

## **Bahrain and Iran - Saudi Arabia Controversy**

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### **Abstract**

The competition between two key and important countries in the Middle East region is one of the main factors of geopolitical change. The conflict between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, two regional actors, often affects the relations between other countries and their foreign policy priorities. A clear example of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is Bahrain, which is primarily based on ideological and geopolitical grounds. The rivalry between the two countries over Bahrain has been going on for a long time. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia are trying to use the leverage they have to expand their influence not only in this country, but also in the region. Saudi Arabia uses the ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa family as a pillar in Bahrain and a means to secure its interests. As for Iran, it relies heavily on Shiites, who make up the majority of Bahrain's population but are not in power, to strengthen its position in Bahrain. Because of this, they are often harassed by the authorities.

**Keywords:** Bahrain, Iran, Saudi Arabia Region, Resistance, Geopolitics.

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### **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Bahrain is the smallest state among the Persian Gulf countries, both in terms of territory and population. It is an archipelago of 33 islands and is located very close to Saudi Arabia (16 km), to which it is connected by the King Fahd Bridge.

The government of Bahrain does not provide official statistics due to the differences between the Shia and Sunni population in this country, therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact number of Shiites and Sunnis in the country. A 2018 report on religious freedom by the US State Department states that 73.7 percent of Bahrain's population is Muslim. Of the Muslim population, 55.60 percent are Shiites. Therefore, the Shiite population dominates the Sunni population of this country.

### **The State of Protests in the Government of Bahrain**

In Bahrain, Sunnis are a privileged group of the population of the country, even though the majority of the population there is Shia. The ruling Al-Khalifa dynasty is Sunni. Important government positions in the country are mainly held by Sunnis. All governmental positions in Bahrain are held by members of the ruling al-Khalifa family. The Prime Minister is also appointed by the King (Gachechiladze 2019; 170. Gelovani, 2008: 74).

The legislative body of the country consists of a Consultative Council (Majlis Ash-Shura) and a Representative Council (Majlis al-Nuwab), most of the members of which are Sunnis. The Consultative Council, which consists of 40 members, is fully controlled by the King. As for the Representative Council, its full composition (40 members) is elected once every 4 years through direct elections (Gachechiladze, 2019: 176-179).

### **Reasons for the Protest Clashes**

It should be noted that differences between sects occur periodically in Bahrain, and to solve the problems, it is necessary to find solutions in this field. The rift between Shiites and Sunnis has been characteristic of this country since the late 1970s.

In this regard, the situation there has changed, especially after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1978-1979. In Bahrain and the Middle

East region, some Shiites began to adopt extremist positions and at the same time mobilize their forces. These positions led to a sharp reaction from the Sunnis.. The issue of exporting Iran's Shiite Islamic Revolution, which was raised by the leaders of this country at the beginning of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, has become a real threat to Bahrain. . Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Bahraini government did not consider pursuing a specific confessional agenda in the country, but over time, developments in Bahrain have highlighted the confrontation between the Shiite and Sunni populations (Alvond, 2010: 159-161).

### **Saudi Arabia's Interests in Bahrain**

Saudi Arabia uses Bahrain to defend its interests and claims that Al-Khalifa, the roots of Bahrain's ruling family, are related to Saudi Arabia. At the same time, Bahrain is highly dependent on Saudi Arabia in terms of economy and security. It should also be noted that the strategic partnership with the United States is also crucial for the security of Bahrain. The third naval base of the US Navy is located in its territory (Mabon, 2016: 120-126).

For years, Bahrain has sought to turn this country into a regional banking and tourism center, because its oil and gas reserves are low in energy compared to neighboring countries. Eighty-five percent of the revenue of the country comes from energy exports.

It was mentioned above that Bahrain is economically highly dependent on Saudi Arabia. This country is one of the main trading partners of Bahrain. In 2011, Saudi Arabia made a statement at the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) regarding \$10 billion in aid to Bahrain (also a member of the organization).

Direct financial assistance to Bahrain continued in the following years as well. With the consent of Saudi Arabia, in 2018, the financial assistance program for Bahrain was re-launched, which included providing material assistance to carry out necessary reforms for the fiscal balancing budget of the Kingdom of Bahrain for 2022. For this purpose, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait have allocated assistance of 10 billion USD for the Kingdom of Bahrain. This program could not be implemented due to Covid 19, so the implementation date of this program has been postponed to 2024.

In 2021, the Kingdom of Bahrain's public debt in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) had the highest rate among member states of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In October of the same year, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait announced the continuation of financing Bahrain's budget plan (Wies, 2018: 66-71).

This country is also dependent on Saudi Arabia in terms of energy. Bahrain's oil sector is divided into two sectors. These are:

- Oil refining hub, which receives crude oil mainly from Saudi Arabia,
- The extraction and refining of 50 percent of Abu al-Safah offshore oil field was shared with Saudi Arabia.

The Maritime Borders Agreement has been signed between the two countries for a long time, according to which Saudi Arabia has full right to extract oil in the border area. In return, Riyadh is obliged to distribute the oil produced from these lands and the oil revenues equally in Manama. It should be noted that Saudi Arabia has paid a much higher interest rate to Bahrain than what was foreseen in this agreement during the past years.

Economic and security dependence on Saudi Arabia significantly affects the foreign policy process of Bahrain. Bahrain's decisions are dictated and guided by Saudi Arabia, in this regard, the coincidence of the political movements of Manama with the direction of Riyadh is clearly seen. Good examples in this regard are:

- In 2016, Bahrain made a similar decision when Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic relations with Iran.
- In 2017, Bahrain declared a blockade of Qatar along with Saudi Arabia.
- With Saudi Arabia's and U.S. mediation's consent in 2020, Bahrain signed the "Decision to normalize relations" with Israel. As already mentioned, this agreement is the result of the consent of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh itself has so far refrained from establishing formal relations with Israel because it has ambitions to lead the Islamic world. But, lately, there has been an obvious improvement in informal relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, significantly facilitated by a common, anti-Iranian stance.

In October 2021, after the collapse of the relationship between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain expelled the Lebanese ambassador from the country.

**Iran's Interests Regarding Bahrain**

In Bahrain, Iran uses the fact that the majority of the country's population is Shiite, who feel oppressed and are therefore upset with the ruling elite of the Kingdom of Bahrain. In addition, Iran uses the foundations of its historical alliance with Bahrain, if necessary. Here, I briefly review the historical connection between Iran and Bahrain. In the 4th to 6th centuries, Bahrain was a part of Sassanid Iran. . In the 17th century, in 1602, an army sent by Shah Abbas I of Iran, led by Alaverdi Khan Undiladze, conquered Bahrain and subjugated it to Safavid Iran. Shiism has been declared the state religion in Bahrain since then. From then on, it remained part of Iran until 1783, when Bahrain was occupied by the Al-Khalifa family of the Bani Utbah tribe, who arrived from the Arabian Peninsula and declared it an independent emirate. From then on, Bahrain is ruled by this family. Later, in the 19th century, the rulers of Bahrain appealed to Great Britain for help, as a result of which it was under British protectorate for a century (1871-1971). Mass demonstrations took place in Bahrain from 1950 to 1960, demanding independence. During the reign of the last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979), the Iranian parliament passed a law in 1957 declaring Bahrain the 14th province of Iran. The basis for this decision was the inclusion of Bahrain in the Safavid of Iran in 1602. In 1970, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza, rejected Iran's historical claims regarding Bahrain due to Anglo-Iranian secret negotiations. In the same year, a plebiscite was held by the U.N. in Bahrain, according to which the vast majority of the population of this country (both Shiites and Sunnis) wanted Bahrain to become an independent Arab state. This country gained independence in 1971. Due to the long historical ties between Iran and Bahrain, Iranian conservatives consider it an integral part of Iran. Iranian officials, diplomats and the media, still periodically reactivate this issue, which irritates Bahrain (Mitchel, 2019: 24-29).

**The Shiite Population of Bahrain and Their Condition**

I have already mentioned above that the majority of the population in Bahrain is Shiite Muslim, but the ruling government is Sunni. Shiites often face social marginalization and political pressure, which is why they express dissatisfaction with the ruling Sunni regime. In this regard, the interesting point was in 1981, and it was the attempt of the Bahraini

Shiite movement, the Islamic Liberation Front of Bahrain (IFLB), to carry out a coup, which failed and the government suppressed it. Manama accused Tehran of supporting the IFLB movement in preparing for the coup in Bahrain because the Iranian media was actively working in favor of the IFLB and that in addition to propaganda, Iran also provided material support to the movement. Bahrain also accused Iran of training some members of the IFLB, allegedly assisted by a corps of Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Later, fake uniforms of Bahraini police were taken from the IFLB, which, according to the Bahraini government, were sewn in Iran (Kapanadze, 2020, 35-41).

It should also be noted that the office of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain in Tehran was opened at the time, which prompted the accusations of Bahrain against Iran.

Bahraini authorities took strict action against the IFLB-planned coup. The demonstrations were violently dispersed and hundreds of demonstrators were arrested (CIA Factbook).

Manama also blamed Tehran for the unrest in the country even in the 90s. The events of 1994-1999 in Bahrain are known as the "Rise of Dignity." These protests began due to the Shiite population's limited civil and political rights, discriminatory policies against Shiites, corruption in the ruling elite and economic hardships.

Leftists, liberals, and Islamists have joined the Shiites in calling for democratic reforms. Bahraini authorities have begun arresting rebel leaders. Violent methods were used against the protesters. The Bahraini government was declaring that the Iranian-backed movement was standing behind the unrest. Tensions in Bahrain eased after the emir (who became king in 2002) of the Country, Hamid bin Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa promised the people to hold democratic reforms in 1999. His "National Action Plan" also included an amnesty for political activists arrested during the 1994-1999 riots, which led to the return of exiled politicians who formed the Pan-Shiite Bloc in 2001, the National Association for Islamic Consent (Al-Wefaq) (Kapanadze, 2020, 42-45).

Despite the promises of the King, most of the reforms were not implemented. The optimistic mood of the Shiite population gradually disappeared and in 2002 and 2004, protests started again in the country (Gachechiladze, 2019, 177-181).

Al Wefaq Movement participated in the parliamentary elections twice in 2006 and 2010, which resulted in winning 17 seats and then 18 seats in the 40-member legislative assembly. . Thus, it became the main Shiite group in Bahrain. In 2011, people dissatisfied with the social and political situation in Bahrain began to protest, which soon reached its climax. In the same period, protest waves in Tunisia and Egypt became known as "Arab Spring".The wave of protests soon spread among the predominantly Shiite youth of Bahrain. The country's government tried to portray the unrest as a Shiite uprising that seemed to be inspired and ruled by Iran. But in its statement, Manama could not prove Iran's involvement in the unrest in its country with reasons and evidence. The Bahraini government has blamed Iran for sparking a wave of protests in Bahrain, saying its influence on the Shiite population of Bahrainis is still strong, given historical and cultural factors. Tehran has categorically denied the allegations of Manama.

The protest rallies of the Arab Spring in Bahrain were not a religious uprising. They had no confessional basis. These protests were a civil movement whose main demands were democratic reforms, human rights improvement, and socio-political situation. These speeches received a great response in the Iranian media. The spark of protests in Bahrain has taken on relatively wide dimensions. For Saudi Arabia, these protests could be a warning, because if these protests are aimed at changing the Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain, they will actually be crossing the red line of Arabia (BBC News. 2019).

In addition, if the demonstrations in Bahrain were successful, the accusation of possible protest charge would be directed at Saudi Arabia's Shia population living in the oil-rich Al-Ahsa province in the northeast of the country. .This would lead to an increase in Iran's ideological and geopolitical influence, not only on Bahrain but throughout the region. If this scenario happens, there will be changes in America's position in the Middle East. One month after the start of the protests on March 14, 2011, at the official request of the Bahraini government, Saudi Arabia used the "Joint Security Agreement" of GCC [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council and sent troops to Bahrain with a mandate to protect strategic facilities together with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The deployment was aimed at helping and protecting the ruling dynasty of Al-Khalifa, an ally of Saudi Arabia. It should be underlined that during the Arab Spring,

Saudi Arabia sided with rebels against the ruling regime in other Arab countries, such as Syria ([https://crisis group.org/triger-list/iran-us-triger-list/flashpionts/ bahrain](https://crisisgroup.org/triger-list/iran-us-triger-list/flashpionts/bahrain)).

The allies broke up the rallies in Bahrain, but demonstrations continued in Shiite villages. Due to this, the government took additional measures to neutralize the opposition. In particular, the main opposing parties, Al-Wefaq and Al-Waad, were declared illegal. They were banned from running in the elections (<https://www.ft.com/content/51472a00-9b26-11e8-88de-49c908b1f264>).

At the same time, Bahrain stepped up its accusations against Iran. Manama again accused Tehran of supporting the insurgency and harboring Bahraini dissidents. Also, according to Manama officials, military weapons were sent to Bahrain's opposition forces from Iran . At the same time, the Shiite population of Bahrain, unofficially, was often referred to as the "Fifth Column" of Iran. The Bahraini authorities could not prove these claims this time either. At the domestic political level, Bahrain's Shiite Arab population is also wary of such a negative attitude. Their attitude towards relations with Iran is incoherent. Iran denies participating in the Bahrain protest rallies.

### **Conclusion**

The rivalry between two key countries is one of the main factors of geopolitical change. This is also the case in the Middle East region. The confrontation between Shiite Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, the two regional actors, often affects the relations between other countries and their foreign policy priorities. A clear example of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is Bahrain, which is primarily based on ideological and geopolitical grounds. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been going on for a long time. It may continue to be a significant challenge not only for the Kingdom of Bahrain but also for Iran and Saudi Arabia.

**Authors' Statement:** The author declares that she has fully abided by all ethical requirements regarding issues including plagiarism, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, data fabrication and/or falsification, informed consent, misconduct, etc.



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