

BAHRAIN

confetti at the centre of power struggles in the Arab-Persian Gulf



After one month of demonstration in Manama, tension seems to decrease in Bahrain whereas the intervention of Saudi and Emirates joint military force shows that this kingdom represents the strategic center of global regional issues. Behind the necessary reconstruction of the relations between the royal family and Bahraini inhabitants, the Arab-Persian Gulf is the theater of a power struggle between the Sunnites monarchies, met within the Gulf States Cooperation Council, and Iran. The rise of Teheran and its regional ambitions represent a source of preoccupation, shared by both the United States and the Atlantic Alliance. Face the risk of radicalization, political reforms in Bahrain – also in the others Gulf monarchies – seems to be the only both way and solution to restrict Iranian influence on Shiite populations.

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On February 14th of this year, the Bahrain police caused the death of a young man in Diya, east of the capital Manama, whilst breaking up crowds of demonstrators in several Shiite villages. The following day, several thousands of people went out into the streets of the capital to attend the victim's funeral and to demand political reform. In the course of this second day, another demonstrator was killed as police attempted to break up crowds. Members of parliament from the main opposition party, the Shiite party al-Wifaq, which holds 18 seats out of a total of 40 – reacted by abandoning parliamentary sessions. At the same time, demonstrators started to gather and subsequently set up camp at Pearl Roundabout. Behind this jumble of local and regional problems blowing on a wind of revolt, the appearance of Saudi soldiers and Emirati police officers is there to remind us that Bahrain occupies a strategic location for regional players and is at the centre of a power struggle within the Arab-Persian Gulf.

Bahrain and the tectonics of protest

The demonstrations in Bahrain were initially inspired by the Tunisian revolution, which produced a shockwave in Northern Africa and the Middle East, leading to hopes of reform. Given the situation, the outbreak of demonstrations in Bahrain is merely following on from other protest movements which have succeeded in overthrowing the established power, bringing hope of building a better world thanks to public pressure. In the current climate of globalisation and deterritorialised virtual social networks, emotions spread from continent to continent, feeding on one another as they go. If it hadn't been for the Tunisian and Egyptian precedents, the demonstrations in Bahrain would probably not have reached the same scale.

Although this local echo of regional events should not be ignored, the Tunisian revolution merely rekindled ancient opposition logic, giving a kind of resonance to what was announced as a day of wrath intended to "celebrate" the tenth anniversary of the referendum held on 14th February 2001 regarding the institution of political reform and a constitutional monarchy. The recent violence in Bahrain can be seen as part of the kingdom's deep-rooted history of revolt. Between 1994 and 1999, the island of Bahrain, which was then an Emirate, was rocked by an uprising which caused nearly a hundred deaths in the space of five years, and only came to an end because King Hamad Al Khalifa, who came to power on his Father's death in March 1999, decided to free political prisoners and decree an amnesty to allow exiled inhabitants to return, as well as re-establishing a constitution and authorising political pluralism. More recently, several months of demonstrations took place in the first half of 2010, marked in particular by the arrest of 25 opposition figures (1).

The roots of contestation in Bahrain are political, social and community-related (2). Following a referendum which led to the massive approval of the National Action Charter, the King had assured the population that a constitutional commission would put forward amendments to the 1973 constitution and that the parliament would be granted sole legislative power. However, in February 2002, the King promulgated a new constitution without consulting the people, giving him close control over the country. Its parliament is made up of a two-chamber National Assembly, forty members of which are elected (members of parliament) but the other forty of which (members of the council of representatives) are selected by the king. If the two chambers fail to agree, the King has the right to demand the adoption of a law by a two-thirds majority in both chambers. He can also decide to amend the constitution and legislate by decree.

From a social point of view, Bahrain is faced with the need to create work for large numbers of young people within its population. According to figures from the 2001 census, just under 17 000 people were then unemployed. Seven years later, in July 2008, the minister for employment announced that the number of people without work stood at just over 4 000. However, the real figures are thought to be much higher. In a report published in 2008, researcher Steven Wright estimated that 15 to 30% people of working age were without jobs. Added to this figure, we must also take into account the fact that many people have a job which is not in line with their level of qualifications (3). This social situation is worsened by a feeling of resentment amongst the Shiite populations, the majority in Bahrain – they make up between 60 and 70% of the 1.1 million

inhabitants (4) –, unlike in the other Gulf monarchies. They are excluded from several professions, in particular in the security field. As far as politics is concerned, the division into districts and the number of representatives for legislative elections do not correspond to the demographic size of the regions concerned and in the past, measures have been taken to naturalise Jordanian, Syrian or even Yemeni Sunni Muslims.

Iran at the heart of regional grammar

The presence of a Shiite majority is not the only thing which makes Bahrain unique. The island houses the headquarters of the 5th American fleet in its capital, Manama. American ships crisscross the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean in order to secure petrol supply routes to the United States. Located approximately 240 kilometres from the Iranian coast, the American base also serves as a tool for monitoring the Arab-Persian Gulf (5). It is not only a matter of securing the greatest petrol-producing region in the world and the maritime trade routes connecting southern Asia and eastern Europe, but also of putting a stop to Iranian ambitions in the Arab world. France and NATO are also strengthening their positions in this strategic region. Paris has opened a base in Abu Dhabi, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, launched at the Atlantic Alliance summit in June 2004, is pushing for practical cooperation between NATO and any countries from the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (6) that would be interested in the idea.

Political evolution within Iran and Iranian foreign policy are a source of concern, of which the country's nuclear programme is just one important aspect. Since the death of Imam Khomeini and the abandonment of his purely ideological stances – Iran was the self-proclaimed world *leader* of the Islamic revolution in the name of pan-Shiism –, Iran has efficiently spread its influence towards the Gulf, the Middle East, Central Asia, Caucasus and even the Sahel, whilst continuing to back Islamic militancy and its combat against "American imperialism" and Israel. Consequently, in parallel to its support of the Lebanese Shiites, Iran is also assisting the Palestinian Hamas and even the Sunnite Taliban. Young Afghans are reportedly being allowed to cross the Iranian border, where they are trained before returning to Afghanistan to fight the coalition forces (7). In March 2001, faced with such voluntarism from Iran and given the risk of destabilisation, the six countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) decided to set up an advanced radar warning system to protect themselves from missile attacks. As pointed out to the White House counter-terrorism adviser by Saudi Arabian monarch Abdallah bin Abdelaziz in March 2009: "we cannot trust the Iranians. [...] Iran's aim is to cause problems" (8).

The arrival of 1 000 Saudi and 500 Emirati soldiers (9) in Bahrain within the framework of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf on 14th March should be set in the context of an Iranian rise to power and opposition between the Sunnite monarchies and Teheran. Our main aim must be to prevent this little allied kingdom from sliding into Teheran's orbit (10). Many of the kingdom's Shiite religious leaders were in fact trained in Iran. What is more, although the Shah of Iran announced that he was officially giving up Iranian claims on the island of Bahrain in 1971, the conviction that Bahrain is Iranian land – in particular due to the presence of majority Shiite populations – is still anchored in the minds of some Iranians. In February 2009, Nateq Nouri, advisor to Khamenei, declared that Bahrain was an Iranian province. His announcement resulted in diplomatic relations being broken off between the two countries.

If we look beyond the regional dimension, we can see that the stakes are even higher for the Wahhabite monarchy because the Saudi Arabian Shiites are the victims of discrimination with regard to employment (administration, armed forces, security forces). Although the regime has engaged in dialogue and acknowledged religious pluralism to a certain extent, Riyadh is in danger of seeing the disturbances spread to the country's eastern province, where the main Shiite population and petroleum wealth are both concentrated (11). Consequently, we must prevent the demonstrations in Bahrain from resonating with similar claims across the Arabian peninsula and, worse still, stop Shiite success in the streets of Bahrain from feeding strong feelings of dissension amongst King Fahd's subjects, where the social network *Facebook* has already relayed calls to

demonstrate in order to bring about change. Indeed, this is partly the aim of the social measures announced by Riyadh (12), especially as it is thought that almost 40 % of Saudi young people between the ages of 20 and 24 are unemployed (the figures are even higher within the Shiite minority) and given that opponents have already called for demonstrations against the regime on at least two occasions via the social network *Facebook*.

Rising tension in the Arab-Persian Gulf

Far from appeasing the situation, Saudi and Emirati involvement has in fact caused tension in the Gulf to escalate. On Wednesday 16th March, the Iranian embassy in Manama was closed, whilst Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared that the involvement of Gulf Cooperation Council troops to put an end to popular demonstrations in Bahrain was "a very ugly move (...) doomed to fail" due to American politics in the region. Five days later, in a speech made to coincide with New Year celebrations, Ayatollah Khamenei repeated these accusations and declared that he would provide Iranian support to all movements of revolt. From Teheran's perspective, failure to acknowledge demands made by the Shiite populations is strengthening the image of Iran as a defender of the Arab streets against hegemonic external endeavours.

The timing is perfect. Police violence is being relayed on the Internet, and one video in particular showing a man apparently being shot at at close range with a buckshot can be seen on the websites of all the major international media groups. However, American diplomacy did distance itself from international involvement in Bahrain. On 14th March, a spokesman for the White House called upon the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf to show restraint and to support dialogue rather than undermine it. Just a few hours later, Hillary Clinton asked the forces involved in Bahrain to show restraint. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are strategic allies of the United States in this part of the world (in 2002, Bahrain was awarded the status of a major non-NATO ally) as well as being key clients of American armament companies. What is more, as far as Teheran is concerned, recalling the existence of an outside enemy is a good way of limiting the repercussions of Arab revolts within the Iranian borders by helping to bind the society together behind its leaders, limiting internal dissent in the process. Incidentally, the Saudi consulate in Mashhad, in the north east of Iran, was attacked by 700 demonstrators on March 18th.

In Bahrain, the opposition asked Iran not to get involved. However, the situation remains tense despite demonstrators being scattered in Manama and a curfew being set up. The protest has shifted from Pearl Square, whose monument has since been torn down, to the Shiite villages on the island. Demonstrations are continuing in the Shiite villages whilst security forces are crisscrossing the country. Given the history of the kingdom of Bahrain and following the recent violence and radicalisation of demonstrators, it is unlikely that the situation will settle down without political reform and unless those in power give the Shiite population some sort of guarantee of their goodwill. More worrying still, the fragile dialogue set up between Shiites and Sunnites was shattered by the demonstrations in February and March. The overwhelmed al-Wifaq party was one-upped by more radical formations, including the al-Haq party, which is made up of Wifaq militants disappointed by the party's decision to engage in dialogue with those in power. In addition, other opponents who have been recently liberated or legally authorised to return to the country are making more and more incendiary declarations and issuing calls for violence, rejecting the King's 19th February offer of talks entrusted to Prince Salman Al-Khalifa. Some supporters of the dynasty have also started to make their voices heard. On 14th March, they even demanded that martial law should be declared to remove protestors blocking the capital.

The challenge of reform for Manama

Given the context, the monarchy is facing a considerable challenge. Re-establishing dialogue with the Shiites will take some time. Back in 2002, the opposition's four main political formations boycotted the parliamentary elections. Consequently, it seems important to support partisans of

conciliation within the monarchy whilst giving credibility to opposition parties like al-Wifaq so that they are not permanently overtaken by a more radical fringe supported by neighbouring Iran and in favour of the abolition of the monarchy. Signals to this effect have been sent over the last few weeks, but they were unfortunately drowned out by the huge confusion of speeches and actions, which alternated between calls for dialogue and for repression. The Al-Khalifa dynasty seems divided. Whilst the King's uncle, who has been at the head of the government since 1971, favours heavy handed methods, probably with the support of Saudi Arabia, Prince Salman Al-Khalifa prefers the idea of dialogue (13).

Political reform is all the more important because it would help to establish the right climate for pursuing the economic reform started by the monarchy to tackle the problem of underemployment within the kingdom and the arrival of young workers. Despite reforms initiated by the Economic Development Board to reform employment legislation, to promote education and training and to encourage companies to set up in Bahrain, the economy remains dependent on petrol, which is becoming ever scarcer (77 % of the government's 2006 revenue was obtained from this one resource) and is having to stand up to competition from Dubai, which remains the most popular destination for companies moving to the region. Which is why the project signed in June 2006 to build a 45 km long bridge between Bahrain and Qatar is so important. This link is thought to have the potential to absorb some of the workers from Bahrain, thereby contributing to economic integration between the different countries in the region (14).

Neither Bahrain nor the Arab-Persian Gulf should have to suffer chronic instability and a strengthening of the radicalisation process, especially as the issue of cohabitation between Shiites and Sunnites is a recurring theme in the region. As Yemen in turn is set alight, it is becoming urgent to set up a new civil pact and to give the region a feeling of hope for the future. In the fight going on between the Gulf monarchies and Iran, breathing life back into the 2001 National Action Charter in Bahrain would be one of the best ways of combining security, stability and development.

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(1) On this occasion, the government had activists arrested for denouncing the civil rights situation in Bahrain at a public meeting in London. It also suspended the *Al Jazeera* television channel for broadcasting a report on poverty in the kingdom.

(2) *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, Middle East Report no. 40, International Crisis Group, 6th May 2005.
[http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrain%20Sectarian%20Challenge.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iran%20Gulf/Bahrain/Bahrain%20Sectarian%20Challenge.ashx).

(3) Steven Whright, *Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain*, Center for International and Regional Studies in Qatar, 2008, p. 10.

(4) These are the figures for the year 2008 (Bahrain General Directorate of statistics, *National Accounts*, 2009 edition, p. 11.
http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_ara/English/Publications/National%20Account/NA2009.pdf).

(5) The United States also has two bases in Kuwait, two in Oman and an air base and logistics facility in Qatar (Marissa Alison, *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States*, CSIS, 6th December 2010, p. 48.
http://csis.org/files/publication/101207_US_Competition_with_Iran_Saudi_Arabia.pdf).

(6) At the end of 2008, four countries had given a positive answer: Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar.
<http://www.nato.int/issues/ici/index-f.html>.

(7) Frédéric Robin, "Wikileaks: le jeu trouble de l'Iran sur le théâtre afghan", *Le Monde*, 2nd December 2010.

(8) Natalie Nougayrède et Gilles Paris, "Wikileaks : La peur des pays arabes", *Le Monde*, 28 novembre 2010.

(9) These men are part of the "Peninsula shield force", a joint force set up by the countries of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (5 000 men in 1984, 20 000 since December 2000). In addition, the Gulf states also decided to create a 20 billion dollar development fund to help Bahrain and Oman on 10th March.

(10) Bernard Gwertzman, *Is Bahrain's Regime Next to Fall*, Council on Foreign Relations, 18th February 2011.
<http://www.cfr.org/bahrain/bahrain-regime-next-fall/p24169>.

(11) 40 % of employees of the Saudi petroleum company Aramco are Shiites. In the Saudi kingdom as a whole, Shiites represent 10 % of the total population.

(12) On February 23rd, King Abdallah announced social measures worth 36 billion dollars.

(13) In an announcement published on 13th March 2011, the heir to the throne officially accepted to launch a "national debate" with the opposition, in particular regarding the establishment of a parliament with legislative power and a government representing the wishes of the people. The prince also declared that he would be in favour of reviewing the country's division into districts before the upcoming legislative elections and that he would welcome discussions on naturalisation and on ways of combating corruption and ethnic and religious segregation.

(14) Steven Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

