

# Iranian Claims to Bahrain: From Rhetoric to Interference

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**Abstract:** *The saga surrounding Iran's potential nuclearisation is a reflection of a more nefarious set of strategies that range from the exportation of the Islamic revolution and the spread of a militant brand of Ithna-Ashriya (Twelver/Imami) Shia ideology to a more geopolitically-centred projection of Iranian influence along the Arabian Gulf littoral and into the Arabian Peninsula for the objective of harnessing Iranian power over its main regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states. This work focuses on a single flashpoint – Bahrain – which the Islamic Republic identifies as a gateway for achieving these ambitions. It presents and explores the main lines of argumentation deployed by the Islamic Republic in the long-attempt to extend its sovereignty over Bahrain and shows how such proclamations may produce violence on the ground.*

**Keywords:** *Iran, Bahrein, Territorial Integrity, Gulf Cooperation Council, Arab Spring, Interference*

**Resumen:** La epopeya alrededor de la potencial nuclearización de Irán es un reflejo de un conjunto de estrategias más perverso que va desde la exportación de la revolución islámica a la expansión de la marca militante de la ideología Ithna-Ashriya (Twelver/Imami) Shia a una proyección más geopolíticamente centrada en la influencia iraní a lo largo del litoral del Golfo pérsico y dentro de la Península Arábiga con el objetivo de emplear el poder iraní sobre sus principales rivales regionales, Arabia Saudí y el resto de estados del Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo. Este trabajo se centra en un único detonante – Bahrain –, que la República Islámica identifica como el pasaporte para alcanzar estas ambiciones. Presenta y explora las principales líneas de argumentación desplegadas por la República Islámica en su intento de extender a largo plazo su soberanía sobre Bahrain y muestra cómo estas proclamaciones pueden producir violencia sobre el terreno.

**Palabras clave:** Irán, Bahrein, integridad territorial, Consejo de Cooperación del Golfo, Primera Árabe, interferencia

## Introduction

Much of the recent security discourse involving Iran has centred on its role in Iraq's and Syria's civil wars, WMD proliferation and the series of international dialogues (P5+1) and incentives meant to curtail the emergence of a nuclear armed Islamic Republic. Since Iranian nuclearisation would likely trigger a regional arms race and heighten already-simmering tensions, that aspect of Iranian policy-making has preoccupied many quadrants of the international community for

the past decade or so.<sup>1</sup> However, the saga surrounding Iran's potential nuclearisation is a reflection of a more nefarious set of strategies that range from the exportation of the Islamic revolution and the spread of a militant brand of Ithna-Ashriya (Twelver / Imami) Shia ideology to a more geopolitically-centred projection of Iranian influence along the Arabian Gulf littoral and into the Arabian Peninsula; all for the objective of harnessing Iranian power over its main regional rivals, Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states.<sup>2</sup> This work focuses on a single flashpoint – Bahrain – which the Islamic Republic identifies as a gateway for achieving these ambitions. Irrespective of whether Iran's quest to join the nuclear family is successful, it seems determined to physically increase its Gulf presence even if this comes at the expense of Bahrain's national survival.

For the most part, Iran's approach to Bahrain is based on three principles. First, the **Shia principle** where the Islamic Republic asserts religious and political control over any substantial Shia community and has targeted Bahrain for subversion since its demography contains an estimated 50%-52% Shia.<sup>3</sup> Second, the **regional hegemonic principle**, where Iran – building on the long history of Persia's regional dominance – constructs a security identity based on its self-prescribed cultural and political superiority and seeks to re-establish the type of political control enjoyed by the Persian Empire throughout the region; though with a theocratic overtone. From this perspective, Iranian attempts at exercising control over Bahrain are based on its historical re-interpretation of how the Persian Empire dominated the country (even if for a short period of time). Finally, there is the **realpolitik principle**, where Iranian interests in Bahrain are based on its power projections against its regional rival, Saudi Arabia. In this way, Bahrain is being treated instrumentally—as a stepping stone to deeper intervention in the Arabian Peninsula.

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1. For samples of the Iranian nuclear question see: Dingli Shen (2006), 'Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Tests China's Wisdom,' *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:2, pp. 55-66, Michael Rubin (2008), 'Can a Nuclear Iran Be Contained or Deterred?' *American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research*, number 8, pp. 1-9, Chris Quillen (2002), 'Iranian Nuclear Weapons Policy: Past, Present and Possible Future,' *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 6:2, pp. 17-24.

2. For overviews of Iran's foreign policy see: Sanam Vakil (2006), 'Iran: Balancing East against West,' *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:4, pp. 51-65 and Anthony Cordesman (2005), *Iran's Developing Military Capabilities*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Significant Issues Series, 27:4.

3. This demographic date is based on research conducted in Bahrain between March 2012 and October 2013. See Mitchell Belfer (2014), *Small State, Dangerous Region: A Strategic Assessment of Bahrain*, Peter Lang Publishing, Frankfurt am Main: Germany. According to leaked US Embassy cables, the Bahrain's Shia community is split into many sub-groups but mainly follow one of three circles, those of Ayatollah Khamenei (Iran), Ayatollah Sistani (Iraq) and Muhammad Fadlallah (Lebanon). The assessments also indicate that Isa Qassim is 'Bahrain's most popular Shi'a cleric.' In reality, these three circles are deeply interwoven and there tends to be wide agreement between these leaders over policy. Hence, Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei asserts religious control over Bahrain's Shi'a using Qassim as a proxy and endorsed by both Sistani and Fadlallah. See: 'US Embassy Cables: Bahrain's Relations with Iran,' published by The Guardian, 15 February 2011.

For its part, and throughout its history, Bahrain has been the object of interest of regional and international actors. While it would be interesting to trace the entire spectrum of states and empires that eyed Bahrain as a potential avenue for enhanced regional influence, this work focuses on the most recent, which also happens to be the most enduring and enterprising of Bahrain's adversaries; Iran. Whether referring to the Persian Empire, Shah Pahlavi's regime or the Islamic Republic, Bahrain has been regarded by the ruling elite of Iran as forming a part of its territory and has spent enormous energies and monies, haphazardly over the centuries, in the attempt to destabilise and occupy the Island.

Long before the birth of the Islamic Republic, Iran maintained a position of occupying all the islands in the Arabian Gulf—including Bahrain.<sup>4</sup> From the early 19th until the late 20th century, Iran has absorbed and militarised most of the islands situated adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz: Abu Musa, Larak, Sirri, Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Qeshm.<sup>5</sup> While most of these islands were acquired during the 19th century, the forced absorption of the three islands belonging to the UAE, and populated by Trucial Arabs – Abu Musa, Lesser and Greater Tunb in 1971<sup>6</sup> – has raised Gulf suspicions about Iran's intentions since such occupations were not overturned following the rise of Khomeini. On the contrary. Revolutionary Iran has been even more vocal in retaining the three islands and has not included status talks as part of any dialogue with the UAE, other members of the GCC or the international community at large. Their annexation may be contextualised as based on opportunity since 1971 marks the final redeployments of British forces from the region and the end of the protection of Bahrain as well as the Trucial states. The Shah seemed to be satisfied with Iran's *fait accompli*. The Ayatollah was not. Since the birth of the Islamic Republic, Iran has sought to connect-the-dots in its Gulf holdings, and this has meant attempts at reaching across to the western shores of the Gulf to Bahrain.

One of the main reasons for the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was to enhance the security of the small – and relatively vulnerable – Trucial states vis-à-vis Iran. Both Bahrain and Qatar decided against joining the UAE since they did not feel their security to be as endangered as the UAE's. This should not be taken to imply that Bahrain did not feel threatened by Iran, it did, especially since Iran only (temporarily) ceased claiming Bahrain in 1970.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more than any other

4. See J. B. Kelly (1957), 'The Persian Claims to Bahrain,' *International Affairs*, 33:1 and Majid Khadduri (1951), 'Iran's Claims to the Sovereignty of Bahrain,' *The American Journal of International Law*, 45:4, as examples.

5. Caitlin Talmadge (2008), 'Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz,' *International Security*, 31:3, pp. 86-87.

6. Gregory F. Gause III (2010), *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, Cambridge UP, p. 23.

7. Alber H. Hourani (2013), *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 408.

political challenge facing Bahrain, the threat of direct Iranian intervention is ranked highest. There is a strange history behind Iran's current claims to Bahrain and while the so-called Arab Spring acted as a pretext to revive anti-establishment activities against Bahrain the historical account of Iranian (Persian) interference runs deep. Before detailing some of the more recent events surrounding Iran's actions in and against Bahrain it is important to provide a longer historical arch.

This work examines the specifics of the Iranian-Bahraini relationship and traces the main challenges the former poses to the latter. To achieve this goal, this work proceeds as follows. First, this work identifies and assesses the specific claims that Iran has raised in regards to Bahrain. This section is based on examining both academic and political debates that surfaced in the late 1950's and resonates until our own times. This section also demonstrates how the underlining logic of Iranian arguments formed the basis of interference in Bahrain. Second, this work argues that the manner in which Iran claims sovereignty over Bahrain has produced a pattern of violent actions targeting Bahrain's government and civil society culminated in Bahrain's chapter of the Arab Spring which continues to unfold. This work concludes with a reflection of lessons learned for a Bahrain that faces a significantly more powerful adversary which refuses to fully relinquish its claims to the Island.

### **Iranian Claims to Bahrain**

In addition to the UAE's islands that have been occupied by Iranian forces since 1971, Bahrain may be considered as part of Iran's strategic super-puzzle, in which each piece must be obtained in order for the puzzle to gain real shape and significance. It is becoming increasingly apparent that Iran views Bahrain as an intrinsic part of the Islamic Republic irrespective of the national ambitions of the Island. While this work recognises the geostrategic importance attached to Bahrain in general terms, there is a clear difference in the manner competing powers have sought to gain access to the country. For the most part, the US and UK sought entry through invitation and treaty. Certainly, the UK has deployed force in Bahrain to accomplish some of its strategic and economic goals, though these were few and far apart and often required shifting alliance from one domestic actor to another. This approach has not been mimicked by Iran in its long quest to absorb Bahrain as its self-declared 14th province. It therefore comes as no surprise that Iran has used a variety of methods for instigating Bahrain's forced accession. These attempts have been based on false lines of argumentation, the deployment of falsified or exaggerated historical claims and the raw usage of political and military power. In this way, it seems that one of the only elements of the Shah's Iran which remains intact today is the manner in which Iran seeks to gain control of Bahrain. Consider that 'the Shah of Iran made tentative

claims to the Island during the period Britain was leaving the Gulf, and Khomeini sent messengers to Bahrain soon after he consolidated power.<sup>8</sup>

The Shah's contention and Khomeini's messengers were, essentially, two ways of achieving the same objective. It is therefore essential to present the main narratives that have been adopted by Iran in its quest to forcibly absorb Bahrain. The following section intends to detail the types of arguments adopted as part of the official narratives of Iran, whether the Persian Empire, the Iranian state or the Islamic Republic, in terms of its claims to Bahrain; points that form the backbone justifying Iran's direct and indirect involvement in the country.

It is essential to trace the 19<sup>th</sup> century lines of argumentation the Islamic Republic deploys in order to assert sovereignty over the Island. These may have been developed well over a century ago, however they continue to form the bedrock of Iranian intransigence over the issue of Bahrain. These claims have facilitated Iran's recruitment and training of paramilitary forces among fractions of Bahrain's Shia population since the Islamic Republic's propaganda maintains that Bahrain was part of the wider Shia Islamic community and that it is the responsibility of each Shia to reclaim and occupy the Island. In fact, the Ithna-Ashriya Shia – whose members tend to follow Iranian Ayatollahs – have propagated the idea that they are the original Bahrainis for centuries and are 'commonly called Baharina, after the original name of their homeland, which was Bahran (later pronounced Bahrayn).'<sup>9</sup>

There is little doubt that the Bahran finds its origins in Bahrain, though it was never the dominant sect and shared the lands and resources of Bahrain with a wide assortment of peoples. The Ithna-Ashriya identifies Bahran as original Bahrainis and whether this is true or not, such historiography does not legally or ethically imply that the country is intrinsically theirs by divine right and the claims adopted by Iran (as the vanguard representative of the Ithna-Ashriya) – and the methods it deploys against Bahrain to assume control over the Island – is out-of-sync with current international relations norms. At the same time, as the Islamic Republic continues to grow in influence and power, it is increasingly clear that its claims to Bahrain, despite using the rhetoric of religious "wholeness," are nothing more than an attempt to expand its power to the western shores of the Arabian Gulf.

In reality, the Islamic Republic's claims are flimsy at best. It is therefore important to re-examine them since 'Iranian policies towards Bahrain have been characterised by antagonistic attitudes which are largely based on Iranian attempts to expand, con-

8. Anthony H. Cordesman and Robert M. Shelala II (2013), 'US and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula,' *CSIS Report*, 3rd Edition, p. 82.

9. Kamal Salibi (1988), 'Tribal Origins of the Religious Sects in the Arab East,' in Halim Barakat (ed) (1988), *Towards a Viable Lebanon*, London: Croom Helm, p. 24.

trol and ultimately dominate Bahrain,' despite that Iranian claims have no legitimacy in international law.<sup>10</sup> Consider Luard's assessment that

Iran's claim to Bahrain is based on a period of occupation in the eighteenth century [...] claims are doubtful under international law unless they have been maintained and reasserted continuously throughout the period of foreign occupation, but this has not deterred some countries [re: Iran] from resurrecting claims that had been long forgotten. Here the dispute is concerned with which period of occupation has most significance.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Iranian claims do not correspond to international legal norms since they have not been maintained and reasserted, they are out-dated, have been repudiated – by Iran and the international community – and have selected a very limited period of their occupation as the basis for their claim; some 30 years of direct rule in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The following subsection examines the specific claims that Iran has raised, and continues to raise, in seeking sovereignty over Bahrain.

### **Iran's Specific Claims to Bahrain**

In 1957, an academic debate erupted over the future of Bahrain—then an independent state under treaty-based protection of the UK. The row centred on two key scholars, Kelly and Adamiyat over the latter's claim that Bahrain was an integral part of the Persian Empire and hence must be returned to Iran as it was considered a “break away” province. This claim formed the backbone of Adamiyat's book entitled: *Bahrein Islands: A Legal and Diplomatic Study of the British-Iranian Controversy*. Kelly took heed and responded; producing an insightful and sharp critique of Adamiyat's work and settling once and for all – or at least Kelly believed so – Iran's claims to Bahrain. It is important to revisit this debate in order to fully recognise the position adopted by Iran vis-à-vis Bahrain.

There are four main lines of argumentation Iran deploys to justify its intransigence vis-à-vis Bahrain. These form the bulk of the dispute between Kelly and Adamiyat and need to be reviewed and assessed so that more sense may be made of the unfolding troubles on the Island and between Bahrain and Iran.

Firstly, Adamiyat claimed that Bahrain was governed by Iran, without major interruption, for some 400 years, since the so-called

10. Khalid al Hamdani (2012), 'Interview,' at the University of Bahrain on 20 September 2012.

11. Evan Luard (1970), 'Frontier Disputes in Modern International Relations,' in Evan Luard (ed) (1970), *The International Regulation of Frontier Disputes*, Thames and Hudson: London UK, p. 13.

Buyyid dynasty, freed and reunited much of the country including Mishmahig Islands [Bahrain in Persian], after controlling Abbasid caliphs at Baghdad, in the Iranian province of Khavarvaran (today known as Iraq), and was part of Iranian realm until 1522 when Portuguese invaded the Island [...] By [sic] In 1602 at the time of soaring power of Safavid dynasty, Iranian forces defeated Portuguese in ports and islands of Hormuz and expelled them from Mishmahig and reunited the islands with the mainland Iran once again.<sup>12</sup>

This is, of course, patently wrong. In addition to the fact that Persia played a very limited role in regional affairs in the lead-up to and following the assumption of al Khalifa power in Bahrain in 1783, there was nearly a 75 year period when 'Persia had played practically no part in the history of the Gulf.'<sup>13</sup> Certainly, Persia was still a major empire, though its holdings were sufficiently sapped and its capabilities to rule hampered. Adamiyat and Mojtahedzadeh conveniently failed to mention the rise of the Omani Empire or the fact that the Persian navy was so dilapidated at the time that they could not even bring enough ships to battle the Portuguese in the Arabian Gulf. Instead, Persia required Dutch and British naval assistance (they organised a short-lived alliance) to achieve their collective objective of ensuring freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

The historical narrative which suggests that Iran was in command of all the islands of the Arabian Gulf for 400 (+) years is a terrible exaggeration which undermines the national self-determination of the peoples of the Gulf islands and challenges the basic legitimacy of small states in the region. In reality, the history of Iranian control over Bahrain is limited. Despite this, Persia and later Iran claim that Bahrain had never been independent but instead that 'Bahrain did not cease to be part of the Persian dominions.'<sup>14</sup> This contrasts with historical records and Khadduri's treatment of Persian claims can be usefully reproduced here in order to illustrate their propagandic nature.

Khadduri reminds us that

Bahrayn, during its long and checkered history, was able to maintain a large measure of internal independence even when it had fallen under foreign control. Apart from its uncertain status in antiquity [...] the islands passed under Arab rule at the opening of the seventh century and remained, either as an integral part of the Arab Empire or as a semi-independent entity, until the sixteenth century. Arab rule, accordingly, may be said to have lasted for more than eight

12. Piruz Mojtahedzadeh (1995), 'Bahrain: The Land of Political Movements,' *Rahavard: A Persian Journal of Iranian Studies*, 11:39, 1995.

13. Kelly (1957), p. 54.

14. *Ibid*, p. 55.

centuries. The Portuguese rule roughly lasted for a century (*circa* 1507 to 1622), and the Persian rule (1622-1783) for little over one and a half century. From a purely historical standpoint, the Persian period has left no special impact on the inhabitants of the islands, whether racial or cultural, which would distinguish it from other periods. Contrary to the Persian contention [...] the inhabitants of the islands have either originally migrated from Arabia or have been Arabised under long Arab rule. They speak the Arabic language, though many of them speak Persian too, and their manners and customs are Arabian. Finally, they have been ruled since 1783 by their own Arab chiefs, even though they acknowledged British protection—a period which lasted longer than that of Persian rule. Iran's historical claim, based on a very limited past attachment, seems to carry with it the air of propaganda; it could hardly challenge Arab historical claims.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, Adamiyat claims that there was, at the time (and repeated) a Bahraini (al Khalifa) acknowledgement that it was a province of Iran, which carried on even after Bahrain's recognised independence. Specifically, Adamiyat argued that 'Bahrain did not cease to be part of the Persian dominions after 1783, and that al Khalifa Shaikhs are reputed to have made acknowledgement of this fact on more than one occasion, notably in 1817, when they solicited aid from the Shah against the Wahhabis.'<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Adamiyat is referring to the four annual tributes the Bani Utabi<sup>17</sup> provided the Persians following their claiming of Bahrain in 1783, however the practice of tribute was customary and was discontinued after a mere four years.<sup>18</sup> In other words, following the victory of the Bani Utabi over the Omanis and the Persians in Bahrain, the al Khalifa Shaikhs (re: the largest family within the Bani Utabi) paid tribute to Persia and this forms the basis of Iranian claims that the al Khalifa's have recognised themselves as vassals of Iran. This claim continues to form an important part of Iran's current claims to Bahrain.

Thirdly, Adamiyat claimed that the UK acknowledged Bahrain as being a province of Iran. Kelly demonstrates that the evidence deployed for such an assertion is based on 'a process of selection and omission, contrived to produce the contrary impression' that the 'British government has in the past recognised the Persian claim

15. Khadduri (1951), p. 640.

16. Adamiyat quoted in Kelly (1957), p. 55.

17. The Bani Utabi was a tribal alliance system which conquered Bahrain in 1783 and set-up an independent Emirate. For a wide reading into the Bani Utabi and Gulf political life throughout history see: Husain al-Baharna (1968), *The Legal Status of the Arabian Gulf States: A Study of Their Treaty Relations and Their International Relations*, University of Manchester Press.

18. Kelly (1957), p. 55.



to Bahrain.<sup>19</sup> For the most part, the selection portion of the equation has been rooted in the statement by one Captain William Bruce (then part of the Political Resident in Bushire) who suggested that Bahrain had ‘always been subordinate to the province of Fars’ and that the UK navy stood poised at the Prince of Shiraz’s request for the ‘reconquest of Bahrain.’<sup>20</sup> The reason for such a statement and embarking on an unauthorised relationship with the Prince of Shiraz? Bruce was already declared *persona non-grata* by the Persian authorities and this was seen as his only option to prolong his political career in the region. British damage control for the Bruce statement was threefold: they recalled Bruce and had his statement officially refuted, reaffirmed their neutrality in the Persian-Bahraini dispute, while explicitly reinforcing the spirit of friendship between Bahrain and the United Kingdom.<sup>21</sup> It is also worth noting that Bruce’s statement inadvertently got the UK and the Persian Empire to agree – if temporarily – on the regional *status quo*.

The Governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone ‘denounced the admission of the “sovereignty of Persia over Bahrain,” of which there is not a shadow of proof.’<sup>22</sup> Apparently, even the Shah, Fath Ali Shah ‘refused to acknowledge the existence of the agreement.’<sup>23</sup> What was disavowed and condemned as an unauthorised statement by a single individual has returned with force to Iran’s 20<sup>th</sup> century claims to Bahrain. It is as though the architects of the latest round of claimants thought that the international community would simply forget the manner in which the UK was supposed to have given its blessings to Iranian claims to Bahrain. Simply, the UK never accepted Persian or Iranian claims to Bahrain, a point made especially clear with the arrival of Ali Pasha’s army to the region and the incapacity of the Iranians to defend, in word or deed, Bahrain a task which was left up to the Bahrainis themselves with the support of the British navy. There was no attempt by the Bahrainis to reach out to Iran for support and neither did the Iranians offer any; they were two separate states that had to deal with their own situations. Iran did not aid Bahrain, the UK did, a point which supports the argument that the UK did not recognise the authority of Persia over Bahrain.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, there is the enduring myth that the Gulf and all that is in it belongs, and have always belonged, to Persia and Iran as its successor. Consider Persia’s (then) Prime Minister, Haji Miraz Aghasi’s statement to a British envoy to Tehran in 1845.

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19. Ibid, p. 57.

20. Ibid, pp. 57-58.

21. Ibid, p. 58.

22. Ibid, p. 58.

23. Ibid, p. 58.

24. See also: Khadduri (1951), pp. 633-638.

In the first place the sentiments of all governments, far and near, are in accordance with those of Persia that the Persian Gulf from the commencement of the Shatt-al-Arab to Muscat belongs to Persia, and that all the islands of that sea, without exception and without the partnership of any other Government, belong entirely to Persia, as indeed, in Your Excellency's language, you call that sea "the Persian Gulf."<sup>25</sup>

It is more than a historical irony that present-day Iran invokes the arguments of a substantially less religiously orthodox Persian empire in a less-than-veiled attempt to legitimise its territorial ambitions since it rejects nearly every other aspect of that time period and has gone to great lengths to demonstrate the continued religious purity of Iran despite the overwhelming evidence that shows that historic Persia was culturally and economically liberal and progressive. Yet, such recounting should not only be taken only as historical narration. Iran continues to lay claim to Bahrain based on the same argumentation and is intent on deploying overt and more clandestine means to undermine the stability of Bahrain for the purpose of correcting a perceived historical injustice. Such revisionist histories are not confined to the period leading up to the 1979 establishment of the Islamic Republic; they continue to comprise the main narrative behind Iranian regional positioning.

Consider Mojtahedzadeh's 1995 article entitled: 'Bahrain: The Land of Political Movements,'<sup>26</sup> which was adopted by the so-called *Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies* (CAIS) at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of the University of London as a key text used to indoctrinate its members as to the lost glory of Iran and mobilise them to accepting revisionist history as true. Indeed, the CAIS republished extracts of the original article under the title: 'Mishmahig Islands (Bahrain), "How Was Separated from Iran?"' Besides the terrible grasp of the English language, this article demonstrates that more than two centuries of Persian/Iranian (unsuccessful) attempts to absorb Bahrain have not been forgotten. Rather, the CAIS is intent on disseminating the Iranian narrative on its ownership of Bahrain in a bid to encourage Iranians to continue to struggle for that objective. This has clearly spilled over into Bahrain since the Ithna-Ashriya brand of Shia Islam is rooted in the Iranian clerical authority and that authority governs the behaviour of its adherents. So, without a legitimate platform from which to launch a campaign to absorb Bahrain, Iran has again laid inflammatory claims to the Islands while encouraging members of the Shia community in Bahrain to overthrow the government and banks on the idea that such an internal situation may present the opportunity for more direct Iranian intervention.

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25. Quoted in Kelly (1957), p. 61.

26. Mojtahedzadeh (1995).

In any case, Persia/Iran has revisited the lines of argumentation presented above time and time again; in the 1820's, 1860's, 1920's, 1950's, 1970's and ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. With each claim, an avalanche of official British rejection has followed.<sup>27</sup> This has been due to the special relationship between the UK and Bahrain founded and maintained by the latter's quest for external security and the former's strategic orientation in and around the Gulf. Yet, it is not a coincidence that for each incremental move the UK took to redeploy out of the region was met by renewed attempts by Iran to incorporate Bahrain under its sovereign domination. Gause captures this well in regards to the Shah who

viewed the British announcement [of its withdraw] as the opening it had long sought to assert its dominance in the Gulf and immediately revived the historical Persian claim to sovereignty over Bahrain and to a number of islands near the mouth of the Gulf.<sup>28</sup>

This pattern has continued into the Islamic Republic's national discourse; when there is a perceived reduction in international support for Bahrain, Iranian claims are publicised. As soon as the international community or selected members within it challenge such Iranian claims, the latter retreats from its position. In 2009, 2011 and 2012 Iran officially claimed Bahrain again.

How long will the UK (among others) defend the interests of Bahrain remains a mystery, however the historical record clearly reveals that the Iranian presence on Bahrain was short-lived and cannot equate to legitimate ownership of the Island. Therefore, the claims by Iran to ownership of Bahrain are themselves illegal under international law since they constitute a direct breach of the peace, instigate unnecessary internal tensions and may be considered as direct interference in the affairs of Bahrain. It is clear that Kelly's warning has not been heeded when it comes to the Iranian governments' (and adherents) belief in their own political rhapsody.

Kelly noted in 1957 that

The actual fact of Bahrain's independence has been established now for more than a century and a half, not by arguments, agreements or official recognitions but by the events of the island's history, by the uninterrupted rule of the Al-Khalifah Shaikhs since 1783 and by the long and finally successful struggle of their subjects against various would-be conquerors. Virtually no state which conducts political or commercial relations with Bahrain regards the island as

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27. Perhaps the most direct rejection of Iranian claims to Bahrain were lodged by (then British Foreign Secretary) Sir Austen Chamberlain in 1928. He denied 'any valid grounds [...] upon which Iran could claim sovereignty over Bahrayn.' See Khadduri (1951), p. 633.

28. Gause (2010), p. 19.

other than independent [...] it is to be hoped that the Persian government will not be misled by the distorted picture he [Adamiyat] has painted in trying to revive an issue which can only be regarded nowadays as dead and buried.<sup>29</sup>

Kelly's hope has been dashed several times since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and it is striking that the more time that elapses, the greater Iran's calls for forced integration of Bahrain into the Islamic Republic. Most recently, 'in May 2012 an Iranian newspaper seen as close to the country's top cleric revived an old, Iranian territorial claim to Bahrain.'<sup>30</sup> Kinninmont does not further explain the origin of such claims though does indicate the level of Bahrain's perceived vulnerabilities as a result. Such intrinsic vulnerabilities have been largely overlooked as the Arab Spring came to define Gulf and Middle Eastern politics. The following section revisits the relationship between Iranian claims to Bahrain and the manner it has intervened in the country.

### **From Debate to Interference**

The rhetoric of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt distorted the images of Bahrain's internal situation and encouraged the assumption that the upheaval was symptomatic of domestic pressures and not fuelled from abroad. While there were, and are, internal issues that need to be addressed in Bahrain, this work argues that the main driving force behind some Shia sects' violence in 2011 was the implicit and explicit spiritual, diplomatic and military support provided by the Islamic Republic. This is not to say that all those who demonstrated during the February-March 2011 period were in-league with Iran. For the most part, demonstrators gathered at the GCC roundabout to voice grievances and articulate a spectrum of trans-sectarian demands ranging from improvements in housing to employment. However, within the main body of campers-cum-demonstrators there was a hard-core group (approximately 500) of radicalised Shia youth, later dubbed the Youth of 14 February, which did not aspire toward further reforms but to overthrow Bahrain's government and replace it with an Iranian-styled theocratic regime. It is, of course, difficult to substantiate this claim. By its very nature, the Youth are secretive and there have been few defections. However, those that have defected or been arrested have provided invaluable information as to the groups' leadership mechanisms, regional support networks (via the Military Wing of Hezbollah Bahrain), tactical situation and rank-and-file soldiers.<sup>31</sup>

29. Kelly (1957), p. 70.

30. Jane Kinninmont (2012), 'Bahrain: Beyond the Impasses,' *Chatham House*, London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. V.

31. This was alluded to in discussions with a representative of Bahrain's Ministry of the Interior who preferred to remain anonymous. The interview was conducted on 11 April 2013 at the Ministry of the Interior in Manama.

At the same time, there has been a steady process of radicalisation that began at the roundabout and reached its zenith in 2012 when, according to Ayoob ‘the leadership of the anti-regime movement was taken over by young and increasingly radicalised Shiites [...]’<sup>32</sup> Instead of looking at the 2011 roundabout standoff as the defining moment that led to a radicalisation, it is more accurate to suggest that the roundabout only served to swell the rank-and-file members of the Youth, who stockpiled weapons and recruited others – often children – to carry out intelligence operations and provide tactical support.<sup>33</sup>

Although Ayoob wrongly assumes that the ‘uprising [in Bahrain] was given a sectarian colour by the machinations of the regime [...]’ he does concede that ‘Shia clerics also came to play a significant role in the protest movement.’<sup>34</sup> Since many of Bahrain’s Shia clerics adhere to Ithna-Ashriya structures which are based on strict adherence to the spiritual guidance and political decisions of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei (in coordination with al Sistani and Fadlallah) it is both logical and reasonable to suggest that Iran bears responsibility for the actions undertaken in the name of Shia Islam in Bahrain. In short, since the Islamic Republic claims spiritual and political leadership over all Shia adhering to the Ithna-Ashriya school of thought, and given that political violence is typically carried out by Ithna-Ashriya affiliated groups in Bahrain, there is little doubt that Iran bears responsibility for the conduct of the local Ithna-Ashriya community (roughly 30% of the entire Shia population of Bahrain).<sup>35</sup>

What Ayoob, and many others, fail to appreciate is that the transformation from peaceful to riotous demonstrations, from placards to sophisticated bombings, arson attacks and assassinations did not begin at the roundabout. Rather, the seeds of such changes began in 2007 with Iran’s reassertion of its claims to Bahrain.

Consider two of Khamenei’s closest confidants; Hossein Shariatmadari and Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, both of whom reiterated Iran’s claims to Bahrain in the pre-Arab Spring period.

Shariatmadari penned a commentary (09 July 2007) in the semi-official Iranian daily, *Kayhan* – of which he was chief editor – where he rehashed claims to Bahrain

32. Mohammed Ayoob (2014), *Will the Middle East Implode?*, Polity Press, Cambridge: UK, p. 38.

33. For instance, during the second half of February 2011, groups of 10-15 year old children were stationed in and around the Sitra and Budaiya police stations with multiple mobile camera phones to take pictures of people coming in and out of the buildings and sending them to Youth members at the roundabout. This information was provided by Bahrain’s Ministry of the Interior during an interview on 11 April 2013.

34. Mohammed Ayoob (2014), *Will the Middle East Implode?*, Polity Press, Cambridge: UK, p. 38.

35. This information is inferred from ‘US Embassy Cables: Bahrain’s Relations with Iran,’ published by The Guardian, 15 February 2011.

and has been unrepentant ever since.<sup>36</sup> His arguments are carbon copies of those deployed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For instance, Shariatmadari states that ‘in various maps from ancient Greece all the islands of the Persian Gulf are mentioned as part of Iranian territory.’<sup>37</sup> In other words, Iranian legitimacy for asserting sovereignty over Bahrain stems from the recognition of ancient Greek maps that declares all the Islands of the Gulf as Persian; not – of course – Iranian. The other argument re-raised by Shariatmadari is the notion that Bahrain’s leaders had recognised Persian sovereignty which, as illustrated above, is false. But even if both of these claims were accurate, they have no relevance for international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their deployment intended to fan the flames of sectarianism and a form of Shia religious nationalism, nothing more. Shariatmadari would not – and still does not – even recognise the GCC by name. Instead, he refers to it as either the ‘Persian Gulf Cooperation Council,’<sup>38</sup> or the ‘Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Persian Gulf,’<sup>39</sup> because, for him, to accept the term Gulf or Arab Gulf is tantamount to treason; Iran is – accordingly – the sole, legitimacy sovereign power in the region. Many in Iran’s establishment agreed with Shariatmadari. For instance, Darioush Kanbari, a member of Iran’s Parliamentary Committee for National Security and Foreign Policy, is said to have remarked that, ‘to apologise to the regime [Bahrain] is tantamount to trampling the principle of national honour in Iran’s foreign policy.’<sup>40</sup>

Shariatmadari is widely accepted as *the* voice of the hard-line in Iran and, unfortunately, the hard-line is responsible for the country’s foreign and defence policies. As Shariatmadari claimed Bahrain, Bahrain faced renewed street violence. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that a positive relationship exists between Iranian instigative claims to sovereignty over Bahrain and the outbreak of violence among some Shia fractions. In this way, Iranian claims to Bahrain may be regarded as interference since they encourage violence and produce a direct impact on the ground in Bahrain.<sup>41</sup>

Just as Shariatmadari’s claims to Bahrain in 2007 produced violence, so did the 22 February 2009 pronouncement of Advisor to the Grand Ayatollah, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, who went a step further and reiterated the claim that Bahrain was Iran’s 14<sup>th</sup> province based on the Persian Empires’ former control of the territory in the

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36. See: Shaul Mishal and Ori Goldberg (2014), *Understanding Shiite Leadership: The Art of the Middle Ground in Iran and Lebanon*, Cambridge UP, p. 64.

37. Hossein Shariatmadari (2007), ‘Op-Ed: Bahrain,’ *Kayhan*, 09 July 2007.

38. *Ibid.*

39. See Y. Mansharof and I. Rapoport (2007), ‘Tension in Iran-Bahrain Relations After Kayhan Editor Claims Bahrain is Inseparable Part of Iran,’ *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, Report Number 379, pp. 1-6.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

41. For an interview with Shariatmadari see: Michael Slackman (2007), ‘Freed by Revolution, He Speaks for Iran’s Hard-Liners,’ *The New York Times*, 22 September 2007. This article is available at: <[www.nytimes.com/2007/09/22/world/middleeast/22shariamadari.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/22/world/middleeast/22shariamadari.html?_r=0)> (accessed 03 July 2014).

17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The claim cost them some political clout in the Arab world and Morocco withdrew its ambassador and diplomatic staff and severed relations to Tehran while the Arab world unanimously condemned the statement.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the seemingly low-intensity delegitimising remarks by Nuri and Shariat-madari the reestablishment of Iran's claim has reverberated throughout the chambers of Bahraini state security which became even more acutely sensitive to Ithna-Ashriya Shia political movements owing to the great uncertainty of how far Iran would be willing to go in order to physically reclaim its self-proclaimed 14<sup>th</sup> province, a point made clearer as 'Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati of Iran called Bahrain Shias on 18 March 2011 to keep up protests and resist "the enemy" until death.'<sup>43</sup>

In other words, four days after the deployment of GCC peninsular shield forces to Bahrain – to deter further Iranian interference – and Iran's government commenced a media onslaught that sought to keep the embers of violence burning in Bahrain. There was not a hint of conciliation from Iran; it sought to polarise Bahrain through the reinforcement of political fantasies on unifying all Shia Muslims within a single state—the Islamic Republic.

For casual readers, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) – the Holy Grail of authority as to Bahrain's 2011 chapter in the Arab Spring – discounts Iranian interference by suggesting that it could 'not establish a discernible link between specific incidents that occurred in Bahrain during February and March 2011 and the Islamic Republic of Iran.' However, the BICI was not charged with examining such a relationship and addressing the issue was only meant to verify the BICI team's opinion that Iran was not directly involved.

However, the BICI did determine that

The arrival of GCC forces in Bahrain on 14 March 2011 was followed by a perceptible shift in the content and nature of press releases and statements issued by Iranian officials. Iranian government representatives criticised the invitation extended to GCC forces and warned of the repercussions that they said would have on regional stability and security. In addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, other government agencies and senior political leaders began to express opinions about developments in Bahrain.<sup>44</sup>

42. See 'Severing Diplomatic Relations with Iran,' *Keesing's Record of World Events*, volume 55, March 2009, p. 49120.

43. Magdalena Karolak (2012), 'Escalation of Social Conflict during Popular Upheavals: Evidence from Bahrain,' *CEU Political Science Journal*, 7:2, p. 185.

44. Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni, Nigel Rodley, Badria Al-Awadhi, Philippe Kirsch and Mahnoush H. Arsanjani (2011), *Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (hereafter BICI), p. 385.

As noted above, much of the Ithna-Ashriya Shia clerical establishment – including Ayatollah Isa Qassim<sup>45</sup> – in Bahrain is directly connected to Iran. It follows, therefore, that Iranian incitement and its less-than-veiled threats against the GCC and Bahrain were meant to change the behaviour of Bahrain as to its domestic political situation and therefore must be regarded as Iranian interference; he was threatening one group and attempting to empower another. So, when ‘on 16 March 2011 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denounced the arrival of GCC forces in Bahrain and advised “those who sent their forces to Bahrain to learn the lesson of Saddam Hussein’s fate,”<sup>46</sup> he was again interfering in Bahrain’s sovereign affairs.

The political posturing of a select number of leading Iranian officials is not going to undermine the legitimacy of Bahrain, and it is a matter of speculation how much credence the Bahrainis lend such proclamations. However, its actions speak volumes as to its true intent and the ominous challenges hurled at Bahrain are becoming increasingly acute and deserve attention. If Iran were content with uttering a few controversial remarks for domestic political consumption then Bahrain would have little to worry about both internally and regionally. However, since the birth of the Islamic Republic (1979), it has taken concrete steps to destabilise, delegitimise and denigrate Bahrain through exogenous pressures and the support of domestic (Ithna-Ashriya Shia Bahraini) revolutionary movements.<sup>47</sup> It is not a matter of Iran claiming Bahrain on paper or as part of its negotiating techniques for other regional concessions. Since the Islamic Revolution – and vigorously pursued after 2007 – Iran has taken concrete steps to undermine Bahrain’s political legitimacy in a bid to absorb the Island as its 14<sup>th</sup> province.

For the sake of illustrating this point, it is important to go back to the very beginning of the Islamic Republic and see how it treated Bahrain in the past.

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In the early revolutionary years (1979-1989), Bahrain – like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – did not have long to wait for Iran to attempt to transmit its ideology via radicalised militants to the Island. Within months of Khomeini’s accession to power

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45. See: ‘US Embassy Cables: Bahrain’s Relations with Iran,’ published by *The Guardian*, 15 February 2011.

46. BICI, p. 385.

47. Kaplan sums it up well as he notes that in the Gulf ‘Iran is the only major power with its long and shattered coastline opposite small and relatively weak Arab principalities, each of which Tehran can militarily defeat on its own, undermine through local fifth-column Shiite populations, especially in Bahrain as we have seen, or economically damage through terrorism in the Strait of Hormuz.’ See: Robert D. Kaplan (2012), *The Revenge of Geography*, Random House Publishing, NY: USA. p. 281.



wide-spread riots erupted in the Shi'ite towns of the oil-rich Saudi province of Hasa, exacting dozens of casualties. Similar disturbances occurred in Bahrain in 1979-1980, while Kuwait became the target of a sustained terrorist and subversive campaign.<sup>48</sup>

Two years later, in 1981, Bahrain faced a full-fledged terrorist campaign by the Tehran-based Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), which commenced its subversive activities with a high-profile attempted coup d'état planned for 16 December, Bahrain's national day, under the leadership of Abdulhadi Almadras.<sup>49</sup> The details of the plot are telling. In late 1980, Iranian intelligence officers assembled a disciplined and highly motivated team of local Shia Bahrainis to conduct intelligence operations and were trained in small arms and explosives. The idea was to have these Bahrainis dress as police and security officials and simultaneously attack the radio and television broadcasting facilities, Bahraini international airport, assassinate key members of the al Khalifa government and stoke a Shia insurgency. From within the ensuing chaos, Iran would directly militarily intervene and establish a theocracy under the leadership of Hojjat ol-Eslam Kamal Haidari, an Iranian cleric. The plot was discovered when the UAE recorded unusual sea-faring transits of young men from Iran to Bahrain and tipped off security officials. All the conspirators were arrested and large weapons caches and communications devices were discovered in six locations around the island.

The fear of Iran's military conquest of Bahrain resulted in tremendous political tremors throughout the region and prodded Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to form an economic-military alliance; the GCC (1981). Since then, Iran has been complicit in a range of activities that targeted Bahrain's stability and prosperity. While this work does not detail each episode in the troubled relationship between revolutionary Iran and Bahrain, it does suggest that past events offer an insight into current events and if Iran has, in the past, systematically worked at forcing the Island into its national enterprise, why would 2011 be any different? The answer is that 2011 was not different. The same logic and demands accompanied the Islamic Republic's interference in Bahrain as it did in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

48. Efraim Karsh (2002), *The Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford: UK, p. 12.

49. 'Alleged Attempted Coup,' *Keesing's Record of World Events*, volume 28, February 1982, p. 31353. According to research conducted for the BICI, 'Abdulhadi Almadras attempted to overthrow the [Bahraini] regime by force.' Almadras was a Shia cleric fully funded, trained and supported by Iran. See: BICI, p. 29.

## Concluding Remarks

There are many scholars and media analysts who attempt to underestimate the role Iran is playing in undermining Bahrain's stability and its security. Such attempts – however irresponsible – do not imply that the Islamic Republic is not involved; they only attempt to cast doubt. However, the evidence is overwhelming and it is a matter of national (for Bahrain) and regional (the Middle East) security that adequate lessons are learned. Consider the charge that 'Iran maintained links with exiled extremists from Bahrain who lived in Lebanon [...]'<sup>50</sup> and that many of the same exiles are now back in Bahrain conducting acts of violence or at least directing others to do so. It stands to reason that Iran has not simply given up on its protégés, but instead is using them to greater effect; in a clandestine and sustained manner.

What the future holds in store for Bahrain, Iran and the wider Arabian Gulf littoral remains a mystery. However, if two centuries of engagement between the asymmetric dyad offers any indication, then there will be a steady spike in Iranian attempts to forcibly absorb Bahrain until international involvement humbles the former and returns the situation to a form of suspended animation. Unfortunately, if Iran continues on the path towards nuclearisation, the cycle will be broken and there will be little to stop Iran from fulfilling its self-determined historical rite of passage; to be the dominant power in and around the Arabian Gulf. Bahrain must therefore develop a strategy that reflects the lessons it has learned from more than 200 years of fending off Persian / Iranian aggression and 36 years of Islamic Revolutionary exportation.

Iran has never fully accepted the independence of Bahrain and often uses the latter's domestic problems to expand its influence and further erode Bahrain's national stability. The arguments deployed by successive Shahs, in a bid to wrestle Bahrain into Persia, have been recycled by the ruling elite in Tehran; their reiteration is often accompanied with violence among fractions of Bahrain's Ithna-Ashriya Shia community.

And so, there is a certain urgency driving Bahrain's foreign policy making; it must learn the lessons of Iranian interference and develop adequate strategies before the Islamic Republic escalates the situation and attempts to physically exercise sovereignty over the Island.

This last sub-section should be taken as a sample strategy that could be developed and deployed by Bahrain in order to put an end to – or at least limit – Iranian interference in the country.

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50. Ronen Bergman (2011), *The Secret War with Iran*, Oxford UK: One World Publishers, p. 193.

### **Bahrain Three-Point Plan**

Bahrain's strategic posture will be enhanced through the adoption of the following Three-Point Plan:

First, Bahrain must formally recognise that it is alliance dependent and can only survive the dangers posed by Iran if its alliances remain intact and credible. In this way, Bahrain must work to further integrate the security apparatuses of the GCC so that it emerges as the prime vehicle to deterring Iran and therefore securing Bahrain. The ability of the GCC to deter Iran has already shown itself as credible since the Peninsular Shield Force deployment in 2011 ensured that Iran would not directly intervene although it was readying itself to do so. At the same time, Bahrain should hedge its bets and establish three new, bilateral relationships to compliment the GCC and its existing bilateral relationships. Namely, Bahrain should attempt to deepen its strategic partnership to Turkey, Azerbaijan and Pakistan. This triangle would work as adequate leverage against the Islamic Republic since all three are rivals to Iran and are geographically proximate.

Second, Bahrain must continue to remove every socio-political and economic disparity in the country. This is needed to resist Iranian interference by constructing a deeper sense of national identity and consolidating the state's civil society. While Bahrain is a regional leader in political openness, the road to reforms will continue to be tough and full of trials and tribulations. Reforms must not stop however. Bahrain must deny Iran the propaganda benefits of domestic tensions, which it has learned to stoke at its will. The BICI made 26 recommendations and Bahrain has done its utmost to meet these. However, reforms must go beyond the BICI and reflect the interests of all citizens and residents so that Bahrain continues on the path to being a functional share-holders' society.

Finally, Bahrain is losing the information war. Iran and its regional allies and proxies were better prepared for the recent spate of violence and have used an assortment of propaganda to further stoke tensions and sectarianism in the country. Bahrain must strike back through a 'take the gloves off' approach. Bahrain must utilise its tech-savvy youth and form crack-teams to generate alternative narratives to Iranian interference and broadcast them into Iran, throughout the region and around the world. For the time-being Bahrain is afraid to do so because of Iranian threats. However, Bahrain cannot afford not to counter Iranian propaganda since the Islamic Revolution is seeking the over-turn the state and Bahrain must resist this at all costs. This counter-propaganda must also be aimed at undermining – once and for all – Iranian claims to sovereignty over Bahrain.

While these points may not subdue Iran, they would certainly up-the-ante and, all things being equal, work towards strengthening Bahrain and undermining Iran's

antiquated claims to the Island. The dangers facing Bahrain do not stem from the rhetoric of Iranian leaders but the manner that rhetoric translates into reality. After two centuries of Iranian attempts to conquer Bahrain, the international community needs to re-evaluate the relationship it maintains to the Islamic Republic and not allow it to further aggravate the tenuous balance of power in the Arabian Gulf region. This means reinforcing Bahrain and further isolating Iran so that its nuclear ambitions are checked and that it fully renounces all territorial claims in the region; including on Bahrain. The Gulf littoral is plagued with endemic historical grievances and frozen conflicts; it is about time for the international community to constructively prevent the return of Empires through the defence of the regions' smallest states.

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