The Fatwa & Sectarianism: Violence and Regulating Life in Bahrain

Introduction

Following the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor in late 2010, protests engulfed a number of states across the Middle East, leading to widespread instability and increasingly fractious relationships between rulers and ruled. Amidst this uncertainty, social groups and political actors across the region deployed myriad strategies in an attempt to ensure the survival of their social and political influence. From the use of force in Syria to the deployment of neopatrimonial networks of patronage across the Gulf, responses were contingent upon local contexts. Yet domestic instability quickly became situated within broader geopolitical tensions amidst a fractious rivalry between some Arab states and Iran, leading to the development of strategies that bore increasingly sectarian characteristics. The cultivation of a geopolitically charged form of sect-based difference quickly became a frame through which some regimes and social groups sought to view the protest movements as a means of circumventing other grievances by closing off communities against perceived insidious threats.

This strategy of framing events along sect-based difference was an attempt to ensure social groups survival through increasing support from domestic and international actors, capitalizing on geopolitical tensions across the Middle East that had long manifested in the domestic politics of states across the region. After the revolutionary events of 1979 in Iran, Sunni and Arab groups commonly viewed Shi'i groups across the Gulf with suspicion, accusing them of possessing greater loyalty to Khomeini's vision of *veleyat-e faqih* (the Regency of the Jurist) than to national projects, although closer examination of history reveals a far more complex picture. Narratives such as the 'Shi'i Crescent' propagated by King Abdullah of Jordan only served to exacerbate fears of Iran manipulating Shi'i minorities across the region.

Although *Fatwas* have been politicised for centuries, after the Arab Uprisings and following the fracturing of political life, Shi'i and Sunni clerics issued fatwas that increased sectarian tensions within and between state borders, challenging the spatial organization of political life. The importance of Islam across the region means that clerical statements remain one of the most powerful challenges to social and political stability, seen to be fundamental in securing the relationship between social groups in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain. The political behavior of individuals and groups across the region are shaped (in)directly by the use of *fatwas* by prominent clerics. In spite of this, very little attention has been paid to the role of *fatwas* after the Arab Uprisings, along with the implications of these statements not only for regional stability, but for the concept of the sovereign state itself.

This paper seeks to explore the way in which *fatwas* from prominent clerics in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon contributed to exacerbating sectarian divisions in Bahrain. In this article, we argue that religious discourse from Shi'i and Sunni clerics in the MENA, has a significant impact in determining the nature of political relationships among Gulf societies, but that religion alone is not the sole factor in escalating tensions. Instead, we offer an account of calls to violence, from a range of regional clerics who are seeking to manipulate Bahrain's domestic affairs through the cultivation and closing off of communities along sect-based lines in pursuit of political ends. We also suggest that this has a more existential consequence in that by framing events in a broad interpretation of communal enmity, longer-term divisions are constructed across the Middle East, with serious consequences for the sovereign state. We seek to add to this exploration by considering *fatwas* that have been issued by prominent Sunni and Shi'i clerics about events in Bahrain. In doing this, we are able to glean greater insight into the extent to which sectarian narratives resulted in a high threat to political stability and promoting violence. In addition, analysis of the

fatwa will contribute to the knowledge of the role of Sunni and Shi'i clerics in deepening hatred in society through religious discourse. The paper draws on interviews with 21 Bahrainis on the island and in exile. The participants had differing religious affiliations (Sunni or Shi'a), either with the opposition or the government, or else were completely neutral and independent, with no political activity[1]. The article also depends on nineteen fatwas that published in online networks from sixteen clerics based in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon in an attempt to locate religious statements within political and geopolitical contexts and consider the implications of such discourses in Bahrain. It has been chosen the *fatwas* that issued by the clerics who have followers and a wide audience in Bahrain, which this may gave us an indicator to what extent their religious discourse has influences on society.

Sectarianism in the MENA

In recent years a vast literature has emerged seeking to understand the ways in which sectarian identities have taken on a prominent role within political life across the Middle East. Typically grouped into three main camps –primordialist, and instrumentalist and 'third ways' – this literature spans different academic disciplines, academic debates and policy discussions. Indeed, as Toby Matthiesen (2015) has acknowledged, sectarianism has become a "catch all phrase in politics, media and academia", demonstrating the resonance of the concept in the zeitgeist.

In spite of this burgeoning popularity, the concept itself is notoriously elusive when it comes to definitions, possessing elements that point to an essentially contested concept replete with considerable ambiguity[2] (Matthiesen et al, 2017). Moreover, there are some such as Fanar Haddad who reject the utility of the concept more generally[3].

Primordialist accounts seek to reduce sect based difference to a consequence of 'natural' identities, communal identities existing as *given*, predicated on intangible elements found in culture, history, biology our tradition which serve to bind individuals to collectives. For those advocating such a position – an increasingly rare breed as Morten Valbjørn astutely observes – contemporary difference between Sunni and Sh'a are the manifestation of 'ancient hatreds', long-standing communal tensions within the Muslim community dating back to the Battle of Karbala and debate over succession after the death of the Prophet[4].

In contrast, Instrumentalists typically argue that identity is malleable and can be mobilised at particular times and in particular spaces by sectarian entrepreneurs who capitalise on malleable forms of identity, shaping it in pursuit of particular aims. The instrumentalist position, we are told, perceive identity politics as a top down process, creating scope for the mobilization or manipulation of identities in pursuit of power and regime survival. From this, instrumentalists are seen to present sectarian difference as a consequence of modernity, emerging from political difference rather than piety. As Valbjørn argues, for the instrumentalist, sectarianism is "an epiphenomenon stemming from social, economic or political contestation"[5] ignoring the resonance of religious identities which prompt people to act on the basis of belief.

In an important piece looking at the contours of debates in sectarianism literature titled *Beyond the beyond,* Morten Valbjørn maps out the middle ground approaches that a number of scholars have adopted, seeking to address the weaknesses of both primordialist and instrumentalist positions. These efforts include attempts to reflect on the institutional dimensions of sectarianism[6]. Others try to map the (re)emergence of sect based divisions, or to contextualise identity politics within political projects. Here, as Justin Gengler[7], Courtney Freer[8], Laurence Louer[9], and Valbjørn and Hinnebusch argue, sectarianism can be seen as a phenomenon used by leaders to build a "reliable core" in efforts to retain control"[10].

Thus, for Valbjørn, acknowledging a claim from Rogers Brubaker, in the study of sectarianism we are all constructivists now[11] (Brubaker, 2009: 28), searching for 'third ways' to aid our analytical projects.

One approach that has gained a great deal of traction in recent years is the *sectarianization thesis* – a modified form of Constructivism – proposed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel[12], which argues that the mobilization of sectarian identities is a consequence of authoritarian fears about political stability, meaning that entrepreneurs seek to manipulate communal divisions in pursuit of their political entity survival. Whilst certainly compelling – and an approach that has gained traction in explaining sectarianism in Bahrain [13](Matthiesen, 2017) this approach offers a modified form of constructivism, without engaging with the reasons through which religious identities find traction or, indeed, looking at the processes through which sectarianization *takes place*.

While Hashemi and Postel's sectarianization thesis is important, there is more work to do to reflect on the ways in which sectarian identities operate within political life[14]. After all, sectarian difference resonates across time and space, it is not limited to times of political protest. Moreover, religious values are not restricted to communal groups within states built rather resonate across borders meaning that efforts to regulate the actions of particular groups in one state may also provoke repercussions in others.

For Hashemi and Postel[15], processes of sectarianization take place within authoritarian political contexts which are characterised by regime fears about survival. At this point, sect-based identities are activated to simultaneously increase communal cohesion – and loyalty amongst regime allies – while also supporting the creation of an 'other' that is often geopolitically charged within the context of tensions between some Arab states and Iran (Mabon, 2017). It is here where we situate this article, contributing to efforts to understand the ways in which sect based difference is constructed and re-constructed over time within the context of political and geopolitical contexts which help define the contours of these processes.

Building on constructivist approaches, we seek to explore one part of the process through which sect-based identities have been activated. While some (Matthiesen, 2017; Mabon, 2019) have considered the ways in which regimes have sought to *sectarianize,* regimes also rely on the support of clerical loyalists who issue *fatwas,* often reinforcing elite positions. The ability to draw upon clerical support in pursuit of legitimacy and, ultimately, authority survival is hardly a new phenomena in the Middle East – the case of Iran and Iraq comes to mind[16] – yet there has been little critical reflection on the role of *fatwas* in processes of sectarianization after the Arab Uprisings.

Religion, Geopolitics and Burgeoning Tensions

Religion has long occupied a prominent role in the fabric of states across the Middle East (Mabon 2019). Across the region, regimes have become reliant upon religious rhetoric and norms as a means of ensuring the survival of their rule, demonstrating the instrumental use of religion for political ends. Beyond individual faith, Islam simultaneously serves as a source of political justification and existential support for regimes and social groups. For those states who refer to Islamic rhetoric as a means of ensuring legitimacy - both internally and externally - religion can act as a 'double-edged sword', simultaneously providing legitimacy and the power to undermine their rule[17]. One such reason for the power of Islam is the sense that it serves as a reservoir of norms and values, having the capacity to undermine the sovereignty of the nation-state by evoking claims to higher authority and legitimacy, whilst also providing the means through which people can come together in their identity. Put another way, it provides

guidance on the way in which life should be ordered whilst also serving as a way through which individuals can perform their identities.

Since the rise of the Wahhabi movement in the eighteenth century, Islam has played an increasingly prominent role across Gulf politics, wherein individuals have evoked claims to Islamic leadership in an attempt to draw support from a range of different people. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution in 1979, we can trace an increasingly politicised use of Islamic rhetoric as Saudi Arabia and Iran engaged in a geopolitical rivalry that was couched in theological terms18. The addition of this theological dimension would result in the emergence of existential concerns from the use of Islam as a source of legitimacy. The revolutionary zeal of the Islamic Republic would also transcend borders, threatening to tear up the sovereign order of the Middle East.

> There is no difference between Muslims who speak different languages, for instance the Arabs and the Persians. It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united [. . .] They create the issues of nationalism, of pan-Iranianism, pan-Turkism, and such isms, which are contrary to Islamic doctrines. Their plan is to destroy Islam and Islamic philosophy[19].

Rhetoric from Tehran and Riyadh would also escalate concerns about the reconstruction of the region. Khomeini stressed that

> We will export our experiences to the whole world and present the outcome of our struggles against tyrants to those who are struggling along the path of God, without expecting the slightest reward. The result of this exportation will certainly result in the blooming of the buds of victory and independence and in the implementation of Islamic teachings among the enslaved nations[20].

The explicitly Shi'i identity of resistance was enshrined within the Iranian constitution, where article 3.16 spoke of the need to provide support to the downtrodden of the Muslim world. Yet there were also deeds to support these words. The establishment of Hizballah, the Party of God, based in South Lebanon was in no small part facilitated by Iranian clerics, finance and logistics, and the narrative of Karbala played an important role in creating an ideology that sought to challenge the regional status quo[21]. In Bahrain, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain would also receive Iranian support in their attempts to overthrow the authority, yet this plot would be thwarted before a *coup d'etat* could take place.

Additional support would be given to several other Shi'i groups across the Middle East, although it should be noted that support would also be counter-hegemonic, with notable support for Hamas, the Palestinian resistance organisation. This support would cement Iran as a counter-hegemonic actor in the region, challenging regional hegemons and using religion as a means to do so. In response, King Abdullah II of Jordan would suggest that Iran is leading a Shi'i Crescent, controlling Shi'i 5th columns across the Middle East, from Tehran to Beirut.

This use of religious rhetoric by regimes across the region went some way to challenging the powerful Pan Arab ideology espoused by the populist Egyptian leader Gamal Adbl Nasser, whose vision of a united Arab nation transcended the sovereign borders of states across the Middle East. This posed a serious challenge to a few states across the region who were less equipped to tap into this font of legitimacy[22], requiring recourse to other methods of demonstrating legitimacy. One such move was to evoke claims to leadership of the *umma*, the community of believers. The emergence of Pan-Islamism would erode the legitimacy of the Pan-Arab ideology and with it, Nasser's popularity. It would also alter the regional order as Saudi

Arabia would become increasingly influential. Yet beyond this geopolitical struggle was a broader struggle over the ordering of regional politics pitting the prominence of the sovereign state against the increasingly powerful narrative of sectarian divisions as some regimes and social groups sought to frame events in sectarian terms as a means of ensuring survival[23].

One component of this is the use of *fatwas* from clerics across the region. The close relationship between regimes and *ulemmas* in several states means that *fatwas* can be employed for political rather than theological reasons to pressure opponents and to mobilize the masses[24]. Even so, such *fatwas* only find traction within the context of a set of beliefs. Within Bahrain, doctrinal differences are perhaps the best example of the collapse of theology and politics, as cycles of *fatwas* from Sunni and Shi'i clerics from Saudi Arabia - notably Muhammad Ibn Al-Othaimeen (1929-2001) and Namer Alnamer (1959-2016) - used to discredit the other, feeding social and political division across the island. One such cleric, Muhammad Ibn Al-Othaymeen has a strong following in Bahrain and issued a *fatwa* stating that some of the Shi'i scholars are not Muslim because they insulted the companions of the Prophet Muhammad[25]. In a different *fatwa,* Abdul Aziz bin Baz suggests that rapprochement between Shi'ites and the Sunnis is not possible because of doctrinal differences; the doctrine of the Sunni is the unity of God and the dedication of worship to God[26]. These *fatwas* shape social barriers between Sunnis and Shi'i in Bahrain, seeking to regulate political life through closing off communities.

Efforts to close sectarian communities off against the other are not restricted to Saudi clerics. Indeed, Mohammed Al–Majlisi from Iraq, Yousef Al-Bahraini from Bahrain and Ruhollah Khomeini from Iran (1902-1989) all issued *fatwas* seeking to discredit and delegitimise Sunnis who do not believe that Ali bin Abi Talib is the *Imam* following the death of the Prophet Muhammad[27]. Many Sunni actors in Bahrain do not believe that God has appointed Ali bin Abi Talib as an Aalma (master of the people) between him and his creation. However, according to *fatwas* from Al–Majlisi, Khomeini and Al-Bahraini, whoever knew Ali as an *Imam* was a believer and whoever denied Ali as an *Imam* was an infidel. In one *fatwa*, Khomeini states that "faith is obtained only by Ali and the guardians who considered infallible[…] Also, does not accept faith in God and His Messenger without *Wilayat* (*Imam*)"[28]. Although these *fatwas* grounded in historical events, they continue to have an impact on the contemporary political and social reality in Bahrain because they form the perceptions and behavior of Shi'i who follow the Khomeini, Al–Majlisi and Al-Bahraini.

Moving religion into the sphere of the political creates space for discourse concerning legitimacy and authority and it is here where we see the political sphere expanding, as some states and social groups with competing geopolitical interests seek to mobilize clerical *fatwas* in pursuit of their own ends. For example, the rivalry between some Arab state and Iran involved funding groups whose ideological worldview was deemed acceptable to policymakers in each state. One consequence was the increasing politicization of sect-based identities, particularly in the aftermath of crises and political fragmentation such as that seen in 2003 and 2011.

Sectarian Difference, Fatwas and 'Master Narratives' across Bahrain

In the years following the US-led invasion of Iraq and after the emergence of conflict in the post-Arab Uprisings context, a great deal of academic work has been undertaken seeking to understand the way in which sectarian difference emerges. This literature is predominantly split into *primordialists,* those who accept the primacy of sect-based identities, and those who argue that identities are constructed amidst the contingency of life[29]. Such debates facilitate greater awareness of sect-based identities and the conditions that give rise to sect-based difference, the typologies of sect-based difference and the way in

which geopolitical factors feed the cultivation of sect-based difference. A common theme in this literature is to reject the idea that events commonly understood as sectarian should instead be viewed as a consequence of the work of 'sectarian entrepreneurs', individuals who manipulate sect-based identities for political reasons. Sects can be viewed as communities of faith comprised of members of the same doctrinal persuasion, subjected to a particular ordering – *nomos* – that can be learned and performed over time.

Along with Lebanon and Iraq, Bahrain is traditionally viewed as a paradigmatic example of a divided society. An island home to around 1.593 million people – only half of whom are Bahraini nationals– is also seen as the 'epicentre' of sectarian difference, caught between Saudi Arabia and Iran, theologically and geopolitically. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Bahrain has been at the foreground of a struggle between two Gulf powers to extent influence across the Middle East. Bahrain occupies a key geopolitical role for the two, lying off the coast of the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, it is seen as a valve for social pressures in the Kingdom, but there has long existed concerns that unrest in Bahrain would cross into the Shi'i dominated Eastern Province. Moreover, given the historical demographic imbalance in favour of the Shi'i, it was long-viewed by Saudi policy makers that Iran had a natural foothold in Bahrain[30]. Reflecting these concerns, the King Fahd causeway was built in 1981, providing ease of access to Saudi forces.

After the revolution, Khomeini's desire to 'export' revolutionary goals enshrined within the structure of *veleyat-e faqih*, notably article 3.16 which provided support to the 'downtrodden' of the Muslim world, caused a great deal of consternation to the conservative monarchies of the region[31]. The establishment of the Lebanese Hizballah in 1981 suggested that words would be followed by deeds[32]. Unrest across the region amongst Shi'i 5th columns was seen as a consequence of Iranian interference and an aborted *coup d'etat* in Bahrain by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain fueled these fears in the minds of many[33]. A history of structural violence cultivated deep seated grievances amongst the pro-Iran groups of Bahrain, which added to the perception that it was prone to Iranian interference. Token efforts at reform attempted to reconcile the Bahraini population, yet the onset of the Arab Uprisings would serve as the spark that would ignite divisions.

Following the onset of protests, a Saudi-led Gulf Co-Operation Council Peninsular Shield Force crossed the King Fahd causeway to prevent the escalation of events in Bahrain. A widespread violence occurred among the components of society and the cultivation of a sectarian master-narrative framing events as occurring along sectarian lines enshrined difference along theological lines[34]. A key part of the anti-Iranian groups' response to the uprisings was the creation of a sectarian master narrative that politicised and deepened theological divisions across Bahrain[35]. In doing so, the Sunni political actor's framed Shi'i groups were as insidious fifth columnists doing the bidding of Iran. This position was supported by a number of Sunni clerics who issued fatwas framing events in Bahrain as a sectarian struggle stemming from Iranian manipulation. These fatwas went some way to support the authority and removed the slogan of the national revolution. Whilst a number of scholars have challenged the credibility of this master narrative[36], identifying a range of identity issues that add an additional layer of complexity to the sectarian conflict and the dilemma of violence, many Shi'i clerics from Iraq and Iran issued *fatwas* urging people to change the authority in Bahrain through the demonstrations and sit-ins or use violence.

The use of *fatwas* has played a prominent role in (re)constructing the *nomos* and with it, shaping the nature of political action in Bahrain. Whilst some political actors and social groups have constructed narratives about sectarian divisions and the relationship between one sect and an 'other', such narratives require a fertile environment to gain traction. It is here where domestic political contexts become fused

with geopolitical agendas[37]. In Bahrain, for example, the stability of the political system is seen to be inextricably linked to that of the Saudi Arabia.

Efforts to ensure political stability in Bahrain are multifaceted, combining economic reforms with the cultivation of sectarian divisions that pre-date the uprisings of 2011. When King Hamad announced a reform project in 2001, *fatwas* issued by Salafi clerics in Saudi Arabia played a prominent role in promoting political safety in Bahrain. Mohammed Al-Othaimeen issued *fatwa* to urge people to participate in elections: 'I think elections are obligatory, we must elect good people, because if the good people do not participate, who will replace them? The bad people will replace them. We must choose whom we see fit'[38].

The Sunni groups and elites in Bahrain responded to this fatwa and Salafist leader in Bahrain, Adel Al-Maaouda, was able to take a *Fatwa* from the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia urging Sunnis in Bahrain to participate in the 2002 elections[39]. This *fatwa* supports the strengthening of political stability in Bahrain and the continuation of the reform project.

In contrast to Sunni support for the reforms, some Shi'i groups embarked on a boycott of the elections in 2002. As a Bahraini Shi'i cleric argued, the opinion of the clergy is influential in participating in or boycotting the elections. Seeking clerical advice, a group of Bahraini Shi'ites travelled to Iran to meet the Supreme Leader in Iran to take seek guidance about participation in the 2006 elections. In response, Khamenei urged them to take the *fatwa* from Issa Qassem[1], the agent of *Wilayat Al-Faqih* in Bahrain[40]. A writer in Al-Wasat Newspaper reported that during the 2006 elections, Issa Qassem issued a *fatwa* urging Shi'ites to participate in the 2006 elections and vote for the *Al-Wefaq* Association, which named the Faithful bloc by the agent of *Wilayat Al-Faqih*[2]. In an interview with Al-Wasat newspaper in Bahrain, Issa Qassem justified his fatwa:

> "Koran did not mention *Al-Wefaq*, but in terms of results, success depended on participation in one bloc. If the *Al-Wefaq* did not exist, clerics had to think of a single bloc… Success in parliament depends on the existence of one bloc because it is difficult for the government to destroy it… One bloc makes informed decisions"[41].

Talking about this justification, an academic at University of Bahrain said this fatwa has made voting for *Al-Wefaq* a religious duty and obedience to Shi'ites, resulting in *Al-Wefaq* winning 17 parliamentary seats out of 40[3]. A Sunni opposition claimed that this fatwa demonstrated the unity of the Shi'i community in elections where only one Shi'i association participated in the elections, so this made *Al-Wefaq* be the largest association in Bahrain[4].

In Lebanon, a number of Shi'i figures clerics such as Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah who oppose *veleyat-e faqih* encouraged Shi'i to participate in peaceful action prior to the uprisings. Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah encouraged people not to commit violence, terrorism, and to avoid confrontation with the Bahraini government because violence only has negative consequences. In one of his last *fatwa*, Fadlallah said:

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[1] Interview with Participant 4, Ali town, 29/3/2017.
[2] Interview with Participant 3, Manama, 21/3/2017.
[3] Interview with Participant 2, Manama, 16/3/2017.

[4] Interview with Participant 5, Riffa, 23/4/2017.

We know the many sufferings of our Bahraini brethren. We know that there is a major challenge that has launched through the global arrogance, which Bahrain considered the center of the American fleet. It also considered it a site to provoke hostility between Iran and the Arab world. In this regard, I call upon everyone to claim their rights, but as God wanted us, call to the path of your Lord politically, religiously and socially with wisdom, good advice and argue with them in ways that are best. Do not take the causes of violence because violence does lead to negative consequences. Call for your rights by peaceful means[42].

Fundamental to this *fatwa* were calls for the Shi'i to claim their political and social rights by peaceful means[43]. This type of *fatwa* also served the interests of the government in Bahrain, given calls for peaceful engagement in political systems, resulting in efforts to build privileged relations with Lebanese clerics such as Ali Al-Amin and Mohammed Fadlallah who opposes Iranian expansion in the Gulf region[44].

The Uprisings and Processes of 'Closing Off'

Following the emergence of protests across the region in 2011, a range of different actors sought to mobilize their respective constituencies in pursuit of power. As Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel opine, the emergence of vitriolic sect-based narratives was part of a process of *sectarianization* amidst social groups and political actors' efforts to ensure their survival in increasingly precarious political conditions[45]. Yet such moves are not restricted to regimes. Other prominent examples are seen in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issuing a *fatwa* to fight the infidels (Sunnis) in Syria, and Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani issuing a *fatwa* against fighting ISIS in Iraq through the popular crowd[46]. The spread of religious communities across state borders means that *fatwas* resonate across sects and can have an impact on political life. In 2016, Hezbollah Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said to the rulers of the Gulf States: 'If not the blessed popular crowd in Iraq, the ISIS would be now in your palaces and enchant your women'[47].

Indeed, these *fatwas* and statements serve as a means of reinforcing communal division across Bahrain and other Gulf states, capitalizing upon sectarian differences on the island and perceptions of the *nomos* both in Bahrain and across sectarian constructs. Therefore, such fatwas define the limitations of political action between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Taken together, in 2002, a Saudi cleric Abdallah Al-Jibreen issued a fatwa suggesting to Sunni elites that political collaboration with Hezbollah– both locally and regionally – is not permissible[48]. Abdallah Al-Jibreen said:

We must not support Hezbollah. It is not permissible to join them under their command. It is not permissible to pray for them with victory and empowerment. Our advice to the Sunnis is to renounce them and disappoint those who join them and to show their hostility to Islam and Muslims[49].

In same context, in 2006, a Saudi Salafist Nasser Al Omar argues that Hezbollah is irresistible in the name of the Sunni people in Palestine because it is an instrument in the hands of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Israel, America, and Iran are the enemies of the Muslim nation[50]. Those previous religious *fatwas* issued by the Salafi clerics is one of the main factors that promote hatred between the two communities in the Gulf States[51].

The spread of sect-based communities across state borders means that *fatwas* are not limited to domestic clerics or audiences. Instead, clerics can influence followers in their communities across territorial borders. Thus, *fatwas* issued by clerics in Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon can have an impact across global Shi'i communities, whilst those seeking to incite Shi'i opposition forces against the authority in Bahrain during

the spring of the Arab revolutions in 2011 were able to do so from outside Bahrain. When Shi'i families claimed that the police had assaulted their daughters[52], Issa Qassem issued a *fatwa* calling for Shi'i citizens to crush police officers, where he declared:

> The mercenary police forces are an assault on innocent women by using foul, dirty and ridiculous words in our villages and cities…, during the day and night hours. We will not surrender (*hayhat min aldhila*). Let us die for our women. If you find anyone assaulting women, crush them[53].

Following this *fatwa*, confrontations between security forces and opposition groups increased across several Shi'i villages in Bahrain[54]. This violence was not solely a consequence of *fatwas* issued by Bahraini clerics but rather, must be placed in the context of burgeoning regional tensions and *fatwas* from clerics across the Middle East. Abdulrahman Al Rashed argues that *fatwas* issued by Shi'i clerics in Iraq and Iran played a key role in increasing violence and subsequently deepening divisions[55]. In one statement issued by the Iraqi cleric Hadi Al-Madrasi, he asked

> How can people rely on this king, who kills innocents in the middle of the night? The king was supposed to be just and to be fair, but he is a first-class oppressor and a disbeliever… To say these words to those who may be deceived by this unjust ruler and this tyrannical king[56].

Almadrasi's statement may be associated with the consideration of the King of Bahrain is not a Muslim made some Shi'i extremist groups to raise the slogan of overthrowing the authority during the crisis of 2011 and fight it, by all means, legitimate and illegal. Moreover, a number of other clerics from across the region including Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran, Ayatollah Namer Al-Namur in Saudi Arabia, Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon and Muqtada Al-Sadr in Iraq urged the Shi'ites of Bahrain to continue demonstrations against the authority[57]. As Ali Khamenei states:

> The Bahraini people are moving because it rejects the dictatorial rule. What the people wanted. They want elections. The Bahraini people face injustice and they do not have absolute freedom. There is no difference Sunni and Shiite in Bahrain, we do not differentiate between Shiites and Sunnis. We condemn the move against the people, we support popular movements in the name of Islam and freedom, and we support these moves. The insolence is that the position of the clergy to protect the people considered an interference in domestic affairs, while the entry of Saudi forces is not considered interference! That the Saudi government had made a mistake, it should not have taken this step, because it would increase hatred in the region and people would hate the Saudi Arabia[58].

The religious statements reported here appear to support the assumption that *fatwas* serve as one of the more important ways of shaping *nomos*. From this, we can see that violence emerges amidst an increasingly strong group identity, whereupon the frequency of clashes between government and opposition increased.

At the beginning of the 2011 crisis, several fatwas issued by clerics in Saudi Arabia denying demonstrations and warning them because the revolution threatens the state and society, as well as, these fatwas claims that popular movement is non-compatible with Islamic values. For instance, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta in Saudi Arabia said[59]; 'That revolution has no origin in religion and not the methods of advice in Islam, it is forbidden in terms of means because of its consequences, as it leads to many evils'[60].

One member of the committee, Saleh Al-Fozan, claimed that revolution is sedition, do not end to thing and cannot control on it, because it is without leadership, therefore, the revolution is chaos and sedition[61]. However, the Permanent Committee for Scholarly Research and Ifta's directives to always with the obedience of the ruler and not to oppose them, whether in Saudi Arabia or the allied countries such as Bahrain. That this religious statement gives the impression that the Shi'ite sought sabotage, violence and instability in society.

Despite the existence of other social and political motives, many Sunni participants argue that religion is seen to be one of the most important factors that incite Shi'a groups to demonstrate against the authority in 2011, in order to pave the way for the appearance of the absent[62] Imam.[5] In this same context, Sunni scholars, such as Hassan Abdulla [63] and Abdulla Talawi[64] argue that Shi'a involvement in revolutions, wars, violence and chaos is aimed at accelerating the appearance of the Hidden Imam, because this Imam will only appear with the spread of death and destruction in the world. For example, a former Islamist deputy in Parliament claimed that Shi'a clerics urged the crowds at Pearl Roundabout to struggle against the authority during the political crisis of 2011, in order to prompt the emergence of the *Mahdi*.[6] . However, many of Bahrain's Imamate Shi'a also believe that the last Imam will appear and free them from injustice, tyranny and hatred; defeating the Sunnis who betrayed Imam Ali bin Abi Talib in the process[65]. Moreover, one Sunni Islamic scholar argued that this incident widened the gap between the two communities in Bahrain, as well as promoting hatred during the 2011 crisis.[7]

Within Bahrain's political and social challenges, ideological dissonance could weaken the authority's legitimacy. Thus, for the followers of the Twelver Shi'a, the authority is considered illegitimate, because it is incompatible with Imamate[66] ideology[67]. In fact, any authority that is inconsistent with the values of Imamate ideology is illegitimate, because it is contrary to God's orders, the Prophet's commandments, and the absent Imam's instructions[68]. Eliash claims that Imamate ideology determines the legitimacy of contemporary regimes in MENA.

> The Imamate is "an institution of a succession of charismatic figures who dispense true guidance in comprehending the esoteric sense of prophetic revelation… While the Imam remained in occultation, a shadow of illegitimacy was bound to cover all worldly strivings and activities, above all those related to government. There was no true authority nor the possibility thereof"[69].

In essence, this view is consistent with the argument that the only legitimate regime is one that is governed by the Hidden Imam, because the Imam's powers are derived from God. Therefore, contemporary regimes that do not adopt Imamate ideology are considered illegitimate, according to the perspectives of Twelver Shi'ism. Moreover, according to Mohammed Al Majlisi[70] and Mohammed Al Kalini[71], any government that does not adopt *Imamate* principles is a non-Muslim regime and consequently an illegal government, which means that its rule should not be accepted by the people. In the same context, Although *Al Wefaq*[72] engaged in the political 'rules of game' laid down by the King in 2001 and participated in parliament from 2006 to 2011, some of the interviewees argued that members of *Al Wefaq* do not recognize the laws of the State or the Constitution, because the authority does not

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[5] Participant 6, Riffa, 7/2/2017 ; Participant 1, Muharraq, 7 /3/2017 ; Participant 7, Muharraq, 7 /3/2017; Participant 8, Manama, 15/3/2017; Participant 9, Riffa, 20/3/2017; Participant 10, Manama, 21/3/2017; Participant 11, Manama, 6/4/2017; Participant 12, Manama, 3/5/2017; Participant 13, Manama, 15/5/2017; Participant 14, Manama, 18/5/2017; Participant 15, Manama, 19/5/2017; Participant 16, Issa Town, 20/5/2017; Participant 17, Manama, 24/5/2017.
[6] Participant 18, Muharraq, 3/5/2017.
[7] Participant 19, Riffa, 2/4/2017.

adopt Shi'a doctrine or *Imamate* ideology. Neither does *Al Wefaq* acknowledge the achievements of King Hamad; it is as if the authority has not achieved anything since 2002.[8]

However, Shi'i opposition and members of *Al-Wefaq* opposition argue that the *Imamate* ideology did not affect the authority, because Shi'a opposition acted within the framework of the Constitution and the National Action Charter.[9] Meanwhile, majority of Sunni interviewee claim that *Imamate* ideology posed a threat to the authority's legitimacy, because Shi'a believe that the successors (the clerics) of the absent Imam are the only ones with the religious right to rule the State, as opposed to the authority.

However, in Kuwait, Osman Al-Khamees claimed that the Shi'ite opposition in Bahrain wanted to destroy and kill people because they hate the Sunnis, whilst the history of Shi'ism was replete with coups and betrayals against the Sunnis[73]. Osman Al-Khamees stressed that

> I am sad like other people due to what happened from Shi'ite groups who wanted corruption in the country and kill *the* faithful. These groups showed their hatred and raised their voice in the face of the Sunnis in Bahrain. This is not strange to them. This is the religion of parents and grandparents. Their history is full of coups, betrayals and stabbing in the back of the Sunnis[74].

In addition, many fatwas emerged in Bahrain warning people against the political demands of the Shi'ite opposition in 2011. For instance, in his religious statement, a Bahraini Sunni cleric Hassan Al-Husseini stressed that

> That the revolution in Bahrain is not like other Arab revolutions, it is a sectarian revolution from the beginning. The Shi'ite made the popular movement as a sectarian revolution. They call what is happening in Bahrain a battle of Karbala. They then divided the Bahraini society into two groups: followers of Yazeed bin Muawiya, and the followers of Hussein bin Ali. Their rhetoric, escalation and the atonement of the Bahraini government led to sectarian strife in Bahraini society[75].

Al-Husseini issued this the fatwa on the Salafist TV channel *Wassal* warning Sunnis of the danger of Shi'ites who sought to sabotage, kill and occupy vital areas of Bahrain. At the end of the statement, Al-Husseini urged Sunnis to pay attention to the Shi'i who raise slogans of injustice and move in accordance with external agendas. For Al-Husseini, Sunnis must unite to confront opposition from Shi'i groups. In 2011, several Salafist groups in Bahrain published *fatwas* across social media channels in an attempt to prevent Sunnis from co-operating with Shi'i political agendas and ultimately, to ensure the survival of Sunni groups in Bahrain.

In response to increasing social disharmony and violence across 2011, Many Sunni created a master narrative of sectarian division, framing unrest because of nefarious Shi'i – and by extension Iranian - aspirations and action. Supporting such a narrative and helping it gain traction across the *nomos*, many Sunni clerics issued *fatwas* proclaiming link between the Shi'ites of Bahrain and Iran. This is evident in the case of the Salafist cleric Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah Al-Sheikh[76] who argued that the Shi'ites of Iran are known for a dark black history and that their whole history shows hatred of Islam and the Sunnis[77]. This *fatwa* issued when members of the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain in March 2011. In the same vein, the Saudi cleric Mohammed Arifi said:

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[8] Participant 20, A'ali Town, 8/3/2017 ; Participant 21, Manama, 21/5/2017.
[9] Participant 10, Manama, 21/3/2017 ; Participant 5, Riffa, 23/4/2017.

That the Shi'i in Bahrain does not follow the king in Bahrain, but a Shi'i wishes to be ruled by Khamenei, instead of the king of Bahrain. The Shi'i in Bahrain wishes to be governed by a man who agrees with their doctrine, and the evidence that the Shi'ites are raising pictures of Khamenei and Khomeini in the streets and not just in the homes[78].

The Arifi example illustrates how *fatwas* seek to shape the *nomos*, creating the impression that Shi'i demands are illegitimate through construction of links with Iran. Moreover, Arifi's *fatwa* also sought to frame the uprisings in Bahrain not as a popular revolution but as sectarian unrest.

In a similar case in Qatar, Yusuf Qaradawi - the president of the Union of Muslim Scholars and the most prominent Muslim Brotherhood scholars – argued that

The revolution in Bahrain was different to other manifestations of unrest across the Middle East. The events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria were expressions of political frustration pitting rulers against ruled, but the revolution of Bahrain is a sectarian revolution, and the problem of the Bahraini revolution is Shi'i versus Sunni[79].

Here, Qaradawi seeks to frame opposition demands as part of a sectarian struggle pitting Sunni against Shi'i as a way of eroding Sunni suppo'rt for the protesters both in Bahrain and beyond. Building on the sentiment cultivated by this *fatwa* and the broader meta-narrative framing events in a sectarian manner, several Sunni political actors also sought to mobilise groups with a complex historical relationship with the state such as the Muslim Brotherhood. An academic at University of Bahrain argues that, in the years immediately after the uprisings, the Muslim Brotherhood played a prominent role in Bahraini politics as a bulwark against Shi'i groups, much like they had done against Arab Nationalism a number of decades earlier[10].

In contrast to the narrative put forward by the regime and clerics such as Qaradawi, Shi'i clerics in Iraq sought to frame events in Bahrain as an "Islamic awakening" and a "revolt against tyranny". For example, Moqtada Al-Sadr, a prominent Iraqi Shi'i cleric stated that "the Great Bahraini revolution is not Shi'i or Sunni, and shame is all shame on anyone who is called what happened in Bahrain is a sectarian revolution, but is popular and patriotic"[80].

The contrasting *fatwas* about the uprisings in Bahrain yet issued by clerics in Qatar and Iraq demonstrates both clerical efforts to shape the post-uprisings landscape but also a broader struggle to frame the uprisings in contrasting ways. Similar strategies were seen in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution when key revolutionary figures framed events as Islamic whilst their Saudi counterparts framed them as Shi'i. Fundamentally, in both cases, this reveals a struggle over popular opinion and legitimacy in the face of the conflation of religion, politics and geopolitics. Yet as *fatwas* found traction amongst the various groups in Bahrain, they exacerbated sect-based divisions between the disparate communities as they reinforced the ordering of political life – *nomos* – and the closing off of a community against the sectarian other, with violent repercussions.

Conclusion

In spite of religious discourse have been politicised for decades, our exploration has attempted to highlight how clerics in Bahrain, Iran, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iran have issued *fatwas* that constitute an essential

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[10] Interview with Participant 1, Muharraq, 7 /3/2017.

element in the phenomenon of sectarianism, political schism, exclusion and social division in Bahrain in 2011. An important side of *the fatwa* is that it strengthens political and social strife between Shi'i and Sunni groups through recourse the name of Allah (God). Shared normative environments mean that the *fatwas* issued by actors in one state have implications for behavior in another, revealing serious questions about the extent to which sovereign control can be exerted, yet also rasing questions about the contingency of Islam.

Fatwas issued by Shi'i clerics in the Middle East were thus designed to rouse Shi'i groups against the government during the political crisis in 2011, including the justification of acts of violence. Based on the range of *fatwa*, it is evident that religious scholars build upon existing divisions and a lack of social harmony, which of course, has political, social and economic factors shaping the capacity for such *fatwas* to gain traction. Here, we see the importance of contingent factors from the political realm when considering the impact of *fatwas* upon political action.

Historically, religious statements issued by the Salafist cleric Adel Al-Maaouda and Shi'i cleric Issa Qassem have played a major role in maintaining political stability and the success of the reform project by urging people to participate in parliamentary elections since 2002 to 2006. As well, the *fatwa* that issued by Ayatollah Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah considered one of the most important factors that help to reduce violence and terrorism in the Shi'i community, and urged young people to claim their political rights by peaceful means.

Thus, whilst anti-Iranian groups driven sectarian master narratives have been important in framing the uprisings in Bahrain along sectarian lines, whilst also suggesting that the perfidious interference of Iran has negatively impacted on the situation, normative context is key for narratives to find traction. The contingency of Islam is apparent given the way in which religious difference manifests in different forms.

Clerical statements from the likes of Mohammed Arifi Yusuf Al-Qaradawi play a prominent role in shaping perceptions of the Shi'i Bahraini opposition through framing their demands and behavior as illegitimate, whilst also framing events as a sectarian schism, fueling the political dimensions of a theological divide. This type of narrative serves to support anti-Iranian groups' master narratives, helping them to find traction amongst people who may have supported opposition groups when their grievances were based around demands for social justice and harmony.

Appendix 1: Interviewee Demographics

Name	Gender	Job or Political orientation	Doctrine	Date	Place
Participant 1	M	Academic at University of Bahrain-Islamists loyal	Sunni	7 /3/2017	Muharraq
Participant 2	M	Academic at University of Bahrain	Shi'i	16/3/2017	Manama
Participant 3	F	Writer in Al Wasat Newspaper	Sunni	21/3/2017	Manama
Participant 4	M	Clerk	Shi'i	29/3/2017	A'ali town
Participant 5	M	Liberal Opposition	Sunni	23/4/2017	Riffa
Participant 6	M	Political researcher	Sunni	7/2/2017	Riffa
Participant 7	M	Liberal loyal	Sunni	7 /3/2017	Muharraq

Participant 8	M	Former Minister	Sunni	15/3/2017	Manama
Participant 9	M	Academic at University of Bahrain	Sunni	20/3/2017	Riffa
Participant 10	M	Leftist opposition	Shi'a	21/3/2017	Manama
Participant 11	M	Members of Al-Wefaq opposition	Shi'a	6/4/2017	Manama
Participant 12	F	Members of Al-Wefaq opposition	Shi'a	3/5/2017	Manama
Participant 13	M	Academic at University of Bahrain	Shi'a	15/5/2017	Manama
Participant 14	M	Members of the House of Representatives in 2014	Sunni	18/5/2017	Manama
Participant 15	M	Academic at Gulf University in Kuwait	Shi'a	19/5/2017	Manama
Participant 16	M	Academic at University of Bahrain	Shi'a	20/5/2017	Issa town
Participant 17	M	Members of the House of Representatives in 2002	Sunni	24/5/2017	Manama
Participant 18	M	Member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain	Sunni	3/5/2017	Muharraq
Participant 19	M	Researcher in Religions	Sunni	2/4/2017	Riffa
Participant 20	M	Liberal loyal- Journalist	Sunni	8/3/2017	A'ali town
Participant 21	M	A former deputy in parliament	Sunni	21/5/2017	Manama

Notes

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[1] In accordance with the ethical procedures for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and the Management School's Research Ethics Committee in Lancaster University (FASS-LUMS REC), to protect the participants' privacy, all important precautions were taken, such as hiding the name of participants due to the sensitivity of the topic.

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