

The End of the Battle for Bahrain and the Securitization of Bahraini Shi‘a

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Since protests shook Bahrain in 2011, the Saudi-backed regime there has embarked on a series of strategic moves, crushing dissent both at home and abroad. This article explores the methods the regime used to ensure its survival. It argues that by framing Bahrain’s Shi‘i majority as a security threat within broader regional challenges, the regime was able to solidify its core bases of support.

We shall deport them to Howar, Jenan and Noon islands . . .
With a shining and sharp sword
We’ll spill their bloods until they all die . . .
We’ll stop their annual (Ashura) processions in the streets
As their poems hurl insults at us . . .¹

On March 14, 2011, as people took to the streets across Bahrain, the Peninsula Shield Force — the Saudi-led, joint military arm of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) — crossed the King Fahd Causeway and entered the island. As part of a broader series of uprisings across the Arab world, Bahraini protesters expressed long-standing grievances about the nature of political and economic life under the rule of the House of Khalifa. However, in the years to come the Saudi-backed Khalifa dynasty would embark on a series of moves that would result in the physical and structural decimation of opposition groups. Such moves also ensured continued support from influential foreign allies despite serious concerns about human rights. This article explores the methods through which the Khalifa regime was able to ensure its survival and argues that, by framing Bahrain’s Shi‘i majority as a security threat, it was able to solidify support from domestic and international sources to ensure its survival.

This article attempts to make two substantial contributions to the literature, one conceptual and the other empirical. First, it contributes to the theory of securitization — framing as security threats issues not traditionally regarded as security issues — by focusing on moves directed at international audiences. Second, it traces the evolution of American and British support for the Khalifa regime during the uprisings, which was deemed central to its survival. Despite initial concern at Manama’s response to the uprisings, both Washington and London softened their stances as a consequence of a process of securitization that stressed the geopolitical importance of Bahrain and ultimately shifted United States policy from a focus on humanitarian issues back to geopolitical concerns.

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1. From a 1995 poem by Shaykh Khalid bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, Bahrain’s foreign minister since 2005, quoted in Justin J. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism, the Khawalid, and the Securitization of ‘the Shi‘a Problem’ in Bahrain,” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 63, doi:10.1080/21534764.2013.802944.

Lying approximately 15.5 miles (25 kilometers) from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia yet only 124 mi (200 km) from the west coast of Iran, the Kingdom of Bahrain is seen as the epicenter of geopolitical and sectarian competition within the Persian Gulf, with a majority Shi'i population and a Sunni royal family.² While in the throes of popular protest in 2011, Bahrain became a site of the proxy competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has shaped the Gulf and the wider Middle East since the Iranian Revolution in 1979.³ While the nature of the competition has differed depending upon the proxy arena, the existence of any form of such competition has regional ramifications. Such proxy rivalries and competition stem from the spread of shared religious and ethnic ties that transcend sovereign borders, leaving identity groups open to the influence of others.

This article begins by outlining processes of securitization before turning to the case of Bahrain. It then offers an account of the domestic and regional conditions the protests emerged from and places them within the wider historical and geopolitical context of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In referring to history we are better situated to reflect on the structural factors that have been used to restrict the agency of and to securitize Shi'i groups. This history also shapes responses to securitized framing of Bahrain's Shi'i population, both from their intended and unintended "audiences." To show how these audiences and their positions evolved, the article draws on fieldwork conducted in Bahrain and the United Kingdom, official speeches made in Washington and London, and material contained in US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks.

THE COPENHAGEN SCHOOL AND SECURITIZATION

The work of the so-called Copenhagen school of International Relations is predominantly concerned with efforts to broaden the state's security agenda by shifting the "referent object" of security to areas not generally considered to be security threats.⁴ In doing so, the theory of securitization involves interrogating ideas of human, economic, environmental, and societal security while also providing scope to engage with different aspects of geopolitics. Moves by states to securitize issues are made when there is a perception of insecurity or threat, prompting a retreat into specific societal identities and upholding cultural norms to reinforce community cohesion.⁵ Of course what may damage issues such as identity is far harder to discern than traditional threats and can lead to tensions between a range of different identity groups — including regimes — existing and operating within states.⁶ Framing events through

2. 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), 53.

3. Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Soft Power Rivalry in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

4. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

5. Barry Buzan, "Societal Security and European Security," in *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe*, ed. Ole Wæver et al. (London: Pinter, 2003), 191.

6. Paul Roe, "The Intrastate Security Dilemma: Ethnic Conflict as a 'Tragedy'?" *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 2 (1999): 196, doi:10.1177/0022343399036002004.

politicized historical narratives proves a useful resource within this context. Following the fracturing of political structures, groups seek to ensure their own survival within an uncertain environment, often locating themselves within broader groups or narratives that transcend state borders.⁷

Such problems have left a number of regimes in the Arab world struggling to ensure their survival since the wave of uprisings that began in late 2010. Challenges to state authority have created conditions of uncertainty, with the mere perception of threats provoking state action. Regimes' bases of support are often found outside the state, and these sources of authority and legitimacy — and ultimately means of maintaining control — become increasingly important amid contestation.⁸

According to the Copenhagen school, perceptions of uncertainty are not necessarily driven by military calculations but rather by ethno-religious divisions and societal insecurity. That uncertainty is driven by division means that efforts to resolve domestic security challenges through claims to legitimacy and attempts to weaken the “Other” through political exclusion or repression can also have geopolitical consequences.⁹ Yet strategies used to restrict political activity have raised concerns across the international community as to the respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In Bahrain the ruling elite has regulated political life by eviscerating meaningful political opposition. Shi‘i groups have long been framed as a source of opposition to ruling elites across the history of independent Bahrain,¹⁰ and the use of structural and direct violence as a means of maintaining control and managing conflicts has been common practice.¹¹

Amid reports of human rights abuses, the widespread stripping of nationality, and use of torture against civilians,¹² growing concern over and condemnation of government strategies was hardly surprising. However, by moving to securitize the Shi‘i threat

7. As the Syrian uprising deteriorated into a full-blown civil war, many rebel groups increasingly framed their struggle less in terms of toppling President Bashar al-Asad and more within transnational Islamic narratives. Christopher Phillips, “Sectarianism as Plan B: Saudi-Iranian Identity Politics in the Syria Conflict,” in *Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Struggle to Shape the Middle East*, ed. Simon Mabon (Lancaster: Foreign Policy Centre, 2018), 21–22.

8. For example, President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi of Yemen has derived a great deal of authority from Saudi Arabia during his country’s civil war. Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, “Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy,” Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Briefing Paper no. 1 (May 2011). www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/17706.

9. For example, Saudi Arabia’s execution of Nimr al-Nimr, an important figure in the country’s Shi‘i opposition, prompted protests in Iran, which led to a diplomatic incident after the Saudi Embassy in Tehran was stormed. “Iranian Protesters Storm Saudi Embassy, Foreign Ministry Calls for Calm,” Reuters, January 2, 2016, <https://reut.rs/2Hta1UA>.

10. Ambassador Adam Ereli to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “Scenesetter for Secretary Rice’s Visit to Bahrain,” April 17, 2008, MANAMA 000252, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (February 15, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MANAMA252_a.html.

11. Sophia Pandya, “Women’s Shi‘i Ma’atim in Bahrain,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 31–58. doi:10.2979/MEW.2010.6.2.31; Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

12. Bahrain Center for Human Rights, “‘Death or Confession’: Bahrain, Secret Military Courts Sentence Civilians Forced to Confess under Torture” (Dec. 2017), [www.bahrainrights.org/sites/default/files/Death or confession.pdf](http://www.bahrainrights.org/sites/default/files/Death%20or%20confession.pdf).

and locating it within a broader geopolitical struggle, concern for values like respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law — which feature prominently within “normal” Western foreign policy discourse — was suspended, suggesting a successful move toward securitization.

A key part of the Copenhagen school’s methodological approach, securitization is one of the strategies used by regimes seeking to ensure their survival amid burgeoning uncertainty. During the securitization process an actor responds to the perception of a threat by framing an issue as an existential threat to a particular audience. Language is thus at the heart of securitization, with “speech acts” constituting the main mechanism actors use to frame threats. Securitization, for Thierry Balzacq, is the articulation of security that *itself* creates a new social order wherein “‘normal politics’ is bracketed.”¹³ Given that what constitutes normal politics differs between contexts, its suspension can result in a range of different sets of behavior. During this process an actor responds to the perception of a threat by framing said issue as an existential threat to a particular audience.

For Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, “in security discourse, an issue is dramatized and presented as an issue of supreme priority; thus by labeling it as *security* an agent claims a need for and a right to treat it by extraordinary means.”¹⁴ The use of language — through speech acts — is the method through which issues are labeled as security, and as such we must also locate such speech acts within the context that they are uttered. Not all securitization efforts are successful, suggesting that an articulated threat is not seen in existential terms or that the extraordinary measures demanded by the securitizing actor are not needed. Alternately the audience may accept the frame while rejecting the implications of the act of securitization.¹⁵ In such a case the severity of a threat may be recognized, yet the justification for the suspension of normal politics may not be accepted. There also may be a range of possible outcomes from processes of securitization that can result in the suspension of normal politics that may not be the suspension desired by the securitizing actor.

There is typically a link between the securitizing actor and the audience, predominantly between a regime and certain groups in society. Yet the complexity of contemporary politics means that securitization is not always unidirectional or causal. We must also consider how certain threats may be constructed by a securitizing actor in a way that involves actors beyond the state who are then able to capitalize on and manipulate events within it. As a consequence we must explore the possibility that audiences exist across borders, within and between states. Such a possibility requires greater theoretical reflection that is beyond the scope of this article, but much like a Foucauldian approach to power, securitization is multicausal and multidirectional.

In response to such issues Matt McDonald argued that, by locating securitization processes within the milieu of domestic security calculations, additional context is provided.¹⁶ For McDonald, the securitization process occurs across three stages: the *desig-*

13. Thierry Balzacq, “The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005): 171, doi:10.1177/1354066105052960.

14. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 26.

15. Paul Roe, “Actor, Audience(s) and Emergency Measures: Securitization and the UK’s Decision to Invade Iraq,” *Security Dialogue* 39 no. 6 (2008): 621, doi:10.1177/0967010608098212.

16. Matt McDonald, “Securitization and the Construction of Security,” *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 4 (2008): 570–71, doi:10.1177/1354066108097553.

nation of the threat, the facilitating conditions, and the audience. To support this process it is important to locate such moves within exogenous, endogenous, and historical contexts. Indeed, for Wæver, the “conditions historically associated with that threat” play an integral role in the securitization of an event.¹⁷ Balzacq was correct to stress that context is formed through the interaction of domestic and international factors.¹⁸

PROTEST AND POLITICS: SPRING IN BAHRAIN

Protests in Bahrain broke out on February 14, 2011, with calls for political reform and greater democratic accountability. In particular, protesters demanded the devolution of power from the royal family to the elected legislature, with Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa being a target of much ire.¹⁹ The protests drew from all parts of society, including Sunnis — both in groups and as individuals.²⁰ Since Bahrain has a Shi‘i-majority population, large and inclusive demonstrations translated to a large presence of Shi‘i protesters in the streets. The early stages of the protests focused around Manama’s Pearl Roundabout, which became a site of peaceful and inclusive protest. Demonstrations quickly became violent as protesters and police turned on each other, resulting in clashes as government forces sought to clear the area.

The Peninsula Shield Force mobilized on March 14 after a request from King Hamad bin ‘Isa Al Khalifa, although Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar all refrained from sending troops. The commanding officer of the force, Mutlaq bin Salim al-Azima, stressed that the mission was “to secure Bahrain’s vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference.”²¹ Martial law was declared on March 15, and a complex network of security checkpoints was established, empowered by emergency measures and military courts.²² On March 18 the monument in the middle of Pearl Roundabout was bulldozed as part of the government’s crackdown.²³

Regime responses to the protests likewise sought to frame events as a consequence of foreign manipulation. Days after Pearl Roundabout was cleared, in an address to the Peninsula Shield Force that was published by the state-run Bahrain News Agency, King Hamad said that “An external plot has been fomented for twenty to thirty years for the ground to be right for subversive designs . . . I here[by] an-

17. Ole Wæver, “The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders,” in *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, ed. Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams (London: Routledge, 2000), 252–53.

18. Balzacq, “Three Faces of Securitization,” 183.

19. Michelle Dunne, “The Deep Roots of Bahrain’s Unrest,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 18, 2011, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2011/02/18/deep-roots-of-bahrain-s-unrest-pub-42677>.

20. Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring That Wasn’t* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 18–49.

21. “A Talk with Peninsula Shield Force Commander Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 28, 2011, <https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/interviews/a-talk-with-peninsula-shield-force-commander-mutlaq-bin-salem-al-azima>.

22. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism,” 74.

23. Amal Khalaf, “Squaring the Circle: Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout,” *Middle East Critique* 22 no. 3 (2013): 265–80. doi:10.1080/19436149.2013.822240.

nounce the failure of the fomented subversive plot.”²⁴ Playing on long-standing fears of Iranian manipulation in Bahraini affairs, the underlying message was clear. During the protests themselves more than a week earlier, Saudi officials involved in Peninsula Shield were more forthcoming: “There is no doubt Iran is involved.”²⁵ Similar remarks were made by key Bahraini allies beyond the Gulf. British ambassador to Bahrain Iain Lindsay explicitly stressed Iranian involvement in the protests. Other embassy staff echoed regime suggestions that Iran was responsible for training and providing weapons to groups of protesters through agents of the Iran-backed Lebanese Shi‘i party/militia Hizbullah.²⁶

These comments find traction when contextualized within the long and complex history of Arab-Persian relations. Over time they became a commonplace, self-perpetuating narrative that has been reproduced by state-controlled media across the Gulf. For example, while Al Arabiya produced a number of documentaries on the uprising in Bahrain, “they all carried one message: the regime is facing an Iranian conspiracy.”²⁷

Over time this narrative was reproduced in other forums. Speaking at the United Nations on September 25, 2013, royal advisor and former Bahraini ambassador to the US Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ghaffar argued that “Bahrain has been suffering for a long time from the Iranian interference in its internal affairs.”²⁸ Meanwhile violent acts across Bahrain are routinely linked to Iran, and there are regular reports of foiled attempts to smuggle explosives and arms into the kingdom from the Islamic Republic.²⁹ Bahraini state-run newspapers routinely referred to the country’s major Shi‘i opposition group, the Al-Wafaq Islamic Society, as “the Bahraini Hizbullah.”³⁰

Such comments were amplified on social media,³¹ while the criminal courts also began to play a role, reaffirming and perpetuating the regime’s securitizing moves. In July 2011 a Bahraini man and two foreigners were sentenced to prison, found guilty of spying for Iran.³² Nearly three years later 12 Bahrainis were sentenced to life in prison, found guilty of the same crime.³³ In October 2017 a court sentenced 19 Shi‘i Bahrainis

24. Quoted in Zoi Constantine, “King of Bahrain Says Subversive ‘External Plot’ Has Been Foiled,” *The National*, March 22, 2011, www.thenational.ae/world/mena/king-of-bahrain-says-subversive-external-plot-has-been-foiled-1.600506.

25. Quoted in Ethan Bronner and Michael Slackman, “Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2Kr5UWt>.

26. Interview by the author with Iain Lindsay and British Embassy staff, May 2014, Manama.

27. Ali Hashem, “The Bahrain Blackout in Arab Media,” *Al-Monitor*, January 13, 2013, <http://almon.co/4si>.

28. Quoted in Yasser al-Chazli, “Adviser to Bahrain King: GCC Basis of Balance in Region,” *Al-Monitor*, November 4, 2013, <http://almon.co/2olf>.

29. Maha El Dahan and William Maclean, “Bahrain Says Foils Arms Smuggling Bid, Recalls Iran Envoy,” *Reuters*, July 25, 2015, <https://reut.rs/2Fe3MR1>.

30. “Bahrain Accuses Foreign Media of Exaggeration,” *Al Jazeera*, May 2, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/05/20125220628139601.html.

31. Marc Owen Jones, “Social Media, Surveillance, and Cyberpolitics in the Bahrain Uprising,” in *Bahrain’s Uprising: Resistance and Repression in the Gulf*, ed. Ala’a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones (London: Zed, 2015), 239–62.

32. Agence France–Presse, “Bahrain Jails Three for Spying for Iran: Report,” *Gulf News*, July 6, 2011, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-jails-three-for-spying-for-iran-report-1.833932>.

33. “Bahrain Sentences 12 People for Life for Spying, Iran Links,” *Reuters*, April 22, 2014, <https://reut.rs/2Wandkp>.

to jail also for spying for Iran and plotting to overthrow the regime. The court found the men guilty of leaking information to Hizbullah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps along with receiving support from the groups.³⁴

Despite the ubiquity of the framing of the protests as an Iranian plot, there was no consensus on the matter. Most notably the Bahrain Independent Commission Inquiry (BICI), established by the king after the protests and chaired by Egyptian-American human rights lawyer Cherif Bassiouni, found no evidence of Iranian involvement in the unrest.³⁵ Of course this finding was immediately rejected by King Hamad and others.³⁶

In contrast with the more forceful approach taken by other members of the royal family, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa sought to bring about reform and foster a peaceful solution to the crisis. Although many saw the crown prince as the great hope for reform, the speed and extent of his efforts meant that redlines would have been crossed, ultimately leading to his removal from the public arena at the request of Saudi Arabia.³⁷ In January 2014, after returning to the political scene, the crown prince sought to hold talks with prominent opposition leaders and build on secret talks that took place over 2013.³⁸ The failure to achieve a breakthrough cast serious doubts on his ability to facilitate reform in the long term, while highlighting the differences within the royal family.³⁹

After the uprising, the *Khawalid* — literally meaning the Khalids, the term is a pejorative referring to members of the royal family of Shaykh Khalid bin 'Ali Al Khalifa (1853–1925), a half-brother of the incumbent king's great-great-grandfather — gained influence within the upper echelons of Bahraini politics, posing a power struggle within the House of Khalifa itself.⁴⁰ To ensure their dominance — and in their eyes, the very survival of the regime itself — the *Khawalid* propagated an anti-Shi'i and anti-Iran agenda that had repercussions across the Bahraini political sphere. The ability of Al-Wefaq to speak for "Bahraini Shi'a" rapidly eroded. Opposition figures were stripped of their citizenship — often finding out on television — while their close relatives were tortured.⁴¹ Such practices built upon a long history of exclusionary politics, resulting in a vicious cycle of increased securitization and suspicion, which deepened social and political grievances.⁴²

34. "Bahrain Jails 19 Shias Accused of Spying for Iran," *New Arab*, October 30, 2017, www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/10/30/bahrain-jails-19-shias-accused-of-spying-for-iran.

35. Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (English), November 23, 2011, 383–85, www.bici.org.bh/BICIreportEN.pdf.

36. Joost Hiltermann and Kelly McEvers, "Barricaded in Bahrain," *New York Review of Books*, December 27, 2011, www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/12/27/barricaded-bahrain/.

37. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Elham Fakhro, "Post-BICI Bahrain: Between Reform and Stagnation," *Open Democracy*, January 19, 2012, www.opendemocracy.net/en/post-bici-bahrain-between-reform-and-stagnation/.

38. Bill Law, "Time Running Out as Bahrain Tries to Revive National Dialogue," *BBC*, January 30, 2014, <https://bbc.in/2XMP5Q>.

39. Toby Matthiessen, "(No) Dialogue in Bahrain," Middle East Research and Information Project, February 13, 2014, <https://merip.org/2014/02/no-dialogue-in-bahrain/>.

40. Gengler, "Royal Factionalism," 62.

41. Interview by the author with an opposition figure who had been in the Bahraini parliament, June 2014, London.

42. Gengler, "Royal Factionalism," 68.

Over time Shi‘i groups were largely (though not exclusively) excluded from political life, while Sunni Bahrainis were also barred from the riot police, which was comprised of Sunni recruits from the Indian subcontinent who were largely unable to speak Arabic but were promised Bahraini citizenship after their service.⁴³ Such a policy was designed to prevent Bahrainis from being asked to go into villages — typically spaces of unrest — so that there would be no fear of reprisal attacks or conflicting sentiments about national identity. Ultimately this was a strategy designed to prevent security forces from siding with protesters and to address Sunnis’ long-term demographic disadvantage.⁴⁴

Naturalization had been routinely used in Bahrain to counter demographic challenges to Sunni/Khalifa rule. For example, in 2002, during the run up to the country’s first parliamentary elections since 1973, some 20,000 members of the Dawasir tribal confederation in Saudi Arabia were given Bahraini citizenship.⁴⁵ In 2011 naturalizing South Asian police recruits had two main benefits: first, bolstering the ranks of the police with individuals loyal to the regime, as there were increasing concerns about the desire of Bahrainis to arrest their fellow citizens who were protesting against the regime. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it addressed the changing demographic dynamics of the island kingdom, albeit raising potential future issues with regard to the country’s Arab identity.

As noted, the regime embarked on a strategy that sought to frame opposition groups along sectarian lines, eviscerating opposition movements both within Bahrain and those operating from abroad. By framing protests in such a way, the regime capitalized on support from Sunni groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood while locating the protest movement within the broader geopolitical struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran along with historical tensions between Arabs and Persians.⁴⁶ As such, the protest movement’s democratic aspects were largely underplayed or ignored amid widespread suspicion about foreign manipulation.⁴⁷

To successfully frame protesters as an Iranian Shi‘i threat, a narrative was required that neglected serious differences among Shi‘a themselves. The most serious intra-Shi‘i divide is between those who follow the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (guardianship of the jurist, i.e., clerical rule), recognizing the authority of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah ‘Ali Khamenei, and those who follow Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali Sistani in Najaf, Iraq, who advocates a less involved role for clerics within political life. Despite perceptions to the contrary, many Shi‘a, in Bahrain and elsewhere, hold Sistani in higher esteem as he possesses far more religious credentials than Khamenei.⁴⁸

43. Interview, British Embassy officials, May 2014, Manama.

44. Fahad Desmukh, “Spare Us Bahrain’s Sudden ‘Concern’ for Its Asian Expat Workers,” *Guardian*, June 16, 2011, www.guardian.com/commentisfree/2011/jun/18/bahrain-expat-workers-state-brutality.

45. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism,” 69.

46. Telephone interview by the author with a Bahraini academic, September 2018; Courtney Freer and Giorgio Cafiero, “Is the Muslim Brotherhood’s ‘Special Status’ Over?” *New Arab*, August 7, 2017, www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2017/8/7/is-the-bahraini-muslim-brotherhoods-special-status-over.

47. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism,” 69–71.

48. Ali Mamouri, “The Dueling Ayatollahs: Khamenei, Sistani, and the Fight for the Soul of Shi‘ite Islam,” *Al-Monitor*, April 25, 2018, <http://almon.co/314i>; Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 273–74, 289–95.

Ultimately the regime was swift in its response, clamping down on opposition actors at home, abroad, and online.⁴⁹ This response had been carefully honed over decades of unrest and was comprised of three parts: the exclusion of Shi'a from prominent ministries and security services, naturalizing foreign Sunnis to offset the Shi'i demographic majority, and electoral gerrymandering to favor Sunnis.⁵⁰ In support of this, the regime created a master narrative that sought to divide the Bahraini population along sectarian lines, ensuring support for the royal family from Sunnis while framing Shi'a as an Iranian fifth column. The use of sectarian narratives is a clear example of a preemptive counterrevolutionary strategy used across the region to delegitimize popular protests by framing them within the context of a foreign threat.⁵¹

Historically the regime had chosen to frame Bahrain's Shi'i population in security rather than political terms and, in doing so, homogenized the Shi'i opposition.⁵² The 2011 uprisings brought about similar, albeit more violent, responses to Shi'i opposition groups. By framing the protests in such a way, the conflict takes on an existential nature for the regime, and in doing so, transcends the potential for resolution. To frame the Shi'i population as an existential threat to the regime is also to speak of Shi'a as a serious security threat to the country's stability, requiring the suspension of normal politics and locating the island at the heart of regional geopolitical debates.

BAHRAIN AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE GULF: THE DESIGNATION OF THE THREAT

Bahrain is at the epicenter of geopolitical competition in the Gulf, shaping the region's sectarian dynamics. To reduce events in Bahrain to either sectarian or geopolitical concerns, however, erodes the agency of Bahrainis themselves and the island's own particular history of trade-driven immigration that has created a plethora of identities, ideologies, and political agendas.⁵³ Historically the House of Khalifa has used securitization and strategies of divide-and-rule as a mechanism of retaining power amid sociopolitical contestation, facilitated by sponsoring Sunni charities and Islamist political groups.⁵⁴ Thus to reduce complex political identities to simple binaries around sectarian identities is problematic and not reflective of contemporary Bahraini society.⁵⁵

49. Bahraini students studying abroad were threatened with the cessation of their funding. Sossie Kasbarian and Simon Mabon, "Contested Spaces and Sectarian Narratives in Post-Uprising Bahrain," *Global Discourse* 6, no. 4 (2016): 691, doi:10.1080/23269995.2016.1259232.

50. Gengler, "Royal Factionalism," 55.

51. Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Sectarianism as Counter-Revolution: Saudi Responses to the Arab Spring," *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (2011): 513–26. doi:10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01129.x.

52. Gengler, "Royal Factionalism," 68.

53. Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf*, 9.

54. Toby Matthiessen, "Sectarianization as Securitization: Identity Politics and Counter-Revolution in Bahrain," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel (London: Hurst, 2017), 199–214.

55. Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980). Incidentally this book is banned in Bahrain.

Such efforts ignore the importance of economic factors in shaping domestic policy, resulting in alliances between wealthy Shi'i families and the ruling elite, a number of which remain today.⁵⁶

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Middle Eastern politics has been shaped by the escalation of a rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia that has helped shape political life in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and others.⁵⁷ This rivalry has exacerbated tensions across the region, building on political and theological differences that gained traction as perception that Iranian influence across the region was growing without the check that Iraqi president Saddam Husayn historically provided. The impact of Shi'i unrest is seen to have regional repercussions. Indeed a report for Bahrain's Ministry of Cabinet Affairs produced in 2006 by British consultant Salah Al Bander argued that Shi'i empowerment across the region could have serious repercussions on the island.⁵⁸

Al Bander's report framed political fragmentation and Shi'i unrest as a consequence of Iran's foreign policy and Shi'i sectarian identity, neglecting the importance of nationalism, class, and ethnicity. Similar themes have been prominent across the region since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which fused theological, political, and security concerns. Prior to the revolution, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran had been fractious though largely cordial, reflected in US attempts to create a tripolar alliance with the two major Gulf powers.⁵⁹ After the revolution, with Saudi Arabia and Iran both laying claim to leadership over the Muslim world, the rivalry between the two escalated across the region.

Regional relations were quickly redrawn, characterized by uncertainty and chaos as Iran sought to export the ideological vision of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.⁶⁰ At the heart of the new republic was a Shi'i liberation theology, drawn from Third Worldist solidarity with the oppressed (*mostaz'afin* in Persian) and framed around the martyrdom of Husayn bin 'Ali — the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and revered as an Imam by Shi'a — and his supporters at the Battle of Karbala in 680.⁶¹ The nascent Islamic Republic even incorporated a foreign policy based on "Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the [*mostaz'afin*] of the world" into its constitution.⁶²

Despite this call for a supporting all Muslims, the Iranian Revolution mainly empowered Shi'i groups across the Middle East that often had grievances against discrimination and structural exclusion. Although Shi'i unrest was often more inspired by than directed by Tehran,⁶³ the material and moral support the nascent Islamic Republic did supply to Shi'i groups created the enduring perception that Iran was sowing discord

56. Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, ed. Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 171–88.

57. Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*.

58. Gengler, "Royal Factionalism," 69–70.

59. Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1979).

60. Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 49.

61. Rola El Hussein, "Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 804–6, doi:10.1080/01436597.2010.502695.

62. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Article 3.16, available at the website of the Iran Chamber Society at www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution_ch01.php.

63. This is particularly true for Saudi Arabia; see the works of Toby Matthiessen, including *Sectarian Gulf; The Other Saudis: Shiism, Dissent and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

throughout the region in order to create what King ‘Abdullah II of Jordan would much later call a Shi‘i “crescent.”⁶⁴ Perhaps the most illustrative example of postrevolutionary Iran’s deployment of the Karbala narrative and rhetoric of solidarity with the *mostaz‘afin* in its foreign policy was its support for the 1982 creation of Hizbullah in Lebanon.⁶⁵

One year earlier, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) was established with ideological, logistical, and military support from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. The IFLB soon tried to stage a coup against the Al Khalifa regime.⁶⁶ Although thwarted early on, the attempted coup helped establish the perception that Iran was behind unrest among Shi‘i populations in the Middle East, denying agency to Shi‘i groups, removing socioeconomic contexts, ignoring the legacy of Arab-Persian tensions, and ignoring schisms within the Shi‘i world.

Particularly for Saudi Arabia, “Continued Sunni control of Bahrain is of paramount importance,”⁶⁷ as it fears both a resurgent Iran across the Gulf and possible repercussions for its own Shi‘i population. Given the role that Saudi Arabia’s morality police has in enforcing a very strict interpretation of Islam, Bahrain has also been as a “valve for social pressures” for many Saudis since the opening of the causeway linking the two kingdoms in 1986.⁶⁸ Of course there were other intentions behind the construction of the causeway, particularly fostering economic ties and providing the Saudis easy access to Bahrain in case the regime ever needed bailing out.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, for Iran, Bahrain is less strategic than it is symbolically important. Before Bahrain became a British protectorate at the end of the 19th century, the forebears of the House of Khalifa “wrested Bahrain in 1783 from an indirect Persian rule,” and Iran has made claims on the island ever since.⁷⁰ Following the British decision to withdraw from “East of Suez” in 1970, the United Nations organized an “independence survey” or plebiscite to ascertain whether Bahrainis favored independence or living under Iranian control. At the time Iranian popular opinion regarded historical and legal claims to Bahrain as irrefutable.⁷¹ Vittorio Winspeare Giucardi, an Italian diplomat leading the UN mission, noted in his report that “the overwhelming majority of the people of Bahrain wish to gain recognition of their identity in a fully independent and sovereign State free to decide for

64. Robin Wright and Peter Baker, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Election from Iran,” *Washington Post*, December 8, 2004, <https://wapo.st/2zOqP3s>. See also US Embassy in Riyadh to US Embassy in Paris et al., “The Saudi Shi‘a: Where Do Their Loyalties Lie?” 06RIYADH3312_a, May 2, 2006, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (July 3, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06RIYADH3312_a.html.

65. James Worrall, Simon Mabon, and Gordon Clubb, *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015).

66. Hasan Tariq Alhasan, “The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain,” *The Middle East Journal* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2011), 603, doi:10.3751/65.4.15.

67. Kasbarian and Mabon, “Contested Spaces and Sectarian Narratives,” 681.

68. Simon Mabon, “The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry,” *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 87, doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00537.x.

69. Simon Henderson, “Saudi Arabia’s Fears for Bahrain,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch no. 1759 (February 17, 2011), <https://washin.st/2tZ5Uae>.

70. Husain Al-Baharna, “The Fact-Finding Mission of the United Nations Secretary-General and the Settlement of the Bahrain-Iran Dispute, May 1970,” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (July 1973): 541, doi:10.1093/iclqaj/22.3.541.

71. Roham Alvandi, “Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question, 1968–1970,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 37, no. 2 (2010): 163, doi:10.1080/13530191003794723.

itself its relations with other States,”⁷² much to the chagrin of the Iranian public.⁷³

The results of the plebiscite did not bring about any closure to the issue. In 2007 Hoseyn Shari‘atmadari, the editor of the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan*, suggested that

Bahrain is a special case among GCC countries in the Persian Gulf because Bahrain is part of the Iranian territories . . . And the main demand for the Bahrain people [*sic*] is to return its province — which was separated from Iran — to the motherland which is Islamic Iran. It is self-evident that Iran and the people of this separated province must not give up this ultimate right.⁷⁴

Shari‘atmadari’s claim caused a great deal of consternation across the Gulf, feeding into long-standing concerns about the loyalty of Bahrain’s Shi‘i population. Protesters took to the streets in front of the Iranian Embassy in Manama in anger. A US diplomatic cable from the time recalls that Shaykh ‘Isa Qasim, the most influential Shi‘i cleric in Bahrain, stressed that any “disagreement between the Bahraini people and their government is strictly an internal affair.”⁷⁵ Yet the arrangement of regional security and the penetration of Bahraini politics by foreign actors would prevent this from happening.

THE FACILITATING CONDITIONS

Questions about how to understand and engage with the protest movements dominated policy debates across Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in early 2011. While uprisings in Bahrain began on February 14, we must place the protest movements within the context of latent structural grievances across Bahrain. In the following section several such grievances will be addressed, particularly disappointments over unfulfilled promises of reform and Bahrain’s precarious economic conditions.

Upon coming to power in 1999 after the death of his father, Emir Hamad bin ‘Isa Al Khalifa immediately changed his title to king and ushered in reforms that sought to address growing political dissatisfaction across the island.⁷⁶ Hamad was initially seen as a reformer keen to bring opposition groups into the political system but was curtailed by increasing tensions with the more conservative factions of the royal family, headed by Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman.⁷⁷ Though the new constitution offered much promise, the renewed parliament in 2002 was Sunni-dominated, which resulted in allegations of election tampering.⁷⁸ These suspicions were exacerbated after the leaking

72. Note by the Secretary-General, United Nations Security Council, April 30, 1970, S/9772, 13.

73. Alvandi, “Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and the Bahrain Question,” 166.

74. Quoted in US Embassy in Manama to Iran Collective et al., “Bahrain Reacts Angrily to Iranian Territorial Claim on Bahrain,” July 12, 2007, 07MANAMA650_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (August 30, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MANAMA650_a.html.

75. US Embassy in Manama to Iran Collective et al., “Iranian FM Assures Bahrain Full Respect for Sovereignty,” July 17, 2007, 07MANAMA662_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (August 30, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MANAMA662_a.html.

76. Frederic Wehrey, “Bahrain’s Decade of Discontent,” *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (July 2013): 118, doi:10.1353/jod.2013.0054.

77. Gengler, “Royal Factionalism,” 54.

78. Lauren Frayer, “Al-Bandar Ejection Exposes Bahrain Split,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 2006, <https://wapo.st/2Hd7zkV>.

of the Al Bander report, which detailed how the government intended to rig elections and naturalize Saudi Sunnis so they could vote in future elections.⁷⁹

Despite an increased suspicion of Iranian involvement after 2011, either directly or through proxy actors such as Hizbullah,⁸⁰ there is as yet little factual evidence to support the idea that Iran is manipulating events.⁸¹ As I wrote with Sossie Kasbarian in a previous study:

Furthermore, despite the occasional discovery of domestic plots whose actors appear to possess ties with Tehran, it is important to remember the caution that many (Arabic-speaking) Saudi and Bahraini Shi'i exercise towards [Iranians] . . . It is also important to note that perhaps stronger ties are shared with coreligionists in Iraq . . .⁸²

This legacy of suspicion manifests itself in the perceptions of many Arabs across the Gulf, many of whom refer to Iranians by derogatory terms, reflecting turbulent histories.⁸³

Economic concerns have left Bahrain in a precarious situation. The country is financially weak compared to its neighbors, which recruit its intelligentsia and prominent engineers.⁸⁴ Broader economic challenges, including declining oil prices and mounting government debt, have social repercussions that, in turn, impact relations with neighboring Gulf countries.⁸⁵ Continued unrest amongst Shi'i groups in Bahrain create fears of reduced investment from Saudi Arabia, including into the Sitrah refinery of the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), which refines Saudi oil, more than 80% of the 267,000 barrels of oil per day refined at BAPCO Sitra.⁸⁶ As such, ensuring that regional audiences are sympathetic to securitization moves is paramount, and by framing the struggle as part of a broader geopolitical struggle against Iran, Bahrain sought to solidify this support. There is then little doubt that Manama had to adhere to Riyadh's redlines during the uprisings. Following this course certainly paid off: in 2011 Bahrain (along with Oman) received a bailout package of \$10 billion from the richer Gulf states, which was followed up by a second financial injection in 2018.⁸⁷

79. Wehrey, "Bahrain's Decade of Discontent," 120.

80. For example the Minister of State for Communications posted a photograph of the Hizbullah flag in a school for foreign children; see Fawaz Al Khalifa, Twitter post, August 10, 2013, 7:53 AM, https://twitter.com/fawaz_alkhalifa/status/366210824097906688.

81. Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," Chatham House, paper (June 2012): 20–21, www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/pr0612kinninmont.pdf.

82. Kasbarian and Mabon, "Contested Spaces and Sectarian Narratives," 683.

83. Justin Gengler, "How Gulf Citizens View Iran: A Survey of What the People Actually Think," *Foreign Affairs*, October 2, 2017, <https://fam.ag/2y4PBMc>; Fred Halliday, "Arabs and Persians beyond the Geopolitics of the Gulf," *CEMOTI* 22 (1996): 251–76. <https://journals.openedition.org/cemoti/143>.

84. Interview by the author with a senior BAPCO executive, May 2014, Sitra.

85. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Post-Rentier Economic Challenges," *India Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (2017): 210–26. doi:10.1177/0974928417700800.

86. Bahrain Petroleum Company, "Bapco Modernization Program (BMP)," www.bapco.net/en-us/responsibility/bapco-modernization-program.

87. Sarmad Khan and Jennifer Gnana, "Bahrain to Receive Second Economic Package from the GCC," *The National* (UAE), June 27, 2018, www.thenational.ae/business/economy/bahrain-to-receive-second-economic-package-from-the-gcc-1.744830.

AUDIENCES AND SECURITIZATION

Central to securitization processes are the audiences. While securitization acts are based upon shared values and identity between actor and audience, there is no fundamental or indeed logical restriction to domestic audiences. As McDonald suggested, this is an often underexplored yet increasingly important part of the securitization literature,⁸⁸ particularly within a region like the Middle East, where shared religious and cultural norms transcend state borders along with security calculations. Efforts to securitize Bahraini Shi'a thus seek to achieve two things: 1) to prevent the proliferation of protests across the island and to solidify the Sunni support base by framing the protests along sectarian lines and 2) to locate the struggle within broader geopolitical events, thus ensuring that regional allies remain committed to the regime. Ultimately both strategies sought to ensure the survival of the regime by speaking to a range of different audiences.

The speech acts used during the securitization process require an audience to engage with them, and typically this audience is located within the state. Yet, in this case, the House of Khalifa was speaking to a number of different audiences — domestic, regional, and international — playing upon concerns about increased Iranian involvement across the region. It is within this context that securitizing actors seek to suspend normal politics and, in doing so, to remove existential threats. Of course definitions of normal politics vary from scholar to scholar, and while many would suggest that the suspension of normal politics would involve the use of military force, securitization theory instead insists that it involves the diminishing of normative concerns around democracy and human rights — a prominent feature of Western responses to the Arab uprisings.⁸⁹

After 2003 the House of Khalifa attempted to securitize Bahraini Shi'a for a number of different audiences, both domestically and abroad, in an attempt to secure its rule. It is imperative to locate these speech acts within the broader regional security context, and in particular Bahrain's relationship with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi presence across Bahrain is tangible, with all those I interviewed for this study stressing the influence of Saudi Arabia on Bahrain's domestic affairs. While this raises questions over the extent of Bahrain's sovereignty, the House of Sa'ud's influence is undeniable. This is reflected in the fears of several Bahrainis whom I interviewed in Manama, including a representative of BAPCO, who all articulated a fear that “the Saudis would turn off the tap.”

Domestically, the need to speak to Sunni support bases, which at times respond both to an anti-Shi'i and some anti-US/anti-Western rhetoric, resulted in the government adopting a seemingly contradictory position of both requiring US support and playing on long-standing anti-imperialist sentiment, stressing American complicity in events as they developed. Indeed the Bahraini military's commander-in-chief, Shaykh Khalifa bin Ahmad Al Khalifa, gave an interview with the Egyptian daily *al-Ahram* in July 2011 in which he suggested that the protests were “a conspiracy

88. McDonald, “Securitization and the Construction of Security,” 579.

89. Simon Henderson, “Bahrain's Game of Detainee Diplomacy with Washington,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, June 1, 2016, <https://washin.st/2EUFII7>.

involving Iran with the support of the United States” aimed at challenging Arab welfare.⁹⁰ Such comments articulated fears that the US was sympathetic to opposition groups — perhaps including those Shi‘i groups involved in the democratic process — while also stressing the apparent hypocrisy of the US’s simultaneous support for normative values and its geopolitical interests.

Indeed Bahrain is a key strategic location for the US as the home of the United States’ Fifth Fleet. Moreover, as Keith Smith argued, the Persian Gulf regional security complex possesses a strategic importance for the US like no other.⁹¹ While this demonstrates the importance of a stable Khalifa dynastic rule for the US and UK, by the same token, support from influential international actors is an additional source of security and legitimacy for Bahrain. As such, stressing the complexity of protest movements within the context of foreign interference would serve to ensure that ties with Washington and London remained strong.

In addition to the US, the UK is an important strategic, cultural, and economic ally of Bahrain, stemming from a legacy of colonial involvement and reflected in the long-standing ties between the two countries’ royal families. Bahrain occupies an increasingly important role in British geostrategic calculations: since the British withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, Bahrain has been a hub of military operations in the Middle East and around the Horn of Africa,⁹² and the offer of a permanent naval base to the UK in exchange for a lack of criticism during the uprisings has undeniably helped smooth over relations.⁹³ Moreover, in light of Britain’s June 2016 decision by referendum to leave the European Union, known as Brexit, the need to ensure access to Gulf markets was of paramount importance — while Bahrain is small relative to Qatar and the UAE, it is a strong economic ally.⁹⁴ Bahrain’s cultivation of relations with Britain led UN special rapporteur on torture Juan Méndez to suggest in 2016 that Britain — then a member of the UN Human Rights Council — had not put enough pressure on Bahrain to allow him to enter. For Méndez the “UK has a responsibility to tell Bahrain they have to invite me.”⁹⁵

Others have used a largely sympathetic British press to stress the threat posed by Iran. Writing in the British daily the *Telegraph*, Bahraini ambassador to the UK Shaykh Fawaz bin Muhammad Al Khalifa argued that the threat posed by Iran-backed Shi‘i militias was greater than that posed by the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Ambassador Fawaz also cautioned against the “expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia

90. Quoted in Justin Gengler, “The Other Side of Radicalization in Bahrain,” *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/07/15/the-other-side-of-radicalization-in-bahrain/>.

91. Keith Smith, “Realist Foreign Policy Analysis with a Twist: The Persian Gulf Security Complex and the Rise and Fall of Dual Containment,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3 (July 2014): 315–33. doi:10.1111/fpa.12084.

92. Interview by the author with a British Embassy official, May 2013, Manama.

93. Jamie Merrill, “Royal Navy Base Construction Begins in Bahrain as Britain Seeks Return to ‘East of Suez,’” *Independent*, November 1, 2015, <https://ind.pn/2EV6afe>.

94. House of Lords, Select Committee on International Relations, “The Middle East: Time for a New Realism,” HL Paper 159 (May 2, 2017). <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201617/ldselect/ldintrel/159/159.pdf>. Note: I served as specialist advisor to the committee and was party to a number of evidence sessions and discussions about the importance of economic ties after Brexit.

95. Alan White, “UN Torture Expert Says Britain Should Pressure Bahrain to Allow Him to Visit,” *BuzzFeed*, June 1, 2016, <https://bzfd.it/2HrWYSu>.

establishment,” which he blamed for unrest in Bahrain, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Yemen.⁹⁶ The UK’s and US’s geopolitical interests in Bahrain undeniably have serious ramifications for the security of the island. Given Bahrain’s position in the Gulf region, the importance of international actors in shaping events in Bahrain should not be understated.

AUDIENCES AND CRITICAL FRIENDS

In the immediate aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Washington supported protesters, reflecting broad US support for democratic norms, human rights, and the rule of law. Yet this support would not last.⁹⁷ What we see in the following sections is how a move toward a more norm-based form of international politics under the administration of President Barack Obama — the *new* normal — initially led to the administration to support protesters across Bahrain. Yet as events unfolded, securitization moves by both Bahraini and Saudi authorities pushed the US toward a suspension of the *new* normal and a return to the *old* normal of realpolitik.

Before his election Obama had declared willingness to reshape US relations with historical foes: “I will meet not just with our friends, but with our enemies, because I remember what [President] John F. Kennedy said, that we should never negotiate out of fear, but we should never fear to negotiate.”⁹⁸ This position was hardly surprising for a constitutional law scholar; indeed, prior to his election, Obama exerted a great deal of energy stressing his realist position on international affairs. Upon taking office, however, a more nuanced engagement with the Middle East emerged. Obama opened dialogue with Iran, and in a widely broadcast speech at Cairo University, he spoke of shared interests between the US and the countries of the region. Attempting to repair damage done by the previous administration’s “war on terror,” Obama articulated a desire

to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles — principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.⁹⁹

The Arab uprisings quickly provided Obama with an opportunity to put this position into practice, yet he quickly got caught between national interests and normative values.¹⁰⁰ After initial consternation at how to respond to the uprisings, the administration firmly aligned itself with protesters in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and their project to

96. Fawaz bin Mohammad Al Khalifa, “The Gulf States Are Stuck between Isil and Iran,” *Telegraph*, January 21, 2016, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/12113355/The-Gulf-states-are-stuck-between-Isil-and-Iran.html.

97. See Simon Mabon, “Aiding Revolution: Wikileaks, Communication and the ‘Arab Spring’ in Egypt,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 10 (2013): 1,854, doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.851901.

98. “Part 3 of CNN Democratic Presidential Debate,” *CNN*, January 21, 2008, <https://cnn.it/2TCPtih>.

99. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09,” June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

100. Fawaz A. Gerges, “The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment?” *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (Mar. 2013): 299–323. doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12019.

topple Egyptian president Husni Mubarak — a long-standing US ally — much to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia.

Following events in Egypt, Obama articulated support for the democratic movement in Bahrain. In February 2011 Obama argued that Bahraini stability would be ensured by “respecting the universal rights of the people of Bahrain and reforms that meet the aspirations of Bahrain.”¹⁰¹ Speaking that May, Obama stressed that “we have insisted both publicly and privately that mass arrests and brute force are at odds with the universal rights of Bahrain’s citizens, and . . . such steps will not make legitimate calls for reform go away.” He also stated that “Shia must never have their mosques destroyed in Bahrain.” Obama further argued that

The only way forward is for the government and opposition to engage in a dialogue, and you can’t have a real dialogue when parts of the peaceful opposition are in jail. The government must create the conditions for dialogue, and the opposition must participate to forge a just future for all Bahrainis.¹⁰²

Such comments surprised many, including the House of Khalifa. Later the same year Obama called on “the government and the main opposition bloc — the Wifaq — to pursue a meaningful dialogue that brings peaceful change that is responsive to the people.”¹⁰³

It was not only US leaders who were critical. Speaking in Kuwait in February 2011, British prime minister David Cameron also stressed that

As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability, rather the reverse. Our interest lies in upholding our values — in insisting on the right to peaceful protest, in freedom of speech and the internet, in freedom of assembly and the rule of law. But these are not just our values, but the entitlement of people everywhere; of people in Tahrir Square as much as [London’s] Trafalgar Square.

So whenever and wherever violence is used against peaceful demonstrators, we must not hesitate to condemn it. . . .

That’s why I think political and economic reform in the Arab world is not just good in its own right but it’s also a key part of the antidote to the extremism that threatens the security of us all.¹⁰⁴

Such comments from world leaders were supported by the BICI, which delivered a brutal dissection of the regime response to the uprisings along with a failure to administer lasting political, economic, or social reform.

101. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Statement by the President on Bahrain,” February 27, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/27/statement-president-bahrain>.

102. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

103. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” September 21, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/21/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

104. Government of the United Kingdom, “Prime Minister’s Speech to the National Assembly Kuwait,” February 22, 2011, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-to-the-national-assembly-kuwait.

Despite these strong messages during and immediately after the uprising, the US and UK lines on Bahrain became weaker and far less prominent as time progressed. A year later the Bahraini case was relegated to receiving only a two-paragraph statement from the White House Press Secretary, demonstrating the extent to which the uprisings in Bahrain had lost importance in Washington.¹⁰⁵ This change of direction allowed the administration to use a loophole to sell arms to Bahrain in spite of congressional concerns while investing another \$500 million in military spending on the island.¹⁰⁶

SUSPENDING THE NEW NORMAL

Given that democracy, human rights, and the rule of law had been such a prominent part of the Obama administration's foreign policy discourse, and that US and UK officials had been critical of events in Bahrain, the shift back to prioritizing geopolitical interests requires exploration. In this section I seek to show that Bahraini and Saudi government securitization efforts resulted in the suspension of "new normal" politics amid concerns over broader geopolitical changes, particularly the escalation of events in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen and the US and UK's desire to achieve a nuclear deal with Iran.

The success of these securitization efforts asserted themselves quickly. By 2012 a defense agreement had been signed between the UK and Bahrain. In celebration of the repaired relationship, Crown Prince Salman praised the British government, saying:

You have stood head and shoulders above others. You have engaged all stakeholders. You have kept doors open to all sides in what was a very difficult and sometimes unclear situation. Your engagement and your help in police reform and judicial reform, your direct engagement with the leadership of the Kingdom of Bahrain and with members of the opposition, has saved lives, and for that I will be personally eternally grateful. Thank you.¹⁰⁷

The UK government's "reward" for standing by its ally was the gift of a new naval base and eternal thanks, which translated into the continuation of a long-term British presence in Bahrain.

It is clear that securitization efforts attempted to suspend the US and UK's "new normal" politics — the open championing of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law — and return to the old form of normal politics whereby foreign policy agendas were driven by geopolitical concerns. By framing the protests as part of a wider Iranian effort to alter the geopolitical construction of the region, the House of Khalifa was able to assuage Western concerns about the treatment of protesters.

Regional perceptions of perfidious Iranian interference across Shi'i communities only served to support such narratives. For the US and UK, finding a means of balanc-

105. White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Statement by the Press Secretary on the Situation in Bahrain," April 22, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/11/statement-press-secretary-situation-bahrain>.

106. Josh Rogin, "Obama Administration Using Loophole to Quietly Sell Arms Package to Bahrain," *Foreign Policy*, January 27, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/01/27/obama-administration-using-loophole-to-quietly-sell-arms-package-to-bahrain/>.

107. Available at "Crown Prince of Bahrain Opens Manama Dialogue 2012," YouTube clip, 25:47, posted by Bahdiplomatic, December 10, 2012, <https://youtu.be/63S93Yom3rQ>.

ing the agendas of all actors while adhering to normative agendas appeared to be nearly impossible. Securitization efforts thus gave the US and UK cover to backtrack on previous commitments to human rights and democracy by reframing events in terms of geopolitical significance. Indeed British foreign secretary William Hague had reacted to the storming of Pearl Roundabout by stating that Britain strongly opposed “any interference in the affairs of Bahrain by other nations . . . ”¹⁰⁸

While very little evidence is publicly available to support the argument that Iran was behind the uprisings in Bahrain, historical precedents have helped to cultivate this view. In my interviews with him, Ambassador Iain Lindsay was keen to stress Iranian involvement, while other embassy officials suggested Iranian complicity in the development of a bomb-making factory in 2013.¹⁰⁹ This demonstrates the success of the Khalifa securitization strategy. In addition, British concerns over Iranian “manipulation” in Bahrain are documented in a report by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office entitled “Why the Gulf Matters”:

The difficult relationship between Bahrain and Iran is underpinned by suspicion and Bahraini claims of Iranian interference in their domestic affairs through links with the Bahraini Shia community. Since the Arab Spring began, the Government of Bahrain has claimed that Iran is providing support to dissident groups and promoting violence. It has been difficult to substantiate these claims and we note that the BICI report on the events of spring 2011 found no evidence to support them. However, we are concerned that Iran and other foreign actors have moved from exploiting the political and propaganda opportunities offered by continuing unrest in Bahrain to offering more direct support to some radical Bahraini Shia opposition elements which are pursuing increasingly violent tactics.¹¹⁰

While Saudi Arabia has been at the vanguard of efforts to securitize the Iranian threat,¹¹¹ it has not been alone in attempting to securitize Iran to a US audience. US diplomatic cables document the extent to which long-standing grievances among Bahrain’s Shi‘i population have manifested in political unrest across the island. Sectarian divisions become a self-perpetuating truth, spreading into economic and political concerns.¹¹² If one explores diplomatic cables pertaining to Iraq and

108. Quoted in “Bahrain Violence: UK Voices Concern,” *BBC*, February 17, 2011, <https://bbc.in/2NWTQPL>.

109. Interviews, British and American officials, Manama and London, 2013.

110. UK Parliament, House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, “Written Evidence from The Foreign and Commonwealth Office: Why the Gulf Matters,” November 19, 2012, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmfa/88/88we14.htm>.

111. Perhaps the best example can be found in a 2008 cable that quotes Saudi ambassador to Washington ‘Adil al-Jubayr’s recalling King ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa‘ud’s calls for the US “to cut off the head of the snake.” See Charge d’ Affaires Michael Gfoeller to Iran Collective et al., “Saudi King Abdullah and Senior Princes on Saudi Policy toward Iraq,” April 20, 2008, 08RIYADH649_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (November 30, 2010), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08RIYADH649_a.html.

112. Charge d’ Affaires Christopher Henzel to US Embassy in Baghdad et al., “Scenesetter for General Petraeus’ Visit to Bahrain,” July 25, 2008, 08MANAMA496_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (February 15, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MANAMA496_a.html.

Saudi Arabia from the late 2000s, one finds similar documentation of the threats posed by Iran.¹¹³

At that time the Iranian nuclear program was of great concern to many. A 2009 diplomatic cable reports King Hamad expressing the idea that the “program must be stopped . . . The danger of letting it go on is greater than the danger of stopping it.”¹¹⁴ While China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and the US — known collectively as the P5+1 — would eventually reach a nuclear deal with Iran in late 2015, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Bahrain and others were increasingly concerned about the apparent rapprochement between Iran and the international community.

In 2007 outgoing US Ambassador to Bahrain William Monroe analyzed the nature of Bahraini-Iranian relations, suggesting that

For the government and ruling family, the existential threat is Iran and its historical claims to Bahrain. Iran’s increased aggressiveness under President [Mahmud] Ahmadinejad, coupled with perceived Iranian inroads in Iraq, have only heightened Bahraini concerns. The government is only too happy to have us focus on potential threats from Iran and their alleged Shia allies in Bahrain. In contrast, Sunnis, even Sunni extremists, form the base of support against a potential Shia/Iranian threat. . . . But our future cooperation will continue to be affected by two factors: Bahraini confidence that, in this small island country, the authorities can stay one step ahead of and deal with any extremists planning a local operation; and Bahraini reluctance to move against or alienate the Sunni Islamist community at a time of heightened concern about Iran and rising Shia influence in the region.¹¹⁵

The Bahraini regime’s position remains the same, balancing between an alliance with Sunni Islamists to retain its own legitimacy among Sunni Bahrainis while also ensuring that attacks against US or Bahraini targets do not occur. It is clear then that regime efforts to securitize Shi’a were for a number of audiences, both domestic and international, yet designed to ensure their survival.

THE VELVET GLOVE

Supplementing such efforts to suspend the new normal, the House of Khalifa also sought to shift the narrative away from the government’s repressive tactics, embarking on a public relations campaign to expand Bahrain’s soft power.¹¹⁶ Hosting a Formula 1 race proved successful, as did hiring American supermodel and reality

113. Simon Mabon and Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 64–73.

114. Adam Ereli to US Embassy in Kabul et al., “General Petraeus with King Hamad: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, NATO AWACS, Energy,” November 4, 2009, 09MANAM642_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (November 30, 2010), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09MANAMA642_a.html.

115. William T. Monroe to US Embassy in Cairo et al., “Future of Bahrain: Ambassador’s Parting Thoughts,” July 19, 2007, 07MANAMA669_a, available in WikiLeaks, *Public Library of US Diplomacy* (May 4, 2011), https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07MANAMA669_a.html.

116. Soft power refers to the ability to get an actor to do what you want them to do through influence and attraction rather than coercion. See Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 153–71. doi:10.2307/1148580.

television star Kim Kardashian to visit Manama in December 2012 to open a local branch of the American dessert drink chain Millions of Milkshakes. While in the country, Kardashian shared positive posts on her social media about Bahrain, endorsing the government and royal family and commenting on the beauty of the country to her millions of followers.¹¹⁷

A number of public relations firms were hired to shape Bahrain's global image. The UK-based firm 3G Communications was hired for £1.5 million (\$2.0 million) by the Information Affairs Authority of Bahrain to create a "media campaign to support the position of the Kingdom of Bahrain in the international community."¹¹⁸ The Washington, DC-based firm Qorvis was subcontracted by British PR firm Bell Pottinger to frame the opposition negatively;¹¹⁹ between October 2011 and March 2012, Qorvis spent \$9,150 on advertising on the social media site Facebook.¹²⁰ Qorvis was also responsible for a number of (now defunct) sites that sought to promote government-friendly narratives about the island.¹²¹

In addition the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry produced a film called *Turning Points* to counter the critical Al Jazeera documentary *Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark*, which documented the plight of the Shi'i protesters involved in the 2011 protests.¹²² *Turning Points* sought to frame Bahrain in a positive light, condemning protesters for using violence.¹²³ It also drew parallels between the protests and the Iranian Revolution, further propagating the narrative of Iranian influence in the protests.¹²⁴

117. Associated Press, "Protests Flare in Bahrain for Kim Kardashian Visit," *USA Today*, December 1, 2012, <https://usat.ly/TBAkUD>; for an example of her social media, see her 10:57 a.m. Twitter post from December 1, 2012, at <https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/274950396861095937>.

118. Kingdom of Bahrain, Tender Board, "بيانات عن المناقصات والمزايدات التي تم ترسيتهها من قبل مجلس" ["Statements of bids and tenders awarded by the Tender Board for July 2011"], 11n97, available on DocumentCloud, uploaded by Fahad Desmukh, www.documentcloud.org/documents/406909-bahrain-tenders-jul2011.html.

119. Bahrain Watch, PR Watch: Qorvis Communications, <https://bahrainwatch.org/pr/qorvis.php>; Bahrain News Agency, "Strong Election Vote in Bahrain Despite Patches of Unrest," *Cision*, September 24, 2011, www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/strong-election-vote-in-bahrain-despite-patches-of-unrest-130504543.html.

120. Safia, "US PR Firm Spends \$9,150 on Facebook Ads to Promote Bahrain Govt," *Blottr*, June 13, 2012, available on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120617232805/http://www.blottr.com/world/breaking-news/us-pr-firm-spent-9150-facebook-ads-promote-bahrain-govt> (June 17, 2012).

121. See captures from the Internet Archive Wayback Machine of the following sites: Bahrain Facts, <https://web.archive.org/web/20141217033825/http://bahrainfacts.org/> (December 17, 2014); Explore Bahrain, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150323023357/http://explorebahrain.org:80/> (March 23, 2015); Bahrain Stories, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140803201735/http://www.bahrainstories.com/> (August 3, 2014).

122. Bahrain Watch, "PR Watch: Cloud Media Entertainment," <https://bahrainwatch.org/pr/cloud-media-entertainment.php>; Al Jazeera, *Bahrain: Shouting in the Dark*, June 19, 2012, www.aljazeera.com/programmes/2011/08/201184144547798162.html.

123. Available as "Turning Points: One Month that Changed a Nation," YouTube clip, 50:04, posted by FrogspawnCreative, September 20, 2013, <https://youtu.be/afuLX5QDo24>.

124. Project on Middle East Democracy, "POMED Notes: Turning Point," February 17, 2012, www.pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/POMED-Notes-Turning-Point.pdf.

THE END OF THE BATTLE OF BAHRAIN

Bahrainis remain trapped within two seemingly existential crises: first, the House of Khalifa's struggle for survival, and second, the wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The development of a regime "master narrative" that securitized the Shi'i "Other" heightened divisions among Bahrainis both on the island and in the diaspora, reflective of broader trends across the Middle East. As a consequence, friends have become increasingly divided, with disputes taking place on Facebook along sectarian lines.¹²⁵ The Saudi-Iranian geopolitical rivalry is increasingly being played out along sectarian lines, subsuming communal identities into broader trends. Of course, given the transnational nature of identities across the region and the challenges facing state sovereignty, where ethno-religious identities transcend state borders, domestic actions will have geopolitical implications. Furthermore, the transnational nature of these identities means the domestic is also shaped by the international.

The Bahraini regime's placing of a velvet glove over its iron fist has allowed it to crush much of the opposition within the country, while also maintaining support from its foreign allies. The soft power strategy employed by the monarchy has assuaged negative perceptions of the regime, and when framed within broader geopolitical issues, Bahrain is seen as an important strategic ally. Ultimately, though, the legacy of the 2011 events will be far stronger as Bahrain becomes increasingly divided along several different lines. The political space opposition groups can operate within has been removed, and opposition groups have been framed within a broader sectarian narrative that erodes the agency of these actors. It is in this context that elections took place in November 2018, resulting in a parliament devoid of opposition parties, many of which had been banned from participating. Others, such as the Al-Wefaq Islamic Society, had already been dissolved amid the prosecution of its leadership.

Securitization strategies were undertaken for a number of audiences. Historical conditions allowed narratives of perfidious Iranian interference to find traction among many already suspicious of the Islamic Republic. Yet, despite the United States' apparent move toward a new form of "normal" politics under the administration of Barack Obama, securitization strategies were successfully used to advocate for the need to return to the old "normal" of US foreign policy, which had been driven by geopolitical aspirations.

Securitization strategies have framed events as part of a broader narrative of Iranian manipulation that has found traction among many, while events in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have exacerbated such fears. We can see a twofold process of securitization occurring in the Bahraini case, with both processes designed to ensure the survival of the House of Khalifa. The first is framing Shi'i protesters as agents of Iran and thus diminishing indigenous agency, a strategy that was regularly used by the ruling family throughout the late 20th century. The second draws upon geopolitical concerns about Iranian aspirations along with the need to maintain the support of the US, for whom normative concerns were sacrificed at the altar of security and survival amid the return to the old "normal."



125. Kasbarian and Mabon, "Contested Spaces and Sectarian Narratives," 689.