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**NAVAL  
POSTGRADUATE  
SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

**THESIS**

**SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW SPACES FOR CONTENTION IN  
AUTHORITARIAN SYSTEMS**

by

Jason M. Belknap

December 2015

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**SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW SPACES FOR CONTENTION IN AUTHORITARIAN  
SYSTEMS**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES  
(MIDDLE EAST, SOUTH ASIA, SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA)**

from the

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## **ABSTRACT**

What role has social media played in Bahraini political movements since 2011? Does it facilitate and encourage a space for free expressions of ideas, or do the dominant groups utilize social media to promote their agendas and shape social unrest outcomes? This thesis examines how the use of social media altered the course of protests in Bahrain on the heels of the regional Arab Spring movement. Historical protest activities incorporated the free space social media offered to offset the effects of government control and intimidation. This change resulted in a level of prolonged protests and violence never before seen in the country, where the momentum for change hung in the balance between protesters and an authoritarian regime. Social media played a role not only in organization and mobilization of the protests but also in the shaping of international opinion of the growing conflict. In the end, government and protesters alike used social media to further their agendas and minimize the effects of the others.

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# I. SOCIAL MEDIA: NEW SPACES FOR CONTENTION IN AUTHORITARIAN SYSTEMS

## A. BACKGROUND

The February 2011 mass protests in the Pearl Roundabout, fueled by thousands of protesters, started the Arab Spring in Bahrain. Although the protest itself was a landmark event in the history of the country, the actions following the protest set the stage for this Gulf country's current conflict and ongoing strife. Over the next two months, 35 civilians and members of the security forces died in the unrest.<sup>1</sup> Accusations of torture and excessive police brutality soon followed with protesters using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms to send their messages to both a local and a global audience. A new phase in a fight to win popular support and sway international opinion began in a society where access to the Internet and use of social media was higher than any other Gulf country.<sup>2</sup> The ability to spread information and organize protests through social media initially appeared to put the momentum on the side of protesters. What started as calls for reform in the Bahraini government soon morphed into more radical calls for a regime change of the ruling Khalifa family.<sup>3</sup>

On the heels of Egypt and Tunisia, Bahrain appeared to be riding a wave of regional protest and activism.<sup>4</sup> Protests and calls for governmental reforms in Bahrain were not new in 2011, but the ensuing protest organizations, coordination among protest groups, and speed at which protesters disseminated communication to each other and to the media at large, appeared to be new to the history of Bahraini protest and their potential to mobilize alarmed government officials. Given Bahrain's history of protest

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<sup>1</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

<sup>2</sup> "Middle East Internet Usage Statistics, Population, Facebook and Telecommunications Reports," *Internet World Stats*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher, Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 207.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas, D. Kristof, "Tunisia. Egypt. Bahrain?" *New York Times*, February 16, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/17/opinion/17kristof.html>

movements and sectarian accusations of oppression and violence, what made this event different and what are the ramifications of the new social media-based protest?

## **B. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This thesis examines the role of social media and its use in the continuing Bahraini protests. Specifically, what role has social media played in Bahraini political movements since 2011? Does it facilitate and encourage a space for free expressions of ideas or do the dominant groups utilize social media to promote their agenda and shape social unrest outcomes? Does the use of social media by both the protesters and government cancel the effects of the other?

This thesis evaluates the role that social media played in disseminating information and organizing protests in real time by using information collected through social media forums, such as Facebook and Twitter, post-2011 in Bahrain. By analyzing the use of social media before, during, and after protest activities, this thesis evaluates whether social media enabled protests, and whether they increased the likelihood of success of the protest. Additionally, this thesis identifies how protest organizations as well as pro-government and government organizations used social media as a tool to inform and persuade popular opinion.

## **C. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

Since grievances against the government were not new in 2011, Bahrain provides an excellent opportunity to examine the use of social media in protest activities.<sup>5</sup> This study can thus provide insight into how social media was used to win popular perception; how Gulf country protest movements and governments use social media against protesters, risks, and threats; and how increased communication affects social mobilization theories.

Since 2011, the use of social media as a free space to express ideas and communicate ideas locally, and in the region, has played an increasing role not only in

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<sup>5</sup> Laurence, Louer, "Activism in Bahrain between Sectarian and Issue Politics," in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, ed. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2014), 172–98.

protests, but also in daily life. With Internet usage at more than 96 percent of the population as of 2015, Bahrain has the highest Internet penetration rate of any Gulf nation.<sup>6</sup> Initial uses of social media to inform the public and media of protests have evolved into media campaigns to sway public opinion and organize protest movements. Protest groups use their online forums to post videos and pictures of protests and violence to bypass government control of print and other media outlets. Protesters found support through their use of social media when international news agencies picked up their stories and broadcast them to a larger regional and international audience. Not only were protest organizations active in this campaign, but government forces also worked quickly to increase their media campaign to combat what they deemed inaccurate reporting of terrorist acts in their country. Social media became a battleground to win popular perception of the ongoing violence that occurred following 2011.

The increased use of social media in a small country such as Bahrain, with a high penetration of Internet usage and access to mobile devices, serves as a test bed for other social movements in the region. Studying the role of social media in Bahrain potentially will lead to a better understanding of other Gulf countries' protest movements and possibly to an ability to predict future movements. Evaluating the role social media plays in Bahrain as a forum for free expression or means to persuade the population can lead to a better awareness of how other protest organizations, as well as governments, use the medium in the region. Bahrain serves as an example of not only expression of protest, but also how the government is using information from social media to target, arrest, and harass anti-government bloggers and organizations.

The world is increasingly interconnecting through information sharing, yet the implications of this increased sharing and knowledge are not fully understood. Previously localized activities are now global events due to information sharing on social media sites. Historically, media outlets and media access in Bahrain is tightly controlled but through the use of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogging, the world is now aware of

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<sup>6</sup> "Middle East Internet Usage Statistics, Population, Facebook and Telecommunications Reports," June 4, 2015, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>.

daily life and protest activities that previously went underreported.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, understanding the role of social media in protest activities enables security organizations to better track and target activist leaders and those claiming responsibility for protests and violence. The comprehension of social media's use in this case study will further the ability to identify and target security risks and threats in other similar scenarios.<sup>8</sup>

Bahrain is one of the poorest of the Gulf countries but as a high middle income nation nonetheless is facing a dilemma in transitioning from an oil wealth-based economy to a diversified economy.<sup>9</sup> The outcome of this thesis can be applied to other rentier states and how their use of increased communication affects authoritarian government relations to their populations as they begin transitioning from oil-based economies to other revenues of financing. This study will assist in understanding whether the increased communication that social media provides destabilizes a rentier state government or if it just speeds up a process of democratization that was already established. Additionally, this study will contribute to democratization theory, which implies that increased development stabilizes a democratic society. Studying virtual or online social developments, as found in Bahrain, allows for a further application of this theory and to see if these virtual social developments offer the same stabilizing effects as in other cases. Studying the increased communication through social media in Bahrain offers insight into how virtual connections and communications affect a person's feeling of relative deprivation. Due to Bahrain's high concentration of Internet usage and connectivity, this thesis aims to understand if virtual connections are used as a free space to share ideas and mobilize the populace to offset or replace traditional face-to-face connections that bond people together.

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<sup>7</sup> Zahera Harb, "Arab Revolutions and the Social Media Effect," *Media-Culture Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/364Two>.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor Dewey, Juliane Kaden, Miriam Marks, Shun Matsushima, and Beijing Zhu. "The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring." *International Policy Program* (2012). <http://stage-ips.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/shared/2012%20Practicum%20Policy%20Brief%20SocialMedia.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Christopher, Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 205.

## **D. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of social media and its effects on the Arab Spring is a fairly recent topic with limited studies. Some important articles are available but only a limited number of books address the subject. The relationship between social media and its interactions and effects on the Arab Spring is ongoing, especially in Bahrain, where it is continuing to evolve. To understand how different groups in Bahrain use social media, this literature review highlights the following three areas:

1. How the historical and political settings effect Bahrain;
2. How groups use social media locally to augment protest activities; and
3. How social media activism relates to real world activism and the interplay between the two.

### **1. Historical and Political Setting**

Bahrain provides an important case for studying social media. The country has a long history of established protest organizations organized to effect change within the government. The introduction of social media use in the early 2000s into the protest movements along with the highest Internet penetration of the Gulf region allow this study to focus on how these changes altered the course of the movements. Bahrain has a rich political history that includes a deep sectarian divide between a ruling Sunni elite and a Shia majority population. The country is strategically located between the two regional powers of each sect, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Political activism in this setting is unique and well portrayed by Laurence Louer. Louer argues that post 2011 Bahrain politics are highly unpredictable due not only to the sectarian divide, but also to the fractured components that occurred as a result of the protests and government response.<sup>10</sup>

According to Louer, the main opposition party, Al Wefaq, “played by the rules of the cooptation game”<sup>11</sup> of the government while more radical opposition groups, tired of

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<sup>10</sup> Laurence Louer, “Activism in Bahrain between Sectarian and Issue Politics,” in *Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism*, ed. Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust (Baltimore: JHU Press, 2014), 172–98.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

what they felt were too many concessions, emerged. Since 2011, these radical groups have escalated the violence, with some labeled by the Bahraini government as terrorist organizations in 2014.<sup>12</sup> With limited ability to meet openly and organize themselves, these groups used the virtual free spaces in which they felt comfortable to share and spread ideas. These more radical groups, along with those groups playing within the institutional framework, embraced social media as a venue to share and spread their ideas. These ideas included organizing protests and violence against the government. The challenge for these new and influential groups is their legitimacy and ability to negotiate with the government and other opposition groups. Their violent tactics and strident calls for the overthrow of the Khalifa government have so far denied them an ability to reduce any divides or obtain an audience with government officials. For the foreseeable future, their use of social media is their dialogue of choice.

Louer's article importantly identifies many of the key players in Bahraini politics since 2011 and ties them in a historical context. Understanding this context between players becomes critical to evaluating the role that social media plays in the evolution of ideas and protests that have ensued in the past four years. As new protest groups formed, some of them assumed a more moderate stance and aligned with Al Wefaq to negotiate with the government: their voices were quickly overshadowed by the more established party. The messages of these new groups appear to have been co-opted in return for a chance of dialogue. This is one example of how an established party uses social media to advance its cause, while at the same time causing cleavages in the formation of new protest organizations.

After the initial violence of 2011 subsided, the King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa ordered an external audit of the actions that occurred not only by the protesters, but also by the government in the wake of an increased outcry of human rights abuses. He commissioned Cherif Bassiouni to lead a team of human rights lawyers to investigate and report on their findings. These findings are found in the Bahrain Independent

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<sup>12</sup> Eman Ragab, "Challenges of Countering Terrorism in the Middle East after the Arab Revolutions," in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Lombardi, Marco, E. Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Y. Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2014), 107.

Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report.<sup>13</sup> This report provides a brief historical context, an understanding of the legal framework of the nation, and most important to this thesis, an in-depth look at the actions that occurred in February 2011. The actions outlined in the report have been accepted by both the government and the main opposition groups. The report identifies both human rights abuses and outlines steps the government should take in order to rectify and move forward from this event.

The report allows an in-depth look at the actions and counteractions during the initial onset of violence in the country. Of note in the report is the government's use of media harassment and using YouTube videos to document and review protest activities. The report highlights the fact that protest groups used YouTube videos to spread their ideas, which played a key role in the dissemination of information during this time when non-government biased media lacked access to the scene. Although important, the report must be considered for what it is, a snapshot in time of a particular event. The documentation of media bias and harassment in the report gives context to the free space that the Internet provided to protesters.

Christopher Davidson's *After the Sheikhs* provides a view of Bahrain in the context of a rentier state on the verge of collapse.<sup>14</sup> The book promotes the idea that Bahrain, like the other Gulf States, is on the verge of collapse due to internal mismanagement along with social and economic pressures. Davidson illustrates decisions the government has taken that set the country on a path to change their system of governance. In the context of this path to change, the author identifies that the government has chosen censorship to maintain a grip on society by controlling information. In response to stricter censorship, Davidson concludes that Bahrainis moved to online forums to express discontent with the government in order to bypass censorship. In response, the government tightened controls of Internet usage by increasing Internet censorship and harassing bloggers on anti-government sites.<sup>15</sup> Davidson cites the World

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<sup>13</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher, Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

Press Freedom Index that as of 2015 ranks Bahrain “among the very worst countries in the world.”<sup>16</sup>

The economic and social factors highlighted in this book help to understand Bahrain’s place in the Gulf and decisions they make as a rentier state. Although his writings do not center on protest activities or the current unrest and use of social media, they underscore that these protests are a mere manifestation of the changes that are already underway. If this is true, then the changes would occur with or without social media; it is just a matter of time.

## **2. Social Media Use to Augment Protest Movements**

The idea of social media as a tool that augments protests is better understood by examining the research provided by Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni.<sup>17</sup> The authors look at how mass uprisings have the potential to enact change and overthrow an authoritarian government. They look at why citizens protest and under what conditions they are successful in leading to regime change.<sup>18</sup> The article also considers that organizing mass protests under a repressive government is more challenging because there are more risks involved and organizing and communication is limited or disjointed. According to this theory, there is a tipping point that must be met where citizens must feel that the prospect of winning is greater than the threat posed by a repressive government. The theory identifies that as more repression limits or deters protests, smaller acts of protests take on more significant meaning as they show weakness in the government and are more likely to cascade into larger events.

Aspects of this theory are applicable to the situation in Bahrain and can be used to explain why organizers of seemingly small protests use social media to portray events to a larger audience in hopes of gaining broader support. This explanation also fits into the government’s application of harsher security tactics to protesters and use of social media

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Kricheli, Yair Livne, and Beatriz Magaloni, “Taking to the Streets: Theory and Evidence on Protests under Authoritarianism,” in *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*, (2011).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 2.

to portray actions from their viewpoint. Government sponsored Facebook pages and official information dissemination increased drastically in the years after 2011 in an attempt to offset what it considered a one-sided and often erroneous portrayal of events. Sectarian language and branding certain radical groups as terrorists also factor into this theory, as the government attempted to factionalize and minimize the opposition. Using communication to strengthen its position in a highly divided state has helped the government, in essence, to mobilize its own uprising of support to counter the protests.

Bahrain has utilized the application of force to stop protests as documented in the BICI report. However, while a security presence is still felt across the country in 2015, it is much lower than the level seen in 2011. In light of this changing security presence, the online presence of protest movements has only grown in that same timeframe. The lessened security presence allowed protest organizations that grew in the free spaces of social media to expand into literal gatherings and face-to-face connections. Similar use of social media to organize and garner support can also be seen in the Eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia where conditions are similar to Bahrain.

Neighboring Bahrain and sharing similar grievances, sectarian divides, and Internet penetration rates, the eastern province of Saudi Arabia witnessed an uprising and government use of force in response at the same time as the Bahrain uprising. During the Saudi uprising, various groups in Saudi began posting their activities online and showed a loose organization through 2011 and 2012. In March 2012, a coalition of youth movements united under a single structure called the Coalition of Freedom and Justice.<sup>19</sup> This unity mirrored a similar move in Bahrain when the February 14 movement assumed control over the online presence of multiple smaller protest groups. This social forum allowed for the loosely organized group to have a disciplined and focused format and a unified challenge to the government message but differed from Bahrain in that Saudi

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<sup>19</sup> Toby Matthiesen, "A Saudi Spring?: The Shi'a Protest Movement in the Eastern Province 2011–2012." *The Middle East Journal* 66, no. 4 (2012): 628–59.

maintained their security presence and oppression of the population limiting the ability of protest organizations to grow.<sup>20</sup>

The ability to organize and portray a unified presence online furthered the aims, as illustrated by Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni to portray a larger presence and attract more people to a cause while portraying the government in a weak position.<sup>21</sup> In Bahrain's case, what started as a loose organization of various groups turned into a political organization that challenged the government to brand them as terrorists.<sup>22</sup>

How did the 14 February movement grow to a point that it became a key symbol for recruiting participants and organizing large events? Studies have shown a correlation between a diffuse network of people among multiple online networks and their relationship with leadership and their ability to recruit.<sup>23</sup> These studies found that the speed that information moved between online organizations correlated with how the organizations were organized. When information was dispersed through multiple, smaller organizations versus few larger organizations, the speed of information drastically increased. Social media forums used by Bahrain's protest organizations facilitated this type of information distribution. This would be one explanation to the success of the February movement as an organizer of multiple nodes of information associated amongst the other protest groups online. Fourteen February movement leaders were able to disseminate information to multiple smaller networks of people where the time needed to distribute information is much shorter. The ability to exchange information and ideas quickly allowed protesters to organize protests and direct protest activities in real time in an effort to counter police tactics. This use of information dissemination and its

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<sup>20</sup> T. C. Jones, and A. Al-Shehabi, "Bahrain's Revolutionaries," *Middle East Channel on Foreign Policy, Communication* 2 (2012).

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Kricheli, Yair Livne, and Beatriz Magaloni, "Taking to the Streets: Theory and Evidence on Protests under Authoritarianism," in *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*, (2011).

<sup>22</sup> Eman Ragab, "Challenges of Countering Terrorism in the Middle East after the Arab Revolutions," in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Lombardi, Marco, E. Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Y. Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2014), 107.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra González-Bailón, Javier Borge-Holthoefer, Alejandro Rivero, and Yamir Moreno. "The Dynamics of Protest Recruitment through an Online Network," *Scientific reports* 1, (2011); Neal Caren, and Sarah Gaby, "Occupy Online: Facebook and the Spread of Occupy Wall Street," Available at SSRN 1943168 (2011).

application in Bahrain further aids this research in identifying the importance that social media plays to organize and express ideas in an environment where literal gathering and exchange of ideas is stifled by government oppression.

### **3. Social Media Activism into Real-World Application**

The dynamics within the online networks also become important for understanding how online activism translates to real-world events. One study analyzing the use of Twitter identified distinct groups of people that disseminate information depending on the type of event.<sup>24</sup> The first group had a high percentage of receiving and disseminating information internal to their network during ongoing events or breaking news stories. This group did not provide as much unique input, rather the individuals acted as a conduit to spread information resulting in a quick and high disbursement rate of the information. In the second group, individuals used Twitter as a medium to post their original comments on a mainstream media event such as an election or television event resulting in a smaller pattern of distribution but with more content. This second group, although timely, did not result in a wide distribution of information.<sup>25</sup> This study further identifies the need for a broad organization of online social networks to distribute information quickly and effectively in order to organize events. Bahrain provides an example of this type of distribution network typified by multiple social networks in use by multiple protest groups able to quickly distribute information during the preparation and actual events as they unfolded.

One final area of study compares online communication as opposed to traditional face-to-face meetings. Earl et al. argue that online activism does not necessarily spur increases in offline activism.<sup>26</sup> They argue that trust and required face-to-face meetings are still essential to participation in protest activities while online activism is used to

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<sup>24</sup> Axel Bruns, and Stefan Stieglitz. "Towards More Systematic Twitter analysis: Metrics for Tweeting Activities," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 16, no. 2 (2013): 91–108.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer Earl, Katrina Kimport, Greg Prieto, Carly Rush, and Kimberly Reynoso, "Changing the World One Webpage at a Time: Conceptualizing and Explaining Internet Activism," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (2010): 425–446.

spread information much like spreading pamphlets or brochures in a traditional setting.<sup>27</sup> Applying this study to Bahrain will help to understand if the protest networks in Bahrain are also information sharing networks or if the repressive atmosphere is forcing people to use the online format as free spaces to meet, discuss, and recruit to participate in mass protests. Bahrain's use of social media supports this argument. Although social media was used to organize and direct protest activities, groups still met face to face to share ideas, recruit new members and organize activities.

#### **E. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Understanding the role that social media played in protest activities in Bahrain is a complex issue and encompasses a variety of factors. Sectarianism divides, economic disparities, and access to power, as well as government control of media and access to information pressure protest organizations and cause fractures within the Bahraini society. How social media is used to counter or utilize this pressure can be broken down into three different areas:

- Is social media being used as a means of solely transmitting information or is it used to organize and mobilize the population?
- Are government and larger protest organizations utilizing social media domains to further promote their agendas and shape outcomes?
- Is social media changing social mobilization and creating a cleavage amongst the population or is it just another tool used to communicate and that does not affect the outcome?

The first question aims to identify the manner in which organizations are using social media in Bahrain. Critical to this question is to identify how the organizations are structured and the interconnections they have between them. This thesis aims to use this information to chart how information is disseminated within and between these organizations and if the outcome leads to an increased organization in protests or simply an exchange of information and awareness. My hypothesis is that protest groups are seeing benefits in activation of protesters through social media in non-violent protests due to a repressive environment. My secondary hypothesis is that dominant youth groups

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 439.

used social media to broadcast their message to a larger international audience to increase pressure on the government, thereby changing the balance of risk described by Kricheli, Livne, and Magaloni.<sup>28</sup>

The second area of focus is separate from the first in that not all entities in Bahrain are using social media to actively encourage people to demonstrate. My hypothesis is that the government and mainstream protest organizations such as Al Wefaq use social media as a means to educate and inform the population while causing further cleavages that advance their causes.

The third area of focus of this thesis is to determine the effect that social media use is having on real change in the country or if it is irrelevant and change is already on the path to occur. My hypothesis is that although social media is encouraging activism and increasing the flow of information and timing of events, in the end, it is just another form of communication just like the telephone or fax machine when they were invented. The unique feature of social media is that it has the ability to impact countless people in a relative short period of time, which at times appears to spur change. In essence, it just compresses an already determined timeline based on prior grievances, social inequalities, and economic opportunities.

## **F. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis compares the Bahrain protest movements prior to the 2011 Arab Spring uprising to the protest movements after 2011 and up to the current time using a comparative framework. Specifically, this thesis evaluates how the use of social media altered the course of these movements and the significance of the changes. By analyzing the increased use of social media and its effects allows for a comparison of these two time periods.

Bahrain is an excellent case to study the effects of social media in protests movements as the country has a long history of protests and a high Internet penetration of the population. Protest organizations and the government both credit the use of social

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<sup>28</sup> Ruth Kricheli, Yair Livne, and Beatriz Magaloni, "Taking to the Streets: Theory and Evidence on Peotests under Authoritarianism," in *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper*, (2011).

media as a factor affecting the current situation. Additionally, other protest movements in the region are using the Bahraini model of social media use as a template to further their causes.

This thesis avails itself to multiple books and articles, which outline and evaluate the history of protest movements in Bahrain and in the Gulf region. Fewer choices in sources and information exist that specifically relate to the use of social media in recent protest organizations and events. For this reason, this thesis includes primary sources, the use of Internet data-mining from the time period and an evaluation of Twitter and Facebook trends from both the protest movements and the government.

## **II. AN AUTHORITARIAN STATE AND ITS HISTORY OF PROTEST**

Bahrain has a long history of protest. During events of the Arab Spring, state run daily media reports focused solely on the violence, placing blame on Shia youth. Residents of the country including foreign workers, worried about driving their children to school or if the roads would be blocked by protesters that evening when it was time to run errands. The violence in Bahrain is far more complex than is characterized in the media and even by the average person living in the country. A history of protests under an authoritarian rule had changed during the Arab spring. Government actions no longer appeared sufficient to contain protests and the ensuing violence and protesters ability to coordinate and engage security forces strengthened every day. Social media use was pervasive throughout the protests and enabled free spaces outside of government control where communication thrived and spread to the people.

### **A. A DIVIDED COUNTRY**

Currently, Bahrain is in the midst of a sectarian conflict that includes a wide range of activities. Government authorized peaceful demonstrations, by pro-government groups as well as by those groups wanting reforms, occurs on a daily basis as do violent protests both intertwined with and separate from peaceful rallies. Terrorist acts and riots by various mainly Shia youth groups occur sporadically, aimed mainly at security forces but at times affect the civilian communities. Gatherings and protests can no longer be taken for their intended purpose. Groups aiming for violence can easily use peaceful demonstrations as cover for more nefarious actions. For instance, on 3 March a government sanctioned funeral procession was interrupted by a group of protesters breaking away from the main procession, prompting police to use tear gas and bird shot to contain the violence. The event ended as a bomb placed by the rioters erupted and killed three officers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>“Bomb Blast Kills Three Bahrain Policemen” *BBC New*, 4 November 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26421744>

Because of the ongoing violence, the government purposefully deploys its security forces in order to isolate and contain the violence and to minimize disruption of daily patterns of life for citizens. Although violence occurs daily in Bahrain, it is localized in mainly Shia neighborhoods and targeted between Sunni government security forces and the Shia protesters. The majority of the Sunni and Shia communities as well as the ex-patriates working on the island feels its effects, but is normally not subjected to direct violence. The unique opportunity to watch a Gulf country go through sectarian conflict post-Arab Spring offered an insight into why this conflict endured and evolved and how a history of sectarian tension and violence aided what has become a daily battle for survival and struggle for power among its population.

Why is there sectarian conflict in Bahrain and what are the causal factors for the increasing violence and instability in the society? Bahrain has endured decades of sectarian violence that initially spiked in the mid-1990s and is currently experiencing a second spike, which appears to become part of a routine pattern of life. This chapter examines this question of violence and instability and identifies the reasons that produce and shape this conflict: the history of the sectarian conflict, the actions of key actors in the conflict, and external pressures. Although there are various sectarian cleavages, this conflict is also rooted in power and economic advantages that are used to further both the cause of the state as well as the opposition groups.

## **B. HISTORY AND THE CONFLICT**

The Kingdom of Bahrain is an island nation comprising over 30 separate islands 15 miles from the eastern coast of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.<sup>30</sup> The majority of the population is located in the northern half of the main island of Bahrain and the two connecting islands of Muharraq and Sitra. The population is mainly urbanized as the island is only approximately 10 miles wide and 30 miles long.<sup>31</sup> Although Bahrain has historically been home to the agricultural production of dates, land reclamation in recent

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<sup>30</sup> Fred Haley Lawson, *Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy*, (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

decades has decimated natural fresh water sources damaging agricultural production and opportunities.<sup>32</sup> The southern half of the island is mainly uninhabited and is crisscrossed with pipelines for natural gas and oil production.

Identifying the sectarian makeup of the country is difficult as the government discourages official censuses that distinguish between Sunni and Shia. The current population of Bahrain is just over 1.3 million with only 45 percent of that number comprising local Bahrainis. The remaining population of the country is made up of expatriate workers, the majority of which are of South Asian descent.<sup>33</sup> The non-native residents in Bahrain largely do not play a direct role in the ongoing sectarian conflict. Although the expat residents do not play a large or direct role, their governments and the pressure they exert do influence the behavior of the Bahraini government as well as opposition groups.

Current estimates identify that the religion of Islam is practiced by close to 70 percent of the total population. Within Islam, the population is divided between Sunni and Shia with the wide-held belief that the Shia carry the majority, with some estimates up to two-thirds of the indigenous population. The remaining religions in Bahrain reflect the varied demographics, with more than 14 percent Christian, almost 10 percent Hindu and a variety of others.<sup>34</sup> Unlike its neighbor Saudi Arabia that strictly forbids other religions to meet and routinely raids and arrests Christian groups that are meeting in secret, Bahrain allows and regulates non-Islamic religious communities in their country. Bahrain is considered amongst expat workers in the region to be more western and unique among the other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in that Bahraini law is more tolerant and amenable to other religions. As an example, churches, synagogues, Hindu and Buddhist temples, and other religious buildings can be found, and their worship services are open to the public. The Bahraini government does stipulate that

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<sup>32</sup> Ismail M. Al-Madany, Mohamed A. Abdalla, and Anwar SE Abdu, "Coastal Zone Management in Bahrain: An Analysis of Social, Economic and Environmental Impacts of Dredging and Reclamation," *Journal of Environmental Management* 32, no. 4 (1991): 335–348.

<sup>33</sup> "The World Factbook: Bahrain," Central Intelligence Agency, April 1, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>

<sup>34</sup> "The World Factbook: Bahrain," Central Intelligence Agency, April 1, 2015, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ba.html>

there is no proselytizing to the Muslim population and the Ministry of Religious Affairs strictly enforces the rules.

A main point of contention between Sunni and Shia in Bahrain is the fact that the governing Sunni family does not represent the majority Shia population, which is considered one of the primary reasons why the state does not allow official designation of Shia and Sunni. , The government of Bahrain has not conducted an official census that distinguishes between Sunni and Shia since 1941 when it was found that nearly 53 percent of the population was Shia. Some of the claims by those seeking political reform include prejudicial treatment in hiring for major positions of power within the government and security sectors. In terms of citizenship, while the state offers citizenship through birth only to Bahraini citizens, the government has since offered citizenship to some Sunnis brought into the country to work, especially in the security sector.<sup>35</sup> This practice has been highly criticized by the Shia community as an overt attempt to minimize the Shia Bahraini population over the years but the practice continues. According to leaders within the Shia community, the lack of official clarity and practice of encouraging an influx of Sunni population allowed the government to maintain official claims of legitimacy that Sunnis are the majority while dismissing claims by the Shia oppositions.

Historically, protests are woven into the social fabric of the Bahrain society. As an example, under the British colonial rule, Bahrain experienced protest activities and a call to end colonialism in the 1940s and 1950s. Economic changes that resulted in a rise in a middle class of entrepreneurs and oil wealth along with a nationalistic movement fueled the protests among the Bahrainis. These protests aimed to end colonialization and end a British push to consolidate Bahrain with the other sheikdoms of the region that included what is now known as UAE, Qatar and Oman. These early protests were

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<sup>35</sup> Aryn Baker. "What Lies Beneath: Bahrain's "New Citizens" Fuel Unrest," *Time*, March 11, 2011, <http://world.time.com/2011/03/11/what-lies-beneath-bahrains-new-citizens-fuel-unrest/>

categorized as unorganized and were brutally put down by the ruling British power that also included revoking the citizenships of people associated with the protests.<sup>36</sup>

After Bahrain gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, they entered an era of prosperity caused by an oil boom. Recounting this time in their history, many Sunni leaders and Shia activists talk of an economic growth that benefited both sides with relatively little tension. As the oil boom slowed during the 1980s due to international market prices, the economic disparity between Shia and Sunni communities became more apparent.<sup>37</sup> Protests against social injustices and a lack of Shia participation in the government increased. During the 1990s, the new Emir (and current King) assumed his position of power with promises of reform. On 14 February 2002, the state of Bahrain officially became the Kingdom of Bahrain with the Emir assuming the title of King. This marked a renewed peace in Bahrain with the hope of future inclusion of the Shia community in the government. The King enacted laws that allowed an elected parliament to form. In response to this new legislation, Shia leaders called for protests to end in hopes of more inclusion. The pause in protests was short lived as the instituted reforms were quickly identified as a token with no real power being given to parliament members. By the end of the 2000s, Shia opposition leaders were calling for renewed protests against the government. This renewed protest and eventual call for violence exemplifies the assertions of David Lake and Donald Rothchild that “intense sectarian conflict is most often caused by collective fears of the future.”<sup>38</sup> Just as the renewed hope of inclusion that the new Emir instituted in 1999 brought a steep decline in violence and protest, it appears that repression after the Arab Spring inspired calls for renewed protests and violence.

In addition to a sectarian divide within the kingdom, there was a growing divide within the Sunni communities. Power within the authoritarian government was strictly

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<sup>36</sup> Fred Haley Lawson., *Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy*. No. 39. (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1989), 47–73.

<sup>37</sup> Geneive Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide,” *Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*, 2013, 11.

<sup>38</sup> David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild. “Containing Fear: the Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict.” *International Security*, 21, no. 2 (1996): 41.

controlled and limited in scope to those close to and loyal to the ruling family. With the consolidation of power within the Khalifa family and those tribal families close to them, the Sunni community was divided into two main parts. This division included those thought to take a hardline approach, including members of the royal court and the commander of the Defense Force, in dealing with protesters, and a more moderate group that included the Crown Prince that espoused ideas of inclusion and reform.<sup>39</sup> This divide was apparent in the protests in 2011. The violence of the initial protests coupled with sectarian rhetoric by the government and protesters as well as the security crackdown that ensued appeared to fracture this alliance between sects.

### **C. PROTEST AND CRIES FOR CHANGE**

The Arab Spring that started in Tunisia in 2011 offered a catalyst for the protesters in Bahrain to mobilize and highlight their fight in the international media. In early 2011, Bahraini protesters, both Sunni and Shia congregated at the Pearl Roundabout and started an encampment, blocking traffic and demanding to be heard by the government. Large-scale protests were occurring throughout the country by both pro and anti-government forces, which led to the GCC sending Saudi led forces into Bahrain to assist in securing the country and re-establishing the rule of law. On 14 February, the government responded to the protesters at the largest site of demonstration at the Pearl Roundabout resulting in multiple deaths and injuries and accusations by the international community of human rights abuses.<sup>40</sup> This day then marked a rallying cry for opposition groups as a reminder of the brutal tactics that the government used to repress and subjugate the people. Since 2011, Bahrain has seen an increase in protests and violence aimed at security forces and a change in the demands of opposition leaders. What was initially a call for a more democratic government process, more inclusion of the Shia population in government and to abide by previously voted on measures from the 2002

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<sup>39</sup> Frederic Wehrey, "The Precarious Ally: Bahrain's Impasse and U.S. Policy," *The Carnegie Papers, Middle East, Feb* (2013).

<sup>40</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

election changed to calls for the removal of the Sunni-led government and King's family, the Khalifas, from rule.

#### **D. IMPACT OF COLONIALISM**

Taken from this history and applied to the current conflict, there are multiple underlying factors contributing to the protests and violence. Colonialism can be credited with a drastic rise in institutional organization in Bahrain, establishing a Sunni led government and setting the stage for future sectarian conflicts. Prior to colonialism, Bahrain was considered a nomadic and tribal region that was embroiled in constant battling with regional neighbors. Even during the Khalifas' rule spanning 130 years until 1861 when colonialism began, Bahrain constantly battled and were threatened by the main regional actors including the Ottoman empire and Iran, providing little peace or stability to the country.<sup>41</sup>

Under colonialism, a political and social stability settled on the island comparative to their previous history although this stability came with a price. The establishment of colonialism was brutal in its own right and instituted a ruling system that entrenched power of the Khalifa family. With the support of the colonial powers, reduced security fears from outside threats and family rivalries in the region, the Khalifa family became the dominant elite under British rule. The Khalifa family used this authority to insert members of their family and close Sunni allies in key political posts that benefited from the economic boom of oil and trade that would come in the next century. Although colonialism brought a semblance of stability to the country within the region, internal sectarian cleavages were only further divided by the ruling elite.

With external threats minimized, the Khalifa family focused inward to strengthen their claim on rule. With the support of colonial advisors, opposition members were deported or ordered to leave the country diminishing threats to the Khalifa family rule.<sup>42</sup> By the 1950s, the Al Khalifas "occupied a predominant position within the country's

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<sup>41</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997). 34–35.

<sup>42</sup> Fred Haley, Lawson, *Bahrain: The Modernization of Autocracy*. No. 39. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 44–47.

political and economic affairs. Economic wealth increased at this time from the growing oil industry controlled by the government while traditional means of wealth in the pearl trade diminished.<sup>43</sup> These changes in the economic wealth of the state versus the ability of the people to share directly in the wealth contributed to further divisions within the community. Although these divisions were not wholly sectarian, they were a contributing factor to future sectarian divides and conflicts.

Over time, British rule was challenged internal from the country with increased protests and violence. These protests and call for reform harbored desires for self-rule by the Bahrainis without any foreign governance. When colonialism ended in 1971, the Khalifas and Sunni allies were positioned to quickly assume control with an organization of governance that allowed for a stable and secure transition. While dominating the political power, the ruling family allowed for merchants to gain economically although with state controls in place. In essence, merchants were allowed the potential for increased wealth albeit under the control of the Khalifas. This agreement benefitted both the political and merchant class in the country reducing potential for future conflicts between them.<sup>44</sup> Although this system did not allow for an inclusive government, the system allowed a strong central government while maintaining the ability for the populace to enjoy economic benefits or a thriving merchant class.

At the end of the colonial era, Bahrain worked to strengthen and unify the country. Government policies to include the populace voice were enacted by rarely used. Hope for a stronger nationalistic unity was fleeting as one power was replaced with another authoritarian power that was reluctant to share power in a growing economic boom based in oil. The new sovereign government was soon to find out that the establishment of organized protest movements against colonial powers had the capability fixate solely on the new government with minimal help from external support.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 73.

## **E. NAVIGATING EXTERNAL SECURITY NEEDS AND DOMESTIC STRIFE**

After Bahrain became an independent nation in 1971, the government moved quickly to ally with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, their closest and strongest Sunni ally in the region, and the United States in order to strengthen their external defensive security.<sup>45</sup> As a function of the alliance with Kuwait and the other Gulf countries, Iraqi aggression was a critical cause for concern. The threat from Iraq presented the issue of an Iraqi Sunni government against other regional Sunni governments. The security threat posed by Iraq worked to unify Bahrain along with its allies against their aggression. Compared to Iraq, Iran posed a separate and unique challenge. This threat included a sectarian issue that was only exacerbated in 1979 by renewed Iranian threats that Bahrain belonged to Iran. This potential sectarian divide was cause for further protests in Bahrain and division between the government and their Shia population. Government statements blaming Iranian support for Shia protests were meant to isolate and contain the protesters and coupled with strict security procedures appeared to contain the violence and protests. This policy of sectarian statements, mass arrests, deportations and security policy of isolate and contain would again be seen after the initial Arab Spring uprising in the country.

Bahrain looks to the United States and Saudi Arabia for external security support. The regional dynamic of Iran's influence in direct challenge to a Sunni rule in the Gulf contributed greatly to Bahrain's position in the conflict. This challenge increased the relationship between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia while allowing Bahrain to work out procedures to contain an internal sectarian based challenge to the government. The alliance with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries that began at this time formed the basis for future military cooperation and the formation of the Peninsula Shield Force. This force would eventually be deployed after the events of 2011 to help Bahrain suppress and contain protests and violence that ensued after the Arab Spring began.

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<sup>45</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE: Challenges of Security*. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 37–38.

Bahrain quickly became a proxy local conflict in the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran after 2011.<sup>46</sup> Iranian leaders criticize Bahrain of atrocities against a Shia population desiring a political future of their own. Bahrain routinely criticized Iran of meddling in internal politics and points to multiple cases of Shia protesters confessing to receiving militant training by Iranian proxies in the region. Citing a recent smuggling incident linked to Iran, Bahrain government officials are convinced that Iran is directly aiding Shia activists to overthrow the Khalifa regime.<sup>47</sup> Since the formation of the country, security fears of outside influence heavily influenced the anti-Shia and sectarian rhetoric of the government, and appear to heavily influence the tactics employed to suppress protests.

The United States influence in Bahrain cannot be discounted. The majority of Bahrain's military equipment and training support is U.S. provided. Additionally, the location of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain provides a layer of external defensive security allowing Bahrain to focus on internal security. The strength of the U.S. support and basing of regional naval operations in Bahrain is a deterrent for external aggression against the country. Maintaining influence and alliance with the U.S. has arguably shaped the dynamics of Bahrain. As a result of the historical U.S. presence and support in Bahrain, the loss of U.S. support has the potential to change the balance of power between not only Bahrain and Iran but also Bahrain's dependency on Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries. The U.S. influence may not control the government's actions but do affect the policies and procedures of the government.<sup>48</sup>

## **F. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE**

Bahraini social and political structure is highly diverse with multiple layers of engagements that go beyond solely characterizing the current conflict solely as a sectarian issue. Using elements of Harff and Gurr's framework, the current conflict can

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<sup>46</sup> Laurence Louër, *Shiism and Politics in the Middle East*. (Columbia: Hurst, 2012), 103–5.

<sup>47</sup> Toumi Bureauk Habib, "Bahrain Foils Weapon Smuggling Attempt," *Gulf News Bahrain*, April 1 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahrain-foils-weapon-smuggling-attempt-1.1272184>.

<sup>48</sup>F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5–6.

be further understood along the following dynamics: discrimination, group cohesion, political environment, use of violence, external support, and international economic status.<sup>49</sup> These dynamics help to isolate some of the characteristics effecting the current violence and crisis occurring in Bahrain.

### **1. Discrimination**

The description of discrimination directly correlates with the Bahrain conflict. Indicators of discrimination include “government policies that treat sectarian groups unequally ... that give some groups persistent advantages over others.”<sup>50</sup> The Sunni-dominated government of Bahrain is plagued with accusations of discrimination. Since 2011, multiple Shia professors, doctors and other professionals were fired from their positions for their roles in the protests.<sup>51</sup> Judicial punishments are perceived by Shia as being lenient on Sunni offenders with little to no accountability of the security forces.<sup>52</sup> Government policy and sectarian divided politics restrict the ability of Shias to gain positions of authority in the Bahraini government, which directs all major political and economic functions of the country.

Shia youth generally feel that they do not have the same economic opportunities for the higher-paying government positions that the Sunni youth have access to.<sup>53</sup> While all Bahrainis have access to the government funded University of Bahrain, government and military officials have additional access to government funded foreign educations and advanced degrees. Through discrimination of placing Sunnis in government and military positions, the secondary effect of limited educational opportunities to the Shia population then becomes a point of future grievances and divisions within the society.

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara, Harff, and Ted Robert Gurr, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 108–12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

<sup>52</sup> “Bahrain Politics,” *Global Security*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/bahrain-politics.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Bahrain’s Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences,” *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 1 (2013): Art-14.

## 2. Group Cohesion

The strength that a group identifies itself varies depending on the number of shared traits.<sup>54</sup> All residents of Bahrain share a common language of Arabic, although the schools teach English which the youth commonly use in the streets. Religion is the main trait that separates the two groups and has been used by both sides to cause further divisions. Although Shia protesters are not calling for Sharia law, they do want a revolutionary approach to change in government. Because religion, which is viewed at a primordial level by the people, is used as a discriminator, the assessment of group identity and the potential for future conflict remains at high risk.

Group cohesion, along both sides of the conflict, runs high. A majority of the Sunni Bahrainis follows the King and ruling Khalifa family religiously with little tolerance for discussions that demean or contradict the King. Khalifa family members are royalty and are, therefore, top of the social order. Close relations to the Khalifa family determine the pecking order of the social status. As previously discussed, the Sunni community is not without its own divides. Even within the ruling family, there are hard line and moderate factions. The King and Prime Minister are generally considered to represent the hard line factions while the younger Crown Prince represents a more moderate approach to governance.

Shia families on the contrary maintain a separate class order. Elite Shia families own trade and merchant companies that have close ties with but are maintained separate from government officials. The remainder of Shia is generally considered part of the working class and lower income. Since 2011, Shia protesters have looked more to protest leaders including Ali Salman and the leadership of the Al Wefaq association as the new social order and leadership. Younger protesters, frustrated with the restricted practices of the Shia leadership, have recently shown to factionalize and start new, more violent protest groups. Most Shia communities now have a small, organized Shia violent protest group that claims responsibility for conflict that occurs in their area. Although there is no overarching leadership visible for all these groups, Iranian influence is visible in

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<sup>54</sup> Barbara Harff, and Ted Robert Gurr. *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004) 108.

increased Iranian flags being flown in Shia villages and pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini being used in mosques and Shia neighborhoods.

The ruling Khalifa family has placed direct members of their family in more than half of the powerful government positions.<sup>55</sup> The King has direct control over all affairs of the Kingdom that is considered an autocracy. The only elected assembly where Shia leaders can participate in the country is the Parliament whose powers to enact legislative change are minimal and must be reviewed by the King to be enacted. Shia tribal leaders are largely excluded from government power positions.

The political environment in Bahrain is currently not conducive to bridging the sectarian divide, freedom of speech or sharing of power compared to western societies. Shia activists accuse Bahrain of limiting their ability to protest and freedom of speech. Recent examples include arrests made of Shia activists for nothing more than speaking out against the king.<sup>56</sup> Political parties against the government are severely restricted or banned outright. Foreign embassies in Bahrain are required to notify the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when they meet with non-government political societies.<sup>57</sup> All political power is strictly held at the highest levels of the ruling government with the king maintaining his position as final executive power.

### **3. Use of Violence**

The widespread use of violence in response to protest activities is currently a debated subject between the Sunni and Shia communities in Bahrain. After the actions at the Pearl Roundabout in 2011, the king called for an independent counsel to review and provide an assessment of the human rights allegations and actions taken by the government. This counsel and its recommendations is what constitute the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) report. This report details the allegations of

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<sup>55</sup> “Bahrain Shia Demand Cabinet Change,” *Al Jazeera*, April 1, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2010/03/2010356756685605.html>

<sup>56</sup> “Bahrain: Free Rights Activist Held for Tweets,” *Human Rights Watch*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/03/bahrain-free-rights-activist-held-tweets>

<sup>57</sup> Elizabeth, Dickinson, “Bahrain Insists Political Groups Seek Approval Before Dealing With International Community,” *The National*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/bahrain-insists-political-groups-seek-approval-before-dealing-with-international-community>

violence that occurred and identifies parties on both sides of the conflict responsible for the violence. Both sides have accepted the findings of this report that indicate that the government did use brutal tactics including torture and executions, discrimination and mass arrests.<sup>58</sup> Since that time, the Ministry of Interior has undergone a transformation taking steps to reform the force and put them in line with international standards of norms. Although there continues to be allegations of abuse and torture by Shia protesters, either the government has refuted each charge with videotaped evidence or charged guilty parties within the security force in order to be more transparent. Additionally, an increased media spotlight has covered Bahrain since 2011 highlighting the grievances of the Shia community against the government.

#### **4. External Support**

External support for the Sunni community is open among the GCC partners. The clear intent of this support is to maintain a Sunni rule in Bahrain. Shia support comes in the form of finance, arms, and training, which has been hard for the government of Bahrain to identify. Multiple caches of weapons and explosives have been found and as previously cited, a weapons shipment from Iran was confiscated as recently as December 2013. Shia activists that have been found guilty of terrorist acts including bombings have confessed to training with Iranian military and supported groups.<sup>59</sup> Sunni government officials consistently accused Iran of meddling in internal politics for decades with little proof. These accusations have only further separated the Shia population but also caused a “credibility gap”<sup>60</sup> that has to be addressed in any future accusations to be deemed credible.

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<sup>58</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Iran and Bahrain: Crying Wolf, or Wolf at the Door?” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 16, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-and-bahrain-crying-wolf-or-wolf-at-the-door>

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## **5. International Economic Status**

As previously discussed, the government and politics are mainly Sunni controlled which includes control of the oil sector. After the discovery of oil and the end of colonialism, Bahrain became a rentier state with oil revenues enabling the government to control the population and assert control by the Khalifa family. Initially, this system worked well to unite the people and offered great economic growth to the country. As time passed, the Shia population saw the Sunni dominated government controlling the wealth with little input or future prospects of input from the Shia community. Understanding that economic discrimination along sectarian and class lines lead to increased violence and conflict in societies help identify goals and intent in Bahrain society.<sup>61</sup> As the disparity between the general people, mostly made up of Shia, and the ruling elite, which were Sunni, became wider, the grievances of relative wealth between these two groups continue to be a growing source for protests.

Bahrain is relatively resource poor compared to neighboring GCC countries but still maintains the oil revenue that fund the country. Bahrain's oil reserves are quickly coming to an end and Bahrain is working to diversify their assets to compensate. Becoming a financial hub is one method that they are working to mitigate this risk. Additionally, Bahrain is a tourist destination for GCC members (mainly Saudi Arabia) that want a break from their repressive environments. Aluminum refining and gas refining are additional areas that Bahrain is investing in for future economic development and sustainability of the Sunni ruling authority. In total, Bahrain's economic status is not what it used to be and the future does not look as optimistic due to continued unrest and withering oil reserves.

### **G. TRIGGERS FOR PROTEST**

Although Bahrain has seen several sustained sectarian conflicts throughout their history, the early 2011 episode had several triggers that are distinct from the previous conflicts. Prior to 2011, Bahrain was already undergoing political changes. Sectarian

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Brown, "Sectarian and Internal Conflicts: Causes and Implications," in *Turbulent Peace: The Challenges of Managing International Conflict*, (Washington, DC, USIP Press, 2001), 217.

divides and rhetoric from the Sunni leadership and Shia activists worked to divide the people. International divisions with regional alignment between Sunni dominated Gulf bloc and a perceived Shia Iranian meddling and aggression also furthered this divide. Economic and political opportunities and motivations played a large part in protest movements as inclusion in the government affairs directly related to increased opportunities. Government responses and actions were additional triggers for protest.

## **H. GOVERNMENT ACTIONS**

In conjunction with strict security measures, the ability to disrupt free spaces and control over the media while targeting and denying protest leadership, the government historically managed and mitigated protests movements. The government use of force, mass arrests and harassment have worked to disrupt protest activities in the past.<sup>62</sup> Police tactics to isolate and contain the protesters then deny them the ability to meet and congregate were routinely used with success. Regular protests were present but with the lower levels of sustained violence. Large scale and enduring protests that were seen in early 2011 did not happen previously, as the people were unable to maintain or increase the required level of mobilization. With little recourse against government oppression, protests could be managed.

In addition to identifying the need to isolate and contain protests and identify and arrest and harass protest leadership, changes in government policy reflect that religious gatherings needed to be monitored as well. In 1996, the government enacted laws that controlled the appointment of both Sunni and Shia clerics as well as controlling funding and religious educational opportunities.<sup>63</sup> Just as the use of force limited the people's ability to meet, the tactic of controlling their religious affairs further denied them a location to organize and sustain a mobilization.

Control of media both domestic and international played a key role in the ability of the government to suppress and manage internal protest activities. By controlling the

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<sup>62</sup> Bahry Louay, "The Opposition in Bahrain: A Bellwether for the Gulf?" *Middle East Policy* 5, no. 2 (1997): 53.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

message to the people and limiting the ability of protesters to share their message, the government held control over public perception of events. The opportunity to voice grievances to a large audience was limited and hampered efforts to mobilize and gain widespread support. Media was a third area or space that was denied through government actions.

Using their control of the media, Bahrain has historically used sectarian rhetoric to characterize opposition as illegal and un-loyal to the country. This tactic to divide protesters from society and control their actions aimed to deny opposition movements to merge and grow.<sup>64</sup> With government control of media, opposition viewpoints and messaging were lost. Control of the message left the government able to respond with little recourse from its allies or the international community at large.

## **I. PREPARING FOR CHANGE**

Bahrain's conflict can be described using David Lake and Donald Rothchild's theory of ethnic conflict.<sup>65</sup> There are multiple causes and catalysts for state weakening that increased the chances of mobilization and conflict in this case. In this theory, elite are important but not essential to the conflict, as the state has to weaken in order for the conflict to occur. In Bahrain's case, elite on both sides contributed to the conflict but only after the causes and catalysts occurred did the current conflict erupt.

There are three causes that attributed to the conflict in Bahrain: information failure, credible commitment, and the security dilemma. Multiple communication failures between sides occurred during this conflict with the government using sectarian language to describe an initial political movement. In response, Shia leaders characterized government security responses as solely sectarian motivated prompting an increased security dilemma. Both sides of the conflict had incentives to misrepresent greatly decreasing compromise.

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<sup>64</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Bahrain's Uprising: Regional Dimensions and International Consequences," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2, no. 1 (2013): 9.

<sup>65</sup> David A. Lake, and Donald Rothchild, "Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (1996): 41–75.

Increased information failures coupled with a growing credible commitment increased the mobilization of groups while decreasing checks and balances. As Bahrain failed in their commitment to uphold laws that would enable a stronger Shia representation and political power, the Shia communities became increasingly bitter and disenfranchised with the process. No longer were they interested in dialogue with the government and inclined to pre-emptive strikes against them as protest activities were only met with violence. As sectarianism was stoked through government statements, Sunni leaders within the government used this opportunity to destroy suspected and illegally built Shia mosques. All combined, these failures and decisions increased fear and incentives to strike violently in conflict. As other avenues of communication and politics closed, violence on the streets grew exponentially. Only after dialogues resumed in early 2013 did violence decrease.

As explained by Lake and Rothchild, the catalysts of sectarian activism and political entrepreneurs led to the conflict in Bahrain. Bahrain was previously a mixed society with intermarriages and business relationships between sects. After 2011, these relationships were strained to the point of broken in many cases. Because of the sectarian language used by both sides during the initial conflict, the community became divided along sectarian lines. Political entrepreneurs fueled this language to promote their agenda. As the state weakened, these Shia elite and entrepreneurs identified an opportunity to further their cause with a polarized mobilization of the masses. Sunni elite capitalized on polarizing Bahrainis to support security measures to restrict movements of the Shia communities and repressive tactics of arrests and discrimination. As the polarization of the sectarian communities increased, so did the conflict. In this case, the elite capitalized on the situations enhancing their positions as the state weakened.

### III. SOCIAL MEDIA—POWER TO THE PEOPLE—2011-2013

#### A. FREE SPACES

Unlike the other Gulf countries, Bahrain is a small, self-contained island with a history of protests and grievances against a minority ruling family. At 96.5 percent, it has the third highest Internet penetration rate of all 198 countries in this year's ranking.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, there are on average nearly 1.7 mobile phone subscriptions per person on the island.<sup>67</sup> Between the Internet penetration rate and use of smart phones, the possibility for social media's impact is greatly enhanced. Because of these circumstances, Bahrain is a unique and interesting case study for social media.

The use of social media as a public or free space was not a new idea in 2011. Jeffrey Juris wrote of the use of social media in 2010 in regard to the #Occupyeverywhere movement in that it was a “confluence between network norms, forms, and technologies ... that, as new media were incorporated into the ongoing practices of core groups of activists, they helped diffuse new dynamics of activism.”<sup>68</sup> The use of social media invigorated the dynamics of activism by offering an alternate path to disseminate information and ideas outside the reach of governments and organizations attempting to stop or minimize the growth of the movements. In 2011, the use of social media in Bahrain opened doors to activists and protesters that were quickly closing due to government security actions. The success of the government tactics of repression and denying groups the ability to meet, were quickly overshadowed by the protester's abilities to communicate and organize through social media. Protest activities did not diminish, as had been the case in the 1990s during a similar instance of violence and mass mobilization, rather protest activities grew. Just as Juris previously noted, the

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<sup>66</sup> “Internet Users By Country,” *Internet Live Stats*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.internetlivestats.com/Internet-users-by-country/>

<sup>67</sup> “Mobile Cellular Subscription per 100 people,” The World Bank, September 21 2015, [http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?order=wbapi\\_data\\_value\\_2014+wbapi\\_data\\_value+wbapi\\_data\\_value-last&sort=desc](http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.CEL.SETS.P2?order=wbapi_data_value_2014+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=desc)

<sup>68</sup> Jeffrey S. Juris, “Reflections on# Occupy Everywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation.” *American Ethnologist* 39, no. 2 (2012): 265.

incorporation of social media into an ongoing conflict changed the manner of the activism and subsequently the output and consequences.

Protesters used social media as a new free space to organize and disseminate information. More people joined ongoing protests as they were able to instantly see mobilization occurring. In essence, the prospect of violence and threshold to join were lowered as mass mobilizations occurred and social media outlets were used to portray the government as lacking the capability to control them. The ability to communicate and exchange information was critical to the success of the large scale mass mobilizations that protesters were able to achieve despite government restrictions and controls. Social media became the manner in which protesters used to mobilize as opposed to the traditional manner of word of mouth or organized rallies. In support of this type of information exchange through social media use, a study by Jeanette Sutton et al. on the effectiveness of communication through social media during disaster management showed that “social media supports backchannel communication, allowing for wide-scale interaction between members of the public that cannot otherwise be easily obtained.”<sup>69</sup>

Government tactics of repression no longer had the same effectiveness and the government was caught unprepared for the continued violence and mass protests. In response, government repression grew, prompting the need for external support from the Peninsula Shield Force and an increased presence of security forces on the street. The increased security and repression only deepened the divide between protesters and pro-government forces. While combatting protests and street violence with the threat of increased state security, harsh judicial rulings, and sectarian rhetoric, the government laid the foundation for an atmosphere of spiraling violence.<sup>70</sup> Only later did the government realize their disadvantage and change security tactics to incorporate the use of social media in their campaign. This use of social media as a free space became the new battleground for an ever-increasing conflict that still endures.

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<sup>69</sup> Jeannette Sutton, Leysia Palen, and Irina Shklovski. “Backchannels on the Front Lines: Emergent Uses of Social Media in the 2007 Southern California Wildfires.” *Proceedings of the 5th International ISCRAM Conference*, Washington, DC, 2008, 624-32

<sup>70</sup> Magdalena Karolak, “Escalation of Social Conflict During Popular Upheavals: Evidence from Bahrain,” *CEU Political Science Journal* 02 (2012): 176.

## **B. TRADITIONAL VIEW OF PROTESTS**

As history shows, generations of Bahrainis have lived with protest for a long time. A distinction must be made at this point between protesters and their supporters and those who commit acts of violence or terrorism, attempting to make change in the name of protest. While not discounting these acts of violence, which are facilitated by ongoing protest activities, this study looks at how social media impacts the ability of protesters to mobilize. This study makes the assumption that individuals that radicalized and used violence as a means to effect change were more reliant on face to face communication to mobilize and recruit versus those that mobilized in support of legitimate protest activities. This assumption is based on continued police investigations that identified traditional methods of communication amongst violent protesters. These investigations identified that social media was used as a tool to coordinate attacks but not for recruiting, training, and organizing violent attacks. Only after attacks were planned was social media used to coordinate the timing with other violent protest groups.

## **C. INITIAL ORGANIZATION EFFORTS AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSES**

### **1. Protesters**

Bahrain protesters and mobilizers were quick to act after Egypt's Tahrir Square incident that brought about the change in Egypt's political structure. The Arab Spring in other parts of the region is credited as being a tool for mobilizing the masses and providing a template to enact policy and government changes. Although, there are fundamental differences between Bahrain, Egypt and the other Arab Spring countries that will not be discussed in this paper, at its core the Bahraini people were motivated by these regional acts along with the other mobilizations and conflicts occurring at that time. The examples set by protesters in Egypt and Tunisia of increased information flow to organize events and disseminate information set the stage for the rapid growth of protests in Bahrain.

By 2011, grievances and sympathies for protests and calls for reform were well ingrained within the Bahraini culture. Social networks were already formed and

interconnected online. Recruitment and influencing people to protest was made easier by actions within the region. Through social media, Bahraini protesters witnessed changes in governments occur quickly offering the needed ingredient of hope to encourage participation. Historic grievances along with hope for real change were essential and allowed protest leaders to use social media as a means to inform and mobilize the masses quickly.

Previous to 2011, traditional protests included marches and demonstrations that blocked roads and disrupted traffic. The event would be announced well in advance allowing people to gather and participate. Normally, this type of announcement occurred in mosques or through informal networks of friends. Weekly rallies and events were established and local communities were generally alerted prior to the event. In all, the process and speed of information flow was lengthy and slow with multiple points within the process that could be disrupted.

In early 2011, social media was used as a vehicle to mobilize a population that already had deep social and economic divides within the society rather than actually deepening the divide. Once the Arab Spring began in the region, images of large gatherings and overwhelmed police forces soon spread amongst the Bahraini public. This information demonstrated to the Bahraini public the power of mass demonstration and ability to garner public and international support. The threshold to join a demonstration was lowered, as the movement of reform was no longer isolated to Bahrain solely but rather part of a broader regional effort.

The use of social media additionally allowed for immediate interaction between diverse groups of participants. Circles of friends and acquaintances could quickly be linked and accessed through social media that traditionally would have taken an inordinate amount of time. The shortening in time that social media allowed in organizing and establishing connections between groups allowed for diverse groups to share ideas and identify commonalities between groups that they were previously unable to do in the same time frame. This shortened time span allowed for faster mobilizations to occur increasing the participation in protests in early 2011.

## 2. Government

Government officials in Bahrain were not prepared for the rapid rise in protest activities nor the encampment that sprung up overnight at the Pearl Roundabout in the center of the financial district and close to major government palaces and buildings. Just as the political changes that occurred in the region were one trigger for increased activism and mobilization to the conflict, the government response was a second trigger with much greater implications in my assessment. After 14 February 2011 government security forces responded with force.<sup>71</sup> This excessive force and subsequent raids in Shia dominated areas of the country along with arrests and up to a reported 30 deaths that occurred at this time unified the Shia population in a way that had never before been seen in Bahrain.

### a. Security Forces

In response to protest activities, initial security forces tactics were designed around isolating and containing protesters. This tactic worked to allow a sense of freedom of speech for protesters while also limiting the scope of the protest activities and impact on normal daily activities of other citizens. As soon as protest activities became violent or started to move into areas that impeded traffic or considered off limits, security forces would step in to stop the protest, at times forcefully. Mass arrests, use of excessive tear gas, and excessive use of force were common accusations of these security responses.<sup>72</sup> This tactic was based on years of experience that demonstrated the power of the government as a show of force. In previous times, prospective protesters were weary of joining a protest when they perceived that security forces could arrest, imprison or cause physical harm without impunity during the protest. Traditionally, this type of reaction was enough to deter future demonstrations and limit participation in protests. In this instance, instead of slowing the protests gaining the initiative, protesters continued to gather in larger numbers.

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<sup>71</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni and Nigel S. Rodley, *Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry* (Manama: Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 219.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

One of the key problems with this type of response was that it was reactive in nature and thereby was time and labor intensive. As witnessed in early 2011, the Bahrain security forces were quickly overwhelmed and unable to contain the growing violence. Security forces were consistently deployed throughout the island and always on a high state of alert. For short periods of time, this type of readiness could be sustained, but as the protests continued, the security forces quickly were unable to respond adequately.<sup>73</sup> It was at this time that the Bahrain Defense Force and then shortly thereafter the Peninsula Shield Force were utilized to contain the protests and violence. Security force tactics that worked well for short durations soon failed once the events were prolonged.

The lack of coordination between security forces hindered a smooth escalation of force in response to protest activities in early 2011. The Ministry of Interior security forces are built with the island divided and associated with police districts. Each district was responsible for policing actions within their areas except for protest and violent activities, which fell mainly to the Special Security Forces Command (SSFC). Under this framework, protests and its attributed violence were assumed to be short lived in nature and one unit could assume that responsibility. As a consequence, when protests were prolonged or grew larger than expected, the SSFC were quickly overwhelmed and incapable of adequately responding. The violence between security forces and protesters escalated quicker than expected during the initial protests and violence of early 2011, overwhelming the police force. The framework of how the Ministry of Interior assessed protests and responded was no longer adequate.

#### ***b. Political Response***

In addition to the threat of violence as a detractor from joining protests, the legal system was a secondary and just as forceful means to stop participation in protests. The legal system was strongly tied with the government through family and tribal associations as well as political motivations.<sup>74</sup> Accusations of unfair trials and lengthy prison

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<sup>73</sup>“Bahrain Asks for Gulf Help,” *Al Jazeera*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/bahrain/2011/03/201131454020610721.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2014: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties* (Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

sentences minimized motivation for prospective protesters to actively participate. People that found themselves inside the prison and legal system rarely felt like they had a voice or adequate defense against charges brought against them.

Prior to 2011, the Ministry had deemed multiple Shia mosques as illegal and in need of closure or destruction. The Shia mosques in questions were built without regulation or permission from the government. The government excuse was that since they did not have permission and were not built to code, they were unsafe and needed to be destroyed for public safety. In a decision of poor timing and perception, the government destroyed dozens of these mosques during the early months of the Arab Spring in 2011.<sup>75</sup> The destruction of mosques considered holy to the Shia population solidified the Shia resistance as one for not only political objectives but also religious. The destruction of the mosques also indicated to the Shia community that their community was now directly threatened politically as well as socially.

Government officials labeled the protests as an overt Shia attempt to overthrow the government.<sup>76</sup> By labeling all protests in this sectarian language, the government further provoked the situation, stoking further sectarian violence between communities. Previous protests were similarly labeled this way in an effort to divide and weaken the resolve of the opposition. Identifying protesters through sectarian language and labeling them as foreign sponsored in an effort to minimize cooperation between opposition groups did not have the same effect this time. Isolating the groups through means of physical separation was no longer effective as groups sharing information through social media networks were already connected. Labeling them as one group only solidified them under one banner.

After the initial protests and government responses in early 2011, foreign investors lost confidence in Bahrain and pulled expat workers, weakening economic

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<sup>75</sup> Glen Carey, "Bahrain Opposition Accuses Government of Demolishing 30 Mosques," *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-04-24/bahrain-opposition-accuses-government-of-demolishing-30-mosques>

<sup>76</sup> Frederik Richter, "Bahrain Expels Iran Diplomat," *Reuters*, April 26, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-bahrain-iran-expulsion-idUSTRE73P3Z020110426>

progress in the country.<sup>77</sup> Not only were Shia leaders not able to access political power, but economic and trade opportunities quickly dissipated. Shia elite were directly challenged by changing economic factors solidifying their resolve with opposition intents on regime change and in turn fueling a larger sectarian fight

### **3. Media Considerations**

Media coverage of events was also strictly controlled by the state. Items of news and its dissemination were heavily censored with the information reaching the masses from a top down approach.<sup>78</sup> Minimal input from the populace was included and stories negative to the regime were never published. Unofficial media outlets were persecuted and shut down while people that supported and spread this news was jailed or harassed. According to the Press Freedom Index of 2011–12, Bahrain was ranked 173<sup>rd</sup> out of 179 countries with the worst media ranking in the country's history.<sup>79</sup> In light of these practices, Bahrain faced a relative crisis of information as the Arab Spring began in 2011. Other avenues of media access were minimalized as even mainstream media from satellites and Internet were censored. In all practical purposes and internal to the country, the state controlled what the people learned.

Cooperation between opposition groups was exceedingly difficult as media and information flow was stagnated by the state. The ability to meet privately and openly was critical to exchange ideas and information to various opposition groups. Initial protests in the Arab Spring included a mix of diverse groups calling for political reform and change. Even amongst the majority Shia participants, groups were fractured along various ideas and motivations. There was no single root grievance among all the players at this time unifying the efforts. Coordination between these groups occurred but at a slow rate as groups needed to meet to discuss ideas and points of joint cooperation. This timely

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<sup>77</sup> Courtney Trenwith, "FOCUS—Bahrain's Fiscal Tightrope: The Island State's Battle to Regain Lost Ground," *Arabian Business*, August 19, 2015, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/focus-bahrain-s-fiscal-tightrope--island-state-s-battle-regain-lost-ground-602661.html>

<sup>78</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, and Christopher Wilson, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square," *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 363–79.

<sup>79</sup> "Press Freedom Index 2011/2012," Reporters Without Borders, September 21, 2015, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html>

process was easily hindered by state policies and intrusion denying groups the ability to meet or even banning groups outright and arresting their members.

Accompanying the difficulties to coordinate between groups, gaining international support was nearly impossible. Media censorship denied the ability of opposition groups to spread their story and public perception outside of the country was tightly controlled by media releases of state controlled sources. Between the lack of external support and the ease of state intrusion between group cohesion, participation in high risk events such as protests was risky. Only after showing up to a protest would people learn how large the demonstrations were and if there was a risk of being arrested or at a minimum identified and detained.

One other output of state control of the media is the perceived legitimacy of the government in contrast to the legitimacy of the protesters. Because the state was able to manage the message that left the country, protesters were always assumed to be violent and extremist justifying a harsh government response to restore order. The voices of the masses were not heard in this arena and the government was good at manipulating the message to suit their needs. Years of deceit, media manipulation, and political censorship damaged credibility of the state and the effects were felt long after the initial crackdown and violence subsided. These actions of the government, combined with years of failed negotiations with oppositionists, led to an increased belief by protesters that the government was not legitimate.<sup>80</sup>

Control and communication during events is the final area identified as a traditional avenue of protest greatly affected by social media. Because communication was based on face-to-face interactions, protesters had limited contact or communication once an event began. As police responded and disrupted events, protesters were left to disperse or attempt to band together in small groups wherever they found themselves. The ability to mount a cohesive and flexible reaction to the police was severely limited. This is not to minimize the fact that many protesters coordinated their efforts and conducted both violent and non-violent resistance. The fact was that the state run

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<sup>80</sup> Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," *Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs*, (2012): 6–7.

operations, with their radios and superior communication advantages, were more flexible and adaptive to an ever-changing environment during protests.

Social media use amongst protesters directly countered the state's ability to control the media and censor the information flow. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube channels appeared and showed daily confrontation with police forces. Many times, blogs and social media sources were the sole source of information coming out of Bahrain during the initial phases of conflict in early 2011. These segments of information showed the conflict from the protesters' point of view, gaining international attention and support from other protesters in neighboring countries. The government initially lost the advantage in media coverage and conceded momentum to the protesters.

Social media usage after the initial Arab Spring events changed the landscape for information flow and dissemination. Networks of people built along familial ties and common bonds were built on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. In comparison with previous methods, social media allowed for an instant exchange of ideas and information. People were no longer required to go to the mosque or meet in person to organize an event. What was once a lengthy process to organize, now took a fraction of the time. Time lines were compressed and rallies and mobilization efforts now became nearly instantaneous. According to Hochheimer and Al-Emad, "social media users encouraged each other to speak out and to rise up against their authoritarian regimes."<sup>81</sup>

Communication flow and dissemination were not the only issues highlighted by the initial use of social media. The ability to organize and portray a unified presence online furthered the aims illustrated by Kricheli<sup>82</sup> to portray a larger presence and attract more people to a cause while portraying the government in a weak position. In Bahrain's case, what started as a loose organization of various

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<sup>81</sup> John L. Hochheimer, and Mohammed Al-Emad, "Social Media in the Arab Spring: Hope and the Spiral of Voice," *5th Global Conference on Hope: Probing the Boundaries* (March, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> Ruth Kricheli, Yair Livne, and Beatriz Magaloni, "Taking to the Streets: Theory and Evidence on Protests Under Authoritarianism," *APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper* (2011).

groups turned into a larger political movement that challenged the government to eventually brand some of the protest groups as terrorists.<sup>83</sup>

#### **D. OUTCOMES OF INITIAL PROTESTS**

The country felt the effects of the protests and their harsh response almost immediately. Using first-hand accounts from protesters and journalists on the ground along with videos, blogs and pictures from social media sites, the international media projected an image of a country desperate to retain control through violence and any means necessary. The government's control of the media and messages of stability were no longer effective tools to control the message regarding their internal problems. The ramifications were felt almost immediately throughout the country. Protesters used this opportunity to tell their story to the international community in a way that they had never been able to before.

As a result of the government's actions and the messages that were broadcast, the international community harshly criticized and vilified the government and the ruling family. The United States suspended military aid while international investments in development projects drastically slowed or stopped. Construction projects were unable to continue through lack of funding and security risks. Tourism came to a halt as the security condition worsened in the country, including cruise ships removing Bahrain from their scheduled stops and the Formula 1 tour cancelling their race in Bahrain that year. Local business leaders who initially compared 2011 events to previous outbursts of protests and violence confided to the author that by mid-2011, the economic viability of Bahrain for the immediate future was in question. These outcomes of the protests became points of hope for protesters quick to show results.

Starting in 2011, protesters were winning an online media campaign while government forces mainly relied on their traditional means of print and broadcast media as a means to reach the people. In addition to telling their story internationally, protesters

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<sup>83</sup> Eman Ragab, "Challenges of Countering Terrorism in the Middle East after the Arab Revolutions," in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Lombardi, Marco, E. Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Y. Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2014), 107.

were quick to target their network of followers with messages of strength as they highlighted government failures. Protesters posted messages to show that the protests achieved real results and offered hope to continue the movement. Accusations of human rights violations, videos showing excessive use of tear gas and force by security forces that were posted along with pictures of massive protests became common on social media sites. Both domestically and internationally, the conflict in Bahrain became dominated by stories that pitted a violent regime against protesters that were deemed the victims.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to security changes and an increased media campaign, sectarian division was beginning to solidify. Government claims of Iranian meddling and identifying the problems of the unrest solely within the Shia community fueled sectarianism and division amongst the Bahraini population. As a consequence of the sectarian language of the government, the Shia population looked to their own leaders for a voice and guidance as they felt marginalized by the government. The main Shia opposition political party, Al Wefaq, represents and is the voice of that Shia majority of the island through their social, religious, and other programs.<sup>85</sup> Initial attempts for a national dialogue were rejected by these Shia leaders, who felt they had momentum on their side. The power of protests and international pressure presented the Shia leadership with an opportunity and window to demand and accept changes in their benefit. This window would require compromise on both sides and built on the prospect of increased pressures from a growing social movement and unrest maintaining that pressure on the government.

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<sup>84</sup> Abdulrahman Al-Zuhayyan, "Western Media's Biased Coverage of Bahrain Riots," *Arab News*, October 27, 2013, <https://www.arabnews.com/news/468939>

<sup>85</sup> Abdulla Hussain, "Targeting Al Wefaq: The Shrinking Space for Political Opposition in Bahrain," *MEMO Middle East Monitor*, February 14, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/blogs/politics/16974-targeting-al-wefaq-the-shrinking-space-for-political-opposition-in-bahrain>

## **E. SECONDARY EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA AFTER INITIAL PROTESTS**

### **1. Protesters**

In contrast to historical examples of protest, the protests did not diminish after the initial security crack-down and deployment of the Peninsula Shield Force in March 2011. Despite the security situation and appeals of the government, protests continued and grew. The online forum *bahrainonline.org*, which had been active since 1998, was widely used by protesters and partially credited for the massive amounts of participants in the initial protests. Out of this forum came the 14 February Youth Movement, which called for continued protests and activism. Incorporating the power and base of supporters from the *bahrainonline.org* forum into the 14 February Youth Movement diversified the network of supporters and allowed a collection of smaller networks to combine into one large movement. This new online movement allowed supporters to share ideas and identify common manners of protest that would be acted upon. The virtual space became a breeding ground for ideas and organization while still relying on the smaller networks of individuals and activists to organize the actual events.<sup>86</sup>

The 14 February Youth Movement was not the only virtual space used by protesters although it appeared to be the largest and most comprehensive initially. Smaller groups centered on village locations and/or specific ideology soon began taking form. The villages of Sitra, Diraz, Saar and Bani Jamra each formed their own online movements and used their forums to advocate activism and protests centered in their villages. While larger forums offered an area to share ideas, the smaller forums were places of coordination and organization.

Protesters additionally used social media to coordinate their efforts to offset security force efforts of containment. Social media has been found to alter tactics of protest groups and aid their ability to share information and coordinate attacks.<sup>87</sup> An

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<sup>86</sup> T. C. Jones, and A. Al-Shehabi, "Bahrain's Revolutionaries," *Middle East Channel on Foreign Policy*, Communication 2 (2012).

<sup>87</sup> Julia Skinner, "Social Media and Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement As Seen Through Three Information Studies Paradigms," *Working Papers on Information Systems* 11 (2011): 13.

example of coordinating efforts can be found in Bahrain as well. As police were engaged in responses to major demonstrations, key intersections in surrounding areas would then be attacked in an apparent effort to block traffic, delay further police responses and cause daily lives to be interrupted. Examples like these highlighted the potential for social media to be used to coordinate attacks between groups to achieve a higher purpose of disrupting daily life, impeding police responses and show that the government was unable to contain protesters actions.

Activists and protesters used social media to exchange ideas and formulate plans but were in some ways affected by those in charge of the sites. Logos and slogans were formed at each site that offered a unity amongst its members. Signs, shirts and banners could be seen during rallies and protests from the different online groups. What started as a place to share ideas soon became a rally point for individuals to identify with and use to justify and coordinate actions.

## **2. Government Reactions**

Despite condemnation of tactics used during the initial protests, security forces continued to use what human rights observers called excessive amounts of tear gas and brute force to manage protesters.<sup>88</sup> The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry commissioned by the King supported the initial claims and highlighted the excessive use of tear gas while implicating multiple government units for excessive use of force. After the release of the commission's report, the King announced in media that there would be reforms made and apologized for any misdeeds that had occurred. This message was received with mixed signals among the population. While supporters of the government were quick to point out that the government was reacting appropriately, protesters and activists took to social media to express their lack of trust that any real change would occur.

Soon after protests initially diminished and with increased security presence of the Peninsula Shield Force, government officials declared that the area around the Pearl Monument was off limits and destroyed the actual monument. Additionally,

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<sup>88</sup> Gregg Carlstrom, "In the Kingdom of Tear Gas," *Middle East Report* (2012).

various Shia mosques deemed by government officials as illegal were demolished under questionable circumstances. In all appearances, these actions along with a state of national emergency with curfews and movement restrictions were an attempt by the government to deny protesters access to free spaces to meet.

Another means to deny literal space was the government's decision to limit some sanitation and cleaning services to historical areas of protest and violence. In early 2011, government workers could be seen daily cleaning graffiti and rubble left from evening protests and violence in an effort to maintain cleanliness and an orderly appearance. By the end of 2011, these services were restricted to main thoroughfares through select areas, leaving the neighborhoods responsible for cleaning. This was also done mainly as a security risk due to improvised explosives being found in the rubble, which caused injury to sanitation workers when they detonated. This restriction in mostly poor Shia neighborhoods left the impression with residents that their government was unable to maintain their social contract with the citizens and provide them with basic services. The unintended consequence was a further divide between the government and people that were further exacerbated as residents took to social media to post their dissatisfaction with the government.

Along with the destruction and denial of actual spaces, government officials also detained key protest leaders, students and faculty of the Bahrain University, health care workers of the Salmaniya hospital and an undetermined amount of citizens declared as part of the violence and protests that occurred. In all appearances, the government attempted to disrupt, deny and harass the leaders of the protest movements with the hopes of stalling any future momentum. Just like the denial of free spaces, this move failed to address the essence of the movement and only contributed to a more united and hardened opposition.<sup>89</sup>

Although the initial protests contained some Sunni activists along with the majority Shia activists calling for reform, social media groups appeared to be divided along sectarian lines. As social media groups are normally aligned along familial and

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<sup>89</sup> Marc Owen, Jones, "Social Media, Surveillance and Social Control in the Bahrain Uprising," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2015).

friendship ties, this was no surprise. The actions of an apparent united front against the ruling family and a call not only for reform but regime change, the government soon began using sectarian language by referring to protesters as the Shia protesters. This decision was similar to previous tactics that were used to divide and isolate the Shia population from power while unifying the Sunni base of support for the regime. This time, there was an unintended consequence that this action also unified and appeared to solidify the resolve of the Shia population as well. In essence, by classifying the problem as a sectarian issue as opposed to reformist demands that were initially called for, government actions supported the protesters' accusations that the government was only consolidating power.

Government officials continued reliance on radio, television and print media could not maintain parity with the speed of communication amongst social media users. Locals used community sites such as mums in Bahrain Facebook page to identify what roads were blocked from protest and where protests were planned or ongoing. Citizens would use Twitter or Facebook to post pictures of ongoing conflicts or protests to warn others to stay away. Although certain government offices such as the Ministry of Interior maintained a Facebook page, they were not a main source of news by late 2012.

Although not specifically a concerted effort by the government trolling of protester social media sites became more active from 2011 to 2012. This type of behavior consists of “aggressive Internet communication where people using anonymous accounts engage in abusive behavior towards other users.”<sup>90</sup> The increase in trolling had the reported impact of intimidation towards protesters and people who shared ideas on these sites. It can be assumed that the intimidation was meant to limit participation in protests and the role that this free space allowed. Unforeseen by those behind these actions, subscribers and members of these groups moved to an anonymous status to protect their identity and those of their family. Instead of limiting actions on social media, trolling and aggressive behavior only contributed to

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<sup>90</sup> Marc Owen Jones, “Social Media, Surveillance and Social Control in the Bahrain Uprising,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2015) 77.

further uniting protesters and users of these sites while making it harder to identify the people behind the movements.<sup>91</sup>

Through mid-2012, security forces continued to rely on an increased security presence throughout the country to contain and isolate protests and minimize their ability to mass as during early 2011. Although initial efforts were made in police units at this time to identify the locations of protests by monitoring social media sites, the police were not organized to respond as fast as needed to match the speed of organization and mobilization that social media provided the protesters. As previously discussed, social media groups at this point were built around small groups in villages as part of a larger framework and were able to quickly notify and mobilize in the streets.<sup>92</sup>

Police units were still consolidated in a few major bases around the island nation making it difficult to respond quickly. In order to maintain the coverage needed, the National Guard was used to fill static security locations, most notably around the old Pearl Monument location, while police units remained on high alert. Checkpoints in historically violent areas remained, and the taxing on manpower soon became burdening.

Through 2012, talks on reform remained on hold until early 2013 when the national dialogue between the government and opposition leaders resumed. By this point, protests had endured 2 years of activities with increased violence against government forces and a prolonged and increasingly sectarian divide amongst the population. The continued protests fueled by an active online audience maintained their ability to thwart government attempts to dislodge their power. The main opposition group Al Wefaq was bolstered by this support although they maintained a separation from the majority of online groups. Al Wefaq gained power from the youth movement's use of social media and their inherent ability to disseminate

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<sup>91</sup> Jillian York, "Twitter Trolling as Propaganda Tactic: Bahrain and Syria," *JillianCYork.com Blog*, December 10, 2011, <http://jilliancyork.com/2011/10/12/twitter-trolling-as-propaganda-tactic-bahrain-and-syria/>.

<sup>92</sup> Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring That Wasn't* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 47.

information quickly, as well as the ability of these same youth groups to mobilize rapidly.

#### **F. END OF THE RISE OF THE PROTESTERS**

By the end of 2013, protests continued to occur on a nightly basis with a sharp rise in violence including bombs, Molotov cocktails and attacks against security forces. Although the police were able to isolate and control the protests and subsequent violence, the experience was taxing on the manpower and ability of the government to respond. More important, up to this point, the protesters had enjoyed freedom of movement through their social networks to share ideas, organize and disseminate information virtually untouched by government control. Government attempts to control protests and the violence rooted in a long history of protests focused on reactionary methods that only caused a further sectarian divide among the people.

While social media was not the root cause of protests and subsequent violence, it played a major role in providing the space for individuals to associate and organize with other like-minded individuals. This space did not replace the traditional role of face-to-face interactions necessary for social mobilizations to occur, rather the networks built along with the ease of access to share and receive information propelled the mobilization process to new heights. This newfound interaction enabled the extension of protests to endure even during harsh security conditions. The country found itself in a sectarian conflict with newfound powers to the Shia community as a result of a continued series of unrest and violence.

#### IV. REPRESSION AND FATIGUE—2013–2015

Protests started under the banner of the Arab Spring continued in 2013 continually putting pressure on the government. Social media continued to play a role in organizing rallies, protest and disseminating information while stoking the flames of historical political and sectarian divides. The role of social media may not have caused the protests to start and was not the root cause for the grievances within the society; however, it was used as a means to mobilize a population prepared to revolt. The rapid rise of mobilization that occurred early in 2011 had given power and a commanding presence to the protesters and subsequently the established opposition parties to the ruling government.

By 2013, the rise of the protesters was met with increased resistance by the government security forces as well as the population itself.<sup>93</sup> Youth groups that mobilized under the banner of 14 February online movement had fractured into village-based organizations with more radical views and violent actions. Unity amongst the different groups became harder to achieve as their diverse goals and intents at times competed with Al Wefaq's goals of reform. The momentum of the protesters appeared to be slowing under the effects of a prolonged fight without the quick successes gained in Egypt or Tunisia. The role of social media as a free space appeared to no longer give a distinct advantage to one group or the other. The effects of politics, economics, group dynamics and an enduring heightened state of security and continuing protests and violence changed the interaction between protesters and the rest of the population.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "In Bahrain, Opposition Groups Become More Radical," Stratfor Global Intelligence, July 19, 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/bahrain-opposition-groups-become-more-radical>

<sup>94</sup> Rory Donaghy, "Uprising Strong, Economy Dire in Bahrain Say Activists," *Middle East Eye*, May 30, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uprising-strong-economy-dire-bahrain-say-activists-1578746200>

## **A. OPPOSITION**

### **1. Youth Movements**

When protests began in 2011, protesters rallied for grievances that historically divided the country. The use of social media filled a vacuum of information exchange and enabled the mobilization to occur prompting an international outcry for change and restraint against the government. Youth groups coordinated their information exchanges through online networks such as Bahrain Online while monitoring social media feeds coming out of Egypt and Tunisia.<sup>95</sup> The mass rallies and spread of information to the international world became the visible output of this movement. The secondary effect of these actions was the building of a large network of users enabled to disseminate and share information quickly.

By 2013, the online 14 Feb youth movement remained strong as a space to disseminate information and organize protests. Online postings by the group highlighted the ability of the protesters to gather and stand up to police actions. Police tactics shown in the videos identified security tactics including the use of tear gas and harassment and detention of those involved in the protest.

Youth groups by this point had formed neighborhood organizations with their own Facebook page and social media groups. Sitra, Muharraq, Diraz, and Saar are only a few of these youth organizations that formed their own identities and followings. Their goals and tactics varied but centered on regime change and violent protests against security forces. These groups used social media as their platform to project images of unity and strength. Videos set to music with accompanying messages of resistance on YouTube channels such as RevolutionBahrainMC and related Facebook pages show their groups attacking police checkpoints with Molotov Cocktails, rocks and improvised explosives.

By 2013 one group in particular, Al Ashtar Brigade was using their online message to not only incite opposition to the government but also to take credit for

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<sup>95</sup>Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," *Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs*, (2012): 6–7.

bombings and other violent actions against security forces. These actions ultimately led to the government labeling the group along with two others in March 2014 as terrorist organizations.<sup>96</sup> Even after being labeled as terrorists, the group continued to remain active using violence and posting videos showing their actions.

Each of the youth groups illustrated used various means of resistance that ranged from simple information exchanges to violent actions. A common thread amongst the groups was their use of social media as a free space to disseminate their ideology. With this common platform, each of their social networks was able to learn from each other and gain from each other's actions. As one group organized protests in one area, the other groups could monitor and plan corresponding protests or violent attacks in a coordinated effort. In this sense, through online networking, groups that had varying intentions could capitalize on the other groups actions by coordinating efforts through their digital free spaces.

In addition to the youth groups use of social media to spread information, various other online forums including Mums in Bahrain spread information to the community at large to help residents avoid the violence and disruptions that routinely accompanied the protests. Starting in late 2012, the Sunni associated group Defend Bahrain started with the intent of "defending Bahrain's reputation against regional and international conspiracies."<sup>97</sup> In total, anyone with access to the Internet had a variety of social media accounts to choose from as a source of news. Similar to television news channels that cater to individual ideologies, religious beliefs and political leanings, opposition and protesters similarly organized social media accounts.

## **2. Al Wefaq**

During the rise of the youth groups, Al Wefaq remained the main political opposition party to the Khalifa government. Separate from the angst and bitterness of the

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<sup>96</sup>Eman Ragab, "Challenges of Countering Terrorism in the Middle East after the Arab Revolutions," in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Lombardi, Marco, E. Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Y. Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, (Amsterdam: Ios Press, 2014), 107.

<sup>97</sup> Defend Bahrain's Facebook page, accessed November 16, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/D.Bahrain/info>.

youth groups that called for a complete change of the government, Al Wefaq remained steady in their conviction that the future of the country rested with a constitutional monarchy and an elected government.<sup>98</sup> The organization had deep ties within the Shia communities and has been a visible part of the political landscape within the country. Although, the organization has a long history, their association with the more social media savvy youth groups is tenuous and full of advantages and disadvantages.

Early on in the protest, Al Wefaq used the social media driven campaigns of the 14 February youth movement to inspire hope to their constituents. The national dialogue headed by the Crown Prince soon after the initial violence began in 2011 ended in failure for both the Crown Prince and Al Wefaq as the main representative of the opposition. This failure is credited for a divide between the ambiguous youth movement inspiring the protests and Al Wefaq who was seen as incapable of negotiating with the government.<sup>99</sup>

As protests grew and youth movements continued to diversify online and intensify in violence and rhetoric, Al Wefaq at times seemed marginalized in the process. Opposition to the government appeared to be further broken down by an older generation that sought political reform and inclusion with a government and a youthful online centered opposition that sought regime change and taking complete power from a Sunni dominated government. Interesting to note is that by 2013, the same disappointment in Al Wefaq that fueled the initial online youth movements would then plague the same youth movements who had not gained the initiative.

Without an online base similar to the youth movements, Al Wefaq was left at a disadvantage to mobilize protests in competition. Instead of competing, Al Wefaq expertly maintained a separation from the youth movements core cause while still being enabled by the ability of the youth groups to mobilize large groups of protesters. As social media campaigns were used to mobilize rallies for change, Al Wefaq piggybacked and assisted or participated in the same rallies. In this sense, they were able to capitalize on the success of the mobilization efforts of the youth groups while minimizing their

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<sup>98</sup> Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," *Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs*, (2012): 7.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

investment in building their own online social networks. As dissatisfaction with the youth movement's ability to enact regime change has grown, Al Wefaq continued to push their message of reform and inclusion.

Al Wefaq was also able to use the strength of the socially networked protesters and their ability to mobilize large rallies as a show of force to the government. The continued protests and rallies demonstrated to the King as well as the international community that the people of Bahrain wanted change. Videos from social media sites of harsh police responses and brutality were highlighted in Al Wefaq speeches maintaining the group's presence as a voice for reform.

Al Wefaq benefits from the ongoing strife and prolonged protests fueled by social media's use as a free space to organize. On the issue of violence, Al Wefaq maintained the right of the people to protest but maintained a separation from the actual acts. The free space that social media offered to organize and mobilize could also be characterized as a faceless entity. Although Al Wefaq did not directly involve their organization with violence, government officials claim that Al Wefaq participated in its planning and organization. These charges resulted in the party being banned from political participation in 2014 before the first parliamentary elections held since 2011.<sup>100</sup> While not directly influencing the free space, Al Wefaq enjoyed the benefits of mobilization organized by youth groups but were later implicated when the youth groups became too violent as seen by their latest ban from political involvement.

### **3. Organizational Changes**

Social media's use as a free space enables organizational changes to occur within the protest groups. Throughout Bahrain's history of protest, solidarity amongst the varying opposition groups continually plagued their effectiveness. The ability to share a narrative was difficult under a regime quick to separate groups, imprison leaders and deny physical spaces to meet. Social media provided the space needed to circumvent

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<sup>100</sup> "Bahrain Court Bans Opposition Group for Three Months," *BBC News*, October 28, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29801796>.

nearly every one of these tools of repression and allow cohesion and unity amongst a diverse population.

Building off of historic grievances and watching the Arab Spring unfold in the region with dramatic effects unified opposition in Bahrain. Youth groups that grew up watching their fathers and mothers protest with few results felt hope that the time was right for change. Under the banner of reform, initial protests and rallies occurred throughout Bahrain. The harsh government response and subsequent crackdown and arrests changed the atmosphere of reform to one of regime change. The free space that facilitated the initial call for mobilization under a unified banner thereafter became a place where smaller groups formed but remained loosely connected through newfound online forums. The free space offered by social media literally enabled the formation of smaller neighborhood based groups to form out of the larger opposition movement.

Social media use in Bahrain since 2011 enabled unity amongst a diverse population. Online followers receive information generally from the point of view of the protests. Classifying the situation as the people against the government enabled a sense of belonging and unity amongst followers. This sense of belonging has the unintended consequence of polarizing the viewpoint between the two groups. As groups become more polarized in their views, it then becomes harder to compromise and reach an agreement between sides. This is demonstrated through the change in intent from the beginning of the protests in 2011 through the calls for regime change by 2012 and 2013. Compromise and negotiation were taken out of the equation in videos and blogs that can clearly still be seen today on the revolutionbahrainmc YouTube channel.

This sense of unity served its purpose well as protests grew and endured since 2011, but as the prospect for regime change weakened, so did the resolve of the people. In late 2012, alternate YouTube and Facebook channels including pro government organizations such as DefendBahrain and also increased use of the Ministry of Interior Facebook page offered an alternative view of the protests to subscribers. Similar to the protest social media depiction of us versus them mentality, the pro-government pages offered a similar view but from the opposite perspective. Protesters were routinely labeled as illegal or terrorist and the actions of the police were labeled as protecting the

population. In an attempt to win control of the free space that social media provided, pro-government sites allowed an alternate but competing source of news. With both sides represented, the people were given a chance of understanding two sides of the same circumstance. No longer was there just one side portrayed but a more-well balanced understanding could be found.

#### **4. Protest, Violence and the Media**

Social media has not only been a source of free space to mobilize protest but also share violent actions of protesters and security forces. Since protests and violence began in 2011, there have been increasingly radical elements found amongst the protesters.<sup>101</sup> As previously discussed, Al Ashtar Brigade is only one of those groups that claim responsibility for bombings, violence, and killings of security forces. These elements have found an outlet in the free space that social media provides. Videos depicting violence both from the protesters as well as from the ensuing police responses continue to be common throughout Bahrain. Increased sharing of this violence is not limited internal to the country. International media groups and journalists unable to witness protests first hand routinely used clips posted through social media sites. Without firsthand accounts, the possibility and probability that biases previously discussed were found in these video clips.

Videos showing heavy police presence and excessive use of tear gas were readily seen in media coverage of early 2011 and 2012 protests in Bahrain. Seeing firsthand the same events, many times the protester violence that incited the heavy security response was not shown as the clip had been edited by the protesters themselves. The government likewise edited their videos as state run news pieces solely focused on violent protesters while minimalizing the effects of the tear gas or security restrictions on a village. Overall, the use of social media is a free space to share videos, photos and accounts of protests and violence offering a rich source for media outlets looking for information albeit with a cost that bias and misguided perspectives are easily inserted.

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<sup>101</sup> “In Bahrain, Opposition Groups Become More Radical,” Stratfor Global Intelligence, July 19, 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/bahrain-opposition-groups-become-more-radical>

Social media use has further shaped protests and violence in Bahrain in that there has been an escalation of protester violence in an attempt to maintain the momentum against security forces. This idea of using social media to promote the dynamics of social change is supported by research that claims, “Communication networks can serve as powerful accelerators of social transformation.”<sup>102</sup> Bahrain provides an example of social media use in protesters actions and conflict violence over a sustained period of time. Initial protest activities shared through social media sites were widely covered in 2011 by major media distributors. As protests endured over time though, media coverage waned and only picked up after a more violent attack occurred. This theory is further supported by the research of Michael Jetter as he found that media coverage is an indicator of future violence and terrorist acts.<sup>103</sup>

## **B. GOVERNMENT**

### **1. Security Organization**

Social media use amongst protesters had many effects and consequences. Early on in the movement, quickened mobilization and dissemination of information were arguably the largest visible outcome of its use. The security organizations in Bahrain felt the immediate effects of this output as security forces were overwhelmed in the initial protests. The Peninsula Shield Force entered Bahrain along with the mobilization of the Bahrain Defense Force and the National Guard to restore order and a sense of control in the country. An additional outcome of the increased mobilization linked to social media use was that protests and opposition activities continued to endure despite the security tactics used to isolate and contain protests and the ensuing violence.

The continued mobilization of protesters led to the extended presence of the National Guard to secure locations including the old Pearl Monument. The activation of the National Guard assuming responsibilities from the Ministry of Interior for certain infrastructure and key location security allowed the police forces to maintain a front line

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<sup>102</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, “The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the “Arab Spring,” *Ponars Eurasia* 15 (2011): 1.

<sup>103</sup> Michael Jetter, “Terrorism and the Media,” *Discussion Paper Series* no. 8497, (2014), 43.

presence and response capability to protest and violent activities. As of 2015, the National Guard continues to actively support the Ministry of Interior. Although the mission of the National Guard is to support both the Ministry of Interior and the Defense Force, the extended support over the last four years has placed an additional burden on the tasking of their force.

In addition to the sustained mobilization of the National Guard in support of the Ministry of Interior, the United Arab Emirates continued to send police officers as part of the GCC agreement as late as 2014. In March of that year, an Emirati police officer died from wounds sustained after a roadside bomb detonated during riots in the village of Daih.<sup>104</sup> The continued support from the GCC after four years of protests along with the continued support of the National Guard is an indicator of a continued need for additional resources by the Ministry of Interior.

Trust and relationships are instrumental to building a social network online just as it is in person. A key to the success of the mobilization effort in Bahrain was that social networks built along familial and tribal lines and inherently contained that trust. As a result of historic divides and grievances, protesters did not have the same level of trust with government sources nor with the established opposition political parties.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, media sources in Bahrain are mainly state controlled and are generally biased toward the government's perspective. As a result of this trust issue, information from government sources was generally dismissed by not only the protesters but also media sources hungry for information on the ongoing protests.

Government attempts to use social media as a means to disseminate information were received initially with skepticism. Like the Bahrain News Agency or local newspapers, Twitter and Facebook feeds were looked at as another tool of propaganda from the state. Police officers associated with this program noticed a change by late 2012 after an increase in public bombings and associated deaths of not only police but

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<sup>104</sup> "Emirati Police Officer among Three Dead," *Khaleej Times*, March 4, 2014, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/article/20140304/ARTICLE/303049992/1011>

<sup>105</sup> Chatham House, "Bahrain: Youth Perspectives on the Future," *Middle East and North Africa Programme Workshop Summary: Future Trends in the GCC*, June 2012, 8.

civilians. By this point in time, protester aims of regime change were no closer to being achieved than in early 2011 and the civilian populace appeared tired of the continued violence. Steady use of messaging with an increased effort on rapid dissemination appeared to increase followers. Speaking with other locals at the time, the Ministry feed provided an alternative narrative to events and was used in conjunction with other sources to understand the ongoing political and protest environment.

As a direct result of social media postings and videos, police actions were under constant scrutiny from inside the country and at times internationally. Cameras at nearly every protest event captured police responses and were quickly spread through Twitter, Facebook and YouTube channels. By 2013, security forces were keenly aware of the protesters use of videos and the potential for international outcry when human rights abuses were recorded. Security forces were also aware of the potential threat these recordings were to their operations as each response to protest was recorded. This tactic was common in Afghanistan and Iraq at the time against coalition forces.

## **2. Political Dialogue**

Social media groups amongst the protesters by late 2013 had migrated to neighborhood and smaller groupings of individuals.<sup>106</sup> After the violence of 2011 began, government officials increased sectarian language attempting to divide protesters from the people. The use of sectarian language only solidified the position of protesters pitting the government and their supporters against a more unified majority of the population. As social networks changed, the use of multiple free spaces through social media enabled the government to try new methods to divide and separate them.

By 2014, the government had changed their stance of identifying the protests as a Shia problem, instead separating violent protesters and their supporting organizations from the rest of the population.<sup>107</sup> Although the government still places blame on Iranian support for violence and unrest, changing the language to unity and nationalism offers the

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<sup>106</sup> “Anti-Government Protests Rock Bahrain Amidst Tight Security,” *Reuters*, August 15, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/news/violence-bahrain-protests-opposition-469/>

<sup>107</sup> “HM the King Underlines Bolstering National Unity, Islamic Values,” *Bahrain News Agency*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/676940>

populace a choice of reconciliation without denouncing religious ties. Billboards were placed throughout the country with nationalistic slogans that culminated in a nationalism conference that was held in February 2015. The move away from purely sectarian to nationalistic language enabled the government to allow protesters an option to align with pro-reform oppositionists and enable another chance at a national dialogue. The evolution of online social groups into smaller niche groups enabled this type of movement and change in ideals.

To further offset the free space to communicate provided by social media, government officials announced amendments to laws in late 2013 that limited an opposition leader's ability to meet with foreign entities without permission from the government.<sup>108</sup> This change strengthened the government's ability to monitor the opposition's communication with potential sources of support or sympathy. While unable to limit the free space that social media provided, the government took steps within their power to limit real world contact.

A national dialogue and ability to maintain communication with opposition and protesters was a key necessity in the findings of the BICI report and supported by western allies to Bahrain. Opposition leaders, feeling strengthened by a strong mobilization fueled by social media of Bahrainis against the government were quick to abstain through 2013 from dialogue if their demands were not met. By 2014 as hope diminished amongst protesters of real change, and increased information across social media platforms that highlighted both sides of the conflict, the government had an opportunity to strengthen their position.

Using the need to uphold the rule of law, law enforcement officials vigorously detained and arrested protesters committing violence, opposition members accused of inciting violence or speaking ill of the King as well as those violating the newly amended law requiring opposition parties to register meetings with foreign entities. An example of the emboldened police actions can be seen in the banning of Al Wefaq from political

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<sup>108</sup> Elizabeth Dickinson, "Bahrain Insists Political Groups Seek Approval Before Dealing With International Community," *The National*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/bahrain-insists-political-groups-seek-approval-before-dealing-with-international-community>

participation in late 2014 and the increased arrests of senior Al Wefaq members. These arrests and flagrant moves to stifle the opposition occurred without unifying the masses as had occurred in 2011. Protests and rallies denouncing the government's actions did occur but only on a smaller scale than before.

### **3. The Continued Media Battle**

In early 2011, media interest in Bahrain as part of the Arab Spring was high.<sup>109</sup> Government restrictions on media forced international media outlets to search and use social media sources for information on the unrest. Bloggers, youth protest organizations and opposition leaders freely shared images and stories highlighting their positions and vilifying the government. By 2013, after an increase in improvised explosive devices, Molotov Cocktails and nightly violence aimed against security forces, protesters no longer held the moral high ground they once occupied in 2011. Government sources used social media's free spaces to share their stories and continually emphasized the terrorist actions of violent protesters. The free space became a place full of multiple viewpoints where previously it was dominated by protesters.

In addition to changes in the landscape of the free space of social media, international headlines began moving away from the Arab Spring. Sectarian divides and historic grievances that fueled the opposition in Bahrain from before 2011 remained after and did not offer the same story of change that Egypt and Tunisia brought. Only more extreme acts of violence would occasionally bring the spotlight back to Bahrain. This time though, the violence was instigated by the protesters, not the government.

Legitimacy and trust were also at stake by 2013–14. Protesters claims for legitimacy while using accusations of human rights abuses against the government no longer held the same sting. Government officials used similar tactics of showing videos of protester violence and the destruction, vandalism and human toll it took on civilian victims as well as security forces.

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<sup>109</sup> Zahera Harb, "Arab Revolutions and the Social Media Effect," *Media-Culture Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/364Two>.

Government oppression of media continued through 2013–14 with state run media outlets continuing to provide the bulk of print and televised media. Social media was also incorporated into the government’s message as an alternative to opposition voices. Regular daily tweets were sent by Ministry of Interior offices to inform the public on matters from road and traffic conditions to areas blocked to violence and protests.

## **C. OUTCOMES**

### **1. Political Opportunities**

As a result of initial mass protests, protesters and Al Wefaq as the main opposition party appeared stronger politically. Government policies and security postures changed after an international outcry against human rights abuses by the government along with pressure against the government by the United States and other Western nations. Although not a direct result of social media use, these changes within the government political system were byproducts of the mobilization that occurred because of the free space provided by social media. However, as protests continued as a result of free spaces, oppositionists were unable to capitalize on this newfound bargaining power.

As of 2015, government officials have declared multiple youth protests groups as terrorists and barred Al Wefaq from political participation under accusations of breaking laws, supporting violence and speaking against king.<sup>110</sup> Any advantages that initially were won through increased mobilization eventually were lost as protester and opposition momentum was lost. Social media as a tool for expression and used as a free space was not sufficient in itself to actuate change. Over time, as the will of protesters waned, government tactics to separate and divide the opposition through security and political means gained the upper hand.

Protests continue to this day but without the media focus and international attention as was seen in 2011. Government officials are able to cite the rule of law and various political measures to limit the amount and size of protests. Mass mobilizations as

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<sup>110</sup> Eman Ragab, “Challenges of Countering Terrorism in the Middle East after the Arab Revolutions,” in *Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism among Youth to Prevent Terrorism*, ed. Lombardi, Marco, E. Ragab, Vivienne Chin, Y. Dandurand, Valerio de Divitiis, and Alessandro Burato, (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2014), 107.

seen in 2011 are no longer occurring although protests occur on a nightly basis. Increased communication from government sources now offer competing sources of information to inform and influence popular support for protests.

Government officials have shown effort to abide by international norms and improve their record of human rights abuses since 2011. This effort was supported by the recent decision of the United States government to lift military aid restrictions in June 2015 to both the Defense Force and National Guard.<sup>111</sup> The King's decision to bring in an outside evaluation of events that resulted in the BICI recommendations and efforts to abide by those same recommendations have worked to offset the effects human rights accusations stemming from 2011 and the ongoing conflict.

Since 2011, the government has continued to allow protests to occur under certain restrictions.<sup>112</sup> This political decision is in line with the country's history of protests and allowing the people to publically display grievances. Although this decision seemed to run counter to the early ability of protesters to mobilize and gain international support, over the long run has proven to work to the government's advantage. Enduring protests and violence have hurt the country politically and economically, damaging further opportunities for success of both the Sunni and Shia populations. Allowing low levels of protests and even violence to continue have also worked to discredit violent protesters and the organizations they represent and support them. The policy has also led to a feeling of fatigue from local families affected by the violence and constant security state. In the battle to win popular support, the steady and continual ability of the state to manage and control protests has won over the short term successes brought on in part to the use of social media to mobilize.

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<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service Report*, Vol. 95, no. 1013, (Pennsylvania: Diane Publishing, 2010), 24.

<sup>112</sup> Rory Donaghy, "Uprising Strong, Economy Dire in Bahrain, Say Activists," *Middle East Eye*, May 30, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uprising-strong-economy-dire-bahrain-say-activists-1578746200#sthash.qwkKP8oA.dpuf>

## 2. Separation and Divisions

“Research indicates that, despite cross-sect origins, the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain fell into divisive sectarianism, with social media expounding anti-Shia rhetoric.”<sup>113</sup> Sectarianism endures in Bahrain despite a renewed call for nationalism by the government. What started in 2011 as a call for reform between oppositionists to the government and the ruling elite has devolved into a deeply sectarian divided country. Aspects of social media use may lead to deeper divisions within the community. Social networks built along familial or religious lines would tend to re-post comments from like-minded people or groups polarizing an issue and furthering the divide within the conflict. As an example, the 14 February Youth Coalition used increasingly polarized language in its postings as well as calling for increased violence against security forces.

Youth groups that formed since 2011 continued this discourse of division in their sites and social networks. The use of social media as a free space to maintain this type of dialogue is not unique but rather allows for a continuing discourse like this to be maintained in spite of harsher government restrictions and repressive tactics. In essence, social media has only prolonged and deepened the conversations that would normally occur and offered an open forum that is available 24 hours a day. With this opportunity, social media has only become an extension and continuation of social networks that would normally occur in real world setting.

In addition to a divide amongst social media users, physical separation has only increased the sectarian divide within the country as well. Bahrain is made up of multiple villages that are mainly divided along sectarian lines. While neighborhoods physically touch one another, the residents increasingly felt socially divided since 2011. The most isolated have been Shia neighborhoods such as Sitra or Saar where nightly violence from protests are met with an increased security presence, checkpoints and scrutiny. Neighborhoods that were once beautiful and clean prior to 2011 are now marred with burnt tires, bricks taken from the road strewn along the sidewalks and makeshift

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<sup>113</sup> Oliver Davies, “The Political Impact of Social Media on the Arab Gulf: Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,” *E-International Relations Students*, November 16, 2015, [http://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/12/the-political-impact-of-social-media-on-the-arab-gulf-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain/#\\_ftn97](http://www.e-ir.info/2015/01/12/the-political-impact-of-social-media-on-the-arab-gulf-saudi-arabia-and-bahrain/#_ftn97)

blockades from rioters. Local residents in these neighborhoods that once were filled with hope for change from initial protests now only desire a return to normalcy.<sup>114</sup> The physical divide of the country only strengthens the sectarian divide of the people.

### **3. The Role of Social Media as the New Free Space**

Social media enabled a compressed timeline and opportunity for mobilization as old grievances were stoked but not started. Trust in the free space was greater than with the government due to long standing history of repression and misinformation. While the government worked to overcome this by increasing their own output of information, online forums were increasing filled with options for news that people could choose from. Social media had the potential as a free space to unite people under a cause but not the source of unification. Early on in 2011, the unifying symbol was the change brought on by the Arab Spring but now, four years later, this symbol does not hold the same value. Social media maintains its worth as a free space while elites on both side search for a new symbol to unify and mobilize their people.

By 2014 as the government strengthened their control over the populace, why did the public not mobilize as they did in 2011? The social networks remained strong and even more interconnected than in times past. Social and sectarian grievances still existed. This thesis argues that multiple factors contributed to the situation. First, the hope for change that was evident in 2011 as other governments fell was no longer visible. Second, after years of bitter fighting, the youth groups were unable to fulfill their promise of change and residents of the contested areas only saw increased security presence, tear gas and physical intimidation as a result of the youth's actions. Third, social networks had been filled with videos and photos of violence for four years by this point and were unable to gain the media's attention as they did in early 2011. This last point lessened the ability of protesters to garner international support and weakened their bargaining position with the government. And fourth, even though the tool of social media to mobilize was still available, it did not lower the threshold to participate in protest or

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<sup>114</sup> Rory Donaghy, "Uprising Strong, Economy Dire in Bahrain, Say Activists," *Middle East Eye*, May 30, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uprising-strong-economy-dire-bahrain-say-activists-1578746200#sthash.qwkKP8oA.dpuf>

violence as it had previously done. Videos of people gathering in the streets were soon followed with images of violence and ultimately arrests of those involved. By 2015, government sources were quick to label the violence as terrorist acts followed quickly by arrests and intimidation of those involved. The motivation for the average participant to join protests was far weaker than earlier. Without a change in government as promised by early calls for change, protests became routine and effected little change with no recourse against government control or oppression. In this sense, social media only enhanced the will of the people not to join as images and newsfeeds of government harassment and arrests filled the free space that previously was mainly dominated by protest and opposition feeds

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## V. CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Bahrain has witnessed regimes fall in the region and felt the effects of increased violence and repression within their own borders. The feeling of hope that felt tangible to protesters in 2011 lessened over time and instead was replaced with a longing for normalcy in their daily routines. Groups of youth, unhappy with the government and feeling increasingly marginalized after the crackdown of 2011, became increasingly violent, fueling an increased tension and repression by security forces. The never-ending spiral of violence between protesters and security forces affected every person living on the island in some way.

In addition to spiraling violence, the ability to maintain a dialogue has continued to plague the conflict. When sectarian language dominated government speech early in this evolution of conflict, there was little room to negotiate or find common ground. As time progressed and sectarian views hardened, so did their desires to return to a time in their history when Sunni and Shia lived peacefully together in the end. A common desire from both sides was an end to the violence and political and economic prosperity in the Kingdom.

### A. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

The use of social media offered a free space, never before available at this extent, to protesters.<sup>115</sup> Government tactics to divide and disrupt activities, while limiting contact between participants, was no longer valid. Massive police presence on the streets and harsh security tactics no longer had the same effect. Groups moved their networking and mobilization efforts online and continued to gain momentum despite the efforts of the government. In the case of Bahrain, the protests grew despite all efforts of the government as protesters adapted and used the new resource available. Government forces, at the same time, were unaware the shift to social

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<sup>115</sup> Taylor Dewey, Juilane Kaden, Miriam Marks, Shun Matsushima, and Beijing Zhu, "The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring," *International Policy Program* (2012): 3.

media, as a free space to protesters, had occurred and took over a year to adapt and regain their own momentum.

Social media has been and continues to be an important tool used in Bahrain.<sup>116</sup> Illustrated by the government's lack of ability to respond, social media use arguably gave the advantage initially to the protesters. For a tool to have such power is incredibly important to understand. Could this occur again in another region or possibly a second wave of Arab Spring like events within the Middle East? Only time will tell. What we do know is that governments are no longer ignorant of this new tool and have honed their skills in its use as well. It is possible that the next time an event occurs like this, the free space that social media became in 2011 might not hold the same power.

## **B. FINDINGS**

### **1. Research Questions**

- What role has social media played in the Bahraini political movements since 2011?

Research indicates that social media enabled the spread of activism from the regional Arab Spring unrest to Bahrain.<sup>117</sup> Residents of the country witnessed historic political changes happen quickly as people in Egypt and Tunisia quickly mobilized and toppled their respective governments. Instilling a sense of hope and a possible pathway to success, Bahrainis mobilized and started their own version of the Arab Spring. In this sense, social media's role was an enabler rather than a root cause for the political movements in Bahrain.

Social media also presented a unique opportunity for Bahrainis to watch protest mobilizations occur instantaneously in their own country, witnessing for maybe the first time in their life, protesters overwhelming the security forces and occupying large pieces

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<sup>116</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, "The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the "Arab Spring," *Ponars Eurasia* 15 (2011): 1.

<sup>117</sup> Catherine O'Donnell, "New Study Quantifies Use of Social Media in Arab Spring," *UW Today*, September 12, 2011, <http://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/>

of physical space, headquartered around the Pearl Monument in the financial district. This ability to monitor the situation through social media lowered the threshold to join ongoing protests as the threat of retaliation from the government appeared to be lowered initially.

Additionally, social media enabled increased communication amongst the protesters.<sup>118</sup> As Bahrainis watched events unfold throughout the region, new networks were formed, predominately under the banner of 14 February Coalition. These new networks created a free space with increased participation from like-minded individuals desiring reform and increased participation in the government. This new free space allowed increased opportunities for a political dialogue amongst its participants which potentially led to the change from calls for reform to a desire to overthrow the government.

After the brutal response of the government and ensuing security crackdown, the calls for regime change further solidified as an us versus them mentality with little room for compromise.<sup>119</sup> Government responses to use sectarian language in classifying the protests as an Iranian backed plot to overthrow the government further intensified the divisions within the society. Social media use facilitated conversations that led to this further divide as protesters went online to air their grievances in this new free space. Government efforts to physically deny protesters the opportunity to meet and share these types of ideas had no effect as social media provided them a digital space untouched by the government's efforts.

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<sup>118</sup> Mohamed Ben Moussa, "From Arab Street to Social Movements: Re-Theorizing Collective Action and the Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring," *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 9, no. 2 (April 2013): 56.

<sup>119</sup> Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain: Beyond the Impasse," *Chatham House/Royal Institute of International Affairs*, (2012): 10.

- Did social media facilitate or encourage a space for free expressions of ideas or did the dominant groups utilize social media to promote their agenda and shape social unrest outcomes?

From the early protests of 2011, social media became a free space that encouraged free expression amongst the protesters.<sup>120</sup> The free space allowed protesters in Bahrain to share in the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia through actively watching the events unfold and building a base for support for protest activities in Bahrain. The free space was dominated initially by youth protesters looking for a place to connect and share images, videos and their own personal accounts of the protests. Social media also became a free space for outside interests including media outlets to observe and use information from inside the country and share with the international community.

As time progressed and the protest mobilization diminished, the social networks remained active. Under the umbrella of a larger youth movement, numerous smaller groups formed with neighborhood ties allowing for diversification in their discussions. Each group had their own grievances and perceptions of the protests similar to how they were organized prior to the Arab Spring. The free space of social media gave these groups the ability to stay connected despite government tactics to keep them separated.

Later in the protests, government offices attempted to enter the discussion on social media sites by increasing their output of information and responding to ongoing discussions in this space. Security forces also used social media sites to identify and target those responsible for violence and what they deemed as illegal protests. These actions worked to hinder the use of this free space. Over time, social media was no longer a protest dominated space but allowed a competition of ideas as multiple groups used this forum for dialogue and information dissemination.

- Did the use of social media by both protesters and government cancel the effects of the other?

There is currently no clear answer to this question. Early in the protests, protesters dominated social media sites but the government has since made strides in its use.

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<sup>120</sup> Julia Skinner, "Social Media and Revolution: The Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement As Seen Through Three Information Studies Paradigms," *Working Papers on Information Systems* 11 (2011): 10.

Another way to answer this question is to identify the how each side used social media to portray and disseminate information and the use symbols to unify groups. In early 2011, the regional Arab Spring movement was a strong unifying symbol for protesters.<sup>121</sup> As time progressed and the Bahraini protesters were unable to capitalize on its success as the other countries had done, this symbol lost its power. Instead of a movement for reform under the Arab Spring, the historic sectarian based division influenced and dominated the calls for regime change. This lessening of the impact of the Arab Spring as a symbol allowed an opportunity for other players to attempt to sway opinion through this free space. The government initially used sectarianism but then changed to nationalism, separating violent protesters out as terrorists. It appears that the governments was using the same tactic of divide and conquer just with a different symbol. If this new symbol of nationalism does not work to unite the people while separating out violent offenders, the question for the future is what group will find the symbol that is able to utilize the already formed social networks and mobilize the masses?

## **2. Hypotheses**

During the course of this research, multiple hypotheses were used to frame the problem. The first hypothesis, protests groups saw benefits in activation of protesters through social media in non-violent protests due to a repressive environment, was validated but cannot be universally applied. The repressive environment in Bahrain led to increased online activism and discussion leading to an increased mobilization in 2011.<sup>122</sup> Also, social media interactions with Egypt and Tunisia allowed an insight into a larger regional movement that was not available through the state-run media channels. In this sense, social media sites broadened the understanding of the regional situation to Bahraini citizens and increased their likelihood to participate in mobilization.

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<sup>121</sup> Stephan Rosiny, "The Arab Spring: Triggers, Dynamics and Prospects," *German Institute of Global and Area Studies*, (2012), 4.

<sup>122</sup> "In Bahrain, Opposition Groups Become More Radical," *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, July 19, 2013, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/bahrain-opposition-groups-become-more-radical>

The second hypothesis, that protest groups utilized social media to broadcast their message to a larger audience in order to increase pressure of the government, was also validated. Throughout the conflict, media outlets continued to use information, images and video from social media in their ongoing coverage of Bahraini protests.<sup>123</sup> The active use by protesters is demonstrated in their editing and publishing of videos and images aimed to display a unified fight against a repressive regime. Images of security forces retreating from protesters, bloody protesters from police brutality and security forces in full riot gear entering villages displayed prominently in protest groups postings on RevolutionBahrainMC's YouTube channel.

The research validated that the government and mainstream protest organizations such as Al Wefaq used social media as a means to educate and inform the population while causing further cleavages that advanced their causes. The ability to sway public opinion only became effective after protest groups lost the momentum to change the regime. At this point, protest group's hope diminished and they began broadening their search for hope for the future. This gave Al Wefaq and the government the opportunities to use social media to sway public opinion. Al Wefaq appeared intent on unifying the movement behind them while the government appeared intent on dividing the opposition while strengthening support for the government. The government, in particular, increased their messaging and online presence after 2011 though the research did not show that the increased presence caused further cleavages in the society. This thesis argues that the evidence shows that the society was further divided along sectarian lines due to government rhetoric and accusations of Iranian meddling rather than their involvement in social media

My final hypothesis was that although social media encouraged activism and increased the flow of information and timing of events in Bahrain, in the end it was just another form of communication.<sup>124</sup> As seen in this study, the grievances that were found in society prior to 2011 did not change after the initial uprising with no substantial

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<sup>123</sup> Zahera Harb, "Arab Revolutions and the Social Media Effect," *Media-Culture Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011), <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/viewArticle/364Two>.

<sup>124</sup> Taylor Dewey, Juilane Kaden, Miriam Marks, Shun Matsushima, and Beijing Zhu, "The Impact of Social Media on Social Unrest in the Arab Spring," *International Policy Program* (2012): 49.

changes from social media use. Social media and its correlating networking and use of free spaces did appear to change the dynamics of the conflict by increasing the information flow within the region and country. It gave a new source of information and perspective to protesters allowing the people to witness firsthand protests going on in their country without actively participating. Social media only compressed the timeline of an ongoing situation in Bahrain. Social media did not appear to add new grievances to the process, rather, it gave an opportunity for people to unite behind their grievances under a common symbol or banner.

### **C. IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH**

The scope of this research was limited by factors unique to Bahrain. Geographic location and containment of an isolated island along with historic grievances and deep sectarian divides in the country were instrumental to the protests of 2011. Bahrain was also impacted by the larger sectarian conflict in the region as they received security assistance from Saudi Arabia while continuing public rhetoric that Iran was manipulating and supporting the protests. In addition to political and social unique qualities of the island, high Internet penetration rates and cell phone usage further enabled the impact that social media had in Bahrain.

This research indicates the need for further study in protesters use of social media as a free space on a larger scale. Specifically, how social media can unify a diverse group of people through increased communication in a digital free space and the use of symbols to unify mobilization efforts. The finding of this research can be applied in multiple settings as social media continues to be used in protests around the world. Although the conditions found in Bahrain are unique, social media's use as a free space is not limited by these factors in all settings and can be found in movements around the world.<sup>125</sup>

How social media appeared to prolong the actions of the protest mobilization while being used in real time to coordinate events to offset police actions is another potential area of future research. The increased communication allowed through social

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<sup>125</sup> Joshua A. Tucker, Megan Metzger, Duncan Penfold-Brown, Richard Bonneau, John Jost, Jonathan Nagler, "Protest in the Age of Social Media," *Carnegie Reporter*, Vol 7, No. 4, (Fall 2014) 9.

media to monitor other protest activities enabled an increase in coordination amongst both violent and peaceful protesters. Implications of this research have the potential to aid security efforts to monitor, track and potentially predict violence associated with protests through social network linkages. Using the free space of social media to organize and mobilize protests not only enables protesters but also governments to potentially benefit from this information. Identification of linkages between social networks further aids efforts to identify potential future protests and or violence but also identify those responsible after the event.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Although ultimately the protest movement did not meet its desired intent of regime change, the use of social media altered the journey rather than the destination. Social interaction amongst the youth population, the dissemination of information internal to the protesters as well as communication between the government and the masses were all affected. More important in my assessment was the social network that was built in 2011 still endures to this day.

Social media use in protest activities will likely continue to be a topic of discussion as Internet usage rates increase around the world.<sup>126</sup> Its use in Bahrain indicated that the need for government's awareness and ability to adapt to this new free space was critical to offset the effects social media use showed amongst protesters. As the conflict in Bahrain continues, the battle in this new free space to unify or divide the populace will help determine the outcome of future stability or continued unrest.

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<sup>126</sup> "Internet Growth Statistics," *Internet World Stats*, November 20, 2015, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/emarketing.htm>.

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