

# **Contested modernity: Divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain**

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## **Abstract**

This study argues that political mobilization based on ethnosectarian identities in Bahrain is a modernist product of the contestations that occurred in the period of increasing British colonial involvement in the early twentieth century. Two concepts are utilized: The first is the colonial "ethnosectarian gaze", marked primarily by its underlying epistemology that saw ethnosectarian cleavages as the main analytic units for approaching local political power, practice, and discourse.

The second is "contested and divided rule". With the advent of Curzon's "forward policy" in the Gulf, Britain actively divided sovereignty between itself and the local ruler, with actors on the island faced with two conflicting sources of jurisdiction. The British viewed issues of jurisdiction primarily through an ethnosectarian lens, and increasingly so did other actors, creating an inter-feeding dynamic between ethnosectarianism, nationalism, and divided rule.

Two emergent forms of political mobilization are emphasized. The first mobilized based on ethnosectarian identity-specific demands and grievances. The other took an overtly nationalist, trans-sectarian, anti-colonial tone, having its roots in the al-Nahda renaissance that swept the Arab world in the nineteenth century. Thus, colonialism, absolutism, ethnosectarianism, and nationalism went hand in hand, products of a similar period of divided rule, their lingering effects still felt today.

# Contested modernity: Divided rule and the birth of sectarianism, nationalism, and absolutism in Bahrain

## 1. Introduction

*"Of the whole population of about 100,000 souls, some 60,000, chiefly townsmen, are Sunnis and about 40,000, mostly villagers, are Shi'ahs."*<sup>2</sup>

Thus did Lorimer begin his discussion on Bahrain in his 1908 Gulf Gazetteer. Using "Sunnis" and "Shi'as" as the basic unit of analysis when discussing Bahrain, and indeed the Gulf generally, remains the dominant mode of thought today. It seems obligatory that any news or academic article opens with a passage similar to the above. These sectarian cleavages are often intersliced with ethnic demarcations that are seen as primordial and unshifting identities; products of age-old local rivalries that have shaped political mobilization since time immemorial. This study seeks to destabilize such a view and turn it upside down: Political mobilization based on ethno-sectarian identities in Bahrain is very much a modernist product, specifically of the contestations and mobilizations that emerged in the period of increasing British colonial involvement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To do so, this article presents a new reading of that period, relying extensively on the use of two concepts: The first is the colonial "ethnosectarian gaze", marked primarily by its underlying epistemology that saw ethno-sectarian cleavages as the main epistemic units for analysing local actors, thus employing a systemic approach to colonial rule that approached issues of political power, practice and discourse primarily through an ethnosectarian lens.

The second concept is "contested and divided rule".<sup>3</sup> With the advent of Curzon's "forward policy" of British expansion in the Gulf, Britain actively divided sovereignty between itself and the local ruler, creating conflicting zones of sovereignties, with actors on the island faced with at least two possible sources of jurisdiction. The British viewed issues of jurisdiction primarily through an ethnosectarian lens, and increasingly, so did other actors, creating an inter-feeding dynamic between ethnosectarianism, nationalism, and divided rule.

Of the many different forms of political mobilization that emerged at the social level, the article emphasizes two different yet intermeshing forms. One would be political mobilization based on

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<sup>2</sup>Qatar Digital Library, IOR/L/PS/20/C91/4, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023515712.0x000042](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023515712.0x000042)>

<sup>3</sup> This is a variation of the concept of "divided rule" developed in: Lewis, M.D. *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938*. Univ of California Press, 2013.

ethnosectarian identity-specific demands and grievances, with an equivocal, sometimes friendly view towards British involvement. The other, largely ignored or misrepresented in the English literature, took an overtly nationalist, trans-sectarian, anti-colonial tone, having its roots in al-Nahda renaissance that swept the Arab world in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus drawing inspiration from an alternative source of modernity than British colonialism. These two visions of modernity would intermesh and clash in 1920s Bahrain, with the contradictions and tensions unleashed at the popular mobilization level continuing to morph, collide, and cross-breed across Bahrain's 20<sup>th</sup> century, their lingering effects felt until today. Thus, modernity, colonialism, absolutism, ethno-sectarianism, and nationalism went hand in hand in Bahrain, products of a similar period of divided rule.

The study provides a new interpretation of events in early twentieth century Bahrain, as well as of the British rule during that period. It does so by extensively engaging with local literature from the period, whereas previous studies have relied almost exclusively on British archives. Furthermore, it ties the analysis on Bahrain to the literature on colonial rule elsewhere, emphasizing the similarities, differences and continuities. Methodologically, it employs a socio-legal institutional reading of history to analyse "divided rule", laced with a close textual reading of British and local documents to dissect the "ethnosectarian gaze" in colonial discourse. Finally, the study provides a novel interpretation of the rise of colonial and absolutist rule in Bahrain and the Gulf, where ethnosectarianism, absolutism, and nationalism rose concurrently in a period defined by clashes of different forms of modernity. Indeed, the final conclusion would be to challenge the epistemic validity of the ethnosectarian gaze in Bahrain and the Gulf more generally, which continues to define and shape the vast majority of scholarship on the region.

## **2. Colonial Ethnosectarian Gaze and Contested Divided Rule**

The above extract from Lorimer's Gazetteer were parts of the first semi-official census in Bahrain that he conducted in 1908. In terms of "primordial cleavages", Lorimer would apply the following divisions: At the sect level were the two great sects of Islam: Sunni (60%) and Shi'ia (40%). Within the local population, Sunnis were divided into Huwala and "Tribes", and Shi'as were composed of Baharna. Added to those would be various groups of "foreigners".

Lorimer's categorizations were based on his reading of locally existing social identifiers. In Bahrain's setting, sect was the most obvious social cleavage, as even without the modern tools of censuses, one could immediately recognize that there was a sizable presence of both sects. Ethnic constructions, in

contrast, are more porous and less stable social categories.<sup>4</sup> Entering into a lengthy discussion on the complex subject of the social and historical constructions of ethnic identities generally and in Bahrain particularly lies beyond the scope of this study, which focuses instead on how these identities came to be mobilized politically. However, it is necessary to give at least a quick overview of the different ethnic identities found within Bahrain's social landscape.

Nowadays, the collective social consciousness uniting those who self-identify as "Huwala" could roughly be described as Sunnis with extensive historical, social and familial ties across both sides of the Gulf, but who see their aspirations and identity primarily anchored in Arab culture, thus considering themselves Arabs. This perception, of course, has been contested by different parties, as well as being porous and open to reshaping as a social construct. Thus they would be called at different times and actors as Persians, Arabized Persians or Persianized Arabs. Furthermore, as we will see in this study, there would be contestation on the coverage and elasticity of "Huwala" as a social category, with the term sometimes used to exclude and at others to include individuals who would be classified as e.g. Khunji or Awazi.

Similarly, the collective consciousness that unites those who today would self-identify as Baharna could roughly be summarized as Shi'a Arabs whose roots lie in the agricultural and fishing villages of Bahrain. Just like in the case of "Huwala", the term "Baharna" would also be malleable and porous across time, facing contestation from different actors, albeit in different ways. Thus, as will be shown in this study, the term would sometimes exclude and at others include people identified as "Hasawi", "Qatifi", those with links to areas in Iraq (e.g. Hilli or Basrawi), and those with links to parts of modern day Iran (e.g. Muhammara).

Finally, "Tribal origins" is a social category whose members today would self-identify as individuals who belong to one of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula. Tribes, of course are a particular socio-economic formation that have been extensively written about<sup>5</sup>, with Ibn Khaldun describing them as the epitome of strong "ʿAsabiyya", or social solidarity based on shared kinship and group consciousness. The most influential tribes in Bahrain are the ʿUtub, with the ruling family of Al Khalifa at the top of the pack. However, in the context of Bahrain, being of "tribal origin", regardless of the particular tribe, increasingly takes on the form of an ethnicity marker, as it is used to identify a particular social group, similar to how "Huwala" or "Baharna" function as ethnic groupings.

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<sup>4</sup> As can be seen in various case studies, e.g.:

Lorcin, Patricia ME. *Imperial identities: stereotyping, prejudice and race in colonial Algeria*. IB Tauris, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> The most widely cited book, although not necessarily the best, is:

Khoury, P.S., and J. Kostiner. *Tribes and state formation in the Middle East*. Univ of California Press, 1990.

Of the groups that Lorimer identified as "foreigners", - a designation that had strong legal and political consequences - the largest group were "Persians". These were mainly Shi'a but also including some Sunnis, the majority of which today self-identify as "Ajam", and who no longer would identify as "foreigners" but as locals of Bahrain.

These ethnosectarian identifiers, always malleable and shift-able as social constructs, existed in Bahrain prior to the arrival of Lorimer, who used them as the basis for demarcation in his census. The demarcations as used by him, however, constituted a new form of knowledge and social categorization. This was in line with colonial practice elsewhere. In the words of one scholar, it was:

"made manifest in the activities of investigation, examination, inspection, peeping, poring over, which were accompaniments to the colonial penetration of a country. In ethnographic description and scientific study, in the curious scrutiny of the colonized by the colonizer, there was much of the attitude of the voyeur as well as of the map-maker. In writing, the gaze appears as bird's-eye description, and is embodied in the high vantage point or knowledgeable position taken up by a writer or traveller as he re-creates a scene."<sup>6</sup>

What most defined this colonial gaze in the Gulf was its ethnosectarian lens, a systemic approach that saw ethnic-sectarian cleavages as the underlying epistemic fault lines that determine political power, practice and discourse. The "local population", its actions, laws, and social makeup were to be analysed mainly based on ethno-sectarian divisions. Hence discourses, censuses, institutions, laws, forms of mobilization, and other apparatuses of power are to be organized by the British around the main fault line of "Sunni" and "Shi'a", and the basic ethnic groupings of "Baharna", "Huwala", "Tribes", "Persian", "Najdi", which are elevated to become the most important markers on the political level. Other socio-economic-political factors such as class, geography, profession, etc., although still playing a role, would take a backseat to these "primordial" elements in shaping the contours of the local political map from the British viewpoint.

Given their nature as social constructs, there were inherent tensions and vagueness in such categories, and as will be shown, British officials would often use problematic, contradictory, and confused definitions across time and agents. The inherent assumption that remained throughout, however, was that it was possible to objectively identify such groups, and that these groupings should serve as the main basis for political analysis.

The resort of British colonial power, epitomized by Lorimer, to such orientalist ethnosectarian groupings was in no way surprising. It emerged out of the need to rule; and in order to rule, it needed

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<sup>6</sup> Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and postcolonial literature: migrant metaphors*. OUP Oxford, 2005.

to codify, order, and make legible those who were to be ruled.<sup>7</sup> The population had to be governed, and this required identifying and codifying the population according to different stratifications that reflect both facts and on the ground and provide manageable, clear-cut categories that are open to practices of governmentality, and these were to be ethnosectarian.<sup>8</sup>

It will not come as a surprise to historians of other regions under colonial rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the British used ethno-sectarian cleavages as basic epistemic units that underlined discourses and practices of colonial rule. The primacy of ethno-sectarian divisions has been well documented in British colonial rule in the Americas, the Indian Princely States, the British Raj, Africa, and Malaya.<sup>9</sup> Thus castes, races, religions, and ethnic identities were elevated and enshrined in censuses, laws and practices of rule across a variety of settings and regions. Indeed, the systems of knowledge structured along racial and ethnic lines is a prevalent trait across colonialist power, stretching back to the Spanish colonization of Latin America.<sup>10</sup>

Lorimer himself was no stranger to colonial modes of rule in India, as he came from a family with a long line of service in the British Raj, and he himself was previously stationed in Punjab in the Northwest frontier.<sup>11</sup> He would collate his Gazetteer when the "forward policy" of active British expansion in the Gulf penned by Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, was in full swing. The Political institutions the British would set up to rule the Gulf would formally be under the Government of India, and nearly all of its staff would have previous colonial rule experience in India, thus creating a robust line between the Gulf and colonial practices of the British Raj.

Unlike scholarship covering other regions under British colonialism, however, existing scholarship on the Gulf has largely dealt with the British colonial gaze -epitomized by the colonial archives- largely uncritically, adopting without exception nearly the same ethnosectarian lens. Hence one important part of this study will be to clearly reveal this colonial ethnosectarian gaze, through an extensive discursive critique of British archival documents, similar to what we applied above to Lorimer's quotes.

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<sup>7</sup> Scott, J.C. *Seeing like a state*. Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Security, territory, population*, Macmillan, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Some examples include:

Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of mind: Colonialism and the making of modern India*. Princeton University Press, 2011.

Ramusack, Barbara N. *The Indian princes and their states*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, P. 212

<sup>10</sup> The foundational text in this regard is:

Quijano, Aníbal. "Coloniality of power and Eurocentrism in Latin America." *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215-232.

<sup>11</sup> Vahman, F. *Encyclopedia Iranica*. "Lorimer, David i. In Persia." <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/lorimer-david-i-in-persia>

This elevation of the ethno-sectarian gaze has been traditionally ascribed to what has been termed in the colonial literature as "Indirect rule", adopting a British-colonial term which refers to a situation in which "native" rulers mediated rule over natives, instead of direct rule by the Metropole. As Jan Smuts, the South African Minister put it: "the "native" would have to be ruled not just by his own leaders but through native institutions."<sup>12</sup> "Ethnicity" was paramount in indirect rule, as it focused on ethnically defined "customary" institutions and laws that supposedly built on native traditions. Hence, the apparatuses of the colonial state were organized based on ethnicity or religion, with the subject population fragmented into several ethnicized minorities, each with its own customary practices.

Indirect rule as a concept has been extensively used, but it has limitations.. First, it implicitly posits a clear dichotomy between indirect vs. direct rule. The line between the two can be blurry, however, with direct vs. indirect rule becoming more of a spectrum, thus limiting its use as an analytic concept. Furthermore, it can downplay the agency of local actors, including the local ruler, ignoring tensions between him and the colonial metropole, as well as tensions between the different imperial and international forces at play.

Instead, it is more useful for our purposes to employ the concept of "divided rule" of Mary Lewis, which approaches the analysis through the lens of sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> It will be argued that the British colonial system in Bahrain institutionalized dual centres of authority and jurisdiction in the territory, where the British had "co-sovereignty" with the local ruler. "Co-sovereignty" meant that the British allowed the local ruler to preserve his own system of customs, taxation, courts, coercive bodies, and religious institutions, while the British also introduced their own set of courts and structures of government side by side with those of the ruler.

We expand the term to "divided and contested rule" (DCR), however, to emphasize that the even the definitions of the jurisdictions of sovereignty were extremely contested in Bahrain. Thus, the local ruler and the British never agreed as to which subjects were to be considered "local" vs. "foreign", and therefore as to which would be under the ruler's vs. British control. These definitions would mainly be constructed and contested by the British along ethnosectarian lines, creating a legal and institutional basis for ethnosectarian political mobilization.

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in: Mamdani, Mahmood. "Historicizing power and responses to power: indirect rule and its reform." *Social Research* (1999): 859-886. P.870

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, M.D. *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881–1938*. Univ of California Press, 2013.

During the years 1900 and 1923, the British and local rulers struggled to reconcile the contradictions arising from this fragmentation and contestations of sovereign power in the new system. They, along with regional powers and local actors on the ground, would simultaneously manoeuvre, reshape, and cross-influence the system from within, with ethnosectarian tensions and political mobilization increasingly coming to the fore.

### 3. Before Divided Rule

Politics on the island, however, were not always mobilized on ethnosectarian lines, and certainly not according to the ethnosectarian lines imagined by the British. Prior to the conquest of Bahrain by Al Khalifa (Sunnis, tribal)<sup>14</sup> in 1783, Bahrain was ruled by the Al Madhkur (Sunnis, Huwala) who were under Persian protection (Shi'as). After a failed attack on al-Zubara in 1782, back then Al Khalifa's bastion, the head of the Al Madhkur fled to Bushehr, and Bahrain was left in a state of political chaos. According to local traditions, the local power feud was split between two factions: one centred around Jidhafs (Shi'as, Baharna), and their main rivals centred around Bilad al-Qadim (Shi'as, Baharna).<sup>15</sup> The enmity reached a point where both factions were engulfed in bloody fights, and the faction in the south reached out to Al Khalifa to overtake the island, pledging them their support. Shaykh Ahmad, the first Al Khalifa ruler, duly arrived, and with barely any resistance, became ruler. For first few decades of rule, he and his two sons would rely heavily on Shi'a ministers to administer the island, as well as Shi'a scribes, poets, and court writers, and representatives to treaties with the British.<sup>16</sup>

It is immediately clear, that an ethnosectarian narrative on its own is unable to explain these political developments, with other socio-geographic factors playing a much more important role. More substantively, it also questions the epistemological validity of giving primacy to ethnosectarian cleavages as units of political analysis. Thus not only is there little evidence that political stances correspond to sect, but even more, that political mobilization and consciousness was primarily formed according to such consideration.

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<sup>14</sup> During the narration, the ethnosectarian affiliations of newly introduced social actors are provided in brackets. This is to show that a purely ethnosectarian reading fails to adequately explain political developments during this period, rather than to reemphasize such a reading.

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad al-Tajir, *Iqd al-Li'al fi Tarikh Awwal* (Bahrain: al-Ayyam, 1994), pp. 100-102.

<sup>16</sup> N. Kazim, *Isti'malat al-Dhakira fi Mujtama' Ta'addudi Mubtala bi-l-Tarikh* (Bahrain: Maktabat Fakhrawi, 2008), pp.62-68.

Indeed, it would be odd if such political mobilization and consciousness was to manifest itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the factors that allow for the emergence of constructed political communities along these lines were still in their infancy in Bahrain. There was yet to be widespread use of newspapers, schools, censuses, maps or roads that would link the various regions and villages in the island together and allow for the creation of uniting mythologies and discourses.<sup>17</sup>

### **Table 1: Occasions when Al Khalifa sought or accepted protection**

Source: Onley, "The politics of protection", p.65.

Instead of ethnosectarian consideration, the regional politics of the first decades of Al Khalifa's rule were based upon the dictates of the politics of protection, which oscillated between the different military and economic powers of the region.<sup>18</sup> The biggest rivalry to Al Khalifa came from other 'Utub tribal members (Rhama bin Jabir Al Jalahma, Sunni), the Al Sa'ud (Sunni), the Imam of Muscat (Ibadi), the Ottomans (Sunni) and eventually their clashes with Al Thani (Sunni) in the Qatari peninsula, as well as Persian (Shi'a) requests for tribute (see Table 1).

Internally, the history of socio-political dynamics can be encapsulated, at least geographically, by the rise of the urban centres of Manama and Muharraq. The rise of both cities would be associated with the pearling and mercantilist trade that would boom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead of overt ethnosectarian mobilization, political power during this period seemed to be more of a conjunctural balance of localized, diffused, and decentralized forces, as political rule was not absolutist and monopolized in a central bureaucracy.<sup>19</sup>

Principal amongst these forces were three economic modes of life: pearl production, trade, and agriculture. These three economic spheres were reflected geographically, with the first concentrated in Muharraq, the second in Manama, and the third scattered across the different villages of Bahrain. Al Khalifa would assign one prince to the Muharraq area, another to the Manama area, while the various agricultural villages of Bahrain were placed under different fiefs that belonged to different Shaykhs, and each had a high degree of autonomy and collected own taxes, particularly in the villages, which were subjected to bonded labour.<sup>20</sup>

Instead, sect considerations would primarily be manifested in affairs at the local social level, particularly those involving Islamic law and practices, as different qadis attended to the legal and

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities*. Verso Books, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Onley, James. "The politics of protection in the Gulf." *New Arabian Studies* 6 (2004):30-92. Pp.40-46

<sup>19</sup> Bishara, F.A, *A Sea of Debt: Histories of Commerce and Obligation in the Indian Ocean, c.1850–1940*." Ph.D. Thesis, (Duke University, North Carolina:2012). Pp.350-355.

<sup>20</sup> Onley, "The Politics of Protection", pp. 60-63.

social practices of each school of Islam in e.g. marriage, divorce, and burial at the different towns and villages. On the flip side, there were factors that would have provided strong impetus to politically mobilize on ethnosectarian terms, should a framework appear that elevates such factors in local politics. Both pearl-diving and agricultural production made for extremely repressive labour conditions, but the two economic activities would differ in significant ways. In pearlfishing, the divers' relationship was mainly with the ship owners, with the Shaykhs of Al Khalifa generally staying out of the pearlers' business.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the pearl merchants and ship captains had developed their own methods and sources of legal custom to settle any disputes (*al-sālifa*). In the agricultural villages, the beneficiaries of the extracted taxes were members of the ruling family, hence creating a direct link of repression between them and those in the villages. Ethnosectarian-wise, the two urban centres were more variegated, with Muharraq displaying a majority population of Sunni Huwala and tribes with some Shi'as, while Manama had a mixed ethnosectarian composition, with a slight Baharna plurality.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the majority of pearl-divers were Sunni, although there were also some who were Shi'a. In contrast, there was strong overlap in terms of ethnicity, sect, and class for the "Baharna" living in villages, who comprised the overwhelming majority of the rural population living on agriculture.

The balance of political forces would significantly shift with the increasing involvement of the British empire in local affairs. This would substantively begin with the treaty of 1861, which effectively (although not officially) made Bahrain a British protectorate, as Britain took over the foreign relations' affairs of Bahrain. British extra-territorial jurisdiction over "British subjects" was established<sup>23</sup>, which would play a significant role in creating a system of divided rule and dual jurisdiction. There were now two legally recognized sources of sovereignty within the same area, with each covering different "subjects" within that area.

From a British point of view, the treaty was imposed because the civil war that engulfed Al Khalifa in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was threatening regional stability and drawing in a large number of regional actors. The encroaching British influence was buttressed when in 1869, British naval forces bombarded Bahrain and forcibly deposed the ruler, thus ending the internal feud. They would agree to install Shaykh 'Isa bin 'Ali as the new ruler, who seems to have received the support of local notables, regardless of sect.<sup>24</sup> In 1880, the ruler would be forced to sign a treaty of exclusivity with

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<sup>21</sup> Almahmood, M. *The rise and fall of Bahrain's merchants in the pre-oil era*. M.A. Thesis, (American University, Washington DC: 2013). pp.15-20.

<sup>22</sup> These estimates are based on Lorimer's previously cited figures. See footnote 2.

<sup>23</sup> Onley, James. *The Arabian frontier of the British raj*. OUP Oxford, 2007. pp.119-121.

<sup>24</sup> Kazim, *Isti'malat al-Dhakira*, p.65.

the British, promising to not enter into treaties with any other international power.<sup>25</sup> Shaykh 'Isa's reign would span the next half of a century until the climax of our story in 1923.

Prior to 1900, Britain relied on a system of "native agents" –locally influential merchants- to administer its interests in the islands. Given that Britain had no white "British" officers present, this system allowed Britain to run their "informal empire" and tap into local politics and business "on the cheap". This native agency system would see the first seeds of the ethnosectarian gaze being implanted, as it played a fundamental role in the choice of native agents. Thus, they were always chosen from ethnosectarian groups that the British considered to be "foreign" subjects of Britain. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the native agents were Bania from India. Based on "covertly racial views", the British in the 1820s switched to native agents from regions closer to the Gulf. In Bahrain, they were drawn nearly all from one family, al-Safar (Shi'a). Of the 13 native agents, only two were born in Bahrain. Once again based on covertly racial views, the British would switch in 1900 from native agents to the employment of white British officers as political Agents.<sup>26</sup>

Even before 1900, the tensions of multiple jurisdictions were slowly simmering. Probably the most significant event from an ethnosectarian perspective was the first public procession of Muharram in Manama in 1891. Previously not allowed, it was headed by the merchant Mirza Muhammad Isma'il, the agent for the British India Steam Navigation Company, who was officially under British protection. He used his official position to head the procession, held in open air for the first time.<sup>27</sup>

The switch from a native agency system to a political agency headed by British officers finally occurred in 1900. As part of a reorganization of imperial policy in the Gulf, the new political agent would report to the Gulf residency in Bushehr, who in turn would report to the government of India. This was based on Curzon's forward policy, which advocated for increasing ground presence in the Gulf in response to increasing imperial rivalry in the region. As pearl-diving and the resultant trade boomed meteorically in Bahrain during the global "Age of Capital" of 1860-1900, Curzon decided that white British boots were needed on the ground. The shift to the political agency system however, would only serve to deepen the contradictions of divided rule.

#### **4. Contesting Divided Rule: 1900-1919**

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<sup>25</sup> Kaiksow, Sarah. *Threats to British" Protectionism" in Colonial Bahrain*. M.A. Thesis, (Georgetown University, Washington DC: 2009), p.35

<sup>26</sup> Onley. *The Arabian frontier*. pp.130-140.

<sup>27</sup> Fuccaro, Nelida. *Histories of city and state in the Persian Gulf: Manama since 1800*. Cambridge University Press, 2009. P.169.

Britain sent the first political agent stationed in the Gulf to Bahrain in 1900. A new power was in town, and unlike before, where it limited itself to regulating the peace and trade between regional powers, it was focused on increasing its powers domestically. This new source of sovereignty would be reflected geographically, between "Dar al-Hukuma", the residence of the local ruler in Muharraq, vs. "Bait al-Dawla", the residency of the political agent in Manama. Given Manama's variegated ethnosectarian composition in conjunction with the British presence there, it would become the main scene for most of the ensuing events. Very soon, it would become very clear which of the sovereign powers had the upper hand.

By all accounts, 1904 was a watershed year in the history of Bahrain. The spark that lit the convulsive events were on the surface two trifling incidents, but which upon closer inspection, pushed all the buttons for the British regarding the issues of divided rule and the ethnosectarian gaze. Both incidents involved followers of 'Ali, the Shaykh who was in charge of Manama, on whose jurisdiction Bait al-Dawla was encroaching. In the first incident, some of his followers had an altercation with local employees of a German merchant, who complained to the British agent for reparations. In the second, altercations happened between "Persians" (as the British would call them) and 'Ali's followers. This induced the Qajari Shah's government in Persia, to strongly protest the matter to the British.

The events<sup>28</sup> climaxed with the British Political resident in Bushehr arriving on a battleship, followed by the public burning of the ships of Shaykh 'Ali, his followers flogged, his house ransacked and its contents burned, and Shaykh 'Ali himself arrested and banished to Bombay for five years.<sup>29</sup> This was a public show of force and humiliation, and a public declaration that there was a new power in town, and this power was above any other.

This event would prove significant in many other respects. Besides publicly declaring a new, supreme sovereign, the British also took over the protection and legal matters of all "foreigners". Thus, individuals were to be categorized either into "foreigners" or "local" subjects, with foreigners falling under the jurisdiction of British rule, while "locals" would be under the jurisdiction of the ruler. The crux, however, was that "foreigner" was not a predefined category, and thus would become a site of contestation, with massive legal and political consequences. The term would

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<sup>28</sup> The events from a British colonial ethnosectarian viewpoint can be found in:

IOR/L/PS/10/28/3, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100026682266.0x0000b1](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100026682266.0x0000b1)>

<sup>29</sup> Al-Tajir, *Iqd al-Li'al*, p.150.

become an "apparatus" in the Foucauldian sense, upon which contestation would occur and institutions, discourses, and mobilizations would strategically form.<sup>30</sup>

The British held that any subject of a government other than the local ruler would count as a foreigner. By this definition, anyone considered a subject of the governments administering Iraq (then under Ottoman rule), al-Hasa (Ottoman), Qatif (Ottoman), Persia (Qajar), Najd (Al Sa'ud), would be considered a foreigner and under British jurisdiction. Given the geographic and familial links of the people who resided in Bahrain, the vast majority of the population would have had some connection with at least one of these regions. To compound the issue, in many of these regions there were yet to emerge modern state bureaucracies, let alone state borders, emigration offices, naturalization policy or passports.<sup>31</sup> The population of the islands would also fluctuate throughout the year, with thousands of divers flowing into the island from these areas during the pearling season. Furthermore, as previously elucidated, nationalism and the factors leading to national identity formation were still in their infancy and yet to be crystallized concretely.

Hence, the British turned to employing ethno sectarian analysis to identify the different subjects. "Hasawi", "Persian", "Najdi", and "Shi'a" became markers that defined the groups in which each individual would fall, and these groups would then shape who was "foreign" or "local" and thus entitled to British jurisdiction and not. The interplay between divided rule, ethnosectarianism, and nationalism was firmly set in motion, with each feeding into the other.

Immediately after the 1904 event, Assistant Political Agent Prideaux would write to the Political Resident:

"Finally, Sheikh Isa, I think, should be told emphatically that no disputes between Shias and Sunnis are henceforth to be referred to the Sharia Court, any more than disputes between Hindus and Mahommedans are. The Shias, who are mostly Persians, in the absence of the Shah's Consular representatives naturally look to us for protection, and as the British Government are interested in the welfare of all classes in Bahrein, they cannot view with equanimity the injustice even of making Bahrein Shias (who are all Persian by origin) submit to the jurisdiction of a religious Court other than their own."<sup>32</sup>

The above quote illustrates several important points. Most obviously, it highlights the ethnosectarian gaze that the British employed, reading events primarily in terms of Sunnis, Shi'as, Persians, etc.

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<sup>30</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon, 1980. Pp.194-196.

<sup>31</sup> F.I. Khuri. *Tribe and state in Bahrain*, University of Chicago, 1980. p.87

<sup>32</sup>IOR/L/PS/10/81, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100027013014.0x000052](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100027013014.0x000052)>

Thus, the person's identity is primarily reduced to his sect and ethnicity, which in turn would define his standing as "foreigner" or "local", and which would have repercussions on his legal, social, and political standing. Thus nationality fed into ethnosectarianism, which in turn fed into divided rule and vice versa. It also highlights the confusion and porousness between the different ethnosectarian categories the British employed, illustrated by the statement, utterly farcical from today's viewpoint, that all Shi'as are Persian.

To sharpen the point, it is worth contrasting the British documents with the writings of local historians from that period. One of most perceptive was Nasir al-Khairi. The word he used to describe the 1904 events was "*fitna*" (strife). He would continue:

"This ominous crisis passed, which due to its grave events and enormous lessons, it is apt to say it was the beginning of a new political era in Bahrain, and the start of an important overthrow in the shape of the government, its system, and the principle of dividing the people of the land (*al-ahālī*) into nationals versus foreigners, and external versus internal."<sup>33</sup>

The ruler was not about to lie down and accept the erosion of his jurisdiction without a fight. His manoeuvre would be to contest what is meant by the word "foreigner". He insisted that his interpretation of the word "subjects" covered not only "locals", but also subjects of other "Arab" governments.<sup>34</sup> The British did not see matters that way, and a contestation would occur regarding the word "foreign", with each side trying to include as many individuals under their jurisdiction. This was a fight over sovereignty, and rule was not only divided, it was contested.

Thus, the administration report of the political agency states that in the year 1918 there were some matters of concern:

"Two of these cases were an endeavour on part of Shaikh Isa to assert his authority over Hasawis and Najdis. In one case the Amir of Muharraq Island arrested and imprisoned Hasawis by order of Shaikh Isa who on representation argued that the Hasawis were under his jurisdiction but he was told that this could not be recognised. Shaikh Isa promised that this will not occur again and sent the Amir of Muharraq to the agency to apologize to the political agent. In the other case the Amir of Manamah took a deposit of 4 pounds from a foreign subject who was suspected of having pearls in his possession belonging to his Nokhedha. On hearing the matter, the political agent went for the Amir

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<sup>33</sup> N. al-Khairi, *Qala'id al-Nahrain fi Tarikh al-Bahrain* (Bahrain: al-Ayyam Publishing, 200), p.416.

<sup>34</sup> IOR/R/15/1/295, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023842168.0x000037](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023842168.0x000037)>. See also: Radhi, *THE BAHRAIN JUDICIARY SYSTEM: A HISTORICAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY*, Ph.D. thesis (SOAS, London, 2000). P.72.

and recovered the money which was handed over to the man whose case was then dealt in the agency. The Amir apologized...."<sup>35</sup>

These two examples serve to show how ethnicity and nationality were both to be contested. In regard to the first case, Shi'a people in Bahrain today with links to al-Hasa are generally considered to part of "Baharna", which shows the porousness within such categories. In regard to the second case, the pearl diver most probably came from the eastern shores of the Gulf or Qatar, which also have strong familial and cultural links to Bahrain, reconfirming the malleability of such categories.

This dispute between the ruler and the British opened up the avenue for other regional forces to enter the fray. Three would come to play a primary role: the Ottomans, the Qajar dynasty in Iran, and the rising force of Al Sa'ud. The ruler of Najd would first side with the British, giving them jurisdiction over "Najdis". He would then switch in 1913 and hand over jurisdiction to the ruler of Bahrain, thus playing the two against each other for his own ends.<sup>36</sup> He would even directly contest the British monopoly on extraterritorial sovereignty in Bahrain, appointing an agent, al-Qusaibi, who would try to issue passports and act as a consul, causing the British great ire and anxiety.<sup>37</sup> The ruler, in turn, also tried to play off regional rivalries. Thus, for example, he opened negotiations with the Turks during the First World War.<sup>38</sup>

The above examples serve to highlight the role of another set of agents who would utilize, resist, and redefine the contradictions opened up by divided rule: "regular" individuals. People on the ground experienced and responded to these treaties and colonial laws in different manners, testing and taking advantage of the ambiguities resulting from contested sovereignty. In hindsight, this seems expected. There were real potential material gains from being considered a subject under British sovereignty. For one, forced labour was abolished in 1904 for "foreigners", and slaves could gain manumission. Furthermore, British jurisdiction could provide a protective coercive force that would easily fend off any other sources of coercive power. In addition, it also opened up the possibility of recourse to British law and courts, useful in cases that might be considered crimes under local law but not so under British law, and vice-versa.

The ethnic group one was to be classified under meant access to different legal systems and recourses of protection. Whether you were to be considered Persian, Hasawi, Baharna, etc meant

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<sup>35</sup> IOR/R/15/2/951, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100025642677.0x000008](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100025642677.0x000008)>

<sup>36</sup> Radhi, *THE BAHRAIN JUDICIARY*, p.73

<sup>37</sup> IOR/R/15/1/562, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100024100267.0x00003f](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100024100267.0x00003f)>

<sup>38</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and state*, p.88.

being under the jurisdiction of different rulers. Thus "forum shopping" was becoming a real phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> The examples are numerous, and the selections below serve as illustrations:

In 1907, a group of "Persians", encouraged by enforcement of British protection under divided rule, would display the imperial flag of Iran at the opening of the Manama 'Ashura ceremonies, which as we saw before was held under British since 1891. By this act they both challenged the ruler's sovereignty, as well as making a political statement regarding events in Iran, showing their allegiance to the Qajar government, which was facing a stiff challenge from the constitutional movement there.<sup>40</sup>

There were cases of "Shi'a Arabs" invoking being Persian subjects in order to benefit from British protection. Under the pretense that he was a subject of Iran, the Persian merchant 'Abd al-Nabi Kal-Ewarz issued formal documents to anyone traveling to Iran.<sup>41</sup> By the same token, the British Agency dealt with cases that supposedly should have fallen under the ruler's authority. The agency manumitted several slaves, protected Arab women accused of "dishonourable behavior"<sup>42</sup>, and gave refuge to merchants and individuals accused of different violations, ranging from absconding debt, to theft, to fraud.<sup>43</sup> The ruler, in return, decided to strike back at that which the British most coveted: he deferred on reforming ports and installing a British officer as heads of customs, and kept extending the customs agency given to the Bania family.

Hence divided rule became a terrain where different actors and forces acted, reacted, and contested the jurisdictional framework. The local ruler contested who counted as a foreigner and the parameters of his jurisdiction. Locals not only practiced forum shopping in terms of courts and laws, but also "protection shopping" in terms of which sovereign power to recourse to for protection against other powers. The British contested the sovereignty of the ruler, while also trying to limit the encroachments of other regional powers, who on their part tried to use the contradictions to their advantage. This was a convulsive mix. Much of this contestation, as we saw, happened according to ethnosectarian identifications, which suddenly had strong legal and political consequences for the individuals. The labels of "foreigner" vs. "local", and under them "Shi'a", "Sunni", "Baharna", "Persian", etc, became apparatuses with a strategic function, as formation of institutions, discourses, and practices, emerged around these new systems of knowledge and categorization, in response to an urgency created by the new situation on the ground.

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<sup>39</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). P.216

<sup>40</sup> Fuccaro, *Histories of city*. P. 169.

<sup>41</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and State*. Pp. 87-88.

<sup>42</sup> Radhi, *The Bahrain Judiciary*. Pp. 66-67.

<sup>43</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and State*. Pp. 87-88.

The British would formally attempt to codify the system of "divided rule" they were informally practicing through the "Bahrain Order in Council" (BOIC), published in 1913.<sup>44</sup> The First World War shifted British interests to other matters, and the BOIC was not put formally into practice until February 1919. 1919 would prove to be an incredibly busy year.

##### 5. "*Fitna*": The breakdown of divided rule 1919-1923

The First World War years were particularly devastating for Bahrain, being hit by a plague in 1915 and 1917, coupled with general commodities shortages. Over 5,000 people, or more than 5% of the population, died.<sup>45</sup> Although the repercussions of divided rule continued, British activity on the island naturally thinned, as its focus concentrated elsewhere.

As soon as the war was over, and with the Ottomans and Germans defeated, British interest in the region generally and Bahrain specifically was renewed in the post Sykes-Picot era. The heightened activity would be propelled by the arrival of two new political agents. Major Dickson would take helm in 1919-1920, after which Major Daly would take over until 1926. Their tenure would prove to be system-shifting for Bahrain.

1919 was a busy year for Dickson. The BOIC was formally put into practice by establishing 6 official courts, marking the beginning of the "rationalizing" of the legal bureaucracy in Bahrain. Following the British tradition of relying on "local customs", the distinction between foreign/national and ethnosectarianism played a major role in the courts' setup. Thus there were the chief court and district court, which had absolute jurisdiction over all foreigners in Bahrain. The joint court was for cases involving "foreigners" and "locals". "Majlis al-'Urf, the local institution that previously adjudicated commercial cases, was acknowledged as an institution that could hear cases of a commercial nature. However, it was inscribed that the political resident had the right to appoint four "foreigners" out of its eight members in consultation with the ruler, and the ruler had similar rights for the other four to be appointed from "locals".

The courts were kept extremely busy, with the number of suits reaching 290 in 1919, 343 in 1920, 777 in 1921, 786 in 1922 and 818 in 1923.<sup>46</sup> As the British admitted, many of these case were done simply to take advantage of the new institutionalized laws and jurisdictions, with a significant

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<sup>44</sup> IOR/R/15/1/305, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100000000193.0x000116](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000193.0x000116)>

<sup>45</sup> Almahmood, M. *The rise and fall*.). p.38.

<sup>46</sup> IOR/R/15/1/305, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023067946.0x00001a](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023067946.0x00001a)>

proportion dropped before conclusions, as the different parties would reach a settlement. Hence, forum shopping reached its zenith during this period. Similarly, appeals for British protection and use of their sovereignty by "locals" continued, particularly by what the British described as "Shi'as", thus continuing the contestation of divided rule.<sup>47</sup>

Another institution promulgated by the British in 1919 which would display a strong ethnosectarian dimension in its formation was the municipality council of Manama. In essence an alliance between the British agency and merchants of Manama to shift power from the ruler towards themselves, while also acting as a vehicle for enacting reforms in the city, the council was partially elected based on nominal elections that were limited to property-holders, and self-financed through taxes levied on dwellers. Its makeup would formally enshrine consociational politics along foreign/national and ethnosectarian lines, with seats allocated for "Hindus", "Shi'a Persians", "Sunni Persians", and "local Sunnis/Shi'as". Its most active member was its secretary, a notable merchant named Muhammad Sharif Awazi, a "Persian" under British protection.

Furthermore, the British established a semi-regular police force in Manama, headed by the same Muhammad Sharif, and staffed exclusively by Persians. Thus 1919 was a year in which the British moved in earnest to consolidate and regulate its sovereign powers in Bahrain, pushing towards increased presence in the legislative (BOIC), judicial (various courts), mercantile (Majlis al-'Urf, urban (municipality council), and coercive powers (police force). All of these were crafted with heavy influence of the ethno-sectarian gaze, which while already in practice, had now codified legal footing with real structures and institutions on the ground.

Other factors started feeding into the ethnosectarian cocktail. There is evidence, for example, that British agents actively tried to cultivate a base of support. Writing in 1919, the Political agent, would report that there is a "a considerable feeling of hostility" towards the British "due to religious, economical, personal, and war reasons", and that "there was no "British party" to counteract that".<sup>48</sup>

"Notables" would also enter the fray, and increasingly the politics of the notables would be based on ethnosectarian, foreign/local considerations. An illustrative case is Muhammad Sharif Awazi, a Manama merchant who we just encountered as the British-appointed police chief and the Manama Municipality secretary. Previously, he had a long involvement in the British native agency system,

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<sup>47</sup> One emblematic case is of Ahmad bin Khamis, whom will reappear later as a "Shi'a notable". See: AlMahmood, *The rise*, pp.33-34.

<sup>48</sup>IOR/R/15/1/730, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100022744604.0x000049](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100022744604.0x000049)>

serving as the acting native agent at some point. Given these connections, he came to be regarded by the British as a notable who represents the "Persian community".<sup>49</sup>

The "ethnicity" of Muhammad Sharif is interesting: A Sunni whose ancestry was from the region of Awaz in Iran, in modern-day Bahrain he would be classified as "Huwala", as the term today has come to include individuals with any connections to the Gulf's eastern coasts. However, Muhammad Sharif in 1919 was certainly neither classified as Huwala by himself, by other Huwala, or by the British. Indeed, he classified himself as Persian under British protection, something which the Huwala of Muharraq (where the vast majority resided) certainly would not have classified themselves as. As was the case when discussing "Hasawis" and "Qatifis", this serves to show how the boundaries of social categories could shift over time.

The second illustrative example is 'Abd 'Ali bin Rajab, a Manama merchant from a well-known "Baharna" family. Rajab's entry into the field of contestation between the ruler and the British was through Majlis al-'Urf when the local ruler appointed him in 1919 to replace a previous "local member".<sup>50</sup> The Political agent objected that he was not consulted in the appointment, while the ruler replied that it was his right to appoint local members. By 1922, Rajab, who by then would be identified by Daly in his petitions as the "head of the Shia community", would become one of the strongest supporters of British reforms.

One of these petitions that both Rajab and Sharif signed provides a stunning illustration and indictment of the British ethnosectarian gaze. This was a petition organized by Daly in 1921<sup>51</sup>, in which he carefully picked 38 "notables" signatures to display support for him, the ruler, and the Political Resident, with several individuals reportedly pressured into signing.<sup>52</sup> The petition's signatories were carefully chosen and categorized to reflect what Daly viewed as the ethnosectarian political composition of the island. First came a section explicitly named "The Arab community", and underneath it the signatures started with those representing tribes: notables from Al Dawasir, Al Bin 'Ali, as well as Al Manna'i. Then came names of several "Sunni" notable traders. Then came the name of the aforementioned 'Abd 'Ali bin Rajab, who was identified as the "head of the Shia Bahrani community", followed by AhmAd bin Khamis, identified as "a Shia notable".<sup>53</sup>

The petitions then had a new section called "the foreigners", and under a sub-section named the "Persian community", there came a list of twelve names, headed by the aforementioned MuhammAd

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<sup>49</sup>IOR/R/15/2/102, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023400694.0x000004](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023400694.0x000004)>

<sup>50</sup> M.M. al-Khalifa, *Sibazabad wa-Rijal al-Dawla al-Bahiyya* (Beirut: al-Mu'asasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2010), pp.451-453.

<sup>51</sup> IOR/R/15/2/121, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023025311.0x00000c](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023025311.0x00000c)>

<sup>52</sup> H. Wahba, *Khamsuna 'Aman fi Jazirat al-'Arab* (Cairo: Dar al-Afaq al-'Arabiyya, 2001), p.15.

<sup>53</sup> See footnote 48.

Sharif, identified as "the head of the Persian community ". Then came a new subsection labelled "the Najdi community", headed by al-Qusaibi, the agent of Ibn Sa'ud. Finally, there was a subsection entitled "Indian Headmen", with two names identified as the leader of the "Indian Moslem community" and the "headman of the Hindu community".<sup>54</sup>

This petition signalled that ethnosectarianism was by now enshrined in the politics of the notables. It is significant to indicate that the head of each "community" that Daly identified was actually a member of Majlis al-'Urf or the municipal council, with such a position giving the person the legitimacy to claim to head his "ethnic community". The petition also heralded petitioning as a potent weapon used by the different sides in the to and fro of their political struggles.

On the flipside to ethnosectarian mobilization, which we endeavoured to show was a "modern" product of the period of British divided and contested rule, 1919 was also the year that crystallized the rise of another form of modernist thought, in many ways antithetical as well as symbiotic to colonial rule. This modernity traced its roots to the al-Nahda "Renaissance" that swept the Arab world in the latter nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> The individuals involved displayed a variegated modernist cocktail of literary renaissance, British anti-colonialism, Arab nationalism, and ecumenical Islamic reform.<sup>56</sup> This cocktail would interact to crystallize itself in a nationalist discourse laced with anti-colonialism and demands for popular participation in decision-making.

1919 was the year that al-Hidaya school was officially opened in Muharraq, the first school in Bahrain financed by and catering for locals, causing great anxiety to the British. Membership of the "educational council" included Qasim al-Shirawi, who was in charge of Muharraq customs and a close adviser of the ruler, as well as a founder of the Literary Club (1919); It would also include 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Zayyani, a merchant from a notable family with exposure to al-Nahda religious thought. The head of the school was Hafiz Wahba, the Egyptian al-Nahda reformer who previously administered the first modern school in Kuwait and the Gulf, and was arrested by the British in India and Egypt.<sup>57</sup>

The roots of this rising literary and political clique stretch back at least to the first attempt to set up a public library in Bahrain in 1913. This initiative included Sa'ad al-Shamlan, who would found with

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<sup>54</sup> IOR/R/15/2/121, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023025311.0x00000c](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023025311.0x00000c)>

<sup>55</sup> Laroui, Abdallah, and Diarmid Cammell. *The crisis of the Arab intellectual: traditionalism or historicism?*. University of California Press, 1977.

<sup>56</sup> Although there is an emergent literature on al-Nahda in other parts of the Arab world, unfortunately the English literature on the reach of al-Nahda in the Gulf is practically non-existent. Although this paper outlines some of the barebones of this movement in Bahrain in relation to political developments on the island, this is an area that is in severe need of more detailed study by scholars in the future. For our purposes, we use the catch-all phrase "al-Nahda movement" to refer to the individuals in Bahrain and the Gulf who were immersed in al-Nahda literature and thought.

<sup>57</sup> Wahba, *Khamsuna 'Aman*, p.14-19.

al-Zayyani "the committee to resist British Colonialism" in 1919, as well as the two historians Nasir al-Khairi and Muhammad al-Tajir, who would play an important role in documenting the events of this period, and whose writings this study relies on extensively. This group would establish Bahrain's first literary club in the same year, Nadi Iqbal Awwal, which also included Ahmad bin Lahij.<sup>58</sup>

If one were to use the ethnosectarian gaze, most of those in the group were Sunni, although there were a few Shi'as too (e.g. al-Tajir). However, they would prove to be the seeds of a different discourse. They were all immersed in al-Nahda writings, with extensive regional contacts with its figures, and the discourse they propelled was that of anti-colonialism and nationalism. By 1923, and with the exception of the two historians, all of those mentioned above were jailed and exiled by the British.

### *The climax of divided rule into Fitna*

1922-1923 were years of turmoil in Bahrain. This was not caused by economic considerations, as pearl exports, trade and customs had returned to booming after the difficulties faced during the first world war. Instead, the contradictions that arose from the system of divided and contested rule coupled with increasing political mobilization along ethnosectarian cleavages had reached a boiling point and was on verge of collapse. Public order was falling apart, in what the British describe as an "abnormal wave of crime". As events will show, neither the British were able to control "foreigners", nor was the ruler able to establish authority over "locals", with clashes increasingly taking on an ethnosectarian dimension.

During 1921-1922, a petition and counter-petition war waged on, with steady escalation of events from all parties involved. Following Daly's previously mentioned petition of June 1921, he would forcibly exile Jasim al-Shirawi on charges of obstructing British reforms.<sup>59</sup> In December, a petition was submitted to the political resident by "Baharna" notables, asking to become subjects under British protection.

In January 1922, Daly would deport Wahba on the pretense of instigating an anti-British article that appeared in Egypt.<sup>60</sup> In February 1922, a *fidāwī*, one of the irregular militias of one of the Shaykhs, got into an altercation with a villager, with other villagers overpowering the *fidāwī* and releasing

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<sup>58</sup> M.M. Sarhan, "Murur Mi'at 'Am 'Ala Muhawalat Ta'sis Awwal Maktaba 'Ammā fi-l-Bahrain", *al-Wasat*, 2 April 2013, <<http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/761039.html>>.

<sup>59</sup> IOR/R/15/2/104, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023246775.0x00003a](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023246775.0x00003a)>

<sup>60</sup> Wahba, *Khamsuna 'Aman*, p.19-20.

their compatriot. Several "Baharna" in Manama initiated a strike, and subsequently "Baharna" notables presented a petition to the ruler. The ruler's response was positive to the petition, agreeing to all but one of the demands in them.<sup>61</sup>

The case of the political mobilization of the "Baharna" provides an illustration of how political mobilization based on ethnosectarian lines could transcend other socioeconomic cleavages. There were significant differences in the socioeconomic conditions of the "Baharna" living in urban areas vs. villages, with villagers uniquely experiencing corvee and related taxes. Indeed, most of the demands in the petition were addressed towards grievances and transgressions that befell villagers. The main drivers and signatories of petitions on behalf of the "Baharna community", however, were urban merchants from Manama. Thus, mobilization based on a "Baharna" identity created a solidarity linking those in an urban setting to those in the villages, bypassing any socioeconomic differences between them.

Some members of "al-Dawasir" tribe, whom were semi-autonomous in their political and economic affairs under the previous system of localized rule, would now violently enter the fray of what had become overtly contentious politics. Emboldened by the support of Ibn Sa'ud, they launched an attack on the village of Barbar, leaving several people dead.

This was followed by deadly skirmishes in Manama by members of two "foreign" groups that were supposedly under British jurisdiction: Clashes between "Persians", led by the previously encountered Muhammad Sharif, and "Najdis", led by al-Qusaibi, erupted in April and May. Newspaper in Iran ran several articles protesting the matter. A petition to the agency was signed by "Persians" for protection, while different notables, all "Sunni locals", signed a petition to the ruler accusing "Persians" of monopolizing and abusing the police force.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, *fidāwīyya* of a semi-autonomous Shaykh attacked a village in Sitra, causing some "Baharna" to congregate at the Political agency in uproar.<sup>63</sup>

Ethnosectarian political mobilization had violently taken centre stage, with different parties contesting the volatile and unclear parameters of sovereign power, each trying to mobilize to its advantage. Two poles were formed around which the different groups mobilized mainly on ethnosectarian lines, with each pole defined by an opposing source of sovereignty: one was pro-British and against the local ruler, the other was anti-British and pro-ruler.

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<sup>61</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and State*, pp. 93-93.

<sup>62</sup> Al-Khalifa, *Sibazabad wa-Rijal*, pp.528-529.

<sup>63</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and State*, pp.93-94.

In such situations, it is usually the party with the largest coercive force which prevails, and so it proved here. On 14 May 1923, two British military vessels arrived with the Political Resident Knox on board. On 17 May the duties of rule were forcibly transferred to the ruler's son, and on 24 May the British ordered the Bania family in charge of customs that revenues were to be transferred to the son. The ruler was deposed on 26 May and his powers officially transferred to his son in a much publicized ceremony, in which Knox gave a speech that provides one of the finest examples of the colonial ethnosectarian gaze. He devoted a section to address each "community": Al Khalifa, Shi'a, Sunni, and foreigners, where he outlined the British concerns and hopes for each ethnosectarian grouping.<sup>64</sup>

Shortly afterwards, the British deported al-Qusaibi to Saudi Arabia, and al-Dawasir tribe would also be exiled there. Sa'ad al-Shamlan was deported to Bombay, accused of playing a role in the events between the "Persians" and "Najdis".

By 1923 Bahrain had become in the eyes of the British an unruly collection of ethnicities and sects, surrounded by regional intrigues from Najd and Persia, and headed by an ineffective and despotic ruler. This had to end and the system reorganized.

Thus, divided rule caused the British, just like the French in Tunisia<sup>65</sup>, to increasingly find themselves in a spiral trap, as their efforts to assume greater sovereignty in Bahrain increasingly engendered contradictions that further forced the British to increase their involvement on the island. This reached a climax in 1923, as they directly and completely took over local rule. As the contradictions engendered by regional intrigues, local actors' mobilization, and the ruler's resistance increasingly began to explode and spin out of control, the British acted decisively to "reform" the system and consolidate political power in a manner that was more manageable for them.

Most of the studies that document the events of 1921-1923 are based on the British archives' accounts of events, which as we saw, significantly reveal the ethnosectarian gaze used by the British.<sup>66</sup> As a counter-narrative, we present the writings of a local historian: Muhammed 'Ali al-Tajir, whom we encountered previously as a member of al-Nahda movement. Al-Tajir's story is interesting, since ethnically he is Bahraini Shi'a from Manama. If we go by the colonial ethnosectarian gaze, the expectation would be that he would have been pro the British reforms and

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<sup>64</sup> Text of the speech:

IOR/R/15/2/131, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023403812.0x00006b](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023403812.0x00006b)>

<sup>65</sup> Lewis, *Divided Rule*, pp.13-14.

<sup>66</sup> The most famous probably is the "Najdi-Persian" incident, with the British discourse being a masterpiece of the ethnosectarian gaze:

IOR/R/15/1/336, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023840573.0x000081](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023840573.0x000081)>

against the ruler. Below is a translated excerpt of his accounts, which due to their importance as a counter-narrative that has not been previously provided in the English literature, are extensively quoted:

"The sole reason for the recent coup is the Western gluttony for overtaking the Eastern Kingdoms under a curtain of deception, flimsy excuses, and commercial and political means whose appearance is love, compassion, sincerity, and enchanting promises, while its substance is treachery, deception, betrayal, disunity, and the creation of problems so that the situation reaches a point where they can appropriate the country without the significant costs that are necessary in warfare; and to have outward excuses to counter any accusations that great countries are attacking small emirates and overtaking them by force. And this is a microcosm of colonialists' policy generally regarding colonies."<sup>67</sup>

Al-Tajir then proceeds to describe the imperial rivalries that Britain faced during first world war, after which he continues:

"And when the air cleared for the British policy in Bahrain, it then dusted itself off from its previous hibernation, and rolled up its leaves for the moment of action. It took off the lamb's fleece and appeared in its true form. It deputized one of its cunning men, "Major Dickson", in the year 1919. He was as fluent in Arabic as a native, and he took to meeting individuals from the people (*al-ahālī*) to mould from them an instrument through which to gain his political motives... For he would show compassion and sympathy for the situation of the oppressed and present them with promises of ending servitude; and that the time of gaining freedom, independence and regaining trampled rights and stolen lands is eminent... And these seeds that he laid started growing, and this became too much to bear for the government, and so it sent a complaint to the Gulf Resident, who answered its request, and the order was issued for his resignation. And so Britain replaced him with Major Daly, which as the saying goes, was like "jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire"."

Daly's machinations on the island then become the focus of al-Tajir's narration:

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<sup>67</sup> Al-Tajir, *Iqd al-Li'al*, p.151.

"And so Major Daly arrived in 1920, and pretended for a year to be stupid and simple. Thus he created the bait for the local government, which was fooled by his appearance of stupidity, and took it as an opportunity to increase its power and to discipline some members of the people which were tempted by his predecessor "Dickson", without having a just reason or them having committed a crime. And henceforth the going became heavy, and that – the silence of the British political agency – was the biggest factor for indulging in oppression... At that moment, when Daly had achieved what he wanted by gaining their trust, he cast aside the appearance of stupidity and appeared in his true form, for he chose for himself *samāsira* -middlemen and brokers- from the people (*al-ahālī*) to reach an understanding with, and hatch the plan he intended to execute."<sup>68</sup>

The above passages are important not because they present a counter narrative to the British view of events, accusing Dickson and Daly of creating middlemen and intentionally fomenting divide and rule; for it is not the intention of this study to examine the validity of the different accounts of the events. What is more important for our purposes, is its complete rejection of the ethnosectarian framework that we see in British documents. Hence, instead of reducing social agents to simply their sects and ethnicity, al-Tajir is careful to label this as divide and rule, and to point out that the specific ethnosectarian categories are social constructions, utilizing the term "*al-ahālī*" (the people) instead of their ethnicities and sects. This is important to emphasize, for if al-Tajir was simply reduced to an ethnosectarian categorization of Bahrani Shi'a, then the above narration would seem puzzling. However, if we remember that al-Tajir was a member of the al-Nahda movement, then such a narration makes sense.

To press the point further, it is useful to compare al-Tajir's narration with those of his compatriot al-Nahda historian we encountered previously, Nasir al-Khairi. Al-Khairi was a Sunni from Muharraq, but paradoxically from the viewpoint of a colonial ethnosectarian gaze, he was actually sympathetic the British reforms, largely blaming the ruler for the events leading to his deposition.<sup>69</sup> What he shares with al-Tajir, however, is his rejection of the ethnosectarian gaze, and a realization that these were social constructs. Thus, both authors used the word "*fitna*" –Strife- to describe the events narrated in 1904 and 1923.

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<sup>68</sup> Al-Tajir, *Iqd al-Li'al*, P.152-153

<sup>69</sup> Al-Khairi, *Qala'id al-Nahrain*, pp.422-431.

## 6. The rise of ethnosectarianism, absolutism, and nationalism

The situation remained volatile for the remainder of 1923. Sporadic violence between the different parties erupted intermittently.<sup>70</sup> Petitions and counter-petitions on the reforms ensued, mainly based on ethnosectarian considerations.

There was one petition, however, that stood out for its discourse and demands. Penned by the "Bahrani National Congress", it was a watershed in Bahrain's political discourse. The letter's demands would be: reinstating the previous ruler; establishing a system of rule based on "equality"; the setup of an elected parliament that attend to the "people's" interests and oversees the creation of institutions of government; and that Britain does not interfere in internal affairs.<sup>71</sup> The letter explicitly adopted an anti-colonialist nationalist discourse, highlighting "the Arab nation" vs "foreigners"<sup>72</sup> who were "mischief mongers", the rule of law, as well as "liberty" and "reforms".

From an ethnosectarian gaze, all of those who signed the letter were Sunni merchants or tribe members. The two main instigators and drivers of the petition, however, were 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Zayyani and Ahmad bin Lahij, whom we encountered previously as members of the al-Nahda group. Indeed, in an effort for cross-sectarian mobilization, the two would explicitly reach out to Rajab, the "Shi'a" notable we encountered earlier, as the two were sympathetic to the demands put forward in the "Baharna petition" Rajab spearheaded, but the offer was refused.<sup>73</sup> These two, out of all the others signatories of the petition, would be the ones the British would imprison and exile.

The ex-ruler would adopt the congress's demands, which would then become the subject of an international to and fro, as cases were placed in front of the courts of the Government of India, with al-Zayyani, now in exile in Bombay, driving their demands.

It is indeed very ironic that the birth of a modernist, nationalist, democratic discourse for a representative form of rule in Bahrain would come from a faction aligned with the ex-ruler, the head of the *ancien* regime. Of course, by this point he was no longer the ruler but one of the opposition, a symbol to them of a usurped power and an anti-colonialist drive.

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<sup>70</sup> Khuri, *Tribe and State*, pp. 93-97.

<sup>71</sup> IOR/R/15/1/339, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100024110738.0x00005b](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100024110738.0x00005b)>  
Arabic (original) text:

Al-Khalifa, *Sebazabad wa rejal*, pp.553-563 and pp.687-689,

<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the discourse used would also display some of the ethnosectarian elements that would emerge with Arab Nationalism in Bahrain and the wider region, as the term "foreigners" here explicitly referred to "Persians", who would become one of the major "Others" that were the target of Nationalist discourse, thus showing how ethnosectarianism even influenced the al-Nahda group.

<sup>73</sup> Kazim, *Isti'malat al-Dhakira*, p.89.

Materially, the group's actions amounted to very little. Absolutist rule was rapidly being consolidated, and the transformation in government would also be reflected geographically. No longer was Muharraq the seat of rule, which shifted instead to Manama, where both the new ruler and the British Political agency were based. The British were not interested in replacing the rule of Al Khalifa, nor in a democratic system, but in "reforming" the current system so that it was stable and compatible with their own interests. The ex-ruler's son, Hamad, would be installed as the new ruler. Weak with minimal local allies and many more enemies, he depended almost entirely on British support for his position.

This would be consolidated when the British brought in an "advisor" in 1926, Charles Belgrave, who would be the executive in chief and effectively the country's first prime minister for the next thirty years. The British bet was that economic and material gains in efficiency and development, driven by the new rationalized system of absolutism<sup>74</sup>, would trump any opposition. There were indeed large material advances, as after a few difficult years caused by the decimation of the pearl industry, oil revenues would arrive in the 1930s, giving the newly established government independence in terms of revenue from merchants and other locals. These revenues would be coupled by a continued drive to rationalize the governmental bureaucracy, whose high posts would increasingly be staffed by British officers and other members of the ruling family, in a system described as "dynastic monarchism".<sup>75</sup> Customs were consolidated under a new British chief, various governmental departments established, and the police force professionalized. All extra-state militias or sources of coercive power were wiped out, and sovereign power was monopolized in the head of state and the advisor behind him. Bahrain would rapidly become the role model for neighbouring states from the British point of view.

As elsewhere in the empire, such a system of "modernized absolutism" would face inherent contradictions with the ethnosectarian gaze that characterized the way the British viewed "local customs". The way these tensions were consolidated in Bahrain (but never resolved entirely) was by governing the population through "vertical segmentation"<sup>76</sup> based on the ethnosectarian gaze. From here onwards, the population was always to be seen as a collection of ethnicities and sects, with a sovereign at the top, watching from the bird's eye view, and holding these groups together. Any

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<sup>74</sup> For more on the system of absolutism in the Gulf, see: Takriti, Abdel Razzaq. *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976*. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Herb, Michael. *All in the family*. SUNY Press, 1999.

<sup>76</sup> Khalaf, Abdulhadi. "Contentious politics in Bahrain" In *The fourth Nordic conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Oslo*, pp. 13-16. 1998.

movements that would arise against this absolutist rule, would be reduced to their "primordial" ethnicities and sects and dealt with accordingly.

Divided rule continued under the new system, as Britain continued to exercise jurisdiction over foreigners, but by this point the "contested sovereignty" part was largely resolved, at least in regards to the relations between the local ruler and the British, as both were now on the same page, largely drafted by the British.

Ethnosectarian mobilization continued. Examples include the 1934 "Baharna" movement for greater ethnicity-based representation in Majlis al-‘Urf and the Manama Municipality council, citing that the "Shi‘a" are the "majority of the population", and thus heralding the entrance of ethno-demographic arguments of "majority" vs. "minority" explicitly into politics.<sup>77</sup> In a similar manner, "tribal notables" would write a petition opposing the 1938 nationalist movement.

Ethnosectarian mobilization would also interact and spill regionally. Thus, during the rise of the Shah's expansionary policies in the 1920s-30s and the increasing harassment facing the Arabs of Muhammarah, the leaders of the "Baharna community" there would petition the ruler of Bahrain for assistance. Similarly, during the crisis in relations between some residents of Qatif and Ibn Sa‘ud in the early 1930s, the British would debate whether the Shi‘a of "al-Hasa" and "Qatif" were "Baharna", and thus entitled to claim refugee status in Bahrain<sup>78</sup>, in a case of how issues of socially constructed identities, forum shopping and divided rule could criss-cross boundaries.

The nationalist, anticolonial opposition would also grow across time, becoming the biggest thorn for the new colonialist-absolutist regime. The previously enumerated "al-Nahda" faction would lay the first seeds of a Bahraini identity that transcended sect<sup>79</sup> and made colonial Britain its enemy and reform of local rule the centre of its demands. In many cases, there were direct familial lineages where such demands were passed down the generations. Thus in 1938, Sa‘ad al-Shamlan, back from exile, would spearhead the labour strikes in the recently formed oil company, and lead a cross-sectarian nationalist movement for political reform. He was also the father of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, who would become the charismatic leader of the Higher Executive Committee (HEC) in 1953-1956, the largest political movement in Bahrain's history, which would display similar democratic nationalist demands. Sa‘ad would also be the uncle of Ahmad al-Shamlan, a noted member of the Movement of

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<sup>77</sup> Fuccaro, *Histories of city*, p.146.

<sup>78</sup>IOR/R/15/1/334, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100023515109.0x000049](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023515109.0x000049)>

<sup>79</sup> However, as previously mentioned, "Persians" would be particularly singled out as "foreigners". See footnote 71.

Arab Nationalists and the communist National Liberation Front in the 1960-1980s, and a member of the 1990s constitutional movement, which would also display comparable demands.

Similarly, Jasim al-Shirawi was the father of Muhammad, the HEC's chief negotiator for the 1957 labour law, the first in the Gulf. The son of Muhammad, 'Abd al-Mun'im, would continue the legacy, being a leading member in the Arab-Marxist "Popular Front", a union leader, as well as a participant in the Dhofar revolution.

The British, and keeping with their deeply ingrained views, would also pass down the reading of such political movements in ethnosectarian terms. Thus, all of the al-Nahda men exiled in 1923 would be reduced through the British gaze to "Tribal and merchant Sunnis". The 1938 movements would be labelled as driven mainly by "Houliis", now classified as "Persians" by Belgrave, who would try to mobilize the "Shi'a" and "Baharna" notables against it, seeing them as the most promising ethnosectarian counterforce.<sup>80</sup> He would derogatively call Sa'ad al-Shamlan a "negro", and a similar racist view would colour his views of the HEC in 1956, where again he would label it as mainly driven by "Houliis". Once again, he would try to create a Shi'a-notables counter-bloc to it.

This ethnosectarian gaze would continue to colour the system of rule throughout the post-colonial era. The now independent regime, learning from its British tutors, would try to lure the "Shi'a religious bloc" in its fight against the leftists and nationalists during the period of the first parliament and its subsequent dissolution in 1975. By the early 1980s, the regional political setting had changed, however, particularly following the Iranian revolution and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. There were now regional factors that would cross feed into the Islamization of politics, and inevitably influence its sectarianization. The ethnosectarian groupings of opposition and loyalists would reverse, and the erstwhile depiction of the opposition to British rule during the 1930s-1950s as largely "Sunnis" from Muharraq would switch to an opposition now labelled as "Islamist Shi'a".

## **7. Conclusion: Beyond the colonial ethnosectarian gaze**

Such ethnosectarian characterization continues to be used in 2015, particularly after the 2011 mass protests that engulfed the country. It is important to keep in mind the roots of this ethnosectarian gaze. This study has illustrated how the "vertical segmentation" in Bahraini politics was not an age old form of political mobilization, but a modernist one whose roots were sculpted during the period of British divided and contested rule in 1900-1925, and the colonial ethnosectarian gaze that

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<sup>80</sup>IOR/R/15/1/750/3, <[http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc\\_100024140827.0x000008](http://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100024140827.0x000008)>

accompanied it. Concurrently, this period also saw the rise of a nationalist, anti-colonial, trans-sectarian discourse that would make the newly consolidated form of colonial absolutist rule its target.

It is essential to understand that colonialism and nationalism did not arrive as fully formed projects in Bahrain. Thus, ethnosectarianism was not exclusively only a form of colonialist gaze and knowledge, nor only a reality which existed in a precolonial past. It was, instead, a product of both precolonial and colonial factors, but in which the newly unfolding colonial order provided the main institutional setting that drove it forward. As was stressed in the study, there was significant overlap in sect, ethnicity, class, and life experiences for many that would have provided strong breeding grounds for ethnosectarian mobilization to thrive locally. Sectarianism is both a colonialist knowledge and a local knowledge that were produced conjointly.<sup>81</sup>

Instead of putting forward a pre-established dichotomy between different sects and ethnicities, foreigners and locals, colonizer and colonized, collaborators and resisters, this study analysed the system of divided and contested rule that played out in Bahrain as an arena of exchange, manoeuvring, and contentious politics, where actions by different actors take on a much more open ended dimension; where pre-existing conditions, colonial rule, regional forces, the politics of the notables, forum shopping by ordinary people, as well as actions of local rulers all played out and cross-fed with each other. Social categories and labels were shown to be emergent, contested, and morph-able over time. The crucial point, however, is this: the distribution of power in this arena was not even, and indeed the arena itself was largely constructed by the colonial power and its system of divided rule and ethnosectarian gaze. The dice were loaded.

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<sup>81</sup> Makdisi, Ussama. *The culture of sectarianism*. Univ of California Press, 2000. pp.7-8.