

# The Shī'īs of Bahrain

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### **Preliminary notes**

This essay has been written on the assumption that its readers have a basic knowledge of Islam and the history of the Middle East. However, further explanations have been included where necessary, e.g. differences between Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs. Additionally, all Arabic names and concepts save for place-names have been transcribed. The Arabic concepts are in italics and supplied with a translation in brackets when it is first used. Furthermore, all mentioned dates refer to the Common Era. Finally, all translations are mine except when stated differently.

## Introduction

*“The people want to overthrow the regime!”*

During the Arab Spring, in 2011, this cry of frustration with authoritarian regimes was heard in many Middle Eastern countries. This essay is specifically concerned with the rebellions in Bahrain. However, a broad sketch of the recent Arab tumults is necessary to fully understand the Bahraini situation.

On 17 December 2011, Muḥammad al-Bū ʿAzīzī (more commonly written as Mohamed Bouazizi) set himself on fire to express his dissatisfaction with injustices perpetrated by the Tunisian government. Muḥammad’s death triggered mass demonstrations against the Tunisian government. Thousands of Tunisians took to the streets demanding freedom, democracy, and the resignation of Tunisia’s authoritarian president Zīn al-ʿĀbidīn ibn ʿAlī (b. 1936). Eventually on 14 January 2011, the President stepped down and took refuge with the Saudi state. Tunisia now had the opportunity to rebuild itself after 23 years of autocratic rule.<sup>1</sup> This uprising against the government after al-Bū ʿAzīzī’s death was not an isolated incident. It was the result of an accumulation of tension in the Middle East against authoritarian rule. This accumulation can explain the upheavals in Tunisia and in other parts of the Middle East.

For the purpose of this thesis it is important to understand the causes of these upheavals. Firstly, and likely of overriding importance in the causes of the uprisings were the social economic conditions of most Arab peoples. Many were impoverished and had no prospect whatsoever of development. To give a few examples: there were high levels of unemployment, people received low wages, national infrastructure was poor, and administrative bribery and corruption was pervasive in society.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the United States’ armed intervention in Iraq in 2003 began the process of liberating the peoples of the Middle East from entrenched dictatorships and democratizing their nations. Former president

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<sup>1</sup> <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/tunisia/index.html?8ga> (accessed 9 June 2012); <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/interactive/2011/mar/22/middle-east-protest-interactive-timeline> (accessed 10 June 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, “Introduction – Understanding the Arab Awakening”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, Kenneth M. Pollack a.o. (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2011), pp. 2-3.

George Bush and his administration were strong advocates of freedom which they believed “can be the future of every nation.” Additionally, they considered the liberation of Iraq to “be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution.”<sup>3</sup> Lastly, prior to 2011, Arab activists traveled to Serbia and Western countries, e.g. the USA, to receive training that taught them how to effectively strengthen democratic principles, mobilize mass protests, and topple regimes by using social media<sup>4</sup> and non-violent methods. The living conditions of the Arabs, foreign intervention, and support motivated them to face their dictatorial regimes and challenge them to introduce social reforms that would fundamentally enhance the peoples’ lives or step down and make room for a truly democratic system. In this respect, al-Bū ‘Azīzī’s protest was, the final straw that broke the camel’s back and caused the Tunisians to revolt.

Subsequently, the people of other Arab countries such as Egypt,<sup>5</sup> Libya,<sup>6</sup> and Yemen<sup>7</sup> have followed suit and succeeded in ousting their indifferent rulers from power. However, other Arab nations are still striving to bring about beneficial social changes (as in the case of Morocco) or to eliminate their regimes altogether (as in the case of Syria). Such oppositional forces are facing great suppression, causing the deaths of thousands of people; in Syria alone at least 10,000 people have been killed since the uprising on March 15 in 2011.<sup>8</sup> The regimes in Syria and Bahrain, among others, use societal divisions that have existed historically to organize and win support. They emphasize the oppositional differences as their “traditional” and arch-enemies.<sup>9</sup> For example, the ‘Alawī Syrian Assad regime is clinging to power by mobilizing support from the ‘Alawī sect and other minority sects to smother the defiant oppositional Sunnī majority in Syria. While the Sunnī Bahraini monarchy draws attention to the Sunnī-Shī‘ī differences. This latter country with its ruling monarchy has, like other ruling monarchies in its surrounding regions, proven to be persistent in the face of the oppositional

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<sup>3</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3248119.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3248119.stm) (accessed 10 June 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening – Islam and the New Middle East* (London: Penguin Group, 2012), pp. 6-8.

<sup>5</sup> <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/egypt/index.html?8qa> (accessed 9 June 2012).

<sup>6</sup> <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/libya/index.html?8qa> (accessed 9 June 2012).

<sup>7</sup> <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/yemen/index.html?8qa> (accessed 9 June 2012).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/07/syria-massacre-kofi-annan?INTCMP=SRCH> (accessed 10 June 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, “Introduction – Understanding the Arab Awakening”, pp. 4-5.

forces. This is due to several factors: these Arab monarchies have the advantage of appealing to “religious justifications, long-standing historical associations between the state and the ruling family, and a degree of popular affection.”<sup>10</sup> In Bahrain’s case, the monarchy is also able to rely on the financial and military support of other governments to quench any kind of oppositional power within its borders.

Of all the Middle Eastern countries that have been turned upside-down, shaken, or influenced by the Arab Spring, Bahrain’s situation is the most captivating. Since the eighteenth century, the royal family of Āl Khalīfa, a Sunnī minority in Bahrain, have held sway over a Shīcī majority. This majority does not consider itself, nor is it viewed by others as belonging within the mainstream Shīcā, i.e. within Twelver Uṣūlī Shīcā.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, it resents the fact that it is governed by a Sunnī minority. Furthermore, the Bahraini government has a close-knit relationship with Saudi Arabia, a solid one with the USA, and a tense one with Iran. Despite the fact that the Bahraini government has adequately restrained mass demonstrations and survived to this day,<sup>12</sup> the recent turmoil in several Arab states has altered Bahrain’s internal and external policies. It is highly probable that the protests will ultimately compel the Sunnī government to implement reform for the sake of its own survival. If it fails to meet the demands of the popular uprisings, the government will likely feel repercussions for years to come. All these intertwined actors and factors inevitably produce a complex situation in this kingdom in the Middle East. The Shīcī Bahrainis’ position and stance is probably the most important factor in this situation. This latter group is the focus of this thesis.

My intention is to describe the genesis of the Shīcā in the region of Bahrain, their doctrines and ideas, and to give a chronological historic description of the region itself. Secondly, I will provide an account of Āl Khalīfa’s origin, how they assumed power, and how they managed to maintain that power and the status quo up to now. And finally, I will shed some light on the contemporary region of Bahrain, its government, the Shīcī citizens, and try to assess how they all influence and affect one another in the light of the Arab uprisings. So my research question in this paper is: How have the Shīcī majority of Bahrain and its (Sunnī) rulers related in the past and how do they relate today?

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> There are discernible differences between Uṣūlī Shiism and Akhbārī Shiism within the Shīcā tradition. A brief explanation regarding these two schools of thought will follow.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack, “Introduction – Understanding the Arab Awakening”, pp. 6-7.

## Chapter 1 – Historical events of Bahrain

To understand the situation in Bahrain today, we need sufficient knowledge of its past. The historian and sociologist <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Wardī (d. 1995) indicates this in his explanation that “the eras of history are, in reality, closely tied together and interwoven.”<sup>13</sup> I will, now, endeavor to furnish the reader with a succinct historical description of the development of the Shī<sup>c</sup>īs in Bahrain. Before I embark upon this, we need to consider two essential features of Bahrain.

The first and most important one relates to religion. In the eighteenth century, a violent struggle occurred between Akhbārī and Uṣūlī Shī<sup>c</sup>īs in Iran and Iraq. These two groups primarily differed from each other on the following issues:

| Akhbārī school   | Uṣūlī school  |
|--|---|
| Accept only the Qur’ān and the Shī <sup>c</sup> ī Sunna as sources of law.                             | Accept the Qur’ān, the Shī <sup>c</sup> ī Sunna, <i>ijtihād</i> (independent judgment in a legal or theological question), and <sup>c</sup> <i>aql</i> (intellect). |
| Accept some Sunnī <i>aḥādīth</i> (sayings of the Prophet) also.  | Accept solely Shī <sup>c</sup> ī <i>aḥādīth</i> .   |
| Reject the <i>taqlīd</i> (imitation) of a <i>mujtahid</i> (one who performs <i>ijtihād</i> ).          | Accept <i>taqlīd</i> .  |
| Consider it condemnable to pass religious judgments except on explicit and reliable religious sources. | Consider it commendable to pass religious judgments when there is no explicit religious source. <sup>14</sup>   |

<sup>13</sup> <sup>c</sup>Alī al-Wardī, *Lamaḥāt ijtimā<sup>c</sup>iyya min tārikh al-<sup>c</sup>Irāq al-ḥadīth* (London: Alwarrak Publishing Ltd., 2007), vol. 1, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Abbreviated table from: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam – The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi’ism* (London: George Ronald Publisher, 1985), pp. 223-5.

It can be deduced from the above table that these two schools irreconcilably differ from one another on matters of law and theology. In 1796, the Uṣūlī school of thought conclusively defeated its adversary and became dominant within Shīʿī Islam, because the Uṣūlī *ʿulamāʾ* (religious scribes) were able to strengthen their power and religious authority, they had more religious freedom, and they had powerful *ʿulamāʾ* at their disposal to agitate violent aggression against the Akhbārīs. Āghā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbihānī (d. 1793) was one of those *ʿulamāʾ*. This brief mention of the Akhbārī-Uṣūlī struggle is incomplete and a fuller analysis goes beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, this short explanation is enough to help us examine further developments in Bahrain.

The second element relates to economics. The region of Bahrain has always been the subject of power struggles. Sunnī and Shīʿī Muslims and other non-Muslim groups have historically competed with each other for the control over the region for its wealth of natural resources:

- it is located in the vicinity of undersea pearl fields;
- it profits from commerce in spices between Asia and Europe;
- it manufactures dates and fine textiles;
- and it breeds Arab horses.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, natural crude oil was discovered in Bahrain in October 1931. The Kingdom's economy strongly depends on this as a source of income.<sup>17</sup>

Understanding Bahrain's religion and economy are crucial to understanding both the country's past and its present situation.

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<sup>15</sup> For an exhaustive study of this topic see: Robert Cleave, "Akhbārī Shīʿī *uṣūl al-fiqh* and the Juristic Theory of Yūsuf b. Aḥmad al-Baḥrānī", in *Islamic Law – Theory and Practice*, ed. R. Cleave and E. Kermeli (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1997), pp. 24-45; Robert Cleave, *Scripturalist Islam – The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shīʿī School* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2002), pp. 58-77; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam – The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, pp. 117-8, 127, 135, 186, 190, 197, 204, 298, 312, 330-1; Heinz Halm, *Shiism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), Translated from the German by Janet Watson, pp. 97-103.

<sup>16</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*, pp. 31-2.

<sup>17</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (London: Academic Division of Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), pp. 46, 51; <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html> (accessed 16 June 2012).



## 1.1 Bahrain throughout the ages

The present-day Shiʿīs of Bahrain, who are mostly Akhbārīs and the majority in the Bahraini region, claim their descent from ʿAbd al-Qays, an ancient Arabian tribe in East Arabia. This tribe, among others, embraced the opinion that Imam ʿAlī (d. 661) was the rightful and immediate successor of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 632) to head the nascent Islamic *umma* (community). Therefore, ʿAbd al-Qays can be included among the first of *shīʿat* ʿAlī (ʿAlī’s party) and thus among the proto-Shiʿīs.<sup>18</sup>

Bahrain became a volatile region where various groups competed among each other for power. The Zanjī Revolution was one of the biggest tumults in Bahrain during the initial centuries of Islam. In the ninth century, enslaved Africans instigated this revolution in Iraq. Their dissatisfaction with the inhuman conditions they worked in prompted them to rise against their Abbasid masters. Their leader, the compelling poet and teacher ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad az-Zanjī (d. 883), mustered loyalists and made his way to Bahrain in 863-4. He incited rebellions that heavily disrupted the status quo. He failed, however, to gain absolute power, because he was soon repelled by a group that would become Bahrain’s first organized state.<sup>19</sup>

This new state was to be called the Qarāmiṭa state of Bahrain. It was a Shiʿī Ismāʿīlī sect. Its legitimacy derived from a certain Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ (d. 899?),<sup>20</sup> who was a leader of a branch of the Ismāʿīliyya<sup>21</sup> and did not recognize the Fāṭimids Caliphs<sup>22</sup> of Egypt. His name was attached to all those Ismāʿīlīs who refused to endorse the aforementioned Caliphs. Abū

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<sup>18</sup> Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics – Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: HURST Publishers Ltd, 2011), pp. 13-5; W. Caskel, “ʿAbd al-Qays”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/abd-al-kays-SIM\\_0101?s.num=0&s.q=abd+al-kays](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/abd-al-kays-SIM_0101?s.num=0&s.q=abd+al-kays) (accessed 14 June 2012).

<sup>19</sup> Alexandre Popovic, “ʿAlī b. Muḥammad al-Zanjī”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Third Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ali-b-muhammad-al-zanji-COM\\_23102?s.num=1&s.q=Zanji](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ali-b-muhammad-al-zanji-COM_23102?s.num=1&s.q=Zanji) (accessed 15 June 2012); Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics – Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, pp. 13-4.

<sup>20</sup> The following source explicitly mentions that he “disappeared” and implies that both his year of death and place are unknown: W. Madelung, “Ḥamdān Qarmaṭ”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hamdan-karmat-SIM\\_2665?s.num=0&s.q=karmat](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/hamdan-karmat-SIM_2665?s.num=0&s.q=karmat) (accessed 15 June 2012).

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296133/Ismailite> (accessed 16 June 2012).

<sup>22</sup> M. Canard, “Fāṭimids”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/fatimids-COM\\_0218?s.num=1&s.q=fatimid](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/fatimids-COM_0218?s.num=1&s.q=fatimid) (accessed 16 June 2012).

Ṭāhir (d. 944) was among them.<sup>23</sup> He set up the Qarāmiṭa state of Bahrain and ruled there until his death.<sup>24</sup> The Qarāmiṭa continued to exert their political leverage in Bahrain until the fourteenth century, albeit in a waning state.<sup>25</sup>

The native Shīʿī Bahrainis enjoyed prosperity under Qarāmiṭa rule. A harmonious situation evolved in which Qarāmiṭa rulers and followers lived together with other Shīʿī practitioners. The last-mentioned group prospered to such an extent that Bahrain became an important place of learning for Twelver Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ* during the thirteenth century.<sup>26</sup> This would remain as such until the Safavids' arrival in Bahrain in the seventeenth century.

After the collapse of the Qarāmiṭa, the Banū Jarwān dominated Bahrain from the advent of the fourteenth century till the middle of the fifteenth century. This tribe was an offshoot of the Qarāmiṭa dynasty and so it had significant Shīʿī leanings, e.g. the utterance of “Alī is God’s friend” in the call to prayer. The Banū Jarwān’s dominance in Bahrain allowed the Shīʿī clergy greater freedom to write about their doctrines and occupy important professions. The Banū Jarwān’s rule came to an end when the Sunnī Banū Jabr took over power of Bahrain in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

In circa 1470, this aggressive tribe from Najd with ʿĀmir Rabīʿa and Ajwad ibn Zāmil (b.1418) at its helm seized the lands of Bahrain. They immediately enforced the rulings of the Mālikī school of law on all citizens in their newly acquired domain. This was to the detriment of the Shīʿīs of Bahrain. The Sunnī Jabrid government designated Sunnī judges in lieu of Shīʿīs, instigated Sunnī Friday prayers, removed Shīʿīs from powerful posts, and even compelled some Shīʿīs to become Sunnī. For these reasons, some Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ*, e.g. Shaykh Muḥammad ibn abī Jumhur al-Aḥsāʾī (b. 1434), opted for a life in exile and spent most of their lives in Shīʿī sanctuaries such as Najaf. Arguably, these Sunnī conquerors aimed to expel the Bahraini Shīʿīs. However, their plans did not materialize for other Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ* remained

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<sup>23</sup> Reza Rezaadeh Langaroodi, “Abū Ṭāhir al-Jannābī”, *Encyclopaedia Islamica*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-islamica/abu-tahir-al-jannabi-SIM\\_0215?s.num=1&s.q=al-%E1%B8%8Ej%CC%B2ann%C4%81b%C4%AB](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-islamica/abu-tahir-al-jannabi-SIM_0215?s.num=1&s.q=al-%E1%B8%8Ej%CC%B2ann%C4%81b%C4%AB) (accessed 15 June 2012).

<sup>24</sup> For a comprehensive study of the Qarāmiṭa see: W. Madelung, “Ḳarṡatī”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/karmati-COM\\_0451?s.num=0&s.q=karmati](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/karmati-COM_0451?s.num=0&s.q=karmati) (accessed 15 June 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Heinz Halm, *Shiism*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>26</sup> Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics – Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, p. 14.

<sup>27</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shi`te Islam*, pp. 33-5.

in their native country, propagated the Shīʿī message, and maintained their supporters.<sup>28</sup> The Banū Jabr's rule of Bahrain did not last long. In search of conquest, another power drew nearer and took control of the islands in the sixteenth century.

The Portuguese, who detected Bahrain's wealth and the convenient trade route between Asia and Europe, defeated and expelled the Banū Jabr tribe in approximately 1521. They began their hegemony and would remain until the Savafids' emergence in 1602. This European dominion brought about negative (economic) developments for all Bahrainis: it enforced harsh policies, it participated in nearby sea battles in the Arabian Gulf that undermined Bahrain's trade system, and it collected high taxes.<sup>29</sup> These two occupiers (the Banū Jabr and the Portuguese) are then easily conceived as antagonists of the Shīʿī Bahrainis. They tried to prevent as much contact as possible between the indigenous Shīʿī Bahrainis and Shīʿīs in other regions. Consequently, these powers forced the Bahraini Shīʿīs to lead an isolated existence. Their isolation ended and their conditions markedly improved under the auspices of a new power: the Safavids.

The forefathers of the Safavids originated from a Sunnī Şūfī order that was founded by Shaykh Şafīy ad-Dīn (d. 1334) in Ardabil. His adherents were mainly found in Anatolia and Iraq. Initially, this order refrained from violence in its interactions with other groups. However, Şafīy ad-Dīn's offspring and successors rendered the order into a military group. Soon, this warring order conquered Shirvan (Baku), Adharbayjan, Iran, and parts of Anatolia and Iraq. Subsequently, Şafīy ad-Dīn's descendant Ismāʿīl (d. 1524) established the Safavid dynasty in Iran in 1501. He realized the conversion of mainly Sunnī Iran to Twelver Shīʿī Islam by creating the apparatus of the Shīʿī *ʿulama*<sup>2</sup>, among others.<sup>30</sup> After sitting firmly in the saddle, this dynasty was bold enough to launch further attacks and broaden its territory. It invaded Bahrain in 1602. This date is credibly the starting point of the modern history of

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<sup>28</sup> Idem, pp. 35-7; G. Rentz and W.E. Mulligan, "al-Baḥrayn", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-bahrayn-COM\\_0089?s.num=1&s.q=al-bahrayn](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-bahrayn-COM_0089?s.num=1&s.q=al-bahrayn) (accessed 13 June 2012); G. Rent, "Djabrids", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on:

[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/djabrids-SIM\\_8483?s.num=1&s.f.s2\\_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=djabrids](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/djabrids-SIM_8483?s.num=1&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=djabrids) (accessed 13 June 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shiʿite Islam*, pp. 37-9.

<sup>30</sup> Heinz Halm, *Shiism*, pp. 79-81, 84-90; <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/296081/Ismail-i> (accessed 12 June 2012); for a detailed report of the commencement and development of the Safavid dynasty both in English and Arabic see: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shiʿi Islam – The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiʿism*, pp. 101-17; ʿAlī al-Wardī, *Lamahāt ijtimāʿiyya min tāriḫ al-ʿIrāq al-ḥadīth*, vol. 1, pp. 21-3, 54-6, 69-72.

Bahrain, because many events after 1602 are directly responsible for the environment in present day Bahrain.

The same course as in Iran took place in Bahrain after the Iranian Safavids expelled the Portuguese from Bahrain and conquered it: Uṣūlī Shiism became both Bahrain's predominant religion and the state religion. This was accomplished through the installation of religious institutions that were supervised by Uṣūlī Safavid *‘ulamā’*. For instance the Safavids “arranged for Fridays prayers to be said in the name of the Safavid shah,” created “an Imami chief religious judgeship,” and established the institution of *Shaykh al-Islam* (master of Islam).<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the new unrestricted travel between Bahrain and Iran encouraged numerous Shī‘ī Bahraini divinity students and teachers to go to Iran and pursue their educational ambitions. In addition, the Safavid empire financially supported and facilitated the training of Twelver Uṣūlī Shī‘ī *‘ulamā’* and the dispersion of their works throughout Bahrain. The Shī‘ī *‘ulamā’* of Bahrain, in turn, were eager to recognize and legitimate the Safavid state and pay homage to it. In this way a mutual commitment of interest was developed between the Safavids and the *‘ulamā’*. In fact, both became dependent on each other for the preservation of Uṣūlī Shiism in Bahrain. The Safavids were able to secure Uṣūlī Shiism in Bahrain and their grip on the country. As a result, they were able to take advantage of its abundant natural wealth.<sup>32</sup> This age of Iranian interference and supremacy is crucial for understanding certain allegations put forward by the contemporary Bahraini government to vindicate its crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators since the Arab uprisings, as will be seen below. It is also important to keep in mind, although to a lesser extent, that the Sunnīs were largely neglected and disregarded by the ruling parties during the Safavid rule in Bahrain.<sup>33</sup> After this reign, different forces entered Bahrain once again and occupied it. These transitional events of power also engendered new religious changes.

The Ibāḍite Omanis<sup>34</sup> and Sunnī Afghans were Bahrain's successive leaders during almost the whole of the eighteenth century. The former group militantly confronted the Safavids in 1717, while the latter put an end to their rule in Bahrain in 1722. The Safavids

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<sup>31</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shi`te Islam*, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, pp. 42-50.

<sup>33</sup> Idem, p. 51.

<sup>34</sup> T. Lewicki, “al-Ibāḍiyya”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-ibadiyya-COM\\_0307?s.num=1&s.f.s2\\_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ibadiyya](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/al-ibadiyya-COM_0307?s.num=1&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=ibadiyya) (accessed 18 June 2012).

destruction was also as a consequence of the decline of their dynasty in 1629.<sup>35</sup> Once the Safavids withdrew from Bahrain, religious alterations took place that have survived to this day. The Bahraini Uṣūlī school of thought, which flourished during the previous century as demonstrated above, took a very different religious turn. It shifted to the Akhbārī doctrines. The three principal reasons for this are:

1. The Bahraini Shīʿīs accepted Akhbārī principles, because these principles urged its followers to abstain from political participation. In this manner the Bahraini Shīʿīs could leave their new non-Shīʿī rulers alone and religiously disassociate themselves from the Safavids.
2. Disappointed followers of Uṣūlī Bahraini *ʿulamāʾ* retaliated against their Uṣūlī education, because it was unable to withstand the Omani and Afghani attacks.
3. The renowned Akhbārī Shaykh Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī (d. 1772) in Karbala convinced his brothers and other family members in Bahrain to become Akhbārī. This resulted in the transformation of the entire city of Diraz into Akhbārism. Thus creating geographical divisions within Bahrain on the basis of religion.

In addition to these religious changes, the invasions of the eighteenth century impoverished most Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ* and forced them to seek their well-being in Iraq and Iran.<sup>36</sup> One can infer from these profound changes that the Shīʿīs of Bahrain had to come to terms with their new reality in which they became citizens of marginal importance. Their influential positions of erstwhile in the religious, economic, and political fields were relegated to a forgotten era due to the Sunnī incursions. This situation would even further deteriorate at the onset of Āl Khalīfa's<sup>37</sup> advancement into Bahrain.

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<sup>35</sup> R. Darley-Doran, "Safawids", *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Brill Online, 2012, available on: [http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/safawids-COM\\_0964?s.num=0&s.f.s2\\_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=safawids](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/safawids-COM_0964?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-2&s.q=safawids) (accessed 18 June 2012).

<sup>36</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War – The Politics, Culture and History of Shi`te Islam*, pp. 42-57.

<sup>37</sup> "Āl" means "family" or "the house of." Thus Āl Khalīfa refers to the family or the house of Khalīfa.

## Chapter 2 - Āl Khalīfa

During the end of the eighteenth century, Sunnī Arab nomadic families and tribes moved away from their home regions in the Arab peninsula to relocate somewhere else. The Āl Khalīfa – a non-tribal branch of the ʿUtub tribe that is a subtribe of the ʿAnaza of which its members descend from the Prophet Muḥammad’s companions<sup>38</sup> – from Najd (central Arabia) was one of these families.<sup>39</sup> Hit by a severe famine, they were forced to depart from their homes. They traveled eastward and settled down in Qatar in 1766. This was a determining step for the Āl Khalīfa, because now they substituted their nomadic life for a sedentary existence. Soon their power increased, threatening other regional powers. In 1783, Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Āl Khalīfa (ancestor of Āl Khalīfa) launched an attack on the islands of Bahrain and conquered it. In spite of this, Āl Khalīfa did not wield total power in Bahrain. They had to compete with the sultan of Oman and with Āl Saʿūd of Saudi Arabia, and gain independence from the British protectorate. Hence, Āl Khalīfa consolidated their rule in Bahrain over the course of two centuries up until 1971, when they became independent from the British. The Shiʿīs of Bahrain viewed this gradual achievement of power as detrimental and alien. Conversely, the Āl Khalīfa saw themselves as true masters of Bahrain and not foreigners. They argued that they liberated Bahrain from Iranian influences and other adverse groups. The above-mentioned Shaykh Aḥmad is named the victorious *fātiḥ* (conqueror) as a result. We are told that it was he who restored Bahrain “once and for all to the Arab fold.” Likewise, Āl Khalīfa assert that Bahrain began to prosper after their take-over.<sup>40</sup> These arguments made by Āl Khalīfa are, necessary, to justify their rule. Concomitantly, their assertions show the Shiʿīs of Bahrain in a bad light and “undermined their sociopolitical position” in their homeland.<sup>41</sup>

To counter the argument of the Āl Khalīfa, the Shiʿīs of Bahrain claim that they are the original population of Bahrain, as they have been known as Baharna until the mid-

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<sup>38</sup> <http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2012/02/03/192332.html> (accessed 24 June 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman*, pp. 47-8.

<sup>40</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power – The Shiʿa in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 16-21.

<sup>41</sup> *Idem*, pp. 21.

eighteenth century.<sup>42</sup> They also argue that their Shiism is almost as old as Islam itself, because the members of ʿAbd al-Qays were supporters of Imam ʿAlī as noted above. Bahrain was also a Shīʿī learning center during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and it has a long history of Shīʿī *waqfs* (religious endowments) that outnumber the Sunnī *waqfs*. Furthermore, the Shīʿī Bahrainis elucidated that there was a sophisticated Shīʿī legal system that ordered and governed Bahrain long before the commencement of Āl Khalīfa’s rule. The Shīʿī Bahrainis believe that this was an equitable and egalitarian system that was destroyed by Āl Khalīfa and thus they were deprived of a golden age.<sup>43</sup> Based on these historical events, one can ascertain that Āl Khalīfa’s arrival on the islands of Bahrain caused much tension between them and the Shīʿīs. The Āl Khalīfa realized that these tensions posed a serious threat to their rule. Therefore, they exerted themselves to gain more power in order to be in control of Bahrain’s interior situation. Interestingly, the Āl Khalīfa have always relied on external powers to maintain their reign.

The Āl Khalīfa were very dependent on their British protectors throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the following account illustrates. Two neighboring governments laid claim on Bahrain several times during this period. The first was Saudi Arabia. The ruling Āl Saʿūd, imbued with the Wahhābī-Ḥanbalī ideology, hoped to extend their authority and power. They masterfully achieved their claim on the islands in 1801 and in 1831. As a result, the Āl Khalīfa had to pay tribute to Saudi Arabia and were instructed to convert their Bahraini Shīʿī subjects to the Wahhābī-Ḥanbalī creed. However, in both years the Āl Khalīfa were rescued by their British protectors. The second power was Iran. Muḥammad Reza Shah (d. 1980) announced Bahrain to be an Iranian province in 1957. Despite his announcement, Iran never managed to dominate Bahrain because it lacked the military capability to achieve this. In 1970, Iran was forced to relinquish its claim because the British, this time with the help of the UN, held Iran at bay. This exposed the Āl Khalīfa’s inability to retain their sway on Bahrain without military support by another force. This became even more obvious when they gained independence from the British in 1971 and, ironically, they began to significantly rely on Saudi Arabia in subsequent decades. This was mainly due to Āl Khalīfa’s fear of the Iranian revolution in 1978-9 and the Iraq-Iran war in

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<sup>42</sup> Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics – Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, pp. 11-2.

<sup>43</sup> Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power – The Shi’a in the Modern Arab World*, pp. 21-5.

1980-8.<sup>44</sup> On the strength of this policy of foreign reliance, the Āl Khalīfa were able to maintain their grip on Bahrain and to control any domestic problems. This policy also implied that the Shīʿīs of Bahrain had to face a humiliating and subordinate position within the Bahraini society.

The Āl Khalīfa actively promoted the immigration of Sunnī tribes to Bahrain and granted them land property, housing, citizenship, and privileged professional posts at the expense of the Shīʿīs. These Sunnīs were exempted from paying taxes to the ruling family while the financial burden was levied on the Shīʿīs. What is more, most jobs within the oil industry, agriculture, pearl industry, bureaucracy, and security services were allocated to Sunnī Bahrainis, Asians, and Iranian workers while the Bahraini Shīʿīs had to be content with menial occupations and low wages or unemployment. Naturally, the Shīʿīs felt neglected and discriminated against and demanded reforms to improve their social status. Their demands included, *inter alia*, a written constitution and a democratic elected parliament. These complaints ultimately accumulated in several waves of protests and strikes in 1943, 1965, 1967, 1970, 1972, and in 1994-9. The Shīʿīs' efforts were, however, to no avail. In all circumstances the Āl Khalīfa (backed by the British until 1971 and by the Saudis and the USA from 1971 onward) either smothered these protests or promised to reform. However, they never kept their promises leaving the protesters confused, frustrated, disillusioned, and angrier than before. One political occasion exemplifies this trend. In 1973, the ruler Shaykh ʿĪsa ibn Salmān Āl Khalīfa (d. 1999) agreed to introduce a constitution and a democratic elected parliament. This went according plan: the constitution was drafted and formalized and the elected parliament represented Bahrain's population equally. But, within two years. the ruler dissolved the parliament and ignored all constitutional stipulations. He was afraid that he and his government would lose too much power to the opposition in the parliament. Accordingly, from that date onward, the Āl Khalīfa have kept their powerful grip on the country and have refused to introduce reforms that would jeopardize their "upper hand in state affairs."<sup>45</sup> This incessant refusal to present reforms for improvement and the rigid hold on power from the Āl Khalīfa's side vis-à-vis the Shīʿīs have caused the latter to protest against the regime and voice their democratic demands once again. One can easily interpret these new uprisings as a reaction to the oppressive policy of the authoritarian regime. It is

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<sup>44</sup> Idem, pp. 54-6.

<sup>45</sup> Idem, pp. 56-71, 134-9.



also useful to observe that these uprisings against the Āl Khalīfa have coincided with the Arab awakening and are likely to be encouraged by it. For this reason, one is required to analyze these events in the light of the Arab tumults and the involved groups. In Bahrain's case, the uprisings began in February 2011 and a number of groups are of major concern: the Āl Khalīfa, the Bahraini Shī'īs, Saudi Arabia's government, the USA, and to a lesser extent Iran. These actors and the Bahraini outbreaks will be the topic of the next and final chapter.

## Chapter 3 – Bahrain, its allies, and the Arab Spring

### 3.1 Bahrain's administrative legal system in a nutshell

Bahrain, as an emirate, has been a patrilineal hereditary constitutional monarchy since 2002. Its king is the head of state. Legislative authority rests with *al-Majlis al-Waṭanī* (the National Assembly), which consists of two houses: the lower house, *Majlis an-Nuwwāb* (Council of Deputies) and the upper house, *Majlis ash-Shūrā* (Consultative Council). The former is elected, while the king appoints the latter. Both houses include forty members and each member serves for four years. All laws must be approved by both houses. Additionally, Bahrain has a Council of Ministers (government) with the Prime Minister at its head. The king, whose descent is always from the Āl Khalīfa, holds a powerful position in this legal system. He appoints the Council of Ministers through whom he directly exercises power. The king is also the “Supreme Commander of the Bahrain Defense Force,” which includes about 12,000 persons. He can dissolve the *Majlis an-Nuwwāb*, he ratifies and announces all laws, and directly appoints the Prime Minister.<sup>46</sup> This means that almost all positions in the legal system that can *de facto* and *de jure* enforce laws with immediate and tangible consequences are held by the king and other members of Āl Khalīfa,<sup>47</sup> because they have the legal right to appoint a government, write laws and implement them. The Bahraini parliament, by contrast, has little legislative power and is overwhelmed by individuals appointed by the ruling family.<sup>48</sup> It could be argued that the extent of this power demonstrates that the ruling family has established a hegemony within the legal system. It seems practically impossible for any oppositional domestic group to raise its voice against the established order and demand change. Nevertheless, this has happened in Bahrain where commoners of mostly Shiʿī background took to the streets peacefully calling for political change.

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<sup>46</sup> Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni a.o., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 10 December 2011, p. 15, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf> (accessed 4 July 2012).

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm> (accessed 10 July 2012).

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html> (accessed 6 July 2012).

### 3. 2 Bahraini demonstrations in the wake of the Arab Spring

The February 2011 demonstrations in Bahrain were first proclaimed on the internet by young Bahraini Facebook members, who demanded far-reaching democratic reforms, a revision of the 2001-2 constitution, and changes within the governmental system. They hoped to achieve this by peaceful demonstrations. This strategy was both encouraged and approved of by Shiʿī *ʿulamāʾ*, e.g. Shaykh ʿAlī Salmān (b. 1965) and Shaykh ʾĪsā Aḥmad Qāsim (b.1973). This phenomenon of using the internet to call for peaceful mass protests and democracy found its way into Bahrain after it was used by the Tunisians and Egyptians. In general, one can say that peaceful calls for democratization in a region, where a common culture and language are shared, usually tend to spill over in nearby countries. What is more, the use of internet by Middle Eastern Arabs and other Middle Eastern civilians has increased in recent years and facilitated the uprisings. The internet also updates the Middle East on the latest news when oppressive Arab and non-Arab regimes try to distort or thwart it altogether. The Middle Eastern regimes have lost their monopoly of the media in this respect.<sup>49</sup>

The Bahraini demonstrations resulted in fatal casualties, despite their peaceful intentions. Some demonstrators were fired at by government forces with live ammunition. Naturally, both sides (the government and its opposition) blamed each other for the unrest and the fatalities. The government expressed that it was merely defending itself because the demonstrators were “armed” and threatened to attack them, while the protesters denied this and argued that government and police services were the real aggressors. These severe confrontations also occurred in the political field. Crown Prince Salmān ibn Ḥamad ʾĀl Khalīfa (b. 1969) warned all Bahrainis not to fall into “chaos” and advised them to maintain “stability” and “social cohesion.” The Shiʿī opposition, by contrast, remained steadfast in their demonstrations in order to oust the ʾĀl Khalīfa and establish a new order in Bahrain.<sup>50</sup> From these controversial incidents, one can conclude that a significant number of Bahrainis are trying to remodel the status quo, whereas their rulers are sabotaging their efforts and

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen R. Grand, “Democratization 101 – Historical Lessons for the Arab Spring”, in Kenneth M Pollack a.o., *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, pp. 22-4; Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni a.o., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 10 December 2011, pp. 65-162, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICireportEN.pdf> (accessed 4 July 2012).

<sup>50</sup> Stephen R. Grand, “Democratization 101 – Historical Lessons for the Arab Spring”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, Kenneth M. Pollack a.o., pp. 13-20; Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni a.o., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 10 December 2011, pp. 65-162, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICireportEN.pdf> (accessed 3 July 2012).

upholding the status quo. In order to better understand this struggle, one can look at the Bahraini demonstrators' requirements and why their government is thwarting them.

Like most other common Arabs the Shi'ī Bahrainis do not desire a theocracy like Iran or a Sunnī or Salafist caliphate. On the contrary, the Shi'ī Bahrainis and Arabs in general want to live in a society built on freedom and democracy. This picture is, of course, strikingly reminiscent of Western democratic countries.<sup>51</sup> The protesting Shi'ī Bahrainis want this, because, as noted above in chapters one and two, they have been treated as second-class citizens for many centuries and feel that they have lost some of their social dignity. It is exactly this dignity that the Bahraini protesters want to resuscitate by demanding freedom, equal civil rights, and democracy. An Aljazeera-English broadcast documentary titled "Bahrain: Shouting in the dark" well captured this Shi'ī aspiration to retrieve their place within the Bahraini society. On 23 February 2011, about a quarter of all Bahraini citizens (this time discontented non-Khalīfa Sunnīs and Shi'īs) marched on the streets demanding the abdication of the Āl Khalīfa and requesting a democratically elected government. This protest, with over 300,000 demonstrators, marked Bahrain's largest demonstration in history.

Prior to this historical day, the largest opposition group al-Wifāq (a Bahraini national Shi'ī-Sunnī society) had informal dialogues with the government to discuss the current issues. Like the demonstrators, the opposition group requested a "new constitution and a fully elected parliament" and rejected "anything less."<sup>52</sup> Unlike the protesters, however, the opposition did not call for Āl Khalīfa's departure but for mere political reforms. The government ignored all demands, decided to use violent crackdowns, and on 23 February 2011 ultimately appealed to Saudi Arabia for military assistance. This ally responded by sending 1,200 military forces to clear the Pearl roundabout, in Manama, where the protesters were holding sit-ins for weeks. On 16 March, Saudi military assistance together with the Bahraini police cleared the sit-ins up and forced all demonstrators to return to their homes. In subsequent weeks and months, over a thousand protesters (mostly Shi'īs), including members of oppositional parties, were arrested and indicted for participation in illicit demonstrations, and for the killing of police officers. Even 47 staff members of the

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<sup>51</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Arab Public Opinion – What Do They Want?", in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, pp. 15-6.

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html> (accessed 4 July 2012).

Salmāniyya public hospital were sentenced to imprisonment, because they treated wounded protesters. Another element of the crackdown included the destruction of 35 Shīʿī mosques that were allegedly illegally built.<sup>53</sup> Both Saudi Arabia and the Bahraini rulers justified these punitive measures by arguing that they were saving Bahrain from an external interference. The two countries point to Iran, blaming it for conspiring with the Bahraini Shīʿīs. They even hold it responsible for having spurred the Shīʿī Bahrainis to demonstrate from the very outset. These accusations seem politically motivated and should be treated with some caution for three reasons. Firstly, evidence of a link between the Bahraini demonstrations and Iran as an instigator has not been provided by Saudi Arabia nor by the Bahraini government.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, the Bahraini rulers appear to be invoking history to justify their actions. As explained above, they view themselves as the “saviors” of Bahrain who drove away the Iranian influences and “Arabized” Bahrain from 1783 onward. Thirdly, the Iranian religious creed is Uṣūlī while that of the Bahraini Shīʿīs is overwhelmingly Akhbārī. As noted in the first chapter, these two Shīʿī traditions differ from each other to such a degree that they are incompatible with one another. It is, therefore, unlikely that the Iranian regime is standing up for the Bahraini Shīʿīs. All the same, the Bahraini and the Saudi authorities consider the islands of Bahrain as a bastion against Iran. Thus, by using violence and by calling in their Saudi allies the Bahraini rulers fully suppressed the pro-democracy demonstrations. During this struggle, one conspicuous ally of Bahrain remained unusually silent when compared to its reaction to the Syrian crackdown for example. The USA did not condemn the Bahraini violence nor did it criticize the joint Bahraini-Saudi undertaking. Instead, it confirmed their support for the Bahraini government and cursorily signaled to political reform. Why then has the USA chosen to take up this ambiguous and at times hypocritical position to the Bahraini upheaval?

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html> (accessed 6 July 2012); <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/bahrain/index.html?8qa> (accessed 6 July 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Michael S. Doran and Salman Shaikh, “Bahrain – Islands of Troubles”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, p. 191; Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni a.o., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 10 December 2011, p. 421, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BIClreportEN.pdf> (accessed 10 July 2012).

### 3.3 The USA in Bahrain

After it secured its independency from the United Kingdom and signed a treaty of friendship with it in 1971, Bahrain allied itself with the USA in that same year. The USA leased the Juffair naval base and deployed its Fifth Naval Fleet and Naval Forces. That area has been a home for the American forces since then. An agreement between Bahrain and the USA signified that the latter would procure friendly relations with the Gulf area and defend its security and stability. Another agreement, in 1991, enabled the American forces “access to Bahraini facilities” and conferred the Americans “the right to pre-position material for future crises.”<sup>55</sup> This American presence in the Gulf caused a great deal of controversy throughout the Arab world. Critics accused the USA of extending its power and influence in the Middle East and of damaging Bahrain’s sovereignty. Hardly surprising, the accusations were waved away as unsubstantiated allegations by the two countries and they continued their agreements. A reasonable explanation for this relationship is that both sides have mutual interests to uphold. Bahrain realizes its limited force within the Gulf region and the international arena and is, therefore, dependent on a greater force to safeguard its affairs. The USA in turn is keen to expand its influence in the Middle East for reasons relating to energy and strategy.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, like Saudi Arabia, the USA considers Bahrain a significant bulwark against Iran. This close-knit relationship between Bahrain and the USA also involves commodity trade, especially arms sales by the USA. The last weaponry deal is estimated at \$53 million.<sup>57</sup>

America’s response to the crack-down is being criticized by the Shi’ites of Bahrain. During new protests in June 2012, they expressed their resentment against the USA on posters: “U.S.A. Stop arming the killers.”<sup>58</sup> The USA did stop selling weapons to Bahrain, but resumed them in May 2012 after a suspension of seven months.<sup>59</sup> This American-Bahraini economic agreement is paradoxical. On the one hand, the Obama administration is strongly condemning Russia for selling weapons to the Syrian regime for use against their own Syrian

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm> (accessed 10 July 2012).

<sup>56</sup> Emile Nakhleh, *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society* (London: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 97, 111-6.

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0514/US-resumes-arms-sales-to-Bahrain.-Activists-feel-abandoned> (accessed 9 July 2012).

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/24/world/middleeast/as-hopes-for-reform-fade-in-bahrain-protesters-turn-anger-on-united-states.html?ref=bahrain> (accessed 6 July 2012).

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/world/middleeast/bahrain-us-arms-sales-to-resume.html> (accessed 6 July 2012).

uprisings.<sup>60</sup> While on the other, America is doing exactly the same in Bahrain. To defend this trade, both Russia and the USA argue that they are selling weapons to their allies to protect themselves from external threats and not for usage against their own demonstrators. So the Āl Khalīfa regime is protected by the USA and Saudi Arabia. The latter country shields the Āl Khalīfa, because it considers its support to be a key factor in its plans for the region.

### 3.4 Saudi Arabia, a regional contestant

Since the Arab Spring in 2011, the monarchy of Saudi Arabia has sought to increase its regional power. The Spring itself did not affect the country. The ruling Āl Saʿūd extinguished any sign of demonstrations in their kingdom, specifically in the Eastern Province.<sup>61</sup> They then continued to exert more regional power lest other more powerful groups would threaten their reign. As stated above, they deployed their forces through the King Fahd Causeway to violently suppress the unrest in Bahrain in March 2011. This show of power was not enough for the Saudis. Two months later, they put pressure on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to invite the two Sunnī kingdoms of Jordan and the more remote Morocco to join the GCC. These invitations are still in progress and no official statements have been made yet.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, in May 2011, Saudi Arabia proposed “to forge a single confederation with its five Persian Gulf neighbors.” This proposal was rejected by all members of the GCC except for Bahrain.<sup>63</sup> These Saudi measures clearly indicate that the country is seeking to strengthen its regional power and to prevent future uprisings in its vicinity. The ruling Saudis also realize that in a growing confederated GCC they could dominate other members and wield more regional power.<sup>64</sup> Regarding its relationship with Bahrain, Saudi power and influence are already of great importance. The Saudis provide oil to Bahrain via pipelines and fund 75% of Bahrain’s budget as a result. They are also Bahrain’s principal trading partner.

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<sup>60</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/13/us-claim-syria-russian-civilians> (accessed 6 July 2012); <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/16/world/europe/russia-sending-air-and-sea-defenses-to-syria.html> (accessed 6 July 2012); <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18642032> (accessed 6 July 2012).

<sup>61</sup> [http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.2/madawi\\_al-rasheed\\_arab\\_spring\\_saudi\\_arabia.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.2/madawi_al-rasheed_arab_spring_saudi_arabia.php) (accessed 9 July 2012).

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/middleeast/26iht-M26-GCC.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/middleeast/26iht-M26-GCC.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) (accessed 9 July 2012).

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/15/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-seeks-union-of-monarchies-in-region.html> (accessed 9 July 2012).

<sup>64</sup> For more information about Saudi Arabia’s foreign policies, see: Bruce O. Riedel, “Saudi Arabia – The Elephant in the Living Room”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, pp. 159-67.

They provide Bahrain with materials for construction and goods for its food industry.<sup>65</sup> This economic relationship affects the Bahraini government and its Shiʿī citizens. Saudi Arabia’s economic dominance over Bahrain means that it has the ability to swiftly deal with developments that threaten its interests, using the Bahraini government as a vassal state. The Āl Khalīfa, in this respect, have gained at least two powerful protectors and are likely to yield to their political strategies and decisions in order to remain in power, particularly in the face of the Bahraini Shiʿīs and Iran. Accordingly, an assessment of the current situation reveals a political stalemate between the Āl Khalīfa and their Shiʿīs, because this latter group finds itself engulfed by powers that refuse to concede to their demands. What remains for the Shiʿī Bahrainis is to persevere in their pursuit of political reform against the intransigence of the Āl Khalīfa, Saudi Arabia, and the USA. It is to those possible reforms that we now turn.

### 3.5 Suggestions for political reforms

Many groups, scholarly individuals, and institutions are advising both the Shiʿīs and the Bahraini government on how to deal with their situation. Both sides have been prompted to make concessions in order to reach a peaceful solution. In what follows, I will summarize and comment on suggestions for political reforms that have been made by three different sources.

The first source is the “Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry,” produced by commissioners, who were appointed by the Bahraini king to investigate the February and March 2011 violent events. The report recommends that the ruling Bahraini family should “establish a national independent and impartial mechanism” to hold the perpetrators to account, including governmental officials who used excessive force against the demonstrators. They should be held responsible for their acts and should be brought to justice. It also urges that all practices involving torture must end. In addition, the security forces are to be composed of members from all the various ethnic and cultural groups in Bahrain. Moreover, human rights, such as freedom of expression and religious freedom,

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<sup>65</sup> <http://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/The-Strategic-Importance-Of-Bahrain-To-Saudi-Arabia.html> (accessed 11 July 2012); Michael S. Doran and Salman Shaikh, “Bahrain – Islands of Troubles”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, p. 192.



need to be respected and enforced.<sup>66</sup> These recommendations are *prima facie* legitimate and the report is independent and unbiased. However, this report was not comprehensive. Nowhere in the report is there a mention of curbing the Āl Khalīfa's authority so that opposition groups can acquire some governmental power, and so satisfy their need for self-determination. This neglect can be explained by the fact that the commission was appointed by the Bahraini king. Furthermore, the commission did not distinguish between Akhbārī and Uṣūlī Shī'īs. In fact, this aspect is completely ignored and the reader has to be content with the explanation that within the Shī'ī tradition there exists "a diversity of religious views and political opinions." Erroneously, the commission explains that most Bahraini Shī'īs adhere to the Shī'ī concept of *marjī' at-taqlīd* (source of emulation) and follow the rulings of Shī'ī *'ulamā'* as 'Alī Khamenei (b. 1939), 'Alī as-Sistānī (b. 1930), and Muḥammad Husayn Faḍlallāh (d. 2010).<sup>67</sup> As I explained in the first chapter, most Shī'ī Bahrainis are Akhbārīs and thus they strongly reject the concept of *taqlīd*.

The second is Chatham House (an independent think tank on international affairs).<sup>68</sup> This think tank issued a report with outlining a political solution. The report recommends that the ruling family of Bahrain needs to divide political and economic positions in the country's system equally, regardless of one's background. The family is also advised to share power with other Bahraini groups "for greater political representation," to solve "socio-economic issues such as corruption," and to ask the GCC neighbors for advice while maintaining Bahrain's sovereignty.<sup>69</sup> These recommendations seem to focus on the sustainability of the Āl Khalīfa's rule, because the report's overall message implies that if the ruling family is deposed the political deadlock in Bahrain will further exacerbate. The Āl Khalīfa are unlikely to comply with this report, because, thus far, the family has been extremely reluctant to make concessions and share power.

The third source refers to the solutions suggested by two scholars. They assert that the best way forward is "to enter into a sustained dialogue, without preconditions, on

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<sup>66</sup> For the entire recommendations, see: Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni a.o., *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*, 10 December 2011, pp. 422-6, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICReportEN.pdf> (accessed 10 July 2012).

<sup>67</sup> Idem, p. 26, available on: <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICReportEN.pdf> (accessed 10 July 2012).

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.chathamhouse.org/> (accessed 11 July 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Jane Kinninmont, *Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse*, June 2012, pp. 27-8, available on: <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/pr0612kinninmont.pdf> (accessed 11 July 2012).

political, social, and economic reforms.”<sup>70</sup> The dialogue has to include the ruling family and all oppositional groups (including the street demonstrators and jailed activists). The scholars agree on a “power-sharing formula” to represent all Bahrainis.<sup>71</sup> Both groups (the Āl Khalīfa and their opposition) have to realize that compromises and concessions are a prerequisite for long-lasting and successful reforms that will benefit all concerned groups. This means that the Āl Khalīfa must be willing to give up some of its powers and that the opposition has to be realistic of their demands and rephrase them. The opposition must understand that the Āl Khalīfa are embedded in the Bahraini system and are very unlikely to be ousted.

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<sup>70</sup> Michael S. Doran and Salman Shaikh, “Bahrain – Islands of Troubles”, in *The Arab Awakening – America and the Transformation of the Middle East*, p. 189.

<sup>71</sup> Idem, p. 194.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I will recapitulate my findings and simultaneously answer my research question (see Introduction). Finally, I will give my own analysis and a modest prediction of the current Bahraini struggle. Naturally, I realize that predicting the future, while political and legal affairs are ongoing, is precarious and fraught with uncertainty. However, considering the future can help us to better understand the present.

The Shīʿīs of Bahrain trace their origin back to Imam ʿAlī's earliest adherents during Islam's inception. During that time, they were shortly disturbed by the Zanjī revolution, but did not undergo major shifts. A distinct and lasting relationship between the Zanjī and the Bahraini Shīʿīs is, therefore, not under discussion. Soon in the ninth century, their homeland was controlled by the Qarāmiṭa dynasty. This dynasty lasted until the fourteenth century. As explained above, the Shīʿīs of Bahrain thrived during this period. A symbiosis evolved between them and the Qarāmiṭa rulers. Later Shīʿī Bahrainis would recall this period as their "golden age" wherein their relationship with the rulers was positive and reassuring. These prosperous times continued for the Bahraini Shīʿīs during the Banū Jarwān rule until the mid-fifteenth century. Especially the Shīʿī *ʿulamāʾ* benefited from even more religious freedom and exceptional professions during the Banū Jarwān's period. So once again, the Shīʿīs of Bahrain and their rulers co-existed harmoniously. This was brought to an end by the bellicose Sunnī Banū Jabr who ruled the region of Bahrain from circa 1470 until approximately 1521. They imposed stringent rules and laws that were disadvantageous to the Bahraini Shīʿīs. This period manifested the first concrete conflicts and inimical relations between the rulers of Bahrain and the Bahraini Shīʿīs. After these powers, the Portuguese came to the Bahraini islands and became the new oppressors. Their relationship with the Bahraini Shīʿīs did not differ much from the Banū Jabr's: the Shīʿīs were again treated as second-class citizens. In 1602, however, the Safavids put an end to this ill-treatment. During the Safavids' rule in Bahrain, which lasted until 1717-22, the Shīʿī Bahrainis not only flourished but also became Uṣūlī Shīʿīs. This was the same religious creed as Safavid Iran and, in this respect, Sunnī Arab Muslims may have viewed the Bahraini Shīʿīs as Iranian henchmen, albeit with a different ethnicity. Indeed, this may be even more convincing since the Shīʿī Bahrainis and the Iranians established good relations and frequent social exchanges.

The Bahraini Sunnīs, during this time, were almost completely discounted. These dissimilar relations of cooperation and neglect explain why today's Bahraini Sunnīs disparage the Bahraini Shī'īs and Iran, and even envisage them as their enemies who covertly work together to topple the current Bahraini regime. As explained above, this position is politically motivated rather than based on facts, because the Shī'ī Bahrainis' religious convictions changed during the Ibāḍite Omanis' and Sunnī Afghanis' conquests of Bahrain in the eighteenth century. During that time, most of the Iranian-Bahraini relationships were severed and the Shī'īs of Bahrain witnessed impoverished conditions and unfavorable relationships with these two different rulers. Despite these historical facts the Āl Khalīfa persist in their claims and seek non-Shī'ī alliances to counter their Shī'ī citizens and Iran.

The Āl Khalīfa have ruled Bahrain with an iron hand, from 1783 to this day. Their relationship with the Bahraini Shī'īs has always been heated. The ruling family has always relied heavily on foreign intervention to help them retain their grip on the country. As explained above, the ruling family was dependent on the UK and, now, on Saudi Arabia and the USA. Prior to the 2011 demonstrations, other demonstrations were held and the Āl Khalīfa either suppressed its people or pretended to listen to their concerns, but Bahrain's rulers never kept their promises. The relationship between the ruling family and the Bahraini Shī'īs has become even more complicated with Saudi Arabia's and America's roles in Bahraini affairs. The two Arabian kingdoms are collaborating to eliminate any Iranian threat to their two countries. In this case, the USA seems to tacitly approve of their conduct and is even supplying them financially and militarily. This is hardly surprising, the USA has great interests in the Gulf region and is working to limit Iran's ambitions to become a regional (super)power.

On the one hand, one can then consider Bahrain too small for its concerns to be taken seriously, while on the other it may be seen as too important to be ignored due to its geographical and strategic positions. The rulers of Saudi Arabia will never allow any revolution to occur in their vicinity and any loss of power. As long as it has the ability, it will do its utmost to eradicate any upheavals, especially Shī'ī ones. The Āl Khalīfa's only concern is to remain in power. Their historical account proves this. They will embrace any group that supports them and their interests. The USA, a staunch Bahraini ally, has tremendous political, economic, and military interests in the region of Bahrain and in the Gulf region as a whole. Thus, its interests cannot afford to be undermined by anything or anyone. It is certain

that the USA will buttress any group that acts in keeping with its policy and interests. From this standpoint, the success of the Shi'ites of Bahrain depends not only on their government, but also on Saudi Arabia and the USA. In the face of these great powers Bahraini Shi'ites have been powerless and their efforts have been to no avail. In the future, there seem to be two possible scenarios.

The first is that the Āl Khalīfa and their allies will realize that it is very difficult, if not ultimately impossible, to proceed on with their agenda of suppressing and discriminating against the Bahraini Shi'ites. The only solution is to implement radical political reforms. They can rely on the suggested reforms provided by all the groups that have commented on the situation as a framework. Among these, the three mentioned above would be helpful. The Āl Khalīfa will then share power with other non-familial rulers and thus remain in power. This is, without doubt, the best possible scenario. However, I believe this scenario is unlikely.

The second, and worst, scenario is that the oppression will continue. Violent acts (both from the Āl Khalīfa and their foes) will take place. Human lives will be lost and the state of security will deteriorate. This is, I assume, the picture we are going to see as the future unfolds itself. The Bahraini monarchy and its foreign allies have too many interests in the Bahrain region to maintain, especially as Iran is aiming to produce a nuclear bomb despite its denials. For the monarchy and its allies, it is unthinkable to allow the Bahraini Shi'ite majority to rule and risk Iranian meddling. Also, based on my findings, Bahrain's history shows that the Shi'ites only did well when they were ruled by Shi'ite powers. A continuous and unwavering rule under the Āl Khalīfa over Bahrain will have pernicious consequences for the Bahraini Shi'ites. Besides, on the balance of probabilities a successful Bahraini democracy situated in the Arabian Gulf will encourage other nearby Arabic peoples to do the same. To prevent such a situation, the Arab regimes (of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for example) will strive to obliterate any challenge to their rule. To prevent such dreadful circumstances in Bahrain, the powerful and influential governments of Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and the USA have a challenging mission ahead. It is their imperative to respect, harmonize, and secure reasonable demands from both the Āl Khalīfa and their opposition. Failing to do so will be damaging to all implicated groups in the current Bahraini case.

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