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The Shiite-Sunni rivalry & the revolt in Bahrain

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Bahrain has recently been the theatre for political developments of two dimensions: the struggle between secularism and tradition in political terms; and the rivalry between the Sunni and Shiite forms of Islam in religious terms. These two aspects of the conflict in Bahrain combined with the strategic significance of the country for Gulf security highlight the significance of the crisis.

As far as the first dimension of the struggle is concerned, it is worth mentioning that protests in Bahrain reflect a wider tendency in the Islamic world for liberal reforms. The long term marginalization of the Shiite majority is the most serious challenge that the Sunni government needs to address in the short run. The formation of political activity based on religious terms is the most distinctive feature of political life in Manama. Moreover the emerging middle class seems to be determined to overcome this political inadequacy, demanding reforms in order to match economic growth with a more liberal political environment.

With regard to the religious dimension of the events, Bahrain constitutes another episode to this fourteenth centuries old Shiite-Sunni antagonism. Being in the country for centuries, the Shiite majority follows the general pattern of being in the margins of political in the Islamic world since the emergence of the Umayyads (7th cent. AD) and the conversion of the caliphate to monarchy. Ever since, the Sunnis have been the ruling Muslims and the Shiites developed the concept of being the oppressed ones. Bahrain seems to confirm this division between the two fractions of Islam.

In geopolitical terms the Shiite-Sunni rivalry is represented by the antagonism between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Persian Gulf is at the centre of this struggle with Bahrain being the hotspot. Tehran has verbally supported the revolt. Since 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the only theocratic country in the Islamic world and a propagator of the Shiite version of Islam. Hence Shiite populations residing in other countries of the region have turned to Tehran for guidance and support in order to free themselves from the oppression they have been living in for centuries. By contrast Saudi Arabia has been leading the Sunni world in their fight against the Shiites. The overwhelming presence of Shiite population in the Arab coast of the Persian Gulf raises Saudi security concerns. Since 2003 the emergence of a Shiite government in Baghdad has changed the balance of power between the Shiites and Sunnis in the heartland of the Muslim world and has raised Saudi fears further.

Expectedly enough on the occasion of the Bahrain protests Shiite-Sunni relations are deteriorating in the Persian Gulf. In recent days tensions are running high between Tehran and Manama with the two countries recalling their ambassadors on March 16 and expelling a senior diplomat in a tit for tat move four days later. On 14 March, Saudi troops had entered the territory of Bahrain at the request of the country's royal family. On March 16, Grand Ayyatullah Ali Sistani from Najaf in Iraq called on Bahraini authorities to end the crackdown on Shiite protesters. On March 21, the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayyatullah Ali Khamenei used his Persian New Year message to express his support for the Shiite revolt in Bahrain and slam western interference in the region. The Shiite Wafaq party in Bahrain thanked Khamenei for his support. These developments alarmed Washington and Hillary Clinton expressed her concern on the occasion of the presence of Saudi troops in Bahrain. By contrast Tehran implied that the Saudi intervention took place under US auspices.

Apparently the crisis in Bahrain will be a long lasting one. The Saudi government sees the Shiite revolt there as a threatening move against Saudi strategic interests. Their decision to send troops in Bahrain could be interpreted as a preemptive move against rising Shiite influence in the region. The image of Iran and Iraq as dominant Shiite states in the Persian Gulf has emboldened Shiite population in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and has caused nervousness in the Saudi kingdom. Thus Bahrain is an important front in this rivalry with both powers exerting their influence in the country.

Undoubtedly the Bahrain government needs to proceed to reforms in order to stabilize the internal political scene. Satisfying partially the demands of the Shiite political parties in Bahrain will lead to a more moderate approach of

politics on both sides. This is what the Shiites are seeking in order to end their protests. By doing so, the Sunni government will ensure a moderate profile amongst the Bahraini Shiites. Such a development will not prevent the Shiites from asking for more reforms in the future but it will give the time to the Bahraini government to explore new ways of facing a similar situation in the future. Moreover Iran has nothing to lose from the Bahraini crisis anyhow. Instead as the crisis is ongoing Tehran invests further in terms of cultural diplomacy amongst the Bahraini Shiites. The crisis takes place in the doorstep of the Sunni world and it is the best interest of everyone to address successfully the Shiite demands for liberalization of political life in Bahrain as soon as possible.

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