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## The Shia crescent

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## THE SHIA CRESCENT

### ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the recent rise in importance of the Shia branch of Islam. Ever since the success of the Iranian revolution, the Teheran regime has persistently claimed to be protector and promoter of the Shia interests outside its borders. Many Sunni rulers in the Middle East fear that the rising position of the Shia and Iran, in particular through its nuclear programme, will alter the traditional balance of power not only in the Gulf region but throughout the Arab world. The study introduces the term “the Shia crescent,” which has become a commonly used expression in popular, intellectual and political debates. As a geo-political term, it is used to describe a region of the Middle East where the majority population is Shia, or where there is a strong Shia minority in the population. The aim of this article is to examine critically the notion of the Shia crescent and suggest possible explanations on what is behind the rise of Shia power, how to account for it, and what are its consequences for the current system of international relations.

### Key words

Shia Crescent, Shiite, Sunni, Iran, the Gulf region

In December 2004 King Abdullah II of Jordan warned publically of the emergence of a “Shia crescent” in the Gulf and the Middle East regions. He sounded an alarm that a vast swath of the region, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean – from Lebanon through the oil rich Caspian Sea to the even richer Persian Gulf, was coming under the sway of the Shia branch of Islam. More importantly, he sent a warning that the hegemonic Iran is attempting to dominate the region through an array of Shiite proxies. He was referring to the growing influence of Iran in Iraq, Iran’s support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the strong alliance between Tehran and Syria.

If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government – the King said – a new ‘crescent’ of dominant Shia movements or governments stretching

from Iran into Iraq, Syria and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects and pose new challenges to US interests and allies.<sup>1</sup>

The King's statements reflected the fear of many Sunni rulers in the Middle East that the rising position of the Shia and Iran, in particular through its nuclear programme, will alter the traditional balance of power not only in the Gulf region but throughout the Arab world. Indeed, in April 2006 in an interview with Al-Arabiya TV, the then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak deliberately conflated Arab Shias with Iranians and questioned their fidelity: "There are Shias in all these countries [of the region], in significant percentages, and Shias are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live... Naturally Iran has an influence over Shia who make up 65 per cent of Iraq's population."<sup>2</sup> President Mubarak reflected a wider views of the royal families from the Gulf countries to Morocco. In January 2007 an editorial in *al-Ahram*, a newspaper widely seen as the voice of the Egyptian state, declared: „Iran is working actively towards spreading Shia doctrine even in countries which do not have a Shia minority... paving the way for reviving the dreams of the Safavids.”<sup>3</sup>

Subsequently the term “the Shia crescent” became a commonly used expression in popular, intellectual and political debates. As a geo-political term, it is used to describe a region of the Middle East where the majority population is Shia, or where there is a strong Shia minority in the population. The aim of this article is to examine critically the notion of the Shia crescent and suggest possible explanations on what is behind the rise of Shia power, how to account for it, and what its consequences for the current system of international relations are.

King Abdullah's idea of the Shia crescent met with a great deal of support among the Sunni Muslim political elite on the one hand and with substantial

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri in their book, A. Ehteshami, M. Zweiri, *Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The Politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution*, London 2007, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> R. Hardy, *Sunni and Shia: Spectre of Sectarianism*, BBC report, 20 February 2007. The Safavids were the 16<sup>th</sup> century Persian dynasty that unified much of Persia under a single political control and, initially, also subjugated large parts of Iraq. They introduced Shia Islam to that part of the world. The theocratic Safavid Empire lasted from 1501 to 1722 and it covered all of contemporary Iran, parts of Turkey and Georgia. Under Safavid rule, eastern Persia became a great cultural centre, best represented by Isfahan, the capital of the Empire for over 120 years.

criticisms from Iran and the leaders of Shia communities throughout the Arab world on the other.

Speaking to the CNN in 2010 king Abdullah was asked whether he regrets making the comment about the Shia crescent. He replied:

No, well, that's not what I said. What I said is I was worried about members – certain members of the Iranian government using an agenda to create the perception of a Shia crescent, because the last thing that we need in this part of the world is a conflict between Sunnis and Shias. And so when I raise the alarm bell, I saw a political strategy that would as an endgame have the Sunnis and Shias at each other's throats. If you look back at the Iraq-Iran war, the war first started as a war of territory. It then became an issue of race – Persians against Arabs – which I think was wrong. Never did they ever come close to touching the religious aspect, because the fault line between Shias and Sunnis goes from Beirut all the way to Bombay and it's a catastrophic subject to play with. In my view, I felt that there was an agenda out there that was going to try and push it in that respect, and also raising the alarm bell that that cannot happen.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, in this re-visit to his controversial opinion, the king placed the responsibility for the idea of the Shia crescent on “certain members of the Iranian government,” ignoring the background to the tensions between the two sects and the role of the Sunni political elites in curbing the Shia minority aspirations. Remarkably, this time king Abdullah extended the fault-line between the Shia and the Sunnis all the way to India.

The Sunni-Shia conflict is centuries old and deeply imbedded into the ideology and theology of the two main sections of Islam, as well as into various aspects of relations between them. The claims of the two groups as to who holds the proper succession from Prophet Mohammad and, therefore, which group represents the properly constituted assemblage of adherence and should be recognised as such, presents an insurmountable problem. Throughout the centuries, the claims of the Sunnis and the Shia to the origins and property of the Prophet's succession have been a source of open conflicts and skirmishes, as well as intense communal animosities. Recently, the Sunni-Shia hostilities reached new dimensions – each of the two main traditions of Islam is now associated with a powerful state – Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Iran on the other – which also represent groupings of countries linked through their version of Islam with two important clusters in the system of international relations.

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<sup>4</sup> CNN Interview with King Abdullah at Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, January 29, 2010.

Shiism arose as a distinct movement within Islam primarily as a political movement and as a political identity, irrespectfully of the issue of the succession to the Prophet Mohammed. The difference between the Shia and the majority Sunni community can be summarised in three different categories: political, religious and ethnical.

The Shiat Ali (the partisans of Ali), were the partisans of a particular movement that believed that the succession to the Prophet Mohammed should rest within the prophet's immediate family. "So when we talk about that original split between Shiism and what will eventually become known as Sunni Islam, we need to recognize that at first there was very little religiously that separated these two groups. This was surely political separation. However, once the Shia political aspirations were more or less denied and the Muslim community transformed into an empire, a distinctly Arab empire, the Shia slowly began to withdraw from the larger political implications of their movement."<sup>5</sup> This was particularly apparent after an epic battle in Karbala in 680 when the grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, Hussain, and a small group of the Shia, fought against the tyrannical reign of the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muawiya. Outnumbered by the tens of thousands, Hussain and his small band of followers fought bravely but were brutally massacred. The "tragedy of Karbala" as it is known continues to serve as inspiration to the Shia; endowing them with the belief that standing up to oppression and injustice, no matter how great or at what odds, is an act of faith.<sup>6</sup> Resistance against despotic rule and rulers is a deeply-seated notion among the Shia. The withdrawal of Shia from the society after 680, particularly in political terms, inescapably led them to become a distinctly religious sect.

It is interesting from the point of view of religious studies that Shiism is one of very few religions in the world whose origins are in many respects defined by ritual, and not so much by mythology. It was the lamentation rituals, the mourning rituals that arose out of the massacre at Karbala that began to give Shiism its distinct religious definition, and only later on the theological implications emerged. The theological definition of Shiism was formed as a result of rituals that had already very organically been going on for quite some time. From about 680 onwards, Shiism comes to represent essentially the protest movement within the Islamic world.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Understanding the Shia*, Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/religion-and-politics/emerging-shia-crescent-symposium-understanding-shia-rush-transcript-federal-news-service-inc/p10864>.

<sup>6</sup> R. Amiri, *The Shia Crescent Revisited*, RSD Reports, February 10, 2011.

Shiism is something that is not so much defined just by doctrine, but by a convergence of a certain type of institutional identity, a very strong, practical sense of ties with whom one follows his religious leader to talk about personal issues, family issues, household and community issues and just about everything else. And then, on the other hand, there is the identity shaped sometimes by rituals, which allowed many different interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

Within Shiism there is a great deal of emphasis on the charismatic leader, the imam, the true successor to the Prophet Mohammed. The Shia clerics have much more organization and much more influence over ordinary Shia believers than most Sunni clerics have over Sunni believers.

The Shia tradition is far from uniformed – there are varieties of schools and sects within Shiism, including the Ismaili, Zaydi,<sup>8</sup> Nizari, Musta'lis, Druze, and Muqanna'ah.

There is little difference between the Sunnis and the Shiites when it comes to basic rituals like prayer and fasting. But fundamentalist Sunnis label Shiite practices, such as treating dead religious figures like saints, as blasphemous.

The idea of Sunni Islam is very much tied to the development of Islamic law, which, while it has its primarily foundations within the Koran, the bulk of Islamic law, particularly in the Sunni world, involves the Sunnah, the traditions of the Prophet.

The contemporary rise of Shiism and the ascendancy of the Shia can be associated with three pivotal events. First was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Tehran. The revolution toppled the secular, well-established and particularly well-endowed, Western-backed administration. The demise of the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime spread panic among the Western-allied governments in the Arab world. But even more telling and worrisome was the technique deployed by Khomeini to secure and further galvanise the revolution. He took the Shia clerics out of the seminaries and told them to teach what was relevant to actual political action. The clerics became political actors and the Shia political force. By many, if not the majority in the Arab world, the Shia in their own countries were now seen as an extension of Iran – a non-Arab Shia country. However, in retrospect, it can be argued that the local Shia communities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq,

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<sup>7</sup> *The Emerging Shia Crescent Symposium: Understanding the Shia*, Council on Foreign Relations, op.cit.

<sup>8</sup> Zaydis (also: Zaidi, Zaidiyah, or in the West Fivers) are the most moderate of the Shi'a groups and the nearest to the Sunnis in their theology.

Kuwait, Lebanon and elsewhere, by supporting Iran and indirectly the Iranian threat, have primarily tried to renegotiate their position in their individual countries. Thus, it can be contended that they have been using the spectre of Iran in order to establish a different relationship with the Sunni regimes they were ruled by.

The second important event that brought the emergence of the Shia, as a new major political force, under intense scrutiny was the result of the first post-Saddam Hussein elections in Iraq. In the poll held on January 30, 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance, tacitly backed by Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, won about 48% of the votes. The Sunnis, which for decades dominated the ruling Ba'ath Party and the administration of the Iraqi regime, lost control of the state. The persecuted and brutally suppressed Shia majority population seized the helm of Iraq's politics.<sup>9</sup> The subsequent emergence of a Shia-dominated government in Iraq<sup>10</sup> and the perceived growth of Iranian influence in the region inevitably generated Sunni backlash.

The third set of events that focused the attention of analysts and politicians on the upsurge of the Shia was the integration of Hezbollah, the Shia political party and militia, into Lebanon's political structure. In 2000 Hezbollah succeeded in forcing the Israelis to withdraw from the south of Lebanon, which they occupied for 18 years. In the 2005 parliamentary election it won 14 seats<sup>11</sup> and two government posts and its leader, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, clearly enjoyed widespread popularity not only in Lebanon but also on the Arab streets outside the country. During the years 2000–2006 Hezbollah managed to construct dynamic and well organized system of Shia community associations and institutions, including hospitals, orphanages, schools and social centres, which formed an essential part of the construction of a modern confident notion

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<sup>9</sup> For the history of political and socio-economic marginalization of the Shia see for example: G. Fuller, R. Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, London 2000.

<sup>10</sup> In the 37-member post-election cabinet, 19 members were Shiites, nine were Sunnis, eight were Kurds and one was Christian.

<sup>11</sup> With political endorsement from Iran, Hezbollah first participated in national elections in 1992. Its decision to present parliamentary candidates marked the beginning of the group's active involvement in Lebanese participatory politics. In 1992 Hezbollah won eight seats in the Lebanese parliament. Subsequently, the group continues to field candidates in national and municipal elections, achieving a modest, variable, yet generally steady degree of electoral success. In the 2009 national election, Hezbollah won 10 seats in parliament and was awarded two cabinet posts for the Ministries of Agriculture and Administrative Reform.

of identity.<sup>12</sup> The Hezbollah-Israeli war in the summer of 2006, which lasted thirty four days and ended without an unequivocal winner, further increased the reputation and popular standing of the group. The war made Nasrallah one of the most admired leaders in the Middle East.

The group's political strength had grown further after May 2008, when in an armed conflict with the Western-backed Lebanese government, it took over western areas of Beirut, in response to a government-ordered shutdown of Hezbollah's communications network. Subsequently Hezbollah worked out a deal that paved the way for peaceful elections in 2009. These elections gave the militia 13 seats in the 128-member parliament<sup>13</sup> and two government posts. In fact, however, together with its allies Hezbollah controlled 11 out of the 30 seats in the Cabinet – enabling them to have veto power over major decisions, keep their weapons and prevent the government from moving too close to the United States.<sup>14</sup>

In August 2010, the Obama Administration reported that Hezbollah is “the most technically capable terrorist group in the world” and stated that the group has “thousands of supporters, several thousand members, and a few hundred terrorist operatives.”<sup>15</sup> According to the Director of National Intelligence, Dennis C. Blair, Hezbollah receives financial support from Lebanese Shiite expatriates around the world and “profits from legal and illegal businesses,” including some illegal drug activity.<sup>16</sup> The US Administration also reported that Hezbollah receives “training, weapons, and explosives, as well as political, diplomatic, and organizational aid from Iran, and diplomatic, political, and logistical support from Syria.”<sup>17</sup>

Since its birth in 1982 as an Islamic militia fighting Israel's invasion of the country, Hezbollah has transformed itself into a powerful military, political and social organization. It controls a large swath of southern Lebanon, much of the Bekaa Valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> A. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton 2007, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah has maintained its electoral standing routinely winning 10 per cent of all parliamentary seats.

<sup>14</sup> *Associated Press*, August 13, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism – 2009*, U.S. Department of State, August 5, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> D. Blair, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, February 2, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> *Country Reports on Terrorism – 2009*, U.S. Department of State, August 5, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> D. Duncan, *Jihadi Tourism Hits Lebanon*, “The Wall Street Journal”, June 17, 2010.



It is important to remember that Hussein's desperate struggle in 680 in Karbala serves as a point of reference for the pivotal events mentioned earlier. They were recalled by Khomeini in the 1979 Revolution deposing the Shah. Although it would be incorrect to conclude that the Shias are in a continuous state of revolt against the established order of the state, their 1991 uprising against Saddam in aftermath of the first Gulf War, Hezbollah's battles against the militarily superior Israeli Army in the 1990s and in 2006, and the continuing clashes between the Zaidi Shia rebels and the governments of Yemen and Saudi Arabia, are all viewed with a great deal of mistrust and misgivings by the Sunni political class in the Middle East.<sup>19</sup>

The Arab world is run by a set of Sunni elites for whom Shia power is an unwelcome novelty. The Sunni Arab governments are understandably apprehensive about the rising profile of the Shia power in Iran, the emergence of the Shia dominated government in Iraq and the influence of Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> The fear has been that all these forces might well inspire domestic opposition forces in their own countries, especially as Hezbollah gained enthusiastic support even among the vast Sunni population of the Arab world.

The idea of the Shia crescent reflects a geopolitical struggle between Iran and the Sunni Arab regimes over who is the regional superpower – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt or the United Arab Emirates? However, there is also another factor which is particularly important in the context of the Arab revolts of 2011. The discontented and, thus far, ignored mass of downtrodden population of the Middle East has turned to Iranian-style Shia radicalism to express their discontent with the status quo.

The notion of an Iranian-dominated "Shia crescent" stretching from Lebanon to Saudi Arabia may be exaggerated, but it is proving hard to shake off.

Although it is difficult to find accurate data on the Sunni and the Shia populations throughout the world, it is estimated that in the years 2009–2010, among the 1.6 billion Muslims (23.4 per cent of the population of the world), the Sunnis comprise 87–90 per cent and the Shia 10–13 per cent.<sup>21</sup>

Between 12–15 per cent of the Muslim population in the Asia Pacific region is Shia, as is 11–14 per cent of the Muslim population in the Middle East and

<sup>19</sup> R. Amiri, *The Shia Crescent Revisited*, RSD Reports, February 10, 2011.

<sup>20</sup> A. Norton, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> *Mapping the Global Muslim Population. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Washington DC 2009.

North Africa. Most Shiites (from 68 to 80 per cent) live in four countries: Iran, Pakistan, India and Iraq. Iran has 66–70 million Shiites, or 37–40 per cent of the global population of this faction. Iraq, India and Pakistan are home to at least 16 million of the faithful of the sect. The following table gives the appropriate number of Shiites in the countries where they count more than one hundred thousand.

	Estimated population of the Shia – 2009	Estimated percentage of the Shia Muslim population
Iran	66–70 million	90–95
Pakistan	17–26 million	10–15
India	16–24 million	1–15
Iraq	19–22 million	65–70
Turkey	7–11 million	10–15
Yemen	8–10 million	35–40
Azerbaijan	5–7 million	65–75
Afghanistan	3–4 million	10–15
Syria	3–4 million	15–20
Saudi Arabia	2–4 million	10–15
Nigeria	<4 million	<5
Lebanon	1–2 million	45–55
Tanzania	<2 million	<10
Kuwait	500,000–700,00	20–25
Germany	400,000–600,000	10–15
Bahrain	400,000–500,000	65–75
Tajikistan	~400,000	~7
United Arab Emirates	300,000–400,000	~10
United States	200,000–400,000	10–15
Oman	100,000–300,000	5–10
United Kingdom	100,000–300,000	10–15
Bulgaria	~100,000	10–15
Qatar	~100,000	~10
Total in the world	154–200 million	10–13

Source: *Mapping the Global Muslim Population. A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population*, The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, Washington DC 2009, p. 8.

The arrival on March 14, 2011 in Bahrain of about 1,500 soldiers from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, led by Saudi Arabia, under the umbrella of the Peninsula Shield Force,<sup>22,23</sup> is the latest manifestation of the on-going Sunni-Shiite conflict that has endured at many levels in the Islamic world. Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran appear to be engaged in a struggle for supremacy among the Muslim faithful.

The expanse of the conflict between two major sections of Islam, represented by the two powerful states, Saudi Arabia and Iran, extends through Africa, the

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<sup>22</sup> The Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), officially created in 1982 at the third summit of the GCC's Supreme Council, comprised of the rulers of the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait and Qatar. It took part in the liberation of Kuwait during the First Gulf War in the early 1990s, and was again sent to Kuwait in 2003 ahead of the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Initially the PSF was based in north-eastern Saudi Arabia, in the city of Hafr al Batin, close to both the Kuwaiti and Iraqi borders. The size of the force was estimated at a modest 5,000 soldiers at its inception, but according *The National* (March 16, 2011) it has since grown six-fold. At the 21<sup>st</sup> GCC summit in Manama on December 31, 2000 the member states signed a mutual defence pact, which also created a joint GCC defence council, and a high military committee – codified what is now the pillar of the GCC's military doctrine: that the security of all the members of the council is an “indivisible whole.” According to the communiqué issued at that time “...any aggression on a member state is aggression against the other states, and facing aggression is considered a joint responsibility whose burden is on all the member states... Interference from any entity in the internal affairs of one of the member states is interference in the internal affairs of all the nations of the council.” The communiqué thus made attacks by a foreign force, foreign interference and destabilisation of a GCC state all contingencies that demand unified action by the council. A proposal by Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, adopted in 2006 by the Gulf Supreme Council, transformed the PSF. It was agreed that soldiers would be stationed in their home countries but come under joint command.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to Saudi forces the UAE sent about 500 police officers to Bahrain. Qatari troops were also deployed to Bahrain as part of the PSF. According to the Qatar News Agency: “The duty of the Qatari force participating in the Peninsula Shield Force is to contribute in restoring order and security in Bahrain” (QNA, March 18, 2011). Subsequently, on March 21, 2011 Kuwait navy vessel with a number of ground forces on board docked off the Bahraini coasts, as part of the Peninsula Shield Force troops deployed by the GCC in the kingdom. In February 2013, the Commander of the GCC peninsula Shield Forces, Joint Staff Major General Motlq Alozima was reported as saying that they will stay in Bahrain “to perform tasks for which they have been provided.” (Shafaqna, February 13, 2013). On April 14, 2013 *Gulf News* reported that “An additional permanent headquarters for the Peninsula Shield... is set to be inaugurated in Bahrain soon... The headquarters will be named The Advanced Command of the Peninsula Shield Forces...” The report did not specify the size of the Gulf force to be stationed in Bahrain.

Middle and Far East to Asia – from Nigeria to Malaysia. Although, generally the relationship between these two major factions of Islam, in most Islamic countries are fairly satisfactory, Saudi Arabia's Wahabi doctrine contains "virulent hatred" for the Shiites, which is semi-publicly and privately often expressed with great intensity.<sup>24</sup> Conservative Sunni clerics in Saudi Arabia routinely denounced the Shia as heretics. For great many, the Shia are simply an inferior community and have been regarded as such for a very long time.

This confrontation is founded on the belief that each of these two factions sees itself as the true representative of Islam, and the other is contemptuously considered as heresy. The confrontations often turn violent, even during the pilgrimage in Mecca and Medina, where riots caused by Shiite pilgrims, whom the Saudi suspect of acting with Iranian encouragement, have caused hundreds of casualties.<sup>25</sup>

Saudi Arabia has decided to intervene in Bahrain after a month of social unrest that has left the tiny Gulf nation sharply divided between the minority

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<sup>24</sup> This antagonism towards the Shi'a is much less pronounced in North Africa, for example. In Iraq, Jordan Egypt and Maghreb countries the Shia and the Sunni intermarry.

<sup>25</sup> There is a long history of clashes between the Iranian pilgrims and the Saudi police in Mecca and Medina. The most notorious one took place during the pilgrimage in July 1987, when the Iranian pilgrims' demonstrations against the "enemies of Islam" (including the U.S. and Israel), turned into a battle between the protesters and the Saudi security forces. The police opened fire on demonstrators, which led to panic among the pilgrims. In this skirmish 402 people died (275 Iranians, 85 Saudis, including many police officers, and 42 pilgrims from other countries), and 649 people were wounded (303 Iranians, 145 Saudis, and 201 citizens of other countries). Much smaller riots took place in subsequent years. In early 2009, the Shiite pilgrims were attacked in Medina after performing rituals that are prohibited by Wahhabi Islam. As a result, the Minister of Interior of Saudi Arabia, Prince Nayef Ibn Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, said that the Shiites should not show publicly their faith with respect to the majority Sunni. According to the Human Rights Watch, a pilgrimage of the Saudi Shia to Medina in February 2009 to observe the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's death led to clashes between the pilgrims and the Saudi security forces, who objected to what they consider the idolatrous innovations of Shia rituals of commemorating special holidays and making visits to graves. The immediate cause of the Medina clashes was the filming on February 20 of female Shia pilgrims by a man believed to belong to the Saudi religious police. The clashes continued over a period of five days in the area of the Baqi' cemetery in Medina, which is believed to contain the graves of several of the Prophet's wives, many of his companions, and four of his successors whom the Shia recognize as rightful leaders of the Muslim community. They resulted in the arrest of 49 Shias.

Sunni Muslims backing the ruling system and the Shiite majority demanding sweeping changes. The ruler of the kingdom, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, is a Sunni Muslim like the entire ruling elite of Bahrain. Although, technically, Bahrain is a constitutional monarchy, the country's parliament's prerogatives are limited in favour of the king, who is the real power broker.

By the middle of March Bahrain's Sunni ruling elite had discovered that the country's security forces are unable to cope with the on-going protests of the majority Shiites, who constitute around 70 per cent of the population of 1,214,705.<sup>26</sup> Ostensibly a parliamentary group asked King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa for a three-month declaration of martial law and claimed that "extremist movements" were trying to disrupt the country and push it toward sectarian conflict.<sup>27</sup> The king declared a state of emergency and invited the GCC to help to establish "security and domestic stability." The deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force has been explained as a show of solidarity among the Gulf Council states – "safeguarding security and stability in one country is a collective responsibility."<sup>28</sup>

Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, the Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, stated: "There are common responsibilities and obligations within the GCC countries... The arrival of Saudi and UAE troops in Bahrain is in line with a GCC defence agreement that calls for all members to oblige when needed and to fully co-operate."<sup>29</sup>

Quite clearly Bahrain's leadership found itself under intense pressure from its Gulf neighbours, particularly from the powerful Saudi Arabia, not to give ground to the demands of the protesting majority of the country's population.

Iran has been accused of being behind the demonstrations in Bahrain. King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa went as far as to blame a foreign plot for the nation's unrest, using veiled language to accuse Iran of fomenting an uprising of the Shia majority.<sup>30</sup> His view was not shared by the US administration which declared that

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<sup>26</sup> The figure includes 235,108 non-nationals (July 2011 est.) *CIA World Factbook: Bahrain*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>.

<sup>27</sup> The 40-seat chamber was left with only pro-government politicians after 18 opposition members resigned to protest violence against demonstrators.

<sup>28</sup> GCC secretary general, Abdulrahman al Attiya, quoted by Frank Kane and Jonathan Lessware, *UAE and Saudi Arabia Send Forces to Bahrain*, "The National", March 15, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> *Saudi Soldiers Sent into Bahrain*, "Al Jazeera", <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/03/2011314124928850647.html>.

<sup>30</sup> *Associated Press*, March 21, 2011.

it “have not seen any indications that Iran is playing an ‘active role’ in helping the mainly-Shiite Bahrain protest movement.”<sup>31</sup> US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks show that the Americans were rather dismissive of Bahraini allegation, or at least that the accusation made by the Manama government was not backed by hard evidence.

Bahraini government officials sometimes privately tell U.S. official visitors that some Shia oppositionists are backed by Iran. Each time this claim is raised, we ask the GOB [government of Bahrain] to share its evidence. To date, we have seen no convincing evidence of Iranian weapons or government money here since at least the mid-1990s, when followers of Ayatollah Shirazi were rounded up and convicted of sedition.<sup>32</sup>

The British Ambassador to Manama, Jamie Bowden, spoke of evidence of Iran seeking to exploit the situation once demonstrations were underway, but he did not think Tehran was involved in starting the protests. “In the case of Bahrain, we did not see any suggestion that the Iranians were responsible for triggering what happened here, but what we do have concerns about is having started, we saw in a number of ways evidence the Iranians were seeking to exploit the situation.”<sup>33</sup>

There can be little doubt that Iran had certainly tried to gain leverage from the Bahraini unrest, insofar as any kind of instability there is to its own advantage. Bahrain hosts the US Navy Fifth Fleet and a major British naval force in the Gulf, and is thus of crucial strategic importance to Washington and London, for instance in monitoring Iran over its nuclear programme.

Bahraini and Saudi anxieties over the role of Iran in the region are shared by the United Arab Emirates. The recent uncovering of an Emirati ‘spy ring’ in Oman, allegedly there to investigate Oman’s Iranian links, further propagates the notion of the Emirates as highly concerned with Iran’s activities.<sup>34</sup>

A secret diplomatic cable from the US Ambassador in Bahrain, Adam Ereli, dated April 17, 2008, published by WikiLeaks illustrates the US diplomat’s awareness of the simmering unrest between the Shia majority underclass and the Sunni minority rulers in Bahrain.

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<sup>31</sup> *Voice of America*, April 14, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/164906>.

<sup>33</sup> R. Smith, *UK Raps Iran Role in Bahrain*, “The Gulf Daily News”, July 7, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> D. Roberts, *The Endgame in Bahrain: Saudi and UAE Troops Enter Manama*, <http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C4D80925B1234B/>.

Small but violent bands of Shia underclass youth, frustrated with persistent discrimination and what they perceive as too gradual a pace of reform, clash with police nearly every week. The Sunni minority, which rules the country and controls all security forces, has generally acted with restraint, but it takes only one mistake to provoke a potentially disastrous escalation.<sup>35</sup>

Another cable from the US Charge d’Affaires, Christopher Henzel, dated July 25, 2008, published by WikiLeaks, again warned of the impending disturbances.

Regional tensions may be adding to long-standing domestic tensions as well, contributing to the stridency of sectarian voices in Bahrain. The majority of Bahraini citizens are part of the Shia underclass, and their grievances, expressed both in legal political activity and in street skirmishes between youths and police, are at the center of all domestic politics here.<sup>36</sup>

There is every evidence that the demonstrations in Bahrain, which began on February 14, 2011 and turned into a revolt had largely an economic base which gave rise to direct political demands for democracy, rule of law and human rights. Primarily, the demonstrators sought the end to what they called the “apartheid-like policies” of the ruling Sunni minority over the Shia majority. In particular, they called for constitutional monarchy and full democratic citizen rights to choose their representatives, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

The Shiites in Bahrain make the poorest and least educated section of the society. According to a secret US Embassy in Manama dispatch published by WikiLeaks: “With the exception of a few merchant families, Shia Bahrainis are poorer than Sunni Bahrainis. Most Bahraini Shia are Arabs, but about 10–15 per cent of Bahrainis are ethnically Persian, and speak Persian at home. Many of these descend from families who came here to work in the British administration or, starting in the 1930s, in the oil industry. Persian-speakers (mostly Shia, a few Sunni) now tend to belong to the professional classes.”<sup>37</sup>

The Shia complain about discrimination on religious grounds in search for jobs and public services and that they are regularly pushed to lower levels, even in comparison with the naturalized Sunni immigrants from other countries, including those from Asia. The majority of Shiite feel shut out of the best jobs and other employment opportunities. Their position is becoming increasingly difficult in a situation when the government of Bahrain naturalizes tens of

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150213>.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/163668>.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/164906>.

thousands of the Sunnis, whose presence in the security forces, is one of the main factors for harsh police responses to protests. The allocation of housing, health care and other benefits for the Sunnis from outside Bahrain also causes resentment among the Shiites who increasingly feel like second-class citizens in their own country. Despite the wealth of the country, they believe that they never received a fair share in economic benefits. As a result, Bahrain Shiites rallied during the Spring of 2011 in expectation of true democracy, pointing to the example of the Shiites in Iraq, where the Shia took over the control of the government after the first post-Saddam elections in January 2005.

This, however, is a nightmare scenario for Saudi Arabia and other Sunni oil principalities in the Persian Gulf – the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait – whose troops are involved in the Peninsula Shield Force. Each of these countries struggle with their own restless Shia minority. Moreover, each of these states is also an object of Iranian ambitions. Their concern is that Shia control of Bahrain will be the final result in the implementation of age-old Iranian desire to take over this strategically located island.

Bahrain is just off the east coast of Saudi Arabia and the two countries are connected by 25 km long causeway.<sup>38</sup> The world's longest causeway links Bahrain with Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province – the largest province of the country, comprising 31.28 per cent of the kingdom's total size. This province is not only inhabited by large number of the Shiite population, but it is an area that contains most of the country's 14 oil fields, all the most important sources of natural gas, crude oil and refineries on which, not only the United States but also the majority of western countries rely. Saudi Arabia in 90 per cent is dependent on oil exports. Also, 75% of the state budget comes from the export. Crude oil accounts for 45% of GDP. The Eastern Province is of paramount strategic importance not only to the Saudi government but also to the global energy supply chain.

There are no accurate figures on the number of the Shia in the Eastern Province. The 1992 Library of Congress study estimates that “in the Eastern Province... they constituted perhaps 33 per cent of the population, being concentrated in the

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<sup>38</sup> The King Fahd Causeway was opened in 1986. The idea of building the causeway is based on the notion of improving relations and ties between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The project cost a total of \$1.2 billion. One of the main contractor of the Ballast Nedam project was based in the Netherlands. This four-lane road is 25 km long and about 23 m wide and was built with 350,000 m<sup>2</sup> of concrete and 47,000 tons of reinforced steel. It is estimated that the number of vehicles using this road is around 45,000 on weekdays and 60,000 during weekends.



oases of Qatif and Al Ahsa.”<sup>39</sup> The 2005 International Crisis Group report states that “Saudi Arabia’s roughly two million Shiites represent between 10 and 15 per cent of the total population. Most live and work in the Eastern Province, which they dominate demographically... While a small number reside in Dammam, the Eastern Province’s capital and largest city, the overwhelming majority live in the towns and villages of the two large oases, Qatif and Al Ahsa. Small Shiite communities also exist in Mecca and Medina...”<sup>40</sup>

Their demands for greater freedom of worship to take account of their religious traditions and freedom from Sunni practices based on the dominant in Saudi Arabia Wahhabi school of Islam, are interpreted as an affront to Sunni Wahhabism which is the basis of the kingdom’s legal system. The Shiites are prohibited to gather in community centres, they do not receive funding from the state budget for the construction of their mosques, and do not have access to certain jobs, such as the teaching of history. Deep tensions exist since 1913, when King Abdul-Aziz, who later created the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, secured control of this region. In recent decades, inner-religious, sectarian issues have become even more accentuated as a result of momentous developments in the region, such as the Iranian revolution, unrest in the neighbouring Bahrain, and the Shiite-Sunni tensions in Iraq following the American invasion in 2003, which has completely changed the power dynamics of the area. The latter in particular “strengthened Shiite aspirations and Sunni suspicions and generally deepened confessional divisions throughout the region.”<sup>41</sup> For the Saudi Shia the failure of their engagement with the Saudi ruling circles dating back to the early 1990s and the successes of their co-religionists in Iraq suggested that they must demand political reforms in the kingdom.

The report published in September 2009 by the New York-based Human Rights Watch gives examples of discrimination against the Shiites<sup>42</sup> that include other aspects than just religious freedom. The Human Rights Watch cites discrimination in the education system, where the Shiites cannot teach religion in

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<sup>39</sup> *Saudi Arabia: A Country Study*, H. Metz (ed.), Washington 1992. The same study suggests that in the whole of the kingdom “Shia... probably constitute about 5 per cent of the total population, their number being estimated from a low of 200,000 to as many as 400,000”, in a population of 12.3 million in 1992.

<sup>40</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, “Middle East Report” 2005, No. 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>42</sup> *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shia Citizens*, Human Rights Watch, New York, September 3, 2009.

schools and Shia students learn from Sunni teachers that the Shiites are infidels.<sup>43</sup> The Shiites are not well represented in school faculties and administration in the Eastern Province. This report also cites discrimination in the judiciary, ranging from denial of access to justice to arbitrary arrests and discriminatory verdicts.<sup>44</sup> Sunni judges sometimes disqualify Shiite witnesses because of their religion and only apply the assumptions of the Sunni religious law. The Shia cannot be judges in ordinary courts. There are no Shia judges except for seven judges serving three Shia courts – two first instance courts in Qatif and Al Ahsa', and an appeals court, also in Qatif. However, their jurisdiction is limited to personal status, inheritance, and endowments cases. In August 2005 a new royal decree significantly curtailed the already limited jurisdiction of the two Shia first instance courts, giving Sunni courts the authority to supervise the Shia courts and take up cases pending there.<sup>45</sup> Discrimination also includes employment. There were no Shia ministers in the successive Saudi governments, high-ranking diplomats,<sup>46</sup> or high-ranking officers. Shiite candidates generally cannot get access to military school. A Shia woman from Ahsa' was detained as she was returning from Syria for having a Shia prayer book in her possession. A court later sentenced her to six months for witchcraft and sorcery.<sup>47</sup> The report also lists instances of closure of Shia mosques and private communal prayer buildings. Damman, the largest city in the area, has no Shia cemetery. According to the 2012 Human Rights Watch Report, Saudi "Authorities continue to suppress or fail to protect the rights... of some 2 million Shia citizens."<sup>48</sup> The same body in its 2013 report said that Saudi Arabia "...systematically discriminates against its Muslim religious minorities, in particular Shia and Ismailis... Official discrimination against Shia encompasses religious practices, education, and the justice system... Security forces have killed at least 11 Shia in protests since 2011."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In its 2005 report International Crisis Groups quotes an example of a middle school history class exam paper it obtained, which asked students to discuss why "the *ahl al-Sunna* [Sunnis] prefer to characterise Shiites as *al-rafiida*" [rejectionists].

<sup>44</sup> Human Rights Watch, op.cit., p. 11.

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> The exception of Shiite ambassador was Jamil al-Jishi, envoy to Iran from 1999 to 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch, op.cit., p. 11

<sup>48</sup> *World Report 2012*, Human Rights Watch, New York 2012, p. 621.

<sup>49</sup> *World Report 2013*, Human Rights Watch, New York 2013, p. 607.

The most serious problems occurred in late November 1979 and were associated with the revolution in Iran. The Shiites in Qatif region organized an Ashura procession without the permission of local authorities. This led to bloody street violence between state security forces and thousands of frustrated Shiites that lasted seven days, and rocked the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup> Women, as well as men, marched in anger. Several buildings were destroyed, including the offices of the Saudia National Airline and the British bank in the town. Protesters seized weapons from soldiers, destroyed state-owned vehicles and even occupied the old city in downtown Qatif, from which they held off the Saudi military for days. The security forces, which included 20,000 officers of the Saudi National Guard, cordoned off the major roadways, particularly those in Qatif, Sayhat, and Safwa to localize the protest. The National Guard relied on the heavy firepower of helicopter gun ships for crowd control, turning the area into a deadly conflict zone characterized by terror, hostility, and fear. The protest was eventually crushed by the National Guard. About 20 people were killed and an unknown number wounded.<sup>51</sup>

Similar clashes took place in Qatif in February 1980. Such events only emphasize the long-held concerns of the Saudi government about Iran's machinations and attempts to interfere. In 1993 Riyadh announced a general amnesty, and many Shiites living in exile returned to the Eastern Province. In exchange for the release of political prisoners and easing travel bans, Shiite activists agreed to stop publishing books and magazines criticizing government policies. However, the gains arising from the arrangements and the attempts at reconciliation proved to be uncertain, when the government began to arrest the Shiites in 1995 after the unrest in Bahrain, and again in June 1996 after the Khobar Towers bombing in the Eastern Province, which killed 19 American

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<sup>50</sup> The protests coincided with the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a group of about 200 Sunni extremists on November 20, 1979. The heavily armed group of fundamentalists, men and women, consisting of peninsular Arabs and Egyptians enrolled in Islamic studies at the Islamic University of Medina took over and besieged the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The seizure was led by Juhaiman ibn Muhammad ibn Saif al Utaibi who belonged to a powerful Sunni family of Najd. He justified the action claiming that the ruling Al Saud dynasty had lost its legitimacy, because it was corrupt, ostentatious and had destroyed the Saudi culture by an aggressive policy of Westernization. The events in the Eastern Province added to an already worrying and insecure situation faced by the Saudi authorities.

<sup>51</sup> T. Jones, *Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shia Uprising of 1979*, "International Journal of Middle East Studies" 2006, No. 38, pp. 213–233.

soldiers. Hezbollah al-Hijaz, a radical Shiite group operating in Arabia and linked to Iran was suspected of involvement in this attack.<sup>52</sup>

During the spring of 2011, several demonstrations in the Eastern Province took place with the protesters demanding the release of prisoners.<sup>53</sup> The most recent unrest in the province took place in October 2011, when, according to the BBC, quoting Saudi state media, fourteen people were injured in clashes.

It should be stressed that the Shiites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and their coreligionist neighbours in Bahrain are among the oldest Muslim communities and are linked by blood ties. The mutual relationship between these two communities is extremely important for the constantly changing links and relationships between the various actors in the Persian Gulf and for the future stability of the region.

The threat to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and also indirectly to the interests of the United States and other Western countries, is also the most likely reason that the administration of President Obama refused to condemn the Saudi military ventures in Bahrain. "The New York Times" quoted White House spokesman Jay

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<sup>52</sup> It should be pointed out that the involvement of Shia in this attack has been questioned. See G. Porter, *Investigating Khobar Towers: How a Saudi Deception Protected bin Laden*, Inter Press Service, <http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=47312>.

<sup>53</sup> On February 16, 2011 the Shiites staged a small protest in the town of al-Awamiyah. On February 25, 2011 residents of al-'Awamiyah held a silent vigil the same day calling for the release of the so-called "Forgotten Prisoners," nine Shia Saudis detained without charge or trial for over 12 years. On March 3, 2011 about 100 people, mostly men and one group of women, staged small protests in two towns of the Eastern Province. On March 4, 2011 more than 100 protesters march through the city of al-Hofuf to demanding the release of Shiite cleric Tawfiq al-Amir. On March 9, 2011 at least three people are injured after police fired in the air to disperse protesters in Qatif. Around 600–800 protesters, all Shia and including women, took to the streets of the city to demand the release of nine Shia prisoners. On March 11, 2011 around 500 protesters demonstrated in the cities of al-Hofuf, al-Ahsa and al-Awamiyah. Hundreds of protesters rallied on March 17, 2011 to show solidarity with their fellow Shiites in Bahrain. On April 8, 2011 hundreds of Saudi Shiites protested in the city of Qatif demanding the withdrawal of the Saudi troops from neighbouring Bahrain and political rights and freedoms at home. Sporadic protests by Saudi Shiite took place throughout 2011 and 2012 – see for example reports by Amnesty International and from the United Nations Human Rights Council. According to *Arab Times*, hundreds of Saudi Shiites staged peaceful protests on April 1, 2013 in support of Shiites in Bahrain and political freedoms at home. When protests began, demonstrators called for reforms. But now, younger militants demand elimination of the monarchy and an end to the US policy of supporting the Saudi ruling family.

Carney saying “this is not the invasion of the country.”<sup>54</sup> This official position of the U.S. administration, however, is open to charges of hypocrisy, because the United States supported the demands of unarmed demonstrators in Egypt and Tunisia, and supported the rebels in Libya.

The Saudis believe the Iranians plan a long-planned game to use Bahrain as a springboard to destabilize this very sensitive area. Already at the beginning of the riots in March 2011, following the revolutions in Egypt, Saudi activists proclaimed the Day of Rage in the Eastern Province during which, hundreds of Shiites demonstrated against the Saudi authorities. Just as in Bahrain, there is deep dissatisfaction among more than two million Shiites in Saudi Arabia, who are on the margins of economic and socio-political life. Their demands and expectations are of course open to exploitation. Saudi Arabia is deeply afraid of possible “fragmentation” – the parcelling of its territory and also its oil and gas wealth without which the kingdom loses its significance.

Iranian politicians are far from shy and openly expressed their desire to conquer Bahrain. Several times in recent years they have called Bahrain the 14<sup>th</sup> province of Iran. In July 2007, the semi-official “Kayhan” newspaper ran an editorial that asserted the Iranian claim to Bahrain. It called Bahrain, “a province of Iran”, ready for reunification with the “native land.”<sup>55</sup>

In February 2009, this claim was repeated by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a close advisor to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei Hosseini. Iran bases its claim on the period in the nineteenth century when in 1830, Sheikh Abdul Al Khalifeh declared his submission to the Shah Fath Ali Shah. Over the next 30 years Iran has controlled the island. And although the government of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the last Shah of Iran, renounced these claims in 1970, it would appear that today the mullah in Iran are clearly nostalgic for the demands of the nineteenth century.

For the Sunni rulers of Bahrain and its neighbours, it is difficult to forget that with the onsets of the Iranian revolution in 1979, Bahrain witnessed mass demonstrations in support of the Islamic revolution, and that the leaders of the

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<sup>54</sup> D. Sanger, E. Schmitt, *U.S.-Saudi Tensions Intensify with Mideast Turmoil*, “The New York Times”, March 14, 2011.

<sup>55</sup> K. Sanati, *US Presence Fuels Iran-Bahrain Tension*, “Asia Times”, July 19, 2007. The claim was made in an editorial written by Hossein Shariatmadari, who is close to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Shariatmadari has reiterated that Bahrain is an integral part of Iran that was taken from it in a Western plot on September 4, 2007.

Shiites in Bahrain, demanded that their state, like Iran, be proclaimed an Islamic Republic.

Iran supports its claims to Bahrain through actions. In the 1970s Tehran bolstered the establishment of a radical Shiite Islamist organization – the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). It is alleged that the IFLB was involved in a coup attempt in December 1981. According to Bahraini sources, “An Iranian-trained team of Shiite Bahrainis were to simultaneously attack telecommunications services and Bahrain’s airport and assassinate key members of the Al Khalifa regime. In the ensuing chaos, Iran would send in its military and establish a new theocratic regime similar to its own.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, in 1981 the government of Bahrain announced the discovery of a conspiracy led by the IFLB, which aimed at the overthrow of the government in Manama and the establishment of the “Islamic Republic.” A group of the Shia from Bahrain and other parts of the Gulf, reportedly trained in Iran, was supported during the overthrow attempt by an Iranian hovercraft.<sup>57</sup> A number of persons were arrested in 1987 in another plot linked to Iran. In June 1996, fifty one Bahrainis were arrested and charged with plotting against the government. They were accused of being members of “Hizballah” trained and armed in an Iranian-backed plot.<sup>58</sup> The importance of the “Hizballah plot” as an attempt to overthrow the Bahraini regime has been largely dismissed by the Shiite observers and the Sunni liberals. Apparently, the number and type of weapons found by the security forces was “hopelessly inadequate to start a revolution or even to stand up to Bahrain security forces.”<sup>59</sup> In December 2008, fourteen people were arrested on suspicion of planning a series of terror attacks against commercial centres, diplomatic missions and nightclubs in Bahrain.

Again in 2010 Bahraini authorities arrested hundreds of Shiites, some local and some foreign, and accused them of taking part in a conspiracy of preparing attacks in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The purpose of this conspiracy

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<sup>56</sup> <http://manamapress.net/?p=4148>.

<sup>57</sup> IFLB infrastructure was badly damaged during the government’s crackdown in 1981 and 1982. Several of its members were imprisoned. The groups influence on political developments in Bahrain has diminished substantially over time. At present the IFLB has little support among the senior Bahraini clergy and only some measure of street support. Its leadership remains based in Iran.

<sup>58</sup> The Bahraini Hizballah were established in 1985 with the help of Iranian cleric Hojjat ol-Eslam Hadi al-Madrasi and are reputed to have operated in coordination with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) Quds Force.

<sup>59</sup> G. Fuller, R. Francke, *The Arab Shi’a: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York 1999, p. 135.

was the “planning and execution of a campaign of violence, intimidation and subversion.” In February 2011, Bahrain put on trial 23 people accused of belonging to a “terror network” aimed at overthrowing the government. Iran was accused of participating in preparing the actions of this network.

## Conclusions

Iran has for a very long time cultivated a covert strategy in the Persian Gulf states, particularly in Bahrain, but also elsewhere in the Arab world, that has helped to advance the Shia unrest, including the revolt in the Spring of 2011. The Iranian strategy is primarily based on the special relationship between the most powerful Shia country and the Shia co-religionists in the Middle East, the Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula. Iran has sought to harness the support of large sections of the Shia community in certain Gulf Arab states, as a means to back Iranian political and strategic objectives.<sup>60</sup> “Iran’s role as a source of weapons, training and ideological support had thus become central to the most radical Shiite groups in a struggle in which it was difficult for the Shia to avoid being dragged into the vortex of broader... struggle whether they liked it or not.”<sup>61</sup>

The action of the GCC states led by Saudi Arabia on behalf of the Al Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain has substantially limited the options available to Iran in terms of being able to sustain the momentum of Shia unrest in eastern Arabia.

While it appears that Saudi Arabia, at least for now, won the battle for Bahrain, its success in other areas of the proxy conflict with Iran are much smaller. Iranian-backed Hezbollah in the past three years, has become a political force in Lebanon intended role of power broker in the country. Lebanese government, backed by Saudi Arabia, was paralyzed for many months. Long Saudi Arabia mediation attempt failed and in January 2011, Hezbollah has withdrawn participation in the government forcing him to resign. Resignation of the government in Beirut, not only emphasized the importance of Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors, but also undermined the importance of efforts and the efforts of Saudi Arabia in the region.

As a result of sectarian violence in Iraq, thousands of the Sunnis were killed and tens of thousands of refugees were forced to emigrate to neighbouring countries, Europe and Canada. President Obama’s intention to withdraw U.S.

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<sup>60</sup> M. Alani, *GCC-Iran Relations: The Encounter in Bahrain and Beyond*, GRC Analysis, October 24, 2011.

<sup>61</sup> G. Fuller, R. Rahim Francke, *op.cit.*, p. 126.

troops from Iraq before the end of 2011 also lies the danger of invasion of Iran, which is likely to lead to direct conflict between the two countries.

The basis of King Abdullah II assumption of the “Shia crescent” are divided loyalties of the Arab Shia and the utility of these to Iran. There is little evidence of the these divided loyalties. The great majority of the Shia communities in the Arab states have not deviated from loyalty to their own country and to their Arab identity. “Indeed, they have never suffered from a conflict of loyalties because, in short, they have no other loyalty superseding that to their country and to their Arab national belonging.”<sup>62</sup>

The case of the Shia in the so called Shia crescent is primarily one of a group of people claiming the civil and human rights that are available to their co-citizens. Ever since the success of the Iranian revolution, the Teheran regime has persistently claimed to be protector and promoter of the Shia interests outside its borders. Unfortunately, the Sunni majority states allowed these claims to go unchallenged. As long as the Shia are marginalised, treated as second class citizens and vilified as infidels in their own countries, the Tehran regime would have call on its claims of protection of their co-religionists.

“Over time and particularly today, this self-proclaimed status of Iran as the leader and protector of the Arab Shia has turned into the main instrument of Iranian interventionist policy in internal Arab affairs.”<sup>63</sup> To eradicate this claim and to undermine the international threat of Iran it is best to change the dynamics of internal Sunni politics.

The rise of the Shia power in Bahrain where the US Fifth Fleet is based, in the strategically important south Lebanon, and the oil producing power house of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia is primarily reflection of domestic policies of those countries. These policies that contained the potential for the Shia to think as a community and allowed them to see themselves as a community not only for historical but most importantly for political reasons. It is safe to assume that in the future within each country the Shia will ultimately demand larger access to power and the Sunnis will ultimately resist it.

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<sup>62</sup> M. Alani, *op.cit.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem.*