



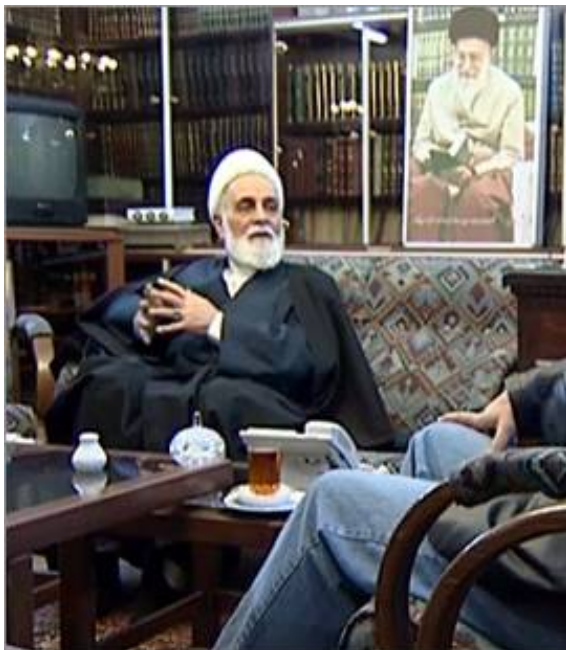
**Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center  
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage  
& Commemoration Center (IICC)**

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## **Iran and the Persian Gulf**

**The claim by Iranian advisor Nateq Nouri that Bahrain was formerly a province of Iran incensed Bahrain and led to shows of solidarity with Bahrain throughout the Arab world. Bahrain, with its Shi'ite majority, is a traditional target for subversion by Iran, which seeks hegemony in the Persian Gulf.**

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Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei (Al-Jazeera TV, February 22, 2009). His claim that Bahrain was once the 14<sup>th</sup> province of Iran reawakened tensions between the two countries and caused a storm in the Arab world.



Bahrain, a tiny country ruled by a king, most of whose citizens are Shi'ites, although the leadership is Sunni. Its proximity to Iran and its basic political-social orientations have made it an attractive target for Iranian subversion (Picture from watanee.com).

## Overview

1. In the middle of February 2009, **Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri**, office supervisor and advisor to the Supreme Leader Khamenei, said that before Bahrain received independence in 1970, it was Iran's 14<sup>th</sup> province, and was even represented in the Iranian parliament (Majlis). His remark provoked stormy reactions in Bahrain and led to another crisis in Bahraini-Iranian relations, which has since been settled. The incident reflects the tensions between Iran and the Arab world, its ethnic polarization (evident in Bahrain's social structure) and its confusion of identities – Persian and Iranian, Sunni and Shi'ite – all urgent issues on the Middle East agenda, as is the volatile Israeli-Palestinian confrontation.

2. The statement made by Nateq Nouri caused a wave of protests in Bahrain and **led to expressions of solidarity with it throughout the Arab world**, culminating in Morocco's decision to sever diplomatic relations with Iran. The incident revealed the full strength of the Persian versus Arab and Sunni versus Shi'ite loyalty-identity crises and dragged both Syria and Hamas (Arab allies of Iran) into the fray. Syria was almost forced to support Bahrain lest its "Arabness" be questioned. Even Hamas (which receives military, financial and political support from Iran) was forced to announce that it was "worried and surprised" by the Iranian claim and that it supported Bahrain's sovereignty. Only the Lebanese Hezbollah remained completely loyal to Iran.

3. **Iran still claims sovereignty over Bahrain**, finding historical justification in the fact that between 1602 and 1783 Bahrain was ruled by Persia. When in 1968 Britain announced its intention to withdraw its forces from the Persian Gulf, Iran renewed its claims to sovereignty over the island. In 1970 the UN held a referendum and Bahrainis were asked to decide between independence and Iranian annexation. They chose independence and received it in 1971, after which the Shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, no longer raised the question. From time to time since the Islamic revolution, Iran has claimed that Bahrain is an Iranian province. Iran also demands ownership of three strategic UAE islands.<sup>1</sup>

4. The Iranian claims to Bahrain are **not new**. However, the fact that a senior Iranian renewed them at a time when Arab fears of Iranian military might and influence are on the rise has led to a wave of Arab reactions and an unprecedented drive to defend Bahrain. Iran, in an attempt to smooth ruffled feathers, was quick to assert that there had been a

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<sup>1</sup> The three islands, Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb, are situated in the eastern Persian Gulf and command the Straits of Hormuz, through which passes much of the oil marketed to the world. In 1992 Iran completed its takeover of Abu Musa, erected a military base and positioned missiles on its shore. The UAE's claim to ownership of the islands is recognized by the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Iran rejects the claim and the issue is its main point of contention with the Gulf States.

“misunderstanding,” but warned Bahrain “not to fish in troubled waters and to play into the hands of the West” in an attack against Iran.

5. Bahrain's religious-ethnic structure is ideal for Iranian aspirations. The population is mostly **Shi'ite** but the royal house and the country's leadership are **Sunni**. The Shi'ites oppose the rule of King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa and are politically, economically and socially inferior. Integration into the political process has not led to a genuine improvement in their situation. As a result of Iran's increased power and the achievements of the Shi'ites in Iraq and Lebanon, and fueled by Bahrain's economic crisis, **their self confidence has grown** and they are trying to change their inferior status by daring to be more aggressive.

6. Bahrain's fundamental political-social-religious systems made it an attractive target for Iranian subversion. Since the beginning of the 1980s, when a cell of an organization called “the **Military Wing of Hezbollah-Bahrain**” was uncovered, Bahrain has accused Iran of subversion.<sup>2</sup> Iran has continued its subversive activities, one of which, which so far has had little success, is an attempt to convince the Shi'ite population to recognize the Supreme Leader Khamenei as the source of its religious authority. Iranian subversion, along with the growing self confidence of Bahrain's Shi'ites, may channel the Shi'ite opposition's disappointment from parliamentary maneuvers into violent protest and reawaken ethnic tensions in Bahrain, making the Shi'ites look to Iran.

7. The effort to undermine Bahrain's stability and challenge its sovereignty are facets of **Iran's strategy to gain hegemony in the Middle East in general and the Persian Gulf in particular**, and to spread Shi'a among the Sunnis. Manifestations of that strategy include the Iranian navy's show of force in the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz, and the public statements made by the upper echelons of the Iranian government expressing Iran's aspirations to power. For example, on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution, president Ahmadinejad said that Iran had become a [world] power and no country could even consider threatening it (Iran's Fars News Agency in English, February 10, 2009).

8. This report examines the tensions between Iran and Bahrain, the background and implications in the following areas:

- i) Iran questions Bahrain's status as an Arab country.

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<sup>2</sup> The organization was established with Iranian support after the Islamic revolution to increase Iran's ability to export the revolution. Its stated objectives were to oust Bahrain's ruling family, the Khalifas, and to establish a Shi'ite regime similar to Iran's and to cut Bahrain off from the UAE. In December 1981 the organization, headed by Muhammad Taqi Mudarissi, tried to carry out a coup and many of its operatives were killed. In 1996 Bahrain detained dozens of the organization's operatives, claiming they had been trained and financed by the Revolutionary Guards and Iranian intelligence to bring down the kingdom.

- ii) Bahrain's response.
- iii) Iran and Bahrain: a history of subversion.
- iv) The internal Bahraini perspective: relations between Bahrain's Shi'ites and the regime.
- v) The influence of the Shi'ite opposition in Bahrain on the Shi'ite populations in Iraq and Lebanon.
- vi) Exercises, war games and belligerent statements made by Iran to express its strength in the Persian Gulf.
- vii) Wider regional contexts: Arab solidarity with Bahrain.

## Iran questions Bahrain's status as an Arab country

9. Relations between Iran and Bahrain have recently become of focus of general Arab attention because of a statement made by Sheikh **Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri**, formerly chairman of the Iranian parliament (Majlis) and today office supervisor and advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei, to the effect that **Bahrain was formerly an Iranian province**. In the middle of February he said that before Bahrain was granted independence, it had been Iran's 14<sup>th</sup> province and had been represented in the Majlis, and he criticized the decision made by the Shah in 1971 to cede control of it. It was not the first time such a statement was made. In July 2007 **Hossein Shariatmadari**, Khamenei's advisor and editor of the Iranian daily *Kayhan* (which reflects official policy), wrote a number of articles for the paper claiming that "Bahrain is part of Iran" (see below).

10. In the past, senior Iranian figures, among them president Ahmadinejad (who sent a personal letter to the king of Bahrain via the Iranian minister of the interior),<sup>3</sup> and the Iranian ambassador to Bahrain made an effort to calm the situation and send the message of "business as usual," and Iran specifically stated that the gas deal with Bahrain was still valid.

i) **Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis**, told its assembled members that the extensive interest in the Iranian statements had been fostered by Iran's enemies as a way of drawing attention from the Palestinian issue, which was "the most important and central [matter] on the Muslim agenda today" (Iran's Fars News Agency, February 23, 2009).

ii) **Hossein Qashqawi**, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, strenuously denied the statements allegedly made by Nateq Nouri, saying that he had been comparing the achievements of the Islamic revolution to those of the Shah's regime but had not spoken about political issues (Al-Alam TV website, February 18, 2009).

iii) **Muhammad Ali Abtahi, former Iranian vice president**, said that Nateq Nouri had been misquoted and that Iran officially recognized Bahrain as an independent state with which it had good relations (*Al-Khaleej*, UAE, February 16, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Iran's Fars News Agency, February 23, 2009.



**Bahraini foreign minister Khaled bin Ahmed al-Khalifa and Iranian foreign minister Manuchehr Mottaki try to defuse the tension (Al-Manar TV, February 27, 2009).**

11. However, after Bahrain had prevented a number of Iranian nationals from entering the country and placed restrictions on the entrance of Iranian vessels into its territorial waters, Iran warned Bahrain against waging an anti-Iran propaganda campaign. In response to the Bahraini protest, on February 23 the Iranian foreign minister said that Bahrain should not allow the Western powers to exploit “minor” disagreements between the two countries (see below). Ali Reza Akbari, former Iranian minister of defense, said that the Bahraini response had to be examined in the light of “the actions taken by a number of Arab countries against Iran through the offices of Israel and the American administration...and in light of the attempts made by a number of countries to externalize their own problems [possibly a hint at the Shi’ite agitation in Bahrain] camouflaged as external issues...” He said that “the self confidence of the Bahraini government and its responsiveness to the wishes of the Bahraini people...were the reasons for Nateq Nouri’s strong statement...**which is historically accurate**” (Iranian *Siyasat-e Ruz*, February 23, 2009).

## **Bahrain’s response**

12. Bahrain strongly protested Nateq Nouri’s statement to **Hossein Amir-Abdollahian**, the Iranian ambassador to Bahrain. The Bahraini parliament called it “irresponsible.” On February 21 a highly-placed Bahraini source said its security forces training along the kingdom’s maritime border had been instructed to prevent Iranian commercial vessels from entering Bahrain’s territorial waters until further notice (PressTV, February 21, 2009). In accordance with Bahrain’s request, the governments of the UAE prevented Iranian nationals from flying to Manama, Bahrain’s capital. **Abdul Hussain Ali Mirza**, Bahrain’s gas and oil minister, said that the discussions for importing gas from Iran had been suspended and that negotiations could not be conducted at a time when Iran was casting doubts on Bahrain’s independence and Arab identity.

13. Interviewed by *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, **Khalid Bin Ahmed Bin Mohamed Al-Khalifa**, Bahrain’s foreign minister, called the Iranian statements “a deliberate distortion of the facts.”

He said he wondered how the contradiction between such statements and the Iranian presence at Gulf and Arab meetings could be explained. Regarding the Iranian subversion of Bahrain, he called attention to **the satellite television stations supported by Iran** which broadcast programs about internal Bahraini issues, such as its citizenship program.<sup>4</sup> He called it Iranian intervention in the Bahrain's national affairs, saying that Bahrain did not intervene in Iran's internal problems (*Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, February 22, 2009).

14. In a confrontation with the head of the foreign relations and national security committee of the Bahraini parliament, an Iranian scholar said that "the claim that Bahrain is an Iranian province has been made at the highest level in Iran from people working in the Supreme Leader's office...**Bahrain was never Iranian**...That is a false allegation...**The same is true for the Iranian claims on the islands that belong to the UAE, Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb**...My parents were born on Abu Musa and the entire population there belongs to the UAE." He said that Iran had not been acting in good faith with its neighbors and asked "why were the Arabs and Muslims happy when Pakistan achieved nuclear capabilities...**and why were they unhappy about the Iranian nuclear program?**...The answer is that Pakistan has no aspirations or ambitions regarding Arab and Islamic states...**and I would also support the Iranian nuclear program if it aided Muslims**..." (Al-Arabiya TV, February 21, 2009).

## Iran and Bahrain: a history of subversion

15. Iran's subversion of Bahrain is part of a larger strategy to achieve hegemony in the Persian Gulf and beyond, and it does not bother to conceal its intentions. Speaking on the occasion of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution, **Ahmadinejad** said that Iran had become a super-power and no country could even consider threatening it (Iran's Fars News Agency in English, February 10, 2009). **Yahya Rahim Safavi**, advisor to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei for military affairs and former commander of the Revolutionary Guards, said that Iran was the strongest country in the Middle East and that the world had witnessed its political influence on the entire region, including Lebanon and Palestine [sic] (Islamic Republic News Agency in English, March 1, 2009).

16. It was not the first time senior Iranian figures claimed that Bahrain was an Iranian province. In July 2007 **Hossein Shariatmadari** wrote in *Kayhan* that "the governments of the Gulf states were established by the direct intervention of world arrogance...and have been accused by their people of collaboration with the Zionist entity...**They know full well**

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<sup>4</sup> The Bahraini foreign minister was also asked about the accusations made against his office by the Shi'ite opposition organizations which claimed that the foreign ministry gave Sunnis citizenship to change the country's demographic structure at the expense of the Shi'ites. He answered that during the past five years only 7012 had received Bahraini citizenship and that the number supplied by the Shi'ite organizations were inaccurate.

**that the earthquake in Iran will lead, sooner or later, to the collapse of their illegal regimes...**" He did not shrink from the fierce criticism the article received and wrote again, on July 15, 2007, calling Bahrain an island rather than a kingdom, giving what he called the historical background of its establishment: "Several decades ago Bahrain was one of Iran's provinces and separated from it after an agreement was signed between the Shah and the governments of the United States and Britain."

17. Following Shi'ite Iran's gradual increase in military might and confidence, and in view of its nuclear program and what is considered Hezbollah's victory in Lebanon and Hamas's in the Gaza Strip, **the Shi'ites in the Gulf States feel more confident in their proceedings against their Sunni rulers.** Iran uses its intelligence organizations and the Revolutionary Guards, as well as Shi'ite clerics and the cultural centers it fosters in Bahrain, to support the trend. It operates a network of local activists loyal to its authority and supports local Shi'ite organizations in an attempt to repeat its success with Hezbollah in Lebanon. It is all directed towards attaining Shi'ite Islamic hegemony and toppling the "weak Western rulers," Iran's epithet for the rulers of the Gulf States and moderate Arab countries.

18. **Twice in the past Bahrain accused Iran of subversion.** In 1996 Bahrain exposed a Hezbollah cell called the **Military Wing of Hezbollah-Bahrain**, detained most of the operatives and deported some of them. Similar claims were raised in Bahrain in 1981 when it exposed the **Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain**, which tried to carry out a coup. Bahraini Shi'ites were viewed as an Iranian fifth column. The rise of Iran and the increasing tension between it and the pro-Western Arab states and the West have increased the deep, long-held fears of the Sunnis ruling Bahrain.

19. **Today Bahrain, which is situated within the jaws of Iran, is facing one of the most sensitive periods in its history.** Besides its internal problems, which play into the hands of Iranian subversion, Bahrain's foreign policy is pro-American and supportive of the American war effort. The American Fifth Fleet has its largest base in the Persian Gulf in Bahrain (the Naval Forces Central Command – NAVCENT). The base is a launching pad for America's war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan and for securing the sea lanes in the Persian Gulf. That is done despite the protests and criticism from Bahrainis, especially Shi'ites, who claim that a large American base in Bahrain is a source of moral corruption and a threat to Iran.



## The internal Bahraini perspective: relations between Bahrain's Shi'ites and the regime

### Background

20. Bahrain has a population of **more than one million**, most of them foreign nationals. Actual Bahraini citizenship is held by between 718,000 and 766,000 residents. Most of the population is Arab, but a significant minority is of Iranian extraction. About **85%** of the population is Muslim, of which **60%** is Shi'ite. The rest of the population is made up of Christians, Hindus and other small minorities, including between 30 and 40 Jews.<sup>5</sup> The Shi'ites in Bahrain have a history of both violent and non-violent protest against various local and regional issues, while Iran often fans the flames. Since Bahrain connected to the Internet its use has become widespread, especially various blogs and forums dedicated to what the Shi'ites consider the continuing discrimination against them in politics and the economy, to reforms and the slow-moving democratization, and **to their solidarity and identification with their Shi'ite "brothers" in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran.**

21. Important in that respect are the events of World Jerusalem Day, which is fostered by Iran and marked throughout the Shi'ite Muslim world. In 2007 and 2008 the demonstrations in Bahrain were organized by **Al-Wefaq**, the largest Shi'ite opposition group in Bahrain. (**Note:** In the 2006 elections, it won 17 of the 40 seats in the National Assembly.) During the events Hezbollah flags were flown, there were placards bearing Hassan Nasrallah's picture, and "resistance items" (scarves, flags, posters, books, etc.) could be purchased at stalls in the streets of Manama. There were also posters and slogans defaming Israel.



The Jerusalem Day demonstrations in Bahrain. Demonstrators carried pictures of Hassan Nasrallah and banners reading "Israel is a cancerous entity which must end" (Bahrain forum BhFuture.net, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> *Economist Intelligence Unit*, February 5, 2009.

### Action taken by the Bahraini regime against the Shi'ite opposition

22. The reforms of King Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa were originally intended to weaken the voice of the Shi'ite opposition, but their slow implementation and the worsening of the economy have made them boomerang. The royal house tried to contain protest by including the Shi'ite opposition in the political process, but all it did was whet their appetite. The reform process is directed from above and intended to strengthen the regime's power base. Other factors sharpened the Shi'ite opposition's appetite: the global economic crisis, which has also influenced Bahrain; the Shi'ite liberation from the domination of Saddam Hussein, and both the national and regional democratic elections held in Iraq; Hezbollah's campaign against Israel launched from Lebanon and the support it receives from Iran.

23. In recent months the Bahraini government took steps against Shi'ite opposition elements. In December 2008 they detained a number of Shi'ite operatives who were planning to carry out a terrorist attack on Bahrain's independence day. According to reports, the group was planning to detonate homemade explosives mixed with inflammable materials and ball bearings. The Bahraini interior minister told *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* that **the group had been trained in Syria** by exiled Bahrainis.

24. On December 17, 2008, the Shi'ites in Bahrain marked Shaheed Day (those killed during government actions against Hezbollah cells) and it is possible that the planned attack was meant for that day as well. The Bahraini security forces prevented a memorial march from being held and in some areas around the capital they clashed with Shi'ites. On December 18 the Shi'ites celebrated Eid e-Ghadir (the day when, according to tradition, Muhammad gave Ali the Caliphate) and that also led to tension and clashes between Shi'ites and the Bahraini security forces, especially in the Shi'ite neighborhoods of Manama.

25. In January 2008 the Bahraini regime detained senior Shi'ite opposition activists, including the leader of the Al-Hak party (whose positions are more extreme than those of Al-Wefaq), its spokesman and a Shi'ite cleric affiliated with the movement. According to the regime, they were suspected of attempting to carry out a coup, and their trial began in February 2009.<sup>6</sup> As a result of their arrest and subsequent trial, Shi'ite activists went on a hunger strike. The son of the Al-Hak leader called on Bahrainis to rise up against the regime and the Iranian press devoted extensive space to the issue.<sup>7</sup> The combination of internal Bahraini and regional developments may channel the Shi'ite opposition's disappointment with its parliamentary experiences, which weakened the base of its popular support, **back into violent protest**, in a way that is liable to reawaken dormant ethnic tensions. Within the Shi'ite community in

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<sup>6</sup> Agence France Presse, February 20, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.thememriblog.org/blog\\_personal/en/13519.htm](http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/13519.htm)

Bahrain there are rumors that the government will speed up return of many Sunnis to change the demographic balance, which will also contribute to the unsettled atmosphere.

### **The influence of the Shi'ite opposition in Bahrain on the Shi'ite populations in Iraq and Lebanon**

26. The blogs and forums in Bahrain are a kind of window into the sentiments of the various sectors of the population and serve the government as a safety valve which operates in a virtual environment. At first the government encouraged their use but at the same time had no compunction about taking steps against a number of bloggers who, they felt, had exaggerated in their criticism of the government and the royal house. However, eventually they were forced to free them because of the protests which overflowed from the virtual environment into the real one, i.e., into the streets. Bahraini Shi'ite protests and activities have been documented in pictures, videos, and even cell phone photos, **and have been uploaded onto Hezbollah-Shi'ite and forums, creating a kind shared fate and "virtual Shi'ite brotherhood."**

27. **The rise in the self confidence of the Shi'ites in the Muslim world** is reflected in their Internet sites and forums. The Bahraini Shi'ites have used the Internet to find common denominators and ideas within the context of wider Shi'ite identity (Hezbollah's political and military successes in Lebanon), which go far beyond the local Bahraini arena. They nurture their feelings of discrimination and deprivation, which are liable to goad some of them to protest in more aggressive and violent ways. **The younger generation of Bahraini Shi'ites sees itself as part of the broader Shi'ite community,** they are more volatile and their confrontations with the government have become more severe. That makes them a convenient reservoir for pro-Iranian enlistment.

28. The sources of Shi'ite religious authority in Bahrain are important for the local population, most of which is not in favor of Iranian activism. Beyond local sources of authority, there are also senior sources in **Iran and Iraq** who are part of the Shi'ite renaissance, such as the **Ayatollah Uzma Sayyid Ali al Husayni al-Sistani**. Sources of authority in Iraq are in favor of separating religion and state while those in Iran want clerical rule. For example, the head of **Al-Wefaq**, sheikh Ali Suliman, who was elected to the parliament in 2006, was supported by Sistani, whom many Bahraini Shi'ites regard as the source of religious authority, and now Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei. Senior Shi'ite cleric in Lebanon Muhammad Hussein Fadlalla, one of Khamenei's bitterest rivals, sent a letter supporting the Shi'ites in Bahrain. Iran is very annoyed by the situation and tries to reinforce the status of Supreme Leader Khamenei in Bahrain and other countries with Shi'ite populations, without much success.

## Exercises, war games and belligerent statements made by Iran to show its strength in the Persian Gulf

29. In October 2008 Iran established a new naval base called "the second navy area" in the Jask region of the Hormozgan province. Its objective was "to protect the strategic depth of the Persian Gulf and to create a defensive line east of the Straits of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman." **Habiballah Sayyari**, commander of the Iranian navy, said that to strengthen the defenses of the Straits of Hormuz new headquarters were necessary, and that a defensive line had to be created to "deal with the enemies of Iran and **to prevent [them], when the day comes, from entering the Straits of Hormuz.**"<sup>8</sup>

30. Between December 2 and 7, 2008, the Iranian navy held an extended, four-phase naval exercise called "Ettehad 87" in the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman in the sensitive region of the Straits of Hormuz. The exercise was carried out by a large number of naval vessels, including frigates, destroyers, missile carriers and submarines, and air craft including helicopters, combat planes and drones. Various types of missiles were fired and symmetric and asymmetric types of combat were simulated.<sup>9</sup>

31. The exercise took place at the height of an **Iranian propaganda campaign** in which the religious-political leadership, the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards and the army, and the Iran media all took part. Its objective was to signal that the Iranian armed forces could repel any threat and that Iran was prepared to respond aggressively if its nuclear installations were attacked. Iran also stressed the issue of its ability, should it so decide, to block the Straits of Hormuz and prevent the passage of tankers. It was also a message for the Gulf States, suggesting that they would do well to rely on Iran for their security, and not on foreign powers.

32. During the exercise the commander of the navy said that it had recently acquired two missile carriers built in Iran, called Flag (*Darfash*) and Fortress (*Kalat*), which in the past had been used to transport fighters and had had rocket launching and intermediate range ground-to-ground missile systems installed. It had also acquired a Ghadir class submarine. Iran recently claimed that some of its submarines had stealth capabilities, making them impossible to detect. Iran recently refurbished a Tariq class submarine,<sup>10</sup> and during 2008 held a number of simulations of naval battles, both defensive and offensive, and invested a great deal of effort in general upgrading and the manufacture of shore missiles, based on the Chinese Silkworm and C-802, all according to the naval commander.

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<sup>8</sup> RadioTehran, October 28, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=IE&hl=en-GB&v=3EUF7RRNp-s>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=IE&hl=en-GB&v=weCg79-psyw>

33. After the exercise, the commander said that it had been successful “beyond expectations” and had proved Iran’s ability to defend its borders and shown that **it was the strongest and most prominent power in the region**. He added that calling the exercise “Unity” had not been a random choice and that it signified that together, the countries in the region could defend their interests without foreign powers. The Iranian minister of defense said that the exercise was symbolic of the Iranian navy’s might and readiness to deal with any threat, and of the achievements and strength of Iran’s military industry on the eve of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

### **Wider regional contexts: Arab solidarity with Bahrain**

34. Nateq Nouri’s statement led to expressions of Arab solidarity with Bahrain. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was quick to go to Bahrain to demonstrate his support. King Abdallah the Second of Jordan also visited Bahrain in a show of solidarity, criticizing the Iranian attack on Bahrain and expressing the support of his country for its sovereignty and independence (Ilaf website, February 18, 2009). Solidarity with Bahrain was also expressed at a conference of the foreign ministers of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf and by the Russian foreign minister’s visit to Bahrain (*Interfax*, February 19, 2009). The Iranian chargé d’affaires in Libya was called to the foreign ministry and told of the “danger inherent in statements which harm Arab-Iranian relations and serve those who talk about the Iranian danger to the region” (Libyan TV, February 23, 2009).

35. The most significant expression of solidarity with Bahrain was Morocco’s announcement that it was cutting off diplomatic relations with Iran as an expression of the support its king for the king of Bahrain. Previously, at the height of the crisis, Morocco returned its chargé d’affaires from Tehran. In addition, Morocco accused Iran of interfering in Bahrain’s internal affairs and of an attempt to spread Shi’a Islam to Morocco’s Sunni population (Agence France Presse, MAP News Agency, March date, 2009).

36. To express solidarity with Bahrain, the Arab media dealt extensively with the renewal of the Iranian threat to the Persian Gulf and the Arab world in general and Bahrain in particular. It was referred to as another point along the “**Syrian-Iranian rift**” **dividing the Arab world** (despite the theoretically comforting call Syrian president Assad made to the king of Bahrain), but at the same time **fully revealed the extent of Iranian versus Arab identity and entangled Syria and even Hamas in the Arab-Iranian and Shi’ite-Sunni identity and loyalty crisis** (see below). Only Hezbollah remained completely to Iran over the issue of Bahrain.

37. The following were some of the reactions in the Arab media:

i) According to an article by Jaser Abd al-Aziz Jaser in the Saudi Arabian paper ***Al-Jazeera*** on February 23, without wanting to, Shariatmadari and Nateq Nouri managed to do a service to the most important Arab interests. Their remarks illustrated better than anything else that Iran coveted Arab territories and that that was in fact the position of the Iranian Supreme Leader.

ii) The article also noted that such a position forced some of the Arabs, who had though Iran was on their side in the struggle against Israel and even led it, to

**ايران وعروبة البحرين**  
عبد الباري عطوان

recognize a dilemma. He said that the "front of the uprising," which included **Khaled Mashaal, head of Hamas's political bureau in Damascus, Hassan Nasrallah, "the representative of the Shi'ite religious teacher in Lebanon, Ali Khamenei, and Mahdi Akef**, head of the Muslim Brotherhood, swore allegiance to the Iranian leader. It also said that the Iranian rulers said that they "supported the liberation of Palestine without shedding one drop of Iranian blood to support the claim," and that no opinion or reservation had been heard from Mashaal, Nasrallah or Akef about the occupation of Arab lands, and that Arab solidarity required them to make their positions clear.

iii) On February 23, **Abd Al-Bari Atwan, editor of *Al-Quds Al-Arabi***, wrote an editorial attacking the crisis from the point of view of the moderate Arab camp. It was printed on the front page under the headline "Iran and the Arabness of Bahrain."<sup>11</sup> It stated that the Iranian claims that Nateq Nouri's comment had been made in the name of "freedom of speech is one thing, but to cast doubt on the sovereignty of Bahrain and to claim that it belongs to another country is something else, especially in light of the fact that statements were made by a number of people like Ali Akbar Nouri, who is not just a journalist but a high-ranking personality close to the Iranian Supreme Leader." The editorial asked why, after it had already recognized Bahrain and instituted diplomatic relations with it, Iran was trying to cast doubt on its own recognition. Was it trying to prove that it was more Persian and more hostile to the Arabs than the government of the Shah?

iv) The editorial also noted that the timing of the statements served the United States and Israel. "We would expect that Iran would be more careful than [former] Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, and not fall into the trap he fell into and not give the United States and its Arab allies an excuse to invade and destroy Iran...but apparently being drunk with power has made the eyes of the rulers in Tehran too dim for them to

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.alquds.co.uk:9090/pdf/2009/02/02-22/All.pdf>

see the facts and to learn the lessons of history...**Nateq Nouri's statement was a present to those who are beat the drums of war against Iran."**

### **The struggle over terminology: Persian Gulf or Arab Gulf?**

38. Tehran has revealed great sensitivity toward the use of the term "Arab Gulf" and has emphasized that it is the "Persian Gulf" (Iran even appealed to Google Earth, which used the term Arab Gulf on its maps<sup>12</sup>). Iranian hackers broke into a number of sites in the Gulf states and vandalized them, writing "the Gulf is Persian, was Persian and will remain Persian."

39. However, on February 19, at the height of the tension between Bahrain and Iran, Jamal Mubarak, a possible heir to Egyptian President Mubarak, told Egyptian TV that "The Gulf is Arab. I repeat, Arab," and that Egypt had fundamental disagreements with Iran. He said that the Egyptian position had been expressed by other senior members of the Egyptian leadership, including the president himself.



Jamal Mubarak (Picture from Egyptnews.net website, 2009)

### **Hamas's position**

40. A number of months ago Hamas suffered for its steadfast adherence to Iran's position in its conflict with the UAE over the three islands.<sup>13</sup> With the tensions following criticism in the Arab media, Hamas issued a statement in support of Bahrain, an extraordinary step considering the close relations between Hamas and Tehran.

41. According to the statement, the Hamas movement expressed its "worry and surprise" at the comments made by Nouri, which attacked Bahraini sovereignty. The sovereignty and stability of the Arab states, it continued, were the fundamental guarantee of the security and stability of the region and the Arab and Islamic states needed relations based on mutual respect and cooperation. The statement also praised Bahrain's support of the Palestinian

<sup>12</sup> Islamic Republic News Agency in English, April 15, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> On October 13, 2008, Musa Abu Marzuq, deputy head of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus, visited Doha, Qatar. He held a press conference where he praised Iran's policy and deplored those in the Arab world who found fault with the country. As an example he gave raising the issue of the three islands contended during the reign of the Shah, now, during the era of the current government in Tehran. His comments roused great anger in the UAE and its press strongly attacked him. Following the attacks he was forced to issue an announcement in which he expressed Hamas's estimation for the UAE in its position on Palestine, noting that **Hamas stood by the "Arab position"** and favored a solution for the issue of the islands through peaceful negotiations (Hamas's Palestine-info website, October 25, 2007).



people and thanked it for its stance during “the Zionist aggression against Gaza” [i.e., Operation Cast Lead] ( Hamas’s Palestine-info website, February 23, 2009).

42. In our assessment, Hamas’s statement will not have a significant influence on the close relations between the movement and Iran, but it is worthy of attention because of Hamas’s great dependence on Iran for political, military and economic aid.

### **Hezbollah’s position**

43. Hezbollah **refrained** from criticizing the Iranian statement about Bahrain, thus falling in line behind its patron, Tehran, and taking a position contrary to that of the Arab world. Hezbollah joined Iran’s propaganda campaign to end the affair and defuse the tension. On February 19, 2009, a posting on the website of Hezbollah’s Al-Manar TV noted that “Iran confirms that it respects the sovereignty of Bahrain.” There were no editorial comments.