

**Research Article**

## **THE INVESTIGATION OF GEOPOLITICAL OUTCOMES FACING IRAN IN BAHRAIN DEVELOPMENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Following the developments in the Middle East and North of Africa, the anti-government protests at the beginning of 2011 gripped Bahrain which led to the aggressive behaviors among the protestors and government forces and these protests are expanding. This crisis had effective geopolitical consequences for regional and trans-regional actors. The goal of the study is to explain the opportunities and challenges facing Islamic Republic of Iran as far as Bahrain developments are concerned. The results show that since Bahrain was part of the Iranian territory in old days and also the majority of its population is comprised of the Shiite, it could have a remarkable effect on Islamic Republic of Iran as a regional power when adopting strategies as well as the type of relations, interactions and conflicts between Iran and the littoral states of the Persian Gulf and their trans-regional allies. These indicate the importance of the developments in the island called Bahrain.

**Keywords:** Bahrain Developments, Iran, Persian Gulf, Geopolitical Outcomes, Opportunities and Challenges

### **INTRODUCTION**

Turbulent waves of Islamic awakening since 2011 till now involved the important geopolitical region of the Middle East and North of Africa and exposed this region to huge geopolitical developments and certainly leads to new geopolitical consequences in the structure of regional geopolitics. These developments exceeded the boundaries of countries and the position of other regional and trans-regional countries was effected by these changes and lead to forming the new balance of forces. In the meantime, due to the specific geostrategic position in geopolitical areas of the Persian Gulf, Bahrain Island is important for regional powers like the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia as the efficient actors; and in trans-regional level for the U.S.A as the strategic alliance of Bahrain in which the fifth fleet of United States of American navy is based. Now due to the Islamic awakening in Bahrain and intensifying the hidden latent unrest among the Shia, the public protests increase daily. Intensifying these crisis can lead to geopolitical developments in Persian Gulf.

The Iranian policy in Bahrain is more different than the other parts of the Arab world as a combination of issues related to interests and values, but as far as interests are concerned, Bahrain is located in the immediate political and security territory of Iran in the sensitive region of the Persian Gulf. Presence of Saudi forces in Bahrain and the US support for this policy which is aimed at dominating and controlling the political and security movements in Bahrain and the entire Persian Gulf region have made the issue of the Bahraini Shiite that form the majority of the population of that country as an important issue of Iran as far as the values are concerned (Barzgar, 2011).

The current study, using descriptive-analytical method investigates the answer to this question what opportunities and challenges will face Iran as far as the Bahraini developments are concerned. This article tries to explain the answer to this question.

Theoretical principles of research: 1. Geopolitical Weight: It means the heaviness of forces and the positive and negative factors effect on the national power of a country and on the other hand, presents sum of factors of national power, geopolitical weight of a country in the countries or the global and regional geopolitical system (Hafeznia, 2006).

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2. Geopolitical Developments: It means the changes and developments in patterns, principles and geopolitical structures. The geopolitical developments are dynamic and appear due to the developments in geopolitical weight, structures and function of factors and variables effecting on national and mass power. As the positive and negative roles of power agents are flowing and the political actors and governments are competing and improving their position in regional and global system, so the global geopolitical system is dynamic and follow a kind of dynamic balance. In other words, they reach a kind of dynamic balance beside developments. In addition, the development in a system requires the turbulence and lack of balance. Lack of balance causes development and development brings about progress in system (Cohen, 1994).

3. Geopolitical Conflicts: Conflict interests and goals are the cases to which the governments have antithetical and non-aligned insights (Hafeznia, 2006). Geographical distinctive features result in diverging behaviors and segregation (Hafeznia, 2009). Causes of conflict lead to separation of political units and crisis (Taherimosavi, 2008). Also, the conflict interests and goals are the sources of competition, conflict and rebellion among the actors, government and countries. Competition process is formed and will be developed in the face of bilateral or multilateral interaction and coalitions from the aligned states and finally it may lead to the military clash (Hafeznia, 2008). With regard to the developments in Bahrain, both regional powers in Persian Gulf that are Iran and Saudi Arabia have conflict interests and goals which they attempt to reach to their interests and goals by competition, clash and conflict. These causes of contest and geopolitical conflicts are observed in Bahrain developments and the competition among actors intensifies the crisis in regional Persian Gulf especially Bahrain.

The method in this research, according to the nature of topic, is descriptive-analytical; and the data were collected, documentarily, from the books, articles, websites; and applying the geopolitical maps of Persian Gulf in order to recognize the geopolitical features of regional and trans-regional powers is fundamental in this research.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Bahrain Developments***

The conflict among the government and public forces is the stimulating factor of domestic policy in regional countries and can influence the great powers (Emami, 2010). The anti-government demonstrations among some countries in the Middle East at the beginning of 2011 happened in Bahrain, too and led to the aggressive behaviors among the protestors and the governmental forces and police. Inspiring the events in Egypt and Tunisia, the protesters in Bahrain started their demonstrations on February 14. It's been a long time that the hidden tension among the Shia under the ruling Sunni exists. The Shia protest for descending the high positions in the army and government. The Al-Khalifa forces retreated on February 18 and few days later, thousands of protesters gathered in LoLo square. The number of protesters climbed up on February 22 and more than 100 thousand protesters assembled around square. The huge demonstrations by Democracy advocates continued for three weeks, soon after that, the happiness of protesters came to an end. On March 14, according to the request from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and UAE, have sent two thousand soldiers toward Bahrain in order to break up the protests. Attending the Sunni forces of adjacent country with the majority of Shia inflamed the conflict. Bahrain government put the curfew and implantation of suppressive acts against the opposition at the top of its agenda; these acts include using force for expelling the protestors from LoLo square, search warrant, mass arrests and torture. Declaring the state of emergency, increasing the gap between the government and society and discriminatory policies enforced by Al-Alkhalifa are the main factors of revolution and political protests of the Bahrainis. This gap is rooted historically and the foreign and domestic political-security variables effect on this gap.

In Bahrain the clashes and unrest originated from the revolution in the region (Hill and Gerd, 2011).

### ***Opportunities Facing Iran in Bahrain Developments***

*Expansion of Geopolitical Range led by Iran in Persian Gulf*

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Following the Islamic revolution of Iran in the region of Persian Gulf and coming out as an independent country and struggling with the superpowers, some developments happened in the region; one of the effects of Islamic revolution was distribution of Islamic insights in the region and Persian Gulf which resulted in Islamic awakening and Islamic-seeking movements which was in paradox of ruling governments (Hafeznia, 2009). As the Islamic revolution happened in the realm of Shia in the world, it effected on the surrounding areas. These processes are observed in three axes of 1) self-awareness of Shia; 2) forming or reinforcing the political parties and organizations; 3) the role played by Shia in the political structure of their countries (Ahmadi, 2010).

Expanding the range of influence of Iran on the basis of religion from other countries brought about the reactions and actions (Ahmadi and Hafeznia, 2010). From the point of view of Arabic governments, the countries around the Persian Gulf were formed to increase the power of Iran and role of the Shia in the Middle East and a Shia crescent was created from Lebanon to Pakistan led by Islamic Republic of Iran (Ezzati, 2010). Form their viewpoint, Iran is trying to increase its power by creating a Shia group in the region and apply it against the interests of Sunni countries and that of Israel and America (Purahmadi and Jamali, 2009). This revolution led to realizing most of the social protests in the region (Walipurezerumi, 2004). Following the Islamic revolution of Iran, Bahrain scared of revolution like many other countries in the region (Hafeznia and Ahmadi, 2009). In 1360, an unsuccessful coupe was done by Shia to suppress the ruling regime in Bahrain (Fazelinia, 2007). This event led to increasing the pressure by the ruling regime on the Shia and staining the relationship between the Iran and Bahrain; but being effected by the Islamic revolution and politicization, the Shia in Bahrain formed the Islamic party for liberty of Bahrain (Amraei, 2004). In Bahrain, the Liberation Movement which was established under the influence of Islamic revolution and expanded its activities, emphasized on forming the optional parliament. In fact, formation of parliament and drafting the fair constitution in which the rights of majority of Shia were officially recognized was one of the goals of this country (Fuller and Franke, 2005). Also, investigation of the slogans of revolutionist in Bahrain in 2011, suggests dominant Islamic aspect affected by the Islamic revolution of Iran (Abasiashlaqi, 2012). Following and continuing the protests by Shia in Bahrain and its expansion beyond the boundaries of this country, especially, Saudi Arabia and awakening of the Shia movements in this region, cause the Shia geopolitics expand and role of Shia on the political affair of Shia countries increase by inspiring the resistance geopolitics, opportunities of playing role by Iran will be seized.

### *Change of the Identity of Bahraini Regime*

Social movements are considered as a response to public needs of the society. Arab countries of the Middle East have been suffering from political dictatorship since mid1980s. Ambiguous protests and unsustainable social movements were formed under the political atmosphere of the regional countries during this time (Mottaghi and Rashad, 2011). The current revolutions of the Middle East nations should be defined as the blast of political participation due to the lack of efficient social and political organizations to attract the participations under the rule of Arabic authoritarian regimes (Soleimani, 2012). Looking back the political history of Bahrain suggests that the political structures, status and the special relationship between the government and society in Bahrain, and the political approach of Al-Alkhalifa is the background of every kind of revolution and public protests (Adami, 2012). The nature of political regime in Bahrain is the constitutional monarchy (Mirrazavi and Ahmadilefurki, 2004). Certainly, one of the most important aims for the current movement in the Middle East was refining the political structure in order to increase the civic participation and sociopolitical freedom in country (Pillar, 2011). The Shia in Bahrain seeks to change the authoritarian nature of ruling regime and this issue reflects the state of dominated classes. These developments can lead to changing the structure of regimen, increasing the involvement of Shia in running the country and providing opportunities for Iran to play roles which brings about the regional geopolitical developments.

### *Threatening Against the Interests of the U.S.A in Persian Gulf*

Berginsky believe that in every condition that the weakness of Islamic countries leads to social pains, vague hostility to religious brings about the anti America feeling and domestic dissatisfaction or regional

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conflicts intensified this feeling (Brzezinski, 2007). It's been for a thousand years that the Middle East geography had been the main factor in determining the military and economical presence in the region and reaching this source (Kemp and Harkavy, 2004). Since the past, accessing to the sea was one of the main factors of expansionism. The marine condition is Island (Ezzati, 2007). All the Island in the world play military roles and geostrategic role of these countries effects on the geopolitical aims. As the time shows, the people resident in an Island, have not perceived their geopolitical conditions and did not show proper reaction in international political scene and they will miss the advantage of dependence and freedom of act soon (Ezzati, 2005). Due to having geostrategic condition, Bahrain as an Island, has been regarded on behalf of the powers and regional and trans-regional organizations; after the Iraqi's invasion to Kuwait and endangering the interest of America in the Middle East, Bahrain has attracted the attention of Americans in order to use this country as a base of supporting the American fighters which headed toward the region to back the Iraqi force away. The relationship between Bahrain and America was formed since 1932 after developing the oil industry in 1948; this country was head quarter of American warships based in Persian Gulf. Navy's Fifth Fleet Center of U.S.A is based in this country. These fleets play important roles, in this region. The relationship between Manama and Washington reached to its climax in 2001. In this year, George W. Bush, has declared Bahrain as one of the strategic unions. Bahrain is an ancient Arabic country which started its military coordination with America. Bahrain and America had signed a mutual military contract in 1971, according to this contract, a 40 km<sup>2</sup> field was handed to America. On July 1973, the current agreement was put at the top of the agenda, on 30 June 1977, it changed. Based on the newly-made contract, U.S navy can benefit from the facilities in Salman Port. Since 1933, the regional headquarter of U.S navy was based in Bahrain and on July 1995, Bahrain was the host of U.S navy's fifth fleet. The activity area of this fleet was the Red Sea (Jafari, 2008).

One of the most important strategies of the U.S.A in the region was continuous presence of military forces in Persian Gulf. Continuous presence of U.S military force in Persian Gulf means comprehensive support of its policy and the allies against the developments in Persian Gulf (Ezzati, 2009). Islamic government of Iran struggled against America since its emergence and called it as the biggest enemy (Yong, 2005). This revolution causes the most severe hit to the interests of America (Cohen, 2008). After the revolution, the policy of keeping away the foreign powers from the Persian Gulf continued (Minaei, 2007). American military presence in Persian Gulf was the most serious change in strategic environment, so that it changed the balance for the loss of Iran (Khademi, 2005). Presence of America around Iran leads to insecurity and Iran had to consume heavy expenses for national security and removing threats, so the approach of Iran to provide the national security should be regional (Heydari, 2005).

Iran is against the presence of the U.S.A in the region and basing the Fifth Fleet Marine in Bahrain which is the obstacle for Iran to play role in the region, on the other hand, Saudi Arabia demands that the U.S.A forces attend in Persian Gulf and Bahrain to decrease the influence of Iran and keep the stability of the region. If Bahrain which was supported by the U.S.A and was its strategic union leads to changing the structure of governing in increasing public conflicts, the influence of Iran in the region will be increased and the interests of America and its unions will be at risk.

### ***Challenges Facing Iran in Bahrain Developments***

#### ***Intensifying the Geopolitical Conflicts between Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia***

The range of political-military changes in some Arabic countries has not been limited to political boundaries of these countries and the position and influence of regional countries will be affected by these changes (Ghorbani and Karazma, 2012). Competition of regional powers to decrease the rivals and their influence on the process of forming governments in Arabic countries are the main challenges in the Middle East (Dehghani and Farazi, 2012). The public protests in Bahrain caught the eyes of both Shia and Sunni rivals such as Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia considers Bahrain as the Strategic supplement and intervened to suppress the protesters. On the other hand, Iran which ruled on this Island for a long time and has religious similarity with Bahrainis, cannot ignore the events and play its role. The developments in Bahrain cause the geopolitical conflicts happen in Iran and Saudi Arabia , as

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two powers in Persian Gulf, and both of them use the aggressive strategies to defeat and remove each other.

In current years, the concerns and regional competitions between Iran and Saudi Arabia cause the relationship between two countries darken and the diplomatic relationship between them weaken. Saudi Arabia adopted measures in order to struggle against the influence of Islamic Republic of Iran and attempted to improve its position to Iran by solving the problems and crisis in the region and decrease the power and influence of Iran within the unions and regional/trans-regional coalition against Iran (Naderinasab, 2010). Foreign policy of Iran and Saudi Arabia is based on the goals which determine and explain the manner of action of these two countries in the region and beyond (Aqaei and Ahmadian, 2010). Intensified conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia result from the policies imposed by the superpowers especially the U.S.A. Following the Islamic Revolution, the political – ideological influence of Iran in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait suggest this issue (Hafeznia and Rumina, 2005). Lack of political maturity leads to depending on the regional and trans-regional powers; for this, the wave of crisis causes the inner tension and instability (Akbari and Nami, 2009). Bahrain has been the chess board of strategic competition between Iran and Saudi Arabi (Ruhidehbone, 2012). Saudi Arabia built a road between Saudi and Bahrain to make entrance of the armed forces easy in case of chaos and made Bahrain depend on Saudi Arabia (Aqaei and Ahmadian, 2010). Saudi Arabia does not wish to support the disorderliness caused by Shia in this country; especially, it is likely that the chaos expand in Shia areas at the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia (Fuller, 2010). Following the occurrence of protest in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia dispatched its armed force to Bahrain with collaboration of UAE, in order to suppress the protesters.

On the other hand, Iran cannot ignore the events, trying to match the global developments and forming them based on the requests and national interests should be a motivation for geopolitics and universalism in Iran and in order to reach this position, it is essential to be in the center of developments (Mojtahedzadeh, 2007). One of the geopolitical distinctions in Iran results from Shia religion (Zainolabedin.2007). Geographic distribution of Shia made Iran as Shia territory and this issue justified the sensitivity of this country to destiny of Shia society (Ahmadi, 2010). National security committee of Iran has issued two statements for supporting the Bahrainis uprising and expelling the armed forces of Saudi Arabia (Hajiyousefi, 2012). The close union between the countries of the Persian Gulf is a part of broad strategy to stop the influence of Iran in the region and attempting to create economic, political and military union and joining Bahrain to Saudi Arabia, stand against the influence of Iran (Adami and Bakhshi, 2012). In fact, the current tensions between Iran and Arabic countries result from accusing Iran for supporting the Shia in Bahrain to suppress the Sunni ruling regime and Iran's protest against the military intervene of Saudi Arabia in Bahrain for suppression of protesters (Roberts, 2011). In this regard, different scenarios were written for seclusion of Iran in order to decrease the role of Iran in development of Bahrain. Competition of regional powers in Bahrain led to self-awareness of Shia and made people emphasize on reaching their request and individual and social rights.

### *More Pressure on Iran by the Regional and Trans-Regional Powers to Reduce its Role*

Under the current circumstances, the US plays an actively present and exclusive role in the Persian Gulf region. The US is present in the Persian Gulf region to prevent Iran from playing a central role to strengthen regional unity and it intends to dominate the political will of the regional states. The American strategists believe that the US vast interests lie in preventing the emergence of every regional power. The US as a trans-regional element always inspires the idea that Iran is a dangerous and nuclear country and it works in a direction to put the interests of the countries in the region and the world at risk. Strict oppositions against the nuclear dossier of Iran, threats and activities to bring public opinion in the direction of the US developing and unilateral policies are the problems preventing unity and creating conflicts in the region (Ezzati, 2009). Putting pressure on Iran through restricting the scope of influence of Iran in the region and playing Iran's role as the influential regional power is the most important goal for the presence of the US military in the region. The US has been calling the Islamic Republic of Iran several times as one of the main threats against its national interests following the cold war (Chubin,

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1995). The US has been trying to reduce the regional competition power of Iran and the grounds for Iran's influence as well as increasing the influence of Iran's rivals in the region by its presence in the littoral states of the Persian Gulf (Akhbari and Nami, 2009).

The US dependence on Saudi's oil became very quickly the cause for an important military and economic unity between the two countries. This is a commitment emanating from a strategic necessity from the US perspective (Cohen, 2008). Saudi Arabia is currently the centre for the hopes and wishes of Washington and Washington finds Saudi a key country in the Persian Gulf (Ezzati, 2005). Saudi Arabia is looking for materialization of an external hegemonic system through coalition and unity with the US and this issue has created conflict and divergence between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Rezaei, 2005). Following the developments in Bahrain and the expansion of protests by the Shiite, the US and Saudi Arabia started intensifying pressures on Iran as trans-regional and regional powers and intensified the sanctions through international bodies and created many challenges to reduce the role of Iran in these developments.

### *Planning of Different Scenarios to Isolate Iran*

Reuters announced in a report that the American Federal Police and Anti-Narcotic Police (DEA) managed to stop the plot of assassination and explosion in the Saudi Embassy in the US through an operation called 'Red Coalition'. According to the request made by the Federal Prosecutor's Office, Mansour Arbab Sayyar was ready to pay a secret agent of the American DEA US\$ 1.5 million to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador.

Eric Holder, the American Minister of Justice claimed that Washington will adopt measures to question Iran regarding the plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador. He also claimed that the US finds Iran responsible for planning to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador in the US

Iran rejected the allegation by the US about Iran's attempt to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador and found it in the direction of the policy to impose tension and political pressure on Iran to create a media war and propaganda against Iran in order to ask for credits by blackmailing Iran. The next scenario was the claim made by the Bahraini Government that five people were going to attack the Saudi Embassy in Manama, the Interior Ministry of Bahrain as well as the highway connecting Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Deputy Foreign Minister refuted the new allegations of Bahrain against Iran and described it as a fabricated scenario by the US using the Bahraini style. Amir Abdollahian added that promotion of the inefficient policy of Iran-o-phobia will not help resolve the issues of Bahrain. Saudi Arabia is looking for ways to reduce Iran's influence and role in the crisis-stricken region of the Middle East, particularly with regard to the Bahraini issue in order to be able to portray a dangerous image of Iran at international level by supporting similar scenarios.

### **Conclusion**

The results of the study suggest developments in patterns, principles and geopolitical structures in Persian Gulf due to the changes in geopolitical weight, structure and function of variables in national and mass power of regional powers such as Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia and also trans-regional intervening power that is the U.S.A. Bahrain is of high value to Iran so that any changes or developments in Bahrain will bring about opportunities and challenges for the Islamic Republic of Iran. As far as opportunities are concerned, such developments increase the geopolitical influence of the Shiite led by the Islamic Republic of Iran and on the other hand, the dictatorship nature of the Bahraini regime will undergo change. This will damage the interests of the US and its other allies in the region and will bring about important interests for Iran. Subsequently suitable strategies for the role that Iran will play in Bahrain should be adopted on Iran's agenda. But Bahraini developments will also impose some challenges on Iran including creation of geopolitical conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia and more pressure and sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community, and in this direction planning different scenarios and portraying Iran as a nuclear and dangerous country are aimed at reducing the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East developments.

Thus if any type of changes and developments happen in Bahrain and the Shiite undertake a more prominent role in the political structure of that country, the geopolitical balance will change in Iran's favor in the Persian Gulf region.

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