

CHAPTER 3

Ethnic Conflict in the *Rentier* State: The Case of Sunni-Shi'i Relations in Bahrain

Tiny though it is, the 33-island archipelago of Bahrain, situated 15 miles off the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf, is an ideal location in which to examine the influence of ethnic-based political mobilization on the normal function of the *rentier* state and, in turn, on regime stability. Indeed, for a kingdom but 3.5 times the size of Washington, D.C., Bahrain holds a number of distinctions: the global center of pearl production and trading until the 1930s; the first Gulf country in which oil was discovered and mined; the former home of colonial Britain's Residency of the Persian Gulf and present base of the U.S. Fifth Fleet; and, since the 2003 fall of the Iraqi Ba'athists, the only Middle East nation still ruled by a Sunni minority.¹ Although the exact proportion is itself a much-debated and highly divisive issue, it is generally accepted that Shi'is comprise between 55% and 75% of the total population of Bahrain, making it one of just three Mideast states, along with Iran and Iraq, wherein this perennial minority holds an absolute majority.²

That Sunnis are here outnumbered, however, is not Bahrain's qualification for study. More important is that relations between Bahraini citizens and the ruling Āl Khalīfa tribe *qua* government, to a degree unparalleled anywhere else in the Arab Gulf, fail to operate according to the standard patron-client formula represented by the *rentier* state model. The lesson to be learned of the past 15 years of political turmoil in Bahrain—to say nothing of the

¹ That is, if one respects S. Mūsā al-Ṣadr's 1974 *fatwā* proclaiming the 'Alawīs to be a branch of Twelver Shi'ism.

² Indeed, among the other products of my representative national survey is the first reliable estimate of this Sunni-Shi'a ratio (i.e., one based on direct sampling and not extrapolations from birth or immigration rates, government figures, *etc.*) since 1941. This discussion follows in Chapter 4. For a recent study that puts the proportion at between 65-75% Shi'a, see Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Muslim Population, Estimated Percentage Range of Shia by Country," October 2009, p. 1.

popular uprising and ethnic clashes of the 1950s; the showdown over a 1965 Public Security Law and ensuing dissolution of parliament in 1975; and the Iranian-organized failed coup attempt of 1981—is that either (a) the Bahraini royal family is singularly inept at using its sizable external rents to placate would-be opponents; or (b) there is something about the way politics operates in Bahrain that renders the state systematically unable to do so. To make a case for the latter is the purpose here.

The “Opening” of Bahrain: The Enduring Legacy of the Āl Khalīfa Conquest

The Āl Khalīfa’s 1783 capture of Bahrain from the Safavid Persian Empire is immortalized for all who see the island in the ubiquitous references to the conqueror (“*al-Fātiḥ*”) himself, Aḥmad bin Muḥammad Āl Khalīfa. Having crossed the bridge into Manama from the airport in Muharraq, one likely turns south onto the Al-Fātiḥ Highway, passing on the way the enormous Al-Fātiḥ Grand Mosque, by far the largest place of worship in Bahrain and one of the largest in the Islamic world. The mosque is flanked to its west by the Guḍaibiyah Royal Palace and to its north by the newly-opened National Library. More than just a painful reminder of the social and political upheaval occasioned by the Āl Khalīfa’s arrival, however, the prominent place of “Al-Fātiḥ” in the national lore and present-day geography of Bahrain represents for the country’s Shi’a population something more hateful. For while the word “*al-fātiḥ*” (الفتاح; literally, “the opener”) can mean “the conqueror” or “the victor” in the military sense, it also carries overt religious overtones that certainly are not lost on ordinary Bahrainis as they would not be on any Arabic-speaking Muslim.

When seventh-century Muslim armies fought to spread their nascent religion across the Arab world and beyond, they were said to be effecting the “*fath al-islām*” (فتح الإسلام)—the “opening of Islam”—a euphemism for the conversion and, upon refusal, destruction of non-Muslim peoples.³ Its use in the Bahraini context, then, implies not simply that the island was conquered militarily by Aḥmad Āl Khalīfa and his Sunni tribal allies, but that it was “opened” for Islam—that is, for true Islam—in view of its indigenous Shi’a inhabitants and its prior status as a protectorate of Safavid Persia, which since 1501 had embraced Shi’ism as

³ More recently, and in line with the interpretation here, “Fath al-Islām” is the organizational name adopted by Sunni militants who made headlines in summer 2007 for their armed rebellion inside a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon that had the larger aim, reportedly, of striking at Ḥizballāh, arousing tensions with the latter and its Shi’a supporters. See Robert Worth and Nada Bakri, 2008, “Hezbollah Ignites a Sectarian Fuse in Lebanon,” *New York Times*, May 18.

a state religion. The continued glorification of this event and of this terminology on the part of Bahrain's rulers thus serves only to further alienate its majority Shi'a population, and aptly symbolizes the socio-political divide separating ordinary Sunni and Shi'i citizens. As pithily expressed by one of my Bahraini contacts, popular Shi'i cleric Sh. 'Abd al-Wahhāb Ḥusayn, a powerful force in the uprising of the 1990s and of February 2011 (and currently serving a life sentence for his role in the latter), the difference between Sunnis and Shi'is in Bahrain is the difference between "*al-fātiḥ wa al-maftūḥ*" (الفتاح والمفتوح): "the opener and the opened."⁴

Precisely how Bahraini society looked prior to the appearance of the Āl Khalīfa is the subject of much speculation. For their part, the Shi'a make, as Khuri (1980, 28) notes in his yet unrivaled sociological survey of Bahrain, an unlikely religious interpretation:

They say that Bahrain had three hundred villages and thirty cities and towns before the Al-Khalifa conquest, each ruled by a jurist who was well versed in Shi'a law. These three hundred and thirty jurists were organized into a hierarchy headed by a council of three, elected by an assembly of thirty-three who, in turn, were acclaimed to power by the jurists of the whole country.

This fanciful portrait of pre-Āl Khalīfa Bahrain governed by the magical number three is but one element of what Louër (2008, 23) has called a "myth of golden age," a tale ingrained into the collective consciousness of the region's Shi'a that draws upon the historical usage of the appellation "Bahrain" to refer to all the Gulf coast from Basra to the Qatari peninsula, the heart of this ancient territory being the modern Bahrain archipelago along with the oases of al-Qaṭīf and al-Ḥasā' now part of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. This narrative, recounted to her in interviews by Saudi and Bahraini Shi'a alike, Louër summarizes as follows:

There was a time when the Shias of Eastern Arabia were united in one single country called Bahrain extending from Basra to Oman. Its inhabitants were called the Baharna and had embraced Shiism since the beginning of Islam. Bahrain was a wealthy country blessed by several natural resources: fresh springs, arable lands and pearls. People were living a simple but fully satisfactory peasant life in accordance with the prescriptions of the Imams. It was a time of social harmony and order. Everything changed when the Sunni tribes—the Al-Khalifa and the Al-Sa'ud—took over the region, appropriated the natural resources for their own use and imposed their brutal and autocratic manners on the native population. They not only oppressed the Shias but cut their unity by breaking the organic ties between the islands and the inland. Since then, marginalized Shias have fought to recover their legitimate rights as the native inhabitants of Ancient Bahrain.

⁴ The choice of the Al-Fātiḥ Mosque as the base of counter-revolutionary protests by pro-regime Sunnis at the height of Bahrain's crisis in February and March 2011 was no coincidence. Indeed, there even emerged an Al-Fātiḥ Group for Electronic Jihād, meant to combat an effective international media campaign waged by protesters.

These tales of the glory days of Bahrain, of the time it was ruled by enlightened Shi'a jurists for the sake of its Shi'a inhabitants and unspoiled by unjust alien intrusion, are not mere bedtime stories related by parents to sleepy children. Historically embellished and selective though they are—where, for example, are the Portuguese and the Ottomans? who by 1550 had already divided “Ancient Bahrain,” the former controlling the archipelago via its Sunni allies in Iran while the latter administered the mainland—they nonetheless represent for today's Bahraini Shi'a population a common historical and ethical starting point that is both a symbol and legitimizing force of their contemporary struggle for a greater influence over Bahraini society in the face of continued foreign domination thereof. Thus they refer to themselves using the collective demonym Baḥārnaḥ (بحارنة; sing. Baḥrānī, بحراني) in reference to their status as the “original” inhabitants of Bahrain (“البحريين الأصليين”) and in contrast to Āl Khalīfa and their Sunni Bedouin allies who migrated from the Arabian hinterland and who only later, it is said, invented the modern designation “Bahraini” (that is, Baḥraynī) as part of their effort to rewrite the country's Shi'i past.⁵ This ethnic distinction showed itself repeatedly during the process of conducting field interviews for my Bahrain mass survey: questionnaires, which employed the standard Arabic demonym “بحريني” throughout, regularly returned with lines drawn through the term and “Baḥrānī” scribbled in the margins. Field interviewers, in particular those operating in the rural villages exclusive to Shi'a, recounted how they were lectured by respondents about Bahraini history and how the latter, when asked as part of the interview, for instance, “How proud are you to be a Bahraini?,” replied matter-of-factly, “I am not proud of being *Bahraini*; but I am very proud of being *Baḥrānī*.”

The influence of this nativist discourse is likely all the more powerful because of the active effort by authorities to suppress it. Prominent books on the pre-Āl Khalīfa history of Bahrain, the royal family itself, and pre-independence political history are banned and subject to confiscation. This includes, for example, Fuad Khuri's masterful *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, which chronicles the political transformation of Bahrain, with the development of oil, away from what he calls a “feudal estate system” comprised of independent agricultural fiefdoms worked by structurally-indebted Shi'a and administered by absentee landlords from among Āl Khalīfa and their Sunni tribal allies, the latter having been granted considerable lands for their part in the Bahrain conquest. Despite being ideologically unsympathetic to Bahraini

⁵ Like the myth of Ancient Bahrain, the term “Baḥārna” is also popular, Louër tells (12), among Saudi Shi'a, especially among intellectuals and political activists, who use it to denote Shi'is living in the Eastern Province. I have also heard the term used widely in Qatar as a generic name for the country's Shi'a.

Shi'a, the book is in high demand nonetheless for its vivid account of nineteenth-century and early to mid-twentieth-century Bahrain—so much so, in fact, that I was requested upon my return to the United States to send a Bahraini friend but one gift: a copy of Khuri's book to replace one that had been confiscated from his father some time ago at Bahrain Airport.

The second most significant volume on the modern political history of Bahrain is undoubtedly the journals of Charles Belgrave, the British officer who served in the position of personal "advisor" to the Bahraini ruler for some thirty-one years between 1926 and 1957 and who eventually came to be known simply as "المستشار"—"the advisor" (KHURI 1980, 110). In the wake of British intervention just three years prior to replace recalcitrant ruler 'Īsā bin 'Alī with his son Ḥamad, Belgrave's appointment was meant to provide Bahrain with some measure of political continuity. At the same time, he was charged with finishing the task of modernizing the whole of the country's outdated bureaucracy, an initiative that effectively spelled the end of the prevailing feudal estate system and one therefore strongly endorsed by ordinary Shi'a but resisted by the ruling and wealthy elite. Belgrave's diary, then, consists of detailed daily reports of meetings and conversations with the ruler and various state officials, observations on Bahraini society, and other quotidian affairs.

Like Khuri's, this important work too is banned inside Bahrain. Or, more precisely, while selected excerpts from the diary were published in 1960 and again in 1972,⁶ the original papers are said to reside in the royal library and in any case have not been made available. Unauthorized copies of the diary somehow made their way onto the Internet in June 2009, however, and were thereafter translated, made to be published, and imported for distribution by the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), itself outlawed. The printed copies were subsequently confiscated by the Ministry of Information, which informed the publisher of the government's decision to ban the book, barring any further imports.⁷ But the damage was already done. The leaked version has persisted in the form of a massive, 2,302-page electronic document that has become required reading for the country's political opponents, having been viewed over 7,000 times in but three years.⁸ Indeed, upon hearing of my study

⁶ In Charles Belgrave, 1960, *The Pirate Coast* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban); and Charles Belgrave, 1972, *Personal Column* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban).

⁷ For further details see Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, "Banning one of the Most Significant Historic Books in the History of Bahrain," 25 May 2010. Available at <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3105>>.

⁸ "Papers of Charles Dalrymple-Belgrave, 1926-1957." Available at <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/16225787>>. This figure is probably a rather low estimate of the total readership, as many more people, myself included, received the document indirectly from those who had already obtained it.

of Bahraini politics, my contacts repeatedly directed me to the text as a sort of prerequisite to any understanding of the local political situation. Yet for all the controversy surrounding the Belgrave diary, and despite its constituting perhaps an embarrassing intrusion into the private lives and court politics of the ruling family, there is nothing in it that could be considered a direct attack on the Āl Khalīfa or that substantiates any heretofore unknown wrongdoing that must be covered up at all costs. No, the papers of Belgrave, like *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, are banned not for their contents per se but for what they represent: information, and more importantly the contradiction of the “official,” sanitized version of Bahraini history that the regime has worked hard to construct. Curiously, the same Minister of Information who enacted the Belgrave ban has herself published at least two separate editions of translated excerpts from the journals,⁹ a coincidence that has led the BCHR to speculate about the completeness and accuracy of the latter volumes, and ask whether this might not help explain the ban on its own, presumably less abridged Arabic translation.

Such promotion of an idealized Bahraini history goes beyond mere suppression of conflicting accounts, however, and pervades nearly all aspects of state-sponsored media and cultural displays. Holes (2005), for instance, has demonstrated that characters in the serials (مسلسلات) produced by Bahraini national television speak a distinct Sunni Arab dialect and ignore almost entirely the vernaculars of both the Baḥārnah and the ‘Ajām,¹⁰ Bahraini Shi’a of Persian origin. In similar fashion, the Bahrain National Museum in its sprawling dioramas depicting pre-oil industry gives a prominent place to the Sunni-dominated activity of pearl fishing while neglecting the quintessentially Shi’i agricultural sector, most obviously the widespread cultivation of date palms, which was the basis of the Baḥārnah’s existence for the centuries preceding the discovery of oil. Even Bahrain’s prehistoric stone burial mounds, which some prominent Salafī politicians have suggested should be destroyed for their pre-Islamic origins, are represented quite extensively, with an entire full-sized mound and pieces of others having been reconstructed inside a large exhibit. The National Museum, naturally, is accessible via an exit along Al-Fātiḥ Highway.

⁹ Sha. Mai bint Muḥammad Āl Khalīfa, 2000, *Charles Belgrave: Biography and Diary, 1926-1957* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing); and Sha. Mai bint Muḥammad Āl Khalīfa, 1999, *From the Surroundings of Kufa to Bahrain: The Carmathian, from an Idea to a State* (Beirut: The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing).

¹⁰ عجم sing. عجمي lit., one who is illiterate in language; silent; mute. Though the term can refer to non-Arabic-speaking peoples more generally and is often considered an ethnic slur, in Bahrain it is used exclusively to denote Shi’a of Persian origin, who even have named for them a neighborhood in Manama (فريق العجم) as well as several prominent religious institutions, including most notably the مأتم العجم الكبير.

The nativism employed by Bahrain's Shi'a that has given rise to the present categories Baḥrānī and Baḥraynī—to the land's "original" Shi'i inhabitants versus their "foreign" Sunni oppressors—is therefore fueled in no small measure by the countervailing effort on the part of the regime to downplay the nation's Shi'i past and, more generally, to obscure the details of Bahrain's pre-oil history while emphasizing its subsequent economic modernization and development under Āl Khalifa leadership. That the authorities would expend such resources in rebranding the state away from its Shi'i roots, the Baḥārnah reason, only goes to prove the validity of their version of the country's contested history and, by extension, the legitimacy of their attendant claims to a collective right in political decisionmaking.

Today, however, there is being written a final, more sinister chapter to this narrative. It tells how the ruling family and its Sunni allies, having failed in their attempt to suppress and distort the true history of the country and so extinguish the embers of Shi'is' legitimate political aspirations, have settled now on a more radical solution: the physical elimination of the Baḥārnah's longstanding demographic majority through an organized program of political naturalization (التجنيس السياسي) of Arab and non-Arab Sunnis. Known simply as "*al-tajnīs*," the issue of granting Bahraini citizenship on a sectarian basis for political purposes is *primus inter pares* among the nation's myriad contentious subjects, and it presents an instructive lesson in miniature on the ethnic bases of political action in Bahrain.

Passports for Allegiance: Political and Demographic Engineering in Bahrain

Accusations that Bahrain was attempting to alter its demographic balance through selective naturalization first surfaced in the aftermath of the 2002 parliamentary elections, which were to be the country's first since the legislature was suspended in 1975 by the former emir, Sh. ʿĪsā bin Salmān Āl Khalifa. Upon the latter's death in 1999, his son Ḥamad ascended to the monarchy promising a general *rapprochement* aimed at easing political tensions and, more specifically, at ending a tumultuous decade of Shi'a-state conflict punctuated by a wholesale Shi'a uprising spanning 1994-1999.¹¹ The reestablishment of the parliament, then, was but one facet of an auspicious but ultimately illusory plan for political change outlined in a new

¹¹ The 1994-1999 uprising has been covered in detail. See, e.g., Louay Bahry, 1997, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?" *Middle East Policy* 5(2): 42-57; Munira Fakhro, 1997, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment," in Sick and Potter, *op. cit.*, pp. 167-188; Adeed Darwish, 1999, "Rebellion in Bahrain," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3(1): 84-87; Louay Bahry, 2000, "The Socio-economic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11(3): 129-143; and J.E. Peterson, 2004, "Bahrain: The 1994-1999 Uprising," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, N° APBN-002. Available at: <www.JEPeterson.net>.

National Action Charter, a reform framework approved by referendum in February 2001. The document also mandated the release of political detainees arrested during the uprising; a general amnesty for political exiles; and the amendment of a repressive State Security Law to disband the notorious State Security Courts.¹² Prior to the vote, finally, King Ḥamad made a dramatic personal visit to the home of prominent Shi‘i religious leader S. ‘Abdallāh al-Ghurayfi, who received him along with Bahrain’s most senior cleric and the spiritual force behind the 1990s *intifāḍah*, Sh. ‘Abd al-Amīr al-Jamrī, where he signed and ostensibly agreed to a list of political demands stipulating that the lawmaking power of the new regime should reside in a democratically-elected lower house of parliament, with any appointed upper chamber limited to a strictly advisory role. The widely-circulated document, complete with photos capturing the act of signature, was seen as a *coup* for the opposition (PETERSON 2008).¹³

The Charter was approved overwhelmingly—a full 89% of eligible voters were said to have taken part, with 98.4% in favor—so overwhelmingly, in fact, that King Ḥamad took its passage for a mandate to fashion a permanent constitution unilaterally, a non-negotiated document revealed on nearly the one-year anniversary of the referendum in a flurry of royal decrees. The opposition was floored. Not only did the king renege on his public declaration by subordinating the elected *majlis al-nuwāb* to a royally-appointed *majlis al-shūrā* with an equal number of seats and a tiebreaking vote, but the constitution also explicitly proscribed any amendment to this system, affirming that “it is not permissible under any circumstances to propose the amendment of the constitutional monarchy and the principle of inherited rule in Bahrain, as well as the bi-cameral system.”¹⁴ Additional decrees promulgated later in 2002 further infuriated opponents: Decree No. 56 extended a previous amnesty order to the

¹² For more on King Ḥamad’s reform initiative, see, e.g., Abdulhadi Khalaf, 2000, “The New Amir of Bahrain: Marching Sideways,” *Civil Society* 9(100): 6-13; J.E. Peterson, 2002, “Bahrain’s First Reforms under Amir Hamad,” *Asian Affairs* 33(2): 216-227; Edward Burke, 2008, “Bahrain: Reaching a Threshold,” Working Paper 61, presented at *El Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE)*, Madrid, June 5. Available at: <<http://www.fride.org/publication/452/bahrain-reaching-a-threshold.html>>; and Abdulhadi Khalaf, 2008, “The Outcome of a Ten-Year Process of Political Reform in Bahrain,” *Arab Reform Brief* N° 24. Available at: <<http://arab-reform.net/spip.php?article1748>>.

¹³ In fact, the event remains so infamous that one can still find a video of the entire ceremony, including King Ḥamad’s signature, on the Internet. Since its posting in August 2007, it has been viewed almost 300,000 times. See “ملك البحرين يحلف على القرآن وينكث” [“The King of Bahrain Swears on the Qur’ān and [Then] Reneges”]. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ux3dIonYpQ>>.

¹⁴ Article 120, para. C of the February 14, 2002, Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain. Quoted in S. M. Wright, 2008, “Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain” (Doha: Center for International and Regional Studies). See Wright’s (2008) work for a thorough analysis of the various provisions of the 2002 constitution.

employees of the Ministry of Interior in the face of widespread claims of torture and other human rights abuses by those imprisoned during the 1990s, denying thousands of victims the opportunity of legal redress; another, released in July, forbade the *majlis al-nuwāb* from “deliberating on any matter or measure taken by the government prior to 14 December, 2002”—that is, prior to the inauguration of the National Assembly (KHALAF 2008, 4-6); yet another rearranged the country into 12 municipalities within 5 governorates, producing 40 gerrymandered electoral districts ranging from 500 to 17,000 registered voters (WRIGHT 2008). In the Sunni-dominated Southern Governorate, 6 members of parliament would represent some 16,000 voters, while a single district in the Shi‘i suburb of Jidd Ḥaḥṣ, District No. 1, itself exceeded that number. Indeed, the entire Northern Governorate, a Shi‘a-populated region home to 79,000 registered voters, was allotted a mere 9 seats in parliament (SHARIF 2009).

Now just months away, the impending October parliamentary elections transformed into a referendum on the new constitution. Municipal elections held earlier in May had seen a meager 51% turnout, a stark contrast to the near-universal participation of the prior year. Sensing its constituency’s deep frustration with the government’s now-unmasked “reform” agenda, the united Shi‘a bloc, al-Wifāq National Islamic Society (جمعية الوفاق الوطني الإسلامية), opted to boycott the parliamentary vote despite an extremely successful showing in the local elections, a move that temporarily averted an intra-Shi‘a schism that was to occur four years later when its leaders would make the opposite decision to participate. Three other notable opposition societies—two liberal secular groups and one affiliated with the Shirāzī *marja’* Ayatallāh Hādī al-Mudarrisī—followed suit, and thus voter turnout reached just 53% in the first round and a dismal 43% in the second (WRIGHT 2008, 6). The resulting parliament would be comprised wholly of Sunni Islamic candidates and pro-government “independents.”

It was under this charged political backdrop that rumors resurfaced about a concerted government effort to alter Bahrain’s demography. Similar claims had been made as early as May 1998, when in the darkest days of the Shi‘a *intifāḍah* the *Financial Times* reported that

Critics of the government say one sinister development is the building by the ruling family of a *cordon sanitaire* around itself by giving nationality to between 8,000 and 10,000 Sunni families from Jordan, Syria, Pakistan and Yemen, whose men, working in the security services, would be loyal to the al-Khalifa family should unrest break out again on a scale which can no longer be contained.¹⁵

¹⁵ Quoted in Manṣūr al-Jamrī, 1998, “State and Civil Society in Bahrain,” paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Middle East Studies Association, Chicago, December 9.

This time, however, the accusers would offer hard evidence in the form of a 17-minute video interview taken in June 2002 with members of the al-Dawāsir tribe of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, who tell how they were solicited to obtain Bahraini nationality and public housing in the run-up to the 2002 elections. Not only were they granted passports in just a matter of months, said the al-Dawāsir, but for Bahrain's 2002 elections they were gathered and driven to a polling station on the King Fahd Causeway linking Bahrain to Saudi Arabia in order to cast their votes. Among the al-Dawāsir, they estimated, perhaps 20,000 had received this dual-citizenship, which they said was now being extended to other tribes around Dammām. Those interviewed were dually able to produce Bahraini passports, national identification cards, and addresses in the country.¹⁶ When the documentary was aired publicly in July 2003 at a meeting of opposition groups in Manama, the reaction was not primarily one of surprise but of vindication: observers had long argued that a June 2002 royal decree allowing other GCC citizens to hold dual-Bahraini citizenship and *vice versa* would be put precisely to this end.¹⁷ All the same, the release of the film and subsequent public outcry did prompt the formation of a parliamentary committee charged with investigating the scandal, though in a clear act of sabotage its members were forbidden from examining citizenship cases prior to the December 2002 establishment of parliament as well as those "special" cases falling under the exception granted the head of state as per Bahrain's 1963 Naturalization Law.¹⁸ Since all of the cases in question could be made to fall under one or the other category, the matter was effectively closed for official discussion.

It was closed, that is, until the sudden appearance three years later of a leaked report by a British national of Sudanese origin, Dr. Sālah al-Bandar, working then as an advisor to the Cabinet Affairs Ministry.¹⁹ The 216-page document purports to outline a secret network of Sunni politicians led by Sh. Aḥmad bin 'Aṭiyatallāh Āl Khalīfa—current Minister of Cabinet

¹⁶ The video and an English transcript can be found at Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, 2002, "Documentary Film Script: The Political Naturalization in Bahrain." Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/269>>.

¹⁷ See Habib Trabelsi, 2002, "Bahrain's Shiite Muslims cry foul over dual nationality plan," *Khaleej Times*, June 16.

¹⁸ See HAQ: Movement of Liberties and Democracy—Bahrain, 2007, "Motivated Change of Demography.. Infringements of Political Rights and Inadequate Living Standards," report submitted to the Universal Periodic Review Working Group of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, November 19. Available at: <http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/BH/MLD_BHR_UPR_S1_2008_MovementofLibertiesandDemocracyHAQ_%20uprsubmission.pdf>.

¹⁹ Sālah al-Bandar, 2006, "البحرين: الخيار الديمقراطي وآليات الإقصاء" ["Bahrain: The Choice of Democracy and the Machinery of Exclusion"], unpublished report prepared by the Gulf Centre for Democratic Development. The entire Arabic document is available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/albandar.pdf>>. The so-called "Bandargate scandal" received no little press and is treated in, e.g., BURKE 2008, LOUËR 2008, and WRIGHT 2008.

Affairs, president of the obscure Central Informatics Organization, and founder of the High Committee for Elections—working to undermine the overall political position of Bahrain’s Shi’a. According to al-Bandar’s report, this network arose at the recommendation of a 2005 study written by an Iraqi academic under commission from the Bahraini government titled “A Proposal to Promote the General Situation of the Sunni Sect in Bahrain.”²⁰ The proposal, which al-Bandar appended to his dossier in a “documentation” section, blames “the rise of sectarian conflict” (“بروز الصراع الطائفي”) in Bahrain—a conflict “between the Sunni sect on the one hand and the Shi’i sect on the other”—on “the existence of an unspoken agenda on the part of Shi’a movements to control Bahraini society, and [these] ambitions may extend to taking over the reigns of power in the country.”²¹ This situation, the essay continues, is the product of “the historic changes that threaten the Arab Gulf region [as a consequence of] the fall of the former Iraqi regime.”²² Thus, it concludes, Bahrain’s case is that of post-2003 Iraq:

the marginalization of Sunnis and the lessening of their role in Bahrain is part of a larger regional problem, whereas [our] sons of the Sunni sect in Iraq face the same problem, meaning there is a direct correlation between [the Iraqi situation and] the marginalization of the Sunna in the Gulf countries, and their marginalization in Bahrain in particular. Thus there is a dangerous challenge facing Bahraini society in the increased role of the Shi’a [and] the retreat of the role of the Sunna in the Bahraini political system; namely, the problem concerns the country’s [Bahrain’s] national security, and the likelihood of political regime change in the long term by means of the present relationships between Bahrain’s Shi’a and all the Shi’a in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia’s eastern region, and Kuwait.²³

To combat this long-run existential threat posed by Bahrain’s Shi’a acting in concert with their co-sectarians across the Gulf region, the paper advocates that the state undertake a multifaceted program designed to dampen the group’s influence in Bahrain and its ability

²⁰ “A Proposal to Promote the General Situation of the Sunni Sect in the Kingdom of Bahrain”, 2005, unpublished paper dated September 1, in *ibid.*, pp. 184-202.

²¹ Translated from *ibid.*, p. 185:

“... وجود أجنحة غير معلنة لدى تيارات شيعية إلى السيطرة على المجتمع البحريني، وقد تمتد طموحاتها لتولي مقاليد الحكم في البلاد”

²² Translated from *ibid.*: “... التغيرات التاريخية التي تشهدها منطقة الخليج العربي من سقوط النظام العراقي السابق”

²³ Translated from *ibid.*, which reads:

تتميش السنة وتراجع دورهم في البحرين هي جزء من مشكلة إقليمية أكبر حيث يواجه أبناء الطائفة السنية في العراق نفس المشكلة، مما يعني أن ثمة علاقة طردية بين تهميش السنة في بلدان الخليج، وتهميشهم في البحرين تحديداً. وبالتالي فإن هناك تحدياً خطيراً يواجهه المجتمع البحريني مع تزايد دور الشيعة مع تراجع دور السنة في النظام السياسي البحريني خصوصاً أن المشكلة تتعلق بالأمن الوطني للبلاد، واحتمال تغيير نظامها السياسي على المدى الطويل من خلال العلاقات القائمة بين شيعة البحرين، وكل من الشيعة في إيران والعراق والمنطقة الشرقية من مملكة العربية السعودية والكويت.

to elicit sympathy and support from audiences abroad. As summarized in the proposal, the overall “goals of the project” would be threefold: to

1. Protect the gains achieved by the national reform project launched by His Majesty the King;
2. Protect the Kingdom of Bahrain from any external interference from regional powers in which the role of the Shi’a has increased, such as Iraq and Iran, and this in order to prevent the destabilization of the [Bahraini] political system; and
3. Protect the Sunni sect in the Kingdom of Bahrain from any Shi’a attempts at marginalizing [it] in the political system or within Bahraini society in general.²⁴

In pursuit of these aims the document urged the Bahraini government toward a coordinated plan of, *inter alia*, increased naturalization of Sunnis; infiltration of Shi’a non-governmental organizations; establishment of parallel civil society groups including the still-extant Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society²⁵ in order to counter the effective media campaigns of Shi’a activists in- and outside the country; and a Shi’i-to-Sunni religious conversion program.

It was this agenda, then, for which the clandestine network of Sunni politicians and officials led by Sh. Aḥmad bin ‘Aṭiyatallāh Āl Khalīfa was allegedly organized. As evidence of this central claim, al-Bandar’s report documents bribes and payments totaling more than one million Bahraini dinars (nearly \$2.7 million) dispersed amongst various members of an electronic group, a media group, an intelligence team, a newspaper, and other organizations launched under the initiative. This documentation, consuming more than 80% of the report, includes photocopies of hundreds of receipts, letters, bank statements, and account sheets, and outlines the personal relationships linking those involved. Bahrain’s 2006 parliamentary elections, then only one month away, were consumed by talk of the “Bandargate” scandal.²⁶

²⁴ Translated from *ibid.*, p. 186, which reads:

١. حماية المكتسبات الوطنية التي حققها المشروع الإصلاحي الذي دشنته جلالة الملك المفدي.

٢. حماية مملكة البحرين من أية تدخلات خارجية من القوى الإقليمية التي زاد دور الشيعة فيها، مثل العراق وإيران. وذلك للحيلولة دون زعزعة استقرار النظام السياسي.

٣. حماية الطائفة السنية في مملكة البحرين من أية محاولات شيعية للتهميش في النظام السياسي أو داخل المجتمع البحرين بشكل عام.

²⁵ Compare the coverage and tone of their English-language website (<http://www.bhrws.org/eng>) with that of, e.g., the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. The Bandar Report contains several documents pertaining to the establishment and funding of the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society. See *ibid.*, pp. 162-169.

²⁶ For still more on al-Bandar’s report, see Zara Al Sitari, 2006, “The Al Bander report: what it says and what it means,” Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/528>>.

Like the allegations three years earlier of improprieties in granting citizenship and of electoral fraud, however, the revelations unleashed with al-Bandar's exposé could sustain only a temporary outburst of public protest due to a swift government containment effort. Indeed, of those alleged to have been involved in the plot, it seems that the only political casualty was al-Bandar himself, who upon the release of his report was promptly dismissed, arrested, and then deported. Sh. Aḥmad bin 'Aṭiyatallāh, on the other hand, to the universal consternation of Bahrain's Shi'a, retained his position as Cabinet Affairs Minister and head of the secretive Central Informatics Organization. In fact, some Bahraini contacts suggest he even gained influence within the Āl Khalīfa family for his perceived role in managing the Shi'a threat. Whatever the case, public discussion of the matter would be abruptly cut short following a press gag order handed down less than two weeks after the story began to appear in newspapers, at a time when even the pro-government *Gulf Daily News* was forced to lead with the dramatic page-one headline: "BANDARGATE!"²⁷ Crowds of protesters marched in "anti-political naturalization" rallies through Bahrain's posh Seef shopping district, and one hundred prominent political figures (nearly all of them Shi'is) composed a public petition to King Ḥamad "appealing to [him] to give a public speech to the common citizens to answer all those dangerous queries and to announce what will be done in regards to that sectarian plan and secret organization that is implementing it."²⁸ But no official government comment—to say nothing of an address by King Ḥamad—would be forthcoming.

Debate surrounding al-Bandar's report, in particular the "dangerous query" as to the ultimate source of the funds made available to Shaykh Aḥmad and his associates, would be confined to private dīwāns until the swearing in of the new parliament the next year. Just four months into the session in May 2007, members of al-Wifāq, which reversed its previous electoral boycott to capture 17 of 40 seats, walked out of the chamber in protest when their resolution to question the Cabinet Affairs Minister twice failed to muster the additional four votes needed to pass. Prompted by newly-published government data indicating a dramatic jump in the number of Bahraini citizens (an increase, according to critics, that could not have

²⁷ "BANDARGATE!," 2006, *Gulf Daily News*, 24 September. See also the in-depth follow-up, "BANDARGATE: The unanswered questions," *Gulf Daily News*, 27 September.

²⁸ A full English translation of the letter can be found at Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, 2006, "A Petition From A Hundred Prominent Figures And Activists To The King Of Bahrain," dated 13 October. Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/610>>.

FIGURE 3.I. A photograph posted to a popular Shi'a discussion forum depicts the "Massive Popular Anti-Political Naturalization Rally" of January 30, 2009.



occurred without mass naturalization²⁹), al-Wifāq MPs tried again to quiz Shaykh Aḥmad in March 2008. Their action provoked a three-week-long stalemate that ended with the hasty replacement of a longstanding parliamentary legal advisor with another who ruled the entire motion unconstitutional. "Parliament's future is blurred," remarked al-Wifāq MP Jawād Fayrūz, "a crippled and unworthy institution, which pokes its eyes with its own fingers."³⁰ Bandargate, and with it a decisive chapter in the ongoing controversy of *al-tajniīs*, was over.

²⁹ According to the head of the leftist National Democratic Action Society (جمعية العمل الوطني الديمقراطي, or Wa'ad), Ebrāhīm Sharīf, the published figures indicated that around 60,000 people had been naturalized since 2001. This was based on the average population growth rate for the preceding years, which was around 2.4%. As the new data implied a growth rate of about 4.2% from 2001 to 2007, they suggested an annual naturalization rate of approximately 1.8%, or about 9,000 citizens per year. All of whom are assumed to be Sunnis, as no Shi'a are known to have been naturalized since several thousand second- and third-generation stateless individuals (*bidūn*) of Persian origin were granted citizenship in 2001 as part of Ḥamad's reforms. Personal interview, May 2009.

³⁰ Quoted in Muḥammad Al-Ālī, 2008, "Session disrupted over 'Bandargate,'" *Gulf Daily News*, 12 March. Available at: <<http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=211314>>.

FIGURE 3.2. Another photograph posted to the same forum shows protestors holding a banner saying “NO to Naturalization: A Betrayal of the Nation”



A Myth of Their Own: The Bahraini Shi'a as an Imagined Fifth Column

Whether one inclines to believe al-Bandar's account or dismisses it as an elaborate, calculated forgery, the viewpoint it embodies, the notion that the Shi'a today represent a transnational political front to be necessarily managed and contained by Arab governments, is certainly no fiction. Even the seemingly inflammatory "Proposal to Promote the General Situation of the Sunni Sect in Bahrain" says little more than did, for example, Jordan's King 'Abdallāh II in a now-famous interview with the *Washington Post* in December 2004. Therein he characterized the newly-empowered Shi'a of Iraq as part of a menacing "Shiite crescent" that could extend all the way from Syria and Lebanon through Iraq and Iran and into the Arab Gulf. Such a bloc of dominant Shi'a governments and movements would constitute a destabilizing force, King 'Abdallāh complained, from which "[e]ven Saudi Arabia is not immune. ... It would be

a major problem. And then that would propel the possibility of a Shiite-Sunni conflict even more, as you're taking it out of the borders of Iraq.”³¹ The news media and several prominent books, exemplified by Vali Nasr's 2006 work *The Shia Revival*, offered extended elaborations of King 'Abdallāh's broad anxiety, weaving disparate events across the Islamic world into a coherent narrative of coordinated Shi'a emboldening that included a combative new Iranian president hell-bent on erecting a military nuclear program; an Iraqi state transforming into an Iranian puppet; a confident Ḥizballāh in Lebanon and Ḥamas in Gaza, each prepared to take on the Israeli army using sophisticated hardware from Iran; and a set of Arab Gulf states looking increasingly vulnerable to Shi'a irredentism. As Louër tells, the power of this “Shiite crescent” concept “no doubt lay in its ability to sum up in a short formula the spontaneous perception of the Shias by the majority of the Sunnis: people united by a corporate solidarity beyond national borders and subservient to Iranian expansionism” (2008, 244).

In the case of Bahrain, this interpretation has prevailed since long before its unofficial coinage by the Jordanian king. It was during an interview with an outspoken Salafi preacher and member of Bahrain's parliament that I would hear the clearest articulation of what is essentially the Sunni counterpoint to the Baḥārnah's “myth of golden age” describing the pre-modern history of Bahrain. Shaykh Jāsim al-Sa'īdī, a well-known imām who delivers regular Friday sermons at a mosque near his home, agreed to meet me at his weekly public *majlis*³² despite expressing some hesitation to our intermediary that as an American, and given his reputation for controversial remarks, I may attempt to misrepresent his words. Indeed, he was fresh off a showdown in which members of al-Wifāq nearly succeeded in stripping him of parliamentary immunity in preparation for prosecution in response to a sermon in which he reportedly “compared some Shiites of Bahrain, without naming their sect, to ‘the sons of Zion bent on acts of destruction and sabotage.’”³³ It was for comments such as these that Sh. al-Sa'īdī was deemed “too extreme” to stand for elections even with the main Salafi society al-Aṣṣālah, itself not known for its liberality, and so in 2002 and again in 2006 he ran and won as an independent. As it happened, however, no manipulation of his words would be necessary.

³¹ Quoted in Robin Wright and Peter Baker, 2004, “Iraq, Jordan See Threat to Elections from Iran,” *Washington Post*, December 8.

³² مجلس, pl. مجالس: lit., “a council”; a weekly public audience held by a notable.

³³ Quoted in Habib Toumi, 2009, “Call to lift Bahrain parliamentary immunity over offensive remarks,” *Gulf News*, February 26. Available at: <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/call-to-lift-bahrain-parliamentary-immunity-over-offensive-remarks-1.53433>>.

The gathering, a popular forum attended that evening by at least 50 to 75 guests, was organized on this occasion around a particular piece of legislation—the contentious “Sunni Family Law” that codified important religious regulations in civil law³⁴—agreed earlier that day after much argument, delay, and most importantly government pressure for its passage. Sh. al-Sa’īdī, known to be a staunch supporter of the king, offered a sermon in defense of the measure on religious grounds, arguing that civilian codification of the Islamic Law is implied by the very writing of the Qur’ān, prophetic Sunna, and Ḥadīth. Any notion to the contrary, he railed, is an obvious “influence of secularism, whose forces continue to wage war against Islam.” He then fielded several questions from the audience, to which the ultimate answer was that in such matters people ought to follow their religious leaders; and that if the latter are wrong, they will be held to account for it in front of God. Sh. al-Sa’īdī next handed the microphone to another imām seated next to him to deliver some concluding “news items.” The first involved the reading of a report by a Bahraini scholar revealing the “true” historical populations of Sunnis and Shi’is in Bahrain by region, statistics that demonstrated to what extent the Shi’a are wrong in asserting that they have always been a majority and that it was *they*, not the Sunnis, who have achieved numerical superiority as a result of naturalization. (Sh. al-Sa’īdī, incidentally, is known by many Shi’a as “*shaykh al-mujannasīn*,” “shaykh of the naturalized ones,” for his tacit political and ideological support of *al-tajnīs*.) The audience was made to show shock and consternation at these data as the speaker read aloud the respective populations of Sunna and Shi’a across various parts of Bahrain. Then, by way of closing, and one assumes not coincidentally, the speaker noted that the following day there was planned an anti-naturalization meeting to be held in the Sunni neighborhood of ‘Arād and organized by Ebrāhīm Sharīf of Wa‘ad—a Sunni no less—and members of al-Wifāq. God willing, he said, it would be cancelled (i.e., by the Interior Ministry), but, if it went ahead, those present should plan to protest the site and also block access to it with their cars.

After the *majlis* I thanked Sh. al-Sa’īdī for the opportunity to speak with him and said that I hoped one of my questions, his take on the recent royal pardon of 178 Shi’a detainees arrested over the course of the previous months’ rioting, had not been too sensitive. At this he opened a discussion about those who had been imprisoned and then released, calling them “terrorists” doing “the work of Iran.” The Shi’a, he explained, smuggle others across the Gulf

³⁴ As implied by the name, the law applies only to Sunni Muslims. Shi’i religious leaders, incidentally, several of whom then sat in parliament, were able to resist the promulgation of a corresponding Shi’a Family Law.

from Iran illegally in large boats. Once they arrive, they are taken to *mawātim*³⁵—holy places that the police cannot enter—until they have been able to learn sufficient Arabic to apply for Bahraini citizenship under the pretext that they had been residing in the country for decades but never naturalized.³⁶ “أمرٌ جداً خطير” —“A very dangerous situation,” I agreed as I left.

Here, then, we find the basic outline of the Sunni rejoinder to the Shi‘i political history of Bahrain: in the first place, historically speaking the Baḥārnah have never formed a majority of the island’s population, having come close to doing so only recently and through decades of immigration from the Iranian mainland, al-Qaṭīf and al-Ḥasā’, Iraq, and Kuwait; thus their complaints of political under-representation and discrimination, made on majoritarian and nativist grounds, are ill-founded and disingenuous. Moreover, even if Shi‘is did outnumber Sunnis today in Bahrain, why should they expect an equal or greater share of state benefits while they show themselves to be lesser citizens? Their highest religious leaders, who by their own doctrine also wield supreme political authority, are not Bahrainis or even Arabs but Persians living in Iran and Iraq, and yet they still somehow see fit to interfere in the internal affairs not of Bahrain only but those of Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Kuwait, and so on. So if the government is afraid to let the Shi‘a serve in the military or sit on the *dīwān al-malikī*, who can blame them? They have already attempted a *coup* once, with Iranian help, and continue to burn tires, kill police officers, and in general cause trouble for society every day. And all this despite a generous if measured program of reform announced by the king in 2001 that has improved the political situation dramatically over the past ten years: Bahrain now has elections, a parliament, many Shi‘a ministers—what more do they want?

One might suppose that such a combative response to the Shi‘a “myth of golden age,” one that echoes precisely the suspicion of the “Proposal to Promote the General Situation of the Sunni Sect in Bahrain” and the idea of a united “Shi‘a crescent,” would be confined to the personal views of noted “extremists” like Sh. al-Sa‘īdī. Yet far from being an outlying opinion, this perception of the Shi‘a—at a minimum, of Shi‘a political dissidents—as constituting a veritable fifth column in Bahraini society I found to be common among ordinary citizens and Sunni political elite alike. Another Salafī parliamentarian and member of al-Aṣṣālāh, Dr. ‘Alī

³⁵ مَوَاتِم sing. مَأْتَم lit., “funeral houses”; known elsewhere as *ḥusayniyyah*, in Bahrain the *ma’tam* is a Shi‘a center of learning and of worship on special religious occasions or holidays, especially during the month of Muḥarram. Most *mawātim* are copiously decorated with images of the Imām Ḥusayn; popular *marāji’* such as Ayatāllahs Rūḥallāh Khomeini and ‘Alī Khāmene’i; and large banners embroidered with Qur’ānic verses or exaltations.

³⁶ Cf. *supra*, the conclusion of note 29.

Aḥmad, spoke of a similar link between the foreign ambitions of Iran and its assumed agents abroad, saying,

As for the polarization in the country, this is the result of Iran's using some people in Bahrain for its own interests—that is, to achieve Iranian control of Bahrain. Before the Iranian Revolution there were no sectarian problems in the country. I attended school with and lived next to Bahraini Shi'a and didn't even know it because [the situation] wasn't politicized. If democracy in Bahrain becomes divided along sectarian lines such as in Lebanon or even in Iraq, then the situation will be bad.³⁷

Here the explicit words of Sh. al-Sa'īdī are replaced by the more diplomatic “some people in Bahrain,” a standard euphemism whose meaning is betrayed by the subsequent reference to “Bahraini Shi'a.” The implication in any case is clear: there are Shi'is inside Bahrain working at the behest of the Iranian government and in pursuit of the same agenda that has driven it for the past three decades, namely the exportation of the Islamic Revolution to the Arab Gulf countries in general and to Bahrain in particular.

A less restrained version of this argument was articulated by yet another (now-former) member of parliament from al-Aṣṣālāh, 'Īsā Abū al-Faṭḥ, who when asked to name the biggest challenges currently facing the country concluded by saying,

The other big challenge, facing not only Bahrain but the entire Gulf, is Iran, which wants to recreate the Persian Empire throughout all of the Gulf areas from Kuwait to the UAE. It will be a nightmare for everyone as Iran continues to grow in power, and the U.S. will be too afraid to do anything about it.³⁸

Yet despite these Iranian pretensions, I noted, the Gulf seems still to enjoy more security and stability than other Arab countries. How can this be? True, he admitted,

However the terrorist attacks that do occur are mostly done by fighters trained in Iran. How do most of the Taliban fighters and Arabs in Afghanistan get there? Just pay 2,000 dollars and they will get you a ticket to Tehran and from there you can go to Afghanistan. Even the 9/11 attacks—those Saudi hijackers were trained in Iran. ...

Even the Bahraini Shi'a train in Iran or with Iranian help in Lebanon with Ḥizballāh. During the 2006 war between Israel and Ḥizballāh, the Bahraini Interior Ministry went to Lebanon to try to evacuate all the Bahraini citizens stuck there, and they found a lot of Bahrainis fighting with Ḥizballāh. The Bahraini Ministry of Immigration found that in just one year over 200,000 Bahrainis traveled to Syria for “vacation.” Ḥizballāh is also buying any land it can get in the GCC countries with money from Iran; and Iran's money

³⁷ Translated from the Arabic. Personal interview, May 2009.

³⁸ This and the following quotation are from a personal interview, April 2009.

in turn comes from the *khums*³⁹ [one-fifth] tax that Shi'a pay to the mullahs in Iran. We in al-Aṣālāh tried to introduce a 2.5% *zakāt*⁴⁰ tax for Bahrain in parliament, and the Shi'a [i.e., in al-Wifāq] opposed it; yet they pay 20% of their incomes to Iran. And then they complain of being poor. If they are so poor, how can they afford to pay?

Rhetoric of this kind, which has in common the belief that some or all of Bahrain's Shi'a are knowing pawns in a larger game of Iranian geopolitics, blindly following whatever orders arrive from Tehran or Qom, has more recently escalated to ascribe to them a new role: that of principal graduated from mere agent. It is one thing, in other words, to say of the Shi'a community in Bahrain that it is exploited as an instrument of domestic subversion by a scheming regime in Iran, serving the latter's political agenda as its local representative; but it is more serious to suggest that it constitutes in its own right an independent center projecting political destabilization elsewhere, that the Shi'a of Bahrain are themselves a sort of Iran vis-à-vis the rest of the Arabian Peninsula—no longer students but the teacher. Yet this is precisely the accusation that surfaced in August 2009 in a controversial interview with the aforementioned Sh. al-Sa'īdī printed in the Saudi daily *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (*The Middle East*). In it, he claimed to have learned that members of al-Wifāq had met secretly inside Bahrain with high-level representatives of 'Abd al-Malik al-Ḥūthī, the leader of a Yemeni separatist group comprised of members of the same extended family whose ongoing conflict with the Yemeni government, portrayed in the Arab and Western media as a "Shi'a insurgency," had just resumed for a sixth iteration. Sh. al-Sa'īdī revealed,

We have confirmed information that members of the al-Wifāq bloc met in Bahrain with key political figures with strong ties to the Yemeni Ḥūthīs, and this but a few months prior to the outbreak of the [sixth Ṣa'adah] war between the Yemeni government and the Ḥūthīs, which raises a lot of questions about the connection linking the Ḥūthī insurgents in Yemen and the Wifāqīs in Bahrain.⁴¹

³⁹ The *khums* (خُمْس), literally "one-fifth," in fact applies only to a family's yearly surplus income or to a windfall gain. This Shi'a-specific tax, considered an unlawful "innovation" (بدعة) by Salafis and other Sunnis, typically is paid to a particular *mujtāhid* or *marja'*, though of course not all of these will be "mullahs in Iran."

⁴⁰ زكاة, or alms-giving to the poor, is common to Sunnis and Shi'a and is one of the five Sunni "pillars of Islam."

⁴¹ Salmān al-Dawsarī, 2009, "البحرين: نائب رئيس اللجنة التشريعية في البرلمان يتهم الوفاق بـ'تحركات مشبوهة' مع الحوثيين في اليمن", ["Bahrain: Vice-Chairman of the Legislative Committee in Parliament Accuses the al-Wifāq Opposition of 'Suspicious Dealings' with the Ḥūthīs of Yemen"], *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 24 August. Available (in Arabic) at: <<http://www.aawsat.com/print.asp?did=533078&issueno=11227>>. Note that the author, fittingly, is a member of al-Dawāsir of *al-tajnīs* fame, and that *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* has a clear pro-Saudi bias. The original quotation reads:

لدينا معلومات مؤكدة بأن أعضاء من كتلة الوفاق قد التقوا بشخصيات سياسية بارزة ذات علاقة وثيقة بالحوثيين اليمنيين وذلك قبل اندلاع الحرب بين الحكومة اليمنية والحوثيين بأشهر قليلة في البحرين، الأمر الذي يطرح الكثير من التساؤلات عن العلاقة التي تربط بين المتمردين الحوثيين في اليمن والوفاقيين في البحرين.

The meeting, he continued, took place

with the knowledge that this Ḥūthī figure has a [criminal] past and a suspicious history in the Yemeni Republic, where previously he was arrested on the back of visits and conferences he participated in [inside] the Iranian Republic, which embraces the errant Ḥūthī [i.e., Twelver Shi‘i] ideology and funds it through an octopus-like network of cells distributed throughout all of the Gulf and Arab countries.⁴²

Sh. al-Sa‘īdī’s insinuations are noteworthy on several accounts. First, they reinforce the idea of a transnational Shi‘a front united in religious solidarity. Why, otherwise, would the Shi‘a of Bahrain, represented here by al-Wifāq, have any connection to a few thousand individuals living in an isolated mountainous region of northern Yemen? Indeed, if anyone should be suspected of taking an interest in their cause, a more natural choice would be the sizeable Ismā‘īlī Shi‘a community concentrated but a few miles away across the Saudi border in Najrān.⁴³ That Bahrainis would sympathize with their Shi‘a brethren in Yemen, one is left to infer, is a foregone conclusion owing to their inviolate bond as co-sectarians. This view is further implied by some pregnant wordplay that draws a clear parallel in Arabic between the “Ḥūthīs in Yemen and the Wifāqīs in Bahrain” (“الحوثيين في اليمن والوفاقيين في البحرين”), where the adjective “insurgents” (“المتمردين”), almost always used in the media to describe the Ḥūthīs, can be interpreted as applying to both them and *al-Wifāqūn*, a non-standard eponym used here as an epithet suggestive of an ideological cause.

The other, more remarkable aspect of these claims by Sh. al-Sa‘īdī is that, rather than accuse al-Wifāq of meeting with the Ḥūthīs as an intermediary of Iran, he credits the group with operating its own agenda outside Bahrain, interfering in the affairs of its neighbors and fomenting Shi‘a irredentism as a veritable Iran-in-miniature on the Arabian mainland. He even goes so far as to imply that al-Wifāq had some role in the resumption of hostilities in Yemen, seeing as how their meeting with Ḥūthī representatives took place “but a few months prior to the outbreak of the war,” a coincidence, Sh. al-Sa‘īdī hints coyly, that “raises a lot of questions about the connection linking the Ḥūthī insurgents in Yemen and the Wifāqīs in Bahrain.” Such allusions to direct assistance—and military assistance at that—in aid of Shi‘a

⁴² Quoted in *ibid.* The original quotation reads:

مع العلم بأن هذه الشخصية الحوثية لها سوابق وتاريخ مشبوه في الجمهورية اليمنية حيث سبق أن اعتقل على خلفية زيارات ومؤتمرات شارك فيها الأخير في الجمهورية الإيرانية التي تحتضن الفكر الحوثي الضال وتموله في شبكة أخطبوطية وخلايا موزعة في جميع الدول الخليجية والعربية.

⁴³ And, in fact, the Saudi Ismā‘īlīs have often been accused by the Yemeni government of just that. See, e.g., “The Shi‘a of Saudi Arabia Call for Better Rights in the South; and Yemen Accuses Iran of Trying to Create a Shi‘a Mini-State”, 2009, *Ma’rib Press*, May 27. Available (in Arabic) at: <<http://marebpress.net/nprint.php?lng=arabic&sid=16782>>.

factions abroad are almost always reserved for Iran proper, whom the Yemenis routinely criticize as a matter of course for its alleged part in prolonging the conflict in Ṣa‘adah. That the same role should be ascribed now to al-Wifāq, the most moderate if largest of Bahrain’s numerous Shi‘a political societies, betrays a grave apprehension on the part of Bahraini and Gulf Sunnis, including Sunni royal families, for whom the danger is not al-Wifāq *qua* political bloc but al-Wifāq as a symbol of the increasing Shi‘aization of the Arab Gulf.

Yet even Sh. al-Sa‘īdī was loath to spell all this out explicitly, at least not publically, in the manner of the Jordanian king and his evocative “Shi‘a crescent.” For this, however, we may turn to Yemen’s president of 33 years, ‘Alī ‘Abdallāh Ṣāliḥ, himself a Zaydī Shi‘i and also not one to mince words. In a primetime interview with the Saudi news channel *al-‘Arabiyyah* in March 2010, at a time when the sixth war for Ṣa‘adah threatened to spiral into a full-scale regional conflict after the Ḥūthī rebels crossed into Saudi territory, Ṣāliḥ was asked about his knowledge of foreign support for the group. In the first place, he began, the attempt to drag Saudi Arabia into the war is proof in itself of outside involvement, since the Ḥūthīs would not have taken such a step on the basis of military considerations alone. Said Ṣāliḥ,

I am certain that more than 80 to 90 percent of it is foreign encouragement, in order for countries of the region to settle their scores with Saudi Arabia, to preoccupy Saudi Arabia, and to send a message to Saudi Arabia via these Ḥūthī elements. [I say this] because we don’t have a problem with [‘Abd al-Malik] al-Ḥūthī—al-Ḥūthī ... what problem is he? [But] al-Ḥūthī now has a foreign ideology: let’s say, [one] based on Twelverism, [while] he is Zaydī. We in Yemen are Zaydīs and Shāfi‘īs. We have no problem [between us]. The entry of the Twlevert sect, introduced to the Ḥūthīs [from outside], is something new ... something new. We aren’t against the Twlevert sect ... the Shi‘i [sect] anywhere. We aren’t against [them]. We believe in a diversity of sects. But we reject its being imposed on our country, or [that] we [should] adopt it. Because for thousands of years in Yemen we’ve been Shāfi‘īs and Zaydīs; and there is no dispute between Shāfi‘īs and Zaydīs. And this new, errant sect will pay ... say, will pay the price [for promoting sectarian strife].⁴⁴

⁴⁴ From “In His Interview with ‘Meet the Press’ with Dāwud al-Sharyān, the Yemeni President: ‘There is not a Single American on Our Soil, and I Won’t Run for the Presidency,’” 2010, televised interview with *al-‘Arabiyyah*, 19 March. The video and a partial transcript can be found at: <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2010/03/19/103454.html>>. The excerpt quoted above, which spans from about 9:50 to 11:00, corresponds to the following speech:

أنا أكّد بأنه أكثر من ثمانين في المئة الى تسعين في المئة هي دفع خارجي، ولذلك لتصفية حسابات دول المنطقة مع المملكة العربية السعودية ... لإشغال السعودية وتوجه رسالة الى المملكة العربية السعودية فيا هذه العناصر الحوثية. لأن إحنا ما عندنا مشكلة مع الحوثي ... الحوثي ... شو يشكله هو مشكلة؟ الحوثي هو عنده مؤدلج أدلجة خارجية ... حلينا أن نقول لتبنى على الاثنى عشرية، وهو زيدي. إحنا في اليمن زيود وشوافع، ما عندنا مشكلة. الدخول المذهب الاثنى عشرية الى الـ ... التّعطي الى الحوثيين شيء جديد ... شيء جديد. إحنا لسنا ضد المذهب الاثنى عشرية ... الشيعي في ... في أي مكان. إحنا لسنا ضده. نؤمن بتعدد المذاهب. لكن نرفض فرضها على بلادنا أو نتبنا ... هذا مرفوض جملة وتفصيلا لأننا من آلاف السنين في اليمن شوافع وزيود، ولا خلاف بين الشوافع والزيود. هذا مذهب ضال جديد بمدفوع ... تقول بمدفوع ثمة.

When asked directly to name the “countries of the region” known to be giving the Ḥūthīs such “foreign encouragement,” Ṣāliḥ hesitated but went on to acknowledge that some of these “foreign elements” (“جهات خارجية”) can be found in “Saudi Arabia, London, and America.” He explained,

They are countries and individuals ... individuals in countries ... in most of the countries in the region. They are all those who sympathize with the Ḥūthīs in the name of Twelverism ... in the name of Shi‘ism. So any Shi‘a in the region, they are the ones that sympathize with and raise some funds to support the Ḥūthīs.⁴⁵

Here, then, are the words that Sh. al-Sa‘īdī in his reproach of al-Wifāq intended but could not say: the “Wifāqīs” have forged a relationship with the Ḥūthīs of Yemen not by chance, not because they are by nature a meddlesome group that tends to interfere in other countries’ affairs, but because they identify and commiserate with them as fellow Shi‘a, as a people that itself complains of political repression borne of religious discrimination. In this respect Ṣāliḥ’s seemingly out of place reference to Ḥūthī supporters in “London and America” is instructive, as the physical remoteness of both locations contrasts markedly with their importance as new global centers of Shi‘a activism,⁴⁶ giving the impression that wherever one finds a Shi‘i, whether in Dammām or Detroit, there he finds a friend of all other Shi‘a, a loyal soldier and when he senses any of his brood in trouble runs instinctively to their defense. This “new, errant sect” that has infiltrated Yemen, upsetting “thousands of years” of religious harmony, has arrived therefore not from Iran only, the most obvious party looking to “settle [its] score” with longtime Wahhābī rival Saudi Arabia, but through the help and support of Shi‘a everywhere, where “Shi‘a” is understood to refer specifically to Twelver Shi‘is.⁴⁷ That members of al-Wifāq might be involved, it would seem, is just the tip of the iceberg.

⁴⁵ From *ibid.*, at approximately 14:30 to 15:00. The original speech is as follows:

هي دول وأشخاص ... أشخاص في دول ... في أكثر دول المنطقة. ... هي كل من هو يتعاطف مع الحوثيين باسم الإثنا عشرية ... باسم الشيعة. فأَيُّ شِيعَةٍ في المنطقة هم الذين يتعاطفوا ويجمعوا بعض التبرعات لدعم الحوثيين.

⁴⁶ London in particular is known as a “foremost centre of Shia activity” worldwide. It was in here, for example, that the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement (IBFM) was founded in 1982. An offshoot of the Bahraini branch of al-Da‘wa, itself active in London following crackdowns in Iraq and in the Gulf throughout the 1970s and 80s, the IBFM continues to be a thorn in the side of the Bahraini regime, maintaining a popular bilingual website (www.vob.org) and electronic newsletter called “Voice of Bahrain” (“صوت البحرين”) that catalogue Āl Khalifa abuses. The group’s real success, however, lay in its effective targeting of English-speaking audiences, which it does by lobbying individual politicians, organizing parliamentary and congressional hearings on Bahrain, and working with human rights bodies like Amnesty International and the UN. Cf. Louër (2008, 202-203, 266).

⁴⁷ For reasons that are not exactly clear to me, neither the president nor ordinary Zaydīs would call themselves “Shi‘a,” a fact that has occasioned many an argument with Yemeni friends.

Whether or to what extent such recriminations reflect reality—whether the claims of Sh. al-Sa‘īdī, Yemen’s president, Jordan’s king, or the other Bahraini parliamentarians quoted above—we need not consider. The decisive point is the degree of apprehension itself, this palpable unease among Sunni leaders and citizens alike at what is perceived as the rebirth of Shi‘a oppositions across the Arab Gulf in a seemingly coordinated political mobilization that harkens back to the early days of the Islamic revolution. As Louër (2008, 245-263) persuasively argues, the supposed “Shi‘a revival,” accordingly, is as much an artifact of changing threat perceptions as it is a result of the Shi‘as’ own initiatives. She writes (258),

[I]t is through the representation that it aroused in the Sunni psyche and not through the modification of the Shia agenda that the regional context played a role in moving the Sunni/Shia relation. For the Shias, the new context only adds to the tools at their disposal to continue with their previous strategy. It is the Sunnis who now feel under siege.

Hence, at a time when the entire region has at least one eye fixated on Iran, the undisputed if inadvertent winner of the U.S.’s “New Middle East” project, Gulf ruling families recognize a new domestic menace in those seen to be divided by competing national and religious-*cum*-political loyalties. If the 1990s was the decade for most Gulf monarchies to combat Sunni Islamic radicalism, the present era is one of managing the Shi‘a, including Shi‘a frustrations, as a way of checking Iranian influence.

While this reprioritization has led to notable developments in the two countries other than Bahrain with substantial Shi‘a populations—a policy of what Louër (245) calls “relative religious recognition” in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait through the enlargement and reform of specialized Shi‘a religious courts in the former and the creation in the latter of a special Shi‘a department in the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Waqf*), in both cases administered by prominent Shi‘is—Bahrain has found itself unable to arrive at a similar compromise with its Shi‘a citizens. In the first place, the Shi‘a of Bahrain face less religious discrimination at the institutional level than those of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, there being, for example, already separate Mālikī (Sunni) and Ja‘afarī (Shi‘i) sections of the governing *sharī‘ah*, religious courts, and *waqf*.⁴⁸ More importantly, though, unlike in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait the Bahraini Shi‘a do not represent an irritating minority but a full demographic majority, and one for whom,

⁴⁸ This is not to say that both traditions are represented in all areas. Notably, few Shi‘a are employed in the Ministry of Education, which continues to reject calls to include Ja‘afarī perspectives in the Mālikī-dominated school curriculum. For more, see “International Religious Freedom Report: Bahrain,” 2009, U.S. Department of State, October 26. Available at: <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127345.htm>>.

as Louër remarks, “a politics of merely religious recognition cannot substitute for a genuine democratization policy” (255). In the case of the Baḥārnah, then, the demand is not for *religious tolerance* as practitioners of a particular faith but for *political equality* as members of a religious group that happen, for the most part, to share the desire for greater political influence on the basis of history and of majoritarianism. And this, of course, the Bahraini authorities have shown no intention of conceding.

If we interpret such post-2003 developments in standard *rentier* theory terms, we easily perceive the extent of the dilemma facing Bahrain’s rulers. If we say, in other words, that what occurred in the cases of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait was essentially a political buy-off—an agreement to provide desired public goods to their respective Shi’a communities (and some private goods for those who would be newly employed) in return for relative political calm—we see how it is that Bahrain arrived at the alternate route of even greater political repression. In short, its leaders were caught in a situation in which the very act of political concessions, meant to pacify Shi’a opponents and preclude their turning to Iran for support of their cause, would itself be seen as opening the door for increased Iranian influence. That is, from the standpoint of the Āl Khalīfa, the intermediate goal of quieting the Shi’a—which could only be bought by agreeing to their demands of major constitutional reform, an end to political naturalization, and equal government employment, including in the military and power ministries—is necessarily at odds with the primary objective, indeed the motivation for the entire exercise, which is to protect against Iranian expansionism. Given the choice between a Shi’a population that is politically agitated but militarily impotent and one that is politically satisfied but strategically better-positioned within the government apparatus, the Bahrainis have decided that it is better to have the former, which while it may be driven closer to Iran could never, even with Iranian help, pose an existential threat to Āl Khalīfa rule of Bahrain, particularly so long as the U.S. Fifth Fleet remains docked at Mīnā’ Salmān. In Bahrain, it turns out, overall regime stability entails not political tranquility but its opposite.

Ethnic Conflict and the Limits of Rentierism

As we return then to Bahrain *qua* *rentier* state in light of Bahrain *qua* ethnically-divided state, it is clear in what ways the latter must revise our understanding of the former. Mutual ethnic suspicion—the feeling among Shi’a of political and possibly (if those behind *al-tajnīs* had their

way) physical disenfranchisement at the hands of foreign Sunni occupiers and their co-ethnic supporters; and the perception among Sunnis that the so-called “Baḥārnah” are more akin to Iranians than to loyal Bahraini citizens—such mutual antagonism demonstrates how a class-based politics can indeed emerge in *rentier* societies, supplanting individual jockeying for royal patronage as the dominant political *modus operandi* in the rent-based state. Whereas typically citizens of allocative economies have incentives to compete independently for a greater personal share of state benefits, in countries with a significant ethnic cleavage, such as exists in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, in-group solidarity combines with between-group rivalry to produce a system in which two broadly-delineated factions—an out-group opposition and nominally pro-government ethnic in-group—contend for the benefaction of the ruling tribe. More than just their relative economic allocations, however, the two parties vie to influence the very nature of the state itself, including their relative stations therein, for fear of ethnic domination by the other (cf. Chapter 2). Thus we have observed in the case of Sunnis and Shi‘is in Bahrain how the key battles of politics are fought not along distributive lines but along the very defining lines of the regime: the nation’s history and cultural identity; the bases of citizenship; and the conditions for government and military service. To be sure, in a society where it is a matter of significant debate whether the true citizen is a “Baḥ-RAY-nī” or a “Baḥ-RĀ-nī,” it is clear that the *rentier* politics of allocation has taken a back seat to an ethnic struggle over group status and national ownership; that, to recall what Horowitz says of ethnically-divided societies, “the symbolic sector of politics looms large” (1985, 187).

It is equally apparent, under such circumstances, why the traditional pressure-releasing levers of the *rentier* state here lack the effectiveness they might otherwise have. If one recalls the discussion of Chapter 2, he will remember that allocative states are said to educe political quiescence through two basic mechanisms—high government employment and non-taxation. In the case of Bahrain, however, ethnic division serves to handicap the *rentier* government by at best making these options less efficient, at worst by taking them off the table altogether. “Every citizen” of a *rentier* state, Beblawi (1990, 91) assures us, “has a legitimate aspiration to be a government employee; in most cases this aspiration is fulfilled.” Though his qualification “most cases” is ambiguous, it is certain that one instance in which this aspiration will *not* be fulfilled is when a government harbors suspicions of disloyalty with regard to a prospective employee. And what if these suspicions extend to a full majority of a country’s indigenous population? Then the state must fill shortfalls in the ranks of the police, the military, and the

power ministries, those pertaining directly to the use of force, with individuals whom it does trust, namely “non-partisan” foreigners imported specifically for this purpose.⁴⁹ In short, this state begins to look much like Bahrain and other Arab Gulf regimes: employment itself being a political tool, those whose political allegiance is doubted are systematically excluded from the public sector; and for every one individual undeserving of service, governments reason, a dozen can be recruited from Yemen, Syria, or Baluchistan.

In moderation this situation may pose few problems for regimes, begetting nothing more than a small percentage of the population who must look to the private sector for work or who perhaps remain unemployed and individually disaffected. But extend it to half of all citizens, indeed the very half that would tend toward government opposition even in the best of economic conditions, and one quickly runs the risk of systematic dissent by members of the excluded out-group. In a survey published in September 2003 of thirty-two ministries and the state-run University of Bahrain, the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights found that

of 572 high-ranking public posts ... Shiite citizens hold 101 jobs only, representing 18 per cent of the total. When the research was conducted, there were 47 individuals with the rank of minister and undersecretary. Of these, there were ten Shiites, comprising 21 per cent of the total. These do not include the critical ministries of Interior, Foreign [Affairs], Defense, Security, and Justice.⁵⁰

More recently, the same BCHR revealed in a March 2009 report that according to a list of over 1,000 employee names obtained from Bahrain’s National Security Apparatus, a mere 4% were Shi’a, while 64% were “non-citizens, most of Asian nationalities.”⁵¹ Finally, without digressing too far yet into the results of my own study, not a single Shi’i of those randomly

⁴⁹ This presumes that members of the extended ruling family, of tribal allies, and of prominent houses, which together will form at least the top echelons of bureaucracy, are numerically insufficient to fill all posts.

Military reliance upon ostensibly non-aligned foreigners is a common practice in the Arab world generally. Khuri (1980, 51 ff.) documents the use in Bahrain of so-called *banī khḍayr* (“the green stock”)—Sunnis with “no clear tribal origin: Baluchis, Omanis, ‘stray’ Arabs who lost tribal affiliation, and people of African origin”—since the time after the Āl Khalifa arrival. He describes them as “essentially a ‘coercive apparatus’ whose task was to execute the will of the ruler,” a feared group who “carried sticks and never hesitated to strike those who refused to acquiesce to their orders.”

⁵⁰ Quoted in International Crisis Group, 2005, “Bahrain’s Sectarian Challenge,” *Middle East Report* N° 40, May 6, p. 8. Available at: <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iran-gulf/bahrain/040-bahraains-sectarian-challenge.aspx>>.

⁵¹ The individual accused of leaking this list of names, himself an employee of an unspecified ministry, was soon imprisoned and purportedly “offered ... a bargain in return for his release, on the condition that he signs a statement in which he accuses both Nabeel Rajab – President of the BCHR – and women activist Layla Dishti – administrator of www.bahrainonline.org [a popular Shi’a opposition web forum where the names first appeared] – that they incited and funded him to publish those names” (BAHRAIN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS 2009). That the authorities would go so far to discredit it lends some evidence as to the authenticity of the list.

FIGURE 3.3. Cartoons posted to a popular Shi'a Internet forum depict:

“an unemployed Bahraini” hindered by
“the government + political naturalization”;



“a university graduate” falling into the trap
of “discrimination,” “the government,” “wasṭah,”
“corruption,” and “political naturalization”;



“unemployed graduates” being consumed by
“sectarianism,” “administrative corruption,”
and “wasṭah” in government ministries; and



a representative of the “Ministry of Sectarianism,”
giving “government jobs” to “those of the Sunni sect”
and “clerical positions” to “those of the Shi'i sect”



selected for interview as part of my representative national survey identified himself as an employee of the police or armed forces.⁵² Compare this to 13% of the 131 total working Sunni households that gave occupational data. In sum, even a cursory look at patterns of public sector employment in Bahrain is enough to show that, at least in this *rentier* state, we must revise the familiar line that “every citizen has a legitimate aspiration to be a government employee” by adding, parenthetically, “so long as he is not a member of that *other* sect.”

⁵² Two questions ask the respondent’s and his/her spouse’s industries of employment. “He works in the armed forces, the public security [police]”—“يعمل في القوات المسلحة، الأمن العام”—is the exact wording of one of the choices.

Of course, one need not rely in these conclusions on the likes of anonymous Internet reports prepared by the opposition. For one can readily glean as much from public officials themselves, who while they deny any specific cases of ethnic-based discrimination seem in their comments to agree with the general sentiment. In an interview with *The New York Times* in March 2009, the chairman of Bahrain's parliamentary committee on foreign affairs, defense, and national security, 'Ādal al-Ma'āwdah of al-Aṣālah, replied when asked about Shi'a claims of exclusion from the armed forces, "There are so many riots, burnings, killings, and not even one case is condemned by the Shiites. Burning a car with people inside is not condemned.⁵³ How can we trust such people?"⁵⁴ My own contacts echoed this reasoning. Sāmy Qambar, a (now-former) parliamentarian from Bahrain's other Sunni political society, the pro-government and Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic National Tribune (جمعية المنبر الوطني الإسلامي, hereafter al-Manbar), told me in regard to the Shi'a complaints,

[S]adly, the Shi'a feel that they are a majority of the population and therefore entitled to have a greater presence in the government and army and police, while the government feels these posts should be filled with people who they can trust and who are loyal to them, not with people from the opposition.

Even top government officials will make the same acknowledgment. Ḥasan Fakhrū, then and current minister for industry and commerce, admitted during the anti-naturalization protests following the release of the Bandar Report, "There is a lack of confidence between the ruled and the rulers. It is not unusual. There is a small percentage who do not have loyalty to the state. Sometimes, for good reasons, you have to be careful who you employ."⁵⁵

And careful the Bahrainis are. Applicants for "sensitive" positions within the police, military, and bureaucracy are required to include a "certificate of good history and conduct" ("شهادة حسن السيرة والسلوك")⁵⁶ issued by the police to verify that an individual has no prior record of arrest or detention, including for political reasons (BAHRY 2000, 134). A difficult hurdle to

⁵³ The allusion here is to a case then very much in the news about a man killed reportedly after his vehicle was hit by a Molotov cocktail thrown by Shi'a rioters in the southern village of Ma'ameer. Seven were arrested and later handed life sentences in July 2010 under Bahrain's broadly-defined (and -criticized) "anti-terrorism" law of 2006. See Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, 2010, "Bahrain: life Sentences against 7 activists in the 'Ma'ameer' Case after an Unjust Trial," July 11. Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3175>>.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Michael Slackman, 2009, "Sectarian Tension Takes Volatile Form in Bahrain," *New York Times*, March 28. Available at: <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/28/world/middleeast/28bahrain.html>>.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Bill Law, 2007, "Riots Reinforce Bahrain Rulers' Fears," *Sunday Telegraph*, July 22. Available at: <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1558179/Riots-reinforce-Bahrain-rulers-fears.html>>.

⁵⁶ More literally, a "certificate of good biography and conduct." Note that Bahry's translation and transliteration mistakenly invert the final two words.

overcome for one accustomed to near-daily street demonstrations for the past three decades, the requirement has the effect of discouraging if not precluding Shi'a applicants for all but a limited set of "non-sensitive," low- and intermediate-level positions within the government ministries. Yet, more significantly, Fakhrū's words summarize well the basic problem of public sector employment as seen from the standpoint of Bahrain's rulers, or indeed from that of any regime distrustful of a certain subsection of its population: absent a reliable way to distinguish a good prospective employee from one lacking "loyalty to the state"—for even a clean past is no guarantee save for that one is prudent—does one rather exclude the class of "disloyals" at the greatest possible level of abstraction (say, on the basis of ethnicity) but with the largest margin for error? or attempt to fish them out individually with the knowledge that one or another may slip by? In its choice between a trawler and a butterfly net, the Bahraini government has settled decidedly upon the former instrument, casting a general web of suspicion upon all Baḥārnah as a certain class of citizen, and accepting the collateral damage of whatever "loyals" may be inadvertently caught up in the mesh. It is this collateral damage, this lost opportunity for the allocative state whereby potential regime allies are made into political opponents by the inefficient use of its greatest organizational advantage—the capacity for abnormally high public employment—it is, again, this foregone co-optation due to ethnic distrust that is a central feature of the dysfunctional *rentier* state.

As for the second half of the classic formula for *rentier* buy-off, the so-called "taxation effect" whereby untaxed citizens of allocative states are left with no objective (read: economic) basis for political participation, it is equally dubious whether this actually obtains, in ethnically-divided Bahrain or elsewhere. The first problem with this line of reasoning is that, historically speaking, it is simply inaccurate. For there were prior to the discovery of oil in Bahrain indeed taxes levied on citizens—that is, on Shi'a citizens—and there certainly was no expectation of political benefits in return. Of the various forms of tax and tribute collected by the pre-oil state, the most prominent were a poll tax, a water tax for irrigation, and some say a tax for organizing Shi'a processions during 'Āshūrā'. The former two types, Khuri explains (1980, 48), "were collected only from the Shi'a, on the grounds that they did not serve in the military. It should be added that they were not invited to do so." On the other hand, he continues, "towns, such as al-Hidd and Rifa, where the tribal allies of Al-Khalifa lived, were not taxed. Highly placed, rich merchants did not pay taxes; they presented 'gifts,' delivered to the ruler in person, to his intimates, or sometimes to his foreign guests" (52). For Bahraini Shi'a, the

taxes and tax collectors—the latter “regarded with suspicion and disgust” (48)—were so hated that when they were poised to be abolished as part of sweeping institutional reforms initiated by the British in the early 1920s, the Shi‘a seized the opportunity to express their frustration with the onerous burden, voicing strong support for the reforms and officially petitioning for British protection against the rulership of Āl Khalīfa. They even went so far as to compose a long poem in praise of the local British political agent, Major Daly, and the reforms (92-93). The result was to prompt island-wide rioting and attacks upon Shi‘a villages by Sunni tribes, including by members of Āl Khalīfa, and ultimately the forced abdication of Shaykh ‘Īsā bin ‘Alī, who opposed the reforms, in favor of his more conciliatory son Ḥamad (94-95). Khuri tells how many a tax collector found it necessary after the reforms to relocate from the Shi‘a villages to the city of Manama, in order to escape as they said the “burden of the past” (48).

From a historical standpoint, therefore, the idea that taxation in Bahrain or the other Arab Gulf monarchies should necessarily have some relation to political rights or benefits, that they would inevitably follow the same state-building pattern exhibited by Western Europe, is a simplification. In fact, if one is impressed by anything from Khuri’s account of taxation in pre-oil Bahrain it is the degree to which the island’s politics seem not to have fundamentally changed since the day of the Āl Khalīfa arrival: the Shi‘a, whether to preserve the elite status of the regime’s Sunni tribal allies or out of sheer mistrust, were systematically excluded from the nascent state apparatus, including most notably the military.⁵⁷ In return, the Baḥārnah not only bore the economic burden of subsistence living on feudal estates, but were forced in addition to pay tribute to the Āl Khalīfa and their allies, who administered the lands as absentee landlords. It was thus on the basis that they were the victims of discrimination, not because they connected taxation with political privileges, that the Shi‘a came out so strongly in favor of the British administrative reforms. Political conflict, in other words, was as now one between a Sunni ethnic in-group and Shi‘a ethnic out-group, rather than an economically-powerful merchant class and politically-dominant ruling class as described other pre-oil Arab Gulf states. The latter case, for example, is the subject of Crystal’s (1986) well-known study of Qatar and Kuwait, where she concludes that in each instance a formidable merchant class was content to exit politics in return for non-taxation and an economic monopoly in non-oil sectors of the *rentier* state. The Shi‘a of Bahrain, of course, have made no such concession, not after the end of taxation and of the feudal estate system, nor following the new economic

⁵⁷ Cf. *supra*, note 49.

opportunities afforded by the post-oil state. At least in Bahrain, taxation and demands for “representation” have been so far inversely related.

Thus we arrive at the other, more basic problem with this taxation thesis: theoretically it conflates two distinct matters: the motivations of governments and those of citizens. So while Vandewalle’s (1987, 160) *rentier* principle of “no representation without taxation” may be able to explain the conditions under which governments are less likely to demand “taxation,” it says little about when citizens are likely to demand “representation” apart from rule out a single possibility, namely when they wish to have a say over how their taxed income is spent by the state. Under what circumstances and to what extent individuals might be spurred politically on some non-economic basis, we are left to wonder. In the end, therefore, that untaxed citizens are, *ceteris paribus*, less likely than taxed citizens to insist on government accountability is not a model of how politics operates in rent-dependent states but a model of how it does *not* operate, and one that makes all the more baffling the current push among Bahrainis and other ordinary Gulf Arabs, untaxed as they are, for a greater role in political decision-making. As expressed by Bahraini parliamentarian ‘Isā Abū al-Faṭḥ,

Nowadays in Bahrain ... about the past 3 years ... everyone is worried about politics—too much about politics and not enough about their own business. I go to the dentist, or a doctor comes to my *majlis* ..., and the first thing he does is starts to ask me what I think about some political issue. I tell him, “Worry about your patients, and leave the politics up to politicians.” But no one minds their own business anymore. It is like this now in all the GCC countries, whereas three years ago it was never like this. Even in Saudi [Arabia] they are talking politics—three years ago you would never hear that.

This revealing response was elicited by a direct question about whether an interest in political participation would exist among Bahraini and Gulf citizens irrespective of their economic situation. While Abū al-Faṭḥ skirts around the root cause of the surge in political awareness that he describes, Sāmy Qambar from al-Manbar does not. Even if everyone were rich, he begins in response to the same question,

I think Bahrain would still face the issue of how things should be divided within the society between Shi’a and Sunna. When you asked at the beginning what is the biggest issue facing Bahrain, this is one of the biggest issues. The Shi’a feel they have a right to power and influence in the society, and a role in the government. This is especially so since the Iranian Revolution. The influence of the Shi’a in Iraq and Iran is very great in Bahrain, and the country needs to know how to deal with and cooperate with them.

Shi'a in- and outside the official channels of politics echo this view. Khalīl al-Marzūq, the deputy head of al-Wifāq at the time of writing, explains that

If the economic situation were better in Bahrain—or at least equal between the Sunna and Shi'a—the sectarian problem would become less but still wouldn't disappear altogether. This is because sectarianism has become part of the national or individual consciousness here in Bahrain since the Iraq war brought empowerment to the Shi'a there. Even post-Iranian Revolution the sectarian thinking reached a certain height, but it was never this bad.

'Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, founder of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and prominent regime critic then only recently-released from prison for a fiery oration at the height of 'Āshūrā' (and today serving a life sentence for his part in the February 14 uprising), tells a similar story:

Before I left Bahrain [for exile in Denmark] when I was 17, ..., there was no "sectarian problem." The political conflict at that time [i.e., the 1960s and 70s] was between socialist groups amongst each other and with the government. Then following the Iranian Revolution and more recently the Shi'a empowerment in Iraq, the feeling in Bahrain is that they should not be marginalized anymore in the face of a ruling Sunni minority.

While the fervor surrounding Arab nationalism may have seemed to overshadow Bahrain's "sectarian problem" for a time, still it is clear from accounts of the period that animosity still burnt brightly between the two sides even prior to the upheavals in Iran and Iraq. Al-Rumaihi, writing in 1976, says of the Shi'a of his native Bahrain (26),

[their] beliefs, whilst strongly held, are at variance with the interpretation of Islamic teaching according to the orthodox sect of Islam, the Sunna, who in Bahrain refer to the Shia as Rafidi ('the Rejectors'⁵⁸). Both points of view are fanatically held by their proponents and these differences of interpretation created the tensions which led to social and political conflict.

Herein, then, lies the basic trouble with the "no taxation, so no representation" thesis, and indeed with the extant *rentier* state paradigm more generally. Without ever saying such explicitly, it purports to understand *why* people become interested in politics, *what* motivates citizens to support a certain government or oppose it: economics is the key, other individual-level factors like ethno-religious identification or personal piety afterthoughts if treated at all. Whereas, in fact, we know quite little about the determinants of individual political behavior in the context of the Arab Gulf, or how such behavior might be influenced by country-level

⁵⁸ That is, rejectors (رافضي sing. روافض) of the "rightful" successors of the Prophet in favor of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib or, less specifically, of (Sunni) Islamic leadership and authority.

variables such as demography, ethnic relations, and so on. To do so would mean, *inter alia*, to actually ask individuals. And to gain access to everyday citizens of Gulf countries one faces many practical and political barriers; to gain access to hundreds or thousands spread across an entire nation even more obstacles; and to ask them how they feel about their ruling families one should keep one's suitcase and passport at the ready.

Even absent a systematic empirical analysis of mass political orientations, however, which we shall reserve for the following chapter, it is clear based on the preceding examination of ethnic conflict in Bahrain that we do know at least one thing about the bases of political action and opinion in the Arab Gulf: namely, that they are not limited to the economic. On the contrary, from the nativist claims of the Baḥārnah and their fear of falling victim to Sunni-sponsored demographic engineering, to Sunni suspicions of an Iranian-backed "Shi'a revival" that threatens to overrun the entire region, political calculation in this Gulf *rentier* state is not dictated by mere economic self-interest. Instead, for fear of ethnic domination by the other, the material rewards citizens might expect for remaining quiet are insufficient to deter them from seeking an active role in political life, which they do not as individual state benefit-maximizers but as members of a larger coalition seeking influence and control over the state itself, and this precisely over against the rival group. Ultimately, therefore, non-taxation as a means of political pressure-relief for *rentier* regimes is, like that of government employment, vulnerable to one fatal circumstance: when strictly economic concern is not the fundamental driver of political action; when the wealthy, corpulent, and politically-disinterested "oil sheikh," the standard caricature of the Gulf Arab both within the Middle East and in the West, does not accurately represent the average citizen, who is neither rich nor poor, is politically-agitated, and, above all, is either a Sunni or a Shi'i.

Yet there remains, in addition to the ethnic-based political mobilization described thus far, a final source of political inspiration in the Arab Gulf *rentier* state that until now has gone untreated: that of religion—of Islam—itself. To this point, the line of argument connecting Bahrain's Sunni-Shi'i conflict to higher-than-expected levels of popular political involvement has not appealed to anything intrinsic about the two conflicting groups themselves; the latter could just have well been left-handers competing with right-handers, or Tamil-speakers with Sinhalese-speakers, for domination of the state and for their relative shares of its benefits. But in fact the Sunni-Shi'i conflict in Bahrain and across the Arab world more generally is not an ethnic conflict merely but one overlapping with a 1,300 year-old religious schism precipitated

itself by a dispute over political succession, a division that as such provides ample historical fodder for those looking to rally the troops for a political cause. This religious dimension is foreshadowed already in al-Rumaihi's preceding description of Bahrain's social problems as stemming primarily from the Baḥārnah's "rejection" of orthodox Islam. Elsewhere he makes the point even more explicit, saying, "The root cause of the problem [is] the conquest of the Shia by the Sunna tribes of the mainland. The latter regarded Shi'ism as a form of heresy, and consequently missed no opportunity to oppress the original Shia inhabitants" (25). We may doubt, of course, whether the social or political outcome of the Āl Khalifa capture of Bahrain would have differed qualitatively had the native population been Sunni, yet as to the role of religion *per se* in stoking the flames of the ongoing political conflict there is no question.

Shi'ism and the Politics of Religion

In Bahrain one may readily distinguish Sunni from Shi'i from any number of details: speech and accent (the former pronounce *k*, e.g., the latter *ch*); facial hair and dress (Salafis keep long, unkempt, often henna-dyed beards, while Shi'a rarely do); given (Khalīfah versus Ḥusayn, ʿĪsā versus ʿAlī) and, if all else fails, family name. Yet among the most straightforward methods is to observe the unmistakable adornment of private property.⁵⁹ Shi'a houses, all clustered together in a tight formation, fly black or multicolored flags bearing the name of the Imām Ḥusayn and other Shi'a martyrs, eulogizing, "يا حسين يا شهيد"—"O Ḥusayn! O Martyr!"; Sunni houses, with their gated entrances and garden courtyards, fly the red and white national flag of Bahrain. Vehicles driven by Shi'a are decorated invariably with an embossed sticker decal bearing the words "اللهم صل على محمد وآل محمد"—"O God, bless Muḥammad and the House of Muḥammad." This line, with which they conclude each prayer and whose invocation of the family of the Prophet flies in direct defiance of Sunni practice, reiterates that they are indeed the Shi'a: *shī'ah* ʿAlī, "the partisans of ʿAlī" and the hereditary line of the Prophet against rival claimants to the Islamic caliphate.⁶⁰ For their part, Sunnis don their vehicles with the familiar

⁵⁹ Though out of place here, worth noting in this regard is the prominent use of newspaper subscription boxes as indicators of political allegiance. An *Al-Waṣaṭ* (*The Center*) box, for example, affixed to many a Shi'a home, is a clear indicator of political opposition and adherence to the pro-Shi'a line. On the other hand, *Al-Ayām* (*The Days*), *Al-Bilād* (*The Country*), and *Akhbār al-Khalīj* (*The Gulf News*), are all safe pro-government choices, the first liberal-leaning but owned by a former minister of information turned advisor to the king; the latter two close to the prime minister. For a more hard-line statement one can opt for *Al-Waṭan* (*The Nation*), close to the royal court and often inflammatory.

⁶⁰ And, as if to be even more emphatic in this point, the vowel in the word آل (Āl) that refers to the "family" of the Prophet is elongated for several seconds for each of three recitations, producing an affecting meter in which every syllable is deliberately uttered: "allāā / hum ṣal-lī / wa sal-lim / ʿalāā muḥammad / wa āāāāāāāāāā muḥammad."

Muslim profession of faith and first pillar of Sunni Islam, the *shahādah* bearing witness that “لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله”: “There is no God but God, and Muḥammad is God’s Messenger.”

During the holy month of Muḥarram, however, in particular the first ten days building up to ‘Āshūrā’ proper, this religious ornament reaches a new height, crossing the line from private to public and hence drawing the ire of many Sunnis for whom such advertisement represents unnecessary embellishment and even provocation. Black banners with brightly-colored, intricately-embroidered calligraphy, usually in the Persian-style *nasta‘līq* script, sprawl across the streets of Shi‘a neighborhoods, recounting the martyrdom of Ḥusayn and brought to Bahrain, I was told, from Iraqi makers in Karbalā’ itself. So too hang building-size portraits of local religious figures such as Sh. ‘Īsā Qāsim, Bahrain’s highest *marja‘*, or source of religious emulation for Shi‘is, as well as decidedly non-local ones like Ayatāllahs Rūḥallāh Khomeini, ‘Alī Khāmene‘i, and Muḥammad Ḥusayn Faḍlallāh, not to mention Ḥasan Naṣrallāh. To commemorate the occasion one may purchase a Ḥizballāh flag, Khomeini t-shirt (which in 2008 were entirely sold out after the first night), or for the younger revolutionary even a Khomeini jigsaw puzzle. Such overt symbolism does not go unnoticed by the government.

Following the 2007 festivities, which saw the brief arrest of three opposition leaders for anti-government speeches, Bahrain’s Minister of Interior, Sh. Rāshid bin ‘Abdallāh Āl Khalīfa, spoke out against the “politicization” of the ‘Āshūrā’ ceremonies, which he said had been “used to excite people through spreading false rumours, inciting hatred, belittling national achievements and seeking to erode unity.” The occasion, he continued, “was also used to put up negatively-worded banners and posters and flags that indicated a lack of national loyalty and allegiance.”⁶¹ Indeed, one “negatively-worded banner” that particularly incensed the government and Sunnis had appeared the previous year under the sponsorship of the Islamic Enlightenment Society (جمعية التوعية الإسلامية), the front of Iraqi al-Da‘wa in Bahrain.⁶² A supposed quotation from a sermon by the aforementioned Sh. ‘Īsā Qāsim, the large banner, distributed across various parts of Manama, recalled the very historical event behind ‘Āshūrā’ itself: the decisive Battle of Karbalā’ of 680 AD in which the Prophet’s grandson Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī, along with much of his family and supporters, was martyred by a military detachment

⁶¹ Quoted in Habib Toumi, 2007, “Minister: Don’t use religious events to fuel sectarianism,” *Gulf News*, February 15. Available at: <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/minister-don-t-use-religious-events-to-fuel-sectarianism-1.161278>>.

⁶² That is, حزب الدعوة الإسلامية, or “Party of the Islamic Call,” that originated in 1957 in Najaf and today comprises one-half of the United Iraqi Alliance bloc led by Prime Minister Nūri al-Mālikī. For more information on the history of al-Da‘wa in Iraq and the activities of its Bahrain wing, see LOUËR 2008, 83-88 ff.

FIGURE 3.4. A banner featuring Ayatallāhs Khomeini and Khāmene'i hangs from the Mu'min ("Believer's") Mosque as drummers proceed through the Manama Sūq on January 5, 2009. Their sashes bear the words "lovers of al-Ḥusayn."



sent by the second 'Umayyad caliph Yazīd I. Our ubiquitous commentator Sh. Jāsim al-Sa'īdī publically denounced the banner as "a flagrant call to sectarian division in Bahrain." A writer for *Al-Waṭan* called it "a blatant violation of the constitution and a shocking incitement to sectarianism taking place months before historic elections in Bahrain and at a critical time when the region is dealing with the Iranian nuclear crisis." The message, she warned, "is an

attempt to provoke Sunnis into a counter-reaction that could lead to a dangerous situation.”

The banner read:

The Battle of Karbala is still going on between the two sides in the present and in the future. It is being held within the soul, at home and in all areas of life and society. People will remain divided and they are either in the Hussain camp or in the Yazid camp. So choose your camp.

For the nation’s Sunnis, this “flagrant,” “blatant” provocation seemed nothing short of, as the reporter from *Al-Waṭan* put it, a “declaration of war by calling upon Bahrainis to choose between the Sunni camp and the Shiite camp.”⁶³ Its timing, moreover, coinciding as it did with heightened domestic and international tensions, was from their point of view either very inopportune or downright suspicious. Whatever the case, it evidenced at a minimum “a lack of national loyalty and allegiance” by those who would subscribe to such Manichean thinking. Yet notwithstanding the rawness of its expression, a contrast to the Sunni tendency toward euphemism (“some groups,” “certain people”) when discussing the inter-communal conflict, the banner does little more than paraphrase the fundamental lesson, past or present, of ‘Āshūrā’: there exists in the world just rule and unjust rule, and it is incumbent upon the lovers of the good and of the just to resist the evil oppressors, even if that means by material and bodily sacrifice; for just as the Imām Ḥusayn gave his life before he would give allegiance to Yazīd, so too must all who are subjugated be prepared to forfeit earthly enjoyment for the true reward in the hereafter. In the words of one leading Shi‘i political activist and theologian known commonly by the title *al-ustādh* (“the professor”), “The history of Shi‘ism is the history of opposition against Sunni powers.”⁶⁴

Here as elsewhere one is indebted to Khuri (1980, 73-74), who provides a vivid account of the Bahraini adaptation of the ‘Āshūrā’ ritual, the particulars of which, as he notes, “need not and do not correspond to the facts of history.” He tells,

The ritual begins on the first day of Muharram and ends on the thirteenth, reaching its climax on the tenth, the day Imam Husain was slain by the Omayyad troops.

⁶³ All quoted in Habib Toumi, 2006, “Bahrain’s Islamist MP calls for removal of sectarian banners,” *Gulf News*, February 19. Available at: <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-s-islamist-mp-calls-for-removal-of-sectarian-banners-1.225726>>.

⁶⁴ Personal interview with Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Ḥusayn, Bahrain, May 2009. Incidentally, it is perhaps for such sentiments as this that his popular website, www.alostad.net, was blocked by Bahrain’s Ministry of Information in September 2010. The site contains mosque sermons from 1994 and 2001 to 2003 (from 1995 to 2000 he was in prison), a widely-circulated “Tuesday meeting” address (“لقاء الثلاثاء”), and transcripts of his many religious works.

Between the first day and the sixth, the mullahs [preachers] relate Husain's military expedition against Yazid from his starting point at Medina until he arrived in Karbala by way of Mecca. They prepare the audience for the battle, which, according to the ritual, comes on the seventh day. In these six days the mullahs expound on the uncompromising stand of Husain on matters of principle. This refers specifically to his right to the caliphate, according to Shi'a traditions. The mullahs refer to the many temptations for Husain to abandon his cause, temptations he utterly rejected. They believe Husain was chosen to be a martyr; he knew in advance that he was "destined" to lose the battle and be slain at Karbala. His martyrdom was meant to demonstrate to the faithful that "giving away one's blood for a right is an act of eternal justice," as one mullah put it. The determination of Husain to fight in spite of the temptations not to do so or of his prior knowledge of the fateful result are strongly projected in the ritual against the vulnerability of human-kind, who easily fall victim to temptations and mundane matters: material gain, positions of power, worldly pleasures, the fear of loss of wealth.

Although it revolves around the person of Husain, the ritual of 'Ashura' is depicted as a form of group sacrifice, the catastrophe of an entire family—men, women, and children. Only the infant Zain al-Abidin survived the battle; the men and children were slain as martyrs, the women were taken captive. ... Of the many male relations of Husain (about seventeen) who took part in the battle, only three receive elaborate treatment in the ritual. ... In the historic battle of Karbala these men were all slain in one day, the tenth of Muharram, but in the ritual each is assigned a specific day.

The preachers who relate these events, which they do in a *ma'tam* or "funeral house" designed specifically for the purpose⁶⁵ and fitted with enormous loudspeakers, Khuri divides into two types: those who focus on the accepted "historical" events of the battle rather than alter the narrative "to accommodate ... the rising sociopolitical circumstances of the day"; and "those who take the battle as a symbol signifying the right of rebellion against injustices, wherever and whatever they be" (76). The latter, as one might expect, he says have been better represented in times of political turmoil, as they were when I attended in 2008-2009. In fact, it was difficult to perceive many of the former category. For both types, though, the goal is the same: to arouse unrestrained grief in one's listeners, if only temporarily. As Khuri says, "Public opinion asserts that a mullah who cannot make his audience cry is 'no good.' [But as] the ritual comes to an end, and it often lasts about an hour, those who have been shedding real tears quickly shift back to ordinary moods." Crying at the death of the martyrs, it is held, "assures the faithful of a place in paradise."

With the murder of Husayn's stepbrother al-Qāsim on the eighth night of the ritual, however, there commences an even more emotionally- and politically-charged feature of 'Āshūrā': mass street processions in which organized groups of mostly young men march in

⁶⁵ Cf. *supra*, note 35.

FIGURE 3.5. ‘Azzah processions move through central Manama; below, with sangal



unison, beating their chests rhythmically and chanting religious poems that glorify the family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) and the Shi‘a martyrs. Known locally as *‘azzah*, or “mourning,” the processions are led by a eulogist (*rādūd*) who composes and recites the chants, the most famous of whom in Bahrain is Sh. Ḥusayn al-Akraf, who played a central role in the Shi‘a uprising of the 1990s by developing new chants “in which he connected the drama of Karbala and that

of the Bahraini martyrs, Husein's fight against Yazid and the Bahrainis' fight against the Al-Khalifa" (LOUËR 2008, 208). For this he was imprisoned for five years, released only after the general amnesty of 2001. Among al-Akrafi's poems, all of which are readily available online complete with video footage from Bahraini 'Āshūrā' celebrations, are "Liar! O [Bahraini] Law!" ("كذاب يا قانون"), "Where's Saddam?" ("وين صدام؟"), a gibe at the late Iraqi dictator and warning to the Āl Khalifa, and "Oh How You Oppressed Us!" ("ظلمتينا وكم كنتي ظلومة"), which on YouTube has been viewed more than 200,000 times since 2007 and carries the subtitle, "God Help the Bahrainis and God Damn the Āl Khalifa" ("ساعد الله البحرينيين ولعن الله ال خليفة").⁶⁶

On the tenth day, the day of Ḥusayn's murder, 'Āshūrā' reaches its climax. It is this day with which outside observers are most familiar for its gruesome images of self-flagellation often broadcast in the Western and Sunni Arab press. This act of *taṭbīr*, called "*ḥaydar*"⁶⁷ in Bahrain, is performed only by the most enthusiastic of the cortèges, Sunnis condemning it outright and the Shi'a themselves divided between those who deem it (or, rather, whose *marāji'* have ruled it) forbidden, permitted, or even obligatory.⁶⁸ We turn again to Khuri (77):

One procession advances at the sound of drums with the participants beating their back with bundles of wire (*sangal*), or with chains whose ends are tied to sharp bits of steel that continually make slight wounds around the waist, gradually biting into the outer layer of the skin. The members of another procession, wearing white robes, beat their closely shaved heads with swords, chanting rhythmically, "Haidar, Haidar ...," referring to Imam Ali. The blood that splatters over their bodies is intended to illustrate the horror of life when injustice prevails in the world. ...

Between the processions there march a number of separate small groups, each depicting a particular scene of the battle. These scenes include stray horses or camels covered with sheets of green and black cloth, indicating that their murdered knights belonged to the House of Ali; or huge paintings of Husain being slain by al-Shimr or grasping his infant son to protect him from the enemy; or a young child in grief mounted on a horse treading lonely on earth, in reference to Zain al-Abidin, the only male child to survive the battle. ...

⁶⁶ See "ظلمتينا وكم كنتي ظلومة للبحرينيين" ["Oh How You Oppressed Us! for the Bahrainis"]. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aS6eu1RfTc>>.

⁶⁷ حيدر, or "lion," is one of the nicknames of the Imām 'Alī and is a common given name among Bahraini Shi'is.

⁶⁸ This intra-Shi'a disagreement gives occasion to highlight another important aspect of 'Āshūrā', which if less central to the present argument bears mentioning nonetheless. Just as the ritual reiterates the magnitude of the Sunni-Shi'i schism, so too does it serve to throw into stark relief the many factions of Shi'ism in Bahrain: the Persian Shi'a vs. the Baḥārīnah; adherents of Khomeini's *vilāyat-e faqīh* (rule by the "Guardian Jurist") doctrine vs. the Shirāzīs (cf. LOUËR 2008 for more on the "transportation" of this longstanding Najaf-Karbalā' rivalry to the countries of the Gulf); and the supporters of al-Wifāq vs. those who eschew formal political participation. All of this intra-communal enmity, finally, is formalized in the institution of the *ma'tam*, whose membership revolves primarily around such ethnic, political, and jurisprudential distinctions, and which compete against each other for the largest and most elaborate 'azzah processions, which they organize. On this see KHURI 1980, all of ch. 8.

FIGURE 3.6. *Dressed in red and faces painted black, members of Yazīd’s army carry on pikes the decapitated heads of Ḥusayn and his stepbrother, as captured members of his family, dressed in green, follow in shackles. Camels carry the green coffins of the martyrs.*



On the tenth day these processions start early in the morning, about eight o’clock, and continue until one or two in the afternoon. The line of participants in Manama, when I observed them in 1975, continued about four hours. When the processions end, each wounded participant retreats to his own “funeral house” to wash his blood away by “Husain’s water,” believed to heal the wounds instantaneously. After washing their wounds the participants are offered a free meal, called *‘aish al-husain* (literally the rice of Husain), to which other people are invited.

Thus far we have limited our consideration to the political symbolism of the formal, ritualistic aspects of ‘Āshūrā’, whether the elaborate decoration that spills into public space, the mullahs’ recitation of the Battle of Karbalā’, street processions and passion plays, or the

FIGURE 3.7. Bystanders look on as a ḥaydar procession moves through the Manama Sūq on the morning of January 7, 2009.



performance of *‘azzah* and *ḥaydar*. Yet there remains another, more strictly political side of the commemoration in which political rather than religious leaders take the opportunity to address their constituencies, aided by the overflowing emotion and sense of eternal betrayal and injustice stirred up over the course of these thirteen days. It is here that the usual dynamic of *‘Āshūrā* is reversed, and instead of the religious making use of the political to reinforce its spiritual lessons, the political makes use of the religious—and to good effect.

Of course, not everyone uses the occasion to “excite people,” “incite hatred,” “belittle national achievements,” and “seek to erode unity,” as the Bahraini government would say. One session I attended styled itself a forum for inter-faith dialogue, bringing together Sunni and Shi‘i imāms along with an Orthodox Christian bishop to discuss, respectively, the similarity

of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Imām Ḥusayn, and Jesus, who were said to share in common the venerable qualities of justice, self-sacrifice, divine guidance, and so on. At the same time, though, it was difficult to overlook the enormous television screen positioned directly above the tent where the discussion was being held, tuned conspicuously to a ‘Āshūrā’ address by Ḥasan Naṣrallāh broadcast live on Ḥizballāh’s pan-Shi’a satellite television station, *Al-Manār* (*The Beacon*). In it he cursed the despicable, Yazīd-like Israelis for their then-ongoing military offensive in Gaza, reminding one that for all the efforts at spiritual reconciliation, the realities of domestic and regional politics were never far away.

For those looking to make a real political statement, the venue of choice is the early morning of the tenth of Muḥarram, in the wake of the almost hysterical mourning at the death of Ḥusayn earlier that night and preceding the much-awaited performance of *ḥaydar* later on after sunrise.⁶⁹ Since the mid-1990s it is an anomaly if at least one political activist is not arrested for an ardent anti-government speech at this the zenith of ‘Āshūrā’ and of the entire month of Muḥarram. The year I attended the outcome would be no different. The keynote speaker was rumored to be ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, who shortly before 2:30 AM duly arrived outside his namesake mosque in the Manama Sūq district. Despite his being from a prominent Shi’i family that gives its name to the large and beautifully-adorned mosque and attendant *ma’tam*, ‘Abd al-Hādī has no claim whatsoever to religious authority, his popular following mainly a result of his well-known foundational role with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and, even more so, because of a brazen 2004 attack on the country’s prime minister—the uncle of the current king, he has held the position since independence in 1971 and among the Shi’a is comfortably the most hated and feared man in Bahrain, his name rarely uttered, certainly not in public—an unheard-of verbal assault that landed him in prison for one year.⁷⁰ In fact, far from a political asset, the little religious affiliation that al-Khawājah does have, as an adherent

⁶⁹ Indeed, it is no coincidence that Khomeini himself chose this exact date to voice his first attack on the Shah in June 1963 during the so-called Khordad uprising (LOUËR 2008, 187 n. 32). The mass street protests of December 1978 that led to the downfall of the Iranian regime some two months later began on the twelfth of Muḥarram, spurred on by an oral communiqué issued by Khomeini on November 23 titled “Muharram: The triumph of blood over the sword,” which opened thusly (in *Islam and Revolution*, 2002, Hamid Algar, trans., New York: Kegan Paul):

With the approach of Muharram, we are about to begin the month of epic heroism and self sacrifice — the month in which blood triumphed over the sword, the month in which truth condemned falsehood for all eternity and branded the mark of disgrace upon the forehead of all oppressors and satanic governments; the month that has taught successive generations throughout history the path of victory over the bayonet (242).

⁷⁰ For more about the incident, see “Bahrain: Activist Jailed After Criticizing Prime Minister,” 2004, Human Rights Watch, September 28. Available at: <<http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2004/09/29/bahrai9413.htm>>.

FIGURE 3.8. *Huge crowds pack the streets adjoining the al-Khawājah Mosque in anticipation of ‘Abd al-Hādī’s speech*



of the minority Shirāzī faction of Shi‘ism, is in Bahrain rather a liability. It is a testament, then, to his political cache that he is able still to command such a general audience as the one that convened on this unusually frigid January night to hear him speak.

The title of al-Khawājah’s address, the text of which would soon be posted to various opposition websites along with video capturing much of the event,⁷¹ was “How the Sacrifices of al-Ḥusayn Exposed ‘the Ruling Gang’ and Toppled It from Power.”⁷² It began by invoking the “anniversary of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn, son of the Prophet’s daughter,” and “the anniversary of the Battle of ‘Āshūrā’, wherein the corrupt ‘Umayyad regime carried out the murder of al-Ḥusayn and his companions from the House of the Prophet Muḥammad.” “On this great occasion,” he appealed to “all who are free”—“from every stream or sect,” “from any social class, whether rich or poor,” to “men, women, and the elderly”—he called upon them all as he called upon himself, to “stand together, to demand reform, to support what is right,

⁷¹ The video has since been uploaded to YouTube and features a quite heated argument in the comments section. See “الناشط عبد الهادي الخواجة: فالنسقط العصابة الحاكمة” [“Activist ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah: ‘Let’s Take Down the Ruling Gang’”]. Available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rC8ANW0UarU>>.

⁷² ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, 2009, “تضحيات الحسين تفضح ‘العصابة الحاكمة’ وتسقطها من الحكم” [“How the Sufferings of al-Ḥusayn Exposed ‘the Ruling Gang’ and Toppled It from Power”], unpublished address delivered in Manama near the al-Khawājah Mosque, January 7.

to promote virtue and prevent vice, all in the name of the martyr al-Ḥusayn bin ‘Alī.”⁷³ He beseeched his listeners “to disengage psychologically from the unjust regime, and to refuse to give it allegiance or to allow it to rule on the necks of the people,” “to break promises ... and humiliate the people, to employ mercenaries [brought in] from everywhere in order to impose itself on the necks of [its] subjects.” For “when the orders came from Yazīd bin Ma‘āwiyah to his governor in Medina,” he continued, “that he should take an oath from al-Ḥusayn or else lop off his head, al-Ḥusayn proclaimed his political disobedience and refused to swear allegiance, and [instead] prepared himself for his own sacrifice, and for that of his family (*ahl baytihi*).”⁷⁴ And this political defiance, al-Khawājah said, was not aimed at the person of the ‘Umayyad ruler, Yazīd, “but at the entire ‘Umayyad regime. So when al-Ḥusayn addressed the enemy’s army he referred to them, saying, ‘O! Partisans of Āl Sufyān!’”⁷⁵ and did not say ‘partisans of Yazīd.’” Accordingly, the introduction concluded, “the result of the sufferings of al-Ḥusayn in the Battle of Karbalā’ was the fall of the ‘Umayyad Empire, a regime that would last no longer than 90 years, inundated by revolutions brought on by the Movement of al-Ḥusayn.”⁷⁶

The next section of the speech, titled “Sectarian Alignment and Political Alignment,” cautions listeners against assuming they are part of the solution, participants in the Movement

⁷³ It is ironic of course that people from “all streams and sects” should be called to action in the name of such a quintessentially Shi’i figure. The corresponding text of the speech, of which portions are omitted above, reads:

في ذكرى استشهاد الحسين (ع)، ابن بنت رسول الله (ص)، وسبط الرسول وحببيه ..
 في ذكرى واقعة عاشوراء، حيث قام النظام الاموي الفاسد بقتل الحسين واصحابه من أهل بيت النبي محمد (ص) ..
 في هذه المناسبة العظيمة ..
 اتوجه بالنداء: الى كل حر، والى كل صاحب ضمير حي، من اي مذهب او طائفة، ومن اية طبقة اجتماعية، غنيا كان او فقيرا، ..
 اتوجه الى الشباب والنساء والشيوخ ..
 اتوجه لهم جميعا .. واطالب نفسي واطالبهم ..
 بالوقوف صفا واحدا: لطلب الاصلاح، ونصرة الحق، والامر بالمعروف، والنهي عن المنكر، تيمنا بالحسين بن علي الشهيد (ع) ..

⁷⁴ The corresponding text, which again contains some omissions, reads:

اتوجه لهم لفك الارتباط النفسي والمصلحي بنظام الحكم الظالم، ورفض مبايعته، وعدم الاقرار له بالحكم على رقاب الناس، ما دام ..
 يغدر، ويخلف الوعود، ويستأثر بالفئ ويذل الناس، ويستعين بالمرتزقة من كل مكان، ليفرض نفسه على رقاب العباد.
 فحين جاءت الاوامر من يزيد بن معاوية، الى واليه على المدينة المنورة بان يأخذ البيعة من الحسين او يقطع رأسه، اعلن الحسين ..
 العصيان السياسي ورفض المبايعه، وهياً نفسه للتضحية بنفسه واهل بيته.

⁷⁵ That is, the dynasty to which Yazīd belongs, known collectively as the “Sufyanids” after his grandfather Abū Sufyān. Notice the clever use of “Āl Sufyān,” itself not unusual but inevitably suggestive of “Āl Khalīfa.”

⁷⁶ The complete corresponding text is:

ولم يكن الحسين في عصيانه السياسي يستهدف شخص الحاكم الاموي يزيد، بل كان يستهدف النظام الاموي برمته. فهو حين خاطب جيش العدو ناداهم بالقول: يا شيعة آل سفيان .. ولم يقل يا شيعة يزيد.

وكانت نتيجة تضحيات الحسين في واقعة كربلاء، سقوط نظام الحكم الاموي، حيث لم يعمر هذا النظام اكثر من تسعين عاما، كانت تموج بالثورات التي تمخضت عن حركة الحسين (ع).

of al-Ḥusayn, simply because they happen to be Shi'is. "Know," he said after a brief historical review, "that the Shi'a of al-Ḥusayn's Movement are they who stood by him and supported him against political and social injustice, and not all those who identified with *ahl al-bayt* historically or doctrinally or psychologically": "for you may be of the Ja'afarī sect doctrinally-speaking, or of Twelverism ideologically-speaking, but at the same time you might be one of the partisans (*shī'ah*) of Āl Sufyān, or of any ruling gang who enslaves [its] people and sheds [their] blood." Thus, he warned in language that mirrored almost exactly that of the controversial 'Āshūrā' banner treated earlier,

The differentiation of people in our society today between Ḥusaynīs (*ḥusaynīn*) and Yazīdīs (*yazīdīn*) is not based on the sect inherited from [their] fathers and grandfathers, nor the school of jurisprudence they rely on in their individual worship, but rather on [their] political and social stance embodied by the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice: the taking charge by the people of the right and of what is good (*ahl al-ḥaqq wa al-khayr*), and the washing of [one's] hands of oppressors and the people of vice (*ahl al-munkar*).

For ordinary people in their dealings with any ruling gang are of two types: there is the one who puts principle and values first but perhaps is involved with the oppressor in earning a living or in his political and social activity; yet there is on the other hand the one who puts his own self-interest first, even at the expense of what is right and true (*al-ḥaqq*) and of the people's best interests. And each of them will reveal his true nature when the injustice ... and the bloodshed becomes too much, and then he either will be of the Shi'a of al-Ḥusayn in his opinions and sacrifices, or he will be of the Shi'a of Āl Sufyān. And so a battle like that of Karbalā' is necessary to reveal every human [type], in front of himself and in front of others.⁷⁷

With this statement of what might be called the thesis of the entire address, 'Abd al-Hādī moved on to his longest and most substantive section: "The Ruling Gang and the Necessity of Uprooting it from Power Whatever the Cost in Effort and Sacrifices." Here the subject "the ruling gang" transitioned naturally from the corrupt 'Umayyad dynasty, in which the right to rule "moves within one family from father to son, and which looted booty and lands, and

⁷⁷ The corresponding text, which concludes with an arcane aphorism attributed to Ḥusayn that I did not translate, is:

وهكذا فإن تمايز الناس في مجتمعنا اليوم إلى حسينيين ويزيديين، ليس على أساس المذهب الذي ورثوه من الآباء والاجداد، أو المدرسة الفقهية التي يتبعونها في عباداتهم الفردية، وإنما على أساس الموقف السياسي الاجتماعي المتمثل في الأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر، وتولي أهل الحق والخير، والتبرئ من الظالمين وأهل المنكر.

إن عامة الناس في تعاملهم مع أية عصابة حاكمة على صنفين: فهناك من يضع المبادئ والقيم أولاً ولكنه قد يتداخل مع الظالم في كسب معيشته أو في نشاطه السياسي والاجتماعي، ولكن هناك في المقابل من يضع منافع الشخصية أولاً ولو على حساب الحق ومصالح الناس. ويتميز جميع هؤلاء وينكشف معدنهم عندما يستفحل الظلم وتنتهك الأعراض أو تسفك الدماء، فعندها إما أن يكون من شيعة الحسين بمواقفه وتضحياته، أو أن يكون من شيعة آل سفيان. ولذلك فإن معركة مثل كربلاء ضرورية لتكشف كل إنسان أمام نفسه وأمام الآخرين. يقول الحسين (ع): "الناس عبيد الدنيا، والدين لعق على السنتهم، يحوطونه ما درت معاشيتهم، فإذا محصوا بالبلاء قل الديانون."

which made God's wealth [i.e., natural resources] into a state, and enslaved the people"—all this he equated to the contemporary Āl Khalīfa "ruling gang" that plunders Bahrain and which claims to rule on the same basis of hereditary succession. Neither state, he said, "was founded around a single person but rather around a gang bound by tribal or familial 'aṣabiyyah,'⁷⁸ [one] that uses bribery and intimidation to gain support and allegiance from the self-interested," then, this support secured, "dominates [its] subjects by force." This is true to such an extent, he continued, "that the son of the Prophet's daughter [al-Ḥusayn] left Medina and then Mecca fearful because he refused the political oath [of Yazīd]," and left with "no supporter and no certainty ... was murdered, and the women from *ahl al-bayt* taken captive." A state such as this, he concluded, "chose not to accept conciliation and compromise, and thus there is no use but to uproot [it]: and al-Ḥusayn's own sacrifices as well as those of his family were the means of uprooting that state, of overthrowing the gang running it, even if [it took awhile]."

He arrived finally at what the listeners had been anticipating the entire night. "The ruling gang in Bahrain," he boomed, "is embodied in the 'Supreme Defense Council' comprised of fourteen of the elites from the ruling family, and they are: the king, the crown prince, the prime minister, the royal court minister, and others of the top ministers and officials" from the ruling family. Among them, he said, "there are not any national sons [*abnā' al-waṭan*] from the Sunna or the Shi'a, as they don't trust anyone but themselves. And since the establishment of this council there have issued from it all of the conspiracies hatched against the people."⁷⁹ All of these "conspiracies" we need not revisit at length. Suffice it to say that al-Khawājah was careful not to omit any of them: the appropriation and gifting of lands (especially seaside lands) by the Āl Khalīfa; al-Bandar's report and "the strategy of sectarian cleansing" that it revealed,

⁷⁸ *عصبية*: 14th-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn's notion of "group feeling" borne of tribal co-sanguinity. Cf. *Al-Muqaddimah*, I, 234. For a modern application see SALAMÉ 1990, which analyzes the central role of 'aṣabiyyah in the unification of the Arabian Najd under Āl Sa'ūd.

⁷⁹ The corresponding, somewhat abridged text is:

ان العصابة الاموية التي استأثرت بالحكم، وجعلته عضوا: ينتقل في اسرة واحدة من الاب الى الابن، والتي نجت الفئى والاراضي وجعلت مال الله دولا، واستعبدت الناس وجعلتهم خولا ومستعبدين، هذه الدولة لم تكن تقوم على شخص واحد وانما عصابة تربطها العصبية القبلية والاسرية، وتستعين بالرشوة والتخويف لكسب المناصرة والولاء من اصحاب المصالح. فتسيطر على العباد بالقهر، الى درجة ان يخرج ابن بنت رسول الله خائفا من المدينة ثم من مكة لانه يرفض المبايعه السياسية، ولا يجد ناصرا ولا معينا، ثم يقتل وتسيى النساء من اهل بيت النبي (ص). مثل هذه الدولة احتارت ان لا تقبل المهادنة والحلول الوسط، لذلك لا ينفع فيها الا الاقتلاع، فكانت تضحية الحسين بنفسه وعياله هي الوسيلة لاقتلاع تلك الدولة، والاطاحة بالعصابة التي تديرها ولو بعد حين.

ان العصابة الحاكمة في البحرين تتمثل في 'مجلس الدفاع الأعلى' الذي يتكون من اربعة عشر شخصا من كبار العائلة الحاكمة، وهم الملك وولي العهد ورئيس الوزراء ووزير الديوان وغيرهم من كبار الوزراء والمسؤولين من الاسرة الحاكمة، وليس بينهم اي من ابناء الوطن من السنة او الشيعة، فهم لا يتقون باحد سوى انفسهم. ومنذ انشاء هذا المجلس تم فيه اقرار جميع المؤامرات التي دبرت ضد الشعب.

including of course the related program of political naturalization; the use of “tens of thousands of mercenaries from various [countries]” that “violate the sanctity of our homes and of our mosques”; and abuses of human rights and the use of torture in dealing with political activists, among whom he named one who had been recently killed in a confrontation with riot police. For all such offenses and humiliations perpetrated by the ruling Āl Khalifa gang, he directed, “the primary order must be to bring it down from power by all means of peaceful civil resistance, and by the willingness to suffer sacrifices for the sake of it, just as the result of the sacrifices of al-Ḥusayn was to bring down the ‘Umayyad gang from power.” To this end, he continued, “there must be a coordination of efforts, a putting aside of sectarian and factional differences, and an avoidance of supporting the regime’s institutions or participating in them.” For, he said, “we are the generation of anger and sacrifice, and from our sacrifices will come a generation that assumes the responsibility of selecting the system of government that suits it, [one] far from injustice, corruption, and sectarian discrimination.”⁸⁰

He ended his long oration with a poem:

حين طالب الحر بن يزيد الرياحي إمامنا الحسين بأن يرجع من حيث أتى والّا فإنه مقتول — كما اننا ربما نقول
مقتولين — ردّد الحسين قائلاً:

When al-Ḥurr bin Yazīd al-Riyāḥī⁸¹ demanded of our Imām al-Ḥusayn to go back whence he came or else be killed—just as we perhaps may be killed—al-Ḥusayn answered, saying,

سأمضي وما بالموت عار على الفتى إذا مانوى خيراً وجاهد مسلماً

I will go on, and death is no shame for a man, / if he sought the good and struggled [jāhid] as a Muslim,

وواسى الرجال الصالحين بنفسه وفارق مذموماً وخالف مجرمًا

consoled the righteous through himself, / and died where he was cursed and in dispute with a criminal.

⁸⁰ The corresponding text, considerably abridged, reads:

لذلك ففي مقابل استراتيجية التطهير والاقصاء، من السذاجة السياسية الاكتفاء بطرح مطالب الإصلاح الجزئي، والاستمرار على البيعة السياسية لهذه العصابة التي لا يضبطها مبدأ أو دين أو أخلاق. ولا يمكن مواجهة سياسة الالغاء والتطهير الا بشعار اسقاط العصابة الظالمة الطائفية. ازاء هذه العصابة المنتهكة للحريات والحقوق، الممارسة للتعذيب، الفاسدة والناهية للاموال العامة وللاراضي، لا بد ان يكون المطلب الرئيسي هو اسقاطها من الحكم بكل وسائل المقاومة المدنية السلمية، والاستعداد لبذل التضحية في سبيل ذلك، وهكذا فقد كانت نتيجة تضحية الحسين (ع) اسقاط العصابة الاموية من نظام الحكم. وفي سبيل ذلك لا بد من تنسيق الجهود، ونبذ الاختلاف الطائفي والفتوي، وتجنب دعم مؤسسات النظام أو المشاركة فيها.

ان النهضة ضد الظلم واجبة لذاتها، وان من سيحكم بدل هؤلاء العصابة قد لا يكون من بين من هم موجودين في هذا الجيل، فان كل من يؤمنون بالحقوق والحريات في هذا الوطن ليس امامهم ان ينشغلوا بالتفكير في غنائم او حكم، بل في العمل على قطع جذور حكم هذه العصابة من الارض الطاهرة، فنحن جيل الغضب والتضحية، ومن تضحيتنا سيأتي جيل يتحمل مسؤولية اختيار نظام الحكم الذي يناسبه، بعيدا عن الظلم والفساد والتمييز الطائفي.

⁸¹ A son of Yazīd and one of his military commanders. According to the Shi‘i account, al-Ḥurr was charged with obstructing al-Ḥusayn’s passage near al-Kūfah but instead was convinced of his cause and defected to his side.

أقدم نفسي لا أريد بقاءها لتلقى خميساً في العراء عرمرماً

I offer up myself; I do not wish to stay / to receive on Thursday a colossal host in the desert.

فإن عشت لم ألم ... وإن مت لم أذم كفى بك ذلاً أن تعيش مرغماً

For should I live I wouldn't be pained, and should I die I wouldn't be blamed. / It is humiliation enough to be forced to live.

These final words⁸² were met with chants of “Let’s bring down the ruling gang!” and, though more muted, “Death to Āl Khalīfa!”

Thus al-Khawājah’s address in the early morning on the tenth of Muḥarram, attended by perhaps a thousand listeners from all over Bahrain, from Manama as well as the various Shi’a villages, appeared by all measures to be nothing short of a call to arms against the ruling Āl Khalīfa in the very image of Ḥusayn’s rebellion that culminated in 680 AD. Indeed, as one commentator says of the online video of the speech, “People, / This guy’s calling for civil war. / Stupid and *ḥarām*. / It’s *ḥarām* for a Muslim to kill his Muslim brother. / Of course, he’d go and say that they were unbelievers [*kuffār*; i.e., Sunnis].”⁸³ Yet beneath this religious imagery and bombast lies a much more measured policy prescription: political and “psychological” detachment from the state, a coordinated rejection of “the regime’s institutions” in both word and in deed. The “sacrifices” of which al-Khawājah speaks are, in contrast with the overall tone of the speech, quite pragmatic and modest. The “Ḥusaynīs,” he says, are those who “put principle and values first” even if it interferes with their immediate material self-interest, as the aim of “earning a living” is no excuse to become “involved with the oppressor.” The false Shi’i, on the other hand—the Shi’i of Yazīd—is he “who puts his own [economic or political] self-interest first, even at the expense of what is right and true.” In sum, to combat a regime “that uses bribery and intimidation to gain support and allegiance from the self-interested,” individuals must resist the temptations of money and power, which are offered only at the expense of their ethical principles and political freedom. For the state, as expressed to me by another of Bahrain’s prominent (and now jailed) Shi’i critics, possesses “a bait for every fish.”⁸⁴

⁸² For additional emphasis the conclusion of the second line—“in dispute with a criminal”—was augmented by the interjection: “a criminal that is in the palace; the criminals that are [living] in the palaces!”

⁸³ Cf. *supra*, note 72. The comment is written in colloquial Sunni dialect:

“يا ناس / هالإنسان يطالب بحرب أهلية / غباء وحرام / حرام المسلم يقتل أخيه المسلم / طبعاً أهو يبطلع ويقول أنهم كفار.”

⁸⁴ Interview with ‘Abd al-Jalīl al-Singace, April 2009. The political spokesman of the al-Ḥaqq Movement, al-Singace is among Bahrain’s most identifiable opposition figures. In August 2010 he was arrested upon his return from a British parliamentary session on human rights in Bahrain, accused of heading a “terrorist network.” Cf. *supra*, note 53.

The Clerics Speak: Religious Authority and Political Participation in Bahrain

When I later had the chance to speak with ‘Abd al-Hādī—some four months later, that is, after his release from prison by royal pardon—he would indeed emphasize this need for ordinary Shi‘is to avoid political cooptation. For the Āl Khalīfa, he said, the problem is

just one of demographics, and how that translates into politics. In a democratic system the Āl Khalīfa could not continue in power, so the goal is to preclude the emergence of such a system, or to co-opt enough Shi‘a so that they have an outlet for political participation without really challenging the status quo.⁸⁵

With the commencement of King Ḥamad’s supposed political reform project, he continued, “The government attempted to co-opt as many Shi‘a as possible but knew that some would reject the elections and parliament and pursue other means to influence politics. So for these people the government had another tactic: crackdown and harsh treatment.” Hence his own arrest, he said, and those of the other 178 activists alongside whom he was pardoned.⁸⁶

The institutional manifestation of this effort at a wholesale Shi‘a boycott of the state apparatus is, since its 2006 split from al-Wifāq, the al-Ḥaqq Movement. Indeed, as mentioned before, the movement’s entire *raison d’être* is its continued rejection of the parliament and electoral process in the wake of al-Wifāq’s decision to join in the 2006 vote. One of its main rallying cries, appropriately, is the slogan: “This isn’t the parliament we asked for!” which still decorates the walls of many a Shi‘a village. The movement, however, suffers from one critical organizational disadvantage compared to its rival al-Wifāq: though it enjoys a large grassroots following as well as the charismatic leadership of Ḥasan al-Mushaima‘, a founding member of al-Wifāq and popular hero of the 1990s *intifāḍah*, it makes no claim to religious authority. Al-Wifāq, on the other hand, is led politically by its well-respected Secretary General Sh. ‘Alī

⁸⁵ Personal interview, Bahrain, April 2009.

⁸⁶ These pardons by the king set off what might be termed a mild media controversy. Though glad to see the release of so many political detainees, most Shi‘a cynically chalked up the gesture to Bahrain’s fast-approaching Formula One race, whose foreign spectators were unlikely to be impressed at the sight of thousands of protestors along the main highways leading to the track. Sunnis, for their part, were largely critical of the leniency shown to these troublemakers, with some even sensing dissension within the Āl Khalīfa ranks. One Sunni member of parliament with whom I spoke said that the prime minister, the king’s uncle, personally opposed the action, as did the Saudis, whom the latter visited the very day before the pardons. According to this conspiratorial account, the Saudi king had also made his displeasure known by sending a secret message to King Ḥamad, and then by temporarily halting the passage of 300 semi trucks bound for Bahrain at the Saudi side of the causeway. Interview with ‘Isā Abū al-Faṭḥ, Bahrain, April 2009. See “عفو ملكي عن 178 محكوماً بقضايا أمنية وسياسية ... والبحرين تبهج” [“A Royal Pardon of 178 Convicted on Security- and Political-related Cases ... and Bahrain Rejoices”], 2009, *Al-Wasaf*, Issue 2416, April 18, p. 9. Available at: <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/data/2009/2416/pdf/all.pdf>>.

Salmān, who studied in Qom from 1987 to 1992 and thereafter “assiduously frequented the circles of [the late ranking cleric of Bahrain] ‘Abd al-Amir al-Jamri” (LOUËR 2008, 237). What is more, al-Wifāq is widely assumed to have the tacit support of Bahrain’s two highest-ranking clerics today, Sh. ʿĪsā Qāsim and S. ‘Abdallāh al-Ghurayfī, who are said to be its spiritual leaders.

This disadvantage would reveal itself in dramatic fashion in the run-up to the 2006 elections. Having already made the decision to take part, the leaders of al-Wifāq were faced with a vocal opposition in the newly-splintered al-Ḥaqq, which was redoubling its call for a unified Shi’a boycott of the powerless and unilaterally-imposed parliament. It was at this decisive moment that al-Wifāq fell back on its main asset: its claim to represent the religious line. Already backed by Bahrain’s Shi’a leaders, al-Wifāq conceived the idea of obtaining the added support of Iraqi cleric Ayatallāh ‘Alī al-Sistānī, whose role in mobilizing the Shi’a for his country’s 2005 elections had been instrumental and well-publicized. His intervention in the case of Bahrain, the leaders of al-Wifāq reasoned, would be equally effective, not least as it would naturally call to mind the spectacular empowerment of Iraq’s Shi’a as a result of their electoral participation. So, just months before the Bahraini elections, Sh. ‘Alī Salmān (290)

declared publically that ‘Ali al-Sistani was in favor of the participation and this is hence what al-Wifaq wrote on several of its leaflets. While none of the leaders of al-Wefaq dared to say that they have received a *fatwa* from ‘Ali al-Sistani, the average Bahraini was nonetheless convinced that [he] had actually issued one in which he compelled his emulators to vote.

In fact, al-Wifaq did not dare to invoke the word *fatwā* because what it had received from the Iraqi cleric was considerably less impressive than this. Louër (292) tells that, according to al-Sistānī’s personal representative in Bahrain, “‘Ali al-Sistani answered to the solicitation of al-Wifaq in the framework of a private telephone conversation between his son, Mohammed Redha al-Sistani, and a Bahraini of al-Wifaq’s sphere whose name he did not mention.” The conversation, moreover, “was not meant to be made public,” a fact which led al-Sistānī’s envoy in Bahrain to compose a public communiqué only weeks before the elections clarifying that while “His Excellency S. ‘Ali al-Sistani considers that participation is most appropriate (*aslah*),” “the point of view of His Excellency the Sayyid is not a *fatwa*, not a religiously legal ruling (*hukum shar‘i*). It is an objective assessment (*tashkhis mawdu‘i*) and anybody has the right to make his own assessment even if this leads him to boycott” (quoted in LOUËR 2008, 292-3).

Quite apart from the controversy surrounding the legal status of al-Sistānī’s advice, the leaders of al-Ḥaqq were incensed that al-Wifāq would resort to such manipulative means to

convince ordinary Shi'is to take part in the elections. Louër (290) says that in an interview with al-Mushaima', he "went as far as saying that the Shias were on the verge of committing the same mistakes as the Christians by giving too much authority to the clerics." In my own meeting with al-Ḥaqq's political spokesman, 'Abd al-Jalīl al-Singace, the *fatwā* episode was said to have "coerced [the Shi'a] to vote." But since that time, he insisted, "the past four years have shown the failure of al-Wifāq to deliver on its promises," as "the record of the authorities is that they will do what they want even if you participate" in the political process. They convinced people once, al-Singace said of al-Wifāq, "but they can't convince people now," referring to the then-upcoming 2010 election cycle.⁸⁷ But when asked about the possibility of such a backlash in 2010, two-term al-Wifāq MP Jāsim Ḥusayn responded confidently,

As for a boycott, I don't think that we will have to worry too much about that. We have backing from many religious leaders in Bahrain that call on people to vote. We met with al-Sistānī in Najaf and he supports it as well. There may be some people who boycott, but I don't think turnout will be a large problem.⁸⁸

For the proponents of total disengagement with the regime, such scheming by al-Wifāq was not to be taken lying down. Instead, Shi'a opposition leaders moved to remedy their main strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis al-Wifāq by bolstering their own religious credentials; they would fight clerical authority with clerical authority. To this end, Sh. 'Abd al-Wahhāb Ḥusayn, a powerful spiritual force behind the mid-1990s uprising whose activities landed him in prison until the amnesty of 2001, left his longtime leadership role with al-Ḥaqq sometime in 2008-2009 to organize what was initially referred to simply as "the New Movement" ("التحرك الجديد"). Later renamed the Islamic Loyalty Movement (التيار الوفاء الإسلامي) in an obvious swipe at al-Wifāq—its operative term *al-wafā'*, or "loyalty," being but one letter off from *al-wifāq*, "accord"—this new opposition faction would mimic the latter in its design, placing its political activities under the direction of a well-known religious authority in Sh. 'Abd al-Jalīl al-Miqdād, who, if he hardly stood up to Sh. 'Isā Qāsim as few could, at least commanded a significant following in the southern part of the country, where both he and 'Abd al-Wahhāb Ḥusayn resided. As Sh. 'Abd al-Wahhāb would explain at his home in the village of Nuwaidrāt, whereas al-Ḥaqq was limited to being a political movement led by "the old guard," al-Wafā' could be a "total movement"—"religious, political, and societal"—precisely because it had a "Qur'ānic basis" inasmuch as it was directed by "religious leaders." Wa'ad head Ebrāhīm Sharīf, speaking of

⁸⁷ Personal interview, Bahrain, May 2009.

⁸⁸ Personal interview, Bahrain, April 2009.

Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, was even more direct in his description: the movement, said Sharīf, was explicitly designed to be “*sharī‘ah*-compliant” so that it “will be able to counter criticism from al-Wifāq that the other Shi‘a movements, like al-Ḥaqq, have no legitimate religious basis, such as that that Sh. ‘Īsā Qāsim gives to al-Wifāq.”⁸⁹

The motivating fear of Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, like that pervading al-Khawājah’s ‘Āshūrā’ polemic and that revealed by al-Singace in his remark about the government’s “bait for every fish,” is political co-option. At the time of writing, al-Ḥaqq and al-Wafā’ remain the only two Bahrain-based Shi‘a opposition political groups⁹⁰ that have yet to conform to the country’s amended Political Associations Law of 2005, which requires all political societies to register for approval by the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs.⁹¹ During the most recent drive for general registration in preparation for the 2010 elections, leaders of the two groups continued their conspicuous defiance of this process despite being called upon personally to meet with the minister himself, Sh. Khālīd bin ‘Alī Āl Khalīfa. “Sometimes,” Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb told me, “the government sends a message to the [unregistered and therefore “illegal”] opposition that it’s prepared to allow them to play by its rules and become co-opted. But, if it refuses, the government will play without any red lines and will stop at no immoral practices” in its fight against them. By way of illustration he claimed that the Bahraini king has met some top opposition figures, most notably al-Mushaima’, “more than once,” most recently in 2008 in London, where the former, as Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb put it, “wished to see if they were ready to talk.” Yet the meeting, he continued, “was not for talk but for cooptation like al-Wifāq,” and when al-Mushaima’ refused the authorities “decided to punish him” by cracking down on opposition activities from late 2008 to early 2009, an offensive that as we have already seen ended with a mass pardon in mid-April 2009.⁹² Yet this, it turned out, was only the beginning. In August 2010, al-Mushaima’, al-Singace, and much of the leadership of al-Ḥaqq and al-Wafā’ were newly arrested, this time charged under Bahrain’s nebulous “Protecting Society from Terrorist Acts” legislation of 2006. Pardoned en masse in February 2011 in an attempt to quell protests, they would be rearrested only weeks later along with the rest of Bahrain’s opposition leaders—including Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Sh. Al-Miqdād, al-Khawājah, and Ebrāhīm Sharīf—to stand trial before a closed military tribunal. All but Sharīf were sentenced to life in prison.

⁸⁹ Personal interviews, Bahrain, April and May 2009.

⁹⁰ The aforementioned London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement is the other. Cf. *supra*, note 46.

⁹¹ See “Bahrain’s Controversial Political Associations Law,” 2005, *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Available at: <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=21150>>.

⁹² Personal interview, Bahrain, May 2009.

We now approach our goal of illustrating the decisive role of religious authority in influencing the course of political action taken by ordinary Bahrainis. We have seen that this role, over and above the separate if also powerful *symbolic* role of religion as represented in the ‘Āshūrā’ ritual of Shi‘ism, is of itself undefined, malleable according to the ends of those making use of it and limited only by the degree of respect afforded those who exercise it. If al-Wifāq wishes to convince its constituents of the right of voting, here we have Sh. ‘Alī Salmān, Sh. ‘Īsā Qāsim, or indeed S. ‘Alī al-Sīstānī himself. If the proponents of regime boycott should wish the opposite, here we have an entire new organization in al-Wafā’ designed just for the purpose, headed by religious authorities in their own right. All of this of course is very well served by the Shi‘a doctrine of the *marja‘iyyah*, which accords every individual the right to choose his own source of religious emulation. Is it, though, a distinctly Shi‘a phenomenon, a product only of the modalities of the exercise of religious authority inherent to Shi‘ism?

It would seem not. In fact, it would seem that the notorious incident of the al-Sīstānī *fatwā*, or non-*fatwā* as the case may be, was only following precedent set four years earlier by the Sunni groups that agreed to participate in the 2002 elections boycotted by al-Wifāq. At that time, the previously-noted head of al-Aṣḥāh, Sh. ‘Ādal al-Ma‘āwdah, “referred to Sunni religious authorities in Saudi Arabia to obtain the edict that allowed him and other Sunnis to vote and run in the elections.”⁹³ “Entering the parliament is not a religious act,” he had said, “but it becomes a must when there is a need to counter probable harm”: and “abandoning the stage to ‘miscreants’ who would enact or pass laws incompatible with religious values would amount to a passive participation in propagating evil.” While we cannot be certain what exactly is implied in this “probable harm,” and whether the “miscreants” al-Ma‘āwdah had in mind were Shi‘is, leftists, liberals, women’s rights advocates, or just plain non-Salafis, it is reasonable to think that the prospect of a Shi‘a-controlled parliament, however far-fetched given their official boycott, could not have been entirely absent. Neither can we be sure that the Sunni participation was not the result of governmental pressure (as we have witnessed already in the passage of the Sunni Family Law), in order to preserve some semblance of legitimacy for an election already spurned by more than one-half of Bahrain’s population. Whatever the truth, it is clear that the Shi‘a are not the only Bahrainis to exploit the influence of religious authorities for specific political ends, a fact that earns a sardonic reproach even from the *Gulf News* writer

⁹³ Habib Toumi, 2006, “Religious fatwas used to explain poll participation,” *Gulf News*, November 21. Available at: <<http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/religious-fatwas-used-to-explain-poll-participation-1.266432>>. All subsequent quotations originate from this source.

of the article quoted here, a Tunisian who cannot help but lament “the increasing significance that religious statements from foreign-based scholars are playing in Bahrain’s polls.” He mocks,

They have become so important that many parliament hopefuls did not have the slightest hesitation to invite religious figures to deliver lectures at their campaign tents.

Suddenly Bahrain has become a favourite destination for eminent scholars who [deliver] lectures that [have] nothing to do with the candidates’ electoral platforms.

Thus is the electoral politics of Bahrain: while Shi’a opponents are worried that their participation would be tantamount to state co-option, Sunnis are concerned lest their *non*-participation should allow a Shi’a takeover. In this way the electoral dynamic simply mirrors that of society’s larger ethnic division, in that substantive questions of policy and resource allocation—the stuff of “candidates’ electoral platforms”—are superseded by fundamental disagreement over the legitimacy of the actual institutions themselves, a question that turns around the ethnic balance of power enshrined therein. Sunnis have come to see in the extant electoral and parliamentary structure a system that, even if it does provide a forum for Shi’a frustrations, at bottom preserves the status quo. Their participation in it, therefore, is not on account of any real enthusiasm, but is essentially negative, out of the “need to counter probable harm”—i.e., to forestall change. And while al-Wifāq has succeeded in convincing many Shi’is that the material rewards of participation outweigh their moral opposition to the system—with the help of course of some well-timed if dubious religious prodding of its own—it remains to be seen whether its constituency will continue to agree that this calculation has been borne out by parliamentary experience, or if the warning of al-Singace will instead prove accurate: that al-Wifāq duped the Shi’a before, to recall his words, “but they can’t convince people now.”

Conclusion: Assessing the Determinants of Individual Political Opinion and Action in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf *Rentier* States

With constant reference to the case of Bahrain, this chapter has sought to illustrate in systematic fashion the limitations of the extant *rentier* state framework under conditions of ethnic division, considering in turn each of the mechanisms said to work in rent-dependent nations toward the attainment and preservation of popular political acquiescence. It was seen in the first place that, in societies divided by ethnic rivalry such as describes three of the six Gulf monarchies, the typical, individual-oriented politics assumed to operate in allocative states, wherein citizens compete against each other *qua* citizens for greater individual shares of state benefits, does

not obtain. In its place is a group-based politics of ethnicity marked by two broadly-defined classes competing not merely over relative benefit allocations but over the very character of the nation itself: its history and cultural identity; the bases of citizenship; and the conditions for inclusion in public service. One's political involvement in the ethnically-contested *rentier* state is thus not limited by the acquisition of tangible (i.e., economic) goods but is influenced crucially by the pursuit of intangible goods tied to one's group: its relative status in society, its relative power as enshrined in state institutions, and its relative access to the ruling elite.

Next we examined the extent to which this higher-than-expected political involvement among ordinary Gulf citizens may be assuaged by the pressure-releasing levers supposed to be at the disposal of the *rentier* state since its description some thirty years ago. These, of course, are its inordinate capacity for public employment and its ability to forego taxation of the vast majority of citizens. Later theorists have added to the list repression by rent-funded police and intelligence services, which as we shall perceive shortly is actually just a stronger version of the non-taxation argument. In ethnically-divided Bahrain, we first observed, the public employment mechanism is neutralized as a tool for political co-optation because Shi'a citizens, for fears about state security and their possible support of or even direct collusion in the regional ambitions of Iran, are disproportionately excluded from the civil service and all but disqualified from police and military service, precluding three of the leading public employers in any *rentier* state. As the Bahraini minister for commerce and industry revealingly asserted, "Sometimes, for good reasons, you have to be careful who you employ." In this case, such Iranophobic paranoia comes at the expense of many thousands of Bahraini Shi'a who might otherwise have been made into regime allies, such foregone co-optation due to lack of trust or outright suspicion being a central feature of the ethnically-contested *rentier* state.

We then considered the second ostensive political advantage of the *rentier* state, its capacity for non-taxation, which in Bahrain we found to perform equally poorly in winning friends of the ruling family from among its would-be political opponents. More precisely, we found that the case of Bahrain gives reason to question the idea that taxation and demands for political representation should go hand in hand in the Arab monarchies *à la* the institutional economics account of eighteenth-century Western Europe. Historically, we noted, the pre-oil Bahraini state did levy several forms of tax, most all of them on the Shi'a, while the latter did not on that account dare to make any claim to reciprocal political privileges. Indeed, their mere support of the British initiative to modernize this feudal system was enough to spark

attacks on Shi'a villages and island-wide ethnic rioting. If one should point as a counter-example to Crystal's (1986) well-known study of the evolution of political authority in post-oil Qatar and Kuwait, we noted further, the difference is that in these cases the taxed party was a cohesive and very wealthy merchant class that constituted a formidable political rival. Compare this to a vanquished ethnic out-group indentured to labor in independent agricultural fiefdoms.

Yet quite apart from this historical objection, we continued moreover, the argument about non-taxation is unsatisfying theoretically. Rather than explain what we would indeed like to understand—the circumstances under which citizens incline toward the political—it merely elaborates one specific situation wherein they are more likely to do so: namely, when they demand to oversee the usage of their taxed income. And even this positive conclusion is obscured by the double-negative contained in the usual articulation of the argument, which posits simply: people will *not* seek a role in decisionmaking if they are *not* taxed. Accordingly we expounded two alternative causes of political inclination in the *rentier* state, two other likely influences of political opinion and action among ordinary Gulf Arabs apart from economics. These are, appropriately, ethnicity and religion.

First, we said, recalling the previous discussion, the competition between Sunnis and Shi'is is not limited to the tangible, to material goods, but encompasses too the intangible. As one Bahraini parliamentarian tellingly admitted, even if all citizens were rich, there would remain “the issue of how things should be divided within the society between Shi'a and Sunna,” things in addition to wealth per se such as status, influence, and participation in governance. For in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution and more recently the inadvertent empowerment of Iraq's Shi'a majority, Shi'a populations across the Arab world have been increasingly forceful in their demands for greater authority, an activism that in turn serves only to mobilize their Sunni counterparts who, in order to combat a perceived growth in Shi'a (and, by association, Iranian) influence—in order, as al-Ma'āwdah says, “to counter probable harm”—organize themselves as a political counterweight to domestic Shi'aization and Iranian expansionism. Citizen interest in political participation thus becomes not a function of material well-being as per *rentier* assumptions, but one of ethnic identification and regional power struggles.

The other key source of political inspiration in the Gulf *rentier* state, we went on, is religion itself, such inspiration being of two types. The first is inherent to Islam itself, to its very history, disputed succession, and resultant political-*cum*-religious division. In emphasizing their unrelenting partisanship of *ahl al-bayt* and the hereditary line of the Prophet, the Shi'a

continue to invoke historical claims to political rule rooted in the very origins of Islam. The immortalization of these poignant episodes of political betrayal and sacrifice in the annual ritual of ‘Āshūrā’, with its evocative passion plays, street processions, and self-flagellation, ensures that no one, Sunni or Shi‘i, will soon forget the lesson of Sh. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Ḥusayn, that “the history of Shi‘ism is the history of opposition against Sunni powers.” The tension stirred up during this month of Muḥarram, utilized to good effect by al-Khawājah in his rant against the “ruling gang” of Āl Khalīfa as it was by Khomeini against the Shah, is a political springboard to rival any other today. That it would be difficult to remedy such deep-seated grievances simply by making the Shi‘a rich, or by not taxing them, goes without saying.

The second way that religion may be put to political service in the *rentier* state is less specific to Islam, applicable anywhere the word of religious leaders is taken as authoritative in political matters. As exemplified in the Bahraini debate over electoral boycott, the shrewd exercise of religious authority for finite political ends can be a powerful if unpredictable influence over individual opinion and behavior. We observed how there was no shortage of religious guidance and even binding edicts for anyone looking to convince the multitude of its political duty, whether that be electoral participation along with al-Wifāq; electoral boycott and total disengagement from the regime *à la* al-Khawājah, al-Ḥaqq, and al-Wafā’; or participation by Sunnis precisely over against the former two groups, out of the “need to counter probable harm” that would come by “abandoning the stage to ‘miscreants.’” Just as the Bahraini regime has “a bait for every fish,” as al-Singace says, so too do the country’s religious leaders possess a *fatwā* to back every political orientation, and they are not shy in employing them.

In short, then, the thesis that *rentier* citizens will be less inclined to make political demands on their governments because they do not pay taxes is most problematic in that it makes the implicit assumption that, absent an economic one, there is no other basis upon which such demands might possibly be made. “In the end,” Luciani tells us in Chapter 2 (23-24), “there is always little or no objective ground to claim that one should get more [state] benefits,” so for the one unhappy with his share “the solution of manoeuvring for personal advantage within the existing setup is always superior to seeking an alliance with others in similar conditions.” Of this someone may wish to inform the Bahrainis, seemingly lacking in objectivity, for whom politics is no less than the exact opposite of this description, tied inextricably to alliances “with others in similar conditions”—“conditions” not, as Luciani had in mind, synonymous with economic circumstances, but rather the societal conditions of ethnicity and religion—and this

not “within the existing setup” but precisely in order to influence, to alter, or to defend “the existing setup” according to one’s loyalties and perceived group interests.

From here, finally, we can easily see why repression⁹⁴ as an explanation of individual political behavior in the *rentier* state suffers from the same flaw as the non-taxation thesis. The only difference is scale: political activism despite non-taxation simply implies that one is moved to engage in politics by something other than strictly economic concerns. Although this does fly contrary to *rentier* assumptions, it is certainly common enough, as illustrated throughout the present chapter. But in the case of breakdown of the “repression thesis,” that a citizen is so motivated by religious or political ideals that he is willing to risk life and limb by engaging in activities in defiance of the state; in defiance of, for example, laws banning “unauthorized demonstrations,” as exist in Bahrain and elsewhere in the Arab Gulf—in such a case, the same underlying force operates but at a higher threshold. Thus to explain the failure of the repression mechanism is to explain a stronger case of the failure of the non-taxation mechanism: as scholars of capital punishment might attest, citizens often simply are not deterred by threats of repercussions, whether physical or economic. Witness the hundreds who since 2003 have died annually in Iraq, braving attack while attending ‘Āshūrā’ commemorations in Karbalā’; those Shi’a who, despite the assurance of physical reprisal by the Saudi *muṭawwa’in*, sneak away during the Ḥājj ceremony to pray at *jannat al-baqī’*, the revered burial site of the Prophet’s daughter and four Shi’i Imāms; and the several dozen would-be Bahraini revolutionaries killed in standoffs with riot police and indeed army infantry since February 14, 2011.

No one will deny that the Gulf regimes maintain incommensurably large and well-equipped militaries and intelligence services; that these are funded by rents from oil and gas resources; and that their use on the domestic front to repress political opponents, not rarely in brutal fashion, probably equals or exceeds their use as deterrents to foreign aggression. Yet when ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Khawājah, after already having spent some two decades in exile and in prison, can stand in the streets of Manama and call for the overthrow of the Āl Khalīfa “by all means of peaceful civil resistance, and by the willingness to suffer sacrifices for the sake of it, just as the result of the sacrifices of al-Ḥusayn was to bring down the ‘Umayyad gang from power”—when such a one is prepared to take this action with the knowledge that

⁹⁴ As discussed in Chapter 2, notes 2 and 21, this argument dates to Skocpol’s (1982) work on Iran. It is thereafter taken up in GAUSE 1995, CLARK 1998, and FEARON 2005 and is tested along with many others by ROSS (2001; 2008; 2009). Finally, it receives extensive treatment by Fearon and Laitin (2005), who appeal to repression to explain the incidence (or non-incidence) of civil war in countries heavily-reliant upon primary commodity export rents.

arrest and probable bodily harm will not be too far away, then it is clear that “repression” as an explainer of political behavior in the *rentier* state must be weighed against the countervailing power of individuals to suffer and indeed embrace sacrifice for the sake of a political cause.

At the most elementary level, then, what is required to disarm the extant *rentier* state framework is to show that there are specific, not uncommon circumstances under which everyday citizens of rent-dependent nations will be motivated politically by something other than or in addition to their wallets. With this examination of ethnic conflict in Bahrain we have given substance to the theoretical account of Chapter 2 that explains when and why one might expect this to be the case, depicting in detail the way that a group politics of ethnicity and religion can come to overwhelm the normal *rentier* politics of patronage and individualized struggles for material self-interest assumed to operate universally in the Arab Gulf states. For a more stringent empirical analysis of these central claims, we turn now to the next chapter, which introduces the first-ever study of the popular political orientations of ordinary Bahraini citizens, informed by a mass survey of the country that I carried out between January and May 2009.

Notes for Chapter 3

- Abū al-Faṭḥ, ʿĪsā Aḥmad. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. April 19.
- Aḥmad, Dr. ʿAlī. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. May 14.
- Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. 2009. "Banning one of the Most Significant Historic Books in the History of Bahrain." 25 May. Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/en/node/3105>>.
- Bahry, Louay. 1997. "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?" *Middle East Policy* 5(2): 42-57.
- . 2000. "The Socio-economic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11(3): 129-143.
- Bandar, Sālah al-. 2006. "البحرين: الخيار الديمقراطي وآليات الإقصاء" ["Bahrain: The Choice of Democracy and the Machinery of Exclusion"]. Unpublished report. Gulf Centre for Democratic Development. Available at: <<http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/albandar.pdf>>.
- Belgrave, Charles. 1960. *The Pirate Coast*. Beirut: Librarie du Liban.
- . 1972. *Personal Column*. Beirut: Librarie du Liban.
- Burke, Edward. 2008. "Bahrain: Reaching a Threshold," Working Paper 61, presented at *El Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE)*, Madrid, June 5. Available at: <<http://www.fride.org/publication/452/bahrain-reaching-a-threshold.html>>
- Darwish, Adeed. 1999. "Rebellion in Bahrain." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 3(1): 84-87.
- Fakhro, Munira. 1997. "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment." In Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds. *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays on Politics, Economy, Security, and Religion*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Holes, Clive. 2005. "Dialect and National Identity: The Cultural Politics of Self-Representation in Bahraini *Musalsalāt*." In Paul Dresch and James Piscatori, eds. *Monarchies and Nations: Globalization and Identity in the Arab States of the Gulf*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Ḥusayn, Sh. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. May 31.
- Ḥusayn, Jāsim. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. April 16.
- Khalaf, Abdulhadi. 2000. "The New Amir of Bahrain: Marching Sideways." *Civil Society* 9(100): 6-13.

- . 2008. "The Outcome of a Ten-Year Process of Political Reform in Bahrain." *Arab Reform Brief* N° 24. Available at: <[http://arab-reform.net /spip.php?article1748](http://arab-reform.net/spip.php?article1748)>.
- Khalifa, Sha. Mai bint Muḥammad Āl. 1999. من سواد الكوفة إلى البحرين: القرامطة من فكرة إلى دولة [From the Surroundings of Kufa to Bahrain: The Carmathian, from an Idea to a State]. Beirut: The Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing.
- . 2000. شارلز بلجريف: السيرة والمذكرات [Charles Belgrave: Biography and Diary]. Beirut: The Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing.
- Khawājah, ‘Abd al-Hādī al-. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. April 29.
- Louër, Laurence. 2008. *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marzūq, Khalīl al-. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. April 30.
- Peterson, J.E. 2002. "Bahrain's First Reforms under Amir Hamad." *Asian Affairs* 33(2): 216-227.
- . 2004. "Bahrain: The 1994-1999 Uprising," *Arabian Peninsula Background Note*, N° APBN-002. Available at: <www.JEPeterson.net>.
- . 2008. "The Promise and Reality of Bahraini Reforms." In Joshua Teitelbaum, ed. *Political Liberalization in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Qambar, Sāmy. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. May 17.
- Sa‘īdī, Sh. Jāsim Aḥmad al-. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. May 14.
- Sharīf, Ebrāhīm. 2009. Personal interview. Bahrain. May 11.
- Wright, S. M. 2008. "Fixing the Kingdom: Political Evolution and Socio-Economic Challenges in Bahrain." Doha: Center for International and Regional Studies.