THE STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE OF SECTARIANISM AND GEOPOLITICS: THE CASE OF BAHRAIN

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INTRODUCTION
The convergence of sectarianism and geopolitics was the main reason for the failure of the Bahraini Uprising in 2011. Further, by reinforcing one another, these factors, in conjunction with the increasing salience of identity-based politics, will continue to exacerbate domestic tensions within Bahrain for the foreseeable future. The sectarian and exclusionary policies implemented by the Al Khalifa regime under the guise of protecting national sovereignty instead establish exploitable communal grievances and fault-lines, ironically providing geopolitical actors the ability to stifle Bahrain’s sovereignty. This article challenges the common narrative propagated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and supported by the United States that sees Iran as solely or primarily responsible for sectarianism within Bahrain.

This analysis aims to establish a methodological framework that analyzes the intersection of sectarianism and geopolitics in a national context of domestic exclusionary policy and resulting external geopolitical manipulation. This analysis is all the more relevant given the recent ascension of hawkish officials such as Donald Trump, John Bolton, Mike Pompeo, and others, who appear determined to push back against perceived Iranian expansionism at whatever cost, and in whatever theater. Accordingly, Bahrain is likely to acquire significance within the United States’ Middle East policy moving forward.

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There is not a single way to explain the outcome of the Bahraini Uprising. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach that recognizes the significance of political, economic, historical, religious, and cultural elements is critical. This analysis aims to avoid the reductionist and essentialist assumptions that sectarianism is an immutable and fundamental force in the region. Rather, this research argues that, in the Middle East, sectarianism is an effective mechanism to advance state interests due to the turmoil within the region and the resulting entrenchment of sectarian and communal identities.

To analyze the effects of sectarianism and geopolitics in the Bahraini context, this paper will discuss: (1) and history of sectarianism in Bahrain, (2) a political economy of contemporary sectarianism within Bahrain, (3) the geopolitical significance of Bahrain, and (4) the convergence of sectarianism and geopolitics. The first section analyzes the different historical narratives propagated by the Sunni and Shia communities within Bahrain, how these narratives shape their respective collective memories and how they approach the issue of sectarianism in the modern context. It also examines the institutionalization of sectarianism stemming from the colonial and post-colonial periods, and how this history still influences contemporary communal relations and identity politics. The second section reviews political and economic marginalization of the Shia by the Al Khalifa regime, why a strong cross-communal opposition has not emerged, the significant role that oil and security forces play, the scattered elements of Sunni opposition, and the prevailing master narrative promulgated by the regime. The third section examines the geopolitical significance of Bahrain to both regional and extra-regional powers. The fourth section explores how these regional and extra-regional powers exploit and reinforce sectarianism in the pursuit of their respective geopolitical agendas. It will also analyze the regional sectarian and geopolitical context within which Bahrain is situated and the shaping effects regional dynamics have within the domestic sphere.

**Literature Review**

This literature review aims to examine the primordialist and instrumentalist arguments regarding the emergence and entrenchment of sectarian narratives in Bahrain. There are two primary schools of thought on the origins and prevalence of sectarianism throughout the Middle East. The first is the primordialist camp, which argues that the Sunni-Shia conflict across the Arab world and within
Bahrain, is rooted solely in the 1,300 year-old religious schism that arose over the issue of political succession following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Proponents of this argument prefer the “ancient hatreds” explanation for current domestic and regional political dynamics, as explained by Bassel Salloukh in the book *Sectarianism: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East.* Salloukh illustrates how even President Barack Obama, in his 2016 State of the Union address, invoked history to explain the current regional turmoil, stating that “the Middle East is going through a transformation that will play out for a generation, rooted in conflicts that date back a millennia.”

Frederic Wehrey, in his book *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East,* examines the primordialist argument advanced by Paul Dixon who views the sectarianism in the Middle East as a consequence of immutable and timeless religious differences rooted in “identity, history, and collective belief.” For primordialists, contemporary sectarianism within the region is rooted in the doctrinal differences and respective histories of Sunni and Shia.

Instrumentalists offer the second explanation for the prevalence of sectarianism in the Middle East. According to Wehrey, this theory assigns blame for the spread of sectarianism to ruling elites and state policies. These policies include distribution of wealth along ethnic lines, discriminatory employment strategies, and geopolitical policies. In *A Political Economy of the Middle East,* Melani Cammett et al. argue that ethno-religious divisions do not produce conflict per se, but rather can form the base of political mobilization in response to state-enacted policies. To Cammett et al., sectarianism goes beyond primordialist
assumptions, arguing instead that modern context and institutionalized policies determine which, and when, identities become salient. Salloukh advocates an instrumentalist approach to sectarianism, arguing that the current wave of sectarianism engulfing the region is driven primarily by state policies deployed to balance “often overlapping domestic and external security threats.” In this sense, sectarianism becomes a tool used by different regimes to bolster their own security by keeping society divided and preventing a unified opposition from emerging.

This theme of “external security threats” is particularly relevant to the Bahraini context. The overwhelming majority of literature focuses either exclusively or primarily on the role that Iran has played in fomenting sectarian discord within the country. This ignores sectarian policies implemented by the Al Khalifa regime to ensure their own authority and security that have led to legitimate grievances among the Shia community. However, since the majority of scholarship produced on Bahraini sectarianism and geopolitics is primarily focused on the extent of Iranian influence, the prevailing narrative tends to present an overly simplistic and incomplete analysis of the root causes behind the entrenched divisions within the country. By continuing to advance the flawed narrative of Iranian manipulation, the prevailing scholarship incorrectly serves to legitimize and justify such claims by allowing them to dominate the discourse surrounding the topic.

Instead of aligning with either camp, this research establishes a middle-way through which both primordialist and instrumentalist arguments are given equal credence and incorporated into the overall analysis of the Bahraini context. In Bahrain, sectarianism goes beyond the primordial assumption that division within the Muslim community is inevitable. Since the colonial period, sectarian policies have entrenched religious divisions and have led to the dominance of identity-based politics. However, the primordial elements of doctrine, history, collective memories, shared symbols and motifs, etc., cannot be disregarded because they provide the traction for sectarian policies and geopolitical manipulation. Primordialism on its own, however, does not adequately address the situation due to the extended periods of Sunni-Shia coexistence throughout history. Therefore,

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8 Ibid.
this type of holistic methodological approach, which considers both historical and contemporary contexts of sectarianism within Bahrain, avoids generalization and reification. The argument in favor of this type of approach is expressed best by Wehrey, who emphasizes the need to “navigate a path between the two poles” before examining sectarianism within the region.\(^{10}\)

The primary takeaway from this literature review is that the prevailing scholarship tends to address historical division and contemporary policymaking—and their outcomes independently. However, the analysis herein, argues that, in the Bahraini context, these two concepts need to be examined in tandem to understand how their convergence affected the 2011 uprising and continues to divide the country. Sectarianism and geopolitics must therefore be analyzed together in order to understand their interdependent relationship, thereby forging a clearer picture of Bahraini developments.

**Argument**

**The History and Historical Narrative of Sectarianism in Bahrain**

**Competing Sunni and Shia Historical Narratives**

This section details the development of the narratives surrounding sectarianism within both the Sunni and Shia communities. The seeds of contemporary Bahraini sectarianism were planted with the arrival of the Al Khalifa dynasty and its Sunni allies from Central Arabia in 1783.\(^{11}\) This period marked not only the end of Persian rule over the island nation, but also the establishment of the Sunni Al Khalifa tribe as the prevailing authority within Bahrain. Immediately after wresting the country from Persian control, the Al Khalifa sought to legitimate the Sunni tribal Arabs as the true Bahrainis, casting the Shia as not only a Persian and non-indigenous people, but a serious political and security threat to the country. The primary source of economic revenue – pearl diving – was concentrated in the hands of the Sunni tribal community and the Al Khalifa, while the Shia were relegated primarily to the less profitable

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\(^{10}\) Wehrey, *Beyond Sunni and Shia*, 6.

agricultural sector. This marked the initial implementation of exclusionary, sectarian policies which created a serious wealth disparity between the two sects that would last up to the present day.

The arrival of the Al Khalifa to Bahrain has been portrayed differently by the country’s Sunni and Shia communities. Unsurprisingly, the Sunni community portrays the arrival of the Al Khalifa in an overwhelmingly positive manner, while the Shia community denounces the arrival as an illegitimate takeover by a foreign entity. These differing portrayals are critical because they establish a historic precedent of sectarianism in Bahrain and are still invoked in the contemporary period as a means of legitimizing the political status quo.

When seventh-century Muslim armies fought to spread their nascent religion across the Arab world and beyond, they were effecting “fath al-Islam” (the “opening of Islam), a euphemism for the conversion of non-Muslim peoples to the “true faith.” In the Bahraini context, this euphemism is used to describe the opening of the country by the Al Khalifa to the “true faith” (in this case, Sunni Islam) from the Shia Persians. Furthermore, the Sunnis contend that historically, the Shia have never constituted a majority of the population and have based their nativist claims on a false historical narrative. Conversely, Bahraini Shia portray themselves as the actual indigenous population and refer to themselves collectively as the Baharna in reference to their status as the legitimate and original inhabitants of the country. In fact, Laurence Louer explains how Shias promote the idea of a “golden age,” drawing on the historical usage of the appellation “Bahrain” to refer to the entirety of the gulf coast from Basra to the Qatar peninsula (with the Bahrain archipelago, along with al-Qatif and al-Hasa in present-day Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province constituting the heart of this ancient territory):

There was a time when the Shias of Eastern Arabia were united in one single country called Bahrain extending from Basra to Oman. Its inhabitants were called the Baharna and had embraced Shiism since the beginning of Islam. Bahrain was a wealthy country blessed by several natural resources:

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13 Ibid., 39.
14 Ibid., 50.
fresh springs, arable land, and pearls. People were living a simple but fully satisfactory peasant life in accordance to the prescriptions of the Imams. Everything changed when the Sunni tribes – the Al Khalifa and the al-Saud – took over the region, appropriated the natural resources for their own use, and imposed their brutal and autocratic manners on the native population. They not only oppressed the Shias but cut their unity by breaking the organic ties between the islands and the inland. Since then, marginalized Shias have fought to recover their legitimate rights as the native inhabitants of Ancient Bahrain.\(^\text{16}\)

This account by the Shia interviewee is significant because it reflects the idealized past venerated in the Shia community to this day. In other words, the presence of this collective Shia memory and the idea that they are the rightful inhabitants of Bahrain serves as the foundation for Shia mobilization. Equally significant is the fact that this account draws a direct parallel between the plight of the Shia in Bahrain and that of the Shia in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province. Therefore, the Saudis – who also portray their Shia population as disloyal and beholden to external authorities – have an incentive to support the narrative espoused by the Al Khalifa to legitimize their suppression of the domestic Shia community.

The Al Khalifa continue to perpetuate the “opening” narrative as a way of crafting a larger national (Sunni) identity in the image of the ruling dynasty, and outlaw all opposing literature on the royal family and pre-Al Khalifa Bahrain. Similarly, the Shia continue to use the notion of an “Ancient Bahrain” as a common historical starting point and a symbol of their contemporary struggle.\(^\text{17}\)

*The colonial and post-colonial periods*

This section analyzes the critical importance of the colonial and post-colonial periods and their effect on the institutionalization of sectarianism within Bahrain. While the Al Khalifa were the first to implement exclusionary, sectarian policies, the British colonial period witnessed the formal institutionalization of such divisions under the auspices of protecting British interests. The British

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\(^{16}\) Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 23.
\(^{17}\) Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf*, 39.
colonial era in Bahrain began in 1861 and depended on divide and rule policies that recognized the Al Khalifa as the best protector of British interests and subsequently the legitimate puppet authority.\textsuperscript{18} Bahrain went on to become the primary military headquarters for British operations in the Gulf, representing the most significant British military installation in the region. In order to protect such a vital asset, the British established within Bahrain the most militarized colonial police force in the Near East, and began recruiting nonpartisan groups from the Indian subcontinent in order to shore up their authority.\textsuperscript{19} The British recruitment of foreigners to police the native Bahraini population established the precedent of non-Bahraini Sunnis controlling the domestic Shia population which still holds true today.

It is significant to mention that during the colonial period, cross-sectarian currents against colonialism did emerge and played a significant role in the subsequent independence movement. Identities such as class and anti-colonialist nationalism at times trumped the notion of sect and confessional identity.\textsuperscript{20} In other words, religion was not always the primary mobilizing tool for anti-government or anti-colonial opposition. This is notable because it demonstrates that sectarian tensions are not inevitable or immutable in nature, but rather become prevalent when identity-based policies are implemented or when sectarianism itself is promoted.

It is during the post-colonial period, however, that opposition came to acquire strict sectarian identities due to policies adopted by the Al Khalifa in the wake of Bahrain’s independence. Following the departure of the British in the early 1970s, the Al Khalifa continued colonial policies of divide and rule. These included the recruitment of non-nationals into the nation’s security forces in order to increase support for the regime and marginalize the Shia and the segments of the Sunni community that were either anti-Al Khalifa or pro-cross communal cooperation.\textsuperscript{21} After independence, the primary job of the security forces was controlling Shia opposition and quelling Shia political activism.


\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

After the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the institutionalization of a Shia Islamic theocracy based on the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (authority of the jurist), sectarian tension within Bahrain was further exacerbated. The Shia were now cast by the Al Khalifa, and the other Gulf monarchies, as a potential Iranian “fifth column” and an existential security threat. Tensions reached new heights in 1981 when Bahrain thwarted an alleged coup attempt by the Iranian-linked Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (al-Jabhah al-Islamiyah li-Tahrir al-Bahrain), which led to dramatically increased political repression throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

The sectarian divide reached crisis proportions in 1994-97 when students and clerics took to the streets demanding social, economic, and political rights for the disaffected Shia population. These protests ultimately resulted in the arrests of at least 2,700 people (primarily Shia), the majority of whom were not afforded procedural rights such as representation or trials.22 Such discriminatory actions and policies continued unabated into the 2000s and would serve as the foundation for mass mobilization in 2011.

A political economy of contemporary sectarianism in Bahrain

Shia political and economic marginalization

This section examines the way in which Shia have been marginalized both politically and economically, and the subsequent impact it has had on communal relations within Bahrain. Bahrain is currently the only majority-Shia Arab state ruled by a Sunni authority and the Bahraini Shia have been institutionally marginalized by the ruling Al Khalifa regime both politically and economically. Sectarian policies and the regime’s oppression of Sunnis sympathetic to the Shia situation have effectively ensured that internal Bahraini politics and economics adhere to strictly sectarian lines. One of the foundational components of sectarian policies within Bahrain is the fact that no one truly knows the religious demographic composition of the state: the last time the government of Bahrain reported official statistics on its Sunni and Shia communities was in its very first census of 1941.23 Therefore, most external

23 Fahim I. Qubain, “Social Classes and Tensions in Bahrain,” Middle East Journal 9(3),
observers have resorted to the limited number of field surveys available, and assert that the Shia currently represent roughly between 60-70% of Bahrain’s population, and that Sunnis represent approximately 30-40%. Furthermore, the Al Khalifa regime has been deliberately trying to alter the demographic balance within Bahrain through political naturalization of non-Bahraini Arabs and non-Arab Sunnis (known popularly as “al-Tajnis”). If the Al Khalifa were actually able to alter the demographic composition of Bahrain to the point where Shias no longer represented an outright majority, it would deprive the Shia of their primary tool for mobilization: that they are the majority and being oppressed at the hands of the minority.

Although many hoped that the rule of Sheikh Hamad in 1999 would usher in an age of liberalization, these hopes were crushed as the status quo of political marginalization maintained itself throughout the 2000s. Political marginalization is most evident in the demographics of the top government positions which are held almost exclusively by Sunnis. According the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, 42.65% of the top positions in government are held by the Al Khalifa family, 42.65% are held by other, non-royal Sunnis, and only 14.7% are held by Shia (despite the fact that Shia represent an estimated 60-70% of the Bahraini population). This problem is further compounded by the fact that voting districts are gerrymandered along sectarian lines and Shias are dramatically underrepresented in the lower house of parliament. In the last fully-contested election in 2010, the average Shia-majority district represented about 9,500 electors, while the average Sunni district represented only about 6,000.

(1955): 269; and Gengler, Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, 96.
These two elements have served to virtually eliminate Bahraini Shia from the decision making process within the country at the national level, and ensures that actual representation is limited at best.

Just as the political sphere has served to disenfranchise the Shia, the economic sphere has isolated the Shia community and has continued to award those Sunnis who side with and support the Al Khalifa regime. While Bahrain’s economy is primarily based on rentierism through oil, it is does not fit the standard rentier model that is typically associated with such a system. This is due to the allocation of funds along strictly-sectarian lines in order to shore-up support among the nation’s Sunnis and marginalize the Shia. Furthermore, the lack of abundant oil supplies within Bahrain (pre-2018 discovery, discussed below) means that the regime wants to allocate only as much as is needed to shore up its own base of support. Justin Gengler notes how even if rentier states could buy the unanimous support of their citizens, they need not attempt to do so. He believes that the state should not waste limited resources on chasing those opposed to the status quo as they require only a minimum coalition of powerful supporters to protect themselves from potential challengers.29

The Al Khalifa have sought to distribute this rent exclusively among Sunnis in order to not only maximize their resource wealth, but to manufacture societal dependence on the regime. Economic marginalization is also present in the disparity in public sector jobs, with Shia virtually excluded from public sector employment. This also means that Shia lose out on the benefits that typically accompany public sector employment, such as job security, public housing, higher wages, and other public services.

It is with this strategy in mind that the Al Khalifa has sought to distribute resources to Sunnis in the hope that they would support the regime – or, at least, remain politically agnostic – while marginalizing the Shia whom they can suppress through force. Therefore, the regime is incentivized to foment sectarian discord between Sunni and Shia in order to ensure the loyalty of the former against what is portrayed as a constant security threat from the Shia community. Sunnis, then, become dependent upon the regime for providing them with


29 Gengler, Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, 8.
benefits, and fear a loss of their economic and political welfare if the Shia were to ever come to power and reverse the status quo. Therefore, the Sunni population now has both an economic and political incentive to ensure the survival of the regime and the status quo.

Role of the security forces

This section analyzes Bahraini security forces, a significant area of Shia exclusion. Most of the naturalized Arab and non-Arab Sunnis previously mentioned above are enlisted into the Bahraini military and security services. These “mercenaries” consist of Yemenis, Jordanians, Iraqis, Syrians, Indians, and Pakistanis, and others. This political naturalization effort is a deliberate attempt to engineer social demographic change by increasing the number of Sunnis in Bahrain and it is estimated that at least 60,000 individuals have been granted Bahraini citizenship this way.30

This strategy serves a dual purpose for Bahrain: first, it creates a community completely dependent and beholden to the regime and the preservation of the status quo, and second, it alters the demographic balance within the country by expanding the Sunni citizenry. On the other hand, Shias are not only barred from employment within the security forces and military, but viewed by these apparatuses as the primary threat to state security. The continued political nationalization of these “mercenaries” and their brutal repression of the Shia on behalf of the regime enforces and aggravates domestic sectarian sentiments and rhetoric.

Sunni (de)mobilization and the regime’s “master narrative”

This section details the narrative the Al Khalifa have sought to construct in opposition to Shia narratives in the hope of mobilizing the Sunni community in their defense. From its outset, the 2011 Bahraini Uprising has been portrayed as a Shia plot inspired by Iran, and led by Iranian agents, Shia extremists, and Shia gangs. The Al Khalifa have promoted this sectarian “master narrative” in order to prevent not only a cross-sectarian opposition to their rule, but also stoke fear within the Sunni community of a Shia-Iranian takeover and a reversal of the benefits they reap from the current status quo. In addition, the regime has promoted a similar

narrative of Iranian expansionism — and the idea that the Al Khalifa represent a buffer against such pursuits — to regional Sunni allies like Saudi Arabia, and to the United States and Great Britain in order to gain external backing for the regime and its policies.

The construction, mobilization, and control of this official narrative by the Al Khalifa have led to a discourse—both internally and externally—that focuses almost exclusively on Iranian expansionism, leading to the disempowerment of any cross-sect or pro-democratic counter-narrative. It is within this dominant discourse that sectarianism begins to spread not only from the top-down, but also from the bottom-up as Bahrainis themselves begin to advance sectarian sentiment and as it becomes socially acceptable to hate the “other.” Indeed, a Bahraini Sunni interviewed by The New York Times in 2010 stated, “If the Shias took control of the country, they would pop out one eye of every Sunni.”31 It is this type of deep animosity and suspicion that the regime relies upon and manipulates accordingly.

The Al Khalifa has effectively mobilized the Sunni community against the perceived Iranian-linked threat that the Shia community poses. Significantly, this mobilization is actually meant to demobilize the Sunni community and prevent them from joining any sort of cross-sect opposition. The primary way the regime achieves this is through the negative legitimacy it acquires by arguing that the only alternative to the regime would be an Iranian-controlled Shia state where the Sunnis are stripped of their rights and privileges.32 For the Sunnis beholden to it, therefore, the survival of the regime takes on an existential importance. A primary example of this is the fomenting of sectarianism among the expatriate community within Bahrain, the vast majority of whom are Sunni. The regime has promoted the notion that if the Shia were to ever come to power, they would expel or otherwise disenfranchise these foreign Sunni workers.33 By doing so, the regime is able to shore up anti-Shia support, while convincing the large expatriate community that the continuation of the Al Khalifa regime and

33 Gengler, Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, 142-158.
the repression of the Shia is inexorably linked to their ability to live and work in Bahrain.

A significant factor worth mentioning is regime’s use of *Ashura* (the event where the Shia remember and celebrate the martyrdom of the third Shia Imam – Hussain) to demonstrate not only the security threat posed by the Shia community, but also their foreign allegiances. Indeed, domestic Sunnis have often accepted the paranoia promoted by the Al Khalifa due to a misperception of religious symbols used and expressed within the Shia faith. However, this paranoia is unwarranted and rooted in misinterpretation; while the imagery of the martyrdom of Hussain, celebrated during *Ashura*, is often used as a metaphor for Bahraini Shia frustrations, it is not necessarily a call for a pan-Shia state or allegiance to Iran as the Sunnis and government fear. However, it does not help that various foreign Shia authorities such as Khomeini, Khamenei, al-Sistani, and others are often depicted on posters during the celebrations. The manipulation of symbols such as *Ashura* is but one example of how the Al Khalifa regime attempts to paint all Bahraini Shia as an Iranian fifth column and the country’s most pressing security threat.

**Sunni Opposition**

While the vast majority of Bahraini Sunnis have an economic and political incentive to support the Al Khalifa in order to preserve the status quo, this section will examine the elements of Sunni opposition that do exist and pose a serious challenge to the regime. As already mentioned in this analysis, the first category of Sunni opposition is comprised of those individuals (primarily of non-tribal pedigree) promoting cross-communal cooperation between sects against grievances affecting both communities: corruption, lack of affordable housing and land, etc. This subset of Sunnis has been viciously repressed and the regime has, as demonstrated in the section above, promoted a discourse of sectarian division within Bahrain in order to prevent such cross-cutting cooperation. Sunni participants in the protests of early 2011 such as Muhammad al-Buflasa and Ibrahim Sharif (who gave speeches of cross-sect cooperation at the Pearl Roundabout), have since been imprisoned,


36 Strobl, “From colonial policing to community policing in Bahrain,” 19-37.
crushing the narrative of “not Sunni, not Shia, just Bahraini” which was heard throughout the early days of the protests.\(^{37}\)

The next category of Sunni opposition encompasses those Sunnis who feel that the prevailing authority within Bahrain – the Al Khalifa – only represent their own interests as opposed to those of the Sunni community writ large. Gengler examines this segment of the Sunni populous, who view the Al Khalifa almost as a “third sect” comprised of the ruling and tribal class, and who demand a more active role in the decision-making process.\(^{38}\) These Sunnis feel that their interests have been sidelined by a regime that is primarily concerned with using the Sunnis to solidify its own authority, as opposed to genuinely promoting Sunni interests.

The final category of Sunni opposition consists of those who have capitalized upon the wave of mobilization among the Sunnis by the Al Khalifa regime against the Shia, and who actually challenge it on the grounds that of not doing enough against the perceived “Shia problem.” These Sunnis have called for harsher security measures against the “traitors” and have lambasted the Al Khalifa for not cracking down hard enough on the protests. The emergence of this type of opposition is ironic because the policies advanced by the Al Khalifa on the basis of dividing society with the ultimate goal of preventing cross-communal cooperation and to shore up Sunni support, have actually led to the emergence of sectarian opposition among Sunnis who challenge the government for not being extreme enough in their approach. The more the Al Khalifa rely on sectarianism throughout the country in the hopes of ensuring its own authority, the more the Al Khalifa risk inciting sectarian hatred and mobilization beyond its capacity to control.

**The Geopolitical Significance of Bahrain**

By virtue of its location in the heart of the Persian Gulf, Bahrain controls the single most significant maritime chokepoint for petroleum exports in the Middle East—the Strait of Hormuz—through which almost 20% of maritime-transported oil passes annually.

Bahrain is also one of the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council

\(^{37}\) Gengler, “Bahrain’s Sunni Awakening,” 234.

\(^{38}\) Gengler, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf*, 137.
(GCC) which also includes Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman. Given their economic and institutional relevancy, there are both regional and extra-regional geopolitical actors who have critical interests in Bahraini stability and the preservation of the current status quo.

The regional power with the greatest geopolitical stake in Bahrain is Saudi Arabia.39 Bahrain is the epicenter of regional “sectarian disenfranchisement” due to its majority Shia population and its perceived ties to Iran;40 therefore, the continuation of Sunni control via the Al Khalifa regime and the preservation of the status quo is of paramount importance to Riyadh. Beyond the preservation of a Sunni-dominated status quo, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states have a critical interest in preventing the emergence of political liberalization and democratization in Bahrain. Such pressures would ultimately challenge regional authoritarian governments.

Therefore, the preservation of the status quo entails not just maintaining Sunni dominance, but the conservation of regime legitimacy within the Gulf monarchies, all of whom work zealously to constrain domestic political opposition. This determination has become even more prominent following events such as the 1979 Iranian revolution, the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the eruption of post-2011 sectarian conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The strategic importance of Bahrain to Saudi Arabia was demonstrated in 2011 when, following the eruption of protests, Saudi-led GCC Peninsula Shield forces crossed the King Fahd Causeway into Bahrain to quell the uprising.

Saudi Arabia also has significant economic ties with Bahrain; for example, the causeway linking the two countries facilitates mutual trade and travel and is crossed by 18 million people every year.41 In addition, the vast majority of Bahrain’s oil revenues come from the Abu Safa oil well located in Saudi territorial waters. The well is jointly owned by Saudi Arabia and Bahrain but solely operated by Saudi ARAMCO.42 Aiding this partnership, Saudi Arabia effectively subsidizes Bahraini

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40 See Frederic Wehrey et. al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009).
refineries by providing discounted crude oil. In contrast, Bahrain actually possesses little strategic importance for Tehran. Iran and Bahrain have no considerable economic or political ties, and Iran has greater regional interests in other countries. Iran, then, views Bahrain opportunistically, as a low risk lever which allows Iran to harass their Saudi rival. Conversely, as demonstrated above, Saudi Arabia’s interests in Bahrain are not merely incidental, but instead inextricably tied to its own economic and political concerns.

Beyond the region, two primary powers that have a strategic interest in Bahrain are the United States and the United Kingdom. Bahrain has had a continued U.S. military presence since the 1950s, and has housed the Fifth Fleet of the United States Navy since 1995.\textsuperscript{43} The Fifth Fleet is formally responsible for the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, and it also plays an important role in U.S. counterterrorism operations while serving as a bulwark against Iran. Both the U.S. and U.K. are major arms suppliers to Bahrain, and have repeatedly expressed their support for the Al Khalifa regime.\textsuperscript{44} Bahrain is also beginning to play an increasingly important role for the U.K. With the November 2016 re-opening of the HMS Juffair, the Royal Naval Support Facility in Bahrain, the United Kingdom re-invigorated its military presence “east of Suez”. The base will serve to support its increasing operations in the broader region, and represents the first permanent British military base to be established in the Middle East since 1971.\textsuperscript{45}

\textit{The convergence of sectarianism and geopolitics}

Sectarianism and geopolitics have begun to merge in such a way within Bahrain (and the greater region) that they reinforce and feed off one another cyclically, a phenomenon – which can be referred to as \textit{geosectarianism}.\textsuperscript{46} The sectarian policies implemented and advanced by the Al Khalifa – on the premise that they are curbing Iranian interference and expansionism – have paradoxically provided geopolitical actors with strategic “entryways” through which they can...

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[43]{Matthiesen, \textit{Sectarian Gulf}, 22.}
\footnotetext[44]{See Potter, \textit{Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf}.}
\footnotetext[46]{See Robert Mason, \textit{Reassessing Order and Disorder in the Middle East: Regional Imbalance or Disintegration?} (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).}
\end{footnotes}
manipulate sectarian sentiments and rhetoric for their own interests. Moreover, the use of sectarianism by both regional and extra-regional geopolitical actors has caused the entrenchment of these identities and narratives, which have come together to spread a sectarian-driven politics throughout Bahrain and the region. The continued manipulation and hardening of these identities will further entrench divisions within Bahrain, and the Middle East exacerbating the phenomenon that domestic conflicts are linked to one another throughout the region.

This new type of “sectarian geopolitics” within Bahrain cannot be treated in isolation from developments in the region. This is particularly true given the degree to which these two elements are intertwined and sectarian divisions continue to entrench themselves – thereby making the geopolitical manipulation of such sectarian identities even more potent. Within this broader regional context, there are several events that have contributed to the strategic merging of sectarianism and geopolitics: the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Lebanese Civil War and the subsequent proxy conflict, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the subsequent devastating insurgency.

The most significant of these for the convergence of sectarianism and geopolitics in the contemporary Middle East is the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the following insurgency and 2014 civil war. Post-2003, sectarianism has become the dominant narrative throughout the region as a new landscape emerged for state competition post-Saddam Hussein. It is within this context of gradual convergence between sectarianism and geopolitics that the Bahraini Uprising must be analyzed in order to understand the strategies employed by the various actors involved. As Toby Matthiesen notes, “what distinguishes this new sectarianism (post-2003) from previous periods of sectarian tensions is that rulers now make decisions on the basis of a sectarian assessment of politics” (i.e. they think strategically in sectarian terms, and shape their foreign policies accordingly). However, as mentioned earlier, this type of sectarian geopolitics is not based on advancing a doctrinal agenda, but rather utilized on behalf of advancing the state’s strategic interests. It is within this new regional context that the Bahraini Uprising – like the other “Arab Spring” uprisings – emerged and was immediately defined in regional sectarian terms. The phenomenon of geosectarianism has been amplified

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48 Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf*, XXII.
exponentially following the 2011 uprisings, as geopolitical “camps” are now overwhelmingly overlapping with sect – particularly the geopolitical conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, the responses to the Arab uprisings and the dynamic of state competition, both within Bahrain and regionally, have reinforced sectarianism, arguably making it more significant than in any other period of history of the modern Middle East.

Within Bahrain, the regime and its backers continue to promote and weaponize the notion of a geosectarian threat from Iran in order to marshall support and legitimacy. This rhetoric is not solely aimed at the domestic Sunni population, but proliferated throughout the region and internationally. The proliferation and dominance of this specific narrative shifts the discourse surrounding the Bahraini uprising from legitimate political and socio-economic grievances and the hope of reform, toward countering the geopolitical threat singularly posed by Iran and maintaining the status quo. Furthermore, by linking geopolitical and sectarian events within Bahrain to those in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, the Al Khalifa and the Saudis are themselves constructing the narrative of calculated Iranian expansionism through the co-opting of Shia communities within the region. This, in turn, serves as the legitimizing and mobilizing “call” around which the Al Khalifa continue to pursue their strictly sectarian policies. These policies are backed fully by Saudi Arabia, which wishes to push back against Iran geopolitically and maintain the Sunni-dominated status quo (not to mention the interests the Saudis have in ensuring that such a large-scale uprising does not spread to its Shia Eastern Province). This narrative is reinforced deliberately by statements made by Iranian leaders, the rhetoric surrounding sectarianism in places like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Indeed, even if Iran were not intervening directly in the Bahraini Uprising, pro-Iranian Arabic-language outlets like al-Alam, Hezbollah’s al-Manar TV, and the Iraq-based Ahl al-Bayt TV, were hard at work to convince the Shia, not only in Bahrain, but more importantly throughout the region, that the conflict was a fight to resolve long standing political and religious differences between sects.49 Therefore, this joining of Bahrain to other regional developments has transformed a domestic issue into a regional power competition between sectarian and geopolitical rivals.

By pursuing the domestic sectarian policies detailed within this analysis, the Al Khalifa regime claims to be countering Iranian influence within the region – and is gaining the backing of the U.S. – but is actually implementing the said policies in order to solidify its power and silence any form of dissent. In other words, the Iranian threat is being blown out of proportion by the Al Khalifa and the Saudis in order to gain the backing and support of the U.S. Therefore, these policies would appear to advance the shared strategic interests of both the United States and the Al Khalifa: countering Iranian expansionism and influence within the region for the former, and solidifying its own rule for the latter. While the U.S. does not benefit per se from sectarian policies within Bahrain, it does benefit from a strong Al Khalifa regime that maintains its grip on power against what is seen as a constant threat from an expansionist and opportunistic Iran. Therefore, the U.S. has granted the regime and Saudi Arabia near impunity when dealing with the “Shia issue” inside Bahrain, tacitly supporting the narrative that the Shia are Iranian agents and loyalists, under the assumption that doing so will advance the United States’ interests. Because of the narrative espoused and enforced by Al Khalifa and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. has come to view Bahrain as the next possible regional “domino” following the growing influence of Iran in places like Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This near unconditional support of the U.S. also serves to undermine any legitimate counter-narrative from emerging, while the continued manipulation of sectarianism for geopolitical purposes entrenches divisions within Bahrain.

**CONCLUSION AND THE ROAD FORWARD**

It is this strategic convergence of geopolitical interests and sectarian politics that crushed the 2011 Bahraini uprising, secured the prevailing status quo, and will continue to dictate domestic realities within Bahrain for the foreseeable future. Bahrain’s future prospects are inextricably linked to the regional balance of power and the further entrenchment and utilization of sectarianism for geopolitical purposes. As the preceding analysis demonstrates, Shias are likely to suffer politically and economically inside Bahrain whether or not they are actively engaged in anti-government activism. This may come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy: continued policies of exclusion will only serve to further cement communal divisions and could potentially—if the country’s Shia come to believe that the only method for tangible change is through unconventional means—serve
to actually push segments of society into the arms of external actors claiming to be genuinely supportive of their plight, such as Iran.

An interesting recent development is the growing relationship between Israel and Bahrain. The Israelis—who view Iran as their primary regional adversary—share the strategic interests of the Al Khalifa, the Saudis, and the U.S. in maintaining the Sunni-dominated status quo within Bahrain. In 2017, a 23-person Bahraini delegation of influential business, social, and religious figures visited Israel. This followed a visit from senior Israeli officials at the 67th FIFA Congress, representing the first official visit from Israel to Bahrain. This growing relationship is significant because it demonstrates the overall geopolitical calculus of the states in the region: the need to push back against Iran at all costs. Israel too falls within this camp, and seems to have bought into the discourse surrounding Bahrain and the threat of growing Iranian influence and interference.

Moving forward, there is also the threat that sectarianism could evolve and take on a life of its own inside Bahrain. In other words, is it possible that the Al Khalifa and their backers have divided society to the point where it can no longer be contained? As explained earlier, elements of an extreme Sunni opposition to the Al Khalifa have begun to emerge, arguing that the regime is not doing enough to suppress the Shia traitors. The aforementioned ties being developed between Bahrain and Israel for geopolitical purposes have brought strong condemnation from sections of the Sunni community, particularly among Salafis and groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Shia extremist cells allegedly backed and supplied by Iran have also begun to emerge, carrying out several low-scale attacks throughout the country. If the more extreme elements of the Sunni community decide to strike back against the Shia because of these attacks, the situation could spiral out of control. As sectarianism within Bahrain encroaches from above and below, the Al Khalifa regime may find itself unable to sustain the delicate balance it has created.

All factors considered, it is likely that the status quo will be sustained for the near future. The recent discovery of an oil reserve with an estimated

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80 billion barrels means that the regime now has the ability to continue its preferential allocation of state funds to the Sunni community, at the expense of Shia enclaves. The increased interests of the U.S. and Israel in Bahraini stability also means that external backing in the name of deterring Iran will persist for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the Al Khalifa face no incentive to change their sectarian policies. On the contrary, with newfound oil revenue and increased external support, it appears likely that the regime will double-down on its exclusionary policies. Whether or not they will be able to contain the balance between these two communities and restrain their more fringe elements has yet to be demonstrated. Moving forward, Bahrain finds itself in the middle of a regional geopolitical and sectarian power struggle that seems likely to intensify as religious divisions continue to entrench themselves and regional geopolitical actors continue to exploit and manipulate such cleavages.

Several recent developments support the likelihood of continued and increased support for the Al Khalifa regime. The first of these is the ascension of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency and his hawkish anti-Iran vision and cabinet. Shortly after assuming the presidency, Trump decided to renew previously suspended sales of F-16 fighters and other military hardware to Bahrain. These arms sales had been halted by former U.S. President Barack Obama due to Bahrain’s deteriorating human rights record. As such, Trump appears to be returning to traditional U.S. policy, stating, “Our countries have a wonderful relationship together, but there has been a little strain [referencing the aforementioned decision by Obama regarding the sale of F-16s], but there won’t be any strain with this administration. We’re going to have a very, very long-term relationship. I look forward to it very much—many of the same things in common.” When Trump states that the U.S. have “many of the same things in common,” he is almost undoubtedly referring to opposition to Iran. President Trump followed this statement with the announcement of $9 billion in bilateral trade agreements, including the extension of a defense cooperation agreement for

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fifteen years.\textsuperscript{54} Also significant was Trump’s first foreign terrorist designation after assuming office, which labeled two individuals as “Iranian-based senior members” operating inside Bahrain for the purpose of destabilizing the country.\textsuperscript{55} Trump’s recent decision in May 2018 to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), popularly known as the Iranian Nuclear Deal, also demonstrates the hardline approach he wishes to implement vis-à-vis Iran.

Considering the example of Bahrain, it is beneficial to forecast what can be expected for other countries within the region that find themselves in similar situations and caught within the matrix of sectarianism-based geopolitics. Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen are the four countries within the region suffering from the same malaise that is plaguing Bahrain: the convergence of geopolitical interests with sectarian sentiments and rhetoric that is being used to mobilize and legitimize the actions of domestic and international actors who are all ultimately seeking the advancement of their own interests. Present within all of these contexts are the competing interests of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the former of which is backed staunchly by the United States, and the latter who are attempting to mobilize Shia communities across the Middle East, ultimately in the hopes of advancing its own geopolitical interests. As demonstrated by the Bahraini case, however, these theaters are not monolithic. Instead, the respective historical contexts of both sectarianism and geopolitics must be considered on a case-by-case basis in order to understand the roots of this phenomenon.


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