

ESCALATION OF SOCIAL CONFLICT DURING POPULAR UPHEAVALS: EVIDENCE FROM BAHRAIN

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Abstract

Bahrain experienced rapidly growing sectarian strife as a result of the "Day of Rage" uprising organized in February 2011. The aim of this article is to assess the sources of latent hostility as well as to explain why the social conflict manifested itself and why it took on a sectarian dimension. The appraisal is based on the elements of Hocker and Wilmot's conflict assessment model, which focuses on the adversaries' perceptions of the conflict. Through an in-depth examination of created stereotypes we evaluate miscommunication between adversaries and ultimately, rigidity of positions and polarization of society. We conclude that, following this pattern of development, the social conflict ultimately enters into a destructive phase, negatively impacting the prospects of conflict resolution. The social division engulfing Bahrain is representative of the power struggle and confessional tensions in the Gulf region.

Keywords: sectarianism, Sunni, Shia, revolution, Arab Spring, Bahrain.

1. Introduction

2011 was marked by series of uprisings in the Middle East commonly known as the Arab Spring. The development of these events was unexpected by the local population and international observers alike¹. Social mobilization led, in some cases, to deposition of long-term dictators; in other cases, open conflict whose outcomes are yet to be resolved. The case of Bahrain stands out among other Arab countries affected by the Arab Spring. The Bahraini "Day of Rage" received relatively little attention from international media compared with other protests. Moreover, after the violent clampdown on the opposition, foreign correspondents were gradually expelled from the country and Bahrain disappeared from the headlines of international newspapers. The authorities tried to preserve the image of the "island of golden smiles", as once Bahrain was known, by cutting out the flow of unfavorable and disapproving information abroad. It is only recently that foreign journalists were allowed to come back and that Bahraini authorities invited an international commission to assess the events.

1 Rosa Balfour, "The Arab Spring, the changing Mediterranean, and the EU: tools as a substitute for strategy?," *European Policy Center brief*, June 2011.

The side effect of the uprising is, however, hidden under the surface. Since February 2011 Bahraini society has been ripped apart by a bitter sectarian split that affected this country of roughly 1 million inhabitants. The upheaval led to a dangerous escalation of the social conflict that took the form of street violence, killing, vandalism and social ostracism. The polarization of society reached levels never seen before as the division between Sunnis and Shias divided neighborhoods, streets, businesses and mixed Sunni-Shia families who felt the split within their own households.² The questions that come to mind are why the sectarian split reached such alarming levels, why the violent clashes spilled out of control and finally, why Bahraini society remains divided. Solicited solutions did not bring results and despite containment at the end of 2011, the Bahraini "Day of Rage" continues.

The importance of this case study is twofold. To begin, it emphasizes development of socio-psychological barriers during conflict escalation which, in turn, lead to an increase of antagonism and set the conflict on a destructive course.³ Secondly, it constitutes a significant point of debate in the analysis of the durability and evolution of Arabian Gulf states.⁴ Bahrain, which underwent a transformation of its political system in 2002, was the only Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member deeply affected by the Arab Spring. The modern approach to building legitimacy that would go beyond the tribal and sectarian affiliations has not fully worked. In recent years, Islam's role in providing a common identity for Bahrainis diminished due to the growing sectarian split. In this context Vali Nasr's evaluation, stated by the title *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, acquires a new dimension in the case of Bahrain and beyond.

The framework used for the overview of escalation of the conflict comes from the Hocker-Wilmot conflict assessment model.⁵ After a brief literature review of the concept of social conflict and conflict assessment, the structure of the paper follows the steps of the Hocker-Wilmot framework. In order to understand the nature of the conflict, we shall explore its exogenous and endogenous causes and its triggering event. Furthermore, we concentrate on the conflict elements, namely, goals, attitudes and strategies. Ultimately, we present the attempted solutions. This

2 Suad Hamada, *Women struggle for unity in Bahrain* (Aljazeera, 24 April 2011) [database on-line]; available at <http://aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/04/2011422135237332438.html>, last accessed on April 4, 2012.

3 Daniel Bar-Tal and Eran Halperin, "Socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution," in *Intergroup conflicts and their resolution: Social psychological perspective*, ed. Daniel Bar-Tal (New York: Psychology Press, 2011). 1-38. 204.

4 Michael Herb, *All in the family: Absolutism, revolution, and democratic prospects in the Middle Eastern monarchies* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

5 William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict, Seventh Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 204-5.

research is ethnographic in nature. It is based on random observations among Bahraini citizens as well as on analysis of social media.

2. The concept of social conflict

Conflict is often defined as "an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other."⁶ Social scientists agree that conflict is an inherent part of human interaction.⁷ Moreover, in any society conflict and tension are intrinsically interwoven with cooperation and peace. Universality of conflict in social relations calls for an explanation of its sources. For Dahrendorf power is "unequally divided, and therefore a lasting source of friction."⁸ In any society dichotomous division of power into those in power and the powerless leads to a conflict of group interests:

Power always implies non-power and therefore resistance. The dialectic of power and resistance is the motive force of history. From the interests of those in power at a given time we can infer the interests of the powerless and with them the direction of change.⁹

Similarly to Dahrendorf, Coser and Lipset, alike, see the source of conflict in an unequal distribution of resources.¹⁰ Coser defines conflict as:

a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting groups are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals.¹¹

Given the fact that "the incompatibility or difference may exist in reality or may only be perceived by the parties involved,"¹² it is important to highlight the role of

6 Ron J. Fisher, *The social psychology of intergroup and international conflict resolution* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

7 With regard to social conflict see, among other studies listed below, Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977[1859]); Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations* (New York: Free Press, 1955); Tatu Vanhanen, "Domestic Ethnic Conflict and Ethnic Nepotism: a Comparative Analysis," *Journal of Peace Research* 36 (January 1999): 57-58; Randall Collins, *Conflict sociology* (New York: Academic Press, 1975).

8 Ralf Dahrendorf, *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 138.

9 Dahrendorf, *Essays in the Theory of Society*, 138.

10 Seymour M. Lipset, "Social structure and social change," in *Approaches to the Study of Social Structure*, ed. Peter M. Blau (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

11 Lewis Coser, *Continuities in the Study of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 232.

people's emotions in conflict situations. Indeed, it is not solely the pattern of distribution that creates conflict but also relative deprivation, the feeling of a gap or discrepancy between "what one considers one's rights, dues and expectations, and what one has actually attained."¹³ According to Gurr, a strong belief that access to certain goods is denied to ethnic or other groups in society leads to frustration and ultimately, is the source of aggression.¹⁴ Sobkowiak puts forward the idea that emotions are nonrational factors in the social conflict. Psychological tensions, stereotyping, fears and animosity increase the level of radicalism leading to polarization, which takes on the following forms: 1) idealization or glorification and degradation and dehumanization of the adversary by adopting a strongly polarized black-and-white perception of the conflict, 2) rejection of information which stands in opposition to one's convictions, 3) disappearance of criticism toward information combined with a belief in its veracity if received from a center of authority, 4) wishful thinking which leads to assessing the situation and planning ones actions based on desires and not on rational analysis, 5) inability to construct long-term realistic plans but only short-term goals, 6) willingness to suffer the negative consequences of the fight and 7) rejection of compromise, mediation and arbitration.¹⁵

Nonetheless, Coser and Dahrendorf argue that conflict fulfils important functions in society and can play a positive role.¹⁶ Deutsch, on the other hand, clearly differentiates between a constructive and a destructive conflict.¹⁷ A conflict is likely to take a constructive course "if it is viewed as a mutual problem" and induces "open, honest communication; friendliness and readiness to be helpful to one another; enhancement of the other's power and well-being; and mutual trust and trustworthiness." However, communication designed to deceive; hostility and obstructiveness directed toward the other; attempts to weaken the power of the other and to keep or place the other in an inferior position; mutual suspicion and

12 Ron D. Fisher, *Sources of Conflict and Methods of Conflict Resolution* (2000) [database on-line]; available at [www.aupeace.org/files/Fisher_Sourcesof Conflictand MethodsofResolution.pdf](http://www.aupeace.org/files/Fisher_SourcesofConflictandMethodsofResolution.pdf), last accessed on April 4, 2012.

13 Earl Corteh-Morgan, *Collective Political Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 304.

14 Ted Gurr, "Psychological Factors in Civil Violence," *World Politics* 20 (Jan. 1968): 245-78.

15 Leszek Sobkowiak, "Konflikt Polityczny – analiza pojęcia" (Political conflict – an analysis), in *Studia z Teorii Polityki* (Studies in Political Theory), ed. Andrzej J. Jabłoński and Leszek Sobkowiak (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1999), 117-131.

16 Evert-Jan Vledder, *Conflict in the Miracle Stories* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 101.

17 Morton Deutsch, *Destructive Conflict and Oppression*, Note prepared for the "Workshop on Humiliation and Violent Conflict," November 18-19, 2004, Columbia University, NY.

untrustworthiness set the conflict on a destructive path, which is damaging for all groups involved in the conflict.

Conflict is a complicated and a dynamic phenomenon; hence an appropriate framework for conflict assessment and conflict resolution should be helpful not only to dissect its elements but also to show their interplay in an interactive manner. Nonetheless, most approaches focus on conflict resolution and present a less thorough analysis of conflict elements.¹⁸ Out of the many frameworks that exist the works of Sandole, Wehr as well as Wilmot and Hocker seem to be best suited for the purpose. Sandole's comprehensive mapping of conflict and conflict resolution is a three pillar based approach, which focuses on understanding the conflict (first pillar), conflict causes and conditions (pillar two) and third party interventions (pillar three).¹⁹ Wehr's conflict mapping guide is intended to be a universal model covering "the full range of conflict types from interpersonal to international levels."²⁰ The guide requires a description of conflict history, context, parties, issues, dynamics, alternative routes to solutions as well as conflict regulation potential.

The Hocker-Wilmot conflict assessment guide builds on Wehr's conflict mapping guide. However, it is composed of a series of questions, which are useful for an in-depth analysis of specific aspects of the conflict or to find gaps in information about the conflict. The guide includes: the nature of the conflict and its triggering events; the attitudes each party holds toward the conflict and each other; goals, the distribution and use of power, tactics and attempted solutions. For the purpose of this text, elements from Hocker-Wilmot's framework were adopted. This framework is less extensive than Wehr's but more detailed than Sandole's. Most importantly, due to its interpersonal focus, it allows for an in-depth enquiry into the problems of communication as well as reality creation among the parties involved in the conflict. Hocker-Wilmot's question-based approach is useful and appropriate for ethnographic work.

3. Nature of the Conflict

In the Hocker-Wilmot's framework, an overview of the nature of the conflict is composed of analysis of the historical context of the conflict, including the ongoing relationships between the conflict groups and other external events, as well as "triggering events" that brought the conflict into mutual awareness. Although in this

18 Cathryn Q. Thurston, "Developing a Comprehensive Framework for Conflict Analysis: Sources, Situation, Attitudes, Group Maintenance, Escalation (SSAGE)," paper presentation, International Studies Association Annual Meeting, 2008, forthcoming, University of Michigan Press.

19 Dennis Sandole, "A Comprehensive Mapping of Conflict and Conflict Resolution: A Three Pillar Approach," *Peace and Conflict Studies* 5 (1998).

20 Paul Wehr, *Conflict Regulation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979).

particular framework conflict elements are included in the overview of the conflict, we decided to present them in a separate section for greater clarity.

3.1. Exogenous and Endogenous Causes of the Conflict

The Sunni and Shia split in Islam, although dating back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, has acquired a new dimension in recent years due to changing geopolitics in the Middle East, namely the growing sphere of influence of Iranian Shia Islam. Apart from being a stronghold of Shi'ism, which largely sets it apart in the Middle East, Iran is characterized by a distinct culture and language. Iranians form a separate ethnic group, unlike their Arab counterparts, which provides them with individual sense of identity and with unique aspirations in the region. These ambitions were strengthened by the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and emergence of the first Shia-dominated Arab state²¹, Iran's involvement in sectarian developments in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the Gaza Strip²² as well as the development of its nuclear program. Iranian influence is considered to be a major challenge for Arab countries in the Gulf region that have substantial Shia populations.

Together with Iran, these areas form what is called the "Shia crescent" where Iran's influence is believed to penetrate beyond its official borders. The changing geopolitics in the region led to a reaffirmation of Shia identity throughout the Middle East. Shias began a struggle for a greater share of power as well as intensified claims for their economic and religious rights. Within this context, it is commonly assumed that Shias, often treated as second class citizens, may be easily susceptible to Iranian influence, which poses questions about their loyalty to Sunni rulers. This phenomenon is especially worrisome for the Sunni rulers of Bahrain, where Shias are estimated to be 60-70% of the population. Persian occupation of Bahrain lasted from 1602 to 1783. The Al Khalifas managed to take control of Bahrain from the Persians at the end of the 18th century and consolidated their rule by series of treaties with Britain. Britain, which controlled Bahrain until 1971 when Bahrain declared independence, acted simultaneously as a protector to the Al Khalifas. Indeed, Iran was the most important contender to this area. In 1970 Shah Pahlavi unsuccessfully reasserted the Iranian claim to Bahrain.²³ In the absence of Britain, Al Khalifas strengthened ties with the USA. Bahrain became the headquarters of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, which became another challenge in the eyes of Iran.

21 Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 185.

22 Mehmet Ödütçü, "Turkey: A Major Regional Power to Engage or Confront Iran," *Insight Turkey* 9 (2007): 113-114.

23 Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 54.

The relations between Bahraini Sunnis and Bahraini Shias have been often branded in binarist terms of the conqueror and the conquered. Al Khalifas who arrived to Bahrain from the mainland were followed by Sunni families from the Nejd who settled subsequently in Bahrain. Since that time, the split between the Shia and Sunni population has been a reason for tensions. It has been noted that Arab Shia who are the indigenous inhabitants of the islands perpetuate the memory of the conquest and subsequent subservience.²⁴ Despite tensions, co-operation between Sunni and Shia populations existed in the 20th century as both sects pushed for political and economic reforms and jointly formed opposition movements during the British mandate.²⁵ After obtaining independence the stalled political reforms under Emir Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa (1961-1999) brought Shia and Sunni opposition even closer.²⁶ In 1973 the very first constitution of Bahrain stipulated that the legislative power would be vested in a unicameral parliament elected in general elections. The first elections to the parliament took place in 1973. However, two years after its establishment, the Bahraini Parliament was dissolved for almost 30 years. Lack of consent related to the issues of foreign policy, the US naval base presence in Bahrain as well as the State Security Law led to split between parliamentarians and the Emir Isa Bin Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa (1961-1999). Consequently, Bahrain was ruled singlehandedly by the Emir under the state of emergency law.

The end of 20th century marked a change in Bahraini politics with the ascension to throne of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. In 2000 the new ruler initiated a plan to establish the National Action Charter. The document was submitted afterwards for approval in a national referendum and was overwhelmingly accepted by society with 98,4 % Bahrainis voting in its favor. The opposition was pleased with the announcement of reforms. Shia clerics called on their followers to stop skirmishes and remain calm.²⁷ On December 16, 2002 Bahrain became a kingdom. However the initial euphoria soon turned into disappointment. A parliament was re-established but as a bicameral body with solely the Council of Representatives, the lower house, elected by universal suffrage. In comparison to the Constitution of 1973, the role of the parliament was reduced. The upper house of the parliament, selected directly by the king, would approve bills proposed by the lower house before they are implemented. Moreover, ultimately the king would have the right to

24 Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics, Political and Religious Networks in the Gulf* (London, Hurst/New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 20.

25 Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: an Assessment," in *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion*, ed. Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) 170.

26 Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: an Assessment," 174.

27 International Crisis Group. "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," *Middle East Report* 40 (May 2005).

veto all bills. In a show of discontent, Shia political associations boycotted the first parliamentary elections in 2002. This step allowed Sunni candidates to dominate the parliament. All in all, the controlled liberalization of the country ultimately led to a split within the society. Sunnis almost overwhelmingly backed the new reforms, while Shias called for further progressive amendments.

The elections in 2006 brought a change of strategy as Al Wefaq, the largest Shia opposition group, announced its participation. The elections were marked by disputes over distribution of electoral wards. Shia opposition denounced gerrymandering that would grant Sunnis advantage in the upcoming elections. Indeed, while Al Wefaq did not gain a majority of seats in the parliament it did become the largest party in the parliament with 17 seats out of 40. Moreover, participation in the parliament was not a particularly fruitful experience. For instance, in the years 2006-2007, 25 out of 27 bills proposed by the lower house of the parliament were rejected by the upper house.²⁸ In 2006 relations were further inflamed by a leaked report that allegedly implicated governmental officials in a planned naturalization of Sunni citizens to weaken the Shia majority.²⁹

Participation of the opposition in the current political system may have been a disappointment, which led to the formation of splinter groups that boycotted the existing political system.³⁰ In the years 2008-2010 protests organized by the opposition intensified and led to violent clashes with the police. Those cumulated tensions cast a shadow over the 2010 parliamentary elections. Al Wefaq used a parliamentary debate to push for further democratic reforms. On the other hand, opposition circles outside of the political system applied different strategies. Youth set burning tires on the roads as makeshift blockades. Rumors of a planned electoral sabotage by the opposition were circulated. The situation seemed to slip out of control of the governmental forces. Indeed, the legitimacy of the political system relied heavily on the elections. In September 2010 official sources announced foiling of a terrorist plot to topple Al Khalifa dynasty. Several members of the opposition were arrested.

3.2. Triggering Event

The successes of Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions provided the Bahraini opposition with an opportunity to at last bring international attention to Bahrain and gain sympathy for their cause. The organizers of the national "Day of Rage" scheduled on February 14, 2011 held a strong belief that a "domino effect" would occur in the

28 Mohammed Al A'ali, "MPs furious!," *Gulf Daily News*, 21 February 2007.

29 Mahjoob Zahid and Mohammed Zweiri, "The victory of al-Wefaq: The rise of Shiite politics in Bahrain" Research Institute for European and American Studies (April 2007).

30 Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Assessing al-Wefaq's Parliamentary Experiment," *Arab Reform Bulletin (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)* 5 (2007).

Middle East and eventually bring changes in Bahrain. It is important, however, to stress the differences between the Bahraini "Day of Rage" and the other upheavals of the Arab Spring. To begin with, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Syria the popular uprisings came unexpectedly. Usually they were preceded by years or even decades of almost complete submission to the ruling circles. On the contrary, in Bahrain upheavals are not a novelty. As a matter of fact, since the country's independence, Bahrain was sporadically shaken by waves of unrest as Bahraini opposition became more vocal in their quest for rights in the 2000's. Thus, the 2011 uprising in Bahrain is part of a much longer and continuous pattern of unrest. Nonetheless, the Bahraini "Day of Rage" was inspired by the protest strategies applied in other Arab countries. Instead of direct confrontations with governmental forces, the organizers opted for a peaceful occupation of the centrally located Pearl Roundabout. Whole families with children moved to the area where they remained squatting in tents.

Furthermore, the Bahraini upheaval stands out since it was almost unavoidable not to analyze it in sectarian terms. Although the protestors strongly declined to identify the upheaval specifically as a Shia protest and the protest was supported by Sunni pro-reformers, the unfolding events led to a polarization of society that accentuated sectarian belongings. The violence that ensued during the crackdown of security forces as well as the deployment of GCC military troops, mostly from Saudi Arabia, to quell the upheaval, accentuated the sectarian dimension of the protest. Gradually all citizens were forced to take a stand by supporting or opposing the revolutionary movement, and their stand was based on religious affiliations.

The sectarian dimension of the Bahraini upheaval was accentuated on the international scene as Shia populations in the Middle East responded by condemning Al Khalifas, while Sunni governments supported the ruling dynasty. Iranian authorities observed the popular uprising in Bahrain closely and with an expressed sympathy for the movement. The crackdown that led to deaths of several protestors sparked an outrage in Iran. Criticism grew further after the deployment of GCC troops into Bahrain. On several occasions, Iranian governmental authorities warned against "foreign" interference in Bahrain. The row escalated with expulsion of Iranian diplomatic representatives from Bahrain and vice versa. Furthermore, Bahrain accused Iran of directly supporting the protestors in an attempt to overthrow the monarchy. The idea of an imminent Iranian intervention was reiterated in the Bahraini media, creating an atmosphere of suspicion. The events in Bahrain reverberated also among Shia populations in Iraq and Lebanon leading to criticism of Bahraini authorities by, among others, Nuri al-Maliki, Iraqi Shia PM, and by Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah. Demonstrations in support of the Bahraini opposition were staged by Shia populations in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq as well as in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The developments on the international scene and within Bahrain led to a drastic increase of antagonism and to a dramatic radicalization of opinions. The sectarian dimension of the 2011 protests became paramount, while the divide within Bahraini society grew wider.

4. Conflict Elements

This section is essential to understand the escalation of the social conflict in the aftermath of the uprising of February 2011. The presentation of the perception of incompatible goals is followed by an overview of the evolution of attitudes as well as strategies employed by each group involved in the conflict.

4.1. Goals

Given the fact that goals are an essential part of a conflict, it is important to analyze the Bahraini "Day of Rage" from this point of view of incompatible goals perceived by groups involved in the conflict. Wilmot and Hocker differentiate three types of goals in human interaction, namely, content goals, relational goals and face-saving goals.³¹ Content goals are easily recognizable, concrete objectives that each party involved in the conflict holds. On the other hand, relational goals, which are often the real cause of the conflict, relate to hierarchy of parties involved. Relational goals usually underlie the content goals and include issues such as fairness, justice and equal treatment. The third type of goals is centered on protection of one's identity. The threat of losing important identities arouses fear. Due to this threat, damage to the other party becomes then a goal by itself. The content goals of the "Day of Rage" protestors were economic and political. However the relational goals were the real motor of the conflict.

The perceived discrimination of the majority has been a leitmotif of all the opposition demonstrations in the past decade. On the other hand, the "Day of Rage" created an identity threat among the government supporters. This face-saving goal, aimed at protection of the Sunni identity of the country, led to a spiraling violence among citizens. The violent attack of the governmental forces on the opposition aroused a similar threat among protestors, who acted in retaliation.

31 Wilmot and Hocker, *Interpersonal Conflict, Seventh Edition*, 63.

Table 1: Typology of goals in the conflict situation in Bahrain

Type	Subtype	Detailed description	
		Opposition	Government supporters
Content	Political	Change of the political system	Status quo
	Economic	Equal share of economic resources; greater access to economic opportunity	Status quo
Relational		Putting an end to perceived discrimination of the Shia population	Status quo
Face-saving		Continuation of the protests; inciting international pressure on the Bahraini governments	Preservation of the Sunni identity of the country

The following analysis presents an overview of the evolution of the goals of each side of the conflict alongside the development of the situation. The opposition put forward political and economic demands. Those content goals were in fact relational since they related to a perceived discrimination of the masses. Firstly, lack of genuine participation in power and decision-making prompted the February 2011 protestors to again put forward the demands for political reform. The opposition called for the abolition of the 2002 constitution; establishment of a genuine constitutional monarchy, where the parliament would have exclusive legislative rights as well as the formation of a new interim government. These demands were justified by a long struggle to obtain full political rights in the kingdom. The 2002 Constitution was considered by the opposition to be just a democratic facade. It satisfied the demands for democratization in the eyes of the Western allies but, in reality, it hardly allowed for any power-sharing.

However, as the negotiations prolonged, the most radical opposition groups insisted on abolishing the monarchy and installing a republic. Secondly, the Shia population had long complained about their economic hardships in the kingdom due to unemployment, low wages and a rising cost of living. Although reasons for this state of affairs are multiple, Bahrain and other GCC countries represent a peculiar case among rapidly developing countries. Growing labor migration to Bahrain profoundly changed the structure of the job market and indirectly affected the local population. Foreign employees almost entirely dominate the private sector. A gap between the public and private sector exists in terms of income and benefits. Low wages and hard working conditions deter Bahrainis from employment in the private sector. These factors were held responsible for structural unemployment among the local population. In 2001, unemployment reached, according to official statistics, a record level of 16% among Bahrainis and caused a

disenchantment of the population.³² Dissatisfaction was significant especially among the Bahraini Shia.³³ Even though labor market reforms initiated in 2006 managed to curb down unemployment to 3.5% in 2009³⁴, these measures did not entirely calm the situation. Shias continued to complain that low paid, unskilled jobs in private sector were offered primarily to them. On the contrary, governmental jobs that deliver higher wages and yield additional benefits were allegedly distributed according to sectarian preference.³⁵ Moreover, Shias pointed out discrimination in the army and police force, where employment was given to naturalized foreigners. Such posts are considered sensitive due to a strong belief in misplaced Shia loyalties. Overall, Shias believe themselves to be a socially disadvantaged group.

It is important to note that the calls for a popular uprising in Bahrain were not unanimous among Bahraini citizens. The occupation of the Pearl Roundabout on February 14, 2011 also mobilized a movement in support of the ruling family. For the pro-government camp, the opposition's quest for political rights was interpreted as a direct attack on the Sunni identity of the country. Not only it was understood in sectarian terms but also it was met with growing defensiveness. Greater leniency towards the opposition and rising Shia influence in politics would be considered a sign of weakness of the ruling family and a step towards imminent danger. Maintaining the status quo in Bahrain was far more important than political liberties. Religious belonging in Bahrain was an already-existing social cleavage and the suspicion of Shias acting as a "fifth column" to promote Iranian interests in Bahrain surfaced in the perception of the common people.³⁶

The suspicions about Shia loyalties are in part due to the Shia structure of religious leadership (*marja'iyya*). Bahraini Shia religious authorities look up to Shia authority figures abroad; specifically, these authorities include Ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah in Lebanon, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi in Karbala. The belief that Bahrain's Shias take not only religious but also political orders from abroad is, in part, a result of this arrangement. Consequently, as the opposition demands hardened, the idea of a "Shia takeover" using Iran's help was commonly expressed as a real threat among Sunnis. At that time King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa had become a cherished symbol. His

32 Duraid AlBaik, "Bahrain takes steps to curb unemployment among its citizens," *Gulf News*, 1 October 2007.

33 Edward Burke, "Bahrain: Reaching a Threshold Project on Freedom of Association in the Middle East and North Africa," *FRIDE*, 2008.

34 Central Informatics Organization. *Statistics* (2009) [database on-line]; available at www.cio.gov.bh.

35 International Crisis Group, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, 12.

36 Laurence Louër, "The Political Impact of Labor Migration in Bahrain," *City & Society* 20 (2008): 32-53.

photographs were displayed on cars, windows and billboards, where he symbolized not only the current political system but also a Sunni Arab identity of the country. On the other hand, the banners of Hezbollah and Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei, carried sometimes during the protests, were for the Sunnis a confirmation of their worst fears. The real intents of the "Day of Rage" movement were further questioned due to comments by Shia religious leaders abroad. For instance, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati of Iran called Bahraini Shias on March 18, 2011 to keep up protests and resist "the enemy" until death.³⁷

The framing of the conflict played an important role in the further developments.

When we frame a conflict, we develop interpretations about what the conflict is about, why it is occurring, the motivations of the partners involved, and how the conflict should be settled.³⁸

The pro-government party framed the conflict in sectarian terms which was not the case for the protestors who emphasized the nonsectarian character of the uprising. Even though Sunnis also participated in the opposition movement; this element was ignored by the general Sunni public. Consequently, the adopted frame led to voices denigrating the Shia denomination of Islam as "deviant" and holding the religion responsible for the acts of the protestors rather than people who, implicitly, were manipulated by it. On the other hand, the opposition adopted a "diagnostic frame" by highlighting the unfairness of their current situation and by portraying themselves as a group suffering from unjust treatment by the pro-government party.

4.2. Evolution of Adversarial Attitudes

Researchers³⁹ stress that as the conflict develops psycho-sociological changes occur among the adversaries. Groups become highly polarized and boundaries between "us" and "them," are emphasized. Strengthening of boundaries between groups involved is usually followed by a reduction or a breakdown of communication. This, in turn, may lead to negative stereotyping, distortion of facts as the parties

37 "Iran cleric urges Bahraini Shiites to keep up protests," *YaLibnan*, 18 March 2011; available at <http://www.yalibnan.com/2011/03/18/iran-cleric-urges-bahraini-shiites-to-keep-up-protests>, last accessed on April 4, 2012.

38 Barbara Gray, "Framing of environmental disputes," in *Making sense of intractable environmental disputes: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Roy J. Lewicki, Barbara Gray and Michael Elliott (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003). 11-34, 12.

39 For example: Elanor Kamans, Sabine Otten and Ernestine H. Gordijn, "Threat and power in intergroup conflict: How threat detremines emotional and behavioral reactions in powerless groups," *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 14 (2010): 293-310.; Barbara-Ann Mullin and Michael A. Hogg, "Dimensions of subjective uncertainty in social identification and minimal intergroup discrimination," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 37 (1998): 345-365.

"evaluate their own attributes more positively than those of the other group"⁴⁰ and derogatory rumors spread that escalate the conflict further. Finally, each group may dehumanize its opponents, which allows them to easily resort to coercion. This process "makes any moral norms against harming other human beings seem irrelevant. Those excluded from moral norms can be viewed simply as inferior or as evil, perverted, or criminal,"⁴¹ which is enough of a justification for harming or destroying the adversary.⁴² It is important to understand that resorting to coercion leads almost inescapably to retaliation, thus violence creates a spiral that produces more violence.

The presentation of "us" and "them", based on an analysis of Bahraini social media, clearly illustrates the polarization of the Bahraini society. Protestors and their opponents, construct a strong sense of belonging surrounding their cause. It is highlighted by the use of pronouns such as "we", "our" in opposition to "they" and "their". Both groups present themselves as victims and the killed on each side are called "martyrs". The Other is often described using labels. Those supporting the government are often referred to as "slaves" and "cowards". On the other hand, the opposition is branded as "terrorists" who place their loyalties with "Iran" and "Hezbollah". Thus protestors are accused of being "traitors" who secretly "gather weapons" to carry out instructions of foreign powers. Moreover, each of the groups presents itself as being under "attack", while the Other constitutes a "threat". The account of the events and the presentation of the events vary widely.

The adversaries and the developments are analyzed in black-and-white terms. Rumors, negative stereotyping and the distortion of facts to fit the perceived scenario are common techniques employed. Ultimately, they lead to dehumanization of the adversary who is perceived as a category and not as an individual. The pro-government camp accused the protestors of being selfish and inconsiderate in their quest for reforms. As the protest took place in a central area of Bahrain and later spread to the Salmaniya public hospital, government supporters claimed that the lives of common people were put into jeopardy. Apart from complaints about blocking main highways and limiting movement in the country, patients not involved in the protests were allegedly unable to receive medical treatment in the public hospital. The integrity of medical doctors was thought to be compromised as well, as Sunnis believed that preference in treatment was given to Shia protestors over other patients. These allegations have brought into scope the issue of human rights. The violations of human rights in Bahrain, such as lack of

40 Louis Kriesberg, *Constructive Conflicts: From Escalation to Resolution* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007) 32.

41 Michelle Maiese, *Destructive Escalation* (September 2003); available at <http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/escalation>.

42 Louis Kriesberg, "Identity Issues," *Peace Prints: South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 3 (Winter 2010): 2-11, 4.

transparency in the judicial system, torture of political prisoners, denial of free speech and discrimination, to quote just a few issues, have been widely denounced by the opposition.⁴³ Excessive use of violence against the protestors that led to several casualties led to the ultimate condemnation of the regime in the eyes of the opposition. It is interesting to note that the pro-government camp strongly believed that human rights were used as a pretext to cover up "criminal acts" committed by the revolutionary movement. Indeed, another point of discontent deals with the truthfulness of the portrayal of the events by the activists themselves and by the media. Both groups accuse each other of providing a one-sided version of the story, sometimes falsifying reality.

The protestors point out the brutality of the security forces that left a number of protestors injured or killed. They also underline aggression towards medical personnel and unarmed civilians including women and children. Uploaded videos and pictures serve as testimony to violence on both sides of the conflict. The pro-government sites present a completely different image. The protestors are shown provoking the security forces, carrying weapons and themselves involved in acts of brutality against the police and expatriates from South Asia. Some comments go as far to state that protestors used fake blood to present events as more dramatic and to manipulate the international opinion. Since these versions differ considerably, adversaries accuse each other of editing footages to serve their own purposes or even of fabricating the videos entirely. Moreover, both groups denounce the national or international media. The protestors claim the national media does not give them justice and "is lying." Their opponents criticize coverage of the events by some international media as completely biased.

Consequently, the issue of peacefulness is raised. Both sides present themselves as peace-loving people who seek protection of their just rights. The anti-government side seeks "freedom," while the pro-government side wants "peace." In addition, Facebook comments take a racial twist. Since the security forces involved include a large number of employees from South Asia and other Arab countries, they are branded by protestors as "mercenaries" who "would do anything to get a passport." The pro-government side presents them as "brave" people who perform their job, while risking their lives. This is shown in contrast to protestors themselves, who are ridiculed as having a "picnic" and engaging in immoral behavior at the Pearl Roundabout.

Even though in certain instances social media contributors underline that they make no generalization towards a specific religious or ethnic group since some of their members may be misjudged in this way, the emotional factor plays a further role in

43 Bahrain Centre for Human Rights documents the cases of human rights abuse; at this time the website of the Centre www.bahrainrights.org is blocked in Bahrain

splitting public opinion. Pictures and video clips taken at funerals of the "martyrs" on both sides of the conflict, often portraying grieving families, cause uneasy sensations among viewers and may easily stir up feelings of revenge and reinforcing the threat of backlash. It has been noted that "pain is likely to justify renewed struggle" and is unlikely to lead to compromise. Moreover, "justified struggles call for greater sacrifices, which absorb increased pain and strengthen determination."⁴⁴

4.3. Strategies

The tactics both groups employed in the conflict evolved over time. The strategy of peaceful occupation put in motion by the protestors was met with coercion. As the authorities cleared the Pearl Roundabout, protestors who tried to return to occupation of the spot were shot upon. At this point, the situation may have seemed contained by the authorities. However, studies suggest that in the presence of repression, protestors become polarized and even moderates are pushed to espouse radical ideas and resort to violence.⁴⁵ Moreover, as explained beforehand, instead of containment, violence leads to further sacrifice. It is not a coincidence that many members of the opposition started to wear flags with inscriptions "Ready to die for Bahrain". Throughout the uprising negative stereotyping that led to dehumanization of adversaries intensified and ultimately the country was plunged deeper into sectarian strife.

The tensions escalated and eventually led to violent sectarian clashes in the areas inhabited jointly by members of both sects. The district of Hamad Town was affected first on March 3, 2011. Tensions have existed there since 2008. The area was particularly vulnerable to instability because it is home to large numbers of naturalized Bahrainis. The naturalization of foreigners is a touchy subject for the Shia. The factors that contributed to the clashes were thus particularly salient. However, the unrest quickly spread to other districts. Subsequently, neighbors set up vigils and security checkpoints to prevent strangers from entering their districts. Meanwhile the unrest affected public schools jointly attended by Sunni and Shia students. The violence and devastation at the University of Bahrain led to the temporary closure of all schools and universities in the country. Several cases of attacks on foreign laborers of Asian origin, purportedly carried out by protestors, were reported in the media.

The interpretation of the events presented herein determined the behavior in the aftermath of the "Day of Rage." When allegations that Hezbollah had trained

44 I. William Zartman, "The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments," *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics* 1 (September 2001): 8-18.

45 Nicholas Sambanis and Annalisa Zinn, *From protest to violence: An analysis of conflict escalation with an Application to Self-Determination Movements*. Yale University, 2004, Manuscript.

Bahraini activists were voiced the pro-government camp saw the use of force as the only option to end the alleged terrorist plot. At this point, the pro-government camp was convinced of an alleged "Shia takeover"⁴⁶ and welcomed the arrival of GCC troops to restore order. For the protestors, their presence meant foreign interference and "occupation" of the country. It is interesting to note that, after the crackdown of March 17, 2011, rumors about a foiled Shia plot were circulated by word of mouth. One version claimed that Iran was due to send weapons by sea to Bahrain under cover of night. Another version spoke about a weapons arsenal containing swords and machine guns discovered somewhere in the Shia coastal village. This interpretation stands in sharp contrast to international analyses, which assessed that in actual fact the Iranian influence in Bahraini protests was rather limited.⁴⁷

5. Attempted Solution

The National Dialogue that was supposed to bring the opposition and the pro-government camps together proved to be a failure. Due to the dehumanization and de-individualization of the adversary, the idea of a dialogue with the opposition may not have been supported to begin with. A 50 year old Sunni man told me that he could not understand how the opposition asked to negotiate with the government whom they wanted to depose. He mentioned that it was ridiculous to just ask the royal family to leave. Consequently, after the crackdown at the Pearl Roundabout and the spread of the conflict into the Salmaniya Hospital, pro-government citizens did not deplore the use of violence and in general, did not express any pity for the injured and killed. On the contrary, a number of informants stated that, in their opinion, protestors should not have been even allowed to use the public healthcare facilities. Since they acted against the government, they should not take advantage of the government-sponsored healthcare system. Furthermore, the opinions became even more uncompromising.

The repressions began leading to imprisonment, suspension and dismissals of employees, withdrawal of study scholarships and the destruction of Shia mosques, which the authorities judged illegally constructed, but still the pro-government camp saw these actions as insufficient. The release of political prisoners and reinstatement of employees that followed the initial crackdown did not satisfy these demands. The protestors were branded as "traitors" who deserve punishment for their actions. In the common opinion of the pro-government camp, the government was overindulgent and it was high time to take firm action so as not to encourage

46 Rebecca Torr, "Masked thugs attack homes," *Gulf Daily News*, 16 March 2011.

47 Babak Rahimi, *Special Commentary: Iran and the Bahraini Uprising*, (The Jamestown Foundation, 2011) [database on-line]; available at http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=37611, last accessed on April 4, 2012.

future revolutionary movements. As an old Sunni man explained "the government takes them [Shias] to prison; then there is amnesty and they are let out and then they start to do the same thing again."

Furthermore, throughout the protests, the attention of the Sunni public shifted towards the economic effect of the unrest in the country. A 60 year old Sunni taxi driver stated that, similarly to the protestors, he was not rich but he preferred to live in peace than to create chaos and ruin the country. The cancellation of the Formula 1 race in March 2011, which is a source of lucrative profit for many businesses, was a punch to Bahraini economy. A general feeling of discontent was expressed among the government supporters. Widely repeated rumors claimed that Shia businesses allegedly profited during the unrest, while purposely plunging the rest of the economy into crisis. The Jawad Business Group, among others, was accused of distributing free food on the Pearl Roundabout, while making additional profits by selling their products during the protests. Some respondents even believed that the "powerful" Shias paid the protestors to stay on the Pearl Roundabout and continue demonstrations. A call for a boycott of Shia-owned businesses was launched.⁴⁸ Throughout the unrest several outlets were attacked and vandalized in areas inhabited by Sunnis. On the other hand, the anti-government camp initiated a campaign to boycott the Formula 1 event in Bahrain in 2012. The protestors believe that staging of an international event in Bahrain would allow the government to promote its image, while international opinion would turn a blind eye to their hardships. At this point, the protest movement was seen by the pro-government camp as an obstacle to the country's economic development.

6. Conclusion

While it is too early to fully appreciate the outcomes of the Arab Spring, this case study provides an insight into the unanticipated consequences of the social upheavals of 2011 in the Middle East. Avoiding simplistic interpretations, this paper offers a comprehensive illustration of the mechanisms responsible for the widening Shia-Sunni divide in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Current Western analyses of the Bahraini upheaval fall into two categories, namely, description of the upheaval as a brutally crushed pro-democracy movement or as an Iranian-backed insurgency.⁴⁹

48 A petition is still available on-line at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/bjb1/>, last accessed on April 4, 2012.

49 Compare, for example, comments of Finian Cunningham, "Syria, Bahrain: A Tale of Two Uprisings... One Fabricated, the Other Forgotten," *Global Research*, March 19, 2012; available at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=29854>, last accessed on April 4, 2012, and Mitchell A. Belfer, "The 'Arab Spring' as Winter Descends," *National Review Online*, January 18, 2012; available at www.nationalreview.com/articles/288392/arab-spring-winter-descends-mitchell-belfer, last accessed on April 4, 2012.

Nonetheless, both approaches, due to their narrow scope, fail to assess the importance of psychological factors in conflict situations. The Bahraini "Day of Rage" opposed not solely the opposition versus the authorities but led to a society-wide confrontation. This paper allows readers to fully understand the motivations of the groups involved in the conflict, their interpretation of events and subsequently, their actions. Consequently, it fulfils the need for a holistic overview of conflict situations. Holistic approaches to conflict resolution and peace building have been stressed as the most effective, yet still sporadically employed strategy.⁵⁰

It is clear that the "Day of Rage" escalated sectarian strife in Bahraini society. In this paper we presented an analysis of the social conflict using elements from Hocker and Wilmot's conflict assessment model. We concluded that Bahrainis interpreted recent developments depending on their sectarian affiliations. The real challenge lies in the fact that, as these interpretations reveal more and more conflicting perspectives, the gap between both sects widens. This polarization has already led to creation of mental barriers, judgments and prejudices that prevent co-operation and peaceful co-existence in society. Eventually, there exists a danger of radicalism, which has already surfaced in social media portals. The escalation of the social conflict in Bahrain induces, what Deutsch describes as a destructive, competitive process of conflict resolution. The following quote of a Bahraini "They [Shias] are not human they are criminals. [...] We never can get along with them" is a worrisome outcome of the "Day of Rage" upheaval tensions. This change in mentality marks a sharp contrast to past experiences of Sunni–Shia co-operation in Bahrain. As Sunnis and Shias look at the past events from different perspectives, the question is whether they can share a common future. The question is all the more important since socio-psychological barriers "serve as a catalyst for continuation of the conflict and in fact [operate] as part of the vicious circle in the intractable conflict."⁵¹ In fact, the dangers of the current situation include an inability to reach a common resolution, a state of continuous upheaval leading to a growing instability of the current political system, increasing militarization and resort to coercion. As the Bahraini uprising continues despite containment, it is vital to study further developments of the social conflict. Moreover, future studies are needed to assess the ability of the political system to evolve and create a stable basis for its legitimacy independent from sectarian divisions. As the system has been under a growing pressure from the opposition, the sectarian dimension of the conflict exacerbates its vulnerability given the fact that the crown is identified primarily with the Sunni part of the Bahraini society.

The limitations of this study stem from the adopted methods of ethnographic enquiry. Firstly, the scope of the study is limited in time. Given the continued

50 Catherine Barnes, *Agents for Change: Civil Society Roles in Preventing War & Building Peace* (The Hague: ECCP, 2006).

51 Bar-Tal and Halperin, "Socio-psychological barriers to conflict resolution," 232.

character of the social conflict in Bahrain and, possibly, changing patterns in group dynamics, the context of the research may be subject to change, thus the findings may need to be further evaluated. Secondly, the volatile situation in Bahrain, including but not limited to the months of February-June 2011, may have impacted equal access to informants from all backgrounds due to restrictions and monitoring of movement in the country. This article aims, however, at revealing the usually unknown or omitted aspect of the Bahraini uprising and at fostering further research. Future research directions may, for example, include measures of social polarization⁵²; analysis of development of civil society in Bahrain and its role in conflict resolution as well as possible limits to democratization of the regime.

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52 Joan-Maria Esteban and Ray Debraj, "On the Measurement of Polarization," *Econometrica* 62 (July 1994): 819-851.

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