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## Bahrain as the area of Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the second decade of the 21st century

### Bahrajn jako obszar rywalizacji saudyjsko-irańskiej w drugiej dekadzie XXI wieku

Katarzyna Czornik\*

#### Abstract

Despite Bahrain's small size, the country's inner political and religious configuration of powers as well as its geopolitical layout make it an area of special interest. At the same time, the existence of the above circumstances contributes to the perception of Bahrain as a field of rivalry, or even a *proxy war*, as was the case during the Arab Spring of 2011, between two key actors in the Persian Gulf, Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. One of the factors which influence the importance of Bahrain's position in the region is the fact that for decades the country has been ruled by a more influential Sunni minority, whereas Shia Bahrainis, who constitute majority of the population, are permanently discriminated by the government in Manama. Other factors are Bahrain's territorial closeness to Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, a strategic region rich in oil

#### Abstrakt

Bahrajn, mimo iż jest państwem o niewielkich rozmiarach, to jednak ze względu na specyfikę wewnętrznego układu sił religijno-politycznych oraz położenie geopolityczne stanowi obszar szczególnego zainteresowania, a nawet pole rywalizacji, czy też wojny zastępczej (*proxy war*) — jak w okresie Arabskiej Wiosny w 2011 roku — pomiędzy dwoma kluczowymi aktorami w subregionie Zatoki Perskiej — Arabią Saudyjską i Islamską Republiką Iranu. Wśród czynników, które w tej materii wpływają na ważkość Bahrajnu jest fakt, że państwem tym od dziesięcioleci rządzi sunnicka mniejszość, podczas gdy kraj w zdecydowanej większości zamieszkują szyici permanentnie dyskryminowani przez władze w Manamie. Drugi czynnik to bliskość terytorialna Arabii Saudyjskiej, której strategiczną, bogatą w zasoby złóż ropy naftowej Prowincję Wschodnią

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deposits, inhabited by Shiites, and its territorial closeness to Shia Iran, which supports Bahraini Shiites, who are thereby considered a threat to the integrity of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

**Key words:** the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United States, the Arab Spring, *proxy war*

zamieszkują szyici, oraz Iranu wspierającego szyitów w Bahrajnie, którzy tym samym stanowią zagrożenie dla integralności terytorialnej Królestwa Arabii Saudyjskiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Arabia Saudyjska, Bahrajn, Stany Zjednoczone, Arabska Wiosna, wojna zastępcza (*proxy war*)

## Introduction

Bahrain is a small country, however, because of the specificity of its configuration of religious and political powers (the country is governed by Sunni minority, even though it is populated by a vast Shiite majority, which, for centuries, have been discriminated against by the authorities), as well as geopolitical location — territorial proximity of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, it has become an area of special interest and political rivalry for both of these countries. Bahrain in the 21st century has become a territory where Riyadh and Teheran wage one of the *proxy wars* taking place in the region. To win it would mean gaining a sphere of influence, assuming an informal status of hegemon, and achieving religious and political dominance in the sub-region. The aim of this article is to answer a number of research questions, namely: What conditions influence the shape of Bahrain's foreign policy? What interests and goals are dominant in the policy of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran in their relations with Bahrain? What was the significance of the Arab Spring for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Bahrain? What prospects, considering the rivalry between Riyadh and Teheran, can be expected for Bahrain's political situation in the second decade of the 21st century?

## Background of Bahrain's foreign policy

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small state (archipelago of 33 islands out of which the island of Bahrain is the largest),<sup>1</sup> located amongst strategic countries

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<sup>1</sup> In the Arabic language, the name of the country denotes two seas and refers to waters surrounding the archipelago; "Kingdom of Bahrain. History," MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS — <http://www.mofa.gov.bh/Default.aspx?tabid=128&language=en-US> (accessed: 14.02.2017).

of the Persian Gulf sub-region, the so-called Eastern Arabia.<sup>2</sup> Bahrain takes the 188th position in the world in terms of the territory size (760 km<sup>2</sup>). Regarding the number of inhabitants, it has the lowest population of all the countries of the Persian Gulf with the total number of 1,421,240 residents, which gives the country the 156th place globally. Interestingly, the urbanization indicator, due to the small size of the country's territory, exceeds 90%, and the coefficient of population density in January 2017 amounted to as much as 1,997.4 persons per km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>3</sup> The largest population centres are situated in the north of the country, near the capital city — Manama, and near Al-Muharraq. Equally important, according to the estimate of the UN from 2015, over 50% of Bahrain's population are immigrants, out of which as much as 45.5% are incomers from Asia, 4.7% from other Arab countries, 1.6% from Africa, 1% from Europe, and about 1.2% from the remaining parts of the world.<sup>4</sup> In regard to the natural resources possessed by Bahrain, one can indicate oil, natural gas,<sup>5</sup> pearls, and shrimps.<sup>6</sup> The geopolitical location of Bahrain determines in large measure the shape of the foreign policy pursued by the state's authorities. This requires them to adopt elastic policy and cautiously balance/leverage in relations with much larger neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, for which Bahrain (similarly as Yemen<sup>7</sup>) is an area of *proxy war*.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the small territory and population, it would be illegitimate to say that Bahrain is a country without significance in the regional (sub-regional) arena. Bahrain's importance is to a large extent based on three determinants. First, its

<sup>2</sup> Bahrain is a part of Eastern Arabia along five other countries: Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (its strategic Eastern Province, to be precise), United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. These countries form a part of the Arabian Peninsula and are surrounded by waters of the Persian (Arabian) Gulf and the Arabian Sea; J. ZDANOWSKI: *Historia Arabii Wschodniej*. Wrocław—Warszawa—Kraków 2004, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> It is expected that Bahrain's population at the beginning of 2018 will amount to 1,443,093 persons, which means that each day there will be 68 new inhabitants; "Bahrain Population" — <http://countrymeters.info/en/Bahrain> (accessed: 16.02.2017).

<sup>4</sup> "Bahrain," CIA, The World Factbook — <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html> (accessed: 14.02.2017).

<sup>5</sup> "National Oil and Gas Authority" — <http://www.noga.gov.bh/index.php?page=4400> (accessed: 15.02.2017).

<sup>6</sup> Ch.G. SMITH, J.A. CRYSTAL: "Bahrain" — <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bahrain> (accessed: 14.01.2017).

<sup>7</sup> D. BEDNARZ, Ch. REUTER, B. ZAND: "Proxy War in Yemen: Saudi Arabia and Iran Vie for Regional Supremacy," April 3, 2015, *Spiegel Online International* — <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/saudi-arabia-and-iran-fighting-proxy-war-in-yemen-a-1027056.html> (accessed: 14.02.2017).

<sup>8</sup> Bahrain is separated from Saudi Arabia by the distance (strait approximately 24 km wide) of approximately 24 km. However, these countries are linked by a causeway named after King Fahd, opened in 1986; S. MABON: "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry, Middle East Policy Council," *Middle East Policy Council*, Summer 2012, Volume XIX, Number 2 — <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/battle-bahrain-iranian-saudi-rivalry> (accessed: 13.02.2017).

geographical location. The fact that Bahrain is situated in the Persian Gulf means for the Western countries which place their interests in that part of the world that it is a part of an important transport route of petroleum from the Persian Gulf sub-region to the open ocean. Secondly, an important role should be attributed to the natural deposits controlled by Bahrain. Since 1970, it is a member of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC).<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, the Sunni-Shia power relations in that country translate into both the distribution of forces and the policy of the powers in the region. Most followers of Islam there are Shiites (70—75%), however, since 18th century the state is governed by Sunni minority (Khalifa dynasty).<sup>10</sup> It is worth adding that when it comes to the general division of population according to religious confession, Muslims are 70.3%, Christians 14.5%, Hindus 9.8%, Buddhists 2.5%, and 0.6% of Bahrain's population are Jews.<sup>11</sup>

While analyzing the background of Bahrain's foreign policy, including the population growth factor, it should be noticed that Bahrain's population is not an aging one. In as much as 56% it is dominated by persons aged 24—56, and seniors (65 and more) are only 2.85%. In 2016, the natural growth rate oscillated around 2.33%. The population of Bahrain is made up in 62.6% of men, and in 37.4% of women.<sup>12</sup> The people of Bahrain are characterized by a high level of literacy — 95.7%. Interestingly, and quite rarely in this part of the world, literacy figures are comparable for men (96.9%) and women (93.5%).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Oil deposits were discovered in Bahrain in 1932. It must be emphasized that the energy resources of Bahrain are not the greatest, but the state remains an important international stakeholder in this respect as it is inscribed in the gas and petroleum policy of the largest countries in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf. As regards the documented resources of gas under Bahrain's control, it occupies the mere 55th position in the world, and in terms of oil — 73rd place (as of 1 January 2016). When it comes to extraction of oil, in 2015 it was ranked 55th in the world, and regarding natural gas — 35th; "OPEC Annual Statistic Bulletin 2016. Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries" — [http://www.opec.org/opec\\_web/static\\_files\\_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2016.pdf](http://www.opec.org/opec_web/static_files_project/media/downloads/publications/ASB2016.pdf) (accessed: 14.02.2017); "Natural Gas Exports. Export of natural gas by the countries of the World" — [http://world.bymap.org/NaturalGas Exports.html](http://world.bymap.org/NaturalGas%20Exports.html) (accessed: 14.02.2017).

<sup>10</sup> The Sunni Khalifa dynasty took over the power in Bahrain in 1783. In the 19th century, by entering into multiple arrangements with London, Bahrain became a British protectorate. Only on 15 September 1971, the country gained the status of a fully independent state. In 1968, it left the Federation of Arab Emirates, which it had co-created together with the Treaty Oman and Qatar. The day of 15 August is recognized in Bahrain as the date of gaining independence from the United Kingdom. On the contrary, 16 December 1971 was the day when Bahrain was liberated from British protection. This day has been officially recognized as a national holiday; J. ZDANOWSKI: *Historia Arabii Wschodniej...*, pp. 310—313.

<sup>11</sup> S. BRAUN: *Islam. Powstanie — dzieje — nauka*. Trans. M.M. DZIEKAN. Warszawa 2003, pp. 63—77.

<sup>12</sup> "Bahrain Population" — <http://countrymeters.info/en/Bahrain> (accessed: 16.02.2017).

<sup>13</sup> "Bahrain," CIA, *The World Factbook* — <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html> (accessed: 14.02.2017).

As far as the political and legal background is concerned, it must be indicated that since 1971 Bahrain has been an independent constitutional monarchy. The constitution in force was adopted on 14 February 2002 and amended in 2012.<sup>14</sup> The legal system of Bahrain makes a *sui generis* hybrid of Islamic law, English common law, Egyptian civil, penal and commercial codes, and customary law. In Bahrain, it is inadmissible to have multiple nationality. Citizenship may be acquired if one's father was a Bahraini national. The prerequisite of naturalization is meeting the requirement of permanent residence for at least 15 years in respect of citizens of Arab states, and 25 years for all the others. The right of suffrage, in accordance with the amendments approved in May 2011, is vested in citizens who have attained 18 years (previously, the age threshold was 20 years). Since 6 March 1999 the head of the state is King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, who appoints the prime minister and members of the cabinet. The monarchy is hereditary and the crown devolves to members of the Bana Al-Khalifa family. When it comes to the administrative structure, Bahrain is divided into five governorates (*Muhafaz*).<sup>15</sup> It should be added that the judicial power in Bahrain rests on two pillars: the system of civil courts and the system of Sharia law courts. The latter can be further subdivided into Sunni and Shia jurisdiction.

The legislature in Bahrain is bicameral. The country's National Assembly consists of the Advisory Board (*Majlis al-Shura*), comprised of 40 seats.<sup>16</sup> Its members are appointed by the monarch. The second chamber of the parliament is the Council of Deputies (*Majlis al-Nuwab*), which, as the name suggests, is a representative body since the 40 seats available are voted for in universal and direct suffrage held in single-seat constituencies and decided by absolute majority of votes (it is possible to hold two rounds of elections). The term of latter chamber is four years. It is worth adding that the last election to the Council of Representatives took place in two rounds on 23 and 29 November 2014.<sup>17</sup> The next one is scheduled for November 2018. Bahrain has been divided into five constituencies, and also women have run in elections.<sup>18</sup> To summarize the results of the vote, it should be pointed out that no party achieved decisive victory.

<sup>14</sup> The first constitution was adopted in 1973; *Arabowie. Słownik encyklopedyczny*. Ed. M.M. DZIEKAN. Warszawa 2001, pp. 97—99.

<sup>15</sup> "Bahrain," CIA...

<sup>16</sup> The Advisory Board was appointed by the monarch only in 1992 and included 30 members. It was chiefly an advisory body. Four years later, the emir decided to expand its composition to 40 representatives; "The Constitutional Law and the Legal system of the Kingdom of Bahrain," April 2010 — <http://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex/Bahrain.html> (accessed: 17.01.2017).

<sup>17</sup> E. DICKINSON: "Bahrain's Elections and the Opposition," Middle East Institute, December 23, 2014 — <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/bahrains-elections-and-opposition> (accessed: 6.01.2017).

<sup>18</sup> "Elections in Bahrain," 2014 — <http://www.vote.bh/En/275?cms=iQRpheuphYtJ6pyXUGiNqtMAczEWUgPf> (accessed: 18.01.2017).



The Council of Representatives was entered into by 36 independent representatives, 2 representatives of the organization Al-Asalah (Sunni Salafist), 1 representative of the Islamic Minbar (Sunni) and one unaffiliated representative. At this point, it should be noted that there are no classical political parties in Bahrain. Such is the case since the activity of political parties was officially prohibited. Nonetheless, in accordance with the Act of July 2005, political pluralism is based on the operation of political associations, among which one can enumerate: Al-Wifaq (Al-Wifaq National Islamic Society), Arab Islamic Center Society, Constitutional Gathering Society, Islamic Asalah, Islamic Saff Society, Islamic Shura Society Movement of National Justice Society, National Action Charter Society, National Democratic Action Society, National Democratic Assembly, National Dialogue Society, National Fraternity Society, National Islamic Minbar, National Progressive Tribune, National Unity Gathering, Unitary National Democratic Assemblage.<sup>19</sup>

Let us mark that the elections to the National Assembly were held for the first time in the history of Bahrain in December 1973. However, already two years later, as a result of a dispute between the government and the parliament over the governmental draft of a State Security Act was passed allowing to detain a person without a judicial warrant even for a period of three years. As a response to a wave of strikes, the emir dissolved and suspended the National Assembly for an indefinite period.<sup>20</sup> In the same way, he violated provisions of the constitution, which only stoked the social frustration already increased by growing economic problems. In the following years, social dissatisfaction escalated until it reached the level which found a vent in 1994, when a part of the population struggled against governmental forces. The opposition against the Sunni authorities was mounted mainly by Shiites, who had been discriminated in Bahrain for many years, but also Sunnis declared themselves against the monarch's dictatorship, demanding reform and restoration of the National Assembly. In the following years, the political situation in Bahrain did not change. There were outbreaks of violence and brutal fights of the population with the police and security services in which citizens of Pakistan, Jordan, and other Arab states performed duties. Such persons were treated by the natives as mercenaries whose services were employed by the authorities against Bahraini nationals. The riots ended with numerous detentions and penalties of imprisonment (thousands of people wounded up in custody or prison). The opposition was supported by emigrant anti-government organizations, such as the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain seated in Iran (and financed by that state)<sup>21</sup> or the Bahrain Freedom Movement seated in

<sup>19</sup> "Bahrain," CIA...

<sup>20</sup> *Arabowie. Słownik encyklopedyczny...*, p. 98.

<sup>21</sup> "The origins of Bahrain's political opposition: Part 11," 26 June 2014 — <http://www.citizensforbahrain.com/index.php/entry/the-origins-of-bahrain-s-political-opposition-part-11> (accessed: 12.01.2017).

London.<sup>22</sup> Anti-government demonstrations temporarily stopped at the time of death of the Emir Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, who had been in power since 1961, which took place on 6 March 1999. The successor to the throne was his son Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa.<sup>23</sup> The new ruler had a more pro-social attitude, which found its manifestation in many of his political decisions. The first of them was the nationwide referendum held in 2001, as a result of which Bahrain became a kingdom.<sup>24</sup> In February 2002 the new constitution was adopted, and under its provisions the country became a constitutional monarchy.<sup>25</sup> Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa was given the title of king (in the period 1999—2002 his title was emir). Pursuant to the provisions of the newly adopted Fundamental Law, a bicameral parliament was established.<sup>26</sup> Although its legislative role was limited, it was in fact invaluable that one of the 40-member chambers was elected in universal suffrage. At that time, women gained both the right to vote and the right to stand for election.<sup>27</sup>

On 24 and 31 October 2002, for the first time in 35 years, elections were held on the local level. This time, the voter turnout rate was 52%. However, at the same time, it must be noted that the adopted constitutional solutions, leaving vast prerogatives to the monarch and providing for a merely symbolic status of the legislative body, led to further protests of the opposition, which, dissatisfied with the results of the election, called for liberalization of political life and expansion of civic freedoms. The vote in 2002 was boycotted principally by Shia political organizations.<sup>28</sup> The discontent among the Shiite majority escalated. On 5 September 2004, the police arrested a human right activist, Abd Al-Hadi Al-Khawaja. This took place the day after he publicly criticized the economic

<sup>22</sup> Bahrain Freedom Movement, seated in London, forms a part of the opposition center named Alliance for a Republic operating both in Bahrain and abroad; “Written evidence from Bahrain Freedom Movement,” 18 November 2012, <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmcaff/88/88vw22.htm> (accessed: 12.01.2017).

<sup>23</sup> “Bahrain, The Al-Khalifa Dynasty” — <http://www.royalark.net/Bahrain/bahrain10.htm> (accessed: 12.01.2016).

<sup>24</sup> “Bahrain’s National Charter Referendum, Human Rights Watch Backgrounder February 2001,” HRW World Report 2000: “Bahrain” — <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/mena/bah-bck-0212.htm> (accessed: 12.01.2017).

<sup>25</sup> “Constitutional history of Bahrain” — <http://www.constitutionnet.org/country/constitutional-history-bahrain> (accessed: 25.02.2017).

<sup>26</sup> In the years 1783—1971, the ruler of Bahrain had the title of hakim, then the emir, and since 2002 king; K. CZAJKOWSKA, A. DIAWOŁ-SITKO: *Systemy polityczne wybranych państw Bliskiego Wschodu*. Warszawa 2012, pp. 299—301.

<sup>27</sup> However, no sooner than in 2004 did the first woman in Bahrain become a minister — Nada Haffadh was appointed the minister of health; M. LIPSKA-TOUMI: *Wprowadzenie do ustroju i prawa państw arabskich*. Lublin 2015, pp. 69—74.

<sup>28</sup> “Bahrain’s October 24 and 31, 2002 Legislative Elections. Prepared by The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs,” NDI, 2002 — [https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2392\\_bh\\_electionsreport\\_engpdf\\_0925\\_2008.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/2392_bh_electionsreport_engpdf_0925_2008.pdf) (accessed: 12.01.2017).



policy carried out by the Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa and the latter's restrictions of fundamental civic freedoms. This event was met with criticism by international human rights organizations, which demanded his instantaneous release. Also in the society which started the wave of unrest one could spot opposition against the policy of the authorities towards the liberal opposition.<sup>29</sup> In February 2005, people took to the streets because of the detention of opposition bloggers, Ali Abdulemam and his colleagues.<sup>30</sup> In the same year, during the Formula One Grand Prix race, the Shiite association Al-Wefaq initiated street demonstrations during which people called for reforms, which was intended not only to produce social resonance but also to draw the attention of the international community.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the political and social situation remained unchanged, and the authorities, except for the repression used, paid no attention to social postulates.

The following parliamentary elections were held in November 2006. Just as the previous ones, they stirred massive social unrest and instigated waves of protests. This time the pro-reform opposition and discriminated Shiites accused the authorities of gerrymandering — manipulating the borders of constituencies by the elites in power to achieve the desired result of the vote. Despite the illegal dealings of persons who had an influence on the shape and size of the constituencies, the Shia formations Al-Wifaq (Islamic National Accord) and the National Democratic Action Society, which took part in the election, received over 40% support,<sup>32</sup> with the voter turnout reaching 72%, which was their unquestionable electoral success. Out of the available 40 mandates, Shia representatives took as many as 17, whereas Sunni representatives ended up with only 15 seats. On the contrary, the radical group Al-Haq boycotted the election.<sup>33</sup>

According to the adopted electoral calendar, on 23 and 30 October 2010, the following elections were held in Bahrain. The situation before the vote was

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<sup>29</sup> "Bahrain: Activist Jailed After Criticizing Prime Minister" — <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/english/docs/2004/09/29/bahrai9413.htm> (accessed: 12.01.2016).

<sup>30</sup> L. SCHLEUSENER: "From Blog to Street: The Bahraini public sphere in transition." *Arab Media & Society*, issue 1, Spring 2007 — <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=15> (accessed: 12.02.2017).

<sup>31</sup> Protests organized during the Formula One Grand Prix race took place also in April 2013 in Manama, when protesters raised the slogans: "Your race is a crime," "Down with Hamad," or "The people want the fall of the regime"; see "Bahraini police clash with Formula One protesters," 13 April 2013 — <https://www.rt.com/news/bahrain-formula-one-protests-776> (accessed: 14.01.2017).

<sup>32</sup> "Parliamentary and municipal elections in Bahrain 2006: Islamic Sunnis are leading the second elections in Bahrain," 13 December 2006 — <http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/No.%2014%20Parliamentary%20and%20municipal%20elections%20in%20Bahrain%202006.pdf> (accessed: 12.01.2017).

<sup>33</sup> "Bahrain profile — Timeline," 1 September 2016 — <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14541322> (accessed: 12.01.2017).

analogous to that from before four years. The Shia opposition accused the authorities of gerrymandering to the opposition's detriment. In addition, numerous anti-governmental protests took place because of the absence of the promised political, social and economic reforms, which were to eventually improve the situation of Shiites in the country. In the months directly preceding the election, multiple arrests took place among political activists who defied the authorities.<sup>34</sup> In August, eight leaders of the opposition were detained and accused of posing a threat to national security. On 14 August, Abduljalil al-Singace, the leader of the oppositional formation Al-Haq, was arrested. In September, the authorities arrested 23 Shiite political activists, who were accused of setting up a terrorist network both home and abroad with the intention to make attempts at toppling the regime in power.<sup>35</sup> In September 2010, a bomb attack took place, as a result of which several police vehicles were damaged (it should be added that in Bahrain terrorist attacks are rare).<sup>36</sup> Despite a wave of social discontent, two rounds of parliamentary election were carried out at the end of October 2010. This time, the voter turnout was about 67%. Importantly, Shia formations maintained the *status quo* in respect of the number of the mandates held. They entered the Council of Representatives with 18 mandates. Sunnis won only 5 seats. The remaining places were split among independent candidates.<sup>37</sup> The parliamentary elections which took place in Bahrain in October 2010 was the last one before the outbreak of the Arab Spring in that country and the subsequent intervention by Saudi Arabia in 2011.

When analyzing the background of the foreign policy of Bahrain, one should pay attention to the fact that although Bahrain is a small-sized country, it takes an active part in several dozens of international organizations (global and regional). Among others, it is a member of the United Nations Organization, the

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<sup>34</sup> It must be noted that the activities of the elites in charge of Bahrain, which adopted a pro-American position in foreign policy, were entirely supported by US authorities. Subsequent arrests of Shia activists were presented in the reports of the US Department of State as effective struggle of the government with terrorist activist, also ones connected with Al-Qaida of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP); "Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview, Country Reports on Terrorism 2010," U.S. Department of State, August 18, 2011 — <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2010/170257.htm> (accessed: 24.01.2017).

<sup>35</sup> E. MICKOLUS: *Terrorism, 2008—2012: A Worldwide Chronology*. Jefferson, NC 2013, p. 147.

<sup>36</sup> On 14 January 2017, in Bahrain, death penalty was performed for the first time since 2010. The convicts were three Shiites accused of carrying out a bomb attack in March 2014. In the attack, three policemen were killed, including two from Bahrain and one from the UAE; "Bahrain executes three for killing police officers," February 18, 2017 — <http://gulf-news.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-executes-three-for-killing-police-officers-1.1961954> (accessed: 17.02.2017).

<sup>37</sup> "BAHRAIN. Majlis Al-Nuwab (Council of Representatives), ELECTIONS IN 2010," Inter-Parliamentary Union — [http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2371\\_10.htm](http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2371_10.htm) (accessed: 27.01.2017).

International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organization, and on the regional scale, of the League of Arab States, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries, the Gulf Cooperation Council, as well as the Organization of the Islamic Conference.<sup>38</sup>

When it comes to economy, it must be emphasized that Bahrain is an industrialized country. Its national income, in the most part (approximately 86%) comes from the extraction of oil and natural gas as well as from the oil-processing industry. A crucial role is also played by the services sector, whereas agriculture is of marginal character (approximately 0.3%). As far as economic indicators are concerned, it should be added that the unemployment rate in Bahrain is very low. In 2014, it amounted to mere 4.1%. Nevertheless, in the recent years, because of the global decrease in oil prices and the destabilization of economy resulting from the events of the Arab Spring, Bahrain recorded a budget deficit of approximately USD 4 billion (13% GBP). To avoid such situation, already in the first decade of the 21st century, the government of Bahrain implemented measures aimed at a widely understood diversification of the sources of budgetary income. One of such initiatives was the implementation on 11 January 2006 of the United States-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement (FTA) — an agreement establishing free trade between the United States and the countries of the Persian Gulf.<sup>39</sup> Also, the authorities tried to expand the transport and communication network in Bahrain. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that it is because of the perfectly developed telecommunication and transport network in Bahrain that the country has become the seat of many international firms that place their interests in the Persian Gulf sub-region, and that it has become a leading banking centre in the sub-region.<sup>40</sup> The principal trade partners of Bahrain, to which predominantly petroleum products and oil as well as aluminum and cloths

<sup>38</sup> “Bahrajn. Informacja o stosunkach gospodarczych z Polską,” Ministry of Development — [https://www.mr.gov.pl/media/22829/BAHRAIN\\_18\\_07\\_2016.pdf](https://www.mr.gov.pl/media/22829/BAHRAIN_18_07_2016.pdf) (accessed: 16.02.2017).

<sup>39</sup> The body appointed under the agreement to supervise its execution is the Joint Committee. It is worth adding that the FTA made one of instruments of the American policy towards the Middle East, intended to promote the advancement of economic reforms and liberalization in the region. In May 2001, USA and Bahrain, as a part of cooperation in that area, entered into a bilateral treaty concerning investment (The United States-Bahrain Bilateral Investment Treaty — BIT); “Bahrain Free Trade Agreement,” Office of the United States Trade Representative — <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/bahrain-fta> (accessed: 27.01.2017).

<sup>40</sup> As regards the advantages for foreign investors placing their interests in Bahrain, the following are quoted: easy access to the market of Persian Gulf; high level of economic liberalism, especially in respect of taxes; long experience in participating in international business; competitive, as compared to other countries of the Persian Gulf, costs of carrying on business activity and residence; highly educated and well qualified labour force (whose asset is bilingualism — the official language in Bahrain is Arabic, but English has remained the language of business); “Business Friendly Bahrain” — [http://www.bahrain.com/en/bi/Pages/default.aspx#.WKlsM\\_KME98](http://www.bahrain.com/en/bi/Pages/default.aspx#.WKlsM_KME98) (accessed: 12.02.2017).

are exported, are: Saudi Arabia (3.6%), United Arab Emirates (2.4%), and the United States of America (2.2%). On the other hand, as far as import is concerned, mainly of unprocessed petroleum, machines and chemicals, Bahrain's largest partners are: Saudi Arabia (21.1%), the United States of America (9.5%), China (7.6%), Japan (6.6%), Australia (5.1%), India (4.9%).<sup>41</sup> Resultantly, it can be easily noticed that Bahrain's economic ties with Riyadh, but also with the United States are strong and that they are assuming a more formalized character, whereas economic relations with Iran are only marginal.

## Bahrain's relations with Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran before the outbreak of the Arab Spring

The fact that Bahrain is governed by Sunni minority, and for many decades the Shia minority has been discriminated against, determined both in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century the shape of the foreign policy followed by Manama.

When analyzing briefly Bahrain's relations with Teheran as well as with Riyadh and Washington<sup>42</sup> before the onset of the Arab Spring, it should be noted that in the view of Iran (especially radical conservative formations), Bahrain is often referred to as the "fourteenth Iranian province."<sup>43</sup> Iran, due to historical<sup>44</sup> and religious factors, beyond any doubt, has strong influence on the Shiites in Bahrain. On the other hand, it should be added that most Shiites in Bahrain recognize Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani from Iraq, and not Ali Khamenei from Iran as their model spiritual leader.<sup>45</sup> However, Teheran, especially since the events

<sup>41</sup> "Bahrain," CIA...

<sup>42</sup> In 1958, Bahrain concluded a sea border treaty with Saudi Arabia.

<sup>43</sup> A. BLOMFIELD: "Bahrain hints at Iranian involvement in plot to overthrow government," 6 September 2010 — <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/bahrain/7983095/Bahrain-hints-at-Iranian-involvement-in-plot-to-overthrow-government.html> (accessed: 27.01.2017).

<sup>44</sup> Historically, Bahrain was a part of the Persian territory, until 1782, when Persians were defeated by the Al-Khalifa family who captured the archipelago. Then it became a British protectorate. Moreover, Iran under the rule of the Pahlavi dynasty made territorial claims to Bahrain, which were abandoned only on the conclusion of a secret British-Iranian arrangement and agreement on the demarcation of border between Iran and Bahrain, which took place in March 1970; Z. LANDOWSKI: *Świat Arabski. Leksykon. Historia, gospodarka, kultura*. Warszawa 2008, pp. 37—38.

<sup>45</sup> K. STRACHOTA: "Islam w irackim Pax Americana." In: *Konsekwencje wojny z Irakiem dla bezpieczeństwa Bliskiego Wschodu, Materiały Konferencyjne*. Ed. W. WASZCZYKOWSKI. Warszawa 2003, pp. 105—117.

of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the slogans preached at that time about the need to export the Islamic Revolution to other Arab countries,<sup>46</sup> has tried to exert influence on the internal situation in Bahrain, which was justified by the necessity to defend and provide assistance to Shiites, who make up a vast majority of Iranian population and who were suppressed by the Sunni authorities in Manama. It was manifested, among others, by the financing of anti-regime opposition and attempts at direct impacts on the configuration of social and political powers in Bahrain. In the 1980s, two coups d'états were thwarted, which were organized by Bahraini Shiites and inspired by Iran. The coup attempts were made by the Shia organization Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, financed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps<sup>47</sup> In 1981, after an unsuccessful coup attempt, which was to install as the Bahraini head of state Hujjat al-Hadi al-Islam Mudarrisi, an emissary of the theocratic authorities in Teheran, several activists of that organization were arrested in Dubai, and Shiites residing in Bahrain to an ever larger extent began to be subjected to repression.<sup>48</sup> Although the Islamic Republic of Iran denied its participation in these dealings, they had negative influence on bilateral relations between Teheran and Manama, and led to even more radical cooling of those relations and consolidation of Bahrain's turn towards the Sunni monarchies in the Persian Gulf and the West (especially the USA). After the creation, on the initiative of Riyadh, in May 1981 of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which also included Bahrain,<sup>49</sup> and which has been perceived by the government in Teheran as a threat to the realization of its own interests in the region, one of the aims of the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran was to weaken this organization and the consistency of its activities. It must be reminded that the organization itself was formed as reaction to the events of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the overthrow of the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as well as to the war between Iran and Iraq.<sup>50</sup> Activities of the GCC, including the ones pursued in the recent years, intended to expand the group by new members — Yemen, Morocco, and Jordan, have

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<sup>46</sup> Ch. HEMMER: *Which Lessons Matter? American Foreign Policy Decision Making in the Middle East, 1979—1987*. New York 2000, pp. 47—90.

<sup>47</sup> In 1987, a member of the Shia community, acting as a member of the organization, was arrested and accused of planting a bursting charge under a petroleum installation. Importantly, however, following the end of the Iran-Iraq war, Teheran minimized its support for the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain; *Encyklopedia terroryzmu*. Warszawa 2004, pp. 364—365.

<sup>48</sup> J. RIVERA: "Iran's Involvement in Bahrain: A Battleground as Part of the Islamic Regime's Larger Existential Conflict." *Small Watch Journal*, March 11, 2015 — <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/iran%E2%80%99s-involvement-in-bahrain> (accessed: 22.01.2017).

<sup>49</sup> "Gulf Cooperation Council" — <http://www.gcc-sg.org/en-us/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>50</sup> E. KARSH: "Lessons of the Iran-Iraq War." In: *Sandstorm. Middle East Conflicts & America*. Ed. D. PIPES. Boston 1993, pp. 220—222, 236—237.

been perceived in Teheran as an element of Riyadh's conscious policy aimed at consolidating and expanding its own sphere of influence and interference with the sphere of influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>51</sup> It must be added that the relations between the governments in Bahrain and Teheran have also been determined by the pro-American policy of the former, manifest, among other things, in the consent to the stationing in the Bahraini territory of the base of the Fifth Fleet of the US Navy and strengthening of ties with Washington in respect of security.<sup>52</sup>

After over 25 years of strongly distanced relations between Bahrain and Iran, only on 17 November 2007, the then President of Iran, Mahmud Ahmadinejad paid his first official visit to Manama. At that time, he met with King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa. During the meeting, the representatives of both parties discussed topics relating to the need to conclude bilateral agreements for the supply of gas from Bahrain,<sup>53</sup> which was a signal that the relations between the countries entered a phase of normalization. Consequently, it may be concluded that the event which once again led to a crisis in the mutual relations between Teheran and Manama and significantly impaired the process of harmonization of bilateral relations were the fresh events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain — protests which broke out in Spring 2011, and especially their ramifications — intervention of GCC member states, which was decidedly condemned by Iran as a threat to its own interests in the sub-region.

It should be noted that despite the pressure exerted by the Islamic Republic of Iran, the direction of Bahrain's foreign policy towards the end of the 20th century and in the first two decades of the 21st century remained quite clearly pro-Saudi and pro-American. Just as the Sunni Saudi Arabia became a client state of the USA,<sup>54</sup> also Bahrain has been more and more dependent on Washington in its

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<sup>51</sup> C. RYAN: "Jordan, Morocco and an Expanded GCC." Middle East Research and Information Project, April 15, 2014 — <http://www.merip.org/jordan-morocco-expanded-gcc> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>52</sup> The first American warship that crossed the Strait of Hormuz in 1879 was USS Ticonderoga. Because of the growing interest of the USA in the Middle East region, which only intensified after the end of the Second World War, Washington decided that it was necessary to establish permanent presence in that part of the world — strategic as in the context of the cold war rivalry for the spheres of influence with the Soviet Union and huge deposits of petroleum situated in the Middle East. When in 1971 Bahrain gained independence from British protection, the United States leased a base in that country from the United Kingdom and named it Administrative Support Unit, Bahrain. In 1999, the base was renamed to Naval Support Activity, Bahrain, which was to reflect its tasks; "U.S. Naval Forces Central Command" — <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Subs-and-Squadrons/> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>53</sup> B. O'ROURKE: "Iran: Ahmadinejad's Bahrain Visit New Piece In Complex Pattern," November 15, 2007 — <http://www.rferl.org/a/1079134.html> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>54</sup> Ch.M. BLANCHARD: "Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations," CRS Report for Congress, June 19, 2012 — <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf> (accessed: 22.02.2017).



foreign policies. One could point to at least a few key decisions which confirmed such position of the government in Manama. Already in 1947, Bahrain, still as a British protectorate, created a space for American activities in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf, and a couple of decades earlier, the activity of the American Mission Hospital in Bahrain affiliated with the Evangelical Church was initiated.<sup>55</sup> Once Bahrain attained independence in 1971, the relations between Manama and Washington were immediately formalized. On 21 September 1971, after the official establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries, the embassy of the United States in Manama was opened, and Joseph W. Twinam (from 1974) became the first ambassador. The Bahraini embassy in the United States was opened in 1977.<sup>56</sup> During the second war in the Persian Gulf, in August 1990, Bahrain made its territory accessible to the US and British air forces in order to support the liberation of Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion on that state.<sup>57</sup> In the years 1991 and 1994, Bahrain entered into agreements with the United States in respect of the state's security. They covered cooperation in the field of defense, provided for joint maneuvers and use by the United States of the military installations located in the territory of Bahrain, and the possibility to react from that territory in the event of crisis situations.<sup>58</sup> Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon of 11 September 2001, Bahrain took part in the American Invasion on Afghanistan. In October 2001, it was granted the status of major non-NATO ally.<sup>59</sup> It needs to be added that over the three last decades one of the manifestations of good relations between both countries were relatively frequent visits of the highest level. In October 1991, the Emir Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa was welcomed in Washington. His deputy, Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, on a couple of occasions paid visits to Washington, including in 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2008. During the last visit, which was of special significance for the tightening of cooperation, the king and his advisors met the president of the United States, George W. Bush, and the leading topic of the discussions were economic issues.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "American Mission Hospital" — <http://www.amh.org.bh/history/> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>56</sup> "U.S. Relations With Bahrain," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, U.S. Department of State, February 2, 2017 — <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>57</sup> K. KATZMAN: "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," CRS, October 3, 2014 — [https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc463514/m1/1/high\\_res\\_d/95-1013\\_2014Oct03.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc463514/m1/1/high_res_d/95-1013_2014Oct03.pdf) (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>58</sup> K. KATZMAN: "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," CRS, October 28 — 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf> (accessed: 14.02.2017).

<sup>59</sup> On the contrary, in 2003, Manama condemned the American invasion on Iraq and offered the latter's leader, Saddam Hussein, shelter in the territory of Bahrain; "Bahrain Becomes a ,Major Non-NATO Ally' - 2001-10-26," October 30, 2009 — <http://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-a-2001-10-26-13-bahrain-67542952/387338.html> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>60</sup> S. HENDERSON: "Small Island, Big Issues: Bahrain's King Visits Washington," March 24, 2008 — <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/small-island-big-issues-bahrains-king-visits-washington> (accessed: 21.02.2017).

The rapprochement between Bahrain and the United States, as seen from Manama's perspective, was not only a guarantee of security in the face of a potential intervention by Iran but also a guarantee of sovereignty in a situation of permanent consolidation of Saudi Arabia's position, which is also observed by Bahraini authorities with a sense of anxiety.

In summary, it is worth emphasizing that both in the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, the dominant problem of Bahrain were the frictions and intersection in that country of multiple influences exerted both by internal centres and external stakeholders, which, at Bahrain's expense, strive for realization of their own interests. In Bahrain, one can observe competition between Sunni and Shiite groups, as well as the influences of Saudi Arabia, United States, and Iran. Such rivalry was especially evident in that country in the period of the Arab Spring, which found its manifestation in the intervention of external forces (Saudi and Emirati).

## The events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain and their implications for the Saudi-Iranian *proxy war*

The political upheaval and social rebellion initiated in Tunisia in December 2010 inspired a wave of pro-civic activity also in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa, including Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.<sup>61</sup>

The Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia was much calmer than in other countries of the region.<sup>62</sup> The strong political and social position of the Saudi monarch, the promise to improve the welfare situation of Saudi Arabs, and threats of the rulers addressed to the protesters (in the second decade of the 21st century, Saudi Arabia has remained a feudal monarchy in which strikes and social protests are forbidden<sup>63</sup>), contributed to the nearly peaceful course of the wave of the Arab

<sup>61</sup> In January 2011, revival took place of a movement for political reform, which had already existed in Saudi Arabia. Among other postulates, protesters demanded establishment of a fully electable parliament in place of the Advisory Board, fight against corruption, women's rights, and release of political prisoners; S. ABUDAYEH: "Początek wiosny arabskiej w Tunezji, Egipcie, Jemenie, Libii i Bahrajnie." In: *Bliski Wschód coraz bliżej*. Eds. J. DANECKI, S. SULOWSKI. Warszawa 2011, pp. 65—66.

<sup>62</sup> Libya and Syria became examples of states in which the Arab Spring implicated disorganization of the country and bloody civil war; I.A. EL-HUSARI: "Yet Another Version of the 'Arab Spring'. Ramifications of the Syrian Armed Conflict for the Existing Arab Order and Beyond." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 2014, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp. 130—145.

<sup>63</sup> G. MAŁACHOWSKI: *System konstytucyjny Arabii Saudyjskiej*. Warszawa 2011, p. 6.

Spring in that country.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, a real challenge for Riyadh were the protests that broke out in the neighbouring states, and which were perceived as dangerous for Saudi interests — this was especially the case of Yemen and Bahrain.

Consequently, it must be noted that the Arab Spring in Bahrain, a venue of strategic importance from the point of view of Saudi and Iranian interests, had a rather turbulent course and was not peaceful in character. The overrepresentation of Sunnis in the state authorities of Bahrain, as well as the worsening economic status of Bahraini residents, coupled with the increasing number of employed immigrants had, for a couple of years, become the factors which eventually led to the situation in which Shiites, in a very decisive manner, demanded widening of their participation in the political and economic life of their country. The events of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and early 2011<sup>65</sup> only encouraged Bahraini Shiites, who were in opposition to their government, in mass manifestations against the Sunni and the allegedly pro-Saudi Al-Khalifa dynasty.

The symbol of the Arab Spring in Bahrain was the Pearl Roundabout, on which demonstrators assembled for the first time on 14 February 2011. Among the postulates made by the gathered crowd, there were: reform of the constitutional system (strengthening of the parliament); end to the political discrimination against Shiites; reduction of unemployment; improvement of economic status of the discriminated social strata; and deposition of the Prime Minister Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa who had been the Bahraini prime minister for 40 years.<sup>66</sup>

Because, day after day, the protesters' demands were growing stronger and the authorities had no intention to meet them, the rulers decided to solve the problem of escalating demonstrations by force. On 17 February 2011, security forces attacked the demonstrators gathered on the Pearl Roundabout, using rubber bullets and tear gas. Four persons died as a result. Despite the pressure from the international community to alleviate the situation, by negotiations and by attempts to reach consensus, the protests did not cease. However, on 13 March 2011, when demonstrators blocked the financial district of Manama, the situation became very strained. What is more, a danger arose of a possible foreign intervention in Bahrain by the forces of Saudi Arabia or the GCC.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Y. AL. ZAHIRANI: "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring. Reshaping Saudi Security Doctrine." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 2014, Vol. 8, Issue 4, pp. 99—112.

<sup>65</sup> G. KEPPEL: "Arabska droga cierniowa. Dziennik 2011—2013." Trans. A. SZEPTYCKI, K. PACHNIAK. Warszawa 2014, pp. 49—115.

<sup>66</sup> A.A. YATEEM: "The Predicament of Shia Fundamentalism in Bahrain." *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 2014, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp. 97—117.

<sup>67</sup> R. STEFANICKI: "Saudyjscy żołnierze wkroczyli do Bahrajnu." *Gazeta Wyborcza* of 15 March 2011.

Officially, the potential intervention was justified by the concern that Shia protesters in Bahrain might obtain vast support from Teheran, which could give rise to a serious regional conflict. In fact, however, the Saudi government was afraid of the “spill over” effect — having the Shiite spilt over the Eastern Province. The Sunni Saudi dynasty was anxious that, as a part of the Arab Spring, a Shia rebellion might break out. Shiites make about 10—15% of the 22.5-million population of Saudi Arabia and live mainly in the mentioned Eastern Province, where rich deposits of petroleum are located.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, if, as a consequence of the protests, the rule in Bahrain was taken over by the Shiites, this would pose a threat to the stability of Saudi Arabia, strengthen the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region at the expense of Saudi influences, and make a dangerous precedent for other countries in which Shiites are in minority or majority.

In the situation at hand, on 13 March 2011, the pro-Saudi government of Bahrain requested the countries which form the Gulf Cooperation Council for aid under the *casus foederis* clause provided for in the Mutual Defense Agreement of 2000. Such decision would be in the interest of Riyadh, which immediately and positively responded to the proposal of the Bahraini authorities. On 14 March 2011, 1,200 Saudi soldiers entered Bahrain, together with 20 tanks and armoured vehicles and approximately 600 policemen from the United Arab Emirates (troops of the Peninsula Shield Force — armed wing of the Gulf Cooperation Council).<sup>69</sup> The external intervention was to guarantee preservation of the *status quo* in Bahrain, or even, in a wider perspective, in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf. The authorities in Iran immediately protested the intervention, accusing Riyadh of interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state and permanent deprivation of rights of the Shiite majority in Bahrain. The Iranian establishment even demanded an instantaneous reaction of the UN, accusing Saudi Arabia of violating fundamental principles of international law. After the intervention, the bilateral relations between Teheran and Manama once again cooled dramatically. Only after several months, on 12 August 2012, the Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Khalid al-Khalifa announced that Iran restored its ambassador to Bahrain.<sup>70</sup>

Accordingly, the armed forces of Saudi Arabia and security forces of the United Arab Emirates forcefully quelled the unrest being a part of the Arab

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<sup>68</sup> Shiites inhabit the cities — Qatif and Al-Hasa. Smaller Shia communities live also in Mecca and Medina and Najran near the border with Yemen; M. BELFER: “Bahrain’s al Khalifa Dilemma.” *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 2014, Vol. 8, Issue 4, pp. 6—10.

<sup>69</sup> R. CHAŁACZKIEWICZ: *Zjednoczone Emiraty Arabskie. Historia, raj i ludzie*. Pułtusk—Warszawa 2011, pp. 336—337, p. 357.

<sup>70</sup> S. MABON: “The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry.” *Middle East Policy Council*, Summer 2012, Vol. 19, No 2 — <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/battle-bahrain-iranian-saudi-rivalry?print> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

Spring in Bahrain and drove demonstrators out of the Pearl Roundabout in Manama. At that time, they demolished the monument standing in the roundabout, which became a symbol of the protests. After the intervention, King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa declared three-month state of emergency.<sup>71</sup>

The situation in Bahrain was stabilized by means of military instruments (hard power). Any recourse to soft power, in the opinion of Riyadh, would not be effective and would not bring any effects. The use of diplomatic methods was not in the interests of Saudi Arabia. It should be indicated that the countries in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf eagerly aided Bahrain for fear of an escalation of the protests, which could implicate Shia rebellion in other countries of the region, especially in Saudi Arabia. It was feared that the Islamic Republic of Iran was going to try and abuse the situation with the intention to enhance its influence in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf, which was not in the interest of the so-called East Arabia.

The intervention of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Bahrain, carried out in March 2011 had ramifications both for Bahrain itself and intra-regional relations, as well as for the policy of the United States in the Persian Gulf sub-region.

When analyzing the situation in Bahrain following the intervention, it must be emphasized above all that the scale of pro-civic protests decreased, and many activists (especially Shiite ones) lost their jobs or were arrested as a part of repressions. According to government data, about 30 persons were killed in the disturbances. In addition, many Shia mosques were demolished (about 16), and other Shiite places of worship were destroyed. Foreign troops removed demonstrators from the Pearl Roundabout, and since 1 June 2011, in Bahrain, there was a state of emergency declared by King Hamad. The monarch announced the necessity to engage in dialogue with the opposition. He also appointed the Independent Investigation Board which was to examine the way in which the authorities reacted to the protests. On 30 October 2011, the Board presented an over 500-page report on its own activities, which contained information confirming the use of force against the demonstrators in the Pearl Roundabout.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, the report did not provide any evidence for the alleged ties of Iran with the protests which broke out as a part of the Arab Spring in Bahrain, or for their inspiration, of which Teheran had multiply been accused by the authorities of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. What is more, after the settlement of the internal situation, the rulers of Bahrain decided to introduce a few social and economic reforms. Basically, however, the situation of the politically discriminated Shiites was not improved. Therefore, the intervention of Saudi Arabia and the United

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<sup>71</sup> J. ARMBRUSTER: *Arabska Wiosna. Rewolucja w świecie islamskim*. Trans. R. KĘDZIERSKI. Wrocław 2011, pp. 87—92.

<sup>72</sup> G. KEPEL: *Arabska droga cierniowa. Dziennik 2011—2013...*, pp. 295—317.

Arab Emirates resulted in the preservation of the political *status quo ante* in Bahrain.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, it should be stressed that the intervention of Saudi forces in Bahrain was not carried out without a certain consent from the United States, which was manifest in the absence of any decided reaction of the White House to the events of the Arab Spring in those countries. In Bahrain (Manama), the central headquarters of Fifth Fleet of the US Navy is situated,<sup>74</sup> and it is therefore quite unlikely that the American administration had not been informed in advance about the planned Saudi intervention in that country. In regard to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, or Yemen, the United States stressed the need to introduce political reforms and resolve protests peacefully, however, they clearly indicated that they had no intention to directly intervene and exert any influence on the internal situation of those countries. However, this did not follow from the requirement to observe international law and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of another country but from pragmatic fulfilment of the interests and aims of the policy of the United States, as pursued for many decades in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf. At that time, such position was to be associated with the growing nuclear aspirations of Iran and perception of that country as a threat to the American allies in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, it can be clearly stated that the Saudi intervention in Bahrain was in accord with the interests of the White House. Both Washington and Riyadh wished above all to preserve the status quo in the region and not to let Shiites take over the power. Such situation would open the possibility or consolidation of the influences of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this part of the globe, and that was something both the USA and Saudi Arabia — the enemies of Teheran — wanted to avoid at any cost. In the following months of 2011, the United States reinforced the bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which only confirmed their acceptance of the policies implemented by both these conservative monarchies.

On 11–13 April 2011, the security advisor to the President Barack Obama, Tom Donilon, paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. He met the leaders of both these Arab states. In the formal declaration made after the end of the visits, the American party emphasized the importance of the relations between Washington, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi (UAE). The White

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<sup>73</sup> K. DEYOUNG: "In Arab Spring speech, Clinton defends U.S. stance on Syria, Bahrain." *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2011 — [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/clinton-defends-us-stance-on-syria-bahrain/2011/11/07/gIQAsAJ9xM\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/clinton-defends-us-stance-on-syria-bahrain/2011/11/07/gIQAsAJ9xM_story.html) (accessed: 19.02.2017).

<sup>74</sup> "Bahrain protests a worry for US and its fifth fleet" — <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/17/bahrain-protests-us-fifth-fleet> (accessed: 15.02.2017).

<sup>75</sup> D. GOLD: "Iran's nuclear aspirations threaten the World," August 6, 2009 — <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/aug/06/opinion/oe-gold6> (accessed: 22.02.2017).



House pointed to the historical interdependencies and long-term commitments of the partners, the need to carry on consultations and preserve friendship between the countries, and emphasized that resolution of internal problems of the states remained the exclusive competence of themselves and the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>76</sup>

In the speech delivered in Washington on 19 May 2011, President Barack Obama referred to Bahrain as a long-term partner, the security of which was in the vital interests of the United States. It was on that occasion that he criticized, for the first time, the authorities in Bahrain for the violent crackdown of protests. Importantly, however, the president of the USA did not make any reference to the Saudi intervention in that state. The thesis that, in the view of the White House, reinforcement of the defense capacity of Saudi Arabia was a key element for the preservation of the regional security was confirmed by the information released on 29 December 2011 on the conclusion by the United States and Saudi Arabia of an agreement involving a financial amount of USD 29.4 billion. The agreement referred to the sale of 84 new combat airplanes F-15SA and modernization of 70 F-15s used by Saudi air forces. Both these arrangements confirmed the fact that the relations between the United States and the countries of the Persian Gulf were strategic. Joshua Earnest, while announcing the conclusion of the agreement with Saudi Arabia, clearly declared that it affirmed the intensity and constant character of the mutual relations between both countries.<sup>77</sup> In the same way, in 2014, Saudi Arabia became the largest importer of American weaponry, and even overtook India in this regard.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

When analyzing the social and political situation in Bahrain following the wave of Arab Spring, which affected also that country, it must be concluded that over the last couple of years there has been no profound political change. The

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<sup>76</sup> “Statement from NSC Spokesman Tommy Vietor on the National Security Advisor’s visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates,” The White House, April 13, 2011 — <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/04/13/statement-nsc-spokesman-tommy-vietor-national-security-advisor-s-visit-s> (accessed: 10.02.2017).

<sup>77</sup> “Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Joshua Earnest on U.S. Sale of Defense Equipment to Saudi Arabia,” The White House, December 29, 2011 — <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/29/statement-principal-deputy-press-secretary-joshua-earnest-us-sale-defens> (accessed: 25.02.2017).

<sup>78</sup> N. SYEED: “Saudi Arabia Topped India as Largest Weapons Importer Last Year,” March 8, 2015 — <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-03-08/saudi-arabia-topped-india-as-largest-weapons-importer-last-year> (accessed: 12.02.2017).

power is still held by the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty, which permanently controls and restricts the political rights and freedoms of the Shia majority in that state. According to the data of the Freedom House from 2017, Bahrain is considered a state in which there are no civic freedoms and liberties (status: “not free”).<sup>79</sup> Although in 2014 another parliamentary election was held, and the next one is scheduled for 2018, its results did not bring any political change. Political discussions between the government and the opposition failed to produce any political consensus, and the constantly growing social discontent about the maintenance of the political status quo makes a factor leading to sporadic frictions between demonstrators and security forces.

What is also important, Bahrain has remained an arena of Saudi-Iranian rivalry for influence. From the point of view of the Saudis, Shiites pose a permanent potential threat to the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia. The authorities are anxious about the loyalty of Saudi Shiites towards their own country as well as their ties with the principal rival in the Persian Gulf sub-region — the Islamic Republic of Iran. That is why the Saudi government has remained vividly interested in the development of the political situation in Bahrain, which is perceived in Riyadh as a *sui generis* safety buffer between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the fact that in Bahrain the Sunni minority has remained in power is also perceived as a guarantee of strategic stability of the petroliferous — Saudi, Shia — Eastern Province.

In the second decade of the 21st century, in the foreign policy of Manama, there arose also other, new challenges, relating to the Islamic Republic of Iran. At this place, special attention should be paid to the conclusion of the agreement of six powers (group P5+1 — Russia, China, France, United Kingdom, and Germany, which was not represented in the Security Council of the UN) with Teheran in mid-July 2015, which envisaged limitation of the Iranian nuclear programme and resignation of that country on its aspirations to obtain nuclear weapons in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions imposed on that country by the West. The Resolution 2231 of the UN Security Council adopted in this matter on 20 July 2015 laid down that if Teheran observed the nuclear agreement, seven UN resolutions adopted in 2006 imposing sanctions on Iran would be repealed.<sup>80</sup> This arrangement, which implicated the cancellation of sanctions at the beginning of 2016, worried Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the other member states of the GCC, and Israel. In all those countries, the abolishment of sanctions which for ten years had been imposed on Iran was perceived as a threat to the regional security and the preserved status quo, as well as dangerous legitimization of the expansive actions

<sup>79</sup> “Freedom in the World 2017” — <https://freedomhouse.org/report/fiw-2017-table-country-scores> (accessed: 10.02.2017).

<sup>80</sup> “Resolution 2231 (2015) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, on 20 July 2015,” Security Council, 20 July 2015 — [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2231(2015)) (accessed: 25.02.2017).

taken by the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East region, especially in the sub-region of the Persian Gulf.<sup>81</sup> The policy of Barack Obama's administration, which supported the concluded agreement, was considered both in Jerusalem and in capitals of the member states of the GCC as one of the worst mistakes in the Middle Eastern policies of the United States. Those countries tried — in vain — to exert pressure on Washington to change that decision.

In the opinion of Riyadh, cancellation of the sanction system which effectively restricted the actions taken by Teheran<sup>82</sup> made it become once again the largest political, cultural (religious) and economic rival of Riyadh in the region of the Middle East. As for Bahrain, it has remained an area of *proxy war* between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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<sup>81</sup> It is worth adding that Bahrain broke off diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran at the beginning of January 2016. This decision was a consequence of an attack on the Saudi embassy in Teheran and sharp Iranian reaction to the execution of a Saudi Shiite priest Nimr an-Nimr, which took place on 2 January 2016. For many years, Nimr an-Nimr had criticized Saudi authorities for the policy of discrimination against Shiites in the Eastern Province. He was executed on the Cutting Square together with 46 other convicts accused of anti-state action (assaults on the police in the period 2011—2013) and terrorism in Saudi Arabia. Among the executed persons, there were four Shiites. The executions, however, aroused massive waves of discontent and protests not only among the Shia in the Eastern Province, but also in Iran, Bahrain, and India. In Iran, competing for influence in the region with the authorities in Riyadh, state-owned media broadcast comments by priests and officials, who praised al-Nimr and augured the forthcoming collapse of the Saud family, and the spiritual and political leader of Iranians, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei paid tribute to al-Nimr on Twitter. On 3 January, indignant Iranians attacked the embassy of Saudi Arabia in Teheran, throwing at it, inter alia, Molotov cocktails and trespassing on its area; "Bahrajn w ślad za Arabią Saudyjską zrywa stosunki dyplomatyczne z Iranem," 4 January 2016 — <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,19425349,bahrajn-w-ślad-za-arabia-saudyjska-zrywa-stosunki-dyplomatyczne.html> (accessed: 9.02.2017); T.C. WITTES: "Saudi Arabia's execution of al-Nimr throws U.S. policy dilemmas into Sharp relief," January 8, 2016 — <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/01/08/saudi-arabias-execution-of-al-nimr-throws-u-s-policy-dilemmas-into-sharp-relief/> (accessed: 22.02.2017).

<sup>82</sup> S. ELLIS, A. FUTTER: "Iranian Nuclear Aspirations and Strategic Balancing In the Middle East," *Middle East Policy Council*, Summer 2015, vol. XXII, no. 2 — <http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/iranian-nuclear-aspirations-and-strategic-balancing-middle-east> (accessed: 25.02.2017).

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