RESEARCH ARTICLE

REGULATING RESISTANCE: FROM ANTI TO COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY PRACTICE - AND BACK AGAIN - IN BAHRAIN

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ABSTRACT: On 14 February 2011 Bahrainis took to the streets demanding political reform as part of a broader wave of protests that swept across the Arab world. In the months that followed, the ruling Al-Khalifa family deployed mechanisms of sovereign power in an effort to ensure the survival of the regime. This article explores counter-revolutionary efforts deployed by the Bahraini state in an effort to eviscerate protest movements born out of the Arab Uprisings. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's ideas about sovereign power, I argue that the Al-Khalifa regime was able to deploy a range of different tools in pursuit of survival, framing Shi'a groups as nefarious fifth columnists operating within a broader regional struggle pitting Saudi Arabia and Iran against one another. The article argues that while sect-based difference is an important aspect of contemporary Bahraini politics – facilitated by securitisation processes led by the Al-Khalifa – counter-revolutionary efforts have their roots in a state building project that gave the ruling family the ability to ensure their survival. This approach created an "anti-revolutionary" environment which prevented the emergence of widespread protest, yet when faced with serious challenges, anti-revolutionary processes morphed into counter-revolutionary mechanisms.

KEYWORDS: Agamben, anti-revolution, Arab Uprisings Bahrain, counter-revolution, sectarianism, sovereignty,

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1. Introduction

In early 2011, the emergence of protest movements across the Middle East and North Africa shook the very foundations of political projects across the Middle East. Popular protests drew support from disparate groups, transcending political, social, religious and other divisions, united by demands for political elites to implement social, political and economic reforms to improve their quality of life. Yet in the months that followed, acts of resistance and popular protest were met with counter-revolutionary strategies from regimes seeking to ensure their survival in the face of widespread protest.

In Bahrain, a society divided along sect-based lines, with a Sunni monarch ruling over a Shi'a majority, protests began on 14 February 2011, a symbolic day for Bahrainis. The uprisings were seen to pose an existential crisis to the survival of the monarchy. Even as protesters gathered in Pearl Roundabout and across other public spaces across the state chanting "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini", the regime set in place a counter-revolutionary strategy by mobilising the mechanisms of sovereign power designed to regulate all aspect of political life. Deploying a range of different strategies including – but not limited to – citizenship stripping, detention, urbicide, and the destruction of opposition movements, the ruling Al-Khalifa regime has created conditions of what Giorgio Agamben termed bare life as a means of regulating all aspects of life across the Bahraini state.

Working broadly within ideas of sovereign power, Agamben's ideas of bare life have resonated widely across contemporary political life, focussing on efforts made to strip political meaning from individuals within political projects through an (inclusive) exclusion. Here, as law is suspended – the sovereign exception – individuals are simultaneously banned from and included in the political order. Ultimately, for Agamben, at the time of the exception, through its exclusion, life is tied to sovereign power and the political order. While this situation emerges at times when the law is suspended, as Agamben observes, these conditions later arise amidst concerns about security and, thus, can be implemented without formal suspension of the law and a declaration of emergency legislation.

In the case of Bahrain, a state of emergency was declared in February 2011 which expired in June the same year. What followed, however, was the reproduction of this political order, through the deployment of technologies of sovereign power, yet amidst a complex and precarious regional security environment, these processes were shaped by external factors. Indeed, one month after the protests began, a Saudi-led Gulf Co-Operation Council Force crossed the King Fahd Causeway to provide support to the Al-Khalifa as concerns grew about perfidious Iranian manipulation of protest movements across the region.

Prominent officials from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the GCC and elsewhere quickly expressed condemnation at Iranian meddling. In a speech to GCC troops, King Hamad declared that "An external plot has been fomented for twenty to thirty years for the ground to be right for subversive designs . . . I here[by] announce the failure of the fomented subversive plot" (Constantine 2011). Writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, Fawaz bin Mohammad Al-Khalifa argued against "expansionist ambitions of the Persian Shia establishment", blaming Iran for widespread unrest across Bahrain and the wider Middle East (Al-Khalifa, 2016). Other officials expressed concern at the "sectarian abyss" that pitted Sunni against Shi'a (Reuters 2011).

Security forces moved to secure prominent sites and the ensuing militarisation of urban politics served as a structural impediment to further protest. In addition, regime efforts to regulate life resulted in the deprivation of citizenship from hundreds of Bahrainis as efforts were made to restrict political expression. Beyond citizenship deprivation, others critical of the regime were caught in precarious conditions, abandoned by the law yet bound to it, reduced to Agamben's idea of bare life. Perhaps the best example of this is the case of

Eman Salehi, a Shi'a sports female journalist who was shot and killed by a member of the Al-Khalifa royal family who, having turned himself in, was released with no charge.

In a more mundane example of the counter-revolutionary strategies deployed by the regime, citizens were urged to abstain from social media in an effort to ensure national unity. A National Dialogue between regime and opposition groups that began in 2011 was itself used as a strategy to eviscerate any semblance of momentum and hope from opposition groups. Taken together, the process of counter-revolution in Bahrain was wide ranging, bringing together direct and structural violence, systemic repression, the manipulation of religious identities, and the framing of events within broader geopolitical currents. While at first this focussed on Shi'a group, over time it later turned to others who were viewed as a threat to stability in Bahrain and across the wider Persian Gulf.

This article explores counter-revolutionary efforts deployed by the Bahraini state in an effort to eviscerate protest movements born out of the Arab uprisings. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's ideas about sovereign power, I argue that the Al-Khalifa regime was able to deploy a range of different tools in pursuit of survival, framing Shi'a groups as nefarious fifth columnists operating within a broader regional struggle pitting Saudi Arabia and Iran against one another. In this paper, I seek to locate the biopolitical approach proposed by Agamben within a geopolitical rivalry that has shaped political life in accordance with spatial and temporal contingencies. The article argues that while sect-based difference is an important aspect of contemporary Bahraini politics - facilitated by securitisation processes led by the Al-Khalifa - counter-revolutionary efforts have their roots in a state building project that gave the ruling family the ability to ensure their survival seemingly whatever the cost. This approach to sovereign power and state-building must also be located within geopolitical currents which point to a form of "nestled sovereignty" in the Bahraini case, stressing the need to provide a more nuanced form of sovereignty and counter-revolution contingent upon time and space (Mabon 2019a, 2019b).

While existing literature on Bahrain focusses on processes of sectaranisation (Matthiesen 2017), coup proofing (Louër 2013) and characteristics of authoritarian rule (Husayn 2015), in this article I seek to demonstrate that these approaches fit together in a holistic approach that consolidates regime power aimed at the survival of the Al-Khalifa monarchy through deploying Giorgio Agamben's ideas of sovereign power. Agamben's ideas provide rich theoretical insight into a case that has been largely albeit not exclusively explored with an empirical focus, allowing for a rigorous exploration of the mechanisms of sovereign power and their impact upon everyday life. Through using Agamben's approach to critically reflect on political life in Bahrain, we are better equipped to understand the processes through which the Al-Khalifa – and their regional supporters – embarked on a concerted and co-ordinated series of moves designed to ensure regime survival in the face of what was viewed as a serious challenge to the ruling Al-Khalifa family.

2. Agamben and Biopolitical Control

In times of political crisis, constitutional documents typically present the sovereign with the capacity to suspend the law in an attempt to preserve the state. This sovereign decision over suspension is viewed as a necessary feature in the very survival of the polis, yet there are serious philosophical, political and legal problems concerning the decision over when to suspend the law. The decision to establish a state of emergency, martial law, or what Giorgio Agamben terms state of exception is central to sovereign power (Agamben 2005).

Building on the work of Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and Walter Benjamin, Agamben's *homo sacer* series offers a powerful account of the way in which sovereign power operates within political life. Agamben's *homo sacer* project is split across a series of books that interrogate sovereign power and the mechanisms through which a ruler is able to exert authority over a population. The eponymous *homo sacer*

character is taken from Ancient Rome and refers to the individual who can be killed yet not sacrificed, abandoned by the law yet bound by its rules, operating within the context of what Agamben terms the state of exception. To understand Agamben's project, we must reflect on the interaction of three parts: the state of exception; the camp; and bare life. Taken together, one is able to piece together Agamben's vision of the way in which sovereign power operates and its capacity to regulate life.

Within his canon of work, Agamben traces the history of sovereign power and political organisation, arguing that this is fundamentally biopolitical, concerned with not only "letting life live" but the ways in which life can be controlled through abandonment. Rejecting the Schmittian claim that the fundamental line of separation in political life is the friend and enemy, Agamben argues that this distinction is between bare life (*zoe*) and political existence (*bios*). Here, the distinction is between the qualified life and that where life is reduced to its "natural form" whilst exposed, bound by the biopolitical mechanisms of sovereign control.

The starting point of Agamben's exploration into sovereignty is a reflection on Carl Schmitt's idea that "sovereign is he who decides the exception". For Schmitt, sovereignty is defined in terms of a decision to determine the suspension of the law, to declare a state of exception in times of crisis to preserve the juridical order – as seen in Article 48 of the Weimar Republic – which allowed for the suspension of the law to protect it from existential threat. Yet as Agamben observes, a central problem – amongst many – with the Schmittian approach, is least the location of the exception. Noting issues with existing approaches, Agamben (2005: 28) argues that the exception is

> is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other. The suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition, and the zone of anomie that it establishes is not (or at least claims not to be) unrelated to the juridical order.

The location of sovereign power in a subjective decision to suspend the rule of law is central to Agamben's work, and locates the sovereign outside of the law albeit armed with the legal capacity to suspend the law in order to protect it (Agamben 1995: 1). The state of exception is a "zone of anomie", a space devoid of law following the deactivation of all legal norms that previously regulated life. This concept is deemed fundamental to sovereign power, serving as the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and at the same time abandons the living being to the law (Agamben 2005: 23). Moreover, the state of exception is "illegal" but a perfectly "juridical and constitutional" measure that is realised in the production of new norms (Agamben 2005: 28). Here a zone of indistinction emerges, where the law suspending itself in an effort to protect itself, produces a new set of norms in the process – viewed by some as a juridical order – and redefining relations between rulers and ruled. It is here, in this relationship, where the sovereign decision can abandon the "living being" to law. The realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoe*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested (Agamben 2005: 9).

Supporting Agamben's work is the idea of the ban is central to understanding contemporary politics. It is this concept that renders individuals into conditions of bare life through the evisceration of meaning form life. In conditions of bare life, individuals are stripped of political and legal protections, simultaneously abandoned by the law yet bound by it. As Agamben argues, "the state of exception is the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds and at the same time abandons the living being to the

law" (Agamben 2005: 23). As the exception becomes the norm – the central feature of political life – the idea of abandonment and bare life gain broader application, potentially applied to any and all. This is articulated through the idea of the camp, a zone of indistinction, where sovereign power operates without limit and possesses a "natural right to do anything to anyone" (Agamben 2005: 109). This idea of "the camp", is identified as the "hidden matrix of modernity", a space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule, the paradigmatic location where the state of exception is given a permanent spatial arrangement (Agamben 1995: 168-9). Those residing in camps are caught in a zone of indistinction between inside and outside, rule and excretion, licit and illicit, abandoned by the law yet bound by it.

As he later suggests, "as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was [...] the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation" (Agamben 1995: 171). This definition of the camp is inherently spatial, referring to both the precise location of areas within which the law is suspended, but also has a metaphysical dimension, as space becomes a potential site of exception, within which all can be rendered into bare life. Within it, the sovereign possesses a perennial "natural right to do anything to anyone" (Agamben 2005: 109).

We should not view the camp as a space devoid of law but rather as a space subjected to a pure form of sovereign power where residents remain bound by the law yet abandoned from its protection and participation. As Sari Hanafi articulates, reflecting on the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, camps are a "space of exception, a space out of place" subjected to "disciplinary power, control and surveillance" (Hanafi 2008). In such conditions, as Jenni Edkins and Veronica Pin-Fat observe, "we have all become *homines sacri* or bare life in the face of a biopolitics that technologizes, administers, and depoliticizes and thereby renders the political and power relations irrelevant" (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2004: 9).This observation hints at ideas of potentiality in Agamben's work, whereby those under sovereign power reside within a metaphysical – and often literal – camp and can, as such, be rendered into bare life through abandonment.

Understanding the ways in which sovereign power operates requires careful reflection on governance processes but also the ways in which regimes respond to periods of contestation and the mechanisms deployed. In what follows, I seek to do this with regard to the processes deployed by the Al-Khalifa in Bahrain post independence. Across this time, I argue that the ruling family's governmental machinery had cultivated anti-revolutionary practices designed to prohibit widespread unrest. Yet as protests swelled across the early months of 2011, these anti-revolutionary practices evolved into counter-revolutionary practices.[1] In the years that followed, as the regime regained control of all aspects of political life, counter-revolutionary practices once again returned to anti-revolution-revolutionary practices, reflecting the widespread repression of dissent and opposition to the ruling family.

3. Protest and Revolution in Bahrain

Bahrain has been ruled by the Al-Khalifa family since 1783 when it conquered the archipelago from the island of Zubarah. A Sunni Arab tribe, the Al-Khalifa came to rule over a complex melange of indigenous identities, including the Baharna, an ethnically Arab Shi'a group, and the Ajam, an ethnically Persian Shi'a community. Ruling over indigenous identities meant that for some, the Al-Khalifa should be viewed as "settler-rulers" whilst for others, their actions are more akin to a form of settler-colonialism (Jones 2020).

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[1] This strategy bears many of the hallmarks of what James Quinlivan termed *coup proofing*, where the ruler is surrounded by his immediate family, then concentric circles are built around this core, with institutions of the state populated with key allies and then pitted against one another. See James Quinlivan (1999).

Across the 20th century, the struggle for control of Bahrain was intertwined with a British colonial project in all but name, as Staci Strobl (2018) and Omar Al-Shehabi (2019) have ably demonstrated. In two powerful accounts of British involvement in Bahrain, Strobl and Al-Shehabi reveal the mechanisms of control deployed by both the Al-Khalifa and their British backers, co-opting urban elites and wealthy Sunni tribes, in a similar strategy to that deployed in Iraq (Mabon 2019b). Yet as a number of accounts have demonstrated, divisions during the formative decades of the 20th century were not along sectarian lines, but rather, shaped by ethnic, tribal, class, or urban/rural divisions. In an effort to foster national unity and stability, governance strategies were designed as mechanisms of control, a means of ensuring the survival of the Al-Khalifa.

While the archipelago was home to a British Political Residency, Bahrain was not officially under the Empire's rule, neither as a protectorate nor colony, yet this situation gave London the means through which it could exert influence over the state. Yet as Strobl has argued, Bahrain should be viewed as a colony due to the vast power wielded by the British across the century.[2] Indeed, the role of the British in Bahraini politics prompted a spate of protests during the 1950s (Abdoul Razak 2017). Across this time, the actions of British figures including Major Clive Daly and Sir Charles Belgrave feature prominently across historical accounts that document the brutality directed at those opposing Al-Khalifa rule.[3] In the years that followed, other officials including Ian Henderson – an erstwhile colonial police offer involved in suppressing the Mau Mau uprisings and later dubbed the "butcher of Bahrain" – played a key role in ensuring the survival of the Al-Khalifa, using a range of techniques honed across the colonies and deployed in support of the ruling family.

Across the post-independence years, Al-Khalifa rule was contested by an array of actors within the state and from across the region. Unlike other Gulf states, Al-Khalifa rule was contested by a vibrant set of opposition groups, prompting the ruling family to cultivate a robust set of governance mechanisms designed to ensure their power, ranging from gerrymandering to urban segregation (Gengler 2019). Fearing the potential for unrest built on a unified front of social groups, the regime cultivated a multi-faced strategy designed to ensure their survival, combining the use of legal mechanisms with a "divide and rule strategy" to prevent the emergence of widespread protest movements such as those that would occur in 2011 (Mabon 2019b). As Kylie Moore-Gilbert observes, this took place in a number of guises, predominantly manifesting in efforts to secure the loyalty of Sunni groups in a form of protection racket politics (Moore-Gilbert 2016). Over time, this divide and rule driven protection racket oscillated between ideological and sectarian bases, coupled with mechanisms of co-optation and/or repression, contingent upon then after of the threat. This strategy was underpinned by what Justin Gengler (2016) terms the "political economy of sectarianism", whereby regime proclamations of communal threats and guarantees of security combine to ensure loyalty from key constituencies. In this vein, the Al-Khalifa derived support from those concerned about security and stability and whilst initially viewed as a mechanism of control against Shi'a groups, it later became a strategy to target dissidents more broadly.

Although such strategies took place after the uprisings of 2011, their roots were much deeper, tied up with Bahrain's democratic experiment in 1973 when the country's first constitution was established, shortly followed by a general election for the national assembly the same year. The establishment of a National Assembly modelled on the Kuwait constitution of 1961 featuring an elected two thirds majority sought to bring together disparate communities from Bahrain. The elections of 1973 established a representative parliament that was largely pro-regime, yet creating political space for agency, albeit curtailed by having to act "according to law". The electoral process caused a great deal of concern for key figures in the Al-Khalifa, notably the Emir, Prime Minister and Crown Prince (Khalaf) who sought to re-assert their power through the

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[2] Personal correspondence with author.
[3] As Strobl (2018) suggests, this was predominantly targeted against Shi'a groups.

Qanun man al-dawla – the deeply unpopular state security law, underpinned by the declaration of a state of emergency in October 1974 which lasted until 2002.

In spite of its unpopularity, this state of emergency and *qanun man al-dawla* permitted the Al-Khalifa to regulate life with little regard for the rule of law and human rights, much to the *chagrin* of many, but allowing the likes of Belgrave to operate with impunity (Strobl 2018). Here, the Al-Khalifa had created conditions designed to prohibit resistance and revolution which could be viewed as a form of anti-revolution-revolutionary control. In this vein, governance strategies were designed not only to regulate life but also to prevent the emergence of revolutionary opposition movements, with a clearly delineated space for opposition to occur in, as seen in the actions of parties such as Al-Wefaq.

Across the 1980s and 1990s, frustration at the political situation grew, as political, social and economic concerns coalesced, resulting in the establishment of a 12-point petition that was presented to the ruling family, underpinned by demands for the repeal of emergency laws. This protest movement drew support from people across political, social and religious groups, reflecting the breadth of political pressure from the regime. In spite of this, however, there was little scope for serious change given the strength of the anti-revolution-revolutionary biopolitical machinery designed by the ruling family.

While a period of reform appeared possible after power was transferred to Hamad at the turn of the millennium, stemming from a number of symbolic reforms, broader aspirations for reform were premature. The decade that followed – one described as one of discontent (Wehrey 2013) – was punctured by acts of dissent which were easily addressed by the anti-revolution-revolutionary processes embedded within the governance machinery of the state. In doing this, the Al-Khalifa refined their anti-revolution-revolutionary strategy, designed to prohibit both the potential and actuality of revolutionary behaviour.

4. Geopolitics & "Nested Sovereignty"

While the emergence of protests across Bahrain were of paramount concern to the Al-Khalifa, they were also a source of apprehension for rulers in Saudi Arabia and across the Gulf. In the years after revolutionary activity in Iran led to the formation of an Islamic Republic in 1979, Shi'a minorities in divided societies across the Middle East were viewed with trepidation amidst perceptions of divided loyalties along national and religious lines. Exacerbating these concerns was the rhetoric of the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, who repeatedly called out corrupt rulers across the Middle East and enshrined support for the *mustazefin* – the oppressed – of the broader Muslim world (Mabon 2013). The legacy of Shi'a thought was evident in both Khomeini's words and the constitution, most notably the narrative of Karbala. With Shi'a populations facing precarious political and economic conditions across the Middle East, Iran's message of resistance resonated amongst many.

In the years that followed, Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in a complex rivalry playing out in a range of different arenas, shaped by the contingencies and peculiarities of time and space., underpinned by competing visions of order (Mabon 2019a). This resulted in a rivalry that ebbed and flowed, oscillating between periods of overt hostility and burgeoning rapprochement. Additionally, the rivalry shaped – and was shaped by – political dynamics in a number of states across the region, particularly those that became the sites of competition between Riyadh and Tehran, notably Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. In each of these states, geopolitical tensions resonated across political contexts that were often sites of contestation. Here, as the "second theory reversed" of International Relations theory tells us, regional political developments can impact on local politics.

It was hardly surprising that the Al-Khalifa and Al-Saud both feared the manipulation of their Shi'a populations amidst concerns of a broader process of Shi'a empowerment; the establishment of Hizballah in Lebanon demonstrated what was possible. In Bahrain, members of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards Corps

provided logistical, financial and ideological support to a group known as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB). This group set out to overthrow the Al-Khalifa dynasty in the early 1980s yet was ultimately thwarted by security services (Alhasan 2011).

Despite its failings, the legacy of the IFLB continues to resonate across Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as a reminder of what could happen with Iranian support, conditioning perceptions of security and shaping decisions about the regulation of life in the process. Moreover, it also provided evidence of Iranian support for Bahrain's opposition movements which would continue to be used to document links between Iran and Shi'a groups in Bahrain. Indeed, in the years that followed, domestic unrest amongst Shi'a populations in both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were routinely framed as a consequence of perfidious Iranian manipulation in an attempt to cultivate a degree of nationalist solidarity in the face of external interference whilst also dividing the protest movement.

Here we see the extent to which domestic and international concerns and spheres of interaction coalesce amidst shared concerns about Iranian activity across the Gulf held by officials in Riyadh and Manama, shaping visions of order and the mobilisation of sovereign power in the process (Mabon 2019a). Reflecting these concerns, the King Fahd Causeway was built in the early 1980s as a means of ensuring that a military force friendly to the regime could gain access to Bahrain at speed.

Underpinning this is the nature of power relations between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, with the former exerting a great deal of influence over the latter due to demographic, economic and geopolitical differences. Indeed, in conversations with Bahrainis working in the financial and energy sectors, this disparity left many feeling reliant on Saudi Arabia and worried that unless Bahrain towed the Saudi line that it would "turn off the tap".[4] Indeed, a dramatic disparity in political and economic power between the two left Bahrain's rulers subservient to the geopolitical aspirations of their larger neighbours.

Of course, there are clear alignments of political and geopolitical interests, particularly around Shi'a empowerment and the perception of Iran's propensity for perfidious activity across the region. For Saudi Arabia, the empowerment of Bahrain's Shi'a community was a source of concern amidst fears that this would incite similar demands amongst the Saudi state's long-maligned Shi'a population (Matthiesen 2014). Given these shared concerns, the events of the Arab uprisings would strengthen Saudi-Bahraini ties, albeit in the form of Riyadh exerting power over Manama over particular areas, namely Shi'a empowerment and foreign policy, resulting in a form of nestled sovereignty (Humphrey 2004) where Al-Khalifa sovereignty is subservient to Al-Saud sovereignty. As such, while the Al-Khalifa exert sovereign power over much of the political life in Bahrain, these decisions take place within the broader context of Saudi Arabia's concerns about increased Iranian influence, leading to a form of "nestled" sovereignty conditioning Al-Khalifa decisions (Mabon, 2020a).

5. The Arab Uprisings: A new hope?

Reflecting on the decades prior to the uprisings, it is easy to see how latent frustrations erupted in the early months of 2011. As such, we should not the view the events of 201 in isolation. Indeed, much like their counterparts across the region, protesters drew on long-standing grievances and frustrations that have been common features of life across the archipelago, resulting in tensions between rulers and ruled. This contestation has occurred in a range of different forms, shaped by myriad different forces, from local communities to geopolitical tensions at a regional level. The presence of shared identities across state borders means that identities can resonate across regions, impacting on the ways in which sovereign power

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[4] Interviews with prominent figures from financial and energy sectors, Manama, 2014.

operates and individuals seek to exert agency. This trans-border resonance shaped both the emergence of protests and, as we shall see, the Al-Khalifa's response.

With Bahrainis from myriad backgrounds taking to the streets demanding political reform – in a range of different forms – the early months of the protests can be viewed as a desectarian moment, one that called for the re-imagining of the role of religion in the political ordering of life. Underpinning this was the chant "not Sunni, not Shi'a, just Bahraini" which rejected the imposition of sectarian affinity as a means of imposing order onto society, a strategy that had been positioned centrally within the Al-Khalifa's governance strategy as a mechanism of sovereign power (Matthiesen 2013). This desectarian moment – albeit without further exploration[5] as to what this may look like – offered a modicum of hope to those wanting revolution to facilitate political and social change across the state. While the protests brought people together across the state, united in their demands for political reform – albeit without a clear vision of what that reform should look like or the ways of achieving such goals – over time the collective fragmented under the pressure of the biopolitical machinery of sovereign power.

By its very nature, the desectarian moment posed an existential challenge to the Al-Khalifa who had long feared such a coalescence of different communal groups and the threat such alliances could pose. These fears prompted the ruling elite to embark on a coup proofing strategy, designed to ensure survival (Louër 2013). Yet regime strategies in response to possible threats are embedded within the very nature of the polis – a position acknowledged by Agamben in the context of political life. This fluidity allows for shifts from anti-revolutionary strategies to counter-revolutionary approaches – and back – positioned within the biopolitical machineries of sovereign power and supported by Gulf allies.

At this time, protesters drew support from across different facets of society, bringing together a range of disparate political, religious, tribal, economic and social groups in a demand for change. The Bassiouni Independent Commission Inquiry (BICI) into the events of 2011 in Bahrain reported that around one third of the citizens of Bahrain joined the protests (BICI, 2011) as demands for political reform were emboldened by social, economic and cultural grievances. Pearl Square quickly became a site of inclusive protest against the ruling family and government, yet four days after the Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain, it was demolished (Khalaf 2013). Emergency Laws had been imposed alongside the GCC force, while a network of checkpoints manned by the state's security forces was established across Bahrain, restricting access to Manama, empowered by the sovereign power of the state. These moments of unity and expressions of national solidarity were the high point of Bahrain's 2011 revolution and in spite of the excitement and aspirations of many, they would not last.

6. The Al-Khalifa Strikes Back: The Counter-revolution Begins

Following the start of the protests, the response from the regime was swift. A state of emergency was declared by the King, once again suspending the rule of law and granting those in power the impunity to act free from the oversight of the legislature and a desire to retain power. Within a month of protesters taking to the streets, a co-ordinated counter-revolutionary process began that positioned the Al-Khalifa's concerns within broader regional dynamics, seen through the Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsular Shield Force crossing the King Fahd Causeway and entering the archipelago in support the regime. In what followed, the regime's biopolitical mechanisms of control nestle within Saudi Arabia's security concerns about increased Iranian influence across the region. To understand the counter-revolutionary process that ended the uprisings, it is necessary to reflect on both the domestic developments which demonstrate the Al-Khalifa's sovereign

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[5] Would this be trans-sectarian, post-sectarian, anti-revolution-sectarian or a different form of protest? For more on this see: Valbjørn (2020) and Mabon (2019d; 2020c)

power in action, whilst positioning these processes within broader Saudi concerns about Iranian influence across the region (Mabon 2013).

It is important to note, however, that the ruling family did not operate as a monolithic unit. Rather, factions within the Al-Khalifa pitted hardliners – led by the Prime Minister – who advocated taking a strong line against protests, against a more reform-minded camp, led by the Crown Prince who was seen by many as the best hope for reform. In spite of this optimism, the Crown Prince's overtures to Al-Wefaq and other opposition groups were viewed by Saudi Arabia with much trepidation, prompting his removal from the public sphere. On returning to public life in 2014, the Crown Prince sought to revive the short-lived National Dialogue of 2011, building on secret talks that had taken place across 2013 (Law 2014). Unsurprisingly, however, the revived National Dialogue proved unsuccessful given the successes of both hardliners in the intra-Khalifa divisions and the counter-revolutionary strategy more broadly.

The regime's response was multi faced and while honed over decades of anti-revolutionary practice, took on new ferocity after the uprisings – evolving into a form of counter-revolutionary practice, permitted initially by the declaration of a state of emergency and facilitated by the biopolitical machinery of the state. Here, a shift took place from a passive form of regulation occurring by defining the parameters of political participation, to a more active form of governance made possible by a state of emergency and its residue on political life. Underpinning all of this were the mechanisms of sovereign power and, as Agamben observes, the ability to abandon (all) individuals into conditions of bare life.

The immediate response to the uprisings sought to frame the protests in security rather than political terms, underpinned by a narrative of Iranian manipulation (Matthiesen 2017). Building on this, dissenting voices were excluded from the security services, denied access to prominent political portfolios, and prohibited from accessing public spaces. Here, dissenting voices were viewed to be all those who did not explicitly profess support for the Al-Khalifa. Efforts were also made to manipulate societal demographics through revocation of citizenship, electoral gerrymandering and the distribution of passports to Sunnis from Asia (Mabon 2019c). Underpinning this strategy was the use of force and the disciplinary power of the state, designed to enforce Al-Khalifa power through punitive measures and also to cultivate a climate of fear.

This multi-faceted strategy sought to eviscerate the protest movement by dividing protesters along sect-based lines through the cultivation of a sectarian master narrative seeking to frame the Shi'a as fifth columnists under the tutelage of Iran. Here, as Saudi Arabia had previously identified, the cultivation of a sectarian master narrative operated as a pre-emotive counter-revolutionary strategy (Al-Rasheed 2011). This long-term process gained momentum after the events of 2011 yet the tools found within this strategy had been cultivated in the preceding decades in the Al-Khalifa's anti-revolution-revolutionary strategy, ably supported by other Gulf monarchies. As Staci Strobl and this author observe, "Sunni monarchies mirror their perception of the threat with cooperation across borders" (Strobl and Mabon forthcoming) perhaps best seen in the formative stages of the Arab uprisings.

This approach diverged from earlier anti-revolutionary strategies in a move towards counter-revolution, a subtle yet important distinction reflecting a shift to a more pro-active deployment of biopolitical machinery designed to eviscerate existing protest movements rather than to prevent their emergence. This shift is predicated on the existence and operation of biopolitical machinery designed to regulate life, with the capacity to abandon individuals into bare life in the process. Under the 27 years long Emergency Law which ran from 1974 to 2001, the Al-Khalifa were granted the right to act free from legal obligations and, in the process, to create structures that would prevent the emergence of revolutionary movements, whilst also creating precedent for what was to follow.

Even after the formal ending of emergency powers after three months, the lasting consequence was the creation of political conditions – in Agamben's parlance, a camp – wherein individuals could be cast into

bare life with no protection from the rule of law. This process was essential in creating conditions of impunity that allowed the security services to exact its counter-revolutionary strategy, perhaps most evidently seen in the brutality enacted by members of the security services against protesters in 2011 (Shehabi and Jones 2015). Although emergency laws were ended in June, the residue of their impact remains in both visible and invisible forms. Security personnel remained *in situ* at key strategic points across Manama, while military courts were used to try civilians (AA 2018), with additional human rights violations documented below.

Beyond physical violence, the Al-Khalifa used structural violence and processes of sectarianisation to exacerbate tensions, along with the deployment of legal mechanisms of control as a mechanism of regulating life (Matthiesen 2017; Mabon 2019c). Fundamental to this was the cultivation of bare life, perhaps best seen in processes of citizenship revocation as a mechanism of control where erstwhile Bahraini nationals were subjected to legal constraints yet receiving no protection and, ultimately, forced to leave the state. Here, Agamben's depiction of the *homo sacer* – the individual abandoned by law yet bound by it – becomes apparent. Let us now go deeper into two main sets of approaches deployed by the Al-Khalifa regime and the security infrastructure of the state.

6.1 The Sectarianisation of the Protests

A key feature of the regime's response to the uprisings was to embark on the sectarianisation of the protests. As Hashemi and Postel (2017) articulate, the sectarianisation thesis argues that through the manipulation of identity – in this case sectarian identities – elites and sectarian entrepreneurs are able to increase their power. After the Arab Uprisings, the cultivation of sectarian difference played a key role in a "divide and conquer" strategy, exacerbating divisions within the protesters in an attempt to weaken the movement and secure the regime support base. This was predominantly achieved through framing the protesters as fifth columnists, doing the bidding of Iran (Mabon 2019c) and laying the groundwork for the creation of bare life. In support of this, the Al-Khalifa embarked on a process of sectarianising the protesters, drawing on history and decades of framing Shi'a groups as an insidious threat to state – and societal – security.

Events were quickly positioned within broader questions of inclusion and external manipulation. In this vein, King declared that an "external plot has been fomented for twenty to thirty years for the ground to be right for subversive designs" (Constantine 2011). Another official, Abd Al-Ghaffar, proclaimed that "Bahrain has been suffering for a long time from the Iranian interference in its internal affairs" (Al-Chazli 2013). The sectarianisation of protesters helped shape a holistic response to protest and criticism of the Al-Khalifa, creating conditions for political and juridical responses to those dissenting against the regime. In addition, the process set a precedent by which protesters could be framed as groups acting in accordance with sect-based identities and manipulated by external agents.

While the nature of such threats had dramatically changed in the years after the Arab Uprisings, demographic concerns had featured heavily in strategic planning in the formative years of Hamad's rule. Indeed, a strategy designed to manipulate societal demographics in pursuit of the creation of a pliant and docile society had been created at this time, documented in the leaked Bandar Report which was predicated on the assumption that Shi'a empowerment across the wider region would have serious repercussions for stability in Bahrain (Gengler 2013). The report set out a range of strategies creating mechanisms of control, designed to regulate the body politic, limiting scope for Shi'a political engagement through electioneering, gerrymandering and naturalisation of Sunnis from other Arab states but also from the Asian subcontinent (Wehrey 2013: 120).

6.2 Exclusion and Regulation

In the years that followed, the biopolitical machinery of the state used mechanisms of exclusion in a range of forms in pursuit of exercising sovereign power and control over the Bahraini population. The revocation of citizenship became a regular tool within the portfolio of strategies which left a total of 804 Bahrainis who had their citizenship revoked between 2012 and the end of 2018.[6] Typically, this involved being forced into exile after the deprivation of legal protection in their homeland, resulting in the creation of diaspora communities of exiles in a number of states across the world.

In pursuit of this goal, leaders of opposition parties and movements were detained, notably those from Al-Wefaq, while over 500 were convicted in the six months between April and October of 2011 (Human Rights Watch 2012). Thus, not only were dissidents removed from the political arena, but Shi'a politicians and figures were excluded from key positions within the state, notably in the political and security realms. Such factors were not only found in the security sector. Indeed, Shi'a Bahrainis were excluded from jobs across the education sector, from 90% in the 2000s to 10% after the uprisings. Moreover, senior doctors were removed from their posts at Al-Salmaniya hospital in Manama due to the provision of medical support to protesters (Wingfield Hayes 2011).

Beyond detention, other techniques of control were deployed by the state, with over 35 deaths and thousands imprisoned for their part in the protests. Amongst those arrested, many were tortured – physically and psychologically – while in custody which was, as the independent report on the uprisings found, reflected a culture of impunity, with mistreatment was often used as a method to both extract confessions and exact retribution for opposing the state (BICI 2011). Additionally, exclusion also took the form of the clearing of physical spaces, such as Pearl Roundabout, where protesters were cleared by military forces who also embarked on a process of urbicide (Mabon 2020b), removing all traces of the uprisings. Additionally, protesters were typically excluded from Manama, facilitated by the regulation of roads in and out of the capital (Mabon 2020b).

The conflagration of these tactics means that by 2018 there was a sharp spike in human rights violations, including an increasing number of people sentenced to death. Torture and ill treatment of prisoners continued, targeted at civil society activists at prisons and centres including the Jau Prison, Dry Dock Detention Centre and the ISA Town Women's Detention Centre. In addition, the use of arbitrary arrests and travel bans against protesters served to reinforce the power of the Al-Khalifa, while journalists and academics wishing to travel to Bahrain were routinely denied entry.

The biopolitical machinery deployed by the Al-Khalifa was mobilised in such a way to target not only those who protested against the state, but also those who provided support to the protesters, notably medical professionals and lawyers, a number of whom were also arrested in the aftermath of the protests.[7] The legal profession requires registration through the Ministry of Justice leaving practicing lawyers without the protection of a professional association.[8] Although relatively common in authoritarian states, in the Bahraini context this absence of legal protection from lawyers adds a political dimension to legal practice, reinforcing absolute regime power and communal difference in the process. As such, any conflict between lawyers and the state means that the Minister himself has the capacity to intervene in support of the regime. This

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[6] See reports produced by Salam for Democracy and Human Rights for more information. Notably: https://salam-dhr.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/التقرير_السنوي_لعام_2018_انكليزي.pdf
[7] Interviews with Bahraini lawyers and opposition movements.
[8] Interview with Bahraini lawyer, phone, October 2019.

reduction in political and legal space once more highlights the ways in which sovereign power restricts political opposition, bound up within the very nature of the state.

Yet strategies were not limited to Shi'a groups. While Sunni Islamist groups had provided an additional source of support for the Al-Khalifa against Shi'a groups in the formative stages of the uprisings, by 2014, relations between the state and groups including the Muslim Brotherhood had become untenable due, in no small part, to pressure from Saudi Arabia. Although possessing a sectarian dimension, efforts to regulate legal spaces resulted in a number of Sunni lawyers being detained and often tried. As one lawyer observed to me, the Al-Khalifa "don't care if justice is being served"[9] but rather were more concerned with maintaining control. In such a context, the challenge to legal decisions was seen as a challenge to the very sovereignty of the state. Here, as Agamben observes, juridical processes are fundamental to the operation of the biopolitical machinery of the state. Dissenting voices are removed from the judicial system. Moreover, the judiciary is structured in such a way that enshrines sectarian discrimination and, additionally, reinforces the sovereign power and political ordering of Bahrain. Fundamentally, as one lawyer told me, "security is about everything here".[10]

6.3 Regional Counter-Revolutions

As noted earlier, the events of 2011 in Bahrain took place within a broader set of protest movements across the region while the response of the Al-Khalifa was also conditioned by broader geopolitical concerns amongst its key allies, notably Saudi Arabia. While decisions about emergency laws and the implementation of governance strategies designed to regulate – and eviscerate – all forms of protest from political life were taken by the Al-Khalifa, these were in some ways contingent upon broader security concerns in Riyadh about rising Iranian influence across the region and the possible repercussions for Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a population. Thus, the Al-Khalifa's response to the protests was conditioned not only by their own security concerns but also by those of their more powerful neighbour. This resulted in an almost palpable sense of concern about Riyadh "turning off the [economic] tap".[11]

Amidst this disparity in power between the two states, Bahrain's uprisings were positioned within broader Saudi concerns about rising Iranian influence and demands for greater democratic rights – indeed Saudi Arabia experienced its own 'Day of Rage', albeit attended by only one individual. For strategists in Saudi Arabia, these concerns are particularly prevalent amongst Shi'a groups, with a long history of unrest in the Eastern Province perceived to be incited or inspired by events in Iran (Matthiesen 2014). Similarly, unrest and instability amongst the Baharna in neighbouring Bahrain was viewed as a security threat to the Saudi state, as was increased Iranian involvement.

Central to the actions of the regime and their Saudi backers was the suggestion of Iranian involvement in the protests. Although BICI found "no evidence" of Iranian support for or involvement in the protests, this claim was quickly refuted by the king, senior officials and others involved in Bahraini affairs, including the British ambassador (BICI, 2011). This involvement was alleged to have taken place in a range of different guises, from direct support to protesters – with obvious parallels drawn to support given to the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain – to the involvement of Hizballah agents to provide training to protesters.[12] Other officials were more forthcoming in their allegations. For Khalid bin Ahmad, the Defence Minister, the protesters were "a conspiracy involving Iran with the support of the United States" aimed at challenging

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[9] Interview with Bahraini lawyer, phone October 2019.
[10] Interview with Bahraini lawyer, phone, October 2019.
[11] Interview with Bahraini businessmen, Manama, 2014.
[12] Interview with embassy staff, Manama, 2013.

Arab welfare (Gengler 2011). Moreover, officials involved in the Peninsula Shield Force declared that there was "no doubt" about Iranian involvement in the protests (Bronner and Slackman 2011). The commander of the Peninsula Shield Force, Mutlaq bin Salem al-Azima, proclaimed that the goal of the mission was to "secure Bahrain's vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference" (Asharq Al-Awsat 2011). The actions of the force are viewed in contrasting ways by those loyal to the regime and those who opposed it, with the former claiming that the troops did little but protect key strategic sites and were prohibited from entering Manama, while the latter argue that GCC troops were involved in the repression of protesters.[13]

The speed of the Saudi response to the uprisings in Bahrain, coupled with comments from key officials and internal reports reveals a great deal about Riyadh's fears of increased Shi'a – and Iranian – influence across Bahrain. Moreover, pressure from Saudi Arabia to withdraw the Crown Prince from front line politics, and to prevent the emergence of an elected second chamber in Bahrain demonstrates the level of influence wielded by Riyadh over its neighbour, particularly over security matters. A Saudi intelligence report detailed a strategy to deal with possible unrest in Bahrain, driven by the selection of officials "in a way that would be in line with the Kingdom's interest and exclude any Shiite influence in the projects it presents to Bahrain" (Bahrain Mirror 2015). Similarly, support was removed from key officials and members of the royal family who were seen to go against the vision set out by Riyadh.

7. Conclusions

The actions of the Al-Khalifa and their supporters in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain have had a devastating impact on political life across the state, eviscerating all forms of opposition. On a human level, over 800 people have had their nationality revoked, while space for political discussion and debate has been eroded. In doing this, the Bahraini state has embarked on a counter-revolutionary process designed to ensure the survival of its ruling family at the expense of its people, notably those from Shi'a backgrounds.

Over Bahrain's post-independence history, it is easy to see how the ruling family has sought to deploy various technologies of biopolitical power in pursuit of its own survival, most evidently underpinned through the formal declaration of a state of exception. Yet the formal declaration of a state of exception helped create a new paradigm of government and a metaphysical camp that allowed individuals could be abandoned into bare life even without a formal declaration of a state of emergency.

In the formative decades of independence these technologies of power were used as anti-revolution-revolutionary mechanisms of control, yet as protests gathered pace, the biopolitical machinery of the state designed to enforce the Al-Khalifa's sovereign power took on new counter-revolutionary meaning, with devastating consequences for opponents of the regime. Yet while the Al-Khalifa's actions were driven by a desire to retain power, they should be viewed within the context of broader regional dynamics and, perhaps, as a form of nestled sovereignty. Here, a broader counter revolutionary effort led by Saudi Arabia and aimed at preventing Iranian gains across the region was central in ensuring the survival of the Al-Khalifa at the expense of the demands of the Bahraini population.

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[13] Interview with Sunni Bahraini, Manama, May 2013.

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