

**THE POLITICS OF THE SHI'A-SUNNI DIVIDE IN THE PERSIAN GULF:
POWER AND GROUP IDENTIFICATION IN BAHRAIN**

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Abstract: This research attempts to convey the importance of the political usage of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide. After demonstrating the motivations behind the Divide, this paper discusses the impact it has on the relationship between the al-Khalifah family and the citizens in Bahrain. In particular, the paper focuses on the formation of groups and their identity, and how group's identification reacts with the majoritarian nationalism promoted by the state. Bahrain is a small island that can be examined in terms of how the image of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide gets manipulated by the state in order to maintain power. Nationalism, a central concern of the state, is the other -ing that has the ability to demonize the Shi'a-Sunni Divide in the attempt to form and retain certain networks of power. The goal of showing the fragility of the perceived Shi'a-Sunni Divide is to demonstrate the ability of Bahrain to move forward without sectarian images that have created a political stalemate in the process toward changing the application of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide. There are differences between the Shi'a and Sunni communities, but this paper describes how it is possible better understand them and begin to make them manageable.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Bahrain (alBaHrayn) translates to ‘the two seas’ using the Arabic conjugation of the dual form. It could be used to denote the placement of Bahrain in the middle of the gulf that separates the conflicting states of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This is important to consider when looking at the implementation of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide in Bahrain, because politics in Bahrain are debated on two spheres of influence, the domestic and the regional. To the West, Bahrainis can travel 26 kilometers on the King Fahd Causeway to reach Saudi Arabia. On the other side of the main island, across a much wider stretch of sea, one sees Iran in the distance. No matter the distance from Iran, its historical influence remains important to the modern island nation in the eastern Middle East. These distances provide some of the fuel for Bahrain’s domestic politics and the conflicts that arise because of it.

The disagreement on the name of a body of water that surrounds Bahrain, which both neighboring powers share, shows their differences at a fundamental level. On international maps, Bahrain is placed in the Persian Gulf, while others show Bahrain in the Arabian Gulf. The Bahraini ruling family of al-Khalifah leans towards its Sunni counterpart in the regime in KSA, yet the majority of the population, seventy percent of Bahrain, practices the Shi’a sect of Islam, similar to Iran. Conflict arises when the Shi’a of Bahrain are assumed to align with their Shi’a brothers in Iran like the Sunnis in Saudi Arabia draw the attention of the Sunni in Bahrain, yet the opposite could be considered as the Bahraini Shi’a take steps to distance themselves from

Iran. Each side has accused the other of promoting the ideals of the state that aligns with their beliefs. Bahrain is the battleground of 'the two seas,' or gulfs.

Official statements of the Bahraini government place the loyalty of seventy percent of the population, the Shi'a community, three hundred kilometers away in Iran, not on the island they call home. On the other hand, the rest of the citizens of Bahrain are assumed to be loyal to the royal family, the al-Khalifahs, and, by default, the neighboring Saudi regime as a result of their religious practices. Within this conversation, the focus draws attention away from domestic dialogue, as it assumes that no one remains loyal to the nation of Bahrain.

If viewed away from the literal meaning of the name, the description could connote a nuanced and political motivation behind the name of Bahrain. Bahrain is placed between two dominant, competing states in the Middle East, and between the Persian/ Arabian Gulf. The Shi'a Islamic Republic of Iran and the Wahhabi, a sect of Sunni Islam, monarchy in KSA are polar opposites; specifically, the sect of Sunni Islam will not recognize Shi'a as legitimate practitioners of Islam. However, they have enough in common to promote some cooperation, particularly in regards to a similar oil economy. Yet, as seen in Bahrain they take any opportunity to question the legitimacy of the other nation. "Until now, the main result of the [discussion of] renaming of the Gulf has been the deepening of hostility between the Iranians and the Arabs."¹ The name remains a point of contention between the two countries that periodically re-surfaces in order to increase tension, yet active discussion of this topic has not occurred since 1981, when the Arab Summit decided to call the body of water the Islamic Gulf (even though the name did not change, due to the fact neither will admit defeat).²

¹ Amin, S. H. (1984). *Political and strategic issues in the Persian-Arabian Gulf*. Glasgow, Scotland: Royston. 82

² Amin, S. H. (1984), 81

Relationships between contradictory groups of people are ever changing and have the ability to be manipulated by political strategies and environments. The Middle East is an area of complex interactions that are commonly described as sectarian. The government frequently refers to these relationships as the Shi'a-Sunni Divide that is assumed to be primordial. Understanding how this image is used is necessary to grasp the politics in the region, yet the emotional and religious aspect of this interpretation masks other political motivations that should also be questioned. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 changed the Middle East and it is essential to reclassify the national groups and states' policies governing interactions between communities so as to clarify the conflicts in the region and provide a better understanding of the relationships that manipulate politics in this global, interconnected world. Looking through history, this remains common; politics continuously govern the interactions between and within society in order to maintain a stable power structure.

For this purpose, politics can be considered on multiple levels: the individual, the community, and the transnational. Each level provides an important perspective on the image of difference within a nation-state: from the day-to-day communications, to the larger societal workings, to the influence of other governments. The image defining Shi'a-Sunni differences has become an all-encompassing label imposed by political motivators on conflict in the region in order to classify each distinctive conflict. The recent increase in the polarization of the sectarian differences has changed how each conflict and interaction will be perceived by those involved and wishing to redefine the struggle. A critical analysis of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide is valuable to those looking at relationships in the Middle East because it will open the discussion to diverse explanations of these conflicts to help better solve these problems.

The Middle East suffers from unclear, miss-focused international policy resulting from continued participation in the region that relies on shortsighted and simplistic information of the conflicts to make quick political decisions. Countries in the Middle East require clarification of their domestic situations beyond the common oversimplification in order to make more informed choices about intervention and aid. Bahrain provides an interesting case study as a result of its continued political situation that takes on a sectarian explanation to portray the minority power in an extreme way. The Shi'a-Sunni Divide is used by the monarchy to maintain and control the balance of power between the classes in Bahrain. As a society dominated by a number of Sunni elite, conflict arises when the Shi'a majority wants to be participatory citizens, instead of watching the intra-family power struggles. The government and international media portrays the Shi'a community as an ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, while the Sunnis look for support from the powerful Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While the latter may be possible, as demonstrated in KSA's support of the royal family during the Arab Spring, investigations of the former proved to have no substantial evidence.³ It is clear that the Shi'a communities on the western side of the Gulf looks towards Iran and Iraq for religious guidance; the only confirmed time the majority has looked towards Tehran for political ideology followed the 1979 Revolution; although for centuries the Gulf has accused Iran of meddling in domestic politics. Sectarian conflict is an image, which has the ability to be manipulated in order to benefit the projector. Bahrain is stuck in the middle of two powerful giants, both vying for influence over the small island nation that has a society built over decades to carry the emotional fear of national sectarian conflict.

The purpose of this paper is to show the fragility of the appearance of an oversimplified term that is being used to categorize the majority of conflict in the Middle East: the Shi'a-Sunni

³ Bassiouni, M. (2011). *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry*.

Divide. Evolved in the seventh century as a response to the question of succession after the Prophet Mohammad's death and the political vacuum that occurred, the differences between Shi'a and Sunni are religious in their connotation. With the growth of state nationalism within the Ottoman's minds as a result of state policies and now modern nation-states, politics have taken differences within society and created a salient divide. This is most commonly used by Sunni leaders to lessen the impact of the Shi'a communities calling for liberalization in Sunni dominated countries, the image of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide provides an emotional foundation on which to base an argument. These countries are sometimes referred to as "the Shi'a Crescent," which includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran with the occasional addition of Bahrain. The Shi'a relationship to these states is commonly discussed as revolutionary and violent as a result of the Iranian Revolution and the violence in Iraq and Lebanon. Within this context, the Shi'a in Iran and Iraq will only be analyzed in relation to how they affect the governments of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

The potential for Shi'a revolutionary power has grown in the last few decades with the creation of the first state, Iran, that incorporates Shi'a religious ideology in its government, and Bahrain sits on the fault line of this struggle with the ability to show this particular political conflict with minimal international influence.⁴ Although this research focuses primarily on Bahrain and the Persian Gulf region, the overall theories applied here have the ability to be considered when examining other cases where there is a single theory of conflict to be applied according to Western policymakers. It is essential to question the easy answer rather than quickly applying and accepting the political label that warps the intentions of those fighting.

⁴ Bahrain cannot be fully considered without the influence of the United States as the fifth naval fleet docks in Bahrain. For this paper, the focus will be directed towards the regional and domestic politics.

2.0 THE HISTORY OF RELATIONSHIPS IN ISLAM, THE MIDDLE EAST, AND THE GULF

2.1 THE SUCCESSION OF THE PROPHET MOHAMMAD

The Shi'a-Sunni Divide began as a political difference based on the theological succession rights after the death of the Prophet Mohammad, yet now is primarily social in its manifestation (while manipulated politically). Recently the differences between the Shi'as and Sunnis focused on the realm of theology, yet the social aspect is of the greatest importance because of its manifestation within the modern political debate of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide. There is a political focus of the Divide because as time has passed each sect has developed into different communities, and sometimes diverse nations, each with a distinct nationalism.

This requires considering the recent history of influential modern policies, but also the ancient civilizations that are still part of the Middle Eastern identity, such as Persia for the Iranians. One overarching identity that continues to influence and classify the region is Muslim – Shi'a, Sunni, and Sufi⁵ – all practice in the birthplace of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and broadly the Middle East and the world. During the time of Mohammad, Muslims practiced together under a single leadership, but after the death of the Prophet, the Islamic leaders split.

⁵ Sufi Islam will not be discussed in this paper, as it does not play an important role in the Gulf countries. However, for clarification, the Sufi faith focuses on the mystical area of religion and the quest to reach a higher plane of thinking in order to connect with God for a brief moment.

One group of Muslims, the Shi'as, believe that the faithful should follow the bloodline of Mohammad; the Sunni sect accepted the companions of the Prophet as the Rightly Guided. Both sects continue to hold Mohammad in the highest regard as well as showing respect to the five central pillars of Islam.

Although Muslims divided politically soon after the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the societal component manifested after many years of practicing and developing differently. Mohammad began the process of creating a Muslim state in order to preserve and institutionalize Islam. From these events, a couple centuries later, Sunnis developed four schools of jurisprudence all with varying degrees of reasoning or textual thinking of interpretation. The Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia are usually considered *Hanbali*, which stems from the most traditional school of thought that follows strict interpretations of the texts only.⁶ Other schools, like the *Hanafī*, allow for more modern interpretations. However different or similar the Shi'a faith may be to the Sunni, there are those that consider Shi'ism to be the fifth official school of thought within Islam. In 1954, al-Azhar, a prominent religious university in Cairo, issued a statement confirming that idea.⁷ This breaks some of the assumptions about the Divide as it shows that even though there are debates on whether or not the Shi'a community is very different.

This study will focus on the sect of Shi'ism that is predominant in the Gulf region. This sect of Twelver Shi'as⁸ follow in the line of imams after Caliph or Imam 'Ali, which ends in the year after 874 with the disappearance of Imam Muhammad al-Muntazar who will reveal himself at the end of days. After the disappearance of the Hidden Imam al-Muntazar, Shi'a began to

⁶ Long, D., Reich, B., & Gasiorowski, M. (2011). *The Government and Politics of the Middle East and North Africa* (6th ed.). Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press. 91

⁷ Saltoot, S. M. (1959, Jul 06). *Al-Azhar Verdict on the Shi'a*. Al-Islam Webpage.

⁸ This lineage is difference from the succession recognized by the Isma'ilis and the Zaydis who distinguish themselves based on the Imams they believe are important.

practice a clergy style of governance to maintain the “rightly guided” path until the Imam reveals himself at the end of days.⁹ The two main schools of thought within Shi’ism differ on how much the imams should assume the work of the Hidden Imam. Iran believes the state should step in a guide the followers in the stead of the Imam; this constitutes the overarching theme of religious dominance in Iran. Whereas the Sunni sect continued the practice of Caliphs throughout the empires of the Umayyad (in Damascus and Cordoba), Abbasid, Mamluk, and finally the Ottoman, until Ataturk abolished the Caliphate in 1922.¹⁰

The Shi’a-Sunni Divide oversimplifies a divergence that started with the death of the Prophet Mohammad in 632CE. A political polarization, based on the line of religious succession has created separate communities that have become a defining social factor within modern Middle Eastern politics that has developed into two similar, yet distinct groups of Muslims. These sects have lived together for 1400 years, with peaceful centuries of neighborly cohesion interlaced with periods of sectarian conflict brought on by political actors, when the differences between populations have taken on a manipulative intent for political ends. Examination of the ability to politically manipulate the Shi’a-Sunni Divide provides clarification of Middle Eastern factions and relationships, and especially within conflicts today that are labeled as sectarian when there are other things that influence the conflict.

⁹ Hourani, A. (1991). *A History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 501

¹⁰ ISIS will not be considered.

2.2 THE GROWTH AND DESTRUCTION OF MIDDLE EASTERN EMPIRES

Centuries passed with limited local territorial conflicts following the passing of Imam Hussein, Caliph 'Ali's son in 680; this event truly separated the Shi'a and Sunni.¹¹ The Shi'a faith became a clearly separated Islamic school during the period of the Abbasid Caliphate as politics pushed to define the politically different group. Empires and Caliphates rose and fell in the subsequent time. The Ottoman Empire conquered Istanbul in 1453, attaining their sought-after capital. A man who became known as Shah Ismail began to gain a loyal following in the outlying northeast Persian territories of the Ottoman Empire. After a series of battles over minor cities in Ottoman territory, he established the Safavid Empire in 1502 in the cities of Ottoman Tabriz and Isfahan. The Shi'a faith with a base in Sufi Islam created the foundation for this empire. Shah Ismail saw himself primarily as a religious figure and gained a loyal following. He threatened the Ottomans by providing an alternative to their political order. In the following two centuries, the empires of the Ottomans and the Safavids would be in a continuing battle for the Persian territories, centered in Iraq. Conflict remained centered around the question of territory, especially the agriculture rich areas of middle and northern Iraq, and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala for their tourism income.

In response, Ottoman Sultan Selim I issued a *fatwa* during the ongoing conflict with the Safavid Empire in Persia.¹² *Fatwas* have been used to justify political maneuvering since the birth of Islam, being officially translated as "authoritative religious decree of Islamic law."¹³

¹¹ This is referring to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein when the Umayyad (Sunni) Caliph Yazid sent armies to kill Hussein for threatening his power. Most of Hussein's allies deserted him and all that remained were slaughtered with him in Karbala, Iraq. This is commemorated in the holiday of 'Ashura and 'Arbayen.

¹² Allouche, A. (1980). *The Origins and Development of the Ottoman-Safavid Conflict (906-962/1500-1555)*. University of Utah: ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. 255, 258

¹³ Fatwa Translation. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://translation.babylon.com/english/fatwa/>

During the course of the conflict between two feuding empires, the Ottoman army refused to actively kill the Islamic army of the Safavids, even though they identified as Shi'a, when no reason provided a good basis to waste more lives except for strategic importance and expansion (which the army did not agree with). During the time of the Safavid growth, the Ottomans grew increasingly worried about their opposing neighbor. Ottomans fought on all frontiers of the empire – north towards Europe, south with the acquisition of Egypt in 1517, in Persia. Sultan Selim I and two powerful religious scholars (one Arabic, one Turkish) issued two *fatwas* that provided a loophole for the government to get the soldiers to continue fighting in 1514 as the Shi'a army of the Safavids were no longer viewed as Muslims as dictated by the *fatwas*.¹⁴ And with that, the fighting continued between the two empires until the Qajars destroyed the Safavid Empire in 1722.

Before this time, armies of Muslims did not regularly engage in battles as designated by the Prophet Mohammad and the Qur'an as he tried to unite the community. However, as a result of the potential that they would threaten the Ottoman's legitimacy, the Shi'a communities outside Safavid territory received a number of ramifications because of the on-going battle. Iraq suffered from common ailments of a territory that changed hands many times; plundering of the city accompanied every transfer of power and soon the cities became semi-autonomous, this was especially possible for the religious cities with their pilgrimage economies. The territories of Bahrain and KSA were never truly part of the Safavid Empire, except from 1602-1717 when the rulers focused on building religious institutions.¹⁵ The Shi'a of the Ottoman Empire experienced

¹⁴ Louër, L. and King, J. (2012),). *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*. New York [N.Y.: Columbia University Press.131-133

¹⁵ Cole, J. R. (2002). *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris. 42-45, 4-5

restrictions when traveling to the Hejaz (the territory that holds Mecca and Medina), both for trading and Hajj, in the 1550s so that they would not spread Safavid politics.¹⁶

2.3 MAKING THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST

As a result of the creation of the modern Middle East, the struggle for security and stability within a country has led to the amplification of differences that have the ability to change dynamics between relationships of different people. Sectarian conflict divides a national group by creating a specific nationalism that will support the state and their supporters. History has seen waves of violence occurring in every region of the world from a wide range of triggers brought on by changing social and political situations. The Middle East is no different. After the height of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1500s, skirmishes occurred often along the eastern and southern border of the empire due to the growth of the Safavid Empire near the Ottoman territory. The Ottoman-Safavid rivalry started with the battle over territory; yet as the conflict continued, the quest for influence ended in the social sphere of the empire with strict control of the Shi'as (with their questionable loyalty) in the Ottoman area and periodic raids on Sunni villages by Safavid armies.

The current discussion of this region is best understood with a historical review of the recent past that created the modern Middle East. The previous political system shattered before and during World War One. This dealt the final blow to an already weakened Ottoman Empire

¹⁶ Cole, J. R. (2002). 38

with its territories in Anatolia, the Middle East and North Africa. The Ottoman Empire allied with Germany's Weimar Republic in a quest to maintain stability in the face of increasing tension in the Arab territories. The British cultivated allies within the Arabs, settling on the al-Hussein Hashemite family who were the custodians of the two Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina. As a result of chafing under the recent Ottoman Turkification policies and the threat to Arab culture, the family was ready to sponsor a Pan-Arab state based in Damascus that the Hussein-McMahon Correspondence suggested.

After many secret and a few public agreements, the war ended and the Middle East became the new frontier for nation building. New countries were created, but not according to those who dwelled within them. The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, implemented in 1921 and signed by the British and the French, divided up the territories in the Middle East between them without considering the concerns of the Arabs involved. The French administered the Levant thus creating Lebanon and Syria; the British maintained control of their routes to India in territory of Egypt, Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq, and the small nations of the Persian Gulf. The armies of Ibn Sa'ud conquered what remained to establish the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the Arabian Peninsula in 1932. Outside the sphere of Ottoman influence, Iran continued to be fought over by the British and the Russians.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement created the modern Middle East, yet little discussion occurred concerning how the Arabs within the territory wanted to govern themselves. As a result of this agreement, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, and their neighboring borders were created. Foreign Arab rulers were placed in each country with the job of maintaining stability to keep their jobs and British influence to a minimum. Borders appeared where once flowing trade

and migration routes operated freely. Each country now is forced to define itself against other countries to create a national consciousness so as to maintain the cohesiveness of the country.¹⁷

The recently formed states are key to the modern manifestation of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, in particular the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran after the Second World War. The territory of Saudi Arabia united in 1932 under the domain of King Abdul Aziz Abd al-Rahman al-Sa'ud (commonly referred to as Ibn Sa'ud). The state of Saudi Arabia is the third of such states started by the al-Sa'ud family with the ideology of Wahhabism. The Ottoman army of Muhammad Ali Pasha overran the first attempt at a state in 1818. The second state lasted from 1843-1871 until another Ottoman governor, Midhat Pasha, from the territory of Iraq, conquered the land.¹⁸

The third state of al-Sa'ud, the largest of them all, became independent in 1932 by the assertive Ibn Sa'ud, who became the first king of the territory. The longevity of this state is due to its ability to drive out other tribes from the region, like the Hashemites (now ruling Jordan) from the Hejaz, the area that houses the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina; and the promises to with the Shi'a and Sunni tribes in the territory, the majority of those to the Shi'a tribes were not kept due to the Wahhabi clerics influencing policy. The Saudi state can also be classified in relation to its religious authority. The Wahhabi faith on which the state is founded is the official religion of the state. In a style of social hierarchy similar to Bahrain, tribes are the core of the state; in particular, there are twelve that are viewed as the original tribes. Little has changed in this country since its start – Saudi Arabia is still governed under Wahhabi principles by the al-Sa'ud family. The discovery of oil in the 1930s and 1940s led to an increase in the government's wealth and modernization practices revolving around communications.

¹⁷ Osman, T. (2013, Dec 13). *The Map that Caused a Century of Trouble*. BBC News.

¹⁸ Long, D., Reich, B., & Gasiorowski, M. (2011). 93

On the other side of the Gulf, the Iranian territory has experienced a couple of different power structures since World War I. This began with the removal of the Qajar dynasty in 1922 by a British-funded coup d'état that placed Reza Shah in power. A quest for national democracy in 1953 led to a Western coup that continued the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah until the Islamic Revolution in 1979. This period between 1953 and 1979 is one of secularization and a lack of political participation. After a series of uprisings, challenges, and exiles, the revolution began to change the face of Iranian society into one with more traditional restrictions. This fundamentally changed the dynamics in the Gulf as Iran is the first country to be governed by a structure that incorporated Shi'a practices into government. The problem manifested not from the internal Shi'a policies, but the Iranian focus of spreading these new policies to countries with significant Sunni population who could not live under them.

This, then, is what affects the discussion of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide in Bahrain and the connection to the Shi'a around the Gulf. To place the events in Bahrain in a regional context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia must be discussed in regards to the Shi'a in the Eastern Province and their continued close connection to their brothers, in faith and history, in Bahrain. This is most commonly discussed in relation to the potential creation of a Shi'a state with Bahrain and Qatif (KSA) as the center of an empire, as it happened in the tenth century.

3.0 CONCEPTUALIZING THE SHI'A-SUNNI DIVIDE

3.1 THE THEORY BEHIND THE RELATIONSHIPS

Groups can be defined through a shared culture, and specifically through their practice of common traditions with relational differences to contradictory groups. This becomes the system by which a community is organized. To show who is within the designated population and who will remain outside the system, there is a process of participation and categorization of those outside the group. This governs the interactions between community members as well as those excluded, which allows for definition instead of a classification of members.¹⁹ In relation to the Middle Eastern dynamics in the region, the social manifestation of differences leads to classification of societies within newly created states, yet with the application of differences into the political sphere, differences have evolved into a defining factor that cannot be easily removed after its incorporation into the national rhetoric. For this analysis, Barth helps describe this creation of groups from the broad community of Arabs and the necessity to define against others; then, Ignatieff imposes a national structure on a group's dynamics to maintain the new state and forces the ideology of the group into politics.

¹⁹ Barth, F. (1998). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. Boston: Little, Brown. 15

Policies and politics have the ability to determine whether or not a society will include different groups within a country. Nationalism is defined by those in power; they have the strength to create a community to benefit their chosen power structure. “Power is the vector that turns minor into major.”²⁰ Sigmund Freud and Michael Ignatieff, and separately Fredrik Barth, argue that minor differences can be the defining factor of variance of relationships between societies. The foundation of conflicts in the Middle East lies in the minor details; the little differences that divide similar communities into warring factions focused on exclusion. In order to counter this phenomenon, Toby Matthiesen suggests that affected communities should work to socialize and accept the differences that others are using to create more conflict and separation.²¹ In other words, there is no need to take Islamic variations and make them into a political divide in order to define communities in opposition to the ruling group. As a result of the recent increase in discussions around the Shi’a- Sunni Divide in relation to Bahrain, Iraq, and Syria, the goal of this argument is to show the fragility and malleability of differences and identity within interrelated communities, such as those in the Middle East.

“Identity is a relational term” that is based on the contradiction and distinction between “them” and “us” in the quest to define them as we define us.²² Fredrik Barth examines how we look at our groups and the inter-relational communications that guide our interactions. Sigmund Freud introduces the vision of communities being formed to create an exclusive group, contextually defined, and adds the role of the state within inter-group politics, which Ignatieff then analyzes further. Imposing difference on an area that before suffered from minimal

²⁰ Ignatieff, M. (1998), *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*. New York: Metropolitan Books. 50

²¹ Matthiesen, T. (2013). *Sectarian gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 126

²² Ignatieff, M. (1998), 37

separation creates a governing structure in which an individual's identity is no longer as important within the community as a defining relationship against an outsider.

Barth wrote a new preface to his 1969 book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, in order to reiterate the need to reconsider the classifications of ethnic groups within the social sciences, arguing that researchers focus more on the culture inside the units instead of the 'mechanisms' that create communities.²³ When discussing the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, there is a great emphasis put on the Islamic background of the Divide, but Westerners are less concerned with the political manifestations of it. There are clear theological differences between Shi'a and Sunni, but this does not mean the Divide always appeared to define relationships concerning the other sect. Instead the pattern holds to show that these two groups can and have lived together, however the problems during interactions occur when rulers feel threatened by those engaging in a ideological battle, like the Ottomans and the states of today.

A focal point of Barth's argument is the "cultural materials that the actors themselves are deploying to construct their own identities and actions," are not what the researcher perceives as differences.²⁴ In other words, what matters is the local discourse, the things people are saying to mobilize the community, and not culture that is a result of the manifestation of difference. Thus the domestic dialogue is more important when considering and analyzing cleavages within societies. The Western mainstream perception particularly is detrimental to the clarification of the real issues, as scholars are rarely part of the community to whom they are speaking. There are clear mechanisms to create societies, but on the outside, it is the culture appears so different to others, while internally it is the one almost similar thing that makes them so distinctive. The Shi'a-Sunni Divide can be defined by its philosophical differences on how Islam should be

²³ Barth, F. (1998). 5

²⁴ Barth, F. (1998). 6

practiced, however, when the culture within the Divide is examined, the political manifestations of differences are ignored by policymakers in order to create easier classifications.

Revolving around the idea of separation, there are certain ways to maintain the distance between social groups and create the Divide. Barth uses three classifications of boundaries that will be used to expand on the concept of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide. These theories are: the formation of "categories of ascription and identification" that organize the individuals and the interactions; the many variations of group organization; and the maintenance of the dividing boundaries between the groups.²⁵ These categories demonstrate the ability to govern all aspects of life, from the individual to the separation of communities.

The first boundary focuses on clarifying the distinction between groups as a "social organization of cultural difference."²⁶ This process is primarily concerned with the initial creation of communities defining themselves by their differences and similarities. The second is an extension of the first and shows how groups define themselves in relation to others, automatically creating a separation from another population.²⁷ When creating a defined group, the identity is clarified as it is compared to what it is not. These discussions revolve around the subtle differences that define a group against other like-minded groups, rather than how they are similar and have a number of commonalties. The last recognizes the importance of maintaining the group and forming an identity to label the community.²⁸ Classifications are not clear unless they have a specific outline of what it means to be within that group. This idea portrays the social construct of groups with their differences, and intends to convey the perceived distance that is imposed between communities.

²⁵ Barth, F. (1998). 10

²⁶ Barth, F. (1998). 6

²⁷ Barth, F. (1998). 6

²⁸ Barth, F. (1998). 6

Those in power construct social and political boundaries, and they change according to what differences are more important in relation to the threatening group. Depending on the power dynamics of the group, the inclusive nature of the community will change based on how comfortable the leaders are in their positions. As competing groups threaten the status of the power balance, powerful leaders will strengthen the reasons why the others are different and alien to the home group. New defining borders will be drawn or redefined creating a newly exclusive group from which to define the “other” as different. The little consideration by those at the lower level of the sensibilities of the opposition group will not grow until the boundaries begin to define which groups they are in and which lose status. As seen in the example of the Divide, the Shi’a and Sunni can participate in a government together as long as Muslims are the national group, not Shi’a or Sunni. As soon as leaders are threatened, boundaries must be moved to protect themselves against the incoming tides of contradicting ideologies.

Identities begin to separate, where once multiple flourished— now there is one. There is no possibility of belonging to multiple groups. The demand is now for exclusivity and a sole allegiance to the prosperity of the group, yet the fear of what happens if one does not completely agree, if one does not want to follow the majority, then what happens to the society? There is less consideration of differences from within a designated group, but all those minor differences become important in the violence of exclusion. Hate manifests in the dissimilarities between groups that are almost the same, in the minor differences that threaten the greater commonality of the group. It doesn’t matter how many things one has in common, it matters how you are not like me.

If one viewed the differences before the implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the variations between Arab Christians, Shi’a and Sunni were not considered as strongly to be

defining factors. All could be considered Pan-Arab nationalists in the face of growing imperialism in the Middle East. But, enacting borders automatically creates difference within formerly united communities by tribal or familial ties. Barth emphasizes the creation of difference where there once was none. Boundaries appear that now govern life within that territory. Examining the Middle East before World War One and after World War Two is an excellent case study in the creation and the manifestation of minor differences to maintain the larger group. The key to maintaining the group's internal relationships is the boundary of difference in the face of opposition. With more similarities it is harder to identify a separate group, thus the differences focus on maintaining a cohesive group in relation to such comparable people.

Although modern recognized nations have made it easier to maintain and manipulate identity within politics, this control of difference is not confined to the modern era as seen with the Ottoman *fatwas*. With a national group being crucial to any society and to those in control of a territory, the ability to create a cohesive identity is an important part to the maintenance of power. Political power comes from the willingness of community members to believe in the leader's ability and policies to guide the country according to how they want the state to be ruled. We balance our own community identification against those who are outside our group, yet as we create our "community of fear" there is another "community of fear" forming in opposition to ours.²⁹ For Ignatieff, Nationalism becomes the "politics of fantasy, leading populations away

²⁹ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 37

from the real issues” that plague a country.³⁰ National identity is the language that guides the citizens, the portrayal of outsiders to create fear and to maintain group cohesion.³¹

Identities are a powerful tool to divert attention from, to draw attention to, and to symbolize the influential aspects of life. An image has the ability to hide many things – the perception one puts forth of oneself when uncertain, the illusion of certainty when threatened, the picture of prosperity when floundering. Some differences are easy to hide; others require a strict focus. In a political sense, well-placed words and careful twisting of perceptions have the ability to enhance divisions so to change relationships within society. Community’s dynamics create the guidelines by which each relationship is governed, and as differences manifest, the interactions change the way societies deal with each other. In the each case, it could be as simple as the groups in a local neighborhood or as big as racial and religious differences in the world.

Nationalism, “is a fiction: it requires the willing suspension of disbelief.”³² Differences are small, sometimes almost invisible, but with the legitimacy of the state supporting the national character; minor differences turn a shared identity into a shared fear. Nations are fragile. There is always the threat that security might be lost, and then the community, once protected, will be forced to reconsider their differences and similarities with others in order to be protected against joining another group. Borders are not set in stone; they are fluid. Especially as groups are prone to expansion, the outside threat is always a legitimate concern for that society. However, this remains a challenge in the modern age and these group borders are much more deterministic as citizenship determines identity in this modern world. Nations in the Middle East are particularly

³⁰ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 43

³¹ The literature on the development of nationalism is extensive; however, due to constrictions, theorists like Anderson and Brubaker will not be discussed in this version.

³² Ignatieff, M. (1998), 38

prone to nationalistic issues as a result of how the nations were created and the once fluid boundaries needed to maintain new nationalistic ideologies.

The Post-World War One period was a confusing time for Arabs; their region was created anew and populations were suddenly under the control of foreign rulers. Each situation required a focus on creating a stable state with a stable foundation. French rule in the Levant was maintained by a particular pseudo-stability constructed from “communities of fear.” Each province was delineated to create no dominant ethnic group; drawing lines and creating difference in one motion to maintain power.³³

The definition of a nation only continues with the discernible difference as a contrast to other groups, no matter how little the distance perceived is, it remains an important distinction for membership. For the Shi’a-Sunni Divide, this distinction takes on a minute quality that could be accepted within the Bahraini, Saudi, or Arab society, as it is a traditional part of the developed Arab communities in other countries. A majority of the Shi’a within the Arab gulf countries consider themselves to be part of the greater Arab identity – comprised of Christians, Shi’as and Sunnis alike – yet the consideration of their different sect of religion became important when states like Saudi and Jordan started to project their Sunni identity in contrast to a Muslim one. New focus on the particular ideal of Sunni Arab immediately put the idea of belonging to that nation in conflict with a part of society not so different before. The simplicity and inclusiveness of the Arab identity was primary for a number of years, however politics seemed to prove that strength in this modern age lies in the nation-state with a government tailored to their needs,

³³ Long, D., Reich, B., & Gasiorowski, M. (2011). 237-238; Matthiesen, T. (2013), xiii-xiv

looking out for only their supporters. As Ignatieff discussed, those who are the closest have potential to be the more dangerous.³⁴

“Where there is less security and people live under greater threat of arbitrariness and violence outside their primary community, the insecurity itself acts as a constraint on inter-ethnic contacts.”³⁵ Insecurity breeds uncertainty, this in turn allows for more concentrated control of the people and the state. If a person is considered outside the defined group, there is less confidence that that person will adhere the social norms that the majority of the population relies. As a result of 11 September 2001, airports and security checkpoints in the West profiles a person based on his/her perceived difference to the typical Westerner. Where once variety was valued by this global society, it is now a reason to distrust some communities based on the actions of a few. In the Middle East, the Shi’a are commonly considered to be outside the normal group thus threatening the overall appearance of cohesiveness, as they might be loyal to another state.

Difference has the ability to change identity and turn neighbors into enemies whose only commonality is no longer shared community but the prospect of conflict. “It is precisely the minor difference in people who are otherwise alike that form the basic feelings of strangeness and hostility between them.”³⁶ Minor differences can be overlooked when the environment is comfortable, however, people become sensitive to disparities when there is threat of the “other.” Yet, “what is wrong with nationalism is not the desire to be master of your own house, but the conviction that only people like you deserve to be in the house.”³⁷ As exemplified by Fredrik Barth, a group cannot be created without an opposing group to base an identity contrary to the unit. Sectarian conflicts in the Gulf have the ability to create differences between groups where

³⁴ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 49

³⁵ Barth, F. (1998), 36

³⁶ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 48

³⁷ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 59

there was none. Governments and politicians active use specific phrases to maintain the idea of a greater evil, against which the majority should unite in order to save and the stability they take for granted.

However resilient the controlled images of difference may seem to those in the middle of the conflict, they are not nearly as strong as how the media portrays the image's strength –in both Eastern and Western sources. In 2012, a Pew Poll published after the most recent rise in sectarian discussion during the Arab Spring inquired into how Muslims thought of each other, whether or not they considered one another a Muslim or not.³⁸ This is something that the media continually discusses on the state level, as countries are seen calling groups bad Muslims or non-Muslims. The results countered the sectarian label imposed on conflicts in the Middle East. Muslims recognize a difference in each other, yet countries continue to suffer from the implementation of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, mainly Lebanon and Iraq, overwhelmingly said the other was still a legitimate Muslim and overall knew more about their neighbors' traditions.³⁹ While countries that maintained a strong majority of Sunnis seemed to believe that Shi'a were not good Muslims because of their practices.⁴⁰ A demonstration of power by those in control of domestic politics does not allow for acceptance throughout a community.

³⁸ (2012, Aug 09). *The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity*. Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS. Pew Research Centers.

³⁹ (2012, Aug 09)

⁴⁰ (2012, Aug 09)

3.2 DEVELOPING CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

In 2005 discourse about the Middle East determined a different direction concerning policy agendas. King Abdullah of Jordan coined the term “Shi’a Crescent” in a speech to the region. It has been used in the subsequent years to define the crescent of politically guided Shi’a countries north of the Gulf. From the west, it begins with Lebanon and Hezbollah, Syria and al-Assad, Iraq and the American Shi’a regime, Iran and its *wilayat al-faqih*, and finishing with the archipelago of Bahrain with a large majority Shi’a, though politically Sunni controlled. The term is used as a threat: the crescent is descending down on the Sunni Gulf, like an invasion. Although this image was probably developed by the entirety of the Sunni Gulf area, it has done its designated job. There is a new image of fear in the Shi’a-Sunni Divide, which manifests when the emergence of differences becomes a label to divide. These countries only started to support each other politically after the Iranian Revolution, however they have had a rocky time. Iran and Iraq have only recently started to get along, yet there are some scholars that say Lebanon and Syria would not be where they are today if not for Iran.

On the other hand, there are much deeper connections between Middle Eastern communities, ones that are much older than modern politics as tribal, familial, and ideological ties have developed over many centuries. Along with those connections, inherent and feared transnational Shia networks connect the Shi’a around the world, and they must be considered in order to understand the perceived relationships in the Middle East, and especially in the Gulf region. These networks of clerics have become the support system of the modern Shi’a faith and remain out of the reach of the western Gulf governments. This structure, not original in the Shi’a faith, was necessary to maintain a leader and teacher until the twelfth Imam returns. The first time this entered the realm of politics and created a new state was in 1979 with Khomeini’s state

of Islamic law, *wilayat al-faqih*. Before this, Shi'a communities debated whether or not there was allowed to be a Shi'a state without a guiding Imam. Over time there developed two centers of Shi'a religious thought, one in Najaf and Qom (present day Iraq and Iran). Najaf has traditionally remained the historical center of thought, supported by Qom, yet during the times of conflict in the area, Qom grew in prominence as a result of Safavid protection against Ottoman politics. Qom is now primarily the center of Khomeini's school of jurisprudence, *wilayat al-faqih*, while Najaf hosts a number of different schools. However, violence makes it difficult to study there.

During the Ottoman period, the wide range of Shi'a clerics began to centralize their schools of thought in ideologies, because the Safavid Empire fell to Afghani tribes in 1722 thus removing the protected area of thought, and spurring the need for the clerics to safeguard themselves from the other ideology that the Ottomans promoted. Clerics during the Safavid era expanded in a state that protected and encouraged the growth of Shi'a thought. Beginning in the 1950s, transnational Shi'a networks started to politicize by the slow process of educational transfer. Students would go to Najaf to study and in the development of their religious ideology; the political aspect grew to compete with the religious studies. After students finished their studies, they would go home as scholars ready to teach the next generation of students their beliefs. During the proceeding three decades, minor details would change as political ideas transferred to communities outside direct contact with Najaf and Qom. These ideologies transferred back to Bahrain by students who started the first political clubs founded in *Shiraziyyin* and *al-Da'wa* religious-political thought from Iraq and Iran.⁴¹ In the modern era, Najaf remains the center of religious study, while Qom became the center for religious

⁴¹ The Bahraini government has declared political parties illegal – yet these political clubs operate in a similar way by organizing social and political thought.

governance after the 1979 Revolution. Since the 1950s and 1960s the *marj'iyya* have divided, separated between different schools of thought, each challenging the other over Iran's system of government.⁴²

The clerical system is a key part of the Shi'a religious practice that provides a group of connected individuals. Each local cleric has a network of leaders, students, and friends keeping him in contact with Najaf and Qom and the religion that develops there. For a time after the establishment of the new Iranian state in 1979, transnational networks concerned with the politics in other countries focused particularly on the states that housed populations of Shi'a. Movements like *al-Da'wa* and the *Shiraziyyin* implemented their politics in other countries in the Gulf that the Iranians thought needed progressive revolutions. *Al-Da'wa* was the political expression of the traditional religious institution in Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE; while the idea of countering Najaf's influence was central to the *Shiraziyyin*, ideology, mainly in Kuwait and KSA.⁴³ There remains a strong connection to the original movements of *al-Da'wa* and *Shiraziyyin*, however, even those movements now look internally (in their country of residence) before looking towards the greater Shi'a community on issues involving transnational politics and Shi'a communities. These historical networks will likely never disappear as continuing studies of imams in Najaf and Qom will influence the connections back home and the discussions there. The hierarchical tradition is long ingrained into the Shi'a faith and will continue to govern the relationships between Shi'a groups.

⁴² The *marj'iyya* are the supreme religious authority for the Shi'a faith based in Iran and Iraq. These religious leaders are those who have the ability to guide the Shi'a community until the return of the hidden Imam. There are a number of Imams from various schools of jurisprudence and based in many cities, but most will have spent some time studying in Najaf and/or Qom.

⁴³ Louër, L. (2009, May 15). The Limits of Iranian Influence Among Gulf Shi'a. Retrieved March 13, 2015, from <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-limits-of-iranian-influence-among-gulf-shia>

The period of proliferation of religiously-guided political parties began with the spread of ideology founded in the occurrence of religious studies abroad, and the expectation that learned scholars would take their knowledge apply them to the domestic situation. This is how the formerly purely religious networks took on a distinctly political agenda, creating anxiety for the Sunni monarchs. This fear of a Shi'a political community with philosophies counter to the government shows the fear of thoughts like, the Shi'a want to impose a Shi'a state, or they simply want to liberalize the local rulers (which is also risky for the monarchies). As the religious networks began to be politicized within and around the Iranian regime, there was step away from maintaining a theological tie to its religious base. Since the 1980s, these highly politicized groups who had a strong ideological connection abroad began to take on an autonomous tone, focusing more on the manifestation of politics domestically while maintaining their religious identity separately. An example of this is *al-Wefaq* in Bahrain and its leader Ali Salman who demonstrates a focus locally instead of entangling himself in regional politics.

After the Iranian Revolution and the practice of “exporting the revolution”, the late 1970s and early 1980s were a time of political mobilization for the Shi'a community in Bahrain.⁴⁴ Politics began to reverse in relation to Shi'a feelings towards Iran as a result of their dealings in the region, particularly Iraq, an Arab ally, during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988. Centralization and an “exporting of the Revolution” foreign policy defined the post-revolutionary period in Iran.⁴⁵ This was welcomed by most of the Shi'a communities in the Gulf, as they wanted a vector of power to advocate for their rights within their countries (with some radical exceptions). However, as the period of the Iran-Iraq War grew longer the mood soured

⁴⁴ Louër, L. (2008), *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*. New York: Columbia University Press. 151

⁴⁵ Mabon, S. (2012). *The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry*. Middle East Policy, 19(2), 84-97.

towards their exported political ideology, as it was deemed too extreme for the mainstream activist.

Political groups have grown and shrunk in membership over the years; most still exist today in some form. The major Iranian advances were made shortly after the revolution, and cumulated in the 1981 attempted coup d'état of Emir Isa al-Khalifah reportedly funded by Iran. The Iran-Iraq War also provided a major diversion in Gulf politics. While Najaf and Qom were unattainable as centers of guidance, national politics began to fester within Bahraini and other Shi'a Gulf communities. The end of the war proved to be bitter and breaking to the Iranian policy of exporting their thought, choosing instead to focus inwards to regrow support within their own foundation. For example, the *al-Da'wa* party became a center to pass ideas instead of actively participating in politics, returning again into Shi'a networks of religious thought.⁴⁶

The late 1970s and early 1980s influence of Iranian political mobilization started the mobilization of political groups in the Gulf states, and from the late 1980s and 1990s Shi'a communities focused domestically to achieve their goals. After the intense years of the 1970s and 1980s as a result of the Iranian Revolution's growing politics, the transnational Shi'a networks withdrew from the political arena. Regional concerns were no longer the primary concern of each group, instead nation-states became more important within community's considerations.⁴⁷ These networks are important to consider when discussing relations in the Gulf region, as they provide hypothetical legitimacy to the theories of the Gulf monarchies threat of the Shi'a political connection with Iran. They also were essential in the easy spread of the Iranian Revolution's policies after 1979, and continue to be a key communication network that has, for the most part, withdrawn from the political arena and refocused on their foundation of shared

⁴⁶ Louër, L. (2008), 198

⁴⁷ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 84

religious ideas. As a result of the Shi'a religious hierarchy and the clerical system, these networks will not disappear anytime soon. However, the change of view from the external Shi'a identity of the 1970s and 1980s to the internal national character in the 1990s has removed the political purpose behind dialogues.

After the 1990s and the political domestication within the transnational networks, only one significant usage of foreign religious leaders guiding policies was documented. *Ayatollah* al-Sistani in Najaf announced that he supported *al-Wefaq's* (the main Bahraini opposition group) decision to participate in the Bahraini elections of 2006⁴⁸. This statement was the only such declaration issued by those within the transnational network, by those not directly part of the domestic process in Bahrain. No *fatwa* was proclaimed, so it was not an official religious statement, instead it remained purely a suggestion by a popular religious leader that carried a significant amount of weight.⁴⁹ Although the religious scholars will likely never leave the very important cities of Najaf and Qom, *Ayatollahs* domestically have become much more important for national considerations of power sharing. For example, the Shi'a opposition in Saudi Arabia shows the maintenance of an internal allegiance instead of a sustainable external support mechanism.

In the last thirty-five years, the division between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims has been exacerbated by political uncertainties in the Middle East. 1979 changed how the Gulf monarchies thought about Iran and its newly intensified "Shi'a" influence. That year the secular dynastic rule of Iran came to an end as a result of popular protest and revolution, after which a Shi'a religious parliamentary government was created. These networks, explained above, grew in strength as a result of a state's support of their ideology. When the people overthrew a seemingly strong

⁴⁸ Louër, L. (2008), 5

⁴⁹ Louër, L. (2008), 5

Western ally, it sent shock waves thru the Middle East and scared the monarchies in the Gulf similar to pre-revolution Iran, as monarchies.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 further deepened the relations between the al-Sa'ud and the al-Khalifah families as a counter to the wanted liberalization of Shi'a groups. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE created the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 as a response to the increasing fears of Shi'a and a way to strengthen ties between the stable, autocratic countries in the Gulf. At an intense time in the region with two closely positioned neighbors fighting (Iran and Iraq), the creation of the GCC can be viewed as an attempt to maintain a cooperative balance in the face of growing Iranian influence. Designated as a "monarchy club" that focuses on the preservation of their member states, sometimes Sunni is included in the name promotes the exclusiveness of the Council, as all the members are Gulf monarchies with a Sunni leader in power. This club perception continued when the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Kingdom of Morocco received an invitation to join in 2011 as a possible stability measure in the wake of the Arab Spring protests threatening autocratic rulers.

The United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 dealt the second blow to Sunni domination of politics in the Middle East, as it removed the secular Saddam Hussein and created a new Shi'a dominated government. In the years following this upheaval, Iraq dissolved into a land riddled with sectarian and tribal conflict that could not be contained after the departure of Saddam. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States put the formerly repressed Iraqi Shi'a in a position of great power, which in turn promoted a sectarian rift between the Iraqi ethnic groups, a rift manifested in the form of religious killings in the following years. All of these political events drew an image of the sects struggling against each other in a quest for dominance in the Middle East, one that began to grow during the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, the western media

has retained the focus of sectarian differences for easier classification. In a region that in the 1990s had transitioned to a focus on domestic political concerns, separate groups are once again begin classified together in order to maintain the simplicity of the emerging conflicts.

The quest for stability, influence, and power in the Middle East has reached a period that is dominated by the transnational struggle for power between state with a number of domestic and international issues. The country of Bahrain –a Sunni dominated but Shi'a majority country- has experienced the struggle of dominance as a consequence of Bahrain's strategic location in the Middle East. Iraq suffers from protracted conflict that creates a different scenario in which to analyze the current struggles, as the conflicts do not have defined dates of start and end. Another country with dominant Shi'a identity is Lebanon, however, it is considered to be a failed state as the infrastructure has collapsed due to proxy wars and occupation. While Syria fractured as a result of civil war, it has lost the secularism that once was part of its politics.

Saudi Arabia also struggles with internal issues that have continued, potential long-term consequences. The American policy towards the Kingdom changed after 9/11; suddenly US foreign policy supported the idea of an independent Shi'a state in the Eastern Province backed by the West.⁵⁰ The population of this province is not a significant part of the Saudi community; however the territory holds the majority of Saudi petroleum, which is something they refuse to relinquish. For the KSA regime, this renewed an old fear. After the Revolution of 1979, Iranians tried to actively project their revolution outside the country into other Shi'a communities. When the Shi'as in Iran overthrew their monarch, revolutionaries, began looking for other causes to sponsor, with a decidedly Shi'a favoritism. The closest to its borders is the small archipelago of Bahrain and the oppressive regime of Saudi Arabia. Though there was a clear push to maintain

⁵⁰ Mattheisen, T. (2009, May 06) *The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads*. Middle East Research and Information Project; Louër, L. (2008), 246

the collectiveness of the Shi'a identity, the spread of information instead of violence accomplished this through by local *sheikhs* primarily.⁵¹

The idea of freeing the repressed Shi'a population spread from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq; each of the three has a large Shi'a community and authoritarian Sunni leaning governments. The West provided the Saudi Shi'a society, as a severely underrepresented population, the perfect opportunity for the community to create a Shi'a state outside the control of Saudi Arabian monarchs. Neither time did the Shi'a Saudi community pursue a full independent state, yet it frightened the regime enough to grant certain rights to the repressed group. This demonstrates the continued focus on working within the domestic sphere of politics rather than attempting to create a new ideologically Shi'a state.

⁵¹ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 53

4.0 LOOKING INTO “THE TWO SEAS” – HISTORY AND BAHRAIN’S POSITION WITHIN ‘DIVIDE’ POLITICS

4.1 THE HISTORY OF BAHRAIN

The small main island of Bahrain is just over three times the size of Washington DC yet was the center of the Carmathain dominion, a population that historically calls themselves the first Shi’a, from 900 until the empire fractured around 1200.⁵² The territory reached from Basra, Iraq to the peninsula of Qatar ruled by the centers of Bahrain and Qatif in present day Saudi Arabia.⁵³ The eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula is thought to be the earliest Shi’a settlement, growing to a significant community in the ninth century of Isma’ili Shi’a,⁵⁴ who began the transition to Twelver Shi’ism as a result of growing popularity. The fourteenth century saw the incorporation of the Shi’a clergy into the governmental structure of the island through the police and judicial system as a way to parallel their social power with the governor’s.⁵⁵ Then scholars migrated to Iran during the time of the Safavids as a result of conflict in Bahrain from clashes between the Ottomans, the Portuguese, and the Safavids. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, the island of Bahrain was a fluid border between the Safavids ruling Persia and the Ottomans in

⁵² Louër, L. (2008), 13

⁵³ Current discussions of a Shi’a state commonly reference this empire’s territory as an imagined state.

⁵⁴ Isma’ili Shi’a believe the line of Imams transferred to Imam Isma’il after the death of his brother Imam Ja’far, while the Twelvers follow the line of succession to Imam Ja’far’s son, Imam Musa.

⁵⁵ Louër, L. (2008), 14

Istanbul, yet neither had control of the island as the colonizer Portugal won control of the ports of Bahrain.

The eighteenth century ended with the event that governs politics today in Bahrain – the conquest by the al-Khalifah family. Earlier in the century the Safavid Empire lost its control over Persia, thus ending the patronage of the Shi'a scholars by the empire. The growing power of the Qajars, an Afghani tribe that gained control of Iran, overran the country, created overall instability, and ruled through proxies that destroyed the previous institutions. All of this generated an undesirable atmosphere for scholars and hurt the economy. Because eastern Arabia provided more opportunities than the East, migration ensued.⁵⁶ In these centuries of fluid borders, a few tribes loosely governed the area, that had fostered such an atmosphere that Twelver Shi'ism grew and ended up converting the majority of the Shi'as on the peninsula to the Twelver faith.⁵⁷

Around this time something drove the tribes of al-Khalifah (Bahrain), al-Sabah (Kuwait), al-Thani (Qatar), and al-Sa'ud (KSA) out of the desert and closer to the coast.⁵⁸ Al-Khalifah first traveled to today's Kuwait then today's Qatar, soon set its sights on the prosperous island of Bahrain with its palm farms and pearling industry. The year 1783 is an important date for the native Baharna, as it represents the year that the al-Khalifah family began its rule of Bahrain. Quickly they began moving in and gathering the land as well as the pearling rights. Over the next century and a half al-Khalifah tightened their control of the country, moving their permanent residence from the Qatari mainland onto the island in order to better benefit from the pearl

⁵⁶ Cole, J. (2002), 177

⁵⁷ Cole, J. (2002), 4

⁵⁸ No literature agrees on what exactly caused the migration of tribes towards the coast.

industry there. Laurence Louër refers to the ruling practices of the family as “virtual serfdom” as a result of the new tribal hierarchy imposed on the inhabitants of Bahrain.⁵⁹

Foreign invaders, as some natives tell the story, arrived in 1783, remained to form a small part of the country and rule Bahrain. The continued feeling of being a foreigner strengthens the contradictory nature of the sect and status imposed by the Shi’a-Sunni Divide and the politics around it. Before the al-Khalifah family arrived, the state did not actively persecute the Shi’a communities on the Ottoman-Persian border in modern day Iraq and the Gulf.⁶⁰ Yet, during the conflict between the Safavids and the Ottomans, the Ottoman government discriminated against the Shi’a communities as a result of their assumed status as loyal subjects of the Safavid Empire. As the Safavid power grew to threaten Ottoman control over the region, the Ottoman policy changed to counter the new threatening group, thus excluding a sector of society previously included – the Shi’a.

Unlike the citizens of Saudi Arabia who are divided on primarily religious grounds, the Bahraini citizens maintain the significance between the majority who experienced the conquest and the minority who conquered, the al-Khalifah and their allies.⁶¹ The al-Khalifah family has not proclaimed a right to rule from the position of religion, like some monarchs have done throughout history and in the region.⁶² In fact, al-Khalifah has allowed for some religious difference in their country. Between the 1850s and 1920s a large number of Iranians migrated to Bahrain to benefit from a better economy than at home. However they remain largely marginalized when they do openly practice their religion, which includes but is not limited to the participation of ‘*Ashura* in the memory of the martyred Imam Hussein.

⁵⁹ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 35

⁶⁰ Louër, L. (2008). 15

⁶¹ Sadeghi, S. (2011, Mar 16). *The Fabrication of Bahrain's Shiite-Sunni Divide*. The Huffington Post.

⁶² Louër, L. (2008), 24-25

Bahrain formally declared a British protectorate in the early 1900s; as a result the Shi'a community had someone to hear their grievances, and soon steps were taken to revise the status of the Shi'a in Bahrain.⁶³ Although the Baharna received more rights than before, the ruling al-Khalifah repeatedly discriminated against and marginalized the Shi'a, in a historical circumstance that precipitated the conflict today as it continued the inequality and further institutionalized it. Since the beginning of the al-Khalifah reign, the government subjects the Shi'a populations to a second-class citizen status, promulgated by the difficulty of mobilization in society because the Shi'a typically suffer from an unstable employment situation and with restrictions for entering certain sectors.

As result of the close contact between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the countries have experienced similar paths of development. Oil was discovered in the 1930s and refineries were soon built to extract this valuable product. As the first to begin running out of oil reserves, Bahrain was the first to recognize the need to diversify economically. As Bahrain grew their industry and financial sectors, they began refining more Saudi oil than Bahraini as a way for Saudi to maintain stability and influence within Bahrain, both economic and political. In the 1960s Great Britain announced its withdrawal from territories East of the Mediterranean, and in 1971 Bahrain was declared independent after a vote went to the United Nations to determine if the Bahrainis could determine their own destiny, either alone or as a part of Iran.⁶⁴ Iran proposed to include the islands within Iranian domain, while Saudi Arabia remained firmly against that. As a result of all the influences on Bahrain, a short-lived union between Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates manifested to form a protected confederation in 1970.

⁶³ Louër, L. (2008), 34

⁶⁴ Nakhleh, E. (2011), *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing Society*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.
8

In 1975 the political scene changed in Bahrain. As part of a step towards liberalization, the government promulgated a constitution and elections were held after independence in 1971. The constitutional assembly focused on basic rights for all Bahrainis, legalization of labor unions, women suffrage, a separation of powers to weaken the al-Khalifah family, and the structure for due process of law.⁶⁵ In 1973 a parliament made up of Shi'as and Sunnis made a step towards equality between the social groups of Bahrain and the guarantee of basic rights for all. Two years after its initiation, the Emir dissolved parliament and the constitution in response to a unification of factions to withhold emergency powers from the monarchy. Over the course of the last thirty years the citizens issued continuous calls for the reinstatement of this parliament.

The Bahrainis experienced an *intifada* from 1994-1999 sparked by a protest of workers calling for a better economic situation.⁶⁶ This manifested as a result of increased unemployment in all sectors and for all sects.⁶⁷ The termination of the mostly peaceful protests resulted in no reforms or changes in the economy. Instead Emir Isa al-Khalifah obtained questionable confessions that led to more arrests and ultimately crippled the movement.⁶⁸ However, with the death of Emir Isa and the ascension of his son, Emir Hamad, the government announced new reforms and released political prisoners as a sign of good will. During this time of political opening, Ali Salman, a Bahraini Shi'a *sheikh*, formed the main opposition group, called *al-Wefaq*. Even though a new constitution passed in 2002, another crackdown began in 2004. During this time Emir Hamad strengthened his power into King as Bahrain officially became a kingdom. Following the new constitution, the government announced new elections for 2002.

⁶⁵ Nakhleh, E. (2011), 151

⁶⁶ Louër, L. (2008), 161, 235

⁶⁷ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 98

⁶⁸ Stork, J. (1996). *Bahrain Regime Stages Confessions, Rejects Compromise*. Middle East Report, (200).

However, because the new constitution granted fewer rights than the one in 1973, the majority of the opposition boycotted the elections.

2005 witnessed a political misfortune for the al-Khalifah family, which came to be known as “Bandargate”. A Sudanese national, Saleh al-Bandar, working within the Bahraini government published a report proving what the opposition had already suspected:⁶⁹ the Bahraini monarchy had put in place a policy to increase the number of Sunni Muslims in the country by naturalizing other Sunni Arabs who lived in Bahrain along with the ethnic Pakistanis in the security services. When al-Bandar quickly left the country as a result of government force, all confidence between the government and the opposition broke. These problems caused difficulties in the months before the 2006 parliamentary elections because *al-Wefaq* had committed to participate in. The election of 2006 faced international and domestic criticism as international watchdogs watched from outside the country. Journalists hypothesized that without the suspected fraud, *al-Wefaq* might have won the majority and thus assume the Speaker of the House.

The Arab Spring protests travelled to Bahrain on 14 February 2011 manifested in the “Day of Rage.” Activities quickly became violent, as King Hamad ignored the calls for liberalization and improved socio-economic status while quickly dubbing the protests sectarian in nature. In order to justify the significant crackdown after the protests, al-Khalifah cited the Iranian regime as the troublemakers. It did not help when the Iranian government released pro-protest statements and sent flotillas towards Bahrain. Eager to portray the conflict with sectarian intentions, al-Khalifah had no trouble using Iran’s actions against the Bahraini opposition. “While ignoring the appeals to Iran made by officials of *al-Wefaq* not to meddle in Bahrain’s

⁶⁹ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 100-102

domestic affairs, the Bahraini authorities were quick to interpret comments by opposition leaders so as to serve their own version of events.”⁷⁰ Iran may have had the best intentions in helping Bahrainis, yet those actions continued to hurt the Shi’a protestors who wanted nothing to do with Iran as it strengthened the regime’s response to the protests. This demonstrates the domestication of politics within Shi’a political groups as the Iranian influence is focused more on the power dynamics between Iran and Saudi Arabia, rather than discussion with Shi’a political societies.

“Saudi troops, under the banner of a little-known GCC joint task force, rolled over the causeway that links Bahrain to the Arabian mainland to crush an essentially peaceful protest movement. The movement largely called for democratic process and gradual change; the occasional clashes with protesters created the pretext for intervention that caused the slogans to become more radical.”⁷¹ Radical slogans calling for the removal of the regime did not appear immediately; because the people of Bahrain did not want the chaos that comes with a new regime. However, with the presence of foreign troops and increased violence and oppression, the regime no longer is seen as the mechanism for change. Although the Arab Spring protests started to highlight domestic issues, the situation changed when KSA crossed the causeway and intervened on behalf of the royal family. The protests turned into a regional bid for power as al-Khalifah had KSA support, while the imperialist power of Iran said they supported the protesters, the Shi’a, against the repressive regime.

Recently the conflict re-emerged into a dialogue of issuing lists of requests followed by a halt of national dialogues that have not attained any tangible results. The main opposition, *al-Wefaq* and leftist groups, proposed the latest list on 8 February 2014, which proposed a

⁷⁰ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 103

⁷¹ Matthiesen, T. (2014, Feb 13). *(No) Dialogue in Bahrain*. Middle East Research and Information Project.

parliament with legislative powers appointed through elections.⁷² The opposition continues to push for the halt of the nationalization process for Sunni foreigners working largely in the security sector, supposedly imposed to balance the demographics of Bahrain. All sectors are starting to call for liberalization and active participation of the population. However, what catches the media's eye is the extremists wanting to have their say. Protests continue weekly in Bahrain with little change from the previous situation.

4.2 CREATING A COUNTRY OF IDENTITY AND POLITICS

These religious differences meant little politically until the introduction of the nation-state and the subsequent nationalism that is key for the stable development of a nation. Ignatieff clarifies the discussion when referring to new identities, as Arab identity is all-inclusive, then new nations suddenly needed to be exclusive and control the narrative: "Nationalism creates communities of fear, groups held together by the conviction that their security depends on sticking together."⁷³ Tribes, religion, dialect as well as loyalty to the group remain essential to the maintenance of difference when comparing the very similar identities in the Middle East.

As soon as countries began building identities based on those in power, societal norms develop and begin to define the society within the territory to bring a sense of collective identity to new states and their people. Bahrain particularly struggles with this as a result of the ruling family's foreign identity. Even though the al-Khalifah family has ruled over the islands of

⁷² Matthiesen, T. (2014, Feb 13).

⁷³ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 45

Bahrain since 1783, there are certain groups within Bahrain that promote the Baharna identity (typically Shi'a) over the Bahraini one (typically Sunni).⁷⁴ In this instance, the Bahraini nationalism that is most commonly referred to is applied solely to the “invaders” who arrived with the al-Khalifah’s tribe. The term Baharna is used to describe the original inhabitants of Bahrain; this population is now denied full access to their state as a result of the al-Khalifah family’s ruling structure.

Once the center of the Carmathian Empire, Bahrain now struggles with local economic and social issues. Bahrain is torn between those who call themselves Baharna and Bahraini, those who do not have full access to opportunities and those who do. The traditional story in Bahrain revolves around the idea of the ruling family as a foreign occupier, which is exacerbated when reforms are attempted then stalled because of the regime’s quest to maintain absolute power. The ethnic Baharna Divide places the national identity against those who aren’t traditionally part of the territory. This is manipulated more often in the politics of the country than the inequality that dominates the life of citizens, which continues to fall along sectarian lines. However, al-Khalifah has not proclaimed the right to rule based on religious lines, thus not hindering the right to practice Shi’ism in daily life.⁷⁵

This “active rejection by the host population” creates a new system that considers the minority the outlier, not willing to allow for difference within their majority society.⁷⁶ This can be considered in relation to a majority or dominant society, either way, not accepting a stranger gives the group’s members the potential to not accept outsiders. The option of disassociating from the minority community remains, as in conversion, yet an identity is particularly hard to

⁷⁴ Baharna has a complicated and underrepresented story within scholarly literature and require mores research than what is presented here.

⁷⁵ Louër, L. (2008), 10

⁷⁶ Barth, F. (1998), 31

remove from one's own relationship to his/herself. Even if the system was created to only serve one society, other groups may never be fully part of one's new organizational system as a result of one's past and emotions. Nevertheless, minorities are normally governed by the dominant society and because of this they are typically restrained within the society.

If this is taken in light of the Bahraini state, the al-Khalifah family arrived in 1783 and quickly began to cement their power to benefit themselves and their friends. The native population, as with most conquests, created a lower class, a subjugated population that can support the elites, such as Barth describes when creating a community against the "other". In Bahrain, the al-Khalifah family immediately took over key a trading port and export industries, such as pearling, to enhance their wealth so as to increase their expanding power base. The native population, the Baharna, received few resources of their own; in fact most became poor workers of the newly founded al-Khalifah monopolies, thus forcing them to assume a second degree status to support the new Bahraini elites. The new rulers bought out or drove out of business the Baharna, who once owned profitable businesses. As a result of the new policies, these islanders became the workers instead of owners.

The increasing inequality in Bahrain compounds the fact that the majority of the lower class is Shi'a thus the realization of the Divide gains strength as a result of the economic difficulties.⁷⁷ Since the beginning of al-Khalifah rule, the ethnic Baharna represent the lower class, thus economic difficulties affect them more. There is relatively little to do in order to increase their status within the country as the highest paying jobs usually go to the Sunni families, who are the allies of al-Khalifah. There seems to be evidence to support the idea of

⁷⁷ The economic sector of Bahrain plays a very important role in the interpretation of the sectarian conflict, yet cannot be fully discussed in this paper. Further research should be expanded in order to fully analyze the Shi'a-Sunni Divide in relation to the class divide within the country.

employment discrimination in the public sector. Those suspected to have participated in the Arab Spring protests lost their jobs following the Saudi intervention compounded the problem.⁷⁸ Restrictions put on Shi'a who would want to go into the military or a government job also cause issues when trying to integrate into Bahraini public society.

Being included in a community allows for greater mobility in the society as a result of knowledge and participation in the state. For example, the overarching identity of a citizen does not allow equal access for all citizens. There are societal pressures and stigmas that promote the classic image of that state, such as the promotion of the white male in America and the Sunnis in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The benefits of citizenship are so great that some states have begun to take that away from those who threaten the regime. Bahrain is one of those countries. In January of 2015, Bahrain announced that it would revoke the nationality of 72 citizens “on the grounds of damaging national security.”⁷⁹ This is not the first time they have used this strategy to counter the revolutionary waves. There continues to be a system of nationalizing Sunni migrants in order to inflate the sectarian ratios.

Change has come slowly to Bahrain, steps towards liberalization have been taken, however, there seems to be just as many, or more, steps in the reverse. The dismissal of the 1973 parliament was the last time that Shi'as actively participated in government and elections. Elections resumed after thirty years in 2002, however, the main opposition party, *al-Wefaq*, refused to participate, stating that not enough had been done to further the democratic process and provide equality. After three years without progress, *al-Wefaq* declared its intention to participate in the election process in 2006. Ali Salman, the founder of *al-Wefaq*, hypothesized that in the three years they had boycotted the government nothing had been accomplished, thus

⁷⁸ Richardson, C. (2011, September 8). *Bahrain Mass Job Dismissals: Shiite Majority Claim Discrimination*.

⁷⁹ *Bahrain Revokes the Nationality of 72 People*. (2015, January 31).

to attempt to induce change they need to work from within the government using some of the tools already in place.⁸⁰ The majority of the party supported Salman; nevertheless, a faction split off to create *al-Haqq*, which focused on continued boycotting of the elections. *Al-Wefaq* is the most organized Shi'a opposition group on the island and as such represents the opposition in most dialogues with the King. Salman was recently arrested in December of 2014 for "inciting hatred against the regime."⁸¹ This in turn sparked another round of protests across the island.

The last thirty-five years have seen multiple opportunities for the al-Khalifah family to further basic human rights as outlined in the first constitutional assembly in the early 1970s. The ruling family is apprehensive about giving even the slightest bit of power over to their people; this is demonstrated in a number of false promises. Recently King Hamad, like his father Emir Isa, has successfully maneuvered the politics of Bahrain in his favor. Liberalization reforms have begun in Bahrain as a challenge to the King's power as to create a parliamentary monarchy, yet the political tide has consistently turned in favor of the al-Khalifahs. Whether or not this current approach will be successful remains a question, but the opposition is growing and crossing sectarian boundaries. The Shi'a-Sunni Divide might become a weaker image. The opposition may stop hindering other Shi'a political parties and instead form coalitions to make a equal Bahraini society for all the citizens.

The Bahraini government has developed a strategy that has worked well in the past. The image of a slightly broken door or window that still closes but isn't quite the same provides a useful analogy, because every time it is opened, another internal crack appears to threaten stability. Since independence in 1971, popular protests portrayed as being manufactured by

⁸⁰ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 100

⁸¹ *Bahraini Shia Opposition Chief Ali Salman to Stand Trial*. (2015, January 20).

external Shi'a groups focused mainly on the outside influence of Iran.⁸² A concise statement about the Iranian transnational interference by Emir Isa bin Salman al-Khalifah covered-up a number of issues, beginning in the early 1970s to redirect fears about the collapsing welfare system and most recently during the protests in 2011. As a result of the strong relationship with the western Gulf, the Western media often supports the official statement of the Bahraini government of Shi'a-Sunni differences as the main opposition to the al-Khalifah and al-Sa'ud regime. Independent agencies have proven this one-sided portrayal of the story to be deceptive, so it demands further investigation. However, with this acceptance of the media image, al-Khalifah is allowed to promote and justify the violence in Bahrain.

4.3 THE TWO SEA DILEMMA – STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE GULF

Despite Bahrain's connection to the United States, it remains a distant partner with minimal political interference. This separation most commonly manifests itself as a silent presence of support through its neighbor, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. While Bahrain has little economic strength, politically the country holds a more favorable international image than Saudi Arabia. While, the formal relationship dates back to independence in 1971 and the withdrawal of Great Britain's protection, the royal families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have benefited from each other economically since the eighteenth century.

⁸² Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 97

Bahrain plays an important role for Saudi Arabia, acting as a valve for social pressures stemming from the implementation of strict Wahhabi doctrine. Indeed, many Saudis regularly cross the King Fahd causeway on a Friday in order to be able to drink alcohol in bars and clubs. However, there also exists a strong level of concern within Saudi Arabia over how the Al Khalifa have responded to the Shia question within Bahrain, as that political accommodation of the Shia community may foster increasing Iranian involvement within the state.⁸³

There are many beneficial ways in which the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants a stable and prosperous Bahrain, the least of which is an increasing fear of Iranian influence in the Gulf, which counters the Sunni ideology of brotherhood between the Sunni Gulf states. Bahrain serves as a multi-faceted buffer zone comprised of economic benefits, political and ideological support both regionally and internationally, security, a more open society for weekend tourism, and a laboratory to watch liberalization unfold in order to consider implementation at home. Bahrain provides an economic service, although it can be argued that KSA contributes more by refining a large amount of Saudi oil coming from the Eastern Province. There is also speculation as to the extent of control that al-Sa'ud has over the ruling family of Bahrain. There have been some attempts at liberalization, such as women's suffrage in recent years. These were supposedly not passed in Bahrain due to Saudi involvement; the thought being that if Bahrain takes this step, there will be increased pressure on Saudi Arabia to do it as well.⁸⁴ As the majority of tourism into Bahrain comes from Saudi Arabia as weekenders wanting to blow off steam not allowed under Saudi laws, Bahrain also enjoys a better standing in the international community than KSA due to its increased liberalization and better human rights record.

⁸³ Mabon, S. (2012). 86.

⁸⁴ Nakhleh, E. (2011). 96

Although these close allies have a number of similarities now, they had very different beginnings. The countries of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were not created with most of their neighbors to the north in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Saudi Kingdom soon united under the armies of Ibn Sa'ud and the islands of Bahrain experienced a new social arrangement in the 1920s and 1930s under British guidance.⁸⁵ Both rulers faced a divided society – Bahrain primarily by religion and social class, and Saudi through the “four corners” tribal groups that relate to the vast areas of Saudi Arabia. Identities were created to support the incoming regime, similar to how they were created in post-revolutionary France: A French person became an individual with loyalty to the French state, Catholic belief, and French language; whereas a Saudi citizen held the model of the majority of Wahhabism practitioners as Sunni with Arab tribal roots, ideas for which Ibn Sa'ud had fought. Bahrain stands by itself in that the al-Khalifah family has traditionally ruled it without regards for the majority and without a particular religious decree. This created the religious identity (Muslim) as part of the nationalism of the state, yet it fails to address the intra-Islam conflicts, as demographics fall under sectarian lines.

As a result of the ideologically support that Bahrain gives to Saudi Arabia, the specifics of the Kingdom must be noted. Since the beginning of the al-Sa'ud nation-state, the teachings of Mohammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab have followed the conquering army. Wahhabism is a very conservative form of Islam, with strict adherence to the Qur'an as practiced during the time of the Prophet Mohammad. A manifestation of this is that the official constitution of the Saudi state is the Qur'an. With Wahhabism as the national philosophy, Shi'ism is referred to as a type of pagan religion; it is not recognized a “true religion.”⁸⁶ This effectively marginalizes the Shi'a from the majority of governmental institutions. There are also restrictions on holidays, and the

⁸⁵ Louër, L. (2008), 33-37

⁸⁶ Louër, L., & King, J. (2012), 43

building of mosques and meeting places. Overall the Shi'as are forced to privatize their practices while the Sunnis openly include religion in their daily lives. In 2009 Prince Nayif, the minister of interior, said this to Shi'a who want to practice in public,

Citizens have both rights and duties; their activities should not contradict the doctrine followed by the umma. This is the doctrine of Sunnis and our righteous forefathers. There are citizens who follow other schools of thought and the intelligent among them must respect this doctrine.⁸⁷

It is the duty of the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia to allow the Wahhabis to practice their religion in public, while the Shi'a must practice in private to not contradict the dominant Wahhabis.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia helps clarify the Bahraini situation in relation to, “nationalism does not simply ‘express’ a preexistent identity: it ‘constitutes’ a new one.”⁸⁸ As states draw new lines, those who benefit from them do not need to acknowledge the lines, while the people outside the new community will question the differences. Power classifies the foundation for oppressing another group. Without power, the al-Khalifah family would not be able to control the populations as they do today. The foundation of power established in the eighteenth century could not have been implemented in this modern age of human rights. Power grew and now forms the basis of the continued oppression.

Where Shi'as make up about 70 percent of the population in Bahrain, there are less than 20 percent in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. What makes the Shi'a population particularly threatening to the al-Sa'ud regime is the placement of the communities in the Hejaz, which encompasses the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and in the Eastern Province, where the majority of the oil reserves are found. Little or no attempt to include the Shi'as in the Saudi

⁸⁷ Matthiesen, T. (2009, May 6).

⁸⁸ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 38

system marginalized the community. If something pledged by the monarchy to allow the Shi'a more religious freedom, the conservative Muslims within the Wahhabi tradition would pressure the al-Sa'uds against the reforms. The Saudi regime legitimized its regime based on the support of the Wahhabi clerics, who continue to have strong influence over the policies of the government. Shi'a in the Saudi community are subjected to much discrimination and there is little room to actively practice Shi'ism in their areas or participate in politics and business. This is seen mostly in the use of *wasta* in the KSA. Defined as the connections one uses to successfully navigate the Gulf system. *Wasta* is based on whom you know within institutions that can make things move easier for you. However, these benefits must go both ways: they help you, so then you must be ready to help them when you can. This is commonly thought of as a Sunni benefit since Shi'a are traditionally marginalized, thus cut off from the advancement and money to create and use *wasta*.

There are three predominantly Sunni countries on the western Gulf region that have a large number of Shi'as within their communities – Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Each has treated the Shi'a community differently from the others. In Saudi Arabia, they are not considered to be true Muslims, in fact, they practice an “illegitimate” religion, according to the Wahhabi Sheikhs and teachings, which they attempted to correct during conservative waves of politics that would periodically occur when the Wahhabi *Ikhwan* would crack down on religious freedoms.⁸⁹ Bahrain has allowed more religious freedom than Saudi Arabia, but continues to practice discrimination against the Shi'a community economically and politically. While the Kuwaiti Shi'a have enjoyed the ability to help build their country, they are not fully involved in domestic politics.

⁸⁹ Louër, L. (2008). 22,

Kuwait is something of an outlier in the Gulf region in that it shares a common identity and a history that is widely agreed upon and accepted by all national groups. Creating a national identity is an important part of maintaining a cohesive, stable government. The Kuwaitis have done this. The shared beginnings of immigrant groups are recognized by all as is typical for a merchant guided society – whether it is former Iranians, Iraqis, Bedouin, Bahraini or al-Sabah, the ruling family. All have contributed to the process of making Kuwait their home in relation to their needs. As is typical for all systems, there are those who are better positioned to control the power, but it is not divided by religion but by class, the merchant class being the most influential in Kuwait. Through Laurence Louër’s research, she found the Shi’as within the country did not consider themselves marginalized. They are free to practice their religion, and even though they are underrepresented in the government, they feel that their needs are met.⁹⁰

In Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Saudi opposition, Hassan al-Saffar, repeatedly made steps to entice the al-Sa’uds into liberalization discussions, instead of opening to popular external support, preferring to keep the politics internal. However, recently another group of Shi’a activists has grown in popularity in KSA, as the older activists have not achieved anything concrete. Hassan al-Saffar attained nothing concrete for the Shi’a communities, and Hamza al-Hassan, an activist living in London, reopened the discussion about secession from Saudi Arabia as a way to attain their rights.⁹¹ For the majority of Saudi Shi’a this is primarily a pressure tactic and they would be content to remain as a part of the kingdom only if they had more freedoms.

The media of Saudi Arabia is also very keen on conveying the idea of an attempt by Iran to gather more influence in the Arab gulf.⁹² Maintaining a synthesized image of Iran is necessary

⁹⁰ Louër, L. (2008), 45-53

⁹¹ Matthiesen, T. (2009, May 6)

⁹² Matthiesen, T. (2013), 72

to strengthen the Bahraini and KSA foundational identity in that the Iranian Shi'a are the evil "other." If Bahrain and KSA do not present a united front, Iran will try to take over and impose a Shi's state on the Sunnis. Particularly in the case of KSA, Iranians are presented as the threatening community. US Ambassador to Bahrain stated, "it has been and remains an absolute belief that 'Iran pulls the strings.' That this belief is self-serving does not render it any less deeply believed."⁹³

The monarchies are in a precarious position as they struggle to stay autocratic regimes in a region slowly democratizing. The manipulation of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide is essential for them to maintain stability. "This explains why Gulf rulers were so afraid when a mass protest movement with the strong participation of Gulf Shia combined their fears of the Shia and Iran with a distain for street politics, and why they reacted to the Arab spring with repression and sectarianism that divide their societies."⁹⁴ Saudi news sources said, "they use such ignorant and young men as a fifth column."⁹⁵ Terms such as "fifth column" evoke the same kinds of images that the Ottoman Empire tried to create a faithful citizenry, or the usage during the Spanish Civil War, when Madrid constituted the fifth unexpected column. As in the past, Bahrain is caught in the middle of two powerful states, one predominantly Sunni with the other promoting Shi'a ideology.

⁹³ Neumann, R. (2013). *Bahrain: A Very Complicated Little Island*. Middle East Policy, 46

⁹⁴ Matthiesen, T. (2013), xiv

⁹⁵ Matthiesen, T. (2013), 72

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 THE ESCAPE FROM OF THE SHI'A-SUNNI DIVIDE

The Shi'a-Sunni Divide appears when the dominant societies in the region are threatened, when politics are needed to spark cohesiveness within a territory and separate with another community. "In the process of providing legitimacy for a political project – the attainment of statehood – it [nationalism] glorifies identity. It turns neighbors into strangers and the permeable boundaries of identity into impassable frontiers."⁹⁶ The manipulation of fear is a powerful thing. Strangers become enemies in the quest to protect stability in the state. Implementation of the Shi'a-Sunni begins at the state level and begins to interfere in the local level as politics affect the relationship between communities.

If Fredrik Barth's argument that groups have to define themselves against the "other" is valid, then the al-Khalifah and al-Sa'ud families have built their national communities in relation to the underrepresented Shi'a. These states will struggle to redefine themselves internally without the perception of a looming threat. Saudi nationalism does not emphasize a connection to the land, choosing instead to focus on religion and economic benefits; there is no cohesive sense of KSA community outside the religion and the overarching Arab identity. During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, reports saying Shi'a in the Eastern Province preparing for an invasion if

⁹⁶ Ignatieff, M. (1998), 58

the Iraqis continued to press through Kuwait, while their Sunni counterparts ran. The Sunnis of the Eastern Province are primarily from the region south of Jeddah, on the opposite side of the country with no connection to the territory where they currently live. The absolute connection to the land is demonstrated by those who are least considered to be Saudi, which shows a detachment from the state and a focus on the heritage of the land.

The Saudi regime is in a better position than the Bahraini to build on their government based on a tribal system that has a lasting political legitimacy. Today, tribes are more likely to come together for political reasons than those of differing religious sects, because of stigmas against other religions and political legitimacy of the tribe. Tribes are political institutions as well as families; they will continue to support the society that recognizes and benefits them. The original twelve tribes of KSA include Shi'a tribes and with representation based on the tribes the Shia' would be represented, thus having the most success long term. Bahrain will continue to suffer as the sectarian image hides the economic issues that are really crippling the nation. Yet the opposition continues to participate in talks with the government, even the Crown Prince seems to want to change his country's situation.

The politics in Bahrain have taken on a sectarian tilt as a result of the potential power of Iran in the Gulf. Portrayals of the conflicts with a Shi'a-Sunni label have the ability to blur the lines of the reality. These perceived images have given the appearance that these conflicts are simply the majority Shi'a attacking the Sunni leaders of the country in response to a message from Iran. Instead the truth seems to lie just below the surface in some instances as well as rewritten quotes and manufactured connections. The political manipulation behind the Divide needs to be over-looked and the opposition needs to be examined without the images of communities that stand against them.

There are number of problems plaguing the Middle East. As seen during the Arab Spring, the region has many youth who want to participate in their governments. While there are still protests on the weekends in Bahrain, the hope of the Arab Spring seems to have stalled. However, the continued activism by those in the street and internationally show the determination of the people, while the government continues to arrest and injure those that oppose their rule of law.

Sectarianism was the short-term “answer” to the Arab Spring in the Gulf. But the Gulf state will have to find new answers to the looming challenges of lack of economic diversification, increasing energy consumption, youth unemployment, and demands for political reform in an era and neighborhood in which autocratic regimes have lost power to regulate what people say and demand in public.⁹⁷

If the progression of current politics continues in the same direction that it travels currently, towards better representation and equality, it has the potential to eclipse the idea of a Shi’a-Sunni Divide. With the inclusion of the Shi’a community in society in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the prominent identity could be the national one instead of an aggravated religious characteristic. Although change is slow and sometimes seems impossible, there is hope on the horizon. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is slowly, slowly allowing more rights to the Shi’a and Bahrainis are willing to induce change.

⁹⁷ Matthiesen, T. (2013), 130

5.2 FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

11 September 2001 was a perspective-changing day for the world that redefined the images concerning the Middle East and relations with differing communities. The Middle East also experienced a period of uncertainty after the events of that day. Two countries were subsequently invaded; the relationship with Saudi Arabia fluctuated as a result of the nationalities of the terrorists, and the West labeled the entire region/religion a terrorist culture. The groups of Hamas and Hezbollah were labeled global terrorist organizations, one a Sunni ally of Iran and the other, a Shi'a group in close contact with Iran.⁹⁸ For the first time since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, geopolitics had the power to shift away from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia remained in a perilous position as a state that had allowed citizens to become terrorists and to fund terrorism. At the same time, Iran was one of the first to offer help to the United States to find the people responsible for the attacks, but it was ignored, even though the terroristic violence threatened Iranian security in the region.

Recent times have been fraught with references to Shi'a-Sunni differences just as Europe is facing an 'Islamic Question' in regards to their identity, the Gulf countries are confronted with a 'Shi'a Question,' which presents itself similar to the 'Jewish Question' in post-revolution France. The question considered since the 1979 Revolution relies on the perceived loyalties of the Shi'a communities, which could lie in Iran or where they have citizenship. "Because they do not belong to the single cultural identity the state claims to embody and defend, are seen as disloyal, the Shia clerics were considered as a threat by the state elite."⁹⁹ This is continuously seen from the very beginning of Shi'a-Sunni differences. The Umayyad Caliph, the Ottoman

⁹⁸ Norton, A. (2007). *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 75-76

⁹⁹ Louër, L. (2008). 101

Sultans, and the royals of the Gulf feel insecure regarding the perceived Shi'a loyalties. However, there seem to be instances where the Shi'a are more loyal to the land than the Sunnis. Laurence Louër discusses the different usages of 'nationalism' (waTHonyah) versus the land, or tribal-based word for 'nationalism' (qumayah). As she conducted research in the eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, she discovered that people said they were nationalistic – in relation to the land, instead of in the tradition western sense of being loyal to the state.¹⁰⁰ This continues to be discussed in relation to the Shi'a willingness to defend the Eastern Province from the Iraqis in 1990.

As individual groups evolve and grow, it experiences different problems, each maintaining their political-succession divide while acknowledging their social similarities as practitioners of Islam. Groups split and transform into new units for any number of reasons, such as an enemy invasion, an internal power struggle or inequality, as the followers of Mohammad challenged each other immediately after Mohammad's death. With the creation of the nation-state, groups experience new threats and become competitors, as well as neighbors. The Shi'a-Sunni Divide becomes a tool used in times of instability, as an image to influence discourse in the user's favor without too much consideration of what lies behind the historical difference or the times of peaceful coexistence. Instead the focus remains attached to the idea of conflict and communities at odds. The challenge is to break this cycle and approach the conflict from a new direction – from its roots within the society, not after the manifestation of a conflict.

In 2006, a New York Times reporter asked people in influential policy positions in the United States if they knew the variations between Shi'a and Sunnis.¹⁰¹ At this time the Iraqi intra-religious, interethnic conflict was at its height. The author wanted to highlight that those

¹⁰⁰ Louër, L. (2008). 240-241

¹⁰¹ Stein, J. (2006, Oct 16). *Can You Tell A Sunni From a Shiite?* The New York Times.

creating American foreign policy did not know the differences in a conflict labeled as sectarian. This seems to appropriately describe the reasoning behind removing an assumed image in the Middle East. The Shi'a-Sunni Divide should not be taken as primordial conflict. Acknowledging this history of differences between a Shi'a and a Sunni Muslim demonstrates the political motivations that guide the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, instead of the assumed Islamic motivations. There were some who later showed interest in learning and asked questions to clarify the subject, but the majority did not know the distinctions classifying the two sects. However, this poll taken as the United States implemented a new regime in Iraq demonstrates the lack of understanding of the sectarian issues as they created a new government.

Even though there is a strong image of sectarianism in the media, there needs to be substantial steps by those outside the conflict to remove the reliance on the Shi'a-Sunni Divide for explanations of Middle Eastern conflict. "This is all to say that it is more useful to look at how religion is used and manipulated by elites for political ends, rather than explain the conflicts plaguing the region solely through references to an age-old schism at the heart of Islam."¹⁰² As it is harder to understand the opposition in a conflict, those who understand the fragility of the image must strive to break the perception of the "other" so that those inside and outside the community can understand the conflicts in society better.

¹⁰² Matthiesen, T. (2013), 20

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