

# Bahrain and Axis of Resistance: Geopolitical Implications for Iran

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## Abstract

In the late 2010 and early 2011, the Arab Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa underwent developments which were unforeseen and shocking in the view of global observers. The growth and spread of popular protests caused some rulers in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen to be dethroned in the form of a domino; however, in Bahrain, the popular protests faced severe squash by the Al-Khalifa rule. Nonetheless, revolutionary movements in Bahrain are of a long record in the country and the demonstration on 14 Feb. 2011 was the onset of geopolitics of resistance in the state. Despite Shia majority against the ruling minority, the revolutionary movement came to failure for a number of reasons including Bahrain's geographical location and the revolutionists' aspirations were unrealized. In the meantime, the present study aims to clarify the Bahrain's geographical location in the geopolitics of resistance in the country and its impact on the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The outcome of the study suggests that being in energy transit line and proximity to energy resources, the island location and the strategic value of the country, the 5th US Fleet deployment, being in the Persian Gulf and its neighborhood to Iran and Saudi Arabia affect the Bahrain's geopolitics of resistance and breed negative consequences for Iran.

**Keywords:** *geographical location, geopolitics of Bahrain, geopolitics of resistance, Iran*

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## **Introduction**

The widespread developments which occurred in Sept. 18, 2010 following Muhammad Buazizi's self-immolation, the Tunisian street vendor, in protest to the ruling cabinet's policies, affected many countries in the Middle East and Africa which have continued up to now. These developments abysmally affected the state policies at home and abroad and also the international system in a way that it stirred the regional and supra-regional actors to act and take position as well as seek the interest of themselves and their allies in shaping the new regional order with varied and occasionally adversary strategies. The geopolitical developments in the Middle East and north Africa highly affected the role and position of Shiites which intensified their resistance against political orders and reduced their social isolation. Likewise, it paved the social ground for maximum political movement and recreation of action by Shiites.

In the meantime, the island of Bahrain with her geostrategic situation in the Persian Gulf has always been into the consideration of regional and supra-regional powers. On the other hand, the Bahraini majority of population are Shiite who are under the Sunni minority rule that this has encouraged them to play a bigger part in administering the country. Although the protests in Bahrain are of a long-standing and fundamental record and stem from the incremental fissure between the government and society and the discriminatory policies adopted by Al-Khalifa dynasty, this time, the Bahraini Shiites were inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt and launched their demonstration on Feb. 14, 2011. Gradually and with the height of popular unrest and

demonstration, the number of protesters reached the peak on 22 Feb. in a way that more than 100 thousand of protesters gathered in LoLo square together with old factions and opposites. Consequently, the Bahraini government severely cracked down protests and sentenced the outstanding opposite leaders to long detainment. The developments in Bahrain, in various periods particularly in 2011, herald the geopolitics of resistance as a concept which has been developed by the Shiite majority against the ruling minority; however, because of different causes including the geographical location, the squash of the Shiite for political stability and maintenance of the status quo, was adopted by the rulers. By the same token, this article seeks to deal with the impact of Bahrain's geographical location on the geopolitics of resistance as a question; to that end, it exploits description-analysis as regards the matter and gathers data on desk and refers to Persian and Latin books, articles and internet sites. Similarly, the main purpose of the study is to account for the geographical-geopolitical location in Bahraini geopolitics of resistance and the possible consequences for Iran, which the outcome of the study suggests that the location of Bahrain as an island, the 5th US Fleet, being in energy transit line and in proximity to energy resources, being in the Persian Gulf and neighboring Iran and Saudi Arabia are of the factors which affect the geopolitics of resistance in Bahrain, and despite the Shiite majority in Bahrain, Shiites have failed to reach their political aspirations, bringing up negative consequences for Iran.

### **I. Bahrain and Axis of Resistance**

Bahrain as one of the most considerable Shiite centers in the world could be historically introduced as the third Shiite center after Iran and Iraq. The connection and interest of the islanders in the Shiite religion is so strong that among the people of the peninsula and the coasts of the Persian Gulf, the word "Bahraini" is used synonymously with the word Shiite, and the Sunni minority on the island is called "Ahl al-Bahrain", not Bahraini.

The Sunni population of Bahrain are mostly Maliki and some Hanbali. Many of Bahrain's Sunnis are Arabs or the Arabs who once lived on the southern coast of Iran. Despite the numerical majority of Shiites in the country, the government rests in the hands of the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty. The system and the type of government in Bahrain is an absolute autocracy, which since the 18th century has been in the hands of the Al-Khalifa dynasty (Mohammadi, 2007).

Making up seventy percent of the population, Shiites are mostly from the working class, and Sunnis often make up the urban population and hold the government power. Shiites, on the other hand, are economically poor and politically marginalized. The composition of the Royal Court, the National Guard, the Intelligence Service and the National Security Service is based solely on the principle of "only Sunni". Shiites only make up 3% of Bahrain's Interior Ministry and Army (Pankraton Ko, 2011).

Bahrain, both before and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, has been the center of Shiite resurrection in the Persian Gulf states, and the people this country, particularly the Shiites have never tasted justice and freedom over the past few centuries. The Bahraini revolution, which follows developments in other Middle Eastern countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Jordan, Yemen, and Libya, is the continuation of a massive wave of awakening in Islamic countries, which particularly stirred the rapid and violent reaction of Al-Khalifa and other neighboring Arab countries for suppression. The Bahraini Shiite groups call for fundamental reforms in all political and social spheres, specially in the following areas: The overthrow of the Al-Khalifa monarchy and the dissolution of the cabinet of ministers and the formation of an elected parliament; Indiscrimination to Shiites and their enjoyment of equal political, economic and social rights and their freedom to practice their religion and worship; Release political prisoners and intensify the fight against corruption at all levels; Lifting the ban on the formation of politico-religious parties and activities and ensuring the freedom of expression and the press;

Abolition of political citizenship granted to foreigners and stopping the process of granting citizenship based on religious and political goals; Withdrawal of foreign forces, specially the Saudi forces from Bahrain (Akhavan Kazemi & Shah Qale'h, 2014: 22).

With the outbreak of the Arab revolutions, political protests in Bahrain intensified against the rule of minority over majority. The protests culminated on Feb. 14, 2011, which was met with an inappropriate response from Al-Khalifa and violence by Bahraini security forces. The Bahraini government tried to quell the protests by imprisoning protesters, torturing detainees, and prosecuting them in repressive military courts; however, the actions were opposed by human rights groups (Yung & Roylance, 2012: 21).

As the protests continued and politico-religious figures joined the protesters, a nationwide political movement was launched in Bahrain, which gradually promoted its demands from reform to revolution; but for some reason, the Shiites of Bahrain were unable to meet their revolutionary demands and goals, because the consequences of regime change in Bahrain overturned the geopolitical structure of the Middle East, specially in the Persian Gulf, and increased the geopolitical weight of the Shiites in the region.

**Bahrain's Strategic Value and US Fifth Fleet:** Bahrain, as an island position in the Persian Gulf, has always been into the attention of regional and supra-regional powers. Noam Chomsky attributes Bahrain's importance to two factors: a) its long-standing geostrategic-geopolitical position, lacking a strong defensive system, its propensity for powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia, and its geostrategic position as an island in the Persian Gulf which has always been into the attention of regional and supra-regional powers; b) enjoying a %70 Shiite population (Touti & Doustmohammadi, 2013: 214).

The stationing of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, Bahrain's geographical proximity to Iran, and the subservience of its Sunni rulers to US have led to US-Bahrain very close relations, and the

ruling system in Bahrain has always been a US ally in the region; accordingly, any change in the region could completely affect the interests of the United States and her allies (Adami et al, 2012: 148).

In Dec. 1971, four months after Bahrain's secession from Iran, following an agreement between the US embassy and the Bahraini regime, the base was ceded to the United States for a total of 25 million Sterling lira along with using all facilities at Al-Jafir Port, airport, Salman Port and other port facilities. The base is the US intelligence hub and the leading US naval command center between the Philippines and the Mediterranean, and also the Middle East Special Command Center.

From 1985 onwards, US activities at the base gradually increased in a way that the United States evacuated all military equipment in Bahrain in 1987 and increased the number of warships and military personnel in the emirate. In addition to the naval base, the US possesses two other military bases in Bahrain, al-Muharraq and al-Hamla, both of which are at the disposal of the US Rapid Deployment Force. Likewise, more than 150 US Navy advisers with their affiliates, and about 3,000 US marines are in Bahrain together with their families (Saif Afjaei, 2002: 20).

Beyond hosting the US Navy headquarters, Bahrain was part of the US-led coalition that ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1991. Bahrain allowed 17,500 troops and 250 US fighter jets to be stationed at Sheikh Isa Airbase to take part in the Desert Storm offensive against Iraqi forces. The US Command has been stationed off the coast of Bahrain since war against Iraq in 1991. Formerly, the US naval base in Bahrain was a command ship that docked mostly in Bahrain and it was technically stationed offshore. Afterwards, Bahrain and the United States decided to recognize the development of their cooperation by signing the Defense Cooperation Agreement on Oct. 28, 1991 for a 10-year period (Katzman, 2014: 22-24).

The agreement not only provides US access to Bahraini airbases, but also calls for consultation with Bahrain if her

security falls into danger, and includes training of Bahraini forces (Hajjar, 2002: 27). In the 1990s, under a Bahrain-US cooperation agreement, about 1,300 US troops were stationed in Bahrain to deter Saddam Hussein. Bahrain also hosts UN international headquarters. Weapons inspectors in Iraq from 1991 to 1998 and the US-led multinational deterrent forces that enforced UN sanctions on Iraq from 1991 to 2003 were stationed in the country. US military bases in Bahrain have two special features. Its naval aspect is very clear, which is highly substantial in the important strategic region of the Persian Gulf, and from the air point of view, it should be taken into account that the US airforce deploys its fighters to Afghanistan and Iraq through airbases in Bahrain. It deploys and manages its air operations from this base, accounting for why the Pentagon's vital lever is at Bahrain's military base. Bahrain is more important than any other country in which the United States has a military base (Adami, 2012: 165). As of March to April 2003, the US fighter jets flew from Sheikh Isa Airbase in both Afghanistan and Iraq operations. In Jan. 2009, Bahrain assigned 100 police officers to Afghanistan on a two-year mission to assist a NATO/ US-led stabilization operation, extended until the end of NATO mission in 2014 (Katzman, 2014: 22-24).

Bahrain, on the other hand, has always defined its part in the regional policies adopted by the United States. With the beginning of Trump's presidency, relations between the United States and Bahrain entered a new phase after a period of tension. In a meeting with the King of Bahrain, Trump described the expansion of US-Bahraini relations as a sign of a new movement and forgetting the tensions of the Obama era. The increase in the level of relations between the two countries and the approval of the US Senate for the sale of an arms package worth \$ 3.8 billion to Manama, indicates the issue (<http://irna.ir/fa/news/82659371>).

The United States is well aware that if major revolutions or political upheavals like the that in Iran take place in the littoral Persian Gulf states, it could easily shake the US position in the



region; hence, it supports the Bahraini government as the most likely option for such an event; because in case of regime change in Bahrain, the US interests will fall into danger by the new government and the bilateral politico-security relations will turn over (Afzali et al., 2013: 221). The unrest and uprising of the Bahraini people has set difficult conditions for the United States, confronted with an unstable ally. Thus, the loss of supervision and control over Bahrain means the loss of control over the Persian Gulf. In the event of the fall of the Al-Khalifa dynasty, given the presence of a majority of Shiites in Bahrain in the next government, the Shiites will undoubtedly take a larger part, and the United States is concerned that the rise of Shiites in Bahrain will end her military presence in the Persian Gulf.

**Geographical Proximity to Iran:** Despite the Bahraini opposition's deep-rooted demands for change, neither the regime has changed nor the power has been equally distributed; in contrast, officials in the Persian Gulf Cooperative Council (PGCC) exploit the old tactic of blaming Iran for interfering in their home affairs. This tactic is employed for two purposes: first, the (Sunni) regime, combining the issue of Shiite loyalty and Iranian intervention as a threat, delegitimizes any activity of the opposition (Shiites) who call for reform; second, introducing the protesters as infidels to the Bahraini government and playing with the traditional classic card of sectarianism, the regime seeks to prevent the emergence of a cohesive and united opposition. Both of these tactics were frequently used in Bahrain and other Persian Gulf states in 2011 (Coates Ulrichsen, 2013: 9). Accordingly, Bahraini leaders accuse Iran of complicity in the protests and claim that Tehran is training, arming and financing Bahraini Shiites directly or with the cooperation of Lebanese Hezbollah. In Oct. 2012, for example, Bahrain summoned the charge d'affaires of the Iranian embassy in Manama for interfering in the affairs of the country and for believing that Iran was stirring up unrest and sectarianism in Bahrain. Shortly afterwards, the US secretary of state Hillary Clinton stated: "We share the view that Iran's

activities in the Persian Gulf are aimed at undermining peace and stability” (Pletka & Kagan, 2014: 36).

Thus, one of the US tactics is to highlight Bahrain's position in Saudi foreign policy and Iran's threshold of success in establishing a Shiite state in Bahrain. The military presence of Saudi Arabia until the end of the elimination of the foreign threat shows that Saudi Arabia is affected by the propaganda attacks of Iranophobia and Shiism (Delavarpour Aqdam & Fardipour, 2011: 6).

Undoubtedly, the recent developments in Bahrain have led to the qualitative growth of Shiites in the field of indirect political participation and widespread civil disobedience. This has highlighted the role of the Shiites in Bahrain's existing order, and it is clear that if the regime in the Bahrain falls into the hands of the Shiites, its wave will spread to all states in the region, including Saudi Arabia. Saudi Shiites live in the strategic oil-rich areas of Qatif and are of geographical-emotional ties to Bahrain's Shiites (map No. 1). This issue will create a serious change in the Shiite geopolitics in the region, leading to the adjustment of Sunni governments in the region, which will inevitably make the future new governments closer to the Islamic Republic of Iran. The importance of these developments is for the strong presence of the Shiite element and its impacts on the form of power and politics in the Persian Gulf; therefore, Iran's strengthening and supporting Shiite element in the Middle East is not only to strengthen ideological grounds, but also to strategize the part of Shiites in the regional power and political developments, and subsequently, to consolidate and stabilize Iranian position and clout in the areas of competition and influence in the Middle East, specially in the Persian Gulf (Adami, 2012: 161-162).

Fulfilling the demands of the revolutionaries and the gradual democratization of Bahrain will further strengthen the considerations of the Bahraini Muslim nation in the field of foreign policy, leading to more independent and indigenous approaches to foreign policy orientations. In addition, the

legitimacy and domestic support in Bahrain will enable the government to operate more independently in foreign policy without relying on foreign powers, and to overcome obstacles to establishing normal and friendly relations with Iran. In the short to long term, these conditions will allow Iran to experience a moderate and even friendly government in its periphery, which is less affected by the West, and will improve Iran's environmental security situation and bring about great changes in coalitions and politico-security arrangements in the region. With Bahrain's withdrawing from the coalition of Western allied states, we could gradually see a kind of arrangement in which actors such as the United States, the Zionist regime and Saudi Arabia will take a minor part (Hatami, 2013: 21).



Map 1

Source: [www.maps.google.com](http://www.maps.google.com)

**Proximity to Energy Resources:** Oil has always been a major driving force behind foreign interests, the balance of domestic and regional power, and territorial disputes in the Persian Gulf (Le Billon & El Khatib, 2004: 109). The major resources of oil and gas in the Persian Gulf littoral states has aroused the sensitivity of political actors to political developments in Bahrain. In addition to the fact that world powers have always sought to ensure the

continuity of energy flow and prevent price fluctuations by pursuing conservative and detention policies, energy resources within countries have also been a factor in adopting certain policies towards citizens.

Shiites make up more than 61% of the population in the Persian Gulf states (Leigh & Vukovic, 2010: 11); however, some sources estimate the 80 percent of the native population in the Persian Gulf region. On the other hand, about 30 percent of oil production and half of its reserves are in the possession of the Persian Gulf states (Luomi, 2008: 27-29). In addition to the West's concern about the concentration of energy reserves and production in the region, what has caused concern in Western countries and governments in the region is the overlap and geographical compatibility of oil fields and the concentration of Shiites. At the regional level, oil-rich countries seek to prevent ethnic, religious and minority groups from dominating the oil fields; this is because, in addition to reducing the central government's power over ethnic-religious areas, it has the potential to facilitate their process of independence and autonomy. Saudi Arabia is tightening its grip on the Shiite minority in the oil-rich areas of Asharqia in this regard, as most of Saudi Arabia's oil is extracted from the region's fields. Although Bahrain produces little oil, its location in the Persian Gulf and proximity to Saudi Arabia (as Bahrain and the eastern regions of Saudi Arabia are geopolitically complementary), have given it a favorable geopolitical position.

Oil has been one of the influential components of US and Western policy towards the developments in the Middle East in a way that despite issues such as the need to democratize the region and fight terrorism, oil-supplying countries have been an exception to this rule. It is clear that in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, several Saudi citizens were identified as the perpetrators; but the West's policy towards the country did not change significantly. Instead, the countries threatening the flow of oil, were attacked. This is why many experts see US campaigns in the Middle East not for the establishment of democracy and the liberation of the

people of the region from the clutches of terrorism and authoritarian rulers, but for the liberation of oil (Le Billon & El Khatib, 2004: 120-127). The reason why the United States wants the Persian Gulf oil to flow primarily, secondarily relatively cheaply, and thirdly uninterruptedly is that the foundation of the global economy has been built on cheap, high-quality oil in the past 50 years, which if destructed, the global economy will collapse. Therefore, Western countries, and specially the United States, prevent any action that could disrupt oil exports; subsequently, supporting the advancement and establishment of democracy and human rights is of secondary importance.

**Persian Gulf Element:** The Persian Gulf as one of the most important centers of gravity for geopolitical-international relations is one of the regions that has long been the scene of widespread geopolitical rivalry between the littoral states as well as the great powers. Today, it is clear that the chessboard of the powers is in Eurasia, and the Persian Gulf, as the heartland, is the site where the interests of the powers are intersected (Adami, 2012: 162).

Bahrain, the smallest country in the Persian Gulf, includes an archipelago composed of 33 big/small and residential/non-residential islands with an area of 760 square kilometers. Bahrain's strategic position has been strengthened by establishing a land connection with Saudi territory through the construction of a 25-kilometer bridge that opened in 1986. In addition, the construction of this bridge has taken a key part in the political, security, economic and tourism dimensions (Map No. 1).

The history of Bahrain's political developments has always been affected by her strategic location in the Persian Gulf. The country has long been home to foreign ships due to her rich wealth, specially in pearl fishing. Also at the height of European rivalry over the colonies, the country was the scene of war between the British and the Portuguese, and after India became an important British colony, Bahrain's position as a link between Europe, the Persian Gulf, India and the Far East found a particular importance (Saif Afjehei, 2002: 19-20). To achieve their goals,

including influence in the Persian Gulf, the fight against piracy, the anti-slavery, the establishment of telegraph lines and their protection, arms trade and its control, the British, aware of the strategic position of Bahrain, took over the protection of the island. Commercially, Bahrain also served as a trading center due to its convenient location on the road between the regional countries and India. With the development of trade relations and economic growth in the region, the country is now the center of international trade and monetary affairs in the region with a number of two thousand branches of domestic, regional and international banks, active in the country; similarly, about ninety regional and international insurance branches operate on this island (Amir Abdullahian, 2011: 153).

Bahrain's reputation for international trade and monetary affairs is not based only on the oil. Her location in the heart of the oil-rich countries of the Persian Gulf has made it a good place for leading the money earned out of the oil sales to international banking and monetary networks (Saif Afjehei, 2002: 22).

In the same vein, Bahrain's location on the southern shores of the Persian Gulf has strengthened her geopolitical position and importance for regional and international actors. Despite the socio-political context for democratic movements in Bahrain, due to Bahrain's importance in the Persian Gulf, the West, specially the United Kingdom, not only did not welcome the pro-democracy movements but in the Bahraini protests of 1895 and 1938 for political stability, it allowed for suppression of protests and political reforms by providing military support to the Al-Khalifa dynasty. Even during the recent popular protests in Bahrain, the British provided Bahraini authorities with intelligence assistance to identify and demobilize the opponents of the Al-Khalifa government (Silver, 2012).

Bahrain also has four Arab countries in her neighborhood, all of which are under the rule by monarchical and undemocratic systems that have been effective in Bahrain's unwillingness to pursue political reform in her own home. With the exception of

Kuwait (a country that experiences a minor parliamentary democracy, which is usually not immune to the intervention of the ruling family), in Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, the authoritarian monarchies are at the top without the least adherence to democracy, and the parliaments of these countries lack legislative oversight powers. The rulers of these countries are essentially traditional and conservative, and they avoid the slightest change in ceding political freedoms and democracy. Likewise, Arab rulers oppose democratic movements in Bahrain and other neighboring countries for fear of the spread of liberal movements to their home, given their proximity to Bahrain and similarities in culture, social structure, and government. This is even more true to Bahrain<sup>1</sup>; because they are concerned about the emergence of a pro-Iranian Shiite government within the PGCC, a process that could lead to a split in the adoption of coordinated policies in the face of Iran.

**Geographical Proximity to Saudi Arabia:** The Islamic Awakening in Arab countries was accompanied by intervention in favor of opponents of dictatorial regime in Libya; however, foreign actors did not much intervene in other countries like Bahrain. As soon as the developments in Bahrain began, Saudi Arabia, the stronghold of dictatorial regimes in the region, became the main supporter of the Al-Khalifa dynasty against the people of the country and posed the most substantial regional obstacle to Bahrain's transition to democracy. Applying the Brezhnev doctrine, the country began military intervention in Bahrain. The Saudis took the key part in suppressing the Bahraini protests, and they did not only oppose any minor talks and reforms by moderate Bahraini officials such as Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad, but they deemed the protests as a sectarian aspect between Sunnis and

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1. The enter of police and military forces of Bahrain's neighboring countries into the state to quell protests in 2011 and 2012 was conducted in line with "Island Defense Shield", i.e. the joint PGCC's military force which has been configured for defense against foreign invasion.

Shiites (Takeyh, 2011). Therefore, the reasons behind Saudi intervention in Bahrain are based on sectarian, economic and geopolitical issues.

Bahrain is adjacent to the oil-rich region of Saudi Arabia, specially the Safwa oil wells, which include a quarter of the world's proven oil resources. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia share the control of some of the oil fields with Aramco's lion share. As Bahrain's oil reserves dwindle, much of the country's budget comes from the Abu Safwa region. Any unrest in Bahrain and its spread to the areas could shake the global oil market. Saudi Arabia, along with other members of the PGCC, pledged \$ 20 billion in economic aid to Bahrain in March 2011 (Bronson, 2011: 2 & Downs, 2012: 14). Bahrain, in rivalry with Dubai, became a safe haven for foreign banks and corporations in the Middle East in 1975, when Lebanon lost its position due to the civil war. Subsequently, the insecurity resulting from the second wave of the transition jeopardizes the economic interests of Saudis (Nuruzzaman, 2013: 5).

Bahrain, on the other hand, is Saudi Arabia's largest trading partner in the region. According to the State Department, Bahrain accounted for 26.7 percent of Saudi Arabia's imports and 3.4 percent of its exports before 2011. Among the countries to which Saudi Arabia exports, Bahrain ranks the first. Seventy percent of tourists who visit Bahrain annually are from Saudi Arabia (US Department of State, 2012 & Trade, Arabia, 2011). Bahrain is geopolitically considered the vital space of Saudi Arabia, so the Saudis provide the most financial and economic assistance to it. Saudi Arabia, by supplying 100,000 barrels of oil per day to Bahrain and handing over oil wells to it, has exercised its influence in Bahrain (Rezaei and Jahanian, 2014: 193). Thus, the economic factor is one of the incentives for Saudi Arabia to intervene militarily in Bahrain in a way to keep the Al-Khalifa regime.

The confrontation with Iran, preventing the spread of the Bahraini popular uprising to Saudi Arabia, and also preventing the



formation of a Shiite alliance is one of the goals of Saudi military intervention in Bahrain. According to some experts, three factors are involved in adopting this approach: the first is the geographical proximity and geographical-religious connection of the Shiites of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, and consequently the rapid and inevitable impact of developments in Bahrain on Saudi political stability; the second concerns the politico-security ties of the Al-Khalifa government with the Al Saud monarchy; and the third relates to Saudi Arabia's regional rivalries with the Islamic Republic of Iran and its efforts to strike a balance with Iran.

Saudi leaders, dissatisfied and worried about Iran's role in regional developments, claim that Iran is infiltrating the Arab sphere (Downs, 2012: 12). Therefore, they are very concerned about any change in Bahrain that would raise the Shiites to power and, as a result, increase Iran's influence near their borders, so they would act to prevent it.

## II. Geopolitics of the Bahrain

The aforementioned geographical factors have prevented the Shiites from achieving their political aspirations despite their majority in Bahrain, having several negative consequences for Iran as follows:

**Ethnic and Religious Tensions:** Although, the unrest in Bahrain initially involved various factions, including Shiites and Sunnis, as well as secular and religious parties, and the primary demands of which were democratic reform and the elimination of religious discrimination, many efforts were made by the Al-Khalifa regime and the Arab media to display the issue of the Bahraini uprising as a sectarian and Shiite movement influenced by Iran. Such accusations and approaches were not ineffective in the rift between Shiite and Sunni in Bahrain who participated in the uprising, as well as in laying regional and international ground for suppressing the it (Asadi, 2011: 75).

Undoubtedly, these intra-religious discourse rivalries (Shia & Sunni), if left unchecked, have a negative impact on regional

relations on the one hand, and stability and peace in the Bahraini state-building process on the other, and exacerbate internal ethnic and religious divisions in the region. As the differences and rivalries between the discourses ultimately damage the security of each one of these countries, the proponents of the discourses seek to expand their differences across the region by expanding tensions in bilateral relations or by creating a barrier for the rival at the regional level. For example, the serious rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran to offer their model of government to the regional countries has extended from the arena of discourse to the internal affairs of Syria and Iraq, exacerbating their conflict and ultimately affecting the security of the entire region. The expansion and continuation of these tensions, along with strengthening the presence and role of supra-regional forces as well as the United States, will have negative consequences for Iran's national security (Dehqani Firoozabadi, 2012: 178-181).

Other consequences of Bahraini Shiites' failure are the increase in verbal tensions between the PGCC members and the Islamic Republic of Iran and the scenario that their relations would lead to the severance of relations from the stage of tension, the evidence of which could be seen the act of Kuwait for the pretext of espionage of Iranian nationals for the Revolutionary Guards (Delavarpour Aqdam & Fardipour, 2011: 169).

**Supporting Terrorist Groups Against Iran:** One of Saudi Arabia's concerns is to increase the likelihood of spontaneous formation of resistance cells following the model of Lebanese Hezbollah in Bahrain and Yemen, and consequently to increase the Islamic Republic of Iran's sphere of influence in its backyard which partly provides Saudi's incentive to deploy force to Bahrain for the suppression of Shia. In this regard, the most important reasons behind Saudi Arabia's presence in Bahrain are: projecting internal problems on the interventions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, sending a message to Bahraini protesters to adopt an iron fist in response to the spread of protests, maintaining the status quo in Bahrain, preventing a Shiite government from coming to power in

Bahrain and inciting the Islamic Republic of Iran to enter a military confrontation in Bahrain. It is also possible that Saudi Arabia, with its destabilizing approach to the Islamic Republic of Iran, increase its support of Wahhabi and Salafi terrorist groups in Pakistan, opposition groups or Kurdish militias opposed to the IRI in northern Iraq to carry out terrorist acts, specially in the border provinces of Iran in Kurdistan and Baluchistan (Delavarpour Aqdam & Fardipour, 2011: 15).

**Israeli Influence:** Bahrain sees its survival in developing relations with regional actors and gaining the security support of supra-regional countries, and defines its role in the region as a function of the policies adopted by Saudi Arabia and the United States. Of course, another factor must be added to this tripartite equation, which is the Zionist regime.

Bahrain's foreign policy towards the Zionist regime is based on moderation and the agenda of the peace process is in line with the US Middle East strategy. Naturally, the Zionist regime considers the Islamic Republic of Iran its enemy, fearing Iran's advocates specially the Shia's rise to power in the Middle East; therefore, the Zionist regime's security strategy towards Bahrain is in line with the regime's security interpretation of the Middle East.

At the same time, the Zionist regime's approach to the popular uprisings in Bahrain is to be taken into consideration in that the Bahraini regime's close relationship with the United States generally means its non-hostility to the Zionist regime.

By the same token, the Zionist regime, in line with the policies adopted by the United States and its allies, considers the option of preserving the Al-Khalifa monarchy to be in its desired interests in the Middle East (Niko, 2012: 140).

The joint views of the Bahraini and Israeli governments towards the threat posed by the Shiites and the Islamic Republic of Iran will bring the two countries closer together. As a result, it has several negative consequences for Iran. The first consequence goes back to the anti-Zionist ideology of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The IRI's basic ideology regarding the existence of Israel in

occupied Palestine is a significant issue. Therefore, the emergence of Israel in the public opinion of the region as a political, economic and strategic partner could legitimize the policies of Tel Aviv at odds with the IRI's anti-Zionist ideology and the normalization of ties with Israel could likely lead to the Iranian isolation in the region and even in the international community. Another consequence of Israeli influence in Bahrain is the pose of security threats to the IRI. The establishment of official diplomatic ties between the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf and Israel means that Tel Aviv is close to the southern borders of Iran. In other words, the opening of the Israeli embassy and consulate in Bahrain will increase Tel Aviv's influence in Iran's neighboring countries. In this regard, the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper stated that the normalization of relations with Bahrain takes part in strengthening Israel's power to deal with Iran in intelligence and even military spheres. The goal is not Bahrain to fight instead of us, however, it allows us to access varied facilities ([www.iiwfs.com](http://www.iiwfs.com)).

**Intensification of Iranophobia and Shiaphobia:** One of the US tactics is to highlight Bahrain's position in Saudi foreign policy by claiming Iran's close threshold of success in establishing a Shiite state in Bahrain. The Saudi military presence until the end of the foreign threat elimination indicates Saudi Arabia's being affected by Iranophobia and Shiaphobia propaganda.

Iranophobia is not an emerging issue in the Middle East. The West and the United States have always sought to reinforce their arms sales and politico-military presence in the Middle East by propagating Iranophobia. We are currently witnessing a securitized image from Iran in the region, which affects the military policies of the PGCC members (Asgarkhani & Babaei, 2012: 169). Some of Iran's tensions with the Persian Gulf states could be reflected at the level of international Islamic organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference or the Asian Parliamentary Assemblies. Apart from domestic and

international issues, the unrest in Bahrain has also led to a renewed focus on this issue and additional pressures on Iran due to the developments, the pressures that drastically reduce Iran's soft power in the region and the world and could bear negative security consequences (Dehqani Firoozabadi & Farazi, 2012: 184).

## **Conclusion**

The findings show that Bahrain's geographical location and strategic value led to the deployment of the US Fifth Fleet and Rapid Deployment Force. Regime change in Bahrain means the loss of US control over the Persian Gulf. In the event of the fall of the Al-Khalifa dynasty, the Shiites will undoubtedly take a strong part, and the United States is concerned that the rise of Shiites in Bahrain could lead to ending the US military presence in the region.

Iran's support and strengthening of the Shiite element in the Middle East, on the one hand, and the geographical-emotional connection between the Shiites of Saudi Arabia and those in Bahrain, on the other hand, together with realizing the demands of the Shiites of Bahrain and the strategic role of Shiites in the development of power and politics in the region, will create a serious change in the geopolitics of the region in a way that it stabilize Iran's influence in the areas of competition in the Middle East and particularly in the Persian Gulf. In the long run, these conditions will change the coalitions and politico-security arrangements in the region and improve Iran's environmental security situation.

Geopolitically, Bahrain is Saudi Arabia's backyard, and the reasons for Saudi intervention in Bahrain refer to sectarian, economic, and geopolitical implications. The geographical-religious proximity of the Bahraini and Saudi Shiites and the consequent rapid and inevitable impact of developments in Bahrain on the Saudi political stability, the Al-Khalifa government's political and security ties with Al-Saud, and Saudi

Arabia's efforts to strike a balance against Iran are the major reasons for Saudi military intervention in Bahrain. Bahrain's proximity to Saudi oil wells, as well as her economic, military, and security dependence on Saudi Arabia, have made any unrest and change in Bahrain at odds with Saudi strategic interests; as a result, Saudi Arabia strongly opposes any change in Bahrain that would drive Shiites to power and increase Iran's influence near its borders, thwarting such revolutionary movements through military intervention.



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