



BAHRAIN III. HISTORY OF POLITICAL RELATIONS WITH IRAN

iii. History of Political Relations with Iran

Up to 1970, Iran claimed that “Bahrain had always and uninterruptedly formed part of Persia in past centuries, except during the Portuguese occupation from 1507 to 1622, in which year the Persian Government resumed possession of this territory” (Ramazani, 1966, p. 248). Yet, even though the Portuguese were driven out of Bahrain in 1622 by the Safavid Shah ‘Abbās, Persian rule over the island did not become effective until 1753, when Shaikh Naṣīr of Būšehr sent an expeditionary force to conquer the archipelago from the Arab Howayla tribe. In 1783, Bahrain was reconquered by the Arab al-‘Otūb tribe led by Aḥmad al-Ḳalīfa. The British government, which had entered into treaty relations with al-Ḳalīfa in 1820, formalized its ties through treaties signed in 1847, 1856, 1861, and the Executive Agreements of 1880 and 1892 establishing “exclusive” control over Bahrain’s foreign relations (Lorimer, pp. 836-999, *passim*), and questioned the validity of the Iranian claim. Relations between Manāma and Tehran were consequently affected by the rise of British hegemonic influence in the area challenging Iran’s posture.

Iran disclosed its claim to Bahrain on November 22, 1927, when “the Persian Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs addressed a sharp letter to Sir Robert Clive,



the British Minister at Tehran, in which he reiterated that Bahrain was incontestably in Persian possession” (Adamiyat, p. 194). In that letter, a copy of which was sent to the League of Nations, the Iranian government protested against the May 20, 1927, treaty concluded between Britain and Saudi Arabia. Article 6 of the Treaty of Jiddah stated that the King of Hijaz and of Najd and their dependencies “undertakes to maintain friendly and peaceful relations with the territories of Koweit and Bahrain and with the shaikhs of Qatar and the Oman coast who are in special treaty relations with His Britannic Majesty’s Government” (Adamiyat, p. 194). London rejected this protest in a letter dated January 18, 1928, from Sir Austen Chamberlain, the British Foreign Secretary, to Hovhannes Khan Mossaed (Mosā’ed), the Persian chargé d’affaires in London. The British denied that “any valid grounds” existed upon which Iran could claim sovereignty over Bahrain (Khadduri, p. 633), and stressed that not only was the shaikh of Bahrain an “independent” ruler but that the island and its inhabitants were under British protection.

The Iranian claim was renewed in 1952 and 1956 to no avail. But on November 12, 1957, Tehran decided to officially integrate Bahrain as the fourteenth Iranian province in the administrative divisions of the country, drawing strong protests from Britain and the League of Arab States. Addressing the Majles, the Iranian foreign minister responded by declaring: “Our Arab brothers should know that Bahrain is part of our body and the question of Bahrain is of vital interest to Iran” (Ramazani, 1972a, p. 46). Bahrain’s politico-strategic significance increased when it became a British stronghold east of Suez after the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen achieved independence. Its strategic appeal to Iran was further heightened when Britain announced its intention to withdraw its troops from throughout the Gulf before the end of 1971 and to terminate the treaties binding it to the Gulf shaikhdoms. Moreover, London encouraged the Arab shaikhdoms to unite into a federation. Bahrain, Qatar, and the seven Amirates of the Trucial Coast opened negotiations in February, 1968, which drew sharp criticisms from the shah. Tehran announced its opposition to the project on July 8, 1968, when the foreign minister released a strongly worded communiqué stating that “the creation of a so-called confederation of Persian Gulf emirates embracing the Bahrain islands is absolutely unacceptable to Iran” (Ramazani, 1972a, p. 48). The Kālifā turned to Britain and Saudi Arabia for support and, following the Bahraini ruler’s visit to Saudi Arabia, King Faysal declared that the Arabs must fill the vacuum created by the British withdrawal. In response, the shah cancelled his scheduled state visit to Saudi Arabia but hinted on January 4,



1969, in a New Delhi press conference, that his country and Riyadh considered the future of the Persian Gulf to be the concern of the bordering countries alone. On this occasion, he softened his attitude toward Bahrain, and suggested that the indigenous population should voice freely its wishes through a United Nations supervised referendum. Shaikh ʿĪsā b. Salmān al-Ḳalifa, fearing that such a referendum would create tension between Persians and Arabs in the Gulf area, rejected this suggestion, drawing a strong threat from the shah on September 9, 1969, who declared that Iran would not recognize Bahrain as an independent state, and if it was admitted to the United Nations Iran would leave that organization (Ramazani, 1972a, p. 51).

After several months of secret negotiations the problem was resolved. During 1969, Shaikh ʿĪsā visited London and Washington. The shah also clarified his intentions and took the initiative on March 9, 1970, by formally requesting the good offices of the Secretary General to send an emissary, so that the true wishes of the people of Bahrain with respect to the future status of the Islands of Bahrain could be ascertained (Ramazani, 1972b, p. 4). Britain accepted the proposal and Secretary General U Thant's personal representative, Vittoria Winspeare Guicciardi, headed a five-member delegation to Bahrain from March 29 to April 18, 1970. Foreign minister Ardašīr Zāhedī revealed that Iran would only accept the recommendations of the mission if they were ratified by the Security Council, and Shaikh ʿĪsā stressed that Bahrain's acceptance of the UN mission in no way implied that it recognized the Iranian claim as legitimate.

The Guicciardi delegation interviewed civic and religious officials and ordinary individuals and representatives in a wide variety of organizations, institutions, and professional groups, asking them to choose either union with Iran, or status as a British protectorate, or independence. The mission found that Bahrainis "virtually unanimously" wanted a "fully independent sovereign state" and the great majority insisted that it should be an Arab state (Ramazani, 1972a, p. 135). The report was endorsed by the Security Council on April 30 and Iran indicated its acceptance of the Bahrain settlement. Prime Minister Hoveyda introduced a resolution to the Majles and the Senate and the government's action was approved by the Majles on May 14 by 184 votes to 4 and unanimously by the Senate on May 18 (Ramazani, 1972a, p. 53). But the complications associated with the British-sponsored federation of Persian Gulf Amirates encouraged both Iran and Bahrain to contemplate the emergence of an independent state. Manāma declared its independence on August 14, 1971,



and Tehran reportedly was the first nation to extend diplomatic recognition.

The Iranian-Bahraini rapprochement throughout the 1970s was sealed by high level visits and the 1971 agreement delineating the continental shelf between the two countries. Cooperation in the economic and cultural spheres culminated with the official *Pārs* news agency agreement in 1977 to exchange cultural programs and information. Yet, political relations between Iran and Bahrain soured on the issue of Persian Gulf security. The shah, for example, did not welcome the 23 December 1971 Jufair Agreement which legalized the U.S. Navy's presence in Bahrain. The shah declared that, as before, Iran did not want any foreign presence in the Gulf, be it England, the United States, or China (Ramazani, 1975, p. 435). The Iranian invasion of Abū Mūsā and the Tonbs (30 November 1971), and the shah's proposed Gulf Security Pact, in the form of an Iranian-led military alliance, further aggravated the situation. Saudi reservations, Iran's lopsided military predominance in the Gulf, and the Iranian revolution contributed to the abandonment of the contemplated alliance. Bahrain aligned itself with the Saudi position while trying to maintain friendly relations with Iran. In June, 1978, during an official visit to Tehran, Shaikh ʿĪsā praised Iran's role as a "regional power," and hailed the shah's efforts to take measures against the dangers threatening the region.

In December, 1978, Shaikh ʿĪsā expressed serious concern over events in Iran, which, he predicted, would inevitably affect the security and stability of the Persian Gulf. Manāma felt directly threatened by the sequels to the Iranian Revolution within Bahrain itself, as more than half of Bahrain's population is Shi'ite. Demonstrations supporting Iran did indeed take place in Bahrain in 1979 when Ayatollah Ṣādeq Rūḥānī revived the old Iranian territorial claim to the Amirate, accusing the ruler of oppressing his people, declaring that the Iranian Majles that had renounced claims to the archipelago in 1970 had been illegal, and announcing that Iran still regarded Bahrain as its 14th Province, pending the decision of the future National Assembly on the matter. Iranian Foreign Minister Ebrāhīm Yazdī dismissed Rūḥānī's pronouncements as personal opinion. Despite this denial, Bahraini Prime Minister Shaikh Ḳalīfa vehemently denounced the Iranian claim, and stressed that Manāma sought to establish cordial relations with the new Iranian regime on a basis of mutual trust and that they would not allow anyone to divide the two peoples. On September 24, Rūḥānī returned to the offensive threatening to "annex" Bahrain unless its rulers adopted "an Islamic form of government similar to the one established in Iran" (Ramazani, 1986, p. 49). Prime Minister Mehdi



Bāzargān officially denied that his country had any expansionist designs in the Persian Gulf region, claiming that Rūḥānī's pronouncements were unauthorized and worthless. Bāzargān's ambassador to Riyadh, Moḥammad Javād Rażawī, declared that Iran respected other nations' sovereignty and had no claims or ambitions on any part of the Persian Gulf. Shortly thereafter, Bāzargān's deputy, Ṣādeq Ṭabāṭabā'ī, went to Bahrain to ease the mounting tension (Ramazani, 1986, p. 49). The normalization of relations between Bahrain and Iran was sealed by the visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Ṣādeq Gōṭbzāda to Manāma in 1980.

On 13 December 1981, however, Bahrain announced that it had arrested a group of "saboteurs" allegedly trained in Iran. The Bahraini interior minister then charged that the group had planned to assassinate Bahraini officials and that it belonged to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, which had its headquarter in Tehran, adding that its "sixty" members were all Shi'ites (Ramazani, 1986, p. 50). Yet, despite the fact that not a single Iranian was arrested in connection with the coup plot, Bahraini officials blamed the revolutionary regime for organizing the incident. Political relations between the two countries further deteriorated as the conservative Arab monarchies on the Persian Gulf, joined in the Gulf Cooperation Council since 1981, implicitly extended their support to Baghdad in the Iran-Iraq War (q.v.).

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