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## ACTIVISM AND NATIONALISM AMONG THE THIRD BAHRAINI WAVE OF EXILE

### **Abstract**

A decade after the 2001 royal amnesty, when the first two waves of leftist then Islamist exiles came back to Bahrain, the 2011 uprising marked a “third” phase in the history of Bahraini outmigration and exile politics. The brutal repression of the protest movement led to a new wave of political exile which affected a wider range of socio-economic profiles; moreover, 2011 saw the emergence of a new generation of Bahraini activists, born and raised in Western countries. This paper focuses on the Bahraini exiled community and its forms of distance activism. Defining it first as mainly political, it seeks to show how legacies of Bahrain exile have contributed to provide international resources to continue the political fight at times of domestic closure. Second, it demonstrates how the regime, following the 2011 crisis, tried to delegitimize the diasporic opposition by appropriating its human rights discourse and excluding it from the nation.



### THE ARAB SPRING'S ECHO IN THE DIASPORA: LOCATING THE BAHRAINI CASE

While Arab masses took to the streets in 2010–2011 in what has since come to be known as the ‘Arab Spring,’ migrants of Arab origin started, in parallel, to organize and mobilize in their host societies, in order to be part of what they felt was an historic moment. Regardless of their political results, the Arab revolutions have had an undeniable impact on Arab communities abroad, giving momentum and inspiration to political mobilizations in Europe, North and South America, whose extent and visibility were unprecedented.

The Bahrainis abroad also expressed solidarity with the popular uprising that started on 14 February 2011 on the Pearl roundabout. Yet, contrary to other Arab countries, the Bahraini overseas community is rather small and presents some peculiarities. Apart from the Bahrainis working in other GCC countries,<sup>1</sup> Bahrain,

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as a country with high GDP/capita,<sup>2</sup> has known no structural flows of economic migrants to the West or the Americas. As a result, in 2011, when the crisis erupted, Bahrain's community abroad was prominently made up of students enrolled in higher education and a handful long-time political exiles.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the Bahraini government's long history of exiling political opponents, most of the political exiles had benefited from a general amnesty, granted in 2001 by the new ruler, King Hamad, two years after his ascent to power. Most of the Bahraini opposition residing abroad for thirty to forty years, decided at this point to come back to the newly proclaimed Kingdom of Bahrain. London, however, as the exile base of one prominent opponent, Saeed al-Shehabi, who refused the conditions of return and placed no trust in the ability of the Khalifa monarchy to reform itself, remained a focal point for the opposition to the Bahraini regime: throughout the 2000s, opponents circulated freely between the British capital and the Gulf island. In February 2011, for instance, Hassan al-Mushaima, one of the opposition leaders from *al-haq* movement, addressed crowds gathered in the Pearl Roundabout, via Internet on giant screens, from London where he was receiving medical treatment. He returned to Bahrain on 26 February 2011 and called a month later "for the regime's downfall through a peaceful escalation of protests and the establishment of a democratic republic."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, most of the second generation of exiles, born and raised in the West as bi-nationals, also came back with their parents or settled in the island country in the 2000s during the process of economic reforms and political change, cultivating a double culture.<sup>5</sup>

In 2011, in a nutshell, Bahrain's opposition possessed a significant legacy of political exile that had started during the British colonial era while simultaneously composed of a rather limited community abroad.<sup>6</sup> The 2011 political uprising and the brutal repression, with which it was met, in particular during the State Security Law between March and July 2011, undoubtedly marked a new phase in the history of Bahraini outmigration. Unlike other Arab countries, where the fall of authoritarian regimes under popular protest created the conditions for the return of opposition and nationals, the resilience of the Bahraini regime, supported by its Gulf neighbors, created the conditions for a new wave of political exile.<sup>7</sup>

This paper takes a broad perspective on the history of political exile from Bahrain in order to understand to what extent this new wave built upon or broke with the hitherto existing forms of political activities abroad, specifically in light of the 2011 uprising. It maps and explores the nature of the relations between the Bahraini exiled community and the resources offered by the Western host environment, particularly the United Kingdom. Field research conducted among Bahraini in the United Kingdom shows that several decades of exile helped build advocacy resources to sustain the political fight when domestic politics are confiscated. In particular, it looks at the international networks of human rights activists mobilized in the West by a new bi-national generation of opponents. Second, this paper analyzes the post-2011 regime's tactics of delegitimizing these resources by casting distance or international activism as disloyalty, competing with the opposition on the themes of reforms and human rights records and trying to exclude exiles from the nation.

To tackle these questions, the paper first discusses ways to define the Bahraini community abroad, arguing that it qualifies as a community of political exiles. In the second part, it retraces the long history of exile, which was used by the regime to regulate political conflict and dealing with anti-monarchical movements in Bahrain. This demonstrates how the legacies inherited by the new generation of activists, in particular the bi-nationals, have opened a new way of doing politics that complement direct opposition on the island by providing a media and associative platform. In the last section, the paper analyzes the government's reaction to the crisis and to the peculiar form taken by the political fight abroad: as the 2011 crisis functioned as a loyalty test it provoked a new wave of exile, sociologically broader, with a clear line on the part of the regime to outcast and exclude opponents from the nation and cast the exile communities as treacherous. The paper concludes that both the legacy of exile activism and the kind of human rights militancy it initiated on the island created the conditions for a new types of Bahraini activist networks, which more fully connect the local, exilic and international levels.

#### DIASPORA VS. POLITICAL EXILE: THE IN AND OUT MOVES OF THE BAHRAIN EXILES

Academics have tended to offer definitions of "diaspora" that have been more and more inclusive. Despite this tendency "towards re-

naming as diasporas the more recent communities of dispersion, those that were formed in the five centuries of the modern era and which were known by other names until the late 1960s: as exile groups, overseas communities, ethnic and racial minorities, and so forth,"<sup>8</sup> Bahrainis abroad barely qualify as a diaspora.<sup>9</sup> They do not claim the title for themselves, preferring the term of *manfiyyun* in Arabic, which translates literally to 'political exiles.' Analyzing this post-1960s enthusiasm for the particularism embodied by diasporas against the backdrop of the previous period of the triumphant nation-state that rendered people dispersed as suspicious, Dominique Schnapper notes "the concept [of diaspora] loses its explanatory power if it is applied to any dispersion of population that is temporary, instable, precarious or 'floating.'"<sup>10</sup>

The dispersion of Bahrainis is certainly of this latter kind: contrary to ethnic minorities such as Armenians, Kurds, or Jews, who were obliged to flee in large migratory movement, and to diasporic groups like the Lebanese and Chinese, who sought better economic opportunities abroad, the Bahrainis have consistently quitted their island mainly for political reasons. The sectarian composition of the exiles has changed over time: the Arab nationalist leaders and communists stemming mostly from urban educated Sunnites in the 1960s shifted to the majority Shiites with the politicization of the villages along religious lines in the 1980s–1990s. Furthermore, the dispersion of opponents has rarely been permanent, with history of return to the country: for instance, the three leaders of the 1956 movement, imprisoned in Saint Helena's British jail, were released in 1961 under the pressure from the British public opinion.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, in 2001, the newly proclaimed King Hamad made a political gesture to mark his rise to the throne and give legitimacy to his measures of political liberalization, by integrating the former exiles. Apart from a few individuals in London, all the Bahraini exiles chose to benefit from the General Amnesty of 2001. When asked about the motives that drove their decision to return, former exiles replied that the question made no sense to them, as staying in the asylum country was not considered an option. In the words of one returnee who left his academic position in Cambridge: "The question of the return should not be asked in terms of it being worthwhile or not: you have to go back to your country. Nobody wants to stay abroad."<sup>12</sup>

This desire to return is what essentially differentiates the exile from any other kind of migration or diaspora, as defined by Hamid Naficy: it affects both the relationships that exiles maintain with their home and establish with their host countries.<sup>13</sup> The exiles long to return to their country; they live physically in one place but mentally in another. This leads us to a third characteristic of the dispersed Bahrainis: even as they became rooted in host countries they retained strong links to their country of origin. For example, Laurence Louer, writing about the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM, or IBFM in the quote below), a 1980s anti-Khalifa Shiite movement created and based in London, notes:

despite its physical removal from Bahrain, the IBFM succeeded in keeping in constant with the opposition at home. This was another of its achievements: contrary to many exiled movements, [. . .], the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement succeeded in continuing to be legitimate in the eyes of the opponents who remained at home and in coordinating with them. The task was especially difficult because charismatic leaders were among the insiders who had remained in Bahrain. The fact that the IBFM enjoyed a family link to the insiders probably facilitated the maintenance of the political tie.<sup>14</sup>

As the case study of the BFM demonstrates, exile is a form of emigration that is not accompanied by the objective of or efforts towards long-term assimilation in the host country. Since 2001, the majority of the exiles' children returned to the island, even those whose parents wished to stay abroad, preventing more integration. Yet, as will be shown below, the exiles acquired a wealth of experience in terms of advocacy during their time abroad. In the words of Murtadha Badr, a former activist of a radical movement who was elected in 2002 at the head of Manama municipal council, the exiles, unlike detainees, have learnt abroad the importance of the media and public relations: "they brought the problems of Bahrain to the world's attention."<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Bahrainis, then, the community abroad is better described as a community of political exiles. This aligns with Yossi Shain's definition of expatriates "as political exiles if they engage in political activities directed against the policies of a home regime,

against the regime itself, or against the political system as a whole, so as to create circumstances favorable to their return.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to highlight that the exiles strive to overpower the Bahraini existing government without challenging the existence of the nation-state and its geopolitical boundaries. Insular identity prevails among Bahraini exiles, although, historically, Bahrainis have spread along the eastern shores of the Arabian Peninsula. The reference to a Golden Age of Greater Bahrain (*al Bahrayn al kubra*) that included both the *Bahama*, that is Arab Shiites, and the Shiites of the now Saudi Eastern Province serves as a claim of autochthony to delegitimize the Khalifa monarchy that came in 1783 from Zubara, in present day Qatar.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the political struggle of Bahraini exiles concentrates on the established nation-state. However, the 2011 crisis has slightly broadened the composition of the Bahraini community abroad.

In this sense, the Bahraini case raises the question of how diasporas are formed. Scheffer has shown that diasporas evolve over time and can even be extinguished.<sup>18</sup> Van Hear looks more precisely at the two ways in which a diasporic community evolves: either through “accretion, emerging as a result of ‘voluntary’ or routine migration” or alternatively, through “crisis, involving coercion, catastrophe, expulsion or other forcible movement resulting from conflict or persecution.”<sup>19</sup> Bahrainis clearly belong to the second category: the 2011 crisis illustrates the dispersion of opponents between those who sought safety in Iraq, Iran or Lebanon—undocumented in this research—and those who went further in the West. This shows that there is clearly “a hierarchy of destinations that can be reached by migrants and asylum seekers, according to the resources—financial and network-based—that they can call upon” but also according to the legal conditions of visa granting or, possibly, ideological orientations owing to the antagonism between Iran and the West.<sup>20</sup> The tradition of exile enabled many new politically motivated migrants to go to the United Kingdom, where a Bahrain presence already existed.

Although it is too early to tell if the different waves of political exiles could amount to a diaspora, the Bahrainis abroad offer an interesting case to study how certain actors or organizations are forming the national community abroad, demonstrating how the dispersed group establish transnational relations and networks to exert influence upon their countries of origin. Benedict Anderson

posits that the attraction of distance nationalism is linked to the effects of migration, triggering identity awareness and questioning of the ethnic-based vision of receiving countries that marginalize migrants.<sup>21</sup> This paper explores the hypothesis that distance-nationalism is being engineered by nationalist entrepreneurs in response to exclusion from the national body politic.

The literature on diaspora has often noted the negative role played by political exiles and diasporas in their host and home countries, who are seen as meddling in the domestic politics in an irresponsible way. Exiles have a reputation for exacerbating and prolonging sectarian violence and conflict without bearing the cost of it,<sup>22</sup> or in case of externally-led regime change, trying to promote themselves as right interlocutors for dealing with countries in transition, as was the case in post-2003 Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Diasporic efforts and actions are often portrayed as self-interested and removed from grounded realities.<sup>24</sup> Yet the recent crisis adds just a new page to the history, leading us to slightly qualify the extent to which diasporic communities are a thing apart. Bahrain exiles maintain strong ties to the home country and these relations also shape the vision of the nation and the political strategies towards domestic issues. To do so, they use the resources available to them in the liberal democracies, in particular the United Kingdom, resorting to MP lobbying, media platforms, judicial procedures, and creating NGOs. Contrary to the assumption made by Anderson, the Bahrainis are a marginal tiny community, however, because they stem from a rich GCC country, they are not stigmatized the way that poor economic migrants such as Yemenis often are.<sup>25</sup>

This study is based on a long-running interest in the Bahraini exile community that led the author to conduct fieldwork in Bahrain in 2008 among *returnees*, and later to revisit the issue in the light of the 2011 events by conducting interviews in London in January and June 2014. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their self-identification as main leaders or founders of political movements or activists in exile. In order to understand both the conditions which lead Bahrainis to leave the country and their activist activities abroad, this study analyzes original data derived from interviews with sixteen Bahraini activists in London. These activists and their organizations mobilized in the wake of the Arab Spring and remained active abroad. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with the exception of one, which took place via

Skype. Of the total number of activists interviewed, six had been forced to flee or expatriate from their home countries during the revolutions fearing for their security, while three were already in exile, and four were denaturalized.<sup>26</sup> Seven individuals were engaged in overt political activities, including three former members of Parliament, with only two advocating anti-regime positions even prior to the 2011 rupture.

## THE LEGACIES OF EXILE: FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE OTHER

### *The First Two Waves of Political Exiles*

Peculiar among the Gulf States, the Bahraini regime has had a long tradition of dealing with political opposition through deportation, entry denial to its own nationals and exile, as “a regulatory mechanism for political systems unable to create pluralistic and inclusive models of participation.”<sup>27</sup> This is partly a legacy of the British colonial rule, which offered the possibility to send dissidents to various parts of the Empire.<sup>28</sup> As a consequence, the British banned, for instance, opposing figures of the royal families unwilling to submit to the rule of British-supported sheikh, the leaders of the movement protesting against the high rate of Indian employment in the public administration and the discrepancy in salaries, sent to Bombay,<sup>29</sup> or the leaders of the Nationalist liberal movement from 1953–56.<sup>30</sup>

In the post-independence period there were two main waves of exiles up until the 2011 uprising: the Marxist and Arab nationalist movements of the 1960s–70s and the Shiite Islamist currents of the 1980–90s. The clandestine leftist opposition was divided between the pan-Arab Popular Front for the liberation of Bahrain, associated with the Arab Nationalist Movement and the liberation of the Trucial Coast and the Arabian Peninsula and the Marxist-leaning National Front for the Liberation of Bahrain. Most of their members left Bahrain between 1965, marking a great strike movement, and 1975, the end of the parliamentary experience (1973–1975). These individuals usually found refuge in South Yemen, and later Lebanon and Syria. Damascus constituted the center of leftist opposition, as the policy of the Arab Syrian Republic was to grant visa exemption to any national of an Arab country. As a result, exiled opponents came to Damascus from as diverse countries as Bahrain or Palestine.



After the repression of the leftist opposition and the diminishing attraction of the socialist projects, the main opposition to the Khalifa rule came from the Islamist revival that affected the whole region. This resistance found its root in the Shiite village's opposition to the Khalifa's feudal system, which was demanding reform from the British colonial administration in the 1920s. Shiite political Islam gave Shiite villages' movements a new thrust. Two Shiite currents ought to be differentiated on their theoretical and theological premises, namely Shiraziyyin and the *al-Dawa* sympathizers, as analyzed by Laurence Louer.<sup>31</sup> These two currents would form the second wave of emigration. Among them, the Shiraziyyin, supportive of the 1979 Iranian revolution, advocated a radical and confrontational strategy with the regime. Accused of fomenting a coup in December 1981, they were severely repressed and sought refuge in Canada or Scandinavian countries.<sup>32</sup> One prominent figure of the movement deserves particular attention: Abdul-Hadi al Khawaja, a member of the Shirazi group, was the one to first adopt a human rights-based approach. Khawaja fled to Damascus before heading to Denmark in 1989, where he was granted asylum and nationality in 1992; in both places, he established organizations denouncing arbitrary detentions, torture, unfair trial, nationality stripping and forced deportation.

The other group of Shiite exiles stemmed from the *al-Dawa* party. Founded in 1972, *al-Dawa* provided most of the religious MPs in the short-lived parliament of 1973–1975. Just as Damascus was the focal point of the left in exile, London became the center of exiled political Islam in the West, be they Sunnite like the Tunisian movement al-Nahda,<sup>33</sup> or Shiite, like the members of the Iraqi *al-Dawa*.<sup>34</sup> In the 1980s, Saeed al-Shehabi, Majdi al Alawi and Mansour al-Jamri—the latter being the son of a major Bahraini Shiite cleric formed in Najaf and elected MP in 1973—founded the Bahrain Freedom Movement or BFM (*harakat al-Ahrar al-Bahrayn al-Islamiyya*). As seen above, this movement managed to keep close relations with the 1990s uprising in Bahrain to the extent that exiled leaders of the intifada movement joined London in January 1995.

As the new Sheikh Hamad re-opened part of the domestic political sphere in 1999 with promises of reform and political liberalization, and with the subsequent return of the majority of Bahraini exiles to their homeland, exile politics naturally receded. Only those who kept a line of no-compromise with the Khalifa's

monarchy remained in exile; among them was Saeed al Shehabi. As the process of reform gradually disappointed the returned opposition, the London opposition center regained some attraction, especially for the members of the movement—*al haq* and *Wafa'a*—who refused the participation in the 2006 elections on the basis that the bicameralism set up by the 2002 Constitution was beneath the promises of reinstating the 1973 Parliament. In 2010, the latter three movements jointly called for the boycott of the parliamentary elections. During the 2011 crisis, they were the ones that formed the “coalition for a republic” in Bahrain calling for the fall of the regime on 8 March 2011.<sup>35</sup>

### *Mobilizations of the Second Generation*

As the opposition leaders who openly called for a regime change were arrested and sentenced for life, a new generation took up the fight. This second generation included, but was not limited to, Ali al-Mushaima, son of the leader of *al-haq* who sentenced to life in prison; Ala'a al-Shehabi, daughter of the head of the London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement; and the prominent figures of the Bahraini struggle, Maryam and Zeynab al Khawaja, daughters of the founder of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights. Maryam al Khawaja took over the co-direction of the Centre and became its international face. Legacies of exile paved the way for the coming to the front of this new generation.

Throughout the 1990s, the Bahraini exiles had taken their political struggle abroad onto the ground of the defense of universal Human Rights, which coincided in the UK with the launching of the ‘ethical Foreign Policy’ by the Labor Party. Ala'a al-Shehabi and Luke Bathia show how this adoption of the universal discourse was part of a genuine tactic to keep in the political fight at a time when political demands of justice and reforms towards power sharing had been dropped.<sup>36</sup> Two institutions were of particular importance: the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM). The BCHR was created by Abdulhadi al-Khawaja and has been operating underground since 2004, when the regime decided to close it in response to Khawaja's denunciation of corruption and poverty in the kingdom. The Centre has trained the new generation of young Bahrainis in abuse reporting, campaigns calling and reaching out to an international audience as ways of empowerment. The second organization, the

BFM, also professionalized its operations, releasing press statements, organizing demonstrations, lobbying for MPs, and advocating human rights. One notable example of this work is the *Voice of Bahrain* website, which is published in both Arabic and English, and posts regular reports on the human rights abuses carried out by the Bahraini government.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the 2011 crisis, a new generation of Bahrainis entered into public activism. This new generation is familiar with the two countries, Bahrain and the host country, having spent time in both, especially after the 2001 general amnesty. The uprising, and even more the brutal repression with which it was met in the first half of 2011, were *catalyzing events*, facilitating the new generation's entry into politics by creating an urgent need to act. It struck most of the former political exiles at the very heart of their families. "The families were transformed because of the experience of repression" says a Bahraini activist born abroad.<sup>38</sup> The exile conditions made possible a multiplication of NGOs, created after the 2011 crisis by children of exiles, together with exiles but also with nationals sympathetic to the cause.<sup>39</sup> Of utmost importance, as compared to former activist techniques of lobbying, is the new involvement of support emanating from a young generation of Western activists.<sup>40</sup>

In a sense, the new generation's education in the West, which included mastering its legal rules and cultural symbols, blurred the lines of the Bahraini social hierarchies. While the political and economic elite of Bahrain used to visit the former colonial power as a sign of distinction, the familiarity with British and European capitals' functioning is now shared with the descendants of exiles. The involvement of second-generation exiles in the political struggle has triggered, in an unforeseen manner, class struggles and competition over social distinction in home and host societies. Exile opposition could even sue royals deemed untouchable on the island. For instance, in October 2014, a Bahraini who was granted asylum in the United Kingdom obtained a court decision stating that the son of the King of Bahrain, educated in Sandhurst and frequently travelling to the UK, did not enjoy state immunity from prosecution over torture claim.<sup>41</sup> This established that even an offense committed outside of the country can still be prosecuted in the UK.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as part of the generation associated with the Arab Spring, the second generation is linked with the emerging youth groups active during the 2011 Arab uprisings, like the

Egyptian jailed blogger Ala'a Abdel Fattah, or other movements in Tunisia.<sup>43</sup>

However, on the governmental side, the discourse of human rights has also been adopted since the 2011 crisis as part of the well-theorized resilience of authoritarianism.<sup>44</sup> This was obvious in the adoption by the King of the conclusions of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) inquiring into the violations of human rights during the State of Emergency period. As a result, the same generation of Bahrainis who remained broadly loyal to the home regime but seek to appropriate the narrative of victimization in order to gain power resources also appropriated the discourse of human rights' defense, endeavoring to obtain recognition for their efficiency and just cause at the international level.

#### THE UPRISING AS A NATIONAL LOYALTY TEST

In a sense, the 2011 crisis was merely the latest event in a tradition of exile groups' activities that try to obtain a form of participation in the state and share power with the existing regime. Dufoix argues that democratic transitions are among the few instances of political changes when the meaning of distance, border and citizenship ties can evolve. At this time, the new definition of national unity through the<sup>45</sup> different modes of designating the nation's representatives meets the concerns of migrants and exiles—even though these might be little more than symbolic measures, rather than actual or significant public policies for overseas nationals. Arguably, the failed 2011 attempt to open the regime through the pressure of popular mobilization shifted the meanings of border, distance and citizenship. Yet in this case, because of the botched democratic change and the prevalence of the counter-revolution, distance was recast in terms of loyalty, in a very polarizing way. This part seeks to address the question of how the national bond was redefined.

#### *Exclusion from the Nation: Deportation and Self-Imposed Exile*

The significance of the 2011 political events and the subsequent repression shaped out-migration insofar as it affected a wider range of socio-professional profiles, as a form of punishment.<sup>46</sup> In addition to clearly-identified political opponents,<sup>47</sup> the 2011 repression also targeted socio-professional classes or socio-professional bodies,

such as the Bahrain Teachers Association,<sup>48</sup> medics from the Salmaniyya hospital, journalists, and in the end, sportsmen.<sup>49</sup> Mass dismissals for absence in the workplace during the protest or the fear of arrest also prompted Bahrainis to leave the country.<sup>50</sup> As shown by Stephane Dufoix, “the struggle between partisans and adversaries of the [regime fled in exile] is such as to result in the necessary choice between one or the other friend or foe.”<sup>51</sup> The middle way is a difficult one to hold, especially since the crisis triggered a polarizing logic along the lines of loyalty and treason.

### *De-legitimization, Denaturalization and Statelessness*

The crisis led the regime, threatened in its survival, to redefine the boundary of citizenship in terms of loyalty and disloyalty, often cast in sectarian terms.<sup>52</sup> The BICI report documents the way people who were suspected supporters of the popular mobilization were punished. As mentioned above, 4,507 employees were dismissed on the basis of their absence from work, involvement in the demonstrations or in union related to the demonstrations, and for civil servants, public display of opinions incompatible with the internal regulations of the ministries.<sup>53</sup> This not only triggered departure in exile, but also worked as a way to delegitimize the activities of exiled Bahrainis. Many Bahrainis, in particular the journalists, who fled abroad, set up new activities to counter the government narrative of the crisis. As two of them stated: “we needed political, media, Human Rights channels to explain the topic [of the 2011 crisis] and to defend our vision.”<sup>54</sup> Several new media run by the exiled Bahraini were created, among them, the Bahrain Mirror, a news website based in Lebanon; and *Lulu’a* TV, close to the *Wefaq* line—the main Shiite inside opposition party adept of a reformist strategy—which broadcasts from London’s suburb.<sup>55</sup> The latter’s content defines the nation as encompassing the emigres in an attempt to cement the community abroad and counter the narrow definition circulated by the regime.<sup>56</sup>

Yossi Shain writes that “the home regime may impair exiles’ operational activities and undermine their claim to political legitimacy by branding them as disloyal and in effect no longer citizens.”<sup>57</sup> He points also at the fact that retraction of citizenship is often accompanied by massive propaganda. In Bahrain, rocked by violence in peripheral village areas, denaturalization has been

linked to the issue of state's security and later to the ill-defined term of "terrorism." In July 2014, the two chambers of Parliament voted 22 measures reinforcing the anti-terrorism legal arsenal; of these, the second one allowed citizenship revocation of "those who carry out terrorist crimes and their instigators."<sup>58</sup> The law was applied immediately on 6 August 2014 against nine individuals, and on a larger scale against seventy-two in January 2015.<sup>59</sup> Most importantly, this measure followed a first batch of denaturalization decided by the Ministry of Interior in November 2012, when thirty-one prominent opposition members were accused of "damaging state security." This group included several foreign-based activists, as well as MPs like Jalal and Jawad Fayrouz. By the end of 2015, as many as 208 persons had been denaturalized, leaving entire families vulnerable to deportation and in search for national sponsors or *kafil*.<sup>60</sup>

Bi-nationals were also the objects of suspicion. Bahrain allows individuals to hold dual citizenship only under particular circumstances: Article 9 of the Citizenship Law of 1963 obliges any individual who has been willingly naturalized by a foreign state without prior permission from the Interior Minister to, within six months, either forfeit the foreign citizenship or submit an application to the minister for permission to retain this citizenship. In April 2012, the government of Bahrain advertised the toughening of measures against bi-nationals who had not notified their second nationality and urged them to regularize their legal status with the Ministry of Interior. The latter stated that it found "some Bahraini citizens holding foreign nationalities were using their status to protect themselves from legal or civil pursuits after they commit acts that jeopardize security and civil peace and that are punishable by law."<sup>61</sup>

The various waves of exile play an important role, since some Bahraini exiles and core opponents acquired European citizenship: two political opponents from what has become to be known as "the Bahrain Thirteen" were sentenced to prison for life for advocating a regime change were nationals of Scandinavian countries. Abdulhadi al Khawaja, veteran human rights defender is a Dane and the Shiite cleric Muhammad Habib al Miqdad is a Swede. The dual citizenship creates diplomatic strains and offers new judicial means for their release by raising citizen's questions to MPs in national parliaments or in the European Parliament. Despite

the general rule according to which “many political exiles refrain from acquiring new national identity [. . .] and minimize the perception of [the acquiring of foreign citizenships] as renunciation of their former national commitment,”<sup>62</sup> the long-exiled Bahrainis have used their bi-nationality in their struggle against the regime, by keeping a certain form of mobility in and out the kingdom island.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of “diaspora” has been extensively debated as for its evolving meaning. Yet more often than not, the existence of diasporas is posited as a self-evident fact, its process of formation unquestioned. This is understandable as a way to avoid predictive approach. Complementing Van Hear’s work on “refugee diasporas,” which are formed from both economic migration and conflict-induced population movements, this paper took a broad look at the history of political exile from Bahrain in order to trace the way trajectories of post-2011 exiles and of second-generation activism built upon previous waves of exile.<sup>63</sup>

Although Bahrainis are better described as political exiles rather than a traditional diaspora, this study highlighted how while Bahraini exile politics in the previous decades had mainly evolved around revolutionary Marxist and, in the West, Shiite political identity, the actions of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ activists have taken new and original forms that built on the earlier presence. Exile organizations have constituted the focal points of continuity through which the very community of Bahrain abroad, defined by its opposition to the Khalifa monarchy, could take shape. The paper also showed that, as part of its counter-revolution tactic, the regime tried to fight the exiled opposition by excluding it from the nation, and thus symbolically suppressing it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bahraini workers started to work in Saudi oilfields in Aramco and for the Tapline in the 1950s and early 1960s. Others also migrated to Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, and Dubai in the early 1960s to work as teachers, oil fields, or in the government administration. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the trend continued towards the UAE, with scores of politically active Bahrainis living the island for work and safety reasons. Nowadays,

educated Bahrainis find better employment opportunities in neighboring Qatar.

<sup>2</sup> According to the World Bank, the GDP/capita in Bahrain was 25,198 USD in 2014, comparable with that of Portugal at 22,080 USD. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>

<sup>3</sup> The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) gives an idea of the number of mobilized students: “Beginning in February 2011, a number of Bahraini students studying at universities abroad had their scholarships revoked. On 27 May 2011, the MoE reinstated all 97 of them.” BICI, final Revision of 10 December 2011, 357. <http://www.bici.org.bh/BICireportEN.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group, *Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (VIII): Bahrain’s Rocky Road to Reform*, Middle East/North Africa report, no. 111, 28 July 2011, 2.

<sup>5</sup> This is the case of the two prominent human rights activists, daughters of Abdul- Hadi al Khawaja, Maryam and Zeynab, but also of Ala’a al Shehabi, whose father stayed in the UK in 2001, yet who decided after her studies to settle in Bahrain. Personal interview, 10 January 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Zoe Holman, “On the Side of Decency and Democracy: the History of British-Bahraini Relations and Transnational Contestation” in *Bahrain’s Uprising: Resistance and Repression in the Gulf*, ed. Ala’a Shehabi and Marc Owen Jones (London: Zed Books, 2015), 175–206.

<sup>7</sup> In Tunisia, for instance, the future first President of the Republic during the Democratic transition, Moncef Marzouki, a doctor practicing in France, and the leader of the Islamist party Ennahda, Rashid Ghannouchi, who was granted asylum in London in 1990, both returned in Tunis within a week of the fall of the President Ben Ali in January 2011. This was also the case of the Libyan exiles who came back to share in the political transition.

<sup>8</sup> Khachig Tölölyan, “Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment,” *Diaspora: a Journal of Transnational Studies*, 5, no. 1 (1996): 3.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete discussion of the usages of the term “diaspora,” see Lisa Anteby-Yemini, William Berthomiere, and Gabriel Sheffer, *Les Diasporas, 2000 Ans d’Histoire* (Rennes, FR: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005); Rainer Bauböck and Thomas Faist, *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories and Methods* (Amsterdam, NE: Amsterdam University Press: 2010); Stephane Dufoix, *La Dispersion: Une Histoire des Usages du Mot Diaspora* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2011); Nina Glick-Schiller, in “Diaspora,” ed. Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember, and Ian A. Skoggard, *Encyclopedia of Diasporas* (New York: Springer, 2004), 570–80; and Dominique Schnapper and Chantal Bordes-Benayoun, *Les Mots des Diasporas* (Toulouse, FR: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2008).



<sup>10</sup> Dominique Schnapper, "De l'État-Nation au Monde Transnational. Du Sens et de l'Utilité du Concept de Diaspora," *Revue Européenne de Migrations Internationales*, 17 no. 2 (2001): 31.

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Joyce, "The Bahraini Three On St. Helena, 1956–1961" *The Middle East Journal*, 54 no. 4 (2000): 622.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Manama, March 2008. The intention to return is confirmed by the fact that some of the former leftists tried an early return at the beginning of the 1990s, hoping to benefit from the detente that resulted globally from the end of the Cold War and regionally from the liberation of Kuwait. But the majority of those who tried their luck were put in custody at the airport and deported to a rather new destination, the Emirates, where they usually start anew and gave up political activities. Interview with Hassan Madan, head of the Min bar Progressive Democratic Society at the time of the interview, the heir to the Marxist-leaning underground National Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, Manama, 4 April 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Exile Discourse," in *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993), 1–31.

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst, 2008), 203.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, Manama, April 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Yossi Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty: Political Exiles in the Age of the Nation-State*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics. At Home Abroad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Nicholas Van Hear, *Migration: A COMPAS Anthology*, ed. B. Anderson and M. Keith, COMPAS, Oxford, 2014; Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities* (London: UCL Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Van Hear, *Migration: A COMPAS Anthology*; Nicholas Van Hear, "The Rise of Refugee Diasporas," *Current History*, 108 (2009): 717.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict Anderson, "Long Distance Nationalism," in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998), 58–74.

<sup>22</sup> Jolle Demmers, "Diaspora and Conflict: Locality, Long Distance Nationalism and Delocalization of Conflict Dynamics," *The Public* 9 no. 1 (2001): 85–96; Yossi Shain, "The Role of Diasporas in Conflict Perpetuation or Resolution" *SAIS Review*, 22 no. 2 (2002): 115–144. For the work of lobbies and vanguard organizations affecting the domestic policies of their host countries, see John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt,

*The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London : Pluto Press, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> This detachment is a main point made by Anderson, noting the lack of accountability of the diaspora. See Anderson, "Long Distance Nationalism."

<sup>25</sup> Fred Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community* (London: 1B Tauris, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> It would be interesting in further research to assess the impact of the denaturalization on the political activities.

<sup>27</sup> Mario Sznajder and Luis Roniger, *The Politics of Exile in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>28</sup> For more details of various deportations, see Claire Beaugrand, "In and Out Moves of the Bahraini Opposition: How Years of Political Exile Led to the Opening of an International Front during the 2011 Crisis in Bahrain" in *Transit States: Labour, Migration & Citizenship in the Gulf*, eds. Omar al Shehabi, Adam Hanieh and Abdulhadi Khalaf (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 289–322.

<sup>29</sup> Fuad Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 197–98.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce, "The Bahraini Three On St. Helen," 619. See also the memoirs of Abd-al Rahman al-Bakir, *Min Bahrain ila al Manfa* [*From Bahrain to Exile-Saint Helena*] (1965).

<sup>31</sup> Louer, *Transnational Shia Politics*.

<sup>32</sup> Hasan Tariq Alhasan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain," *The Middle East Journal* (Autumn 2011): 603–17.

<sup>33</sup> Two years after Ben Ali's *coup d'état*, the repression against Islamist movements intensified. Rashid Ghannouchi left the country in 1989, before the 1991 show trials accelerated the departure abroad of the rest of his party's cadre.

<sup>34</sup> Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent: Inside British Islam* (London: Hurst, 2014).

<sup>35</sup> For the conjunction of the movements in 2011, see Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Foreword: on the Prelude to 14 February Uprising," in *Bahrain's Uprising*, xiii–xvii.

<sup>36</sup> Ala'a Shehabi and Luke Bathia, "Shifting contours of activism and possibilities for justice in Bahrain," in *Bahrain's Uprising*, 93–134.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Saeed al-Shehabi, May 2008.

<sup>38</sup> Skype interview, 10 January 2014.

<sup>39</sup> European Bahraini Organisation for Human Rights (headquartered in Bern with members based in Sweden), Bahrain institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD), based in Dar al-Hekma, Bahrain Watch registered as a charity in London, the Bahrain Rehabilitation and Anti-Violence Organization, BRAVO, registered in Ireland. The American for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain should be singled out as an American pioneer: created in 2002 by Hussein Abdulla, it was registered as a non-profit organization in 2008 and works extremely efficiently through the American legal arcane.

<sup>40</sup> This is, for instance, the case of BahrainWatch's initiative, composed of academic-activists of mixed nationalities, most of them PhD students or holders, who gathered with the goal of establishing an "effective, transparent, and accountable governance for Bahrain.

<https://bahrainwatch.org>.

<sup>41</sup> Accessed 29 March 2016. <http://www.ft.com/intl/ems/s/0/b07d9af6-4e25-11e4-adfe-00144feab7de.html#axzz43CVORieT>.

<sup>42</sup> Jane Croft and Simeon Kerr, "Court Overturns Bahrain Prince's Immunity from Prosecution," *The Financial Times*, 7 October 2014,

<http://www.ft.com/intl/ems/s/0/b07d9af6-4e25-11e4-adfe-00144feab7de.html#axzz3nVx5njso>.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, 10 January 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Shehabi and Bathia, "Shifting Contours of Activism," 124–25. See also Michel Camau, "Remarques sur la Consolidation Autoritaire et ses Limites," in *L'autoritarisme dans le monde arabe*. Autour de Michel Camau, Luis Martinez, ed. Assia Boutaleb, Jean-Noel Ferrie, and Benjamin Rey (CEDEJ, Cairo, 2005), 9–51.

<sup>45</sup> Stephane Dufoix, "Un Pont Par-Dessus la Porte. Extraterritorialisation et Transétatisation des Identifications Nationales," in *Loin des Yeux, Près du Cœur: Les États et Leurs Expatriés*, eds. Stephane Dufoix, Carine Guerassimoff, and Anne de Tinguy (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2010), 15–57.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with two former Bahraini journalists, London, 25 January 2014. One of them worked for a "pro-government" newspaper during the 2011 crisis.

<sup>47</sup> For instance, Ali Abdulemam, blogger and founder of the pioneer *BahrainOnline* website.

<sup>48</sup> At the University of Bahrain, see the case of Mike Diboll. Mike Diboll, "Hard Lessons in Bahrain," *The Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, 6 April 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Hard-Lessons-in-Bahrain/131429>. To be noted, the students already abroad who showed support for the protest movement were also sanctioned by the suspension of their state-scholarship. For an analysis of the mobilization of the Bahrain Teachers' Association and the Bahrain Nursing Society,

see Amy Austin Holmes, "Working on the Revolution in Bahrain: From the Mass Strike to Everyday Forms of Medical Provision," *Social Movement Studies* (2015): 1–10.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with two former Bahraini journalists, London, 25 January 2014.

<sup>50</sup> An interviewee from Waad told the story of a businessman who, imprisoned in 2011 chose to seek asylum in Germany during a business trip there upon his release, rather than going back to Bahrain where he was summoned by the Criminal Investigation Department. Skype interview, 9 October 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Stephane Dufoix, "Les légitimations politiques de l'exil," *Geneses* 34 (1999): 53–79. *La lutte entre les partisans et les adversaires de ce dernier est telle qu'elle aboutit à la nécessité absolue d'un choix entre l'un et l'autre – ami ou ennemi*, 55, translation by the author.

<sup>52</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring that wasn't* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> BICI report, 397 (figures: among the 4,507 dismissed, 2,462 were private employees and 1,945 worked in the public sector) and 331 (grounds for dismissal).

<sup>54</sup> Interview with two exiled journalists, London, 25 January 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Important to note here that since 2011, *Wefaq* has followed the line of negotiating with the regime. Yet, with the gradual marginalization of the Shiite political associations, the arrest of *Wefaq's* secretary-general in December 2014 and his sentencing to four years in jail, on 16 June 2015, the compromising strategy of *Wefaq* appears more and more to be failing.

<sup>56</sup> In March 2015, the website posted a series of three articles entitled "The emigres (*al muhajjirun*) opened their heart to Lulu'a, with a nostalgia reaching its peak," accessed 29 March 2016, <http://lualuatv.com/?p=25514>.

<sup>57</sup> Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty*, 147.

<sup>58</sup> On 24 July 2014, Bahrain's *Official Gazette* published amendments to the Citizenship Law of 1963. Article 10 now permits the Interior Ministry, with cabinet approval, to strip the citizenship of a person who "aids or is involved in the service of a hostile state" or who "causes harm to the interests of the Kingdom or acts in a way that contravenes his duty of loyalty to it." Accessed 29 March 2016, <http://bna.bh/portal/en/news/573207>.

<sup>59</sup> "Bahrain Revokes the Nationality of 72 People," *BBC*, 31 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-3107521>.

<sup>60</sup> Kate Kizer, "Bahrain's Five-Year Plan of Repression," *Middle East Eye*, 14 February 2016. It is essential to note that the figure includes ISIS fighters along with opposition members.

<sup>61</sup> "Bahrain Urges Dual Citizenship Holders to Verify Legal Status," *Gulf News*, 8 April 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-urges-dual-citizenship-holders-to-verify-legal-status-l.1005615>.

<sup>62</sup> Shain, *The Frontier of Loyalty*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> Van Hear, "The Rise of Refugee Diasporas."