



**Bahrain and the global balance of power  
after the Arab Spring**

Lars Erslev Andersen

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**LARS ERSLEV ANDERSEN**

is senior researcher at the Danish Institute for International Studies  
e-mail: lea@diis.dk

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS  
Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark  
Ph: +45 32 69 87 87  
Fax: +45 32 69 87 00  
E-mail: diis@diis.dk  
Web: www.diis.dk  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The global balance of power is changing, and the role of the US as the only superpower is being challenged by emerging new powers and a still more powerful China. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Persian Gulf. Two wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and continually rising debt have meant that the position of the US has declined. At the same time, Asian states are increasing their economic expansion in the Persian Gulf. Increasing political influence, including a bigger role in hard security, is following the increasing economic role of Asia. These developments have been consolidated by the Arab Spring, where US support for reform and democracy in Egypt and North Africa has pushed the Arab Gulf states even more towards Asia and to a more wary attitude towards the US. This Working Paper argues that if we are fully to understand these developments we need to analyse the Persian Gulf as a regional security complex in its own right. The argument is developed empirically with reference to the case of Bahrain.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to understand regional security dynamics after 9/11, which have been greatly accelerated by the Arab Spring and the Iraq war, we need to challenge the often-repeated perception of American hegemony and analyse the importance of Asia. Whereas the US Middle East policy has been subjected to endless academic analyses, this new axis between the Gulf region and Asia – which is seeking a new, ripe area for influence – has not been given much attention.<sup>1</sup>

### The Balance of Power and the Politics of Identity

Since 1800 the Persian Gulf region has played a significant security role in international affairs. For the British Empire the Arab Gulf states played an important role as a station between Britain and India and were British protectorates from 1820 to 1971, when Britain withdrew from the Persian Gulf. In British naval strategy the harbours of the Gulf have always played a crucial geopolitical role in containing the great Eurasian land power, whether Russia or the USSR, by blocking access to the sea in order to prevent that land power from gaining control of the high seas and thus achieving global hegemony (Drysdale 1985: 23ff.).<sup>2</sup>

1 In this paper I am very much indebted to N. Janardhan's study, *Boom amid Gloom: The Spirit of Possibility in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gulf* (Reading: Ithaca Press 2011). In his book Janardhan provides a very well documented examination of the increasing involvement of Asian powers in the Persian Gulf.

2 In their book *The Middle East and North Africa: A Political Geography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985), Alasdair Drysdale and G.H. Blake outline the geopolitical theory first developed by the British geographer Halford J. Mackinder that throughout the twentieth century Britain and America saw the big land power in Eurasia as the pivotal power, while the coast lines stretching from the Balkan Sea to the Persian Gulf was called 'the marginal crescent'.

This important strategic significance became further reinforced after World War II and during the Cold War, as the Baghdad Pact (1950), the Carter Doctrine (1980) and US support for the Mujahidin in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation 1979 to 1989 clearly document. One can also point to international involvement in the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), the broad coalition of the willing in expelling Iraq from Kuwait (1990–1991), the heavy sanctions that followed this expulsion directed at Saddam Hussein's Iraq and of course the Iraq war of 2003–2011. After the British decided to use oil instead of coal (1912), the southern part of Iraq became important as an oil supplier, and during WW II Iran became still more important in supplying world markets with oil. From then on the whole region, where approximately 25 % of the world's known oil resources are located, became the strategically most important region globally concerning oil and gas resources.

After the Iranian revolution (1979) and the Kuwait war (1991), Iran and Iraq became 'States of Concern' (rogue states) for the West (and Israel), since in the interpretation of the US and Israel they were illegally developing weapons of mass destruction, supporting international terrorism and competing for regional hegemony (Litwak 2000). In response, in 1993 the Clinton administration initiated the dual containment strategy, formulated by the top diplomat Martin Indyk in a famous speech (Gerges 1999: 98ff.). This strategy was aimed at isolating Iran and Iraq through sanctions, deterrence and pressure from the international community. While Iraq had already been tabled in the UN Security Council after the war in 1991, sanctions against Iran were primarily a matter for the US. The Clinton administration strengthened these sanctions in 1995 by banning any company cooperating with the Iranian energy sector from doing deals with US companies, and in 1996 the

Iran–Libya Act passed the US Congress. After the election of Ayatollah Khatami in 1997, the US softened sanctions in limited areas, but since 2003 and up to 2012 the sanctions have been strengthened to target the Central Bank of Iran, as well as imposing an oil embargo on the Islamic Republic (Pollack 2004).<sup>3</sup>

The geopolitical and strategic importance of the Gulf has shaped research and political analysis regarding it, which has overwhelmingly taken the form of perspectives on security policy and very often globalization theory, where, especially since WW II and particularly since the withdrawal of the British in 1971, the US has played a privileged role either as alliance partner to the Arab Gulf States or as an enemy of Iran and Iraq. As an alternative to globalization theory, the dynamics in the Persian Gulf region have been analysed from a basis in classical balance of power theory, either in relation to the competition between the three regional powers of Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, or seen in relation to developments in the Middle East, especially the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These two theoretical approaches seem either to overestimate the global perspective and the role of the US or to underestimate specific regional dynamics, in particular what we shall define here as a politics of identity (Buzan and Wæver 2003; Telhami and Barnett 2002; Ehteshami and Hinnebusch 1997, Chapter 2: ‘Middle East international relations: a conceptual framework’).

Balance of power theory (realism) underestimates, even ignores, what we here define as a politics of identity, by which we mean a strategic intention in one state to mobilize ethnic, religious or other groups in another state

by using transnational links to create unrest or conflict in that other state. In security policy terms, a politics of identity is a foreign policy asset that can be used offensively against other states. In domestic politics, on the other hand, any threat in the Persian Gulf is often used by regimes to justify the repression of ethnic and religious groups. In the Persian Gulf there are many fault lines between peoples rooted in identity: Sunni–Shia; Kurdish–Arabs–Persian, different religious communities. Historically a politics of identity has played a significant role in the security dynamics between states in the region: since the Summer War in Lebanon between Israel and Hizbollah and with the increased influence of Shia Muslim Iran after the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, the fault line between Shia and Sunni has become a still more important issue which in 2006 King Abdullah of Jordan called a threat from the Shia Crescent, meaning Shia Muslim communities and parties in Iran, the southern part of Iraq, the eastern shores of the Arab Peninsula into Lebanon, and Syria. King Abdullah’s warning against this threat pushed the conservative Arab states and Egypt into an alliance with Israel and the US in order to keep Iran out and the Islamists down (Andersen 2007, Postscript: After Lebanon: A New Cold War in the Middle East). After the Arab Spring and the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, it was exactly this alliance that was threatened, creating worries in Saudi Arabia and Israel, which both saw the risk of an Islamist Egypt opening the gates of the Arab Middle East to Iran. When the Arab Spring inspired young people in Bahrain to go out on to the streets with their demands for reform and democratization, the kingdoms in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) immediately interpreted the Bahraini uprising as Iranian interference in the Shia Muslim communities on the Peninsula, thus justifying brutal crackdowns on the rebellion (Andersen 2011). Classical balance of power theories (realism)

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of US sanctions against Iran, see: <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/iran.aspx>

miss these important dynamics in the security policy of the Persian Gulf region.

In contrast to balance of power theory (realism), globalization theory stresses the importance of a politics of identity. Actually the most famous theory, set out by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, developed the idea of fault line wars and pointed to their potential for disseminating conflicts and wars without the international community being able to limit and control them (Huntington 1997: 252ff.). But because the perspective is global, globalization theory tends to overstress the global level, including often the role of the US, and to underestimate specific regional dynamics. In trying to overcome the limitations posed by globalization theory as well as power of balance theory, in analysing the Persian Gulf, it may be fruitful to use regional security complex theory as developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003). In their book *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (2003: 3ff.) they state that regional security complex theory

enables one to understand this new structure and to evaluate the relative balance of power of, and mutual relationship within it between, regionalising and globalising trends. Regional Security Complex Theory distinguishes between the system level interplay of the global powers, whose capabilities enable them to transcend distance, and the subsystem level interplay of lesser powers, whose main security environment is their local region. The central idea in Regional Security Complex Theory is that, since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regional based clusters: security complexes.

Here, the Persian Gulf is defined as a regional security complex. In the research literature, discussion has concerned whether the Persian Gulf is a security complex in its own right or a sub-complex of the Middle East (Gause 2010; Legranzi 2011). I will argue that the Persian Gulf is a security complex in its own right and that theories that see it as a sub-complex of the Middle East often overstress the ramifications of developments in the Levant, and especially the Israel–Palestinian conflict.

The way the GCC handled the situation in Bahrain also provides evidence of a still more self-confident region where states are willing to act in their own interests, regardless of the interests of the US and the West. The situation after the Arab Spring, then, is that the GCC states have come out more strongly into the international community than ever before without adopting processes of liberalisation, democratisation or reform. This situation can be seen as a direct consequence of the Arab Spring, but it was not initiated by it. The fact is that the GCC has been wary for years of US Middle East policy. Saudi Arabia was provoked by US ignorance of the peace plan to resolve the Palestinian conflict, for which the Kingdom obtained Arab League support in 2002, it was deeply uncomfortable with the Iraq war in 2003, it is worried about the US failure to handle the Iran problem, and last but not least Saudi Arabia became angry and irritated over the tendency in the US to blame the kingdom for the growth of al-Qaida and basically for 9/11, which many neoconservative politicians and analysts inside the beltway in Washington accused the Kingdom of having sponsored (Gauss 2010). Shortly after 9/11 the US left the newly finished Sultan base in Saudi Arabia and moved it to Qatar, while Saudi Arabia approached Asian countries, especially China, for closer cooperation both economically and also more broadly in political affairs, including defence cooperation, like joint naval exercises

(Janardhan 2011). This tendency to decrease economic and trade links with the West and increase them with the East is a general trend within the GCC states, meaning that, while US influence in the Persian Gulf is declining, the political significance and economic involvement of China, India and South Korea are increasing (Janardhan 2011; EUI 2011).

Many analysts focusing on US–Persian Gulf relations, even if they approach their research on the basis of regional security complex theory, seem to have a rather fixed interpretation of the role of the US, their premise being that it is the US alone that sets the conditions for these relationships. They point to the fact that the whole security structure in the Arab part of the Persian Gulf has developed under an US umbrella: it is the US alone that is able to guarantee the security of the regimes there. They would add that it is the US that has trained the security forces of the GCC states, that the US has bases in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the UAE, and that the GCC states are not able to ensure their own safety without the support of the US. They would rightfully point to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, from which only the US was able to expel Iraq in 1991. They would also argue that no other state, including China, would have the capacity to offer the same security umbrella. Even if all these arguments are valid, this does not imply that it is the US alone that sets the conditions for relations between itself and the Arab Gulf states: developments both before and certainly after the Arab Spring clearly show otherwise. To understand how the GCC states seek to define these relationships, it is necessary to analyse both their security dynamics regionally and how they see their relationships with the US and Asia differently. In other words, it is necessary to examine the security architecture of the Persian Gulf in its own right much more closely if we are to understand better how the US can act in the region and how its role is

changing, as well as how the security architecture of the Persian Gulf is changing and may be opening up a more important role, including in security matters, for states like China and India.

### **The Case of Bahrain**

While there has been a substantial focus on the very activist role that Qatar has played in international affairs in recent years, especially since the Summer War in Lebanon in 2006 and more recently followed increasingly by a similar engagement by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Bahrain has more and less been pushed into the shadows. The West has to a very large extent accepted the way that Saudi Arabia especially has interpreted the conflict in Bahrain, namely, that it is a Sunni–Shia conflict in which Iran is playing a manipulative role behind the scenes. But a closer look at the conflict shows otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

Political tensions in the island kingdom have been present for some time. Time and again protests and riots have echoed demands for political influence for citizens, the transition to a constitutional monarchy, equal rights for Sunni and Shia Muslims, economic reform, fair housing policies and the allocation of public-sector jobs to local Bahraini citizens rather than the preferential treatment of Sunnis and Asian foreigners. Such protests were seen, for example, in connection with parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2010. The opposition has been split between those who refuse to be a part of the political process because they consider it a disingenuous diversion leading to

**4 Many of the data and observations on the situation in Bahrain I am presenting in this article have been gathered on two fieldtrips to Bahrain, the first during the demonstrations in March 2011, the second a year after the outbreak of the crisis in February 2012.**



no concrete results, and those who hope to gain influence by running for parliament, which has so far merely been a forum for idle talk, while the all-important decisions have been made by the royal family (Gauss 2010).

Inspired by developments in Tunisia and later also in Egypt, the opposition's hope that protests could lead to change was revived. These protests began on 14 February 2011 in a Shia-dominated village where young people took to the streets, echoing the chants heard in Cairo's Tahrir Square. The security forces, as usual a massive presence in the capital's Shia-dominated neighbourhoods, as well as in the villages, with check-points every few hundred metres, reacted brutally, attacking the protesters, two of whom died. The conduct on the part of the security forces did not stop the uprising; in fact, it had the opposite effect. The following day, people in the capital flocked to Pearl Roundabout, setting up tents and booths and issuing their demands. Again, the reaction of the Bahraini security forces was ruthless: at 3 a.m. on 17 February they arrived at Pearl Roundabout when most people were asleep and ordered the square to be cleared. Five minutes later they moved in. Many were wounded, chaos ensued at the hospital, and three people lost their lives. The brutal clearing of the square did not quell the popular uprising. The next day, new groups of young protesters headed toward Pearl Roundabout, which had been secured by the Bahraini military. The people walked toward the square with their arms raised above their heads, showing that they were unarmed. Yet the military fired live rounds at them, and two young people were thus shot down in the street. Images of the brutal slaughter of peaceful protesters in the streets were posted on YouTube and seen worldwide (documentation collected by the Media Center during the time at the Roundabout and available at Bahrain Updates: [wefaq.international.affairs@gmail.com](mailto:wefaq.international.affairs@gmail.com)). That may have been a factor in

vice president Joe Biden's decision to call up King Hamad of Bahrain to explain that the US considers the use of violence against peaceful protesters unacceptable. This US intervention led to the withdrawal of the military and the disappearance of the security forces from Shia neighbourhoods, and Pearl Roundabout became the base for the protests.

Bahrain achieved independence in 1971, after the 1970 declaration by Iran that it no longer considered Bahrain an Iranian province and therefore gave up its claim to the area. The small Persian Gulf states had in fact never been part of Iran. Until 1971, they remained under the control of the British Empire, which then withdrew entirely from the Gulf, thereby creating the basis for the independent Gulf States. It fell to the small Khalifa royal family to head the country, since it has basically run the state like its own private property for centuries. This has created immense wealth for the royal family, members of which are likely to rank among the world's wealthiest individuals. But the state as such is not wealthy. Proceeds from the energy sector and, later on, the financial sector, in which Bahrain is in long-standing competition with Dubai for the status of the financial hub of the Middle East, have been channelled into the hands of the royal family. It has then, in the manner of bestowing gifts, invested some of the funds back into Bahraini society through development of the country's infrastructure, the construction of housing and the funding of public-sector employment.

The Royal family constitute the true power base, in spite of the new constitution with which he provided the country in 2001, reinstating the Bahraini parliament. The country has a population of about 1.2 million, of whom about 560,000 are Bahrainis. The remaining 600,000 are migrant workers, predominantly from Pakistan, the Philippines and India. The army which numbers 20,000, the security forces which number 15,000 and the

national guard which numbers 10,000 men are led by members of the royal family or men who are loyal to them, but consist largely of people imported from Pakistan (data collected during fieldtrips).

Approximately 64% of the half million local inhabitants are Shias, according to the king's figures. This number has fallen throughout the last decade, and the balance has been changed as part of a conscious effort to naturalize immigrants from Yemen, Egypt, the Palestinian Territories and especially Syria. For those on the bottom of society, the Shias, it is a major provocation that Syrians are issued with passports and citizenship shortly after arrival and jump to the front of the queue for public-sector jobs and proper housing. This made passport and immigration offices a primary target for protests in March 2011. So-called naturalized 'Syrians' make up an estimated 15% of local Bahrainis.

This naturalization policy, which is meant to improve the balance between the Shia majority and the Sunni minority, is a direct reflection of the king's interpretation of the political situation or, at least, how he wants to present the situation: the main security threat to Bahrain is posed by Iran, which, according to the king and the other Gulf state leaders, is working to mobilize the Shias to rebel, opening the Gulf region to Iran. There is no indication that fundamentalist and Iran-leaning forces in fact make up a majority in Bahrain, nor that they wish to turn the island kingdom into an Iranian vassal state. It is worth noting that protesters in Bahrain adopted the Bahraini flag as their main symbol. The protesters had a nationalist message: posters everywhere featured the slogan: 'Sunni and Shia are brother, and our nation is not for sale', meaning that the country is not prepared to suffer domination by *any* external power, including Iran.

The fact that the king's message about a Sunni-Shia conflict nevertheless resounds

throughout the region, as well as in the western media and with western politicians, is largely due to regional developments following the Iraq war and the framing of the so-called 'Shia Crescent'. This narrative constituted the time and context for the US decision to de-prioritize the project of democratization in the Middle East and instead to focus on forming an alliance against the Shia Crescent, whose main actors were Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, as well as their vassal Hamas. In this effort to counter the threat posed by a strengthened and increasingly defiant Iran, it was in fact these very conservative, Arab Sunni monarchies, along with Egypt, Israel and the US, who were to represent stability and order and so constitute a bulwark, particularly against Iran. This also provides the context for statements issued by Bahrain's King Hamad and his Arab colleagues in the other Gulf States, in which they describe the protests in Bahrain as a Shiite, sectarian insurgency, which will open the gate to Iran. This has made the Shia Crescent the official reason given by the Saudi authorities for the ruthless quashing of any signs of protests among Shias within Saudi Arabia, as well as the adamant refusal to accept any concession on the part of King Hamad to the protesters at Pearl Roundabout.

The message resounding from Pearl Roundabout was, however, neither Shiite nor subordinated to Iranian interests (see also BICI 2011). It was about political rights, economic reform, the right to jobs and housing; about ending corruption and the promised of a constitution made by the king in 2001 in order to facilitate the transition to a constitutional monarchy (posters and pamphlets collected at Pearl Roundabout, March 2011).

In those first weeks of March, some optimism could indeed be detected among the protesters that this time there was a real possibility of dialogue being opened with the government. The protestors' conditions for this dialogue and for ending the protests were simple: the hugely

unpopular prime minister, in office since 1971, must resign, and the regime must enter into direct dialogue with the protesters. This model closely resembled that being followed in Egypt, which was in fact not a revolution, but rather the preamble to a process of reform, which, through dialogue and constitutional amendments, was to lead to a liberal political system.

After the bloody incidents at Pearl Roundabout, the king delegated the responsibility for negotiations to the crown prince, who is seen as both open to reform and liberal, as opposed to the prime minister, who is a conservative stalwart and sees brutality as the only option in dealing with the opposition. The crown prince refused to fire the prime minister, but he did invite dialogue; this, however, was interpreted by the protesters as a mere pretence at negotiations: They therefore turned down the invitation issued by the crown prince, and the protests continued.

The royal family appears to be split on the issue of reform, with a conservative wing representing hard-core Salafism and led by the prime minister, and the opposing wing, to which the king and his crown prince belong. Many hoped that the king would step up to the plate and invite real negotiations. But even if the king wanted to do that, Saudi Arabia limits his power. In hindsight, it was from the outset very clear that Saudi Arabia would under no circumstances allow any change whatsoever in the small neighbouring state of Bahrain. This had to be prevented using all conceivable means, including military support to the Government of Bahrain, and regardless of US objections to the use of violence against peaceful protesters. The steps taken by Saudi Arabia did not go unnoticed by Washington, which responded with a hyperactive display of diplomatic activity: both the national security advisor and the secretary of defense have been sent on missions to the Middle East, with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visiting the re-

gion three times in the course of a single month (Andersen 2011).

When talking of Bahrain, it is often mentioned that the Fifth US Navy is based in the country and that the Americans therefore feel hard pressed to criticize the regime. Of much greater import, however, are US relations with Saudi Arabia, due to the kingdom's power to regulate the oil market, in part because of its vast oil resources and reserves. Moreover, Saudi Arabia dominates security policy in the Gulf region, and the country is playing a central role in the war against Al-Qaida, a significant factor in this being its great influence on and within the unrest-ridden country of Yemen. Strategically speaking, the US simply cannot afford discord between itself and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is well aware of all these factors and therefore displays its power quite freely, for example, by deploying troops to Bahrain in order to suppress the popular uprising there.

Saudi Arabia, however, is aware that, even if the GCC moves to closer cooperation with Asia, the region is still dependent on the US in security matters and therefore has to play a careful game. Saudi Arabia's brilliant move in the spring of 2011 was, together with Qatar, to convince the Arab League to support the military mission in Libya at the UN, to broker a deal in Yemen leading to the withdrawal of the unpopular president Ali Abdullah Salah, and to play an active role in increasing the pressure on the Assad regime in Syria. In other words the UN, US, NATO and EU became still more dependent on the GCC states in handling the problems in the Middle East following the Arab Spring. This dependence on the GCC was strengthened further by the withdrawal of US forces in Iraq and the increasing tensions between the US and UN on the one hand and Iran on the other: the US military bases in the Arab Gulf states became more than ever important, as did the supply of oil to replace Iranian oil, which, since the end of 2011, has been sub-

ject to sanctions by Western countries. Strategically neither the US nor the European states can afford a serious conflict with the GCC, and especially with Saudi Arabia.

Accordingly, if it comes to a clash between strategic interests and values in the form of human rights, political reforms and democracy, since the Arab Spring entered Bahrain the US and Europe have already demonstrated that they will choose strategic interests and turn a blind eye to legitimate calls for political reforms, as shown by the US decision in May 2012 to revive arms sales to the Bahraini royal family, despite their brutal repression of the legitimate opposition (announced by Secretary of State, 12 May 2012). The deadlock with which popular protests have so far been met has become even more suffocating. The only way that the conflict in Bahrain can reach a sustainable solution is by real national dialogue, but is blocked by Saudi Arabia. To strengthen its grip on Bahrain, Saudi Arabia is now working on developing a union between the two states, which in fact will bring about the total annihilation of Bahrain as a sovereign state (for developments, see Bahrain Justice and Development Movement, [www.bahrainjdm.com](http://www.bahrainjdm.com)).

## **CONCLUSION**

Due to the increasing dependence on the GCC in global power politics as played out in the Persian Gulf and more broadly in the Middle East, in the clash between a legitimate political opposition and autocratic regimes, Western states will go for the latter. To understand fully this priority of strategic interests over human rights and democracy in the Persian Gulf, we need both to analyse the global power struggle and the rapprochement between Asia and the GCC, and understand the Persian Gulf region as a regional security complex in its own right.

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