dialogue gives an impression of reconciliation and that it enables more political rights and improvements of life for the Bahraini population based on national consensus. However, it is abundantly clear that nothing can be achieved in favor of the citizens of Bahrain until repression ceases. The opposition needs to speak freely about its grievances without the threat of imprisonment or intimidation.

The US involvement during the 2011 unrest of Bahrain did not facilitate the negotiations and the resolution of the conflict as they came with a very polished discourse, which neither helped the opposition nor the Bahraini authorities. US officials stated that they asked the al Khalifa to use reforms than security measures to solve the problems. Defense Secretary Gates proposed to the King to think in 'evolutionary and not revolutionary terms'. The Americans also implored Bahrain to pay more attention to the Shia issue as too much polarization along sectarian lines could encourage the Bahraini Shias to turn to Iran for help.²⁴³ However, the US criticism of the Bahraini authorities' repressive attitude was soft, therefore it did not incite the al Khalifa to accept more concessions towards its people. The ruling family, who could have felt

242 <http://www.nd.bh/en/index.php>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

243 Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', op. cit., p22.

pressurized by severe comments from the US due to their substantial economic ties, felt on the contrary very free in its repressive moves.²⁴⁴

At the end of 2011, interfaith tensions seemed to be still high and persisting in both camps.²⁴⁵ It is observed for instance that some Sunnis started posting some lists online about Shia businessmen involved in the uprisings so as to ask people to boycott the products manufactured by their companies. It seems that Sunni liberals were also part of this sectarian initiative.²⁴⁶ The emergence and the strengthening of the National Unity Gathering, a pan-Sunni organization and ally of the al Khalifa that capitalized on the fear of Sunnis towards alleged threats from the Shias, did not help at maintaining communal harmony. However, this National Unity Gathering brought also unexpected outcomes that could, on a long term basis, change again the picture in the direction of a reconciliation between the Bahraini Sunnis and Shias. By constantly directing the Sunni energy at containing the opposition, this movement has cultivated an atmosphere of fear that deterred Sunnis from political dormancy. People are now more reluctant to transfer the responsibility of the decision-making to the monarch. Moreover, by repeatedly asserting that the Shias represent a threat while it tries to negotiate through back-channels with al Wifaq, the government loses credibility and hence Sunni support. It is :

'thus a new generation of Sunni activists that has begun to demand a more efficient role in political decision-making and a larger share of state benefits. Among the most vocal of these nascent coalitions is an offshoot of the National Unity Gathering called the al-Fatih Youth Union, whose Friday rallies draw thousands of Sunni supporters each week'.²⁴⁷

244 Mainly because of the high tenancy paid by the US to Bahrain in relation to the presence of the Fifth Fleet on the Bahraini territory, but also the Free Trade Agreement, etc.

245 'Bahrain Sunni-Shia split manifests itself in mistrust', *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-17002308>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

246 'Popular protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII) : Bahrain's rocky road to reform', op. cit., p16.

247 Justin, Gengler, 'Bahrain's Sunni awakening', *MERIP*, 17 January 2012, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero011712>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Justin Gengler speaks of the 'Bahrain's Sunni awakening' and the end of the 'Sunni docility' in Bahrain.²⁴⁸ These elements can play in favor of a pacification of the sectarian tensions and possibly eventually, a return of the situation against the al Khalifa with citizens better aware of their rights and more interested in political participation.

III.II Saudi Arabia and Iran's Roles in Bahraini Unrest, a Reflection of their Struggle for Power and Influence in West Asia

Iran and Saudi Arabia have a share of responsibility in the turmoil faced by Bahrain in 2011. Whether directly or indirectly, both countries played a significant role in the unrest, and more particularly on the strategy adopted by the al Khalifa's government. The extent of the role they played though is a reflection of the degree of influence they both have throughout the West Asian region.

Saudi Arabia and Iran's Roles during Bahraini Uprisings

For the reasons indicated earlier, Saudi Arabia has been maintaining very close ties with Bahrain in all fields. Saudi Arabia was the first country to react during the 2011 unrest and rescue the al Khalifa government. It did it by sending one thousand troops on Bahraini territory as soon as the nature of the population's demands started to represent a risk for the Saudi monarchy. A call for a republic in Bahrain could rapidly lead to the same request vis-à-vis the Saudi government. In parallel to this military intervention, Saudi Arabia was also influencing by its silence. Unlike Iran which expressed its opinion at multiple occasions on the Bahraini unrest, Saudi Arabia did not give its point of view on the issue whereas many violations of human rights were taking place. The silence of Saudi Arabia on the issue comforted, not to say encouraged, the Bahraini ruler in his use of a despotic policy. In that sense, Saudi Arabia strongly supported the al Khalifa's tyranny.

248 Ibid.

Iran on the other hand has been particularly prolix on the topic of the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain. Many Iranian officials from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, followed by the spokesman of the Foreign Ministry (Rahim Mehmanparast), members of the Parliament including Ali Larijani or the secretary of Iran's Expediency Council (Mohsen Rezai), condemned Bahrain's use of violence against demonstrators, the presence of the Saudi and other GCC forces and interference in Bahrain's internal affairs.²⁴⁹ Ahmadinejad stated the size and scope of the Bahraini demonstrations were forcing the al Khalifa to address the concerns of the protesters.²⁵⁰ Mohsen Rezai accused Saudi Arabia of falling in the trap of the US by sending its troops to Bahrain and try to stop the Muslim uprisings. He also raised the fact that people throughout West Asia who participated in anti-governmental demonstrations understood that 'their source of reliance (was) Iran'.²⁵¹ As evoked earlier, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei showed its support for the Bahraini opposition and all 'anti-despotic' movements, highlighting that it was not connected to any sectarian issues.²⁵² Iran's semi-official Fars News agency reported that thousands of Iranians had protested in support of the demonstrations that took place against the US supported 'crimes' of the Saudi and Bahraini governments.²⁵³ It is interesting to note that Iran is still keen to play the card of the *Umma*, showing that they should be perceived as the defenders of the whole Muslim community and not the Shias only.

It is necessary to analyze further the Iranian standpoint in relation to the turmoil in Bahrain and more generally to the Arab Spring given the strong factionalism that exists within the Iranian political sphere. Iran has claimed its support to all the protests movements of West Asia. However, there is a distinction to make between the Iranian

249 'Bahraini gov't must respond to citizens' demands', *Tehran Times*, 20 February 2011, http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=236095, 'Iran censures brutality of 4 Arab states', *Press TV*, 23 February 2011, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/166665.html>; 'Presence Of Saudi Troops In Bahrain Unacceptable: Iran', *Mehr News Agency*, 15 March 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1274935>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

250 'Learn lesson from Saddam's fate: Ahmadinejad', *Mehr News*, 16 March 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1275897>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

251 'EC Secretary Blasts Saudi Military Intervention in Bahrain', *Fars News*, 19 March 2011, <http://english.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8912280325>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

252 'Uprising in Bahrain has nothing to do with Shiism, Sunniism: Leader', *Mehr News*, 22 March 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1277180>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

253 'Iranians March to Condemn Brutal Suppression of Bahrainis', *Fars News*, 18 March 2011, <http://english.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8912270542>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

government and the conservatives on the one hand and the reformists on the other hand. If all of them have agreed on the question of supporting the Arab revolts in the region, they differ on their interpretation about the root causes of these uprisings and the repercussions of their stances for Iran. More than condemning the crackdowns on the Bahrainis, the Iranian government as well as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei describe the Arab Spring as a sign of a period of 'Islamic awakening' inspired by the Iranian Islamic revolution.²⁵⁴ Khamenei shows even bigger ambitions when he said in May 2011 :

'People's awakening in the Middle East and North Africa is the continuation of the Iranian nation's great movement, and this awakening will certainly spread to the heart of Europe (...) The European nations will certainly rise up against their politicians and leaders who made them submit to the cultural and economic policies of the U.S. and the Zionists'²⁵⁵

The conservatives also recommend the adoption of the 'Iranian methods of revolution, calling for a popular regime based on revolution' which is not clearly the direction promoted so far by the emerging regimes in Tunisia, Egypt for instance.²⁵⁶ They finally involve regularly an ideological anti-American address that revives the Iranian struggle against the US and its allies under Khomeini. However, what is not mentioned in the views of the conservatives are factors such as personal freedom, democracy or social justice which were pivotal in these revolutionary moves. Instead of referring to the 1979 Islamic revolution, the Iranian reformists focus on the social, economic components of these uprisings as well as those relevant to personal liberties. They even make a parallel between these Arab revolts and their own Green Revolution that occurred after the 2009 presidential elections. The reformist and former Prime Minister Mir Hussein Moussavi highlights in a statement made in January 2011 that the Egyptian authorities :

'fail(ed) to mention that this day of anger is the result of inefficiency and corruption at the highest levels, squandering of public funds, restriction of written and spoken word, and

254 'Khamenei: Arab uprisings sign of Islamic awakening', *Now Lebanon*, 04 February 2011, <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=237397>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

255 'Awakening will spread to the heart of Europe: Leader', *Mehr News*, 4 May 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1305266>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

256 Firas, Abu Hilal (2011) 'Iran and the Arab revolutions : positions and repercussions', Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha Institute, September.

executions and executions and executions, the setting up of gallows in public to terrorize the people'.²⁵⁷

He adds that if the regime respected the sovereignty of the people to determine their own fate and if it refrained from stealing the recent Egyptian elections, it would not be facing the demand of 'overthrow of the system' by the respected people of Egypt'. Moussavi's criticism is directed as much towards the Egyptian government as towards his own government which abused and kept down its people after the 2009 presidential elections. By fear of an internal rebellion, it is possible that the reformists' stands about the Arab Spring encouraged the Iranian government to condemn more severely the autocratic Arab regimes and develop even further its Islamic propaganda and ideological rhetoric around it.

More particularly on Bahrain, Iran sided with the protest movements and highlighted their legitimacy but the Iranian comments were much more numerous and punishing than for the rest of the countries touched by the Arab Spring. The level of accusations against the al Khalifa family was unparalleled. The media played an important role in this flow of charges with Mehr News, Fars News and Islamic Republic News agencies as well as Al Alam and Press TV satellite stations being at the forefront and very active. The rationale behind such specific approach from Iran vis-à-vis Bahrain lies in the fact that it believes that it can still play the 'Shia card' in Bahrain due to its Shia majority. But the truth of the matter is that Bahraini Shias do not feel any specific affinity with Iran. Besides, they are not interested in implementing an Islamic regime's agenda or the way it exists in Iran.

Notwithstanding its propaganda, Iran has not directly interfered in Bahraini domestic politics. The few steps taken by Iran such as the expulsion of a Bahraini diplomat in response to Bahrain's dismissal of an Iranian chargé d'affaires, are rather answers to Bahraini decisions taken against them. Iranian interference was mostly verbal.²⁵⁸

257 'Mousavi Statement on Recent Events in the Arab World', *PBS*, 29 January 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/mousavi-issues-statement-on-tunisia-egypt-and-iran.html#ixzz1rKS7ZTXg>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

258 'Iran expels Bahraini diplomat in tit-for-tat move', *Reuters*, 20 March 2011, <http://www.trust.org/alertnet/news/iran-expels-bahraini-diplomat-in-tit-for-tat-move>, [accessed on 01

A Reflection of Saudi Arabia and Iran's Respective Power of Influence in the Region

Saudi Arabia and Iran reacted very differently vis-à-vis the 2011 upheaval in Bahrain. Iran loudly and repeatedly denounced the despotic attitude of the al Khalifa towards its people but did not take any step beyond that while Saudi Arabia remained silent but militarily interfered on the Bahraini territory to suppress the uprising.

Iran stuck to its habit of adopting provocative stances in the hope that they would have an upper hand in Bahrain. Iran might think that once the Bahraini Shias would obtain a proportionate representation in their political system, ties with the Iranian regime would get strengthened, and Bahrain would become an additional 'Lebanon' for Iran. However, unlike Lebanon where Iran spends tremendous amounts of money, Iran has no particular hold on the Shias of Bahrain. As an illustration, despite recent vehement criticism and threats by Iran over Bahrain, implementation measures did not follow. Therefore, if by any chance the Shias eventually manage to be part of their political system, the possibility of Bahrain becoming an ally of Iran is remote.

Iranian foreign policy is built upon a combination of pragmatism, Islamic ideology and nationalism, which compliment each other. More latent under the former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, the Islamic ideology is back on the front line of the foreign policy of Iran these days.²⁵⁹ By opportunism, Ahmadinejad used it regularly until he realized that the Iranian society was not receptive to it. On the other hand, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei still makes full use of it. His address during the Arab Spring to the whole community of Muslims without differentiating between Shias and Sunnis is an indicator. Raising the idea of an 'Islamic awakening' and comparing the protest movements throughout West Asia with the Iranian Islamic revolution are other manifestations of an Iranian foreign policy driven by a strong ideology. Likewise, Grand Ayatollah Saafi Gulpaygani of Iran sent a warning to King Abdullah of Saudi

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259 Rob, Pinfold, 'Essay : Iranian foreign policy since 1979, pragmatic or ideological?', 07 March 2012, <http://www.theriskyshift.com/2012/03/essay-iranian-foreign-policy-since-1979.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

Arabia at the occasion of the Saudi military intervention in Bahrain in 2011. This Fatwa was related to the protection of the holy sites and refer to the issue as an 'entire Islamic world' concern.²⁶⁰ However, this ideology is inseparable from the pragmatic goals of Iran which is to have correct state to state ties. Iran's foreign policy seeks to enhance its influence and to be recognized as a regional power that cannot be ignored on the international scene. It also aims to challenge its enemy, the US. Khomeini was very transparent in this determination. The collaboration and support provided by Iran in the 1980s to the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Hamas and Islamic Jihad proves it. The Iranian backing of the coup d'etat in Bahrain in 1981 is another example.

Despite its propaganda and revolutionary rhetoric, Iran achieved little on the international stage for a long period of time. In the recent years though and with an acceleration in 2011, Iran gained some influence in West Asia thanks to both independent factors and Iranian inputs. It started indirectly with the victory of Hezbollah over Israel during the 2008 war. Then, Iran secured an incredibly strong foothold in Lebanon in 2011 since Hezbollah is now heading the government.²⁶¹ Iran also won in Iraq thanks to the US invasion as the Shias have now replaced the Sunnis in power. The fact that Iran recently proposed to organize the nuclear talks with the US in Baghdad evidences the great confidence that Iran has in the current Iraqi government.²⁶² Iran has invested a lot in Iraq and worked through the charity field to help the Shias living in Iraq. In addition, it persistently supported Shia militias to take on US forces on Iraqi soil but until recently, it had not managed to affect the powerful religious establishment represented by Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Since last month, in concert with the Shia Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, it has been trying to install Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who is close to Ali Khamenei, to undermine Sistani's

260 'Grand Ayatollah Saafi Gulpaygani warns King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia', *Islamopedia*, 29 April 2011, <http://www.islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/grand-ayatollah-saafi-gulpaygani-warns-king-abdullah-saudi-arabia>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

261 Hussein, Dakroub, 'Mikati upbeat about representative cabinet', *Daily Star*, 02 February 2011, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Politics/Feb/02/Mikati-upbeat-about-representative-cabinet.ashx>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

262 'Iraq says Iran proposes Baghdad as nuclear talks venue', *Reuters*, 04 April 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/04/us-iran-nuclear-iraq-idUSBRE83305G20120404>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

authority and hence draw Iraq closer to Iran. Iran would like to fill the vacuum with its own influence and this would strengthen Iran in its position of a regional power.²⁶³

Similarly, the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, at the parliamentary elections in 2011 allow Iran to dream that Egypt will get closer to them after decades of enmity. As for Bahrain, a better Shia representation in the political structure of the country would help Iran in its regional strategy and possibly undermine the Saudi and US' influence there despite the presence of its Fifth Fleet. The phenomenon is described by some analysts as the 'rise of Iran against the backdrop of the Arab Spring', since 'with the Hezbollah on the north, Hamas in the south, Assad's Syria in the east and rejuvenated Egypt in the west, Iran has encircled Israel'.²⁶⁴

However, in having a closer look at Iranian relations with West Asian countries, one can find out that its influence is still relative and fragile. In Lebanon, it is difficult to know to what extent Iran has contributed to Hezbollah's access to power in 2011. With the recent threat of an air strike on Iran by Israel, Hezbollah clearly stated that it receives support but no orders from Iran and that hence, in the event of war between the two, it would 'sit, think and decide' about how to react.²⁶⁵ Hezbollah's support to Iran in case of war imposed by Israel is apparently not unconditional. Regarding Egypt, firstly, the victory of the Freedom and Justice Party does not mean that the Muslim Brotherhood will have an extended decisional power. The president still has a great deal of influence for instance. Then, it is not clear whether the Muslim Brotherhood has the intention to follow the Iranian model or restore ties with Iran. Even though the legitimacy of the future government will make it less dependent on the West's support

263 'Aiming to boost influence, Iran maneuvers candidate to succeed Iraqi Shiite spiritual leader', *Washington Post*, 05 April 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/aiming-to-boost-influence-iran-maneuvers-candidate-to-succeed-iraqi-shiite-spiritual-leader/2012/04/05/gIQA2ChfxS_story.html, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

264 Yashsvi H., Chandra (2012), 'Iran Israel relations: from verbal confrontation to a military strike?', in *L'Iran et les grands acteurs régionaux et globaux*, edited by Michel Makinsky, March, Paris, Editions l'Harmattan.

265 Laila, Bassam, 'Hezbollah says gets support, not orders, from Iran', *Reuters*, 07 February 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/07/us-lebanon-hezbollah-idUSTRE81629H20120207>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

and more focused on the country's national interests, Egyptian authorities might still prefer to keep distances with Iran. In Iraq, as forces are loosing their main enemy with the withdrawal of the US in 2011, they may not need Iran as much as during the war.²⁶⁶ Finally comes Syria, the closest ally of Iran in West Asia. Syria has been facing multiple mass protest movements against its autocratic regime but also an extremely severe repression from the Assad government. The Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) reports more than five thousand casualties since the beginning of the uprisings in March 2011.²⁶⁷ Despite these flagrant atrocities committed by the government, Iran proves to be so far the greatest defender of the repressive regime of President Bashar al-Assad as Damascus has long been the conduit for weapons and cash to Hezbollah, and home to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. There is also a chance that Iran is providing the Syrian regime with paramilitary training and equipment in its crackdowns on the Syrian population.²⁶⁸

Iran's blind eye about the Syrian regime's violations plays against itself and Saudi Arabia takes advantage of it in their struggle for power influence over the region. Saudi Arabian foreign policy is more on a defense mode than Iran since it deals with maintaining the status quo and containing Iran's expansionist ambitions. However, Syrian uprising has become the current biggest battleground between Iran and Saudi Arabia.²⁶⁹ In an attempt to undermine the alliance between Iran and Syria and to exploit the Syrian weakness, Saudi Arabia started lobbying in the Arab diplomatic circles and encouraging its Wahhabi establishment to raise its voice against the Assad regime.²⁷⁰ It is also believed that Saudi agents have been collaborating with Iraq and Jordan on

266 David S., Cloud, 'As U.S. prepares to leave Iraq, Iran's shadow looms large', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 November 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/nov/14/world/la-fg-1114-us-iran-20111114>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

267 'Syria: New report indicates over 5,000 deaths since March', *UNHCR*, 21 September 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,IRIN,,SYR,,4e7c54202,0.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

268 'Foreign Office confirms Iranian support for Syria', *The Telegraph*, 06 June 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8558066/Foreign-Office-confirms-Iranian-support-for-Syria.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

269 Janessa, Schilmoeller, 'Syrian bloodshed reflects power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia', 9 February 2012, *Mint Press News*, <http://www.mintpress.net/syrian-bloodshed-reflects-the-continued-power-struggle-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia/>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

270 Jasmine, Roman, 'Poisons of sectarianism have seeped into Syrian character', *The National*, 05 December 2011, <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/poisons-of-sectarianism-have-seeped-into-syrian-character>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

organizing smuggling routes to support Syrian insurgents.²⁷¹ Saudi Arabia was the first country to officially support the pro-democracy movement in Syria and was the first Arab country to recall its ambassador from Damascus. In Egypt, Saudi Arabia is also keen to ensure that Iran will be kept at bay. The country has hence pledged a four billion dollars aid package to Egypt's military rulers to prevent normalization of relations between Cairo and Tehran.²⁷² In Bahrain, the Saudi military intervention in March 2011 followed by the other GCC States' support marks here as well the clear intention of Saudi Arabia to contain Iran's ambitions. Months later, part of the Saudi and GCC troops are still parked in Bahrain and there is no timeframe set for their withdrawal.²⁷³

Other tools for Saudi Arabia to counter the influence of Iran are organizations such as the OPEC and the GCC. Regardless of the 2011 uprisings, Saudi Arabia remains the leading producer of oil on the energy market, far ahead of Iran. With the fears generated by the 2011 turmoil and the overthrow of four Arab leaders, the GCC countries headed by Saudi Arabia felt the urgent need to overcome the sporadic political divisions within the organization and strengthen the ties with the setting up of concrete help or development projects. Among other steps taken, they surprisingly welcomed the request of two Arab but non Gulf countries, Morocco and Jordan, to join the GCC although they have very less in common with the six oil-producing Gulf states. The organization also pledged twenty billion US dollars in financial aid to Bahrain.²⁷⁴

Finally, the nuclear issue is another path to an increased power in the region and especially in the face of Iran going nuclear as well. Saudi Arabia has threatened to go

271 Joshua, Jacobs, 'Saudi Arabia's Syrian Jihad', *Information Clearing House*, 05 April 2012, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article30998.htm>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

272 Mohsen M. Milani, 'Iran and Saudi Arabia Square Off, The Growing Rivalry Between Tehran and Riyadh', *Foreign Affairs*, 11 October 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136409/mohsen-milani/iran-and-saudi-arabia-square-off?page=show>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

273 'Saudi forces withdrawing from Bahrain, Saudi officials say', *New York Times*, 29 June 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/29/world/middleeast/29bahrain.html>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

274 'GCC aid for Bahrain and Oman', *CNTV*, 11 March 2011, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/newsupdate/20110311/100890.shtml>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

nuclear, should Iran persist in its policy. Riyadh has already started to develop a civilian nuclear energy program negotiating with help from the US and other countries to build sixteen nuclear reactors in the next two decades. The Commerce and Industry Minister Abdullah Zainal Alireza said in 2011 that 'Saudi Arabia will spend more than one hundred billion dollar to establish sixteen nuclear energy plants in different parts of the country within the next few years'.²⁷⁵ Alireza also mentioned that Saudi imports from the US would go beyond ninety five billion dollars or twenty three percent of the total US exports to Arab countries by 2012.²⁷⁶

In a nutshell, although Saudi Arabia is not keen to work on an offensive mode like Iran, it is keen to expand its influence in the region. It is also unlikely that Iran will succeed at extending its influence given the Saudi current state of vigilance and well rooted potency in the region. The Arab Spring reopened or increased battlefronts between both countries and Bahrain is one of them. However, Saudi Arabia anticipates wherever Iran operates and in the end, can take more drastic actions than Iran.

There is one element nonetheless which might change the balance and encourage Iran and Saudi Arabia to choose the path of reconciliation : the attitude of the US in relation with the Arab Spring. The US and Saudi Arabia have shared a sixty-year old friendship during which as long as the Saudis were meeting the political and economic interests of the US, the latter was ready to turn a blind eye on the radical elements of the Wahhabi ideology and the autocratic ruling system.²⁷⁷ Suspicion arose though in the aftermath of 9/11 when the US found out that al Qaida nests were based in Saudi Arabia, and hence the US-Saudi relationship started to suffer from it. Then, the US disappointed Saudi Arabia by prematurely invading Iraq in 2003, fostering the sectarian violence and finally paving the way for Iraq to be led by Shias.²⁷⁸ Saudis dislike 'Maliki and accuse him of being a sectarian figure who hinders reconciliation among Iraqi communities'.²⁷⁹ The Saudis opposed the way the US handled the ouster of Hosni

275 P.K. Abdul, Ghafour, 'Saudi Arabia to spend \$100bn on 16 nuclear plants', *Arab News*, 8 December 2011, <http://arabnews.com/economy/article545341.ece>. [accessed on 01 March 2012]

276 Ibid.

277 Naseer, Aruri (1997), 'The US and the Arabs: a woeful history', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol.19, No. 3.

278 Robert, Gibbons, 'Saudi Says US policy is handing Iraq to Iran', *Reuters*, 21 September 2005.

279 Terrill, op. cit., p51.

Mubarak, accusing President Barack Obama of 'abandon(ing) a longtime ally'.²⁸⁰ Lastly, the US requests and stance with regards to the situation in Bahrain deepened further the rift between the two. The US required Saudi Arabia not to send troops to Bahrain and to enter into a process of reforms to give more political rights to Shias but Saudi Arabia ignored the US's call.²⁸¹ In Bahrain, the US adopted an equivocal position that satisfied neither the opposition nor the al Khalifa and the Saudi elite. This succession of disappointments from both sides, made Saudi Arabia and the US gradually reassess their mutual cooperation and Saudi Arabia is nowadays looking for alternate partners to better balance the US unilateral decisions on the Iraqi or Lebanese fronts for instance.²⁸² It is to counter-balance the power with the US that Saudi Arabia has started to think about developing a nuclear program for instance. Iran and Saudi Arabia will remain as neighbors and also, given their multiple common objectives in the energy field, the war of terrorism, and stability of the Persian Gulf areas, they will have to co-exist. There is bound to be some competition for influence among the two but equally there are also avenues for mutual cooperation. The problem faced by Iran and Saudi Arabia though is that they share some common objectives but their means to reach them are different.²⁸³

280 David E., Sanger, and Eric, Schmitt, 'U.S.-Saudi Tensions Intensify With Mideast Turmoil', *New York Times*, 14 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15saudi.html?pagewanted=all>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

281 Helen, Cooper, and Mark, Landler, 'Interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran Collide, With the U.S. in the Middle', *New York Times*, 17 March 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/18/world/18diplomacy.html? r=1>, [accessed on 01 March 2012]

282 Keynoush, op. cit., p238.

283 Kayhan, Barzegar (interview), 'Iran-Saudi relations : time for active diplomacy', *Iran Review*, 11 July 2011.

Conclusion

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia seems rooted in ideology. Iran was invaded by Iraq in 1980 and since 1979, the Islamic republic has been largely isolated. Ayatollah Khomeini who led the Islamic revolution, inaugurated a system that would answer Iranian expectations of power and governance. He mobilized Iranians through the Islamic ideology to make Iran strong and powerful. Undoubtedly, Khomeini was seeking to export the Islamic revolution as well as expand Iran's degree of influence globally especially throughout West Asia. The US lost its influence in Iran after the Islamic revolution and since then is seeking to overthrow the Islamic regime.

The power struggle with Saudi Arabia comes really into the picture at that time. Saudi Arabia is a close ally of the US since the beginning of the Cold War. It is a Muslim country with the privilege of guardianship of the two holy Muslim sites. Saudi Arabia, was also keen to maintain the strong links it had with the West through the US, and of course to maintain the status quo. This was uncomfortable for Iran. There is also no reason for Saudi Arabia to loose ground on the international scene in favor of Iran. The latter feels that it could gather people under it through religion but it has constraints. The change of strategy under Ahmadinejad illustrates this sudden understanding very clearly. He was using Islam at the beginning to gather constituency but he gradually understood that the Iranian society was not interested enough and therefore, he gave up Islamic rhetoric to become a frank nationalist during his second mandate. This strategy of using Islamic ideology also failed abroad for Iran, except in Lebanon. Though, it is extremely difficult to find out if the ties between Lebanon and Iran have been very close

due to religion or due to the massive yearly injections of investments made there since 1982. On the other hand, it is limpid in Bahrain since the Shias themselves asked Iran at different occasions not to get involved in their domestic affairs and highlight once in a while that they share no affinity with Iran. Without going to the extreme of irredentism, many Bahraini Shias still have ties with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and Iran would gain a lot at improving their relationships. An alliance between them would help Saudi Arabia at distancing itself from the hold of the US and Iran at getting stronger in the face of the rest of the world. They occupy respectively top positions on the production, marketing of oil and could utilize many opportunities to work in concert in this field within and outside the OPEC as well as in the energy security one as they share similar concerns. They would also save money in sustaining rival militias in Lebanon, Syria and Yemen or in trying to 'bribe' one country in order to avoid the latter to get closer to the enemy. That is what happened in Egypt in 2011. They could also join their hands in the peace process with Israel. They could also produce interesting work if they were collaborating at fighting against terrorism as both of them are victims of terrorism in Afghanistan, Yemen or Iraq.

Finally, in Bahrain, if none of them would interfere in the domestic politics, it would very likely generate some changes. Less supported by the Saudis, the al Khalifa would need to deal with the grievances of its population, Shia and Sunni together, with more attention. In the event Saudi Arabia and other GCC states would not have sent their troops in March 2011, the al Khalifa would have been compelled to initiate genuine political reforms. Similarly, with the absence of repeated condemnations of Iran about the attitude of the al Khalifa, perhaps the latter would have felt less threatened and therefore, less worried of compromising with the popular demands.

This dissertation has highlighted the contemporary history of Bahrain with a focus on the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran and make it the focal point of a thorough analysis. No such approach was taken so far except in a fragmented manner. Hopefully, this study gives an overview of the implications and generated outcomes,

which therefore tries to analyze in depth the current dynamics and strategic position of Bahrain in the Gulf region vis-à-vis Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Research questions have been listed and hypotheses proposed in the introduction. It appears that the findings of the readings match the hypotheses. The lingering internal struggle of the Bahrainis for more political rights, better living standards and more equality between different communities has been investigated and the outcome of it is that the al Khalifa family has been practicing for decades the 'divide and rule' policy and discrimination based on faith. Subsequently, Bahrainis have been regularly protesting against their government to get an improved life. They took to the street massively in 1979 and the beginning of the 1980s, came back in 1994-1996 and in force in 2011. Each time, the government answered with tyrannous measures such as arbitrary crackdowns, numerous arrests and imprisonment of political activists. The rationale behind the al Khalifa's attitude is double. Above all, they do not want to lose control over the Bahraini population and cannot accept to share power with the majority Shia. In parallel of ensuring their leadership, the government seeks to contain Iran's influence. An attempted coup d'etat backed by Iran against the al Khalifa has already occurred in 1981. Therefore, they have deep fears that the Shia community maintains ties with Iran in order to sooner or later get some help from them, and thus overthrow the ruling family. In this climate of fear, repression and despotism, Bahrain has witnessed years of domestic instability affecting its all around development.

In addition, with the internal struggle experienced by Bahrain, the country finds itself in the middle of a power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The strong alliance between Saudi Arabia and the US, the presence of the American Fifth Fleet in Bahrain and close ties of the latter as well as with the US, the religious common denominator between Iran, Saudi Arabia enhanced by the Shia factor in both Iran and Bahrain, makes this archipelago a real cockpit for influence between Iran and Saudi Arabia. They use Bahrain as a platform on which they can in competition with each other exert their influence. Iran interfered in 1981 as it aimed to topple the Sunni government and replace it by Shias in order to get their support and become a proxy in

case of conflict with Iran's enemies. It might have interfered also during the 1994-1996 unrest for the same reasons but no evidence could be found. From the Saudi perspective, it has developed many areas of interaction with Bahrain such as in the military, economic, political or religious fields. Iran's interference in Bahraini domestic affairs is subtle but constant. This power struggle of course fosters either directly or indirectly the tensions between the Bahraini authorities and their people as well as political instability in the country.

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