



ASHURA IN BAHRAIN

US EMBASSY WIKILEAKS

bahrain
MIRROR

Bahrain
MIRROR

TO SHEIKH ISA QASSIM

YOUR RHETORIC REMAINS THE CORE
THEIR CABLES REMAIN THE MARGIN

“With some 70 percent of its population Shia Muslim, Bahrain is the only GCC country that permits widespread public Ashura celebrations.”

Wikileaks, Cable number 05MANAMA347

“Bahrain’s most prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, in a January 29 sermon, swore that he would never accept the oppression of any Sunni and that he would fight alongside Sunnis to regain their stolen rights anywhere in the world.”

Wikileaks, Cable number 07MANAMA93

“Al-Khawaja made reference to Imam Hussein’s battle against the Umayyad caliph Yazid in a thinly veiled appeal to Bahraini Shia to stand up to the Sunni government. He finished with a threat: ‘They lost the chance for peace.’”

Wikileaks, Cable number 09MANAMA22

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Introduction

Ashura played highly effective political roles in all stages of Bahrain throughout history. Since the mid-90s, “It was surprising if not at least one political activist was arrested on the backdrop of an anti-government rhetoric, at the height of Ashura and the entire month of Muharram,” this is how academic researcher Justin Gengler says it in a nutshell.

Ashura will always incite controversy and continue to be monitored by not only state authorities, but the US embassy as well.

According to the Wikileaks Cable, since 2005, the US Embassy in Manama collects information on Ashura for study and examination in order to give a comprehensive overview to the US administration, in a form of an annual confidential report.

The cables date back to the period between 2005 and 2010. The embassy was closely monitoring the Ashura commemoration events in Bahrain and regularly sending detailed reports to the State Department. The details in the cables included the number of people participating in a certain event, what Sheikh Isa Qassim and Sheikh Ali Salman said, how the Ashura speech went, and how the security situation was. They further mentioned whether there were violations, whether the United States was mentioned, what upsets and provokes these people participating in the events and how the commemoration of Ashura would affect them that particular year.

It is the type of information gathering that even the government would not detect and civil society organizations would disregard.

These cables do not only reach the US State Department, but are also sent to the central US leadership in the Gulf as well as to intelligence agencies, analysts and researchers.

The Embassy lists all the minor details of Ashura in their religious, social and political context. The deep observation of Ashura in Bahrain (even if the US flag is drawn on the streets to be marched on) makes the US Embassy reports historical documents of great significance.

In 2008, the former US Ambassador Adam Ereli and other embassy officials attended Ashura commemorations in central Manama in January, as part of a post-s outreach to Bahrain's Shiites.

There is a team that the Embassy sends annually to observe these events attentively. The Embassy also calls its Shia contacts to collect more information.

To US policy, Ashura was an inspiration for many revolutions and Shia resistance movements in the region, starting from Iran and not ending in Lebanon. The US has since been asking itself when this Shiite passion for Ashura in Bahrain will end?

The cables prove that Ashura is related to Gulf security, the stability of ruling regimes, the fifth fleet, the Iranian neighbor, and how the US image is portrayed in a Shiite's mind.

Coinciding with the occasion of Ashura in 2015, "Bahrain Mirror" displayed these dangerous documents, and now publishes them in a book for the first time for research purposes, aiming at analyzing how the US diplomacy works in this regard, as well as how the Bahraini government deals with the US Embassy's follow up.

01

WikiLeaks:

US Embassy and Ashura in Bahrain, Crisis of
Photos and Flags in 2005

WikiLeaks continues to disclose information whose parties would rather want it buried away and never revealed no matter what the circumstances are; from communications, statements, discussions, to visits and promises that no one knows of but the US Embassy.

A number of cables leaked by the WikiLeaks website unveiled that the US Embassy in Manama annually sends a confidential report on the commemoration of the religious Ashura occasion in Bahrain to the US Department of State.

The cables date back to the period between 2005 and 2010. The embassy was closely monitoring the Ashura commemoration events in Bahrain and regularly sending detailed reports to the State Department. The details in the cables included the number of people participating in a certain event, what Sheikh Isa Qassim and Sheikh Ali Salman said, how the Ashura speech went, and how the security situation was. They further mentioned whether there were violations, whether the United States was mentioned, what upsets and provokes these people participating in the events



and how the commemoration of Ashura would affect them that particular year.

It is the type of information gathering that even the government would not detect and civil society organizations would disregard.

Coinciding with the occasion of Ashura and the Islamic Month of Muharram, Bahrain Mirror will display these dangerous documents for research purposes, aiming at analyzing how the US diplomacy works in this regard as well as how the Bahraini government deals with the US Embassy's follow up, even providing it with additional information.

In this report, we will address the black banners and pictures of Iranian and Hezbollah officials that were widely spread on the streets during Ashura in 2005. The Bahraini government stirred up a crisis out of this situation, which, as it seems, led it to make numerous communications with the US Embassy.



Cable 1: Mohammed Abdel Ghaffar describes Sheikh Isa Qassim as «agent of Iran» and worries about «dangerous» Shia government in Iraq

What was different about the government's campaign against Ashura manifestations and celebrations in 2005 was that it was launched under the pretext that pro-Iran photographs, posters and flags were being hung and pro-Iran slogans were being chanted.

The US Embassy sent a report to the State Department on February 28, 2005 on this matter- on a meeting that was held between the US Ambassador William T. Monroe and the Bahraini Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Mohammed Abdel Ghaffar.

The latter delivered a sharp message to the US Ambassador outlining his government's deep concern about «Iranian interference in Bahrain's internal affairs,» which he said reached a zenith

during recent Ashura celebrations. The cable further mentioned that the Bahraini Minister also had harsh words for Shia opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman and leading Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, calling the latter «an agent of Iran who believes that Iran should rule everywhere in the region,» adding that «he is a very dangerous man.»

Abdel Ghaffar accused Iran of «using Bahrain's openness and democracy to penetrate into Shia society.» He said the Iranians were operating smartly, for the most part not going through their Embassy in Bahrain. The zenith of these activities, he said, came during Ashura. He further claimed that there are Shia who politicized the religious celebrations for their own gain, citing as examples Sheikh Ali Salman and Sheikh Isa Qassim. Elaborating on the politicization of the event, he stressed that, during Ashura, pictures of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran Imam Khomeini and the current Iranian Supreme Leader Sayyed Khamenei proliferated in Shia villages, «more and larger than usual, he said.»

«Even more worrisome, camps were set up to offer ideological training to youth,» the minister said, calling these camps «very dangerous.» He said that Bahraini authorities found in the camps Hizbollah logos as well as numerous American and Israeli flags drawn on the ground for people to stomp on.

He also expressed concern that the Shia governments in Iraq and Iran could be a dangerous development for Bahrain.

The cable considered that Abdel Ghaffar's strong demarche reflected concerns of his superiors and worries about the potential Shia threat in the region, adding that it underscores

the cross-cutting reactions in Bahrain, a Shia-majority country run by a Sunni royal family, as it faces the new reality in Iraq. On the other hand, it said that there are already signs that the successful election in Iraq is helping push Shias who boycotted the last election in Bahrain «into giving serious consideration to voting in the 2006 elections,» deeming it a positive development for the government.

Cable 2: Mohammed bin Mubarak says Iranian hand is more evident during Ashura and Khamenei is a political not religious leader

On March 8, 2005, while Bahrainis commemorated Ashura during the Islamic Months of Muharram and Safar, the Embassy sent a cable about a meeting (or communication) between the US Ambassador and the Bahraini Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa, during which they discussed the issue of the photographs and slogans raised during Ashura.

Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told the Ambassador on March 7 that Minister of Interior Rashed bin Abdullah Al Khalifa briefed members of Parliament on March 6 on what he described as «Iranian interference in Bahrain's Ashura celebrations.»

Mohammed bin Mubarak said that «the Iranian hand was much more evident during Ashura celebrations this year than in previous years.» He also said that Sheikh Isa Qassim spoke publicly flanked by large photographs of Khomeini, Khamenei, and even Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah. Bodyguards were posted around Qassim as if he were a political, not religious, figure, he added.

He further stated that in the past, the Shia had kept the photos



inside their Maṭams; this year they were everywhere, claiming that the Shia had tried to «blanket» Bahrain with black flags. The cable added a comment stating: (Many black flags were placed in intentionally provocative locations, including directly across the street from the largest Sunni mosque in the northwest of the island, in Saar.)

The cable also said that Mohammed bin Mubarak claimed that several Bahraini Shia had come to the government to complain about Iranian interference in the celebrations. He said «they protested imposition on Bahrainis of the concept of the «velayat-e faqih,» or rule by the jurisprudent,» the doctrinal basis for Iran's clerical rule. Bin Mubarak said, «Khamenei is not

a religious leader; he is a political leader. He is commander-in-chief of the Iranian army.»

The Foreign Minister expressed his concern that extremists are

abusing Bahrain's freedom. Iranians were using agents to incite people, hoping to create a «fifth column» inside Bahrain, he said. «The government had to react now before things became worse. Bahrain had faced similar

challenges before, from communists and Baathists.»

He warned that these activities could allow extremists to «hatch» terrorism inside Bahrain. He said that in Muharraq (a district to the east of Manama), Sunnis and Shias almost had a clash over the placement of flags and other religious symbols in sensitive locations.

The cable further noted that the Bahraini Minister complained that the administrators of the Bahrain On-Line website who were detained in late February were trying to stir up trouble.

Cable 3: The Bahraini government hasn't developed a policy to deal with potential full

On March 9th, the US Embassy sent another report entitled «GOB (Government of Bahrain) Reacts to Outward Signs of Shia Activism during Ashura Observances»

The report said that the GOB launched a public and private campaign complaining of «Iranian interference in Bahraini affairs and attempts to sow sectarianism in Bahrain.» It added that the Interior Minister said publicly that «some people spread hate messages during mid-February Shia Ashura celebrations by chanting slogans and hanging posters inciting divisions within Bahraini society.»

The report noted that Bahrain is the only GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) country that permits widespread public



Ashura processions. The means of celebrating the holiday in Bahrain varied depending on the participants' school of thought, but those who cut themselves are a very small minority in the country's Shia community, it added. «The processions allow the Shia to push the envelope of public expression.»

The Embassy considered that the Bahraini government could well be right that Iran is fomenting activism in the Shia community, «but another source of Shia empowerment and public confidence is undoubtedly the Shia success in Iraq's elections.»

«The GOB encourages the participation of all sectors of society in its political system, but it may not be ready to deal with an increasingly assertive Shia population,» and «has not yet developed a policy to deal with the potential full empowerment and possible political success of the Shia community.»

The report also said that the Bahraini government «could be

laying down markers that it will permit a Shia renaissance to go only so far.»

The report further spoke in detail of the measures taken by the Bahraini Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa that reflect the government's frustration towards the events taking place during Ashura. The US Embassy also described in detail the long tradition of Ashura observances, based on its own understanding of these Shia religious rites.

Cable 4: Between the Interior Minister and Sayed Abdullah Al-Ghuraifi, between pens and flags

On March 20th, the Bahraini Interior Minister Rashed bin Abdullah Al Khalifa discussed the same Ashura events with the US Ambassador William T. Monroe, and the US Embassy sent a report on this discussion in a cable addressed to the US State Department.

Showing photographs, taken during Ashura, of Hizballah flags, Khomeini and Khamenei

posters, and a group of Bahrainis stomping on an American flag, the Bahraini Minister said that «there was definitely a greater political edge to this year's Ashura activities,» although only a minority of Shia were involved in activities of concern, noted the Embassy in the cable.

The Interior Minister described for the Ambassador the Bahraini «government's concern that the Sunni-Shia split would grow in Bahrain if decisive action were not taken against Shia political activism during recent Ashura celebrations,» further discussing «his personal efforts to control Shia extremism in Bahrain.»



The cable stated that Rashid bin Abdullah «personally met with leading Shia cleric Al-Ghuraifi, trying to gain his support. Al-Ghuraifi, for his part, asked the Minister to control anti-Shia articles/editorials in the press.»

The cable added that the Bahraini Minister also met with Sunnis, who he said were concerned that black flags (representing Shia mourning during Ashura) had suddenly popped up everywhere. The Minister claimed that some Shia were «using Ashura as a political opportunity.» He said the Ministry received numerous calls, including from some Shia, asking what the government was going to do in response. «The Sunnis expected the government to take some action, or they would act themselves,» he added. However, the Minister alleged that he had «spent the previous evening visiting Sunni majlises in the Al-Hidd area, trying to calm emotions and make sure they did not take any actions against Shia.»

On a strange note, the cable mentioned that the Minister said «Bahrain did not want to follow the example of Saudi Arabia, which waited too long before acting decisively against extremism (Sunni).» And if the government waited too long, «there would be a Sunni reaction against the Shia.» The best strategy, he said, was for the Shia leadership to take care of the problem themselves. The Minister, who expressed confidence that the problem was manageable, also claimed that «his Ministry was making an effort to bring more Shia into the police force.»

The US Embassy said that the Interior Minister «has played a prominent public role in his government's effort to deal with the issue,» meeting with members of the two houses of the Parliament, conferring with leaders of Shia «matams» (assembly halls), and calling on Shia cleric Sheikh Abdulla Al-Ghuraifi. He described Sheikh Al-Ghuraifi as positive and understanding of what the government was trying to do. «He appreciated my visit. He is proud to be a Bahraini, and believes that unity is important.» But Sheikh Al-Ghuraifi also expressed concern to the Minister that the government was letting the story get too big in the newspapers, the cable noted. The cable added that «he asked the Minister to control press articles/editorials critical of the Shia.» The Minister said he could not control the press but, playing on the similarity of the Arabic words for flag (alam) and pen (qalam), told Al-Ghuraifi that it is a question of flag and pen.

«If you raise Hizbollah flags, pens will rise. If you want the pens to stop, bring down the flags.»

The cable further noted what was mentioned in press reports what Sheikkh Al-Ghuraifi said in his Thursday night (March 18)

prayer sermon at Imam Sadiq Mosque, in which he stated that unity, security, and stability are red lines that cannot be crossed, and rejected any behavior that harmed those concepts.

The cable added that he then warned against «pens» of «incitement and treason» that take advantage of events to cause enmity between people, and incite the regime against a major and loyal sect in society. He called on the government to stop these «pens,» warning of a disaster if they continued to write. He said the Minister of Interior had invited him to the Ministry, and his acceptance would depend on «how much change we see on the ground.»

The Embassy saw that the Interior Minister, overall, thought the problem was manageable. There are extremists on both sides, he said, and they need to be controlled on both sides.

According to the cable, the Ambassador asked about hiring practices in the Ministry of Interior, noting that he had heard complaints of underrepresentation of Shia. The cable further stated that the Minister said that the police force is now trying to set an example in recruiting from both sides. In an incoming class of police officers last month, he stated, 39 out of 40 were Shia. Another time, he said, Bahrain's municipalities put out an announcement to hire community service police. He claimed large numbers of Shia showed up, expecting not to be hired but to embarrass the government by making a point about unemployment. When several were in fact hired, he alleged, they went back to their villages complaining that they were «stuck» because they now had jobs they didn't want with the community police.



Cable 5: Red and white flags waved in pro-reform demonstration

On March 28, 2005, the US Embassy sent a cable to the US State Department that included a report on a peaceful pro-reform demonstration held on March 25th. The Embassy said that the leading Shia opposition political society Al-Wefaq «defied the Ministry of Interior's decision to refuse to permit a demonstration and led several thousand people in a rally calling for constitutional reforms.»

This demonstration was held in the same period that witnessed the «flags and photos» crisis, at the end of the Month of Muharram and during the Month of Safar of that year. The cable said in a paragraph entitled, «red and white the colors of the day» that the head of Al-Wefaq Sheikh Ali Salman, «prior to the protest, in response to the government's public statements of alarm about the Ashura celebrations in mid-February, urged participants to refrain from carrying any foreign flags, photos or slogans.»

02

WikiLeaks:

US Embassy's Report on Ashura Chest-Beating, Bloodletting and Mourning Processions in Manama

During the Ashura photos and flags crisis in 2005, the US Embassy in Manama found itself compelled to learn more about the Shiite religious holiday of Ashura and the commemoration rituals of this particular occasion practiced in Bahrain. So the Embassy did its research and released an impressive, extremely detailed report in just a few days.

This report- which was sent as a cable to the US Department of State on March 9, 2005- is one of the most significant official documents that shows how much knowledge the US diplomatic corps has of the meanings behind Ashura, its cultural and sociological backgrounds, the rituals and ceremonies practiced in Bahrain, in particular, to commemorate it, and all the details surrounding this occasion, including its religious and doctrinal aspects.

The cable gives a historical and religious background on the Shia-observed holiday of Ashura. It also details how the various methods of commemorating Ashura reflects different schools of thought in the Shia community. The US Embassy report offers a comprehensive overview on the Ashura observances, in Bahrain particularly, meticulously describing the religious rites held during this holiday,

from participation in Ma'tams (Shia assembly halls), chest-beating, bloodletting (called al-Haidar), to traditional mourning processions as well as modern ones, where musical instruments are used.

Perhaps, this cable is the most inclusive «western» documentation of these religious rituals. This undoubtedly raises many questions as to why the US Embassy is so interested in all of these details, and how they would be reflected in its stances, views and understanding of the Shia sect, as well as the political and social events that take place in the island kingdom.

The cable of Canonical ID (05MANAMA347_a) that included this information was classified as «Secret». In the United States, secret material would cause «serious damage» to national security if it were publicly available. The following are the details on the traditional Shiite Ashura holiday listed in the cable:

Long Tradition of Ashura Observances

3. (SBU) The Shia-observed holiday of Ashura, commemorating the killing of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein in Karbala, runs for the first ten days of the Islamic month of Moharram. The holiday reaches its peak on the 9th and 10th of Moharram, coinciding with February 1819- this year. With some 70 percent of its population Shia Muslim, Bahrain is the only GCC country that permits widespread public Ashura celebrations. Bahrain's Shia are proud of their unique status in the region: one contact boasted that the Shia had carried out their traditions for centuries before the ruling (Sunni) Al Khalifa family came to the island.

4. (SBU) Ashura is best known for images of the faithful marching in processions covered in blood from self-inflicted sword and knife cuts on their heads and backs (called «haidar» in Arabic), symbolizing



the suffering of Hussein. While this striking and gruesome scene was visible in downtown Manama, particularly on the morning of the 10th of Moharram (February 19), Bahraini Shia note that there is much more to the holiday than blood-letting. They note that this year in particular, Shia assembly halls («ma>tams») in both the capital and smaller towns and villages organized regular lectures on the events and personalities surrounding Ashura, «passion plays» portraying the suffering of Hussein, blood drives to support local hospitals, and papier-mache reproductions of Hussein's martyrdom reminiscent of Christmas nativity scenes. On a vacant lot across the street from the landmark American Mission Hospital in downtown Manama, Shia clerics, at least one of Iranian origin, gave lectures in fluent English to interested foreigners.

Variety Among Rituals of Procession Participants

5. (SBU) Although less bloody, the Ashura processions of the evening of the 9th of Moharram, February 18, were nonetheless remarkable for

their size, variety, and religious fervor. With the exception of a group of about 10 young men who struck their backs with swords and knives, the many thousands who marched did not cut themselves. Organized by ma'tams, most groups (men-only) walked in rows accompanied by riderless horses, preachers broadcasting chants via mobile speaker systems, drums, banners, and the occasional mock coffin. One group was accompanied by a marching band whose members wore identical black satin uniforms with gold sashes, similar to the spectacle of a New Orleans Dixieland jazz funeral procession.

6. (SBU) The ma'tams are identified by their location in a particular area of Bahrain or by the ethnic origin of the members. There are ma'tams for Shia of Bahraini origin, called «Baharna;» of Persian origin but with Bahraini citizenship, called «Ajaam» (some of these families have been in Bahrain for generations but are considered to be Persians); guest workers from the sub-continent, mostly Pakistanis; and Saudis from the Eastern Province who can practice their faith in relative freedom. Each of the groups performs a particular style of self-flagellation in unison. Many tap their chests gently with their right hands; others have complex, dance-like rhythmic movements resulting in a hard chest smash with both hands; other groups swat their backs with strands of chain-link attached to wooden handles. There is some measure of «having fun» and teenage testosterone-fueled one-upmanship in the enthusiasm some of the faithful demonstrate. Small groups of what appear to be brothers, cousins, and best friends urge each other on to ever higher frenzies of shouting, praying, and pounding.

7. (SBU) The route of the procession is lined with stalls organized by ma'tams, distributing hot and cold drinks and food free of charge to any and all present, including (clearly non-Bahraini) Emboffs.

Volunteers at the stalls went out of their way to make foreigners feel welcome, personally delivering food and drink to those standing in the immediate area. They also walked with participants in the processions for short distances, plying them with refreshments like spectators passing drinks to marathon runners. Many women and children watch the processions from the sides of the street or from windows, adding to the almost carnival-like atmosphere.

Public Displays of Shia Luminaries

8. (SBU) There were numerous photographs, including some very large ones, of Khomeini and Khamenei along the procession route in central Manama. Pasted on the walls were posters featuring the two Iranians as well as Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah. Although Emboffs did not see any Hizballah flags, other spectators did. Some posters protested Article 56 of Bahrain's 2002 constitution, which grants a general amnesty to, among others, security forces personnel accused by Shia of torturing and killing detainees during strife in the mid-1990's. These posters displayed photos of the bodies of those killed in clashes with security forces and while in detention. A few participants in the processions wore badges saying «Death to America» and «Death to Israel» in Farsi.

Shirazis at the Extreme

9. (C) According to Shia contacts, the various methods of commemorating the death of Hussein reflect different schools of thought in the Shia community. Bahrain's Shia follow many different trends within the Shia sect, including those of Khomeini/Khamenei, Al Khoei, Fadlallah, Sistani, and Shirazi. In the late 1980's, Khomeini issued a fatwa saying that performing haidar, the blood-letting, is «haram,» or religiously unacceptable. He recommended that Shia donate blood instead. The large majority of Bahrain's Shia still



follow this instruction. However, just two years ago, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Shirazi, the (now deceased) leader of the more radical Shirazi movement, disagreed and issued a fatwa saying that haidar is religiously acceptable. His fatwa coincided with the greater political openness in Bahrain initiated by the King's reform policies, and adherents of the Shirazi philosophy moved quickly to resume this bloody practice, which many non-Shirazi Shia view with disgust.

10. (C) The Al Qassab ma'tam in downtown Manama is the center for Shirazis in Bahrain. It is run by the Al Alawi family. Minister of Labor and former exiled dissident Majid Al Alawi is from the same family, but he is not close to the branch involved in the Al Qassab ma'tam. Our contacts say that almost all the men performing haidar in the Ashura processions are members of this ma'tam. One contact claimed that many of the Saudi Shia who come to Bahrain for the holidays are members of the Shirazi movement and also cut themselves in the processions.

03

WikiLeaks:

Fareed Muftah to US Ambassador in 2006:
Sunni Salafists Organize Provocative Shows in
Ashura

Starting from 2005, the US Embassy in Manama's report on the commemoration of Ashura became a routine report, even if the occasion was event-free, or had no repercussions on ground. Since then, Ashura in Bahrain itself became an event that had to be observed, monitored, and reported by the Embassy.

In 2006, two cables mentioned this Shiite religious occasion. The first comprised an annual report that was to become a «US Embassy tradition», and the second was a report on an interesting meeting held between the Under Secretary of the Bahraini Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Fareed Muftah, and US Ambassador William Monroe. The meeting was set for the latter to look into the Ministry's Islamic ecumenical efforts, in particular, aimed at recovering the unity among Sunnis and Shiites, including efforts during the season of Ashura.

Ashura in 2006 was calmer than that before. The majority of the Embassy report talked about the fact that it was free of tensions and acts of violence, let alone that groups of Shiites took on the task of maintaining security and safety in the areas where religious procession were held across the Bahraini capital Manama. There were



no official security forces deployed in these areas. The US Embassy on this matter quoted in its telegram a source saying, «For ten days each year, we control the area. The government does it during the remaining 355 days.»

The cable also included a report about the activities of «The Haq («Right») Movement» during Ashura, and a report about the controversial banner that quotes Shaikh Isa Qassem as saying, «that Bahrain is divided into two camps, that of Hussein and that of Yazid.» Also, the report noted the political situation surrounding the events, on top of which was the arrest of a group of youths at the Bahrain International Airport, following a rally they staged in protest of Shaikh Mohammad Sanad's arrest.

The Embassy said, «An estimated 150,000 people participated in Ashura of 2006, some from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.»



Ashura 2006

In February 2006, the US Ambassador in Manama, William Monroe, sent his report, discussing the commemoration of Ashura in Bahrain.

The report starts off with mentioning the number of individuals who took part in Ashura religious rituals in the old Manama city, a number estimated by the Ambassador to be 150,000. «By all accounts, activities went very quietly and smoothly with no reports of violence or confrontations», the report states.

In other words, the report describes the rituals of Ashura again, saying «the event was marked by large groups of (mostly young) men, sometimes numbering in the thousands, marching in unison on a several-kilometer circuit while rhythmically beating their chests with their fists or striking their backs with strands of chain-link attached to wooden handles.»

«The groups were organized by the many Shia religious/social halls in the area, called matams,» the report further reads.

The report also lists other activities that take place during Ashura, under the title: «Something for Everyone During Ashura». This part of the report talked about «the manned booths offering free food and drink», the «art association exhibition», «blood drives», «lectures in English on the subject of Ashura and its meaning», in addition to «a play re-enacting the battle of Kerbala».

«There were many displays similar to Christmas nativity scenes scattered throughout the area depicting aspects of the story, some bordering on gruesome in their attention to detail,» the report states.

The report did not fail to also mention the mourning processions led by marching bands.

Moreover, the report quotes Hussein al-Alawi, the Processions Committee President, who said, «Thousands of Kuwaitis and Saudis came to take part in the activities.»

Flags and Photographs in 2006

In reference to the flags and photos crisis witnessed in 2005, the report said, «EmbOffs (Embassy Officials) observed no participants carrying posters or flags of foreign leaders such as Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei or Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah.» «EmbOffs saw a permanent billboard with a painting of prominent Bahraini Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem positioned next to that Nasrallah, and a few matams placed televisions on the street broadcasting speeches and sermons, including those of Nasrallah,» it went on to say.

«Flyers were taped to walls with photos of Ayatollah Sistani and

quotes that were entirely religious (vice political) in nature,» the report indicated.

Absence of Security Forces While Shiites Controlled Central Manama

«EmbOffs noticed no/no uniformed security presence in the area with the exception of traffic police controlling the flow of vehicles on the perimeter of the old town area. Volunteers associated with the matams, wearing large numbered badges and carrying radios, were deployed inside the processions zone and actively engaged with those present to provide information and assist those in need,» the US Embassy's report explains.

The Embassy quotes one of its contacts saying, «Ashura was a period of tremendous freedom and liberation for Bahrain's Shia: «For ten days each year, we control the area. The government does it the other 355 days.»

Political Situation during Ashura of 2006

Furthermore, the report mentions the political situation that occurred during Ashura, highlighted by «convicting 12 Shiite youth who took part in a protest in the Bahrain International Airport, following the arrest of prominent religious cleric Sheikh Mohammad Sanad (December 2005). The report notes that «the harshness of the sentence angered many in the Shia community, and it was a steady topic of conversation in the downtown area during the final two days of Ashura.»

The Embassy Officials, according to the report, «observed a crowd of some 500 people listening to a speaker denouncing the government for the conviction. Despite the tension, there was no violence or clashes.»



The US Embassy's report says, that «the most disturbing sight was a group of about 20 young men in military style headbands, t-shirts, and camouflage pants jogging slowly in unison chanting Death to America, Death to Israel, Death to Denmark.» It went on to add, «in a twist unique to the 2006 event, marchers in the processions walked over 1020- boards that were nailed into the street and painted as the Danish flag. This was in addition to a collection of boards painted in the colors of the American and Israeli flags.»

Moreover, the leaked telegram further addresses the meeting between «Minister of Interior LTG Shaikh Rashid bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Processions Committee President Al Alawi, Shura Council member Fouad Al Haji, and Council of Representatives (COR) member Issa Hassan bin Rajab to review security for the occasion.» «The meeting occurred at the same time that community leaders in [Shiite Towns] were accusing police of pulling down the black flags that blanket Shia areas to mark Ashura (...)» an issue that provoked the condemnation of Northern Municipal Council members, the report adds.

Haq Movement Activity: The UN Petition

The cable also discussed an activity practiced by «The Haq («Right») Movement» in Ashura (This was its first activity since it was established in 2005):

«The Haq («Right») Movement, a hardline splinter group from leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq, issued a press release February 6 announcing a petition to be presented to the UN calling for a new «democratic» constitution drafted by a council of elected representatives. Petition supporters set up tables and booths in several sections of the downtown area and, outside the largest matam, showed a video about Shia poverty in Bahrain. Organizers announced their goal of getting 100,000 signatures, almost 25% of all Bahraini citizens, on the petition during Ashura. To date, there has been no announcement about the number of signatures, but knowledgeable sources say the group likely reached its goal,» the report indicates.

Shaikh Isa Qassem's Quote: Hussein's Camp and Yazid's Camp

The said telegram documents one of the most important events that took place during Ashura, which is the event when a banner was raised by the Islamic Taw'iya (Enlightenment) Society, quoted an old saying by Shaikh Isa Qassem, which triggered vast controversy amongst pro-regime sides. This eventually led to the authorities removing the banner, and launching an aggressive campaign against Shaikh Qassem and Taw'iya Society in the press, as well as statements and comments made by government officials.

The leaked telegram said, «The greatest controversy flared more than a week after Ashura ended.»

The Al-Watan daily, which is reported to have ties to the country's Sunni



Salafi community, published an article February 18 attacking a quote on a billboard sponsored by the Shia Islamic Enlightenment Society. The quote by Shaikh Issa Qassem says, in elliptical fashion, that Bahrain is divided into two camps, that of Hussein and that of Yazid (whose army killed Hussein and his followers in Kerbala),» the report clarifies.

«While a generous interpretation of the quote is that Qassem was referring to the differences between good, pious, observant Muslims and lapsed Muslims, most understand the reference to be to Shias (Hussein's camp) and Sunnis (Yazid's camp),» it further comments.

The telegram narrates the repercussions of the aforementioned case, indicating that senior officials, members of parliament, and columnists quickly dove into the controversy. It notes that the «Cabinet condemned posters and slogans that threaten national unity, saying this is a misuse of democracy and freedom,» while adding how in another statement the Prime Minister criticized the banners calling them «offensive». Meanwhile, then Parliament Speaker Khalifa Al Dhahrani, in the presence of the Prime Minister, condemned the slogan and said the billboard was a «balloon launched to test the limit» of acceptable speech. Minister of Social Development Fatima Al Balooshi threatened to take measures against the Islamic



Enlightenment Society for posting a banner, while on his part Salafist MP Jassim Al Saeedi called for removing all banners that cause division in Bahraini society, according to the leaked report.

The pro-regime columnist Sawsan Al Shaer, with several other writers who echoed her comments, wrote an article condemning what they dubbed «politicizing religion with the purpose of harming national unity.» In addition, the report quotes Editor-in-Chief of Al Wasat newspaper Mansour Al Jamry, asserting that «slogans that send mixed messages should not be posted so as to avoid instigating any conflict (...) [even if] other religious societies also posted religious-political banners previously that scared the other side.»

The Embassys Final Note on the Report

«Given the backdrop of intermittent clashes between Shia youth and police since late November 2005, Ashura was marked by a distinct lack of tension or violence. A Shia MP assured EmbOffs that there would be no violence at the event, saying Shia want to show the government and

all Bahrainis that they can police themselves when given the opportunity. Now that Ashura is over and Bahrain's security services control the streets once again, those seeking to provoke confrontations no longer feel the peer pressure to behave like they did during the holiday. While the scene has been mostly quiet since the end of Ashura, a charged atmosphere could return as supporters of the 19 jailed youth take to the streets and the timing of the municipal and legislative elections draws closer.»

2006 Under Secretary at Islamic Affairs Ministry: Hussein is for All Muslims

Another telegram dated February 19, 2006, documented a meeting between Under Secretary of Islamic Affairs Fareed Muftah and US Ambassador William Monroe, on February 7, 2006.

During the meeting, Muftah told the Ambassador that «his Ministry was trying to spread awareness between Sunnis and Shias in the run up to the occasion of Ashura. The Ministry had arranged for Sunni and Shia scholars to appear together on Bahrain TV programs to discuss coexistence, tolerance, understanding, and respect for others' cultures.»

On this level, the report stated that Muftah said «the audiences were mostly receptive to these messages. Some Sunnis say that Ashura is not their holiday, so they cannot address it. His response is that Imam Hussain is for all Muslims, not only Shia. He can serve to unify Muslims in the face of global challenges.»

The report further states that Muftah noted that some Sunni mosques, particularly those following the fundamentalist Salafi interpretation, organize TV programs to emphasize their Sunni identity during Ashura. To counter these potentially provocative actions, the Ministry promotes engagement between Sunnis and Shias during Islamic occasions. He organized the visits of Sunni scholars to matams during Ashura to show understanding and to minimize suspicions.»

04

Wikileaks:

2007_ 2008 US Embassy Cables: Ashura in Bahrain, Desire to Express Shia Identity to Fullest

In addition to the United States' keen interest in following the commemoration of Ashura in Bahrain reflected in the US Embassy annual reports, the former US Ambassador Adam Ereli attended Ashura commemorations in central Manama in January, 2008, accompanied by Embassy officials, as part of the post's outreach to the Shia community in Bahrain, according to a US Embassy cable.

On February 1, 2007, the US Embassy sent what can be considered the third annual report on the commemoration of Ashura in Bahrain, since the Embassy started demonstrating interest in this religious occasion in 2005. This report was signed by the then Deputy Chief of Mission at US Embassy in Bahrain, Susan L. Ziadeh, who currently serves as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs.

On January 27, 2008, the US Embassy sent its annual Ashura report, signed by Ambassador Ereli, who had been assigned recently at the time.

Looking at both cables sent in 2007 and 2008, it is safe to say that the tone of the reports towards the Bahraini Shia slightly changed.



250,000 Participants and Humble Television Coverage

The 2007 report stated that an estimated 100150,000- people crowded into downtown Manama to participate in or observe processions commemorating the «death of Imam Hussein, a Shia martyr and hero, in Karbala in 680 AD.»

There was a surprisingly large number of Saudi and Kuwaiti Shia participating in the processions, the report added. «There is a matam (Shia community center) in Bahrain that caters to Shia from two particular areas of the Saudi Eastern Province, and Shia from other areas are free to participate in activities organized by any of the Bahraini matams.»

However, the 2008 telegram stated that an estimated 200250,000- people crowded into the narrow streets of central Manama, noting that participants in Saudi, Kuwaiti, and Emirati dress were numerous.

The 2007 telegram reported a knowledgeable observer who pointed



out that Bahrain television devoted minimal coverage to the processions. At most, some video clips were shown during the news bulletins. However, the «Zahra» satellite station, which focuses on Shia religious issues and has part-Bahraini ownership, featured non-stop coverage of events in Bahrain and in Karbala.

No Overt Anti-Americanism or Displays of Iranian Leaders

The 2007 report stated that in contrast to previous years' organizers, there were no overt displays of Iranian leaders, in particular Sayed Al-Khomeini and Khamenei or any displayed photos of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayed Hassan Nasrallah. The report; however, mentioned that television monitors set up along the highly traveled routes played the speech delivered by Nasrallah.

Most of the nailed flags and banners were for Bahraini religious leaders.

The report added that missing from this year's event was overt anti-

Americanism. Speakers mostly avoided explicit criticism of the United States, although there was much talk of an unspecified «enemy.»

The 2008 report highlighted that organizers succeeded again this year in ensuring that zealots did not display posters lionizing Iranian or Hezbollah politicians, yet it was reported that there were large posters of Khomeini and Khamenei inside a number of ma>tams. In past years, Sunni media commentators pointed to such displays during the Ashura celebration and questioned the loyalty of Bahrain>s Shia.

Sheikh Isa Qassim in 2007 and 2008 US Cables

Even the embassy>s view with respect to Sheikh Isa Qassim seems to have changed in these telegrams.

Bahrain>s most prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Isa Qassim, in a January 29 sermon, swore that he would never accept the oppression of any Sunni and that he would fight alongside Sunnis «to regain their stolen rights anywhere in the world.» He complained that divisions among Muslims resulted from the policies of the United States and Europe, reported the 2007 cable.

However, the 2008 telegram said that Sheikh Qassim, the spiritual leader of Bahrain>s Shi>a community, led a silent procession of imams, including Al-Wefaq parliamentary bloc leader Sheikh Ali Salman, through the winding streets. Spectators along the route fell silent as they noticed Qassim at the head of the group.

Politics during Ashura of 2007 and 2008

The 2007 report noted that the Shia Clerics Council distributed a pamphlet calling for national unity and understanding, regardless of one>s sect, during a time of increasingly strained sectarian relations in the region.



Another section of the report discussed that capitalizing on a chance to connect again with constituents, there were signs and posters of recently elected Shia members of parliament hung around the downtown area.

There also were some banners recalling a saying of Imam Hussein about the refusal to live under suppression or repression, interpreted locally to mean the situation of Shias living under a Sunni government.

The most pressing local issue was the imminent decision in a court case involving two Shia activists charged with possessing and distributing illegal pamphlets during the pre-election period last November. The pamphlets carried a reprinted article by Shia exile and London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement leader Saeed Al Shehabi calling for an election boycott and questioning the legitimacy of the Al Khalifa regime. Supporters of the two called for their release and hung posters publicizing their plight. On January 30, the court sentenced one of them to one year and the other to six months in prison.

Shia neighborhoods and villages were expected to revert back to the control of government police and security after the occasion. The embassy also anticipated that friction and misunderstandings will inevitably reappear.

«Shi'a clerics, and leaders of the matams who organized the processions, worked closely with government authorities and their own memberships to keep politics out, mentioned the 2008 report. However, it stated that «both government authorities and Shi'a community leaders had been concerned that the Al-Haq movement, which most here view as connected to December's street violence, might use the occasion of Ashura to instigate a new round of unrest with protests over the death of Ali Jassim Mekki,» it added.

Al-Haq did set up shop outside the Al-Khawaja mosque (a longtime epicenter of Shi'a political dissent) and at three other locations seeking signatures for a petition calling for the Prime Minister's resignation. «While some people were stopping to sign, response seemed to be moderate at best,» the report highlighted.

«Haidar» in the US Embassy's Cables: Less than 10% Support the Practice

The 2007 cable recounted that a group representing a Kuwaiti «husseiniyah,» or matam, put on a particularly fearsome display as about 100 men marched carrying long swords and chanting «Haidar, Haidar,» the term for cutting one's forehead in symbolic re-enactment of the death and beheading of Imam Hussein. A contact stated that less than 10 percent of Bahraini Shia support the practice of «Haidar».

The third part of the 2008 report entitled «Haidar! Haidar!» read that probably the most notorious feature of Ashura processions is «tatbir,» during which parades of bare-chested men flail themselves bloody



with chains or swords. This practice is becoming less common as mainstream clerics denounce the practice each year and urge Shi'a to instead donate to blood drives. In this context, thousands of Bahrainis responded this year and donated blood at local hospitals.

«However, a few ma>tams still practice «tatbir» with gusto, and appeared to do so as much out of machismo as out of devotion to the Imam Hussain.» The embassy employees saw several group of people striking their foreheads with swords to exuberant chants of «Haidar! Haidar!» led by drummers and specialist Iraqi cleric.

Mingling between the 2 Sexes

The report highlighted that volunteers sectioned off areas of the sidewalks with black cloth to create segregated viewing areas for women, but this did not deter the teens and twenty-somethings who viewed the gathering as an opportunity to see and be seen.

According to sources, Shi'a youth use the Ashura celebration to

mingle with the opposite sex. An embassy observer saw one teen boy toss a small, crumpled piece of paper (presumably with his mobile phone number) toward a group of four girls who giggled and moved on.

According to a contact, one of the most important jobs the organizers have is making sure that rowdy young men do not harass any of the women present, the 2007 report explained.

The Shiite Identity

Once again, both 2007 and 2008 telegrams noted that despite the police cordoned off the area to control automobile traffic, they remained outside the perimeter. The whole organization was at the hands of the Shia volunteers.

The embassy believed in its 2007 report that «Bahraini Shia intentionally projected a benign image while commemorating Ashura, perhaps in an attempt to show the government and security services that they deserve and are ready for greater responsibility in society.»

At the end of 2008 report, the embassy said that «this year's Ashura commemorations were a success due to the mainstream Shi'a leadership and the security services' low profile,» stressing that there were no protests and no violence. «Most attendees seemed content to enjoy the opportunity to express their Shi'a identity to the fullest,» it further stated.

05

Al-Khawaja's 2009 Ashura Speech:
"The Ruling Gang" in US Cable and Justin
Gengler's Book

The Chargé d'Affaires at the United States Embassy in Bahrain, Christopher Henzel, sent a cable, classified as confidential, to the US State Department on January 13, 2009. Wikileaks; however, disclosed this document in 2010.

The cable addressed with great concern one of the most significant political speeches in Bahrain's Ashura history. It was an outstanding address that still resonates today. It attracted the attention of many researchers and academics who worked on analyzing its structure, and political and social context.

What political analyst specialized in Bahraini affairs Justin J. Gengler, who conducted a research on the said oration delivered by Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, shed light on the most is that al-Khawaja makes no claim to religious authority. He is a human rights activist who is currently serving a life sentence for his alleged role in the February 14, 2011 uprising.

Abdulhadi al-Khawaja: Manama's 2009 Ashura Orator

Al-Khawaja's fiery speech delivered at the height of Ashura in the Bahraini capital Manama on January 7, 2009 expressed the peak of



political frustration and distress and it was without doubt considered one of the primary tools of mobilization used by the Haq Movement led by Hasan Mushaima to stir up the public and pave the way for an (unplanned) uprising.

Al-Khawaja enjoyed a controversial character since his return to Bahrain at the onset of what was known to be the 2001 reform project. He was not an ordinary rights defender, for he possessed a daring revolutionary side. He does not grow weary of confronting oppression and tyranny and history proves that he did not fear any repercussions.

Al-Khawaja as a popular figure became more intimidating than ever, since this oration, through which he made use of his religious cache to speak of the value of sacrifice in Ashura and standing against the oppressor, in the name of Imam Hussain.

Writer and academic researcher Justin Gengler happened to be in

Bahrain at the time and personally attended al-Khawaja's oration. He devoted many pages to discuss this speech in the «Religion and Politics in Bahrain» chapter of his published PhD dissertation entitled «Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf».

Gengler translated the entire speech including the Ashura poem recited by al-Khawaja. He documented every part of the oration, analyzing it in the framework of religion's effects on politics and placing it in its political, social and historical context.

Al-Khawaja's Speech in Justin Genglers Book

Gengler realized that there is a more strictly political side of the Ashura commemoration «in which political rather than religious leaders take the opportunity to address their constituencies, aided by the overflowing emotion and sense of eternal betrayal and injustice stirred up over the course of these thirteen days.»

«For those looking to make a real political statement, the venue of choice is the early morning of the tenth of Muharram, in the wake of the almost hysterical mourning at the death of Husain earlier that night,» he added.

He further explained that since the mid-1990s it is an anomaly if at least one political activist is not arrested for an ardent anti-government speech at this the zenith of Ashura and of the entire month of Muharram.

Gengler pointed out the secrecy surrounding the identity of the speaker to deliver an oration from the Haq Movement pavilion on Ashura day. «The keynote speaker was rumored to be 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawajah, who shortly before 2:30 a.m. duly arrived outside his namesake mosque in the Manama Suq district.»



«Despite his being from a prominent Shi'i family that gives its name to the large and beautifully adorned mosque and attendant ma'tam, al-Khawajah makes no claim to religious authority, his popular following mainly a result of his well-known foundational role with the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights and, even more so, for a brazen 2004 verbal assault on the country's prime minister, Prince Khalifa bin Salman,» Gengler noted.

The political analyst also highlighted that «it is a testament, then, to his political rather than religious cache that he was able still to command such a general audience as the one that convened on this unusually frigid January night to hear him speak.»

The Ruling Gang

Al-Khawaja's address was entitled «How the Sacrifice of al- Husain Exposed 'the Ruling Gang' and Toppled It from Power.»

The speech began by invoking the «anniversary of the martyrdom of

al-Husain, son of the Prophet's daughter,» and «the anniversary of the Battle of Ashura, wherein the corrupt Umayyad regime carried out the murder of al-Husain and his companions from the House of the Prophet Muhammad.»

He went on to say that «when the orders came from Yazid bin Ma'awiyah to his governor in Medina,» he continued, «that he should take an oath from al-Husain or else lop off his head, al-Husain proclaimed his political disobedience and refused to swear allegiance, and [instead] prepared himself for his own sacrifice, and for that of his family.» And this political defiance, al-Khawajah said, was not aimed at the person of the Umayyad ruler, Yazid, «but at the entire Umayyad regime. So when al-Husain addressed the enemy's army he referred to them, saying, 'O! Partisans of Al Sufyan!' and did not say 'partisans of Yazid.' « Accordingly, the introduction concluded, «the result of the sufferings of al-Husain in the Battle of Karbala was the fall of the Umayyad Empire, a regime that would last no longer than 90 [more] years, inundated by [Shi'a- led] revolutions brought on by the Movement of al- Husain.»

«On this great occasion,» he appealed to «all who are free»- «from every stream or sect,» «from any social class, whether rich or poor,» to «men, women, and the elderly»-he called upon them all as he called upon himself, to «stand together, to demand reform, to support what is right, to promote virtue and prevent vice, all in the name of the martyr al-Husain ibn 'Ali.»

He beseeched his listeners «to disengage psychologically from the unjust regime, and to refuse to give it allegiance or to allow it to rule on the necks of the people,» «to break promises . . . and humiliate the people, to employ mercenaries [brought in] from everywhere in order to impose itself on the necks of [its] subjects.»

Who are the Shia of al-Hussain and who are the Parisians Yazid?

The next section of the speech, titled «Sectarian Alignment and Political Alignment,» cautions listeners against assuming they are part of the solution, participants in the Movement of al-Husain, simply because they happen to be Shi'a. «Know,» he said, «that the Shi'a of al-Husain's Movement are they who stood by him and supported him against political and social injustice, and not all those who identified with ahl al-bayt historically or doctrinally or psychologically»: «for you may be of the Ja'afari sect doctrinally speaking, or of Twelverism ideologically speaking, but at the same time you might be one of the partisans (shl'ah) of Al Sufyan, or of any ruling gang who enslaves [its] people and sheds [their] blood.»

Gengler further highlighted that al-Khawaja warned in language that mirrored almost exactly the controversial quote by Sheikh Isa Qassim regarding the «Hussain camp and the Yazid camp.»

«The differentiation of people in our society today between Husainis (husayniyyīn) and Yazidis (yazīdiyyīn) is not based on the sect inherited from [their] fathers and grandfathers, nor the school of jurisprudence they rely on in their individual worship, but rather on [their] political and social stance embodied by the promotion of virtue and prevention of vice: commitment to those who are true and good, and repudiation of oppressors and the people of vice,» stressed al-Khawaja in his speech.

«For ordinary people in their dealings with any ruling gang are of two types: there is the one who puts principle and values first but perhaps is involved with the oppressor in earning a living or in his political and social activity; yet there is on the other hand the one who puts his own self-interest first, even at the expense of what is right and the

interests of the people. And each of them will reveal his true nature when the injustice . . . and the bloodshed becomes too much, and then he either will be of the Shi'a of al-Husain in his opinions and sacrifices, or he will be of the Shi'a of Al Sufyan,» he added.

Gengler considered that this statement is what might be called the thesis of the entire address.

The Umayyad and the Al Khalifa States

Abdulhadi moved on to his longest and most substantive section: «The Ruling Gang and the Necessity of Uprooting it from Power Whatever the Cost in Effort and Sacrifices.»

Here the subject «the ruling gang» transitioned naturally from the corrupt Umayyad dynasty, in which the right to rule «moves within one family from father to son, and which looted booty and lands, and which made God's wealth [i.e., natural resources] into a state, and enslaved the people»-all this he equated to the contemporary Al Khalifa «ruling gang» that plunders Bahrain and which claims to rule on the same basis of hereditary succession.

Neither state, he said, «was founded around a single person but rather around a gang bound by tribal or familial aSabiyya, [one] that uses bribery and intimidation to gain support and allegiance from the self-interested,» then, this support secured, «dominates [its] subjects by force.» This is why, he continued, the Imam Husain «left Medina and then Mecca fearful because he refused the political oath [of Yazid],» and left with «no supporter and no certainty . . . was murdered, and the women from ahl al-bayt taken captive.» A regime such as this, he concluded, «chose not to accept conciliation and compromise, and thus there is no use but to uproot [it]: and al-Husain's own sacrifices as well as those of his family were the means of uprooting that state, of overthrowing the gang running it, even if [it took some time].»

Gengler then stated the al-Khawaja arrived finally at what the listeners had been anticipating the entire night. «The ruling gang in Bahrain,» he boomed, «is embodied in the Supreme Defense Council comprised of fourteen of the elites from the ruling family, and they are: the king, the crown prince, the prime minister, the royal court minister, and others of the top ministers and officials» from the ruling family. Among them, he said, «there are not any [ordinary Bahrainis] from the Sunna or the Shi'a, as they don't trust anyone but themselves. And since the establishment of this council there have issued from it all of the conspiracies hatched against the people: the appropriation and gifting of lands (especially reclaimed seaside lands) by the Al Khalifa; al-Bandar's report and «the strategy of sectarian cleansing» that it revealed, including of course the related program of political naturalization; the use of «tens of thousands of mercenaries from various [countries]» that «violate the sanctity of our homes and of our mosques»; and abuses of human rights and the use of torture in dealing with political activists, among whom he named one who had been recently killed in a confrontation with riot police.

For all such offenses and humiliations perpetrated by the ruling Al Khalifa gang, he directed, «the primary order must be to bring it down from power by all means of peaceful civil resistance, and by the willingness to suffer sacrifices for the sake of it, just as the result of the sacrifices of al-Husain was to bring down the Umayyad gang from power.» To this end, he continued, «there must be a coordination of efforts, a putting aside of sectarian and factional differences, and an avoidance of supporting the regime's institutions or participating in them.» For, he said, «we are the generation of anger and sacrifice, and from our sacrifices will come a generation that assumes the responsibility of selecting the system of government that suits it, [one] far removed from injustice, corruption, and sectarian discrimination.»

It is humiliation enough for one to be forced to live.

Al-Khawaja ended his long oration with a poem: «When al-Hurr bin Yazid al-Riyahi demanded of our Imam al-Husain to go back whence he came or else be killed- just as we [i.e., Bahraini dissidents] perhaps may be killed-al-Husain answered, saying:

«I will go on, and death is no shame for a man,
if he sought the good and strove [jahid] as a Muslim,
consoled the righteous through himself,
shunned disrepute, and was at odds with a criminal.
I offer myself up- I don't wish to remain-
to face [Yazid's] colossal host in the desert.
For should I live I wouldn't be blamed,
and should I die I wouldn't be disgraced.
It is humiliation enough for one to be forced to live.»

When reciting the second verse, al-Khawaja added «in the palace» after «criminal», in reference to the Bahraini King. Gengler said that these final words were met with chants of «Let's bring down the ruling gang!» and, though more muted, «Death to Al Khalifa!»

Gengler further stated that al-Khawaja's address in the early morning on the tenth of Muharram, attended by perhaps a thousand listeners from all over Bahrain, from Manama as well as the villages, appeared by all measures to be nothing short of a call to arms against the ruling Al Khalifa in the very image of Husain's rebellion that culminated in the events of 680 CE.

In a critical sense, Gengler said that beneath this religious imagery and bombast lies a far more measured policy prescription: political and «psychological» detachment from the state, a coordinated rejection

of «the regime's institutions» in both word and deed. In this sense, the «sacrifices» of which al- Khawajah speaks are, in contrast with the overall tone of the speech, quite pragmatic and modest.

Gengler also highlighted that «when 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawajah, after already having spent some two decades in exile and in prison, can stand in the streets of Manama and call for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa «by all means of peaceful civil resistance, and by the willingness to suffer sacrifices for the sake of it, just as the result of the sacrifices of al- Husain was to bring down the Umayyad gang from power»-when such a one is prepared to take this action with the knowledge that arrest and probable bodily harm will not be too far away, then it is clear that «repression» as an explanator of political behavior must be weighed against the countervailing power of individuals to suffer and even embrace sacrifice for the sake of a political cause.

Genglers Interview with Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja: In a democratic system Al Khalifa could not continue in power

Justin Gengler met with Abdulhadi al-Khawaja four months after the speech; i.e. after he was released by a royal pardon, since he was detained following this Ashura oration.

During the interview, al-Khawaja emphasized the need for ordinary Shia to avoid political cooptation. «In a democratic system the Al Khalifa could not continue in power, so the goal is to preclude the emergence of such a system, or to co-opt enough Shi'a so that they have an outlet for political participation without really challenging the status quo.»

It is noteworthy in this context what Gengler mentioned in the book's notes about the release of al-Khawaja and 178 other activists by a royal pardon. He said that one Sunni member of parliament with

whom he spoke claimed that the prime minister personally opposed the action, as did Saudi Arabia, where the premier visited the very day before the pardons. According to this account, the Saudi king made his displeasure known in a letter to King Hamad, and then by temporarily halting the passage of some 300 trailer trucks bound for Bahrain at the Saudi side of the causeway.

WikiLeaks: Urgent and Confidential Cable

Al-Khawaja's oration did not only attract the attention of political researchers and analysts like Gengler but was also the focus of the US Embassy's cable sent to the US State Department. The cables disclosed by Wikileaks have shown that the US Embassy in Bahrain closely follows the commemoration of Ashura in Bahrain and issue annual reports considering the religious occasion to be equally political.

In his cable, the Chargé d'Affaires at the United States Embassy in Bahrain at the time, Christopher Henzel, said that activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja called for the overthrow of the Al Khalifa family.

In the section entitled, Ruling Family «Gangsters», the report said that «the radical Shia opposition Haq Movement used the large annual Ashura processions January 6 in Manama's old town to denounce the Al Khalifa family. As Ashura processions attempted to pass through the narrow, crowded streets, speakers at a Haq pavilion harangued a thousands-strong mix of supporters, curious penitents temporarily distracted from their religious tasks, and many who were just stuck in the traffic-jam in the packed street.»

«Haq leader Hassan Mushaima denounced the «sixteen gangsters» running Bahrain, naming the King, Crown Prince, Prime Minister, and other Al Khalifas. Mushaima, who did not explicitly call for the overthrow of the government, said that oppositionists should appeal to foreign governments and international NGOs for support.»

«Overthrow the Gangsters»

The cable stated that «Abdulhadi Al Khawaja, former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR) and current Protection Coordinator for the Middle East at the international human rights NGO Front Line, also spoke from the Haq pavilion. Econ FSN and local media reported that Al Khawaja described the government as «corrupt, oppressive gangsters,» and said, «Our first demand is to overthrow them and get rid of them...we must root out these gangsters.»»

The cable added that throughout his speech, «al-Khawaja made reference to Imam Hussein's battle against the Umayyad caliph Yazid in a thinly veiled appeal to Bahraini Shia to stand up to the Sunni government. He finished with a threat: 'They lost the chance for peace.»»

The US Embassy's Comment: Why al-Khawaja's Speech?

The Embassy noted in a comment at the end of the cable that the Haq Movement inspires the youths who frequently skirmish with Bahraini riot police.

«Haq appears to be spoiling for a fight following the government's attempt to link Mushaima's son to the alleged national day plot. Al Khawaja's January 6 speech may have been calculated to provoke the authorities to move against him, a development which would increase sympathy for Haq in the Shi'a community. The government has so far resisted the urge to lock him up,» it added.

The comment concluded that «the moderate Wifaq party remains more popular among Shia than Haq. In order to retain its lead, Wifaq needs to persuade the GOB to deliver the housing, jobs, and steps against discrimination that the Shia street demands.»

06

WikiLeaks:

Sheikh Isa Qassim's Ashura Sermon in 2009 &
Account of Iranian Envoy to Manama

During the Ashura season in January 2009, the US Embassy in Manama sent two cables to the US Department of State; one on prominent activist Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja's speech and another about the central Ashura address of the Bahraini Shia spiritual leader Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim.

See: Al-Khawaja's 2009 Ashura Speech: «The Ruling Gang» in US Cable and Justin Gengler's Book (Part 5)

Since Ashura sermons are one of the main lines that draw the general Shiite political mood, the US Embassy continued to follow up the commemoration rites of this religious occasion steadily, particularly the central address delivered during the commemoration rituals.

While a separate cable was devoted to discussing Al-Khawaja's speech, the first cable spoke of the central Ashura speech delivered by Sheikh Isa Qassim, which included an attack on the Government of Bahrain (GOB) over its relations with the United States, and condemnation of US policy due to the American stance regarding the war on Gaza (20082009-).

This address had controversial consequences, as more relevant US



cables were sent raising suspicions about the Iranian envoy to Bahrain after the Bahraini King held an urgent summit in reaction to the war waged on Palestine's Gaza strip.

The US Embassy in Manama was concerned of potential Bahraini-Iranian cooperation, thus the Bahraini Foreign Ministry was compelled to deny this accusation and clear the King's name of any mention of coordination with Iran.

Cable: Top Cleric Hits US-Bahrain Ties over War on Gaza and Shia Grievances

The Embassy cable, sent on January 8, 2009 and classified by Chargé d'Affaires (CDA) Christopher Henzel as confidential, tackles Sheikh Isa Qassim's sermon delivered on Ashura. The cable describes the said address as an «attack» and says «is widely viewed as having crossed an informal red line into criticism of Bahrain's security relationship with the US.»

This cable reflects how much US diplomats were concerned over Sheikh Isa's sermons, taking into account their role as a main source of political motivation and mobilization in Bahrain whether with regards to local or international issues.

The cable stresses that «Bahrain's top Shia cleric implied the GOB had «sold out» to the U.S. There are numerous calls for more demonstrations,» noting that «an official expressed fear of popular reactions, urged the U.S. to press Israel to better protect civilians, and expressed support for Egypt's approach.»

In one of the cable's paragraphs entitled «Top Cleric Hits U.S.-Bahrain Ties,» the Embassy mentions that in a January 7 sermon, the island kingdom's «most popular Shia cleric Shaikh Isa Qassim said the «silence» of most Arab governments on Gaza amounted to collaboration with Israel and the U.S. Some of these Arab governments had «sold out» by accepting U.S. protection in exchange for silence.»

«The sermon was reported in local newspapers and websites, and is widely viewed as having crossed an informal red line into criticism of Bahrain's security relationship with the U.S.,» it added.

Gaza, Karbala and Shia Grievances

In an peculiar interpretation, the US Embassy said that Sheikh «Qassim's attack reflected sincere anger in reaction to events in Gaza, but was also calculated to put pressure on the GOB to address the grievances of Bahraini Shia.»

As for the commemoration events, the cable read that «Bahrain's large Ashura processions January 6 and 7 were orderly, but included several speeches from radical Shia leaders equating Gazans' suffering

with the Shia passion story, and criticizing the GOB over domestic issues.»

«There were several unauthorized small demonstrations late January 8 in predominantly Shia areas. Numerous Shia and Sunni clerics have called for pro-Palestinian demonstrations after Friday prayers tomorrow, January 9. Local media featured prominently more gruesome photos from Gaza,» it further read.

A previous cable had predicted that opportunity for larger anti-Israel and anti-west gatherings «will come during Ashura processions late January 6 and during the day January 7,» noting that «Sunni and Shi'a generally attended separate demonstrations.»

The emergency action committee at the Embassy had held a meeting on on security implications of local reactions.

Foreign Minister: Bahrain's Leaders «Fear» Popular Reaction

In a routine manner, the Bahraini state officials exchanged communications with the US Embassy on the developments in the country. The cable said that the Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs «Undersecretary Abdulaziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told CDA January 8 that the GOB was 'shocked' at the scale of civilian suffering in Gaza. He said Bahrain's leaders 'fear how the man in the street here will react.»»

«Because of this, he said, King Hamad would convene later that day an extraordinary meeting of Bahrain's cabinet to 'raise the profile' of Bahrain's opposition to Israeli actions in Gaza.»

In an official government reaction to mollify the frustration of the people in Bahrain, the undersecretary «requested that the USG urge Israel to exercise restraint in order to avoid additional civilian



casualties in Gaza. CDA cited U.S. financial support for UNWRA and senior USG public statements on the priority of the protection of noncombatants, but undertook to convey the Bahraini request to Washington.»

However, Abdulaziz said Bahrain ‘fully backs’ the Egyptian approach to Gaza.

King Calls for Emergency Summit: Concern over Events in Gaza and Mollifying Domestic Public Opinion.

The US Embassy followed up closely the Bahraini government’s stances on the events taking place in Palestine. In a previous cable, the Embassy described these stances by stressing that the Government of Bahrain condemned Israel in strident terms for the Gaza conflict, but was more measured and pragmatic in private, adding that government officials hoped that U.S. and moderate Arab diplomatic efforts «could produce an outcome that minimized sympathy for Hamas and damage to moderate Arab governments standing with their streets.»

Another cable mentions that Bahrain's King Hamad called for an Arab-Islamic summit to address the Gaza situation if it was not possible to convene an Arab summit.

It said that «the King's statement -- that an Islamic summit should discuss Gaza if it proved impossible to convene an Arab summit -- along with announcements January 8 of donations to Palestinian causes from the King's personal account, more government aid for Gaza, and offers of free treatment at Bahraini state hospitals for injured Gazans, were all well received in local mainstream media and on most blogs,» adding that «these gestures also probably helped keep calm the large (for Bahrain) demonstrations Friday, January 9. Crowds hailed the King while denouncing Israel, the U.S., and Egypt.»

Iranian Envoy

On January 11, 2009, a US Embassy cable reported the Bahraini Foreign Ministry's justification regarding the Government of Iran envoy's (GOI) visit to the country, following the King's call for an emergency Islamic summit on Gaza.

The cable says that both Ministerial advisor Saeed Al Faihani and Under Secretary Abdulaziz Al Khalifa claimed Bahrain had not coordinated with any other government or the OIC in advance of the King's statement. They added that the Iranian's visit had been planned for the previous week but postponed, and reiterated that the Iranians had not been informed in advance of the King's summit idea.

«Al Faihani and Under Secretary Abdulaziz Al Khalifa -- told CDA separately that King Hamad's call January 8 for an Islamic summit on Gaza was a unilateral GOB gesture aimed at raising the profile



of Bahrain's concern over events in Gaza, and mollifying domestic public opinion,» the cable further read.

«However, Iran's Embassy in Manama announced January 10 that a GOI envoy, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohamed Hussain Safar Harendi would soon visit Bahrain and the UAE with messages on Gaza for heads of state. When a journalist asked the Iranian Embassy spokesman whether the message was a response to King Hamad's call for an Islamic summit, the spokesman said 'Iran always supports such summits.»»

The Embassy concludes this cable with comment stating: «The Bahrainis probably did intend their Islamic summit proposal as a sop to domestic opinion, but may have inadvertently created an opening for Iran.»

07

Final WikiLeaks Cables:

US Embassy Says Mushaima's Ashura Speech
in 2009 More Restrained, Expressed Respect
for King

In a cable disclosed by WikiLeaks, dating back to October 2009, the United States Embassy in Manama, in reference to the establishment of «Al Wafa» (Loyalty) Islamic Movement» led by detained activist Abdulwahab Hussein, noted that «the Ashura holiday in late December, when tens of thousands of Shia will concentrate in central Manama for religious processions, might provide an insight into Wafa»s strength.»

«In recent years Haq has tried, with little success, to turn the processions into political happenings. Wafa» may try this year to use the processions to demonstrate that it is the new voice of the Shia fringe,» it added.

The final US Embassy cable on Ashura in Bahrain that WikiLeaks managed to leak was of Canonical ID «09MANAMA609_a» and classified as confidential. It discussed the Ashura commemorations during December of 2009. Al Wafa» movement was not present during Ashura as the Embassy expected, but Haq was rather the group that continued to focus on the political aspect of this religious occasion and identifying itself as a separate movement



with a political vision different than that of Al-Wefaq Society, the mainstream Shia opposition party in Bahrain.

The Haq political movement during Ashura; however, had a different tone, as in the event, its leader Mushaima «seemed more restrained this year, with the notable exception of his ‘warning’ that political naturalization might eventually lead to ‘civil war.’» Even the US Embassy found that there was a remarkable change in Mushaima’s rhetoric, as «many were curious to see whether Haq would repeat its performance during the January, 2009 Ashura when Musheima denounced King Hamad as a ‘gangster’ and other Haqis called for revolution,» according to the Embassy.

Did the Ashura 2009 political stance of Haq witness a potential transition; did it prove that it no longer has a strict tone and might have become more flexible and inclined towards negotiations; or did it give hope that the anti-regime political groups will seek

options other than a revolution that Haq threatened with the year before?

The Embassy did not see that yet highlighted that Mushaima «pointedly expressed respect for King Hamad and denounced government corruption only in general terms - he did not name, as he has in the past, the Prime Minister, who is the usual target of such allegations.»

December 2009 Cable: Larger-than-Usual Number of Omani Shia, Men Significantly Outnumbered Women

The report, classified as confidential, was sent to the US State Department on December 29, 2016, signed by Ambassador Adam Ereli.

In the summary of the report, the Embassy pointed out that «as is traditional, community leaders ensured that politics took a back seat to popular piety.»

Entitled «Shia Commemorate Ashura peacefully,» the report said that «an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 people crowded into the narrow streets of central Manama during the night of December 2627- to mark Ashura, the Shia commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at Karbala in 680 AD,» adding that «tens of thousands of men from Bahrain's predominantly Shia villages were joined by large contingents from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, and South Asia.»

The cable also said that several Bahraini contacts commented on the larger-than-usual number of Omani Shia who participated this year.

«As usual, Shia community leaders worked successfully with

Bahraini authorities to ensure that the emotional processions took place without incident,» it noted, further stating that «aside from a few traffic police who kept vehicles out, there was no visible police presence in the warren-like streets of the Maharqa neighborhood of Manama where the main processions took place.»

In the comments, the Embassy highlighted that «men significantly outnumbered women in the streets. The women in attendance wore black abayas and headscarves, many worn in the style of a chador, and most confined themselves to specially sectioned-off areas along the main parade routes or balconies above the fray. Nevertheless, embosfs [Embassy officials] observed scores of younger, self-confident women moving among the crowd in groups of two or three.»

Bigger Crowds, Less Blood

The Embassy said that its contacts agreed with Embassy officials that «the streets seemed

even more packed than during the last few Ashuras,» noting that the officials also «observed only a few mourners who had drawn their own blood during more than three hours of processions, a marked change from recent years,» in reference to the bloodletting mourning practice of «Tatbir».

«Most of the chanting mourners struck their chests lightly with their fists,» it added. It is worthy to note that the Embassy wrote a side note in the same paragraph pointing out that «Shia religious leaders have increasingly discouraged «tatbir,» the practice of drawing blood with swords or heavy flails, and encouraged instead participation in the Red Crescent's Ashura blood-drive.»

Pictures of Khamenei and Nasrallahs Speech

The cable also highlighted that «posters lionizing Iranian or Hizballah clerics were once common at Ashura. Since 2006, when the mainstream Wifaq party agreed to participate in elections, they have become less prominent.»

«The few we spotted this year were pictures of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei inside tents run by ma>tams -- societies of Shia laymen. The Wifaq tent broadcast Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah's Ashura remarks,» the cable further read.

More Restrained Haq Speech, Warning of Civil War

Concerning the Haq Movement, the Embassy said that «although there is a consensus among mainstream Shia that the Ashura processions in downtown Manama should be kept apolitical, the radical Shia Haq movement has set up a podium each of the past few Ashuras opposite the Khawaja mosque, an epicenter for Ashura ceremonies.»

The Embassy report further stated that «after midnight, a small crowd of about 300 gathered there for Haq leader Hassan Musheima's speech. Many were curious to see whether Haq would repeat its performance during the January, 2009 Ashura when Musheima denounced King Hamad as a 'gangster' and other Haqis called for revolution.»

«In the event, Musheima seemed more restrained this year, with the notable exception of his 'warning' that political naturalization might eventually lead to 'civil war,» it added, noting that they «suspect this will sound to most Sunnis more like a threat than a warning.»

The Embassy cable also mentioned that «he pointedly expressed respect for King Hamad and denounced government corruption only in general terms - he did not name, as he has in the past, the Prime Minister, who is the usual target of such allegations.»

In a final comment, the cable stated that «Haq might inspire some Shia with its radical rhetoric at Ashura, but we suspect it alienates more who see it as exploiting Ashura for politics. Most Bahraini Shia value an understanding with the government that enables them to mark Ashura more lavishly than any other Shia community in the GCC. Recent years, including this year, saw weeks of planning and collaboration between the government and Shia religious leaders in the lead-up to Ashura. This cooperation produced yet another peaceable mass religious ceremony for Shia from around the region.»

08

Shia Mourning Season:

Why Does US Embassy Monitor Ashura in Bahrain?

The Shiite season of mourning lasts for two months, kicking off in the beginning of Ashura, followed by the occasion of Arbaeen, and finishing off with the commemoration of Prophet Mohammad's demise. In seven episodes, Bahrain Mirror presented a reading research on the cables sent by the United States Embassy in Bahrain's capital Manama to the US State Department about Ashura commemorations across Bahrain. The cables were disclosed by WikiLeaks in 2010.

This begs the question: Why is US diplomacy so interested in Bahrain's Ashura?

Political Ashura: From Imam Khomeini to Qatif, Najaf and Nabatiyeh

In June 1963 during Ashura, thousands of Iranians were killed after taking to the streets in protest of the Shah, answering the call of a Shiite religious authority, who later became the founder of the Islamic Republic.

The revolution led by Rouhollah Khomeini in Iran wouldn't have succeeded without Ashura. Again on the commemoration of this religious occasion in August 1978, the most massive protests of the revolution were held. The scene was described as the final



confrontation and last challenge that made the country spiral out of control, leading to the overthrow of the Shah regime a few months after.

Imam Khomeini's words on Ashura became part of the Shiite heritage, such as «All we have is from Ashura,» and «Ashura is the victory of blood over sword.»

Coinciding with the Iranian Revolution, the month of November in 1979 witnessed what was known as «the uprising of Muharram» in Qatif and Al-Ahsa. Determined to publicly commemorate Ashura, Shia Saudis took to the streets, chanting political slogans denouncing sectarian discrimination and persecution. The uprising was stifled with a siege imposed on the Qatif region, after violent clashes erupted between Shia citizens and Saudi Arabian National Guard, leaving around 20 people killed and dozens injured and imprisoned.

Iraq in 1977 also witnessed what was known as the «Intifadah of Safar,» which was launched to fight the authorities' decision banning marches from Najaf to Karbala during Arbaeen, and ended with



(Ashura Protests in 1979, Safwa, Saudi Arabia)



(Lebanese citizens burning Israeli military vehicles during Ashura in 1983)



bloodshed. These demonstrations are considered to be the most prominent anti-Ba'ath movement, which was backed by the late Shiite religious authority Mohammad Baqer Al-Sader.

Elsewhere in Lebanon in 1983, the city of Nabatiyeh saw historical confrontations between the Shia and the Israeli forces during the commemoration of Ashura. Demonstrators set Israeli military vehicles on fire and attacked occupation forces with swords.

Ashura Tax in Bahrain: National Union Committee

Bahrain is the only Gulf state where Ashura is an official holiday. The old market neighborhoods in the capital Manama are considered the historical central location of Ashura events. Thousands of people attend Ashura in Manama. Shia mourners even flock from neighboring countries and that is why it is called «the Karbala of the Gulf.»

Bahrain has always been considered an improved model of Shiite religious freedoms, yet the history of how these freedoms were achieved is a matter of controversy. Prior to the administrative reforms,

historians report that the ruler imposed a tax on the commemoration of Ashura, according to Lebanese anthropologist Fuad Khuri in his book *Tribe and State*.

Even dozens of years before the Iranian Revolution, Ashura in Bahrain automatically turned into a political platform against the ruling family and its British protector amid the accumulating suppression practiced against the Shia majority in the country. The island kingdom was always on alert and Manama and the rituals practiced therein were a source of intimidation.

In the 1950s, although Ashura was the cause of sectarian scuffles at the time, this religious occasion became the drive behind the establishment of the first political entity that brought together both religious sects. Symbolically, the first meeting of the National Union Committee was held at the Bin Khamees Maṭam, and that is how a semi-consensus took place between the Sunnis and Shiites that Ashura be used politically for the fight for freedoms and rights. It was also a pleasant surprise when the Poet Abdulrahman Al-Muṭawda, who belongs to one of the most prominent Sunni tribes, stood and recited a eulogy about Imam Hussein on the Arbāeen during the National Union Committee meeting, urging people to confront oppression and imperialism, walking in the footsteps of Imam Hussein.

It was a historic Ashura success in Bahrain. The anti-imperialism Sunni Bahrainis could not resist the power of Ashura. They could not find a better platform that would help accomplish their anti-British domination political aims, since Ashura fuels willpower and fervor, and mobilizes the people. The former British advisor Belgrave expressed in his memoirs his admiration for this occasion which was also followed up in British diplomatic communications.

1990s Intifadah: The Opposition in a Poem



«Since the mid-1990s it is an anomaly if at least one political activist is not arrested for an ardent anti-government speech at this the zenith of ‘Āshūrā» and of the entire month of Muharram,» says Justin Gengler in his book entitled, *Group Conflict and Political Mobilization in Bahrain and the Arab Gulf*.

During the Intifadah in the 1990s, the authorities arrested Husseinī preacher Sheikh Ali Al-Najas. Even though he was blind, the secret security servicemen tortured him to death. The reason, of course, was his repeated outspoken criticism about the ruling family, which he expressed on Ashura platforms.

What distinguished the 1990s uprising in Bahrain is its intensive use of Ashura and its rituals: such as taking advantage of Maṭam platforms and mourning processions to deliver opposition political speeches and mobilize crowds against the regime in power. Bahrain's most senior cleric and the spiritual force behind the 1990s intifadah was Sheikh Abd al-Amir Al-Jamri, who was also an outspoken preacher. In one of Al-Jamri's messages, he stressed on the important and systematic role of Ashura platforms, expressing regret that the

authorities imprisoned the majority of eulogy (Azaa) reciters. They were playing the role of Twitter today: They were the only media platform the opposition had.

Throughout Bahrain's modern history, any reciter that addressed politics was pursued by security authorities along with the whole group (Husseini procession) he was linked to. Thus, a secret group called «The Martyr Procession» emerged, which was not affiliated to any party and had no announced leaders. Through that procession, political slogans were launched.

During the 1990s, security forces did not only raid Ma'tams and attack mourning processions for chanting anti-regime political slogans, but also targeted anyone wearing black, including university students for instance.

After 2001: Politics from the Womb of Ashura

«Indeed, to an outside observer of the most holy Shi'i festival of Ashura, it is difficult to perceive whether the myriad processions, passions plays, and sermons tell of the battle against the 'Umayyad caliph or against the Bahraini monarch,» noted Gengler describing the 2009 Ashura events he attended in Bahrain.

The Ashura season, which does not end on the Tenth of Muharram but rather extends through the entire Month of Muharram until the end of Safar, continued to occupy a political role even following a stage of political relief and what was known as the reform project launched by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2001.

Eulogy reciters and preachers continued to use the Ashura platform to touch on local and international political issues. Harsh criticism of the government, the political situation and new laws did not stop and also the Palestinian and Iraqi causes remained the highlights of the religious season at the time.



With larger space to practice religious freedoms, during that period, central congregational prayers were held and the Ashura speech was delivered by Sheikh Isa Qassim in Manama. Also from the womb of Ashura, more hardline speeches were delivered by opposition groups that defected from Al-Wefaq Society after the latter decided to take part in the Parliament.

On Ashura, the Haq Movement, a splinter group that broke away from Al-Wefaq, led by detained activist Hasan Mushaima also set up a platform in central Manama. In Manama as well a tent was set up for the martyrs and torture victims committee. Ashura to both parties was the most significant platform for political mobilization and gaining supporters and sympathizers.

Furthermore, leftist political societies (a mix of secular Sunnis and Shiites) began to issue annual statements on Ashura. These statements, according to Dr. Abdulrahman Khalifa, «adorned the front page of Al-Jamaheer newspaper» issued by the Bahrain National Liberation Front, which was a party founded by leftists in the 1950s.

Hence, Ashura will always incite controversy and continue to be monitored by state authorities and the US embassy as well.

WikiLeaks and Ashura: US Embassy on a Mission

The US cables leaked by WikiLeaks makes us certain that US embassies around the world, even those that are not intelligence bases, work on the ground to gather and analyze information. Unlike government forces that monitor the Shia's commemoration of Ashura with the purpose of punishing and arresting those who participate, the US Embassy in Manama collects information on Ashura for study and examination in order to give a comprehensive overview to the US administration in an annual confidential report.

Why were the US embassy cables confidential? What is so dangerous and important about the speeches of Sheikh Isa Qassim, Hasan Mushaima or Abdulhadi Al-Khawaja, according to US diplomacy? What is so secret about Ashura commemoration rituals and ceremonies in Bahrain and what controversial impact does it leave? Are certain directives, decisions or reactions taken based on these cables and reports? Or is there a need to use them in devising plans and security and political strategies for the region?

These cables do not only reach the US State Department, but are also sent to the central US leadership in the Gulf as well as to intelligence agencies, analysts and researchers.

The Embassy lists all the minor details of Ashura in their religious, social and political context. The deep observation of Ashura in Bahrain (even if the US flag is drawn on the streets to be marched on) makes the US Embassy reports historical documents of great significance.

To US policy, Ashura was an inspiration for many revolutions and Shia resistance movements in the region, starting from Iran and not

ending in Lebanon. The US has since been asking itself when this Shiite passion for Ashura in Bahrain will end?

These cables, which seemed to have become an annual mission since 2005, show that US diplomacy does not see Ashura as a mere religious occasion commemorated by seasonal rituals every year. The cables prove that Ashura is related to Gulf security, the stability of ruling regimes, the fifth fleet, the Iranian neighbor, and how the US image is portrayed in a Shiite's mind.

In 2008, the former US Ambassador Adam Ereli and other embassy officials attended Ashura commemorations in central Manama in January, as part of a post's outreach to Bahrain's Shi'a, stated a US Embassy cable.

This intensive monitoring is not to be taken lightly. There is a team that the Embassy sends annually to observe these events attentively. The Embassy also calls its Shia contacts to collect more information.

On the local Bahraini level, the Embassy finds Ashura to be a big opportunity for measuring the presence of political forces, their effectiveness and draw the public political mood. The cables note that these religious celebrations provide insight into the strength of movements, groups and public views.

British Colonialists Too

The leaked US cables gave us clear insight on the extent to which the US Embassy in Manama follows up this religious occasion, yet there are other documents from the British records that prove that the UK was as paranoid, also monitoring the commemoration of Ashura.

The document says that the British Political Agent Gault asked in August 1955 the UK foreign office to provide a military cover in the Gulf and strived to convince the ruler of Bahrain Sheikh Salman bin Hamad to deploy a number of the «Flamingo» destroyers at the Juffair

base. He told the «Loch Lomond» destroyer to head from Kuwait to Bahrain to face what is taking place at the zenith of Ashura, fearing a possible eruption of tensions and popular outrage after National Union Committee threats to organize protests, rumors of a strike and planning of confrontations. The document says that Gault considered Ashura to be a difficult period during which emotions rage.

The Americans were keen to monitor Ashura celebrations even before they had an embassy in Bahrain, even from a cultural perspective. The US Embassy shows pride in the events it holds where it showcases rare and perhaps the oldest pictures of mourning processions taken near the US mission house in 1908.

Why didn't Saudi Arabia Study Ashura?

Justin Gengler highlights that the personalities and events of these founding days in particular can evoke powerful remembrances of political grievance when institutionalized in ritual and lore-and when put to good use by shrewd political entrepreneurs looking to rally the troops.

Ashura has the ability to politically and emotionally fuel the people. In many pages that Gengler devoted to speak of the political aspect of Ashura in Bahrain, he says that «many a citizen will be motivated by religious or political ideals such that he is willing to risk life and limb by engaging in activities in defiance of the state,» adding that «repression» as an explanator of political behavior must be weighed against the countervailing power of individuals to suffer and even embrace sacrifice for the sake of a political cause.»

Despite all the limelight shed on the commemoration of Ashura, the annual season of Shiite mourning, there is not any unprovoked objective political reading on this occasion and its rituals written by an official state authority in the Gulf States or any research or academic centers affiliated to these states; although it is deep rooted

in the very existence of Shiites and has proved that it can influence even the adherents of other religious sects and schools of thought.

Why didn't the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain attempt to study Ashura far from the ideological conflict? Why didn't they try to understand their Shiites citizens through this door? Why didn't they try to gain the support of the Shia rather than cause divisions and question their loyalty?

Ashura in the Gulf and Bahrain, according to the US reports, is the largest public gathering and the best measure of the political behaviour of Shiite citizens. Ashura has also proven, through its cultural and historical aspects, to shift from a cause of sectarian and ideological confrontation and conflict to an occasion for political organization based on mutual values and interests, even when founded on sacrifice as was the case of the National Union Committee.

Although the Ashura commemoration was compared to the celebrations of Christmas by the US Embassy, there is no religious festival that can compete with Ashura in the extent of its political influence and mobilization. Ashura in Bahrain continues to shake the Gulf even after 2011. Even though WikiLeaks stopped leaking US Embassy cables by the end of 2009, there is no doubt that this annual mission is still ongoing.

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