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Arab Spring and the escalation of the sectarian divide in Bahrain: An assessment

Kurzfassung: Der vorliegende Aufsatz untersucht, warum der "Day of Rage" in Bahrain offene Feindseligkeiten zwischen sunnitischen und schiitischen Einwohnern des Königsreiches ausgelöst hat. Die Analyse erfolgt unter einer psychologischen Perspektive. Aufbauend auf Vamik Volkans Theorie präsentiert der Artikel ein detailliertes Lagebild des sozialen Konfliktes, in dem religiöse Identitäten eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Die Anwendung der Großgruppen-Psychologie auf die sich entfaltenden Ereignisse ermöglicht ein vertieftes Verständnis der angespannten Situation in Bahrain. Die soziale Spaltung in Bahrain ist repräsentativ für den Machtkampf und die konfessionellen Spannungen in der Golfregion.

Abstract: This article assesses why the Bahraini "Day of Rage" has inflamed sectarian fear and prompted open hostility between Sunni and Shi'a inhabitants of the kingdom. The analysis approaches the subject from a psychological perspective. Using Vamik Volkan's theory, the article presents a detailed overview of the social conflict in which religious identities play a central role. Influence of large-group psychology on the unfolding events enables a more in-depth understanding of the tense situation in Bahrain. The social division engulfing Bahrain is representative of the power struggle and confessional tensions in the Gulf region.

1. Introduction: group identity and social conflict

Year 2011 was marked by series of uprisings in the Middle East commonly known as the Arab Spring. The development of these events was unexpected to the local populations and to international observers alike (Balfour, 2011). Social mobilization led, in some cases, to deposition of long-term authoritarian rulers; in others, opened conflicts whose outcomes are yet to be resolved. Anti-government sentiment has been fermenting in Bahrain for the past three decades, leading occasionally to violent upheavals, however the successes of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and in Egypt provided an opportunity to bring international sympathy and attention to Bahrain. Following the example of other countries, Bahraini opposition groups called for a local "Day of Rage" to show their discontent with the current political system. Nonetheless, as the Arab Spring swept the Middle East, Bahrain experienced a rapid growth of sectarian strife between its Sunni and Shi'a populations. Even though religious affiliation has always been an important social cleavage, in the past, both sects cooperated in their quest for political reforms¹. Yet, the social conflict that ensued as a result of the "Day of Rage" made these religious identities more salient, and ultimately, irreconcilable. The mechanisms of defense of one's identity were set in motion. Consequently, polarization of Bahrain's population eventually undermined the social stability and caused a thoroughgoing social divide.

Understanding such complex social phenomena is not an easy task. Arab Spring motivated citizens across the Middle East to demand political changes. However, presence of conflicting political aspirations does not necessarily need to lead to open social conflicts. On the contrary, "conflict exists in all societies at all times and need not necessarily be negative or destructive" (Hilker & Fraser, 2009, p. 10). Nonetheless, according to Moser and Rodgers (2005, p. v) violence is associated with increasing inequality. Exclusionary factors such as "unequal access to employment, education, health and basic physical infrastructure" foster alienated, frustrated and excluded populations to engage in violence such as economy-related gang violence, politically motivated identity conflict and domestic violence; all of which are often related to loss of self-esteem. In the context of Bahrain, identity is perceived as the source of social inequality among the Shi'a population; hence it is a source of the conflict. On the other hand, attempts to bring political changes during the Arab Spring in Bahrain were ultimately seen as an attack on the Sunni identity of the country. In turn, defense of the Sunni identity fuelled attacks on the Shi'a identity. Consequently, identity is the core reason for the exponential growth of the conflict for both parties involved in confrontation.

Identity remains thus the central concept of analysis for this case study. Factors that fuel identity conflict situations are primarily psychological since

"group identity issues and rituals are involved in every aspect of the political, economic, social, legal, or military relationships between large (i.e. ethnic or national) groups, especially when the groups are under stress or engaged in protracted conflicts. In such situations, psychological issues contaminate the real world issues and create resistances to peaceful and adaptive solutions" (Volkan, 1999, p. 143).

For the purpose of analysis, the psychoanalytical approach to group identity devised by Vamik Volkan's (1988, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2001, 2005) proved to be especially insightful. Volkan's "Tree Model" offers a comprehensive methodology to address problems between antagonist groups in conflict situations. The model is composed of the psychopolitical diagnosis phase (the "roots"), the process of psychopolitical dialogues (the "trunk") and organizations and institutions that grow out of the dialogue (the "branches"). This article is limited to the diagnosis phase, which aims at examining "common themes, both

1. The co-operation was especially visible after the dissolution of the first parliament in 1973 when urban Sunnis and urban Shi'as previously united in the parliamentary People's Bloc jointly pushed for reforms.

overt and covert, to recognize anxiety provoking issues as well as common fantasies and expectations from one's own group and from the enemy group" (Volkan, 1998, p. 344). The diagnosis includes examination of "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories" as well as real world problems and hidden resistances (Volkan, 1998, p. 351).

Given the fact that identity lies at the core of the research, the analysis will begin with an overview of the concept as well as characterize the processes of identity defense from the perspective of Volkan's works. Identity is one of the important concepts for analysis in social sciences. Yet defining identity poses a major challenge as different approaches led to multiplication of its meanings rendering the concept difficult to grasp (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 8; Malešević, 2003). Thus Fearon (1999, p. 2) differentiates between two basic types of identity: personal and social. Personal identity refers to "some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable", while social identity is defined as "a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes". The latter type remains in the focus of the present research. This collective character is reflected in terms of a category – "people all of whom recognize their common characteristic, and whom everyone else recognizes as having that characteristic" (Adams, 2008, p. 13) as well as the idea of a network linking group members. Volkan (2005) stressed the importance of understanding the psychology of large groups of ethnic, national and religious character. Such groups have their specific characteristics that were built over centuries and include shared mental representation of history and myth. In times of threat to its identity, members of the group "will do anything to stabilize it, repair it, maintain it and protect it" (p. 8). If necessary, they will resort to most extreme means such as sadism or masochism. Volkan refers to the process of maintaining, protecting and repairing of group identity as "regression." The ways of protecting large group identity against the perceived "enemy" become "pathological" and often lead to violent escalation. The outcomes of violence lead to group traumas, which fuel feelings of humiliation, shame and helplessness. In the long run, anger motivates revenge on the enemy. Groups cope with the negative feelings through the processes of mourning. Traumas can however become internalized within large group identity and passed over generations if the group is unable to reconcile their feelings of loss and reverse their helplessness, shame and humiliation. In the so-called process of transgenerational transmission of trauma, images of injury and psychological tasks that ought to be completed are passed on in hopes that the next generations will fulfill them. On such occasions, a mental representation of a historic event can become a significant marker of an identity acting as a "chosen trauma". Apart from "chosen traumas", social narratives of history include also "chosen glories". Although less potent for large group identities than "chosen traumas", they include historical events remembered and celebrated such as victories in battles, times of prosperity and famous leaders.

As the field of psychology offers valuable insights into group behavior, this article will contribute to understanding of the escalation of religious identity-related conflicts during social upheavals. Bahrain is an exemplary case of such escalation as the internal psyche of its inhabitants was shaped by external as well as internal factors. To begin with, this article will discuss the external factors that have contributed to rising antagonism of Shi'as and Sunnis in the Gulf region and secondly it will focus on the escalation of identity-based social conflict in the aftermath of the "Day of Rage" in Bahrain using the psychological framework of Volkan.

This research is ethnographic in nature. The data collection spanned over four months from January to April 2011. During this timeframe the sensitivity of the situation made data collection difficult¹. Consequently, this article is based on random observations, conversations with ten Bahraini informants of various ages who were chosen based on their willingness to provide unsolicited comments and reflections on the "Day of Rage" events, and analysis of social media. The social media sites for this study were selected through a Google search with key words "Bahrain"; "Revolution"; "Day of Rage". They included comments on blogs, Facebook sites and Twitter profiles that were downloaded starting from the very first activity.

2. Shi'a identity: coping with the "chosen trauma"

Since its inception, division of the Muslim community into different subgroups was probably "inevitable" (Lippman, 1990, p. 136). Indeed, Islam unlike Christianity does not acknowledge formal clergy and there is no "centre of priests who can decide upon what is and is not orthodox" (Eickelman, 1981, p. 213). Hence, Islamic history is marked by proliferation of sects, branches of schools and brotherhoods; some of which disappeared over time (Lippman, 1990, p. 137). The division into Sunni and Shi'a doctrines has been an enduring one. In spite of the belief in the universality of Islam and the integrity of the Muslim community, Shi'as are set apart from Sunnis "in terms of how they interpret and elaborate the meaning of Islam and in the practical sense of self-differentiation from other Muslims" (Eickelman, 1981, p. 213). In the early struggles for leadership, Shi'as became "the defeated faction" (Lewis, 1998, p. 30) and today they constitute a minority group, which accounts for roughly 15 % of all Muslims (Luomi, 2008, p. 6).

1. The unfolding events led, among others, to detentions and deportations of foreign journalists reporting the "Day of Rage" events and foreign human rights activists from Bahrain.

Psychological processes in large groups shed light on the formation of Shi'ism. The identity of the Shi'as is rooted in a trauma. The split between Sunnis and Shi'as is directly linked to a power struggle over rightful leadership of *umma*, the Muslim community of believers. The martyrdom of Hussein and his followers in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD is the central event in Shi'a history and has acted ever since as a "chosen trauma" for this community. Hussein, the last descendant from the line of the Prophet Muhammad, was killed by the Sunni Umayyad caliph Yazid. Consequently, Shi'as "had always seen themselves as the righteous few struggling against the unjust many" (Brumberg, 1997, p. 21). In this context, Shi'as refer to themselves as *ahl al beit*, people of the house of the Prophet, which strengthens the opposition between the "righteous" and the "wicked". Sunni coreligionists often consider Shi'a as a splinter group and in most radical cases do not acknowledge Shi'as as Muslims but declare them polytheists. Till this day, mourning over the loss of Hussein is incomplete. The death of Hussein not only meant humiliation of his followers but also shame over some tribes who failed to fulfil their promise and support Hussein. Consequently, mourning over the death of Hussein is a continuous process that takes place yearly during the procession of Ashura. During this religious festival men engage in a ritual self-flagellation. Masochistic behavior is, according to Volkan (2005, p. 8), characteristic of groups affected by a trauma. Secondly, although seeking the path to leadership of all Muslims, Shi'as have perpetuated the memory of long-term struggle against the "unjust" rulers as well as martyrdom and oppression since the split in 7th century. Consequently, transgenerational transmission of trauma takes place. This "chosen trauma" of Hussein's death is the most significant identity marker that constitutes a pillar of identity of Shi'as all over the world and sets them clearly apart from the rest of the Muslims.

Interestingly, we are witnessing phenomena that could signify an attempt at reversal of the humiliation, shame and loss for the Shi'as. Indeed, the Sunni and Shi'a split in Islam has acquired a new dimension in recent years due to changing geopolitics in the Middle East, namely the growing sphere of influence of Iranian Shi'a Islam. Apart from being a stronghold of Shi'ism, which sets it apart in the Middle East, Iran is characterized by a distinct culture and language. Most importantly, Iranians form a separate ethnic group, unlike their Arab counterparts, which provides them with individual sense of identity and with unique aspirations in the region. These ambitions were strengthened by, to begin with, deposition of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, which opened doors to emancipation of Iraqi Shi'as and emergence of the first Shi'a-dominated Arab state (Nasr, 2007, p. 185). Furthermore, the successes of the Iran-backed Hezbollah and Hamas in their fight against Israel in Lebanon made them heroes in the eyes of the Middle Eastern public opinion (Rabi, 2008, p. 14). All of these factors, combined with continuing development of its nuclear program, prompted Iran to rise as regional power with expanding international ambitions. It comes as no surprise that Sunni rulers in the Middle East observed these developments with growing suspicion and nervousness. The so-called Iranian "threat" has been publicly denounced, between the others, by the rulers of Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, UAE and Saudi Arabia (Walker, 2006). Apart from Iran's involvement in sectarian developments in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and the Gaza Strip (Ödütçü, 2007), Iranian influence is considered a major challenge for Arab countries in the Gulf region that have substantial Shi'a population. In Iraq Shi'as constitute 60% of the population; in Kuwait - 25%; in Saudi Arabia - 10 to 15%, while in Bahrain Shi'as are estimated to be 60-70% (PEW Research Centre, 2009). Together with Iran, these areas form what is called the "Shi'a crescent" where Iran's influence is believed to penetrate beyond its official borders. The growing role of Iran in the region led to a reaffirmation of Shi'a identity throughout the Middle East. Shi'as began a struggle for a greater share of power as well as intensified claims for their economic and religious rights. Within this context, it is commonly assumed that Shi'as, often treated as second class citizens, may be easily susceptible to Iranian influence, which poses questions about their loyalty to Sunni rulers.

On this basis, we can infer that reaffirmation of the Shi'a identity and their growing aspirations to power were understood as an imminent threat to Sunni identity of Arabian Gulf. In Bahrain, this tension has been an ever-existing motif in modern history.

3. Religious and ethnic context of Bahrain's identity

Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf. Thanks to its strategic position in the Gulf, Bahrain has been a crossroad of trading routes between Asia, Europe and Africa since ancient times. Throughout centuries foreign powers fought over control of this area. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Arabs, Portuguese and British occupied the islands in order to secure their domination in the Gulf. At the end of the 18th century, the Sunni dynasty of Al Khalifa managed to take control of Bahrain and consolidated their rule by series of treaties with Britain (Khuri, 1980, p. 13). Britain, which controlled Bahrain until 1971 when Bahrain declared independence, acted simultaneously as a protector to the Al Khalifas. Indeed, Iran was the most important contender in this area. Persian occupation of Bahrain lasted from 1602 to 1783 (Fucaro, 2009, p. 17). Moreover, Bahrain's population is often described as majority Shi'a¹. It has been noted that Arab Shi'as²

1. The latest official census presenting sectarian affiliations in Bahrain dates back to 1941 and reports an almost equal share of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. Recent studies estimate the Bahraini population to be 60-70% Shi'a (see for example PEW Research Center, *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, 2009).
2. Bahrain is also host to Shi'a population of Persian descent (*Ajams*)

(*Baharna*), who often highlight the fact that they are the indigenous inhabitants of the islands, perpetuate a memory of the conquest of Bahrain by Al Khalifas and their subsequent subservience to new masters of the land. The era before the conquest is depicted in form of an idealized myth of a "golden era" (Louër, 2008b, p. 20). The conquest of Bahrain by a Sunni tribe is another "chosen trauma" specific for the *Baharna* population. Indeed, the commemorations of Hussein's death during the procession of the Ashura in Bahrain seem to be a reflection of the long-term struggle of the Shi'a against the "unjust" rulers, in this case the Bahraini royal family (Gengler, 2011, p.113).

Among the Shi'a, religious identity is believed to be the source of conflict. The feeling of humiliation is not based only on perceived political discrimination. Shi'a population has long complained about their economic hardships in the kingdom due to unemployment, low wages and rising cost of living. Shi'as denounce what they believe to be an unequal distribution of wealth, including land and the country's resources. Moreover, they argue that low-paid, unskilled jobs in the private sector are offered primarily to them leading to job market discrimination while governmental jobs that deliver higher wages and yield additional benefits are allegedly distributed according to sectarian preferences. Third, the element of humiliation relates to naturalization of foreigners. In 2006, the so called "Bandargate" scandal allegedly revealed a pre-planned move to readjust the Shi'a – Sunni ratio in the country by granting citizenship to Arabs from neighboring countries who were supposedly allowed to retain double citizenship. Consequently, the Shi'a majority would get considerably weakened thanks to naturalization of the Sunnis from abroad (Zahid & Zweiri, 2007). The "Bandargate" scandal reinforced the perception of discrimination against the Shi'a population and was understood as an attempt at eradicating the identity of the "original" inhabitants of Bahrain (Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2006). Overall, Shi'as believe they are a socially disadvantaged group and claim their identity is threatened.

The reversal of the "chosen trauma" of the *Baharna* population has been attempted. Bahraini "Day of Rage" is part of a much longer and continuous series of unrest. The anti-government protests intensified in the 2000s as the Shi'as became more vocal in their quest for rights. The years 2005, 2006 and 2008, were particularly marked by demonstrations based on economic and political demands. Nonetheless, the opposition groups did not achieve their goals. Consequently, the Arab Spring provided them with a new opportunity to seek reforms. The organizers of the national "Day of Rage" scheduled on February 14, 2011 held a strong belief that a "domino effect" would spread in the Middle East and eventually bring changes in Bahrain. Yet, the Bahraini upheaval stands out since it was almost unavoidable not to analyze it in terms of religious identity. Although the protesters strongly denied identifying the upheaval specifically as a Shi'a protest and the protest was supported by Sunni pro-reformers (Murphy, 2011), the unfolding events led to a polarization of society that accentuated sectarian religious affiliation. Violence that ensued during the crackdown of security forces as well as deployment of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military troops, mostly from Saudi Arabia, to quell the upheaval, accentuated the sectarian dimension of the protest. Gradually all citizens, including children¹, were forced to take a stand by supporting or opposing the revolutionary movement, decisions based on religious affiliations. The sectarian identities were so strong that mixed Sunni-Shi'a families felt the split within their own households (Hamada, 2011).

The sectarian identity dimension of the Bahraini upheaval was accentuated on the international scene as Shi'a populations in the Middle East responded by condemning Al Khalifas, while Sunni governments supported the ruling dynasty. Iranian authorities observed the popular uprising in Bahrain closely and expressed sympathy for the movement. The crackdown that led to deaths of several protesters sparked an outrage in Iran. On several occasions, Iranian governmental authorities warned against "foreign" interference in Bahrain. Bahraini authorities responded with a criticism of Iran's interference in its domestic matters. The row escalated with mutual expulsion of Iranian diplomatic representatives. Furthermore, Bahrain accused Iran of directly supporting the protesters in an attempt to overthrow the monarchy. Subsequently, Bahraini authorities revealed a "plot" that implicated diplomats in the Iranian embassy in Kuwait, allegedly spying on behalf of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The idea of an imminent Iran intervention was reiterated in the Bahraini media, creating an atmosphere of suspicion. The events in Bahrain reverberated also among Shi'a populations in Iraq and Lebanon leading to criticism of Bahraini authorities by, among the others, Nuri al-Maliki, Iraqi Shi'a prime minister, and by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. Demonstrations in support of the Bahraini opposition were staged by Shi'a populations in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Due to diplomatic tension, Bahrain undertook further steps to temporarily cool relations with Iran.

4. Bahraini "Day of Rage" as an identity conflict

It is important to note that the calls for a popular uprising in Bahrain were not unanimous among the citizenry. On the contrary, occupation of the Pearl Roundabout on February 14 2011 mobilized a movement in support of the ruling family. On February 18 2011 mass pro-governmental demonstrators marched from the Al Fateh mosque, named after the Ahmed Al-Fateh, Al Khalifa who conquered Bahrain. The anti- and pro-government rallies continued for the following three weeks

1. For an in-depth overview of the children's involvement consult the Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry available at www.bici.org.bh/BICReportEN.pdf

with separate areas allocated for each party. However, the real world issues at stake in the conflict were contaminated with psychological barriers (table 1). As the tensions intensified, direct confrontations between both camps could not be avoided.

Type	Subtype	Anti-government groups	Pro-government groups
Real world issues	Political demands	Change of the political system	Status quo
	Economic demands	Equal share of economic resources, greater access to economic opportunity	Status quo
Psychological issues		Putting an end to the perceived discrimination of the Shi'a population	Preservation of the Sunni identity of the country

Table 1: Typology of goals during the months of January –April 2011

The anti-government groups put forward political and economical demands that aimed at ending the marginalization of the Shi'a majority. The political reform that would allow a genuine division of power between the citizens and the ruling family has been long sought. In 1973 the first constitution of Bahrain stipulated that the legislative power would be vested in a unicameral parliament elected in general elections. The first election to the parliament took place in 1973. However, two years after its establishment, the Bahraini Parliament was dissolved for almost 30 years. Lack of consent related to the issues of foreign policy, US naval base presence in Bahrain as well as the State Security Law led to split between parliamentarians and the amir Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa (1961-1999). Consequently, Bahrain was ruled singlehandedly by the amir under the state of emergency law. The beginning of 20th century marked a change in Bahraini politics with the ascension to throne of Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. In 2000 sheikh Hamad initiated a plan to establish the National Action Charter. It was submitted afterwards for approval in a national referendum and was overwhelmingly accepted by society with 98,4 % Bahrainis voting in favor. On December 16, 2002 Bahrain became a kingdom. A bicameral parliament was re-established with the Council of Representatives, the lower house, elected by universal suffrage. However, in comparison to the Constitution of 1973, the role of the parliament was reduced. The upper house, selected directly by the king, would have to approve bills proposed by the lower house before they could be implemented. Moreover, ultimately the king has the right to veto all bills. In a show of discontent, Shi'a political associations boycotted the first parliamentary elections in 2002. This step allowed Sunni candidates to dominate the parliament. The elections in 2006 brought a change of strategy as Al Wefaq, the largest Shi'a opposition group, announced its participation. The election was marred by disputes over distribution of electoral wards. Shi'a opposition denounced gerrymandering that would grant Sunnis advantage in the upcoming elections. Indeed, Al Wefaq did not gain a majority of seats in the parliament. Moreover, participation in the parliamentary was not a particularly fruitful experience (Kinninmont, 2007). For instance, in the years 2006-07, 25 of 27 bills proposed by the lower house were rejected by the upper house (Al A'ali, 2007).

Lack of genuine participation in power and decision-making prompted the February 2011 protesters to demand political reform. The opposition called for the abolition of the 2002 constitution; establishment of a genuine constitutional monarchy; where the parliament would have exclusive legislative rights and formation of a new interim government. These demands were justified by a long struggle to obtain full political rights in the kingdom. The 2002 Constitution was considered by the opposition to be just a democratic facade. It satisfied the demands for democratization in the eyes of the Western allies, but in reality it hardly allowed any power-sharing. However, as the negotiations prolonged, the most radical groups insisted on abolishing the monarchy and installing a republic. For the pro-government camp, the opposition's quest for political rights was unfounded. It was met with growing distress. As a matter of fact, greater leniency towards the Shi'a and their rising influence in politics would be considered a sign of weakness of the ruling family and a step towards imminent danger. Maintaining the status quo in Bahrain was far more important than political liberties. The suspicion of Shi'as acting as a "fifth column" to promote Iranian interests in Bahrain surfaced in the perception of the common people (Louër, 2008, p. 33). As the opposition demands hardened, the idea of a "Shi'a takeover" using Iran's help was commonly expressed as a real threat among Sunni Bahrainis. At that time King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa had become a cherished symbol. His photographs were displayed on cars, windows and billboards, where he symbolized not only the current political system but also a Sunni Arab identity of the country. On the other hand, the banners of Hezbollah and Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei, carried sometimes during the protests, were for the Sunnis a confirmation of their worst fears. The real intentions of the "Day of Rage" movement were further questioned due to comments of Shi'a religious leaders abroad. For instance, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati of Iran called Bahraini Shi'as on March 18 to keep up protests and resist "the enemy" until death. The suspicions about Shi'a loyalties are in part due to the Shi'a structure of religious leadership (*marja'iyya*). Bahraini Shi'a religious authorities look up to Shi'a authority figures abroad; these are Ayatollah Muhammad Hussayn Fadlallah in Lebanon, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Iran, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al- Mudarrasi in Karbala (International Crisis Group, 2005, p. 6). The belief that Bahrain's Shi'as take not only religious but also political orders from abroad is in part a result of this arrangement.

5. "Day of Rage" through the prism of Volkan's theory

According to Volkan (2001) various signs of group "regression" may be observed in large groups that underwent a trauma, which was deliberately caused by others. Volkan listed a total of twenty such signs, namely:

1. Group members lose their individuality;
2. The group rallies blindly around the leader;
3. The leadership ruins "basic trust" within the family
4. The group becomes divided into "good" segments - those who obediently follow the leader - and "bad" - those perceived to oppose the leader;
5. The group creates a sharp "us" and "them" division between itself and "enemy" groups;
6. The group's shared morality or belief system becomes increasingly absolutist and punitive toward those perceived to be in conflict with it;
7. The group uses extensive introjective and projective mechanisms
8. The group feels "entitled" to do anything to maintain its identity;
9. Group members experience increased magical thinking and reality-blurring;
10. The group experiences new cultural phenomena or adopts modified versions of traditional societal customs;
11. The group's chosen traumas and glories are reactivated, resulting in a time collapse;
12. The leadership creates a break in the historical continuity of the group and fills the gap with elements such as "new" nationalism, ethnic sentiments, religious fundamentalism or ideology, accompanying "new" morality, and sometimes a "new" history of the group purged of unwanted elements;
13. Group members begin to experience the group's shared symbols as "protosymbols,"
14. Shared images depict enemy groups with symbols or protosymbols associated with bodily waste, demons, or subhuman traits,
15. The group experiences geographical or legal boundaries as a "second skin,"
16. The group focuses on minor differences between itself and enemy groups,
17. Group members become overly concerned with the notion of "blood" and an associated homogeneous or purified existence,
18. The group engages in behaviors symbolizing purification,
19. Group taste has difficulty differentiating what is beautiful from what is ugly,
20. The group turns its physical environment into a gray-brown, amorphous (symbolically fecal) structure.

The emerging identity conflict in Bahrain escalated with mechanisms aimed at protection of large group's identity. The following signs of regression: protection of borders, the "us" and "them" divide and the rise of uncompromising attitudes were observed during the timeframe of this study and will be discussed in detail.

5.1 Protection of borders

Although Bahrain is a small unitary country, it is divided into areas of more or less uniform population. While some districts are inhabited by expatriates, local populations concentrate in neighborhood based on their religious denomination (Gengler, 2011). During the "Day of Rage" the "borders" between Sunnis and Shi'as were drawn over particular streets and corners. The tensions escalated and eventually led to violent sectarian clashes in the areas inhabited jointly by both sects. The district of Hamad Town was affected first on March 3. Tensions have existed there since 2008. The area was particularly vulnerable to instability because it is home to large numbers of naturalized Bahrainis. The factors that contributed to the clashes were thus particularly salient. However, the unrest spread to other districts of Isa Town, Sanad, Riffa, Saar and A'ali. Subsequently, neighbors set up vigils and security checkpoints to prevent strangers from entering their districts. Both sides accused each other of spreading hatred, false rumors and carrying on attacks. Meanwhile the unrest affected public schools attended jointly by Sunni and Shi'a students. The violence and devastation of the University of Bahrain led to a temporary closing of all schools and universities in the country. Several attacks on foreign laborers of Asian origin, carried out by protesters, were reported in the media. At this point, the panic and chaos made the pro-government camp welcome the arrival of GCC troops to restore order and prevent an alleged Shi'a takeover (Torr, 2011). For the protesters, their presence meant a foreign interference and "occupation" of the country.

Protection of borders ultimately took another turn and included boycott of businesses. Widely repeated rumors claimed that Shi'a businesses allegedly profited during the unrest, while purposely plunging the rest of the economy into crisis. The accusations claimed, among other things, that the Jawad Business Group distributed free food on the Pearl Roundabout, while making additional profits by selling its products during the protests. Some respondents even believed that the "powerful" Shi'as paid the protesters to stay on the Pearl Roundabout and continue the demonstrations. A call for a boycott of all brands related to this business group and other Shi'a-owned businesses was launched¹. Throughout the unrest several

1. A petition is still available on-line at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/bjb1/>

outlets were attacked and vandalized in areas inhabited by Sunnis. On the other hand, the anti-government camp initiated a campaign to boycott the Formula 1 event in Bahrain in 2012. The protesters believed that staging an international event in Bahrain would allow the government to promote its image while international opinion would turn a blind eye on the hardships of the Bahrainis. Initially, a request was posted on Facebook to get the Grand Prix cancelled in a show of condemnation of violence of the regime; however, it was unsuccessful so the race went on¹.

5.2 "Us" and "them"

Analysis of social media such as Facebook or Twitter reveals a growing "us" and "them" divide. It is highlighted by the use of pronouns such as "we" and "our" as opposed to "they" and "their". Both groups present themselves as victims, and those killed on each side are called "martyrs". The Other is often described using labels. Those supporting the government are often referred to as "slaves" and "cowards". On the other hand, the opposition is branded as "terrorists" who place their loyalties with "Iran" and "Hezbollah". Thus protesters are accused of being "traitors" who secretly "gather weapons" to carry out instructions of foreign powers. Moreover, each group presents itself as being under "attack", while the Other constitutes a "threat". The account of the events and the presentation of the events vary widely.

The pro-government camp accused the protesters of being selfish and inconsiderate in their quest for reforms. As the protest took place in a central area of Bahrain and later spread to the Salmaniya public hospital, government supporters claimed that lives of common people were put into jeopardy. Apart from complains about blocking main highways and limiting movement in the country, patients not involved in the protests were allegedly unable to receive medical treatment in the public hospital. The integrity of medical doctors was thought to be compromised as well, as Sunnis believed that preference in treatment was given to Shi'a protesters over other patients. These allegations have brought into scope the issue of human rights. Violations of human rights in Bahrain have widely been denounced by the opposition. Lack of transparency in the judicial system, torture of political prisoners, denial of free speech and discrimination, to cite a few, are on the long list of abuses repeatedly committed in Bahrain². Excessive use of violence against the protesters that led to several deaths and severe injuries brought the ultimate condemnation of the regime in the eyes of the protesters. It is interesting to note that the pro-government camp strongly argued that human rights were used as a pretext to cover up "criminal acts" committed by the revolutionary movement. Indeed, another point of discontent deals with the truthfulness of the portrayal of the events by the activists themselves and by the media. Both groups accuse the other of providing a one-sided version of the story, sometimes falsifying reality. The protesters point to the brutality of the security forces that left a number of injured and killed. They also underline aggression towards medical personnel and unarmed civilians including women and children. Uploaded videos and pictures serve as testimony to both sides of the conflict. The pro-government sites present a completely different image. The protesters are shown provoking the security forces, carrying weapons and involved in acts of brutality against the police and expatriates from the Indian Peninsula. Some comments go as far as to state that protesters used fake blood to present events as more dramatic and to manipulate international opinion. Since these versions differ considerably, each group accuses the other of editing the footage to serve their purpose or even fabricating the videos. Moreover, both groups denounce national and/or international media. The protesters claim the national media does not give them justice and "is lying". Their opponents criticize coverage of the events by some international media as completely biased.

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

Even though in certain instances social media contributors emphasize that they make no generalization towards a specific religious or ethnic group since some of their members may be misjudged this way, the emotional factor plays a further role in splitting public opinion. Pictures and video clips taken at funerals of the "martyrs" on both sides of the conflict, often portraying grieving families cause uneasy sensations among viewers and may easily stir up feelings of revenge.

1. Examples of Facebook Formula 1 boycott pages

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Boycott-the-Bahrain-Grand-Prix/197621703616831>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bring-Moral-Accountability-to-Formula-1-Boycott-Bahrain-Grand-Prix/188401241200832>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bernie-Ecclestone-Boycott-the-Formula-1-in-Bahrain/203492862997892>

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

5.3 Uncompromising attitudes

The interpretation of the described events determined the behaviors in the aftermath of the "Day of Rage". As allegations of Hezbollah training Bahraini activists were voiced, the pro-government camp saw the use of force as the only option to end the alleged terrorist plot. This interpretation stands in sharp contrast to international analyses, which assessed that in fact "the Iranian influence on the evolution of the Bahraini protests is seen to be very limited" (Jamestown Foundation, 2011). However, the idea of a dialogue with the opposition was not supported to begin with. A 50 year old Sunni man stated to me that he could not understand how the opposition asked to negotiate with the government that they wanted to depose. He mentioned that it was ridiculous to just ask the royal family to leave. Consequently, after the initial crackdown on the Pearl Roundabout and the spread of conflict into the public healthcare centre Salmaniya Hospital, pro-government citizens did not deplore the use of violence and in general, did not express any pity for the injured and killed. On the contrary, Sunni informants believed that, in their opinion, protesters should not have been even allowed to use the public healthcare facilities. Since the protesters were acting against the government they should not take advantage of the governmentally sponsored healthcare system. Furthermore, the opinions became even more uncompromising. The repressions of those involved in the protests begun leading to imprisonment, suspension and dismissals of employees, withdrawal of study scholarships and destruction of Shi'a mosques, which the authorities judged illegally constructed; however the pro-government camp saw these sanctions and reactions as insufficient. The general idea was not to indulge in taking revenge but rather to teach protesters a lesson. Release of political prisoners and reinstatement of employees after the initial crackdown did not satisfy these demands. The protesters were branded as "traitors" who deserve punishment. In the common opinion of the pro-government camp, the government was overindulgent and it was high time to take firm action not to encourage future revolutionary movements. As an old Sunni man related to me "The government takes them [Shi'as] to prison; then there is amnesty and they are let out and then they start to do the same thing again."

5.4 Emergence of another "chosen trauma"?

The reaction of the authorities to the "Day of Rage" events was to begin with uncompromising. On February 17, security forces pacified the Pearl Roundabout. Families who camped there were removed and the area was cleared of makeshift tents. Protesters who attempted to return to the occupation of the roundabout were shot at close range. Pacification led to several casualties and use of force against civilians was ultimately judged as "both unnecessary and disproportionate" (BICI, p. 166). Wounded protesters reported difficulties of access to medical treatment. The events of February 17 were symbolically named "Bloody Thursday". The connotation of the name is clear. February 17 marks a tragedy for the Shi'as. It has been inscribed as yet another chapter of Shi'a martyrdom and unjust treatment. It adds as a new "chosen trauma" to the historical narrative of Bahraini as well as transnational Shi'a community. Moreover, each death of a protester is considered a path to martyrdom. In a metaphysical sense, the "Day of Rage" is a modern narrative for reliving the martyrdom of Hussein. The situation in Bahrain is compared to "Karbala" and the martyrs are compared to the Karbala Martyrs. On the other hand, the Al Khalifas are often referred to as "Umayyad rule" and "Servants of the Umayyad". A deceased in an honorable death acquires a status of martyrdom, which is revered. As noted by a Facebook forum participant "the tougher the test is, the highest status one achieves, like Bahraini people" (Karolak & Guta, 2012). The process of mourning is not only incomplete but it is also deepened by modern events, which exacerbate the feelings of shame and helplessness. On the other hand, it is important to analyze the overall outcome of the events for the Sunni part of society. Even though Bahraini authorities did not refer to the final containment of the process in terms of "chosen glory", the memory of the movement and of the events that took place was symbolically erased through the destruction of the Pearl Roundabout and a complete revamp of the area.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that the "Day of Rage" escalated the sectarian strife in the Bahraini society. Using Vamik Volkan's psychoanalytical approach this article presented differences in analyzing and understanding the events by the pro- and the anti-government camps. Indeed, Bahrainis interpreted real world issues depending on their reality of everyday life, which was heavily contaminated with psychological barriers. The real challenge lies in the fact that, as these interpretations reveal more and more conflicting perspectives, the gap between both sects widens. These differences can lead to creation of permanent mental barriers, judgments and prejudices that prevent co-operation and peaceful co-existence in society. Eventually, there exists a danger of radicalism, which has already resurfaced in social media portals. The following quote by a Bahraini "They [Shi'as] are not human they are criminals. [...] We never can get along with them." is a worrisome outcome of the "Day of Rage" upheaval tensions. This change in mentality marks a sharp contrast to past experiences of Sunni – Shi'a co-existence in Bahrain. As Sunnis and Shi'as look at the past events from different perspectives, the question is whether they can share a common future.

Volkan posited that through the processes of "progression" it is possible to achieve peaceful coexistence between large groups once again and "tame threats (especially the fantasized ones) to large-group identity coming from the "other" (2005, p.20). Important signs of progression include existence of society capable of consensus. Its members are able to evaluate moral concepts. During "progression" they also analyze and strive to understand even the most brutal behavior of other groups in conflict situations. Volkan refers to this procedure as purification. While this step does not necessarily mean forgiveness and forgetting, it is fundamental in order to establish a stable society. From the point of view of the situation in Bahrain, progression has not been yet attempted. On the contrary, existence and deepening of socio-psychological barriers may "serve as a catalyst for continuation of the conflict and in fact [operate] as part of the vicious circle in the intractable conflict" (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011, p. 232). In fact, the dangers of the current situation include the inability to reach a common resolution, a state of continuous upheaval leading to a growing instability of the current political system, increasing militarization and resort to coercion. The appearance of new "chosen traumas" and unfinished processes of mourning are factors to consider. Transgenerational transmission of trauma will continue to exert a heavy weight on the social relations in the kingdom.

In light of the above, future research should focus on the evolution of sectarian identities in the Kingdom of Bahrain and in the broader Gulf region. Comparative analyses of the role of identities in domestic politics may reveal additional insights into the escalation and reduction of sectarian tensions.

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