



SECTARIANISM: A BLEMISH ON IRAN-BAHRAIN RELATIONS

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Bahrain is a tiny nation in West Asia with Shi'a majority which gained independence in 1971 from the British rule. This happened on the assertions of Iran related to its dispute with Britain on the dominion of rule over Bahrain. Both Shahs and Ayatollahs had asserted claims to sovereignty over Bahrain from time to time. For the same reason, Bahrain had recognised, in the past, that it needed the foreign powers such as Britain at first and later US, to protect it from dominating neighbours such as Iran. After Iranian Revolution in 1979, this Iranian muscle flexing over Bahrain had increased leading to the strained relations. Iran had been accused of promoting sectarianism in the region vis-à-vis Bahrain—which has a majority Shi'a population and Sunni government in power at present.

In yet another incident Iran has been accused of perpetrating sectarianism and violence when Bahrain—the Sunni Muslim ruled kingdom—stripped the top Shi'a Muslim cleric of its citizenship. The cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim had

been accused of using his position to serve foreign interests and promote sectarianism and violence in the country. The authorities added that the cleric had “adopted theocracy and stressed on the absolute allegiance to the clergy.”¹ The Iranian foreign ministry criticised this move with a threat from the commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) that the act might set the whole region on fire thereby leading the Shi'a people to resort to armed resistance against this act of the Bahrain government. This incident comes after Bahrain had suspended the leading Shi'a opposition group—Wefaq Nationalist Islamic Society—by closing down all its offices and freezing all its assets. The act has been criticised by the Lebanese Shi'ite movement Hezbollah. Scholars are speculating that this incident is a setback in Iran-Bahrain relations.

Iran and Bahrain have had modest economic and trade relations in the past. However, there was a drop in the trade between

Iran and various other GCC countries including Bahrain, after Iran and Saudi Arabia severed their diplomatic ties earlier this year. As a result, Iran's trade with Bahrain, Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia—the four other countries that have snapped trade relations with Tehran—reached a low of 145 million collectively.²

Bahrain is at the heart of the sectarian fault lines running across West Asia with Saudi Arabia on the one side and Iran on the other. Shia-Sunni sectarianism is the root cause of violence in the west Asian region as has been pointed by many scholars and analysts. It may be noted that, of the total Muslim population (1.5 billion) of the world, 85% are Sunnis and the rest are Shi'a. Both the sects share some common beliefs and practices. There are many places in the world where both the sects have existed peacefully.³ It is also true that the out-and-out violence amongst these factions has never happened, however, it had led to tension in the West Asian region leading to the present day violence. Geographically, the Kingdom of Bahrain is made up of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf region that has been experiencing unrest and rioting on a continuous basis for the last two years. Bahrain is a country that grew rich on oil discovered in 1931.⁴ The Shi'a population in Bahrain have complained of various issues including discrimination by the government, high rate of unemployment etc. Importance of Bahrain for Iran cannot be understated. Bahrain improves Iran's acceptability as a benign nation with a

considerable Shi'ite population. At the same time, this would enable Bahrain to show more benevolence to its own Shi'a population.

Iran had the historic claim to Bahrain until March 1970s when Shah abandoned the claim as a result of a secret Anglo-Iranian treaty. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, history perceives that Shi'ite clerics in Bahrain orchestrated a failed coup in 1981 which was regarded as an act perpetrated by Iranian support. This was, however, denied by Iran. The fear of recurrence of similar incidents led to the crackdown on the Shi'ite population thereby further straining the relations with Iran. Since then, the ties between Iran and Bahrain have remained strained with Bahrain asserting that Iran was trying to export terrorism to the countries in West Asia during the 1980s and 1990s. However, the diplomatic and political relations between the two countries have improved since then but not to the desired level, with unrest continuing amongst Bahrain's Shi'ite population fuelling tensions between the two nations.⁵ Scholars believe that the 'Arab Spring' has been responsible for fanning the flames in the region with Bahrain alleging that the Iranian proxies are behind the growing unrest in Bahrain. In January this year, Bahrain, being a close ally of Saudi Arabia in the region, had severed its ties with Iran following the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry over the execution of Shi'ite cleric Nimr-al-Nimr along with more than 40 others. Bahrain government has accused Iran of "blatant

and dangerous terrorism” in the internal affairs of Arab countries.⁶

Soufan Group, a New York based Strategic Security firm, has concluded that while the Sunni-Shia divide is as old as Islam, current divisions are driven far more by regional rivalries and political gamesmanship than by religion, though the latter remains a primary factor. The group’s report further added that sectarianism encourages extremist rhetoric and violence and serves to distract the populations from economic and social concerns, by providing a convenient enemy to focus on.⁷

There is a general perception in West Asia that Shi’ite Islamism can be linked to Iran. However, this proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Bahrain has its roots in ideological and geopolitical importance of Bahrain in the region. A permanent solution to this sectarian rhetoric is quite unlikely; however, it is necessary to understand the regional scope of these problems in order to find a practical solution to the sectarian tensions in the region. For Iran, it is necessary to address all the pending issues with its immediate neighbours through diplomatic dialogue. This is essential element for any nation to grow. Given the current scenario where Iran is on the threshold of getting integrated into the global regimes, it thereby, seeks global acceptability by engaging positively with its neighbours.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ “Iran general warns Bahrain after Shia cleric stripped of citizenship”, June 20, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36578844>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

² Alireza Ramezani, “Will Saudi’s cut to trade with Iran really matter?”, February 03, 2016, <http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/02/iran-saudi-commercial-ties-cut-trade-impact.html>. Accessed on June 22, 2016

³ Harriet Sherwood, “Sunni-Shia sectarianism at the root of much of Middle East violence”, January 04, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/04/sunni-shia-sectarianism-middle-east-islam>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

⁴ Bill Law, “Bahrain GP: The BBC explains the background to the protests”, April 16, 2013, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22122792. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

⁵ Will Fulton & Ariel Farrar-Wellman, “Bahrain-Iran Foreign Relations”, July 14, 2011, <http://www.irantracker.org/foreign-relations/bahrain-iran-foreign-relations>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

⁶ Suman Varandani, “Diplomatic Actions against Iran: Bahrain Severs Ties After Saudi Arabia Breaks Off Riyadh-Tehran Relations”, January 4, 2016, <http://www.ibtimes.com/diplomatic-actions-against-iran-bahrain-severs-ties-after-saudi-arabia-breaks-riyadh-2247576>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.

⁷ Pamela Engel, “The greatest threat in the Middle East is 'going to get much worse before it gets better'”, January 11, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.in/The-greatest-threat-in-the-Middle-East-is-going-to-get-much-worse-before-it-gets-better/articleshow/50525514.cms>. Accessed on June 21, 2016.