

ISLAM IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. THE SITUATION OF THE SHIA POPULATION OF BAHRAIN IN THE WAKE OF THE ARAB SPRING 2011 // *Article was written for the bulletin "Russia and the Moslem World."*

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Vladimir Kirichenko,
Research Associate,
Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS

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Abstract. The article focuses on the situation of Shiites in Bahrain after the events of the "Arab Spring" in 2011. Shiites make up the majority of the population in this country, but continue to be oppressed by the ruling Sunni dynasty of al-Khalifa in the Kingdom. Shia political and spiritual leaders are being prosecuted.

Bahrain is an island state in the Persian Gulf. In 1521, Bahrain became the property of Portugal. In 1602, Abbas I¹ from the Persian Safavid² dynasty expelled the Portuguese from the islands, which was the beginning of the spread of Shia Islam in Bahrain³.

The ancestors of the current ruling Al-Khalifa family in Bahrain were of Bedouin descent and came from the Bani Utba (Utub) tribe, originally dislocated in Central Arabia. In 1782, the Bani Utba tribe moved to the islands of Bahrain. In 1783, representatives of the Al-Khalifa family expelled the Persians from the country and became the ruling dynasty.

Since then, the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty has ruled the Shiite majority (Shiites make up 55–60 per cent of the population of Bahrain)⁴. At the same time, Shia are discriminated by the authorities. Shiites are perceived as a threat to the stability of the regime. Shiites are not employed by Bahrain's security agencies, such as the Bahraini Defense Forces, the National Guard, the police, which is responsible to the Ministry of the Interior and the National Security Agency. The Government recruits foreign mercenaries into these services. Naturally, members of the ruling dynasty occupy the most important command capacities⁵. Nevertheless, the Sunnis of Bahrain have always had a higher social status⁶ than the Shiites.

The situation of Shia rights in Bahrain has not changed since the events of the Arab Spring. In 2011, protests began in the country, the participants of which (most of them Shiites) demanded democratic reforms, as well as an end to discrimination against the Shiite population. Later there were demands for the resignation of Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa⁷, who at that time held office of prime minister. At the same time, the Shiite Al-Wifak⁸ movement did not put forward radical demands, but only was in favor of a change of government and that it was elected, and not appointed, by the king. Shia protesters also complained that the Bahraini authorities, in their opinion, were trying to change the confessional composition of the Bahraini population by granting citizenship to Sunni foreigners⁹. Demonstrations resulted in clashes with the police. The Bahraini government ultimately put down the protests with military force. The military from Saudi Arabia and police from

the UAE¹⁰, whom the king of Bahrain invited, took part in the suppression of protest activity in Bahrain¹¹.

July 2, 2011 at the suggestion of the heir to the throne Salman bin Hamad there was opened a “national dialogue” to develop a consensus on the situation in the country. 15 days after its start Al-Wifak refused to participate in the dialogue, considering it unpromising. The participants in the “national dialogue” developed recommendations for amending the Constitution, expanding the powers of parliament. In May 2012, these amendments were published, but the opposition rejected them. The opposition advocated the formation of a government consisting of deputies of parliament. According to the plan of the opposition forces, the head of the faction, who occupied the majority of seats in parliament, was supposed to become prime minister. However, such a suggestion undermined the established longstanding order. If these demands had been accepted, the ruling family would have lost its monopoly on power¹².

Subsequently, the “national dialogue” was resumed several times and interrupted in 2013–2014¹³. Ultimately, this government initiative was not successful. In November 2014, Bahrain held parliamentary elections. Al-Wifak boycotted them, hoping to intensify the protest movement, but by that time it had significantly weakened¹⁴.

In 2014, three Shiites were found guilty of a bomb attack that had killed police officers. The accused denied any implication in the crime and reported torture¹⁵. In 2017, they were executed.

The leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran condemned these executions. At the same time, Ayatollah Ali Eslami, a member of the Iranian Assembly of Experts, said that “the real organizers [of executions] are Saudi Arabia, Great Britain and the United Arab Emirates.” And Hossein Amir-Abdollahyan, a former ambassador to Bahrain who is associated with the Al-Cods battalion (special forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps¹⁶), recalled that Iran only “provided spiritual support to [Bahrain] in the uprising.”¹⁷

In 2016, the court handed down a decision to dissolve the main Shiite opposition group of Bahrain, Al-Wifak. The Manama Administrative Court also decreed to seize the funds of the party found guilty of “harboring terrorism.” The Court stated that Al-Wifak had called for violence and had facilitated demonstrations and sit-ins that could have led to stirring of “interfaith hatred.”¹⁸

In 2016, a group of UN human rights experts expressed deep concern about the “systematic persecution” of the Shia population and religious leaders. Among the violations of rights was the deprivation of citizenship practiced by the Bahraini authorities¹⁹.

Thus, the International Commission on Human Rights sharply criticized the decision of the Bahraini authorities to deprive Ayatollah Isa Kassim²⁰, one of the country's leading clergy, of his citizenship. In June 2016, Bahraini authorities accused Kassim of trying to divide Bahraini society, enkindling interfaith enmity and encouraging young people to violate the Constitution²¹.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei also condemned the decision of Bahraini leaders to deprive one of the Shiite leaders of citizenship. “This is glaring stupidity and madness. When he could still address the people of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa Kassim... he would advise you to refrain from radical and armed actions” Khamenei said in his speech on state television²².

Khamenei also emphasized that “the attack on Sheikh Isa Kassim means removing all obstacles that prevent the heroic Bahraini youth from attacking the regime.”²³ In May 2017, Bahrain security forces broke into Sheikh Kassim's residence in the village of Diraz²⁴ and arrested everyone in the house. It's said that at least five people were killed in the raid and more than 280 arrested. The assault on the Sheikh's house occurred a few days after a Bahraini court sentenced Sheikh Kassim to one year in prison on charges of “money laundering” and illegal fundraising²⁵. The court ordered the confiscation of his property in the amount of three million Bahraini dinars (about \$8 million US dollars). Kassim was also ordered to pay a fine of 100 thousand Bahraini dinars (about 265 thousand dollars).

Events around the Shiite spiritual leader led to protests among Shiites²⁶. According to Shia Rights Watch, although the Shia protests were peaceful and the demonstrators were not armed, the authorities brutally put them down. At the same time, due to restrictions on movement, ambulances could not enter the city, and hospitals were ordered not to provide assistance to wounded protesters²⁷.

In 2017, a Bahrain court sentenced 19 people to long prison terms on charges of spying for Iran and conspiracy to overthrow the regime. Eight people got life sentences, 10 were sentenced to 15 years in prison, and two were sentenced to 10 years in prison for espionage and inciting religious discord in society²⁸.

The court also deprived fifteen people of Bahraini citizenship. The court found them guilty of transmitting information to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizbullah²⁹, as well as of receiving "material support" from these two organizations³⁰.

In 2017, Bahrain's supreme court upheld life sentences to three opposition leaders, including a prominent opposition politician and preacher Sheikh Salman, who was arrested on charges of spying for Qatar. Salman was the head of the Al-Wifak party.

A senior Bahraini Shiite clergyman has been jailed since late 2014 and sentenced to nine years in prison for that the Manama regime described as "insulting" government officials, sedition fomenting with his protests against the authorities during the 2011 uprising and trying to overthrow the regime with the assistance of foreign powers (this was a hint at Iran).

On November 1, 2017, Sheikh Salman and his two assistants were charged with "espionage on behalf of a foreign state... with a view of carrying out subversive acts against Bahrain and damaging its national interests."³¹

Salman was also accused of "revealing the secrets of defense to a foreign state and disseminating information that could harm the status and reputation of Bahrain."³²

Sheikh Salman denies all accusations, saying that he was only seeking for reforms in the country by peaceful means³³.

In 2014, another politician, Al-Wifak parliamentary speaker Khalil al-Marzouq³⁴, was accused of terrorism instigation.

Iran is closely following developments in Bahrain. Iranian media covered the situation with Shia pilgrims from Bahrain who could not leave Iran due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In April 2020, Bahrain resumed flights by Gulf Air to bring Bahrainis home. Since 2016, there have been no direct flights between Bahrain and Iran. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Sudan cut off diplomatic relations with Iran in January 2016 after a scandal caused by an attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. The attack on the embassy, in turn, was a reaction to the execution of the Shiite theologian Nimra al-Nimra³⁵ in Saudi Arabia.

Since 2016, relations between Bahrain and Iran have not improved. In March 2017, Bahrain authorities announced the revelation of a “terrorist cell” associated with Iran. The arrested persons were suspected of involvement in the bomb explosion on a police bus in February 2017 and in a conspiracy to kill high-ranking officials³⁶.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry condemned the conclusion of an agreement in September 2020 on the normalization of relations between Bahrain and Israel³⁷. This document is a part of the “Abraham Agreements”³⁸ signed through US mediation.

It should be noted that Bahrain is one of the main allies of the United States. Bahrain and the United States signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement in October 1991, which gives the US military access to Bahrain’s facilities. The kingdom is the base of the 5th Fleet of the US Navy³⁹.

At the same time, Bahrain expressed “strong condemnation” of Israel’s actions on the Temple Mount, May 7, 2021, in the month of Ramadan revered by Muslims, saying that Israel should take measures to prevent attacks by security forces on believers during this holy month⁴⁰.

Bahrain’s Shia protest activity is low. A few demonstrations took place in Bahrain in February 2021 on the 10th anniversary of the events of the Arab Spring⁴¹.

The tenth anniversary of the Bahraini democratic movement against the despotic Al-Khalifa regime was celebrated in Qom⁴², Iran, in February 2021. Leader of the movement, Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim⁴³ spoke at the ceremony. It is believed that this event will make the Bahraini authorities be even more wary of the Shiites and Iran.

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The Shia of Bahrain continue being subject to persecution by the authorities. Repression of the spiritual and political leaders of the Shia causes discontent among this part of the Bahraini population. However, this does not lead to mass protests by Shiites, as it was in 2011–2012, and all centers of protest are suppressed. Bahrain's relationship with the largest Shiite power – Iran has not also improved since the break of diplomatic relations between the countries in 2016.

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Nikita Kuklin,
Fellow employee
Department of Theory and
History of International Relations, RUDN