

The Narrative of Resistance

by Anne Hagood

The protests in Bahrain reflect demands for long overdue changes in a country where social and class divisions have often been formulated in sectarian terms. While in relatively homogeneous countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, protest movements have overthrown longstanding leaders and taken important steps towards political freedom, Bahrain has proven a challenging environment for change, although political unrest is nothing new there. Bahraini Shi'a, who represent 70 percent of the population and are ruled by a minority Sunni elite close to Saudi Arabia and the United States, have been in the vanguard of protest movements in the 1980s, the 1990s and again today. The Bahraini government has historically been unable or unwilling to follow through on promises of reform, exacerbating tensions and resentment in a way that resonates with other groups in the region. Attempts at political reform in 2002, when the government converted Bahrain from an emirate to what it called a constitutional monarchy, have so far failed to yield meaningful changes.

The reasons for the discrimination against the Shi'a in Bahrain are numerous and go beyond the scope of this paper. However, the discrimination certainly reflects the Bahraini government's perceptions of an existential threat from Iran and its use of identity politics to promote the notion that some Bahraini Shi'a are in fact agents of destabilization. Tensions between the sects were greatly exacerbated after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, which heightened the anxieties of Sunni Bahrainis.

Iran has a longstanding territorial claim to Bahrain, the smallest of the Gulf states, dating back to Safavid rule, which began in the 16th century. Later Iranian governments did not press the claim but the religious leaders of the Iranian revolution revived it on the grounds that the majority of the population was Shi'a. The Iranian parliament went as far as leaving two nominal seats empty for Bahraini representatives. Bahrain certainly lies on the front lines in the struggle for regional influence between Tehran and Saudi Arabia, the leading Sunni power in the region and Iran's great political rival. Saudi-Iranian relations help define broader Arab-Iranian ties and are pivotal to the security of the Gulf.

In addition, the Bahraini government has a strong relationship with the United States, another ideological rival to Iran, and receives valuable U.S. military protection. This relationship also plays a part in Tehran's narrative of the current conflict in Bahrain. Equating Saudi military intervention in Bahrain with an American threat to its own regional position, the Islamic republic proclaims a discourse of resistance and victimization in defending Bahraini Shi'a against "double standards" that reveal "the mask of deception from the face of bullying powers,"¹ while calling for peaceful resistance against the ruling Al Khalifa family.

Bahrain's own sense of national identity is undermined by the sectarian divides within Bahraini society. Most Bahraini Shi'a identify themselves as Arabs and wish to remain independent from Iran. While they certainly welcome religious and economic ties with their Iranian counterparts, the two nations are fundamentally different. The political representatives of the Bahraini Shi'a community, such as Al-Wifaq, the largest political bloc in the opposition, holds a plurality in the elected lower house of parliament, and seeks greater political influence rather than to serve Iranian ambitions. However, the Bahraini authorities remain unwilling to compromise or work with the opposition, partly because Iran would interpret any concession as an ideological victory against Saudi Arabia and the United States.

This paper looks at aspects of the conflict in Bahrain between the mainly Shi'a protest movement and the Sunni-dominated government, with particular attention to the way that Iran and newly empowered Iraqi Shi'a have adopted the cause of the protest movement, and how Iraqi sympathizers have set it in a narrative of resistance that parallels their own recent history of oppression by Sunni groups.

Longstanding Distrust in Bahrain

During the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and again in the 1990s, the Bahraini government repeatedly jailed members of Shi'a political groups that called for greater political representation, justifying such actions on the grounds of national security threats amid lingering Iranian

¹ <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/173048.html>

territorial claims over Bahrain. Bahraini Shi'a on the other hand resent the widespread suspicion among officials about their national loyalty and their ties to their coreligionists in Iraq and Iran. These suspicions stem in part from misconceptions about the relationship between Shi'a' spiritual and political leadership. They ignore the broader trend over the last two and half decades, in which the sectarian tensions in Bahrain have been driven far more by local political and social frustrations than by national religious irredentism.

Sunni Bahraini distrust of the Shi'a is partly grounded in the nature of the structure of Shi'a religious authority (marja'iyya), which transcends national boundaries. Many Bahraini Shi'a emulate clerics in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. But Ayatollahs Sistani and Hussaini Shirazi² in Iraq, for instance, are not in line with Iran's theocratic ideology, and their conception of clerical involvement in politics is more in support of electoral politics than of militant activism and the formation of an Iranian-style theocracy.

According to rough estimates, 30 percent of Bahraini Shi'a follows religious leaders who look to senior clerics in Iran for guidance. The majority look to Ayatollah Sistani, and a few to the clerics in Lebanon, especially Muhammad Fadlallah until his death last year. Bahrain's most popular Shi'a cleric is Sheikh Isa Qassim, who has occasionally endorsed the Iranian regime's doctrine of velayat-e faqih, or rule by clerics. Historically, the Shi'a in Bahrain look to their coreligionists in Iraq as a model in terms of political and social achievements.

Shi'a activism is sectarian in character and is a reflection not so much of regional or transnational aspirations but of historical processes and political life in the Islamic world. Because of the status of Shi'ism as the minority variant of Islam and its adherents' status as politically marginal or even oppressed communities in most of the states where they reside, communalism has become the most natural form of Shi'a political activism. Clearly, the current Shi'a political and social movement in Bahrain is not a transnational one, and this was made explicitly clear by protesters who marched chanting "Neither Sunni nor Shi'a but Bahraini."³

² Though an Iraqi Shi'a Marja, he resides most of the time in Qom, Iran

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12471243>

The Bahraini government's official narrative is one of defense against Iranian interference, legitimizing the military intervention by Saudi Arabia and the UAE through the GCC. Official state newspapers such as Al-Watan, which is financed by the Bahraini royal family, describe the unrest as the result of infiltration by Iran, and the opposition movements are painted as organized by political organizations and unions working for Iran⁴. These accusations serve to legitimate not only the violent repression of the protesters, but also actions such as suspending the opposition newspaper Al-Wassat⁵ and summoning its founder and board member Karim Fakhawi, who later died in custody.

In response, Iran's narrative of the uprising in Bahrain is based on anti-imperialist rhetoric and sectarian conflict, reflecting Tehran's intent to exert greater influence in a region undergoing profound political changes. While the current events in Bahrain resemble historic struggles over political and class inequalities, the focus on the sectarian narrative in this discourse is bound to heighten tensions in Bahrain and in the region, particularly in countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, where sectarian issues are already sources of conflicts and political deadlock.

In fact, the sectarian overtones have dominated the protests, leading King Hamad Al Khalifa to accuse Lebanese Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shi'a movement, of involvement, and later to suspend all flights to Iran and Iraq. Iran engaged in an acrimonious retaliation through the media as well, with its parliamentarians advocating a "military preparation" against Saudi "occupation" troops⁶.

The protesters in Bahrain selected 14 February 2011 as a day of protest to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the National Action Charter⁷. As violent clashes with police forces escalated, resulting in civilian deaths, troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates entered Bahrain on 14 March with the stated purpose of protecting essential facilities, including oil and gas installations and financial institutions. The arrival of some 2,000 troops undoubtedly fueled sectarian tensions: Al-Wifaq strongly objected to the move and denounced it as an "invasion,"

⁴ <http://www.alwatannews.net/columns.aspx?id=oR2VXKIZvN3ekOfRIy3X8Q>

⁵ <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/03/144036.html>

⁶ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/04/12/145125.html>

⁷ The National Action Charter of Bahrain is a document put forward by King Hamad ibn Isa Al Khalifah of Bahrain in 2001 in order to end the popular 1990s Uprising and return the country to constitutional rule.

whereas many Sunnis saw it as a “brotherly” intervention to restore order. Regionally, the move has been fiercely criticized by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and radical Iraqi cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.

Al-Wifaq’s rhetoric, while within a broader Shi'a eschatology, tries to maintain a broader sense of national unity by focusing on internal demands and rejecting accusations that it serves foreign interests. The party’s latest attempt to call on Kuwait to mediate the conflict reinforces this idea. Furthermore, in calling for the intervention of another GCC member to mediate and thereby offset any political and social losses that may have been inflicted by the intervention of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Al-Wifaq demonstrated political acumen. Kuwait was more likely to exert influence on the Bahraini government than Iran or Iraq as mediators. In the meantime, Iraq has taken a stance of its own, according to its own political designs.

Shi'a leaders in Iraq appeal to Muslim solidarity and present themselves as supporters of the oppressed in the Arab and Muslim worlds, while simultaneously portraying Saudi Arabia as a puppet of American and Israeli policies⁸. It was therefore no surprise when Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki and Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani warned of the possible repercussions from Saudi military intervention⁹ in Bahrain and accused the kingdom of fueling “sectarian violence,” rather than promoting political stability. Other religious leaders, such as Sheikh Abdel Mahdi Al-Karbalai, a representative of Iraq's top Shi'a religious leader, similarly aligned their religious ideology to that which views the unfolding events in Bahrain through the prism of “social injustice,” where “revolutionaries” seek “salvation from injustice and political tyranny.” Such a perspective is framed in the path of orthodox Shi'a martyrdom.

Looking to Najaf and Karbala

At the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Bahrain was already restless. Young Shi'a, jobless and resentful, echoed the demands of their coreligionists in Iraq. Revolutionary fervor gave way to democratic hope in Iraq after Sistani began to clamor for “one person, one vote,” and the Shi'a won the Iraqi elections in January 2004. As a measure of how closely Bahrainis followed Iraq, in May 2004 large crowds protested the fighting between U.S. troops and the Mahdi Army in Najaf

⁸ <http://www.alesbuyia.com/inp/view.asp?ID=25212>

⁹ <http://www.alesbuyia.com/inp/view.asp?ID=25111>

and Karbala. Most Bahraini Shi'a took to heart the example of Iraq and demanded real democracy, which would mean a transfer of power to Shi'a and not just a "House of Lords" to legitimate the Sunni monarchy. They sought what their numbers warranted, that is to rule Bahrain just as their co-sectarians were now ruling Iraq.

Noting the close link that exists between Iraqis and Bahrainis, American diplomats concerned by the growing Iranian influence in Bahrain suggested in Washington-bound cables reintegrating Iraq in the Arab fold in order to offset Iranian influence¹⁰. Iran's policy of sectarian polarization to satisfy its regional ambitions nonetheless materialized in the narrative promoted by Shi'a parties and media outlets in Iraq.

When Iraqi Shi'a cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr called for mass demonstrations in Baghdad and Basra in support of mainly Shi'a demonstrators in Bahrain a few days after the military intervention by the GCC, the discourse of solidarity "with their brothers in Bahrain" to support "innocent revolutionaries" and stop having the "blood of martyrs flowing," significantly galvanized Iraq's own Shi'a community¹¹. Notably, the use of the words "revolutionaries¹²" and "martyrs", which directly pertain to Shi'a eschatology, echo previous uprisings that have fueled identity politics in Iraq.

Enshrined in the narrative of martyrdom and jihad, Al-Sadr and his supporters appealed to popular sympathies to rally their "brothers," chanting that they were "ready to volunteer to defend the land of Bahrain." At the same time, they tried to discredit Saudi Arabia by association with Israel, carrying banners reading "Al-Saud and Israel are two sides of one coin," and "No God but Allah, Al-Saud, the enemy of God."¹³

Al-Sadr's martyrdom imagery and call for solidarity echoed a symbology used during the Islamic revolution, the Lebanese Civil War, the 1990s unrest in Bahrain, the uprising in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, the Houthis in Yemen, and now by the Bahraini demonstrators. Overall,

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/150213>

¹¹ <http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=71168>

¹²Insofar that historical and cultural symbols of Shi'ism appeal to the sentiments of the masses and have often been used by religious leadership to foment uprisings.

¹³ <http://www.alesbuyia.com/inp/view.asp?ID=25210>

Iraq remains a wild card in the settlement of the current crisis in Bahrain, mainly due to its own internal political disaccords and sectarian tensions.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Iranian influence in Iraq can be felt among the fragmented Iraqi political leadership, whether it is through Iranian proxies such as Al-Sadr or ambiguous characters such as Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri-Al-Maliki. Iran has through the years been able to increasingly exert influence in Iraq through financing political factions across the spectrum and with ideology skillfully delivered through sophisticated media and intelligence. If Iraqi Shia do not necessarily align themselves with their Iranian co-religionists, some rapprochement has definitely been made among the political elites, and the ambiguities persist.

Political Interests in Iraqi Media

The current leadership of Iraq is deeply attached to the core values of Shi'a Islam and those values are ingrained in the country's political discourse, propagated through their respective media outlets. While those values appeal to the sympathy of Muslims, especially to Shi'a, Iraqi media never mention "the Sunni government" of Saudi Arabia. Attacks on Saudi Arabia are made indirectly by associating the country with the United States and Israel, denoting a contextual objectivity¹⁴ used by numerous media outlets in Iraq, which present the story in a seemingly impartial manner that remains sensitive to local sensibilities. It is this same contextual objectivity that embodies the complex underlying arguments used by the authorities in Bahrain regarding the alleged ties of the demonstrators to Iran, blurring the lines between what the audiences perceives as objective, thereby justifying the government's subsequent actions, and what the message actually communicates. Eventually, the discursive discrepancies grow between "demonstrators," "Iranian agents," and "revolutionaries" or "martyrs."

In many ways, the media reflect the views of society at large, and since 2003 Iraq has been no exception to the rule. Deborah Amos, a correspondent for NPR, argues that in the current atmosphere of chaos and conflict "Iraq's media landscape now reflects the ethno-sectarian divide in the country."¹⁵ This fosters strife and erodes a sense of national identity and unity, which in

¹⁴ Cf. work by Mohammed El-Nawawy & Adel *Iskandar*, *The Story Of The Network That Is Rattling Governments And Redefining Modern Journalism*

¹⁵ http://www.hks.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/papers/discussion_papers/d58_amos.pdf

turn makes the population profoundly distrustful and skeptical towards the national media. Corroborating Ibrahim Al-Marashi's description, Amos characterizes the Iraqi media as powerful fissiparous empires "coalesced around ethno-political groups . . . who have print, radio and TV communications at their disposal."¹⁶ In pointing out that there is no neutral media outlet, Amos highlights that broadcasts are funded by ethnic political parties, political Islamists, Arab business interests representing sectarian groups, and the Iraqi government. Today, sectarian political factionalism increasingly occurs on media platforms rather than in the streets.

In this context, numerous Iraqi media have established politically motivated communication channels focused on information management (censorship) and perceptions (propaganda). They tend to rely considerably on the aesthetics of dramatization (a means exploited as well by Al-Wifaq in Bahrain), while seeking to break the latest "news." The dramatization is enhanced when they report live events, creating a psychological link between the audience and the object of the reporting, which makes the media consumer overly concerned with events and discourses. This trend explains the highly graphic nature of some programs showing mutilated bodies of "martyrs," for example.

Iraqi media outlets with a heavy Shi'a hue also aim to discredit the reports disseminated by Saudi or Bahraini media by alleging that Saudi media maintain suspiciously close ties to the White House or by questioning the legitimacy of the Bahraini government. In the Bahrain affair, particularly, Iraqi media accuse Saudi Arabia of being pro-Zionist in order to play on widespread anti-American sentiments across the Arab world to serve other political interests. In discussing the parties to the crisis in Bahrain, they often refer to "the foreigner" (the United States) and "their mercenaries," or "hired guns" (the Saudis)¹⁷. Again, such discourse strongly resembles that of Iran's media outlets. Needless to say, the protests led by Sadr did little to help Bahraini demonstrators, who have been struggling to convince their own government that they are not acting on behalf of foreign interests.

¹⁶ Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "The Dynamics of Iraq's Media: Ethno-Sectarian Violence, Political Islam, Public Advocacy and Globalization," *Open Society Institute*, 2007.

¹⁷ <http://www.al-hodaonline.com/radio/index.php?news=6502>

Commenting on the Bahraini slogan “Not Shi'a nor Sunni, Just Bahraini”, the Iraqi newspaper Al-Wasat denounced Saudi Arabia’s alleged intention of using sectarianism to spread chaos in the region, while the “Shi'a majority in Bahrain, despite the oppression, injustice and aggression it faces from its Sunni neighbor,” struggles against sectarian strife that has shed “the blood and tears of the martyrs.”¹⁸ Al-Wasat is directly funded by the Islamic Virtue Party, Al-Fadhilah, headed by Sheikh Mohammad Yaqubi, an influential Iraqi Twelver Shi'a cleric, and Hashem Al-Hashemi. It is a rival to Muqtada Al-Sadr’s group and tends to garner support from the lower strata of society among the Shi'a in the south of Iraq. The news site elaborates on how the Bahraini government abandoned its Shi'a citizens, turning them into the victims of neighboring Sunni powers. The fluid shift between victimization and heroism, punctuated with visceral attacks on Saudi Arabia and the broader Sunni community, feeds the transnational sectarian divide propagated in the Iraqi and Iranian narratives, while simultaneously condemning this approach. The consequent polarization in the self-perceived victim’s narrative turns into sectarianism and transforms the fight for social and political equalities into a Manichean discourse serving Iraqi political interests within a religious framework.

Al-Jewar, a news site funded by and affiliated to Al-Hakim and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which garners support from the Shi'a population and is Iraq’s most powerful party, lambasts Saudi Arabia and to a lesser extent the Al Khalifa family, accusing them of fomenting sectarian divisions and threatening the national unity of Bahrain¹⁹. Al-Jewar juxtaposes the kingdom with Israel, a perceived aggressor against their “brothers” in Lebanon (namely Hezbollah), and challenges Saudi Arabia’s legitimacy as a nation and as a religious model.

Interestingly, other mainstream Arab media outlets in the region (mainly Saudi-funded) are barely covering the events in Bahrain, leaving a vacuum in terms of discourse among the various groups who have vested interests in what is happening. A case in point is the commercial media franchise Al-Sharqiya; founded by former Iraqi Ba’athist entrepreneur Saad Al-Bazaz, who moved to Dubai after running counter to the Shi'a-dominated government and who faces accusations of discriminating against the country’s Shi'a population, it barely mentions the

¹⁸ http://www.wasatonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4302:---l--r&catid=41:2010-10-30-00-57-19&Itemid=101

¹⁹ <http://www.aljewar.org/shownews.aspx?id=31564>

protests in Bahrain. When it does, articles consistently refer to Iranian interference²⁰.

Nonetheless, Al-Sharqiya remains the most trusted TV channel for news among Iraqis, with one third of the population citing it as a reliable source of news.

Conversely, Al-Wasat reinforces the discursive solidarity between the people of Bahrain and Iraqi leadership, extensively reporting on the latest activities of politician Ahmad Chalabi, who says he is collecting five million dollars in support of the protesters, who heads a “Committee for our Bahraini Brothers” and poses as the “Godfather” of Bahraini Shi'a²¹. It is worth noting that in early 2010, Chalabi was accused of reviving "deBaathification," to eliminate his political opponents, especially Sunnis. The banning of some 500 candidates prior to the general election of 7 March 2010, at the behest of Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, was reported to have badly damaged otherwise improving relations between Iraqi Shi'a and Sunnis. Many thus eye with suspicion his attempts to raise money intended to “fight the crimes committed against humanity” in Bahrain. Chalabi goes on to denounce the “injustice in Bahrain,” saying “Iraq cannot remain silent or ignore the oppression of a people seeking to build a democratic constitutional regime.” His discourse highlights the importance with which Iraq views Bahrain due to “shared religious, cultural and historical values.”

Al-Wasat consistently evokes martyrdom and humiliation not only in line with Al-Fadhila's rhetoric, but also with Shi'a eschatology. It has carried the Iranian president's acerbic criticism of Saudi newspapers for igniting violence and hiding behind sectarianism to the detriment of the “democratic pleas of the people.”²²

A number of media in Iraq now feature side-bars and graphics in the margins that express solidarity with Bahrainis through their common history, as well as links to the list of “martyrs” fallen during the protests. This is notably exemplified by slogans such as “The Other News on

²⁰ http://www.alsharqiya.com/index.asp?fname=mainstory\2011040511\20110404160902reup--2011-04-04t160739z_01_teh10_rtrmdnp_3_iran_h.txt&storytitle=

²¹ http://www.wasatonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4168:2011-03-18-20-36-06&catid=42:2009-10-14-13-57-23&Itemid=120

²² http://www.wasatonline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4160:2011-03-18-08-27-36&catid=42:2009-10-14-13-57-23&Itemid=120

the Intifada in Bahrain²³” and “We are with you, the People of Bahrain.²⁴” As previously mentioned, Iraqi media repeatedly refer to the uprising in Bahrain as an intifada, echoing not only the protests in Bahrain between 1994 and 2000, in which leftists, liberals and Islamists joined forces, but also the 1991 intifada that took place in Iraq.

From One Intifada to Another

As noted above, the anti-government motif and preoccupation with oppression woven into Shi'a religious traditions have been at the core of the community's activism. Iraqi Shi'a dissidence is grounded in longstanding Shi'a clerical opposition to Sunni governments because of their secular trappings. After the Iraqi army was driven out of Kuwait in 1991, many heads of state, including U.S. President George H. W. Bush, expected Saddam Hussein to fall from power. When President Bush called on Iraqis to rise up against Saddam, the 1991 intifada was already under way in southern Iraq, but the strongest element of the regime's power, the Republican Guard, remained largely intact. The uprising spread within days to all of the largest Shi'a cities of southern Iraq: Karbala, Hilla, Nassiriyah, Amarah, Samawa, Kut, and Diwaniya. Unrest also extended to the Shi'a slum of Sadr City (then-called Saddam City), in Baghdad. On the day that each city rebelled, masses of unarmed civilians and small contingents of rebels converged in the streets. They descended on government buildings shouting anti-regime and pro-Iranian slogans before attacking.

Eventually, the uprising was no match for the government's forces and the rebellion was brutally crushed while the United States and other powers stood by. Iraqi Shi'a remember this period as “the betrayal” (al-khiyanah) by international bystanders, and it has left a deep imprint on the psyche of Iraqi Shi'a. The trials of people allegedly involved in the repression of the intifada remained ongoing until 2008²⁵.

Since returning to Iraq after 2003, many exiles have tried to impose an artificial narrative in which the legacy of pragmatic cooperation with the Ba'athist regime is overlooked. Rather than target formerly Ba'athist individuals, these former exiles, when running for political office,

²³ <http://www.al-hodaonline.com/radio/index.php?category=3>

²⁴ http://www.burathanews.com/news_search-start.html

²⁵ <http://www.aljewar.org/shownews.aspx?id=9418>

indirectly pinpoint political opponents (often Sunnis) as “Baathists” and co-opt their political friends (especially if they happen to be Shi'a) without mentioning their old Ba'athist ties at all²⁶. The result is a hypocritical and sectarian approach that is as divisive as other cases in the region, where political interests are driven by sectarian intents.

The domestic political rhetoric resulting from the 1991 intifada has become a model and inspiration for coverage of Bahrainis fighting sectarian discrimination. Today in Iraqi news, messages and logos frequently make a link between current events and the 1991 intifada. Iraqi media affiliated to Shi'a leaders have declared support for the “Intifada of Bahrain”, saying that “the hearts of Iraqis are alongside the hearts of the Bahraini revolutionaries.” In the same way, clerics have also made numerous references to their uprising against Saddam Hussein, chanting their support for the Bahrainis to do the same.

Buratha News, affiliated with Al-Hakim's ISCI, accuses Saudi Arabia of employing former Saddam fedayeen²⁷ to crush a protest movement that is only seeking “legal reforms for social justice.” The article uses terms such as “infidels” to refer to these alleged fedayeen working hand in hand with the Saudis to target the leaders of the Bahraini opposition.

In another article, Buratha reports a sermon by Hassan Al-Zamily, the senior ISCI leader in Qadisiyah province, criticizing the intervention of Saudi Arabia and the Bahraini government's actions against its Shi'a population. The article presents an exhaustive series of metaphorical associations, through which it opposes the Bahraini Shi'a on the one hand, and the Bahraini authorities and Saudis on the other: “truth and falsehood, the weak and the arrogant, the oppressed and the tyrant.”²⁸ Al-Zamily laments that the current conflict is nothing new, reminiscing over the intifada of 1991 and the government's attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja, saying that Bahrain's case constitutes “a replica of Iraq.” After detailing at length the similarities in experience and struggle that Bahrainis and Iraqis have grappled with, the religious figure holds the United States accountable for the military intervention by Saudi Arabia, calling

²⁶ <http://gulfanalysis.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/why-ad-hoc-de-baathification-will-derail-the-process-of-democratisation-in-iraq/>

²⁷ The Fedayeen was a paramilitary organization loyal to the former Ba'athist government of Saddam Hussein. The name was chosen to mean "Saddam's Men of Sacrifice".

²⁸ http://www.burathanews.com/news_article_119704.html

both the United States and Saudi Arabia imperialist “tyrants.” “Victory is close for the Bahrainis. The Iraqi people are with them every step of the way,” he adds.

The display of solidarity between Iraqis and Bahrainis is a continuation of Iraq’s own narrative with its intifada. By choosing to call the events in Bahrain an intifada, Iraq’s Shi'a leadership categorized the demonstrations as a legitimate struggle associated with a long history of suffering and martyrdom, with religious overtones, while appropriating the struggle to itself. The prophesized victory lies in the religious nature of the message. Pictures of the “martyrs” (demonstrators who were killed in Bahrain), along with videos portraying the violence used against demonstrators, contribute to the broader discourse of violence perpetrated against a people seeking justice. The “martyrs” narrative stems naturally from the Shi'a’s apocalyptic world view and cult of martyrdom, glorifying sacrifice for the cause. It is the same approach to the glories of death as occurs in narratives of the 1991 events in Iraq²⁹. The criticism leveled against the United States not only reflects a current Iraqi political position regarding U.S. influence in the region, but also the deep resentment inherited from the *Khiyanah*.

The framing of the social and political movements in a religious context fits into the Shi'a eschatology of political activism, whereby faith requires social action and possibly sacrifice for greater justice. Through this narrative, the Shi'a community in Iraq creates a bond of shared experience and a common future between themselves and their Bahraini brothers and sisters. Under Saddam Hussein, the values of Sunni tribalism were strongly promoted to counter the discourse of resistance circulated by Shi'a groups in Iraq and to undermine the validity of the groups’ demands. Bahrain offers today a similar landscape, where the kinship system of tribalism prevails, primarily in Sunni circles. While this notion exacerbates the polarization between the two sects, it also allows space for the idea of groups of tribes working together towards national unity and combating fissiparous elements inside Bahrain.

Sacrifice and martyrdom offer a gateway for the creation of a common identity cemented by sectarian belief. The glory and sacrifices emphasized in the Iraqi narrative and in Iranian

²⁹ http://www.burathanews.com/news_article_120338.html

discourse on what is happening in Bahrain is a unifying concept, pivotal to creating solidarity and eventually defining the identity of Shi'a groups, calling for some form of action as a "duty."

More importantly, Iraqi leaders capitalize considerably on the sectarian rhetoric through the unraveling events in Bahrain. Solidarity becomes a political tool inside Iraq's fragmented political and social landscape where the polarization of religious and ethnic groups has served to garner support at the elections polls.

Conclusion

The crackdowns on demonstrators in Bahrain by the Al Khalifa leadership have intensified. Concerns over Iranian interference in Bahrain are grounded in real territorial claims by the Islamic republic, but Ali Salman, the Shi'a opposition head in Bahrain, has warned Iran and Saudi Arabia against using his country as a "battlefield" in a proxy war. "We don't want Bahrain to turn into a conflict zone between Saudi Arabia and Iran," he said. "That's why we object to the Saudi intervention. We call for immediate withdrawal of the troops, and we reject Iranian interference." Turning to Kuwait for mediation, even though it has failed, was a strategic move that made sense in the broader context of political legitimization and regional stability.

While the opposition clearly maintains that it acted in accord with its own perceptions of national interests and denies any affiliation with Tehran, the largely Sunni Bahraini authorities argue the opposite to legitimize the crackdown, with tacit support from the GCC members and the United States, which has remained relatively silent on the matter. Later reports of an agreement between Saudi Arabia and the United States, by which Saudi officials gave their backing to Western air strikes on Libya in exchange for the United States muting its criticism of the authorities in Bahrain, did little to quell anti-American sentiment in the region and is more than likely fueling counter-rhetoric by Iran and its allies.

The Manichean approach framed by the myth of martyrdom as understood in the broader Shi'a eschatology is more obvious on protesters' banners and in Iraqi media than it is in the political rhetoric of Al-Wifaq. From the intifada of 1991 to today's intifada, Iraqi Shi'a leaders have been

quick to liken the current uprising in Bahrain to their past revolts against Saddam. The focus by Shi'a groups on the sectarian overtones of the protests, already a major factor against national unity and political workings in Iraq, is spreading through the media in the guise of solidarity movements.

Iran's recent announcement that it will send an aid flotilla to Bahrain, to depart on May 16 from Bushehr, echoes the aid flotillas that have been sent to Gaza³⁰, also ostensibly to bring humanitarian aid. The flotilla will be named after female Bahraini poet Ayat Al-Ghermezi, who allegedly was raped and killed during the crackdown. While the status of the woman could not be confirmed, the Iranian government reinforces sectarian identity and transforms it into a legitimate transnational group, binding Shi'a groups together in opposition. Likewise, Sadr's latest visit to the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al-Thani, in an attempt "to solve the crisis in Bahrain and ensure the safety of the Bahrainis," according to Sadr's website³¹, hints possibly at Qatar's aspiration to become a more prominent regional player, offsetting Saudi Arabia's unchallenged position, with the possible cooperation of Iran. After all, Al-Jazeera has covered the abuses, crackdown and violence in Bahrain in some depth and emphasizes in its reporting the victimization of the protesters, without nonetheless taking a sectarian approach.

The role of Arab nationalism, although an ideology of diminished appeal, is not to be undermined. The notion of resistance and social justice in the intifada echoes deeply in the Arab psyche, starting with the movements against colonization, imperialism and mirroring the narrative of the Palestinians. The intifada is perceived as a call to muster people around one cause for the greater good. But shrouded in the hue of sectarian ideology as promoted by the current newspapers in Iraq, it may only serve to erode national identity, while reinforcing the fissiparous nature of Iraqi society, potentially destabilizing to other countries, while benefiting Iran.

Finally, concerted political action and economic cooperation, especially with other Gulf countries, could offset the sectarian rhetoric promoted by Iraqi political and religious elements closely linked to Iran. As it stands, the Arab summit has been postponed until March 2012 at

³⁰ <http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/NewsDetails.aspx?storyid=305743>

³¹ <http://www.alsadronline.net/ar/permalink/4872.html>

the request of the Iraqi government. Invoking political unrest, Iraqi lawmakers and politicians have incensed GCC members over their criticism of the Sunni minority leadership in Bahrain. The rising tension is a foreboding sign for the future of Iraqi-Bahraini relations, which is bound to affect Iraq's relations with other Gulf countries, and consequently rapprochement with Iran. Although no longer a GCC associate member, providing Iraq with a provisional consultative status in the regional organization could pave the way towards resituating the country strategically and bring its policies into alignment with the interests of its Gulf Arab neighbors.