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**The Return of the Bahraini Exiles (2001-2006):
The Impact of the Ostracization Experience on the
Opposition’s Restructuring**

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The Return of the Bahraini Exiles (2001-2006):

The Impact of the Ostracization Experience on the Opposition's Restructuring

The coming to power of the King Hamad bin Eissa al-Khalifa marked a revival of the Bahraini political life, with the resurgence of opposition movements and the election of a new parliament, both put on standby in 1975 with the dissolution of the first Parliament. When one gets a closer look into the current registered political associations and their personnel, it is striking to see that from the first president of the National Democratic Action, Abd-al Rahman al-Naimi, who spent 33 years in Syria, to the current president of al Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman who stayed 6 years in London, via the secretary general of the Progressive Democratic Forum Hasan Madan exiled for 26 years to quote but a few here, most of the opposition leaders have lived a significant part of their life in exile. Though being completely overlooked in the debate and analyses of the post-reform political strategies of the opposition, this feature is worth being taken into consideration.

I will use very simple conceptual tools of migration studies to analyse domestic political strategies

This paper proposes to explore the impact that decades of exile have had on the shaping of the opposition in Bahrain after February 2001, when the new King of Bahrain allowed the exiles back into the country. It is based on a series of personal interviews I carried out in March and April 2008 with Bahrainis who left their countries because of their political and militant activities.

To do so, it will first map the community of Bahraini exiles by distinguishing between two kinds of out-migration: the outlawed nationalist and Marxist revolutionaries of the 1960-70s who found shelter mostly in the Ba'athist Syria or Communist South Yemen; secondly the leaders of the Shiite Islamist opposition, spreading unrest after the Iranian revolution, who made their way through the asylum seeking process of Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries.

Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the political agendas, *transnational* strategies and mobilisation means designed in the specific context of exile and investigates the way these political experience was to be brought back in the native country.

Finally, it assesses, seven years after the return of the exile, the actual disappointing outcomes of the reintegration of the 'Returnees' ('*aidin*'). It does argue that the notion of 'homeland' built in exile together with the practice of open criticism considerably renewed the terms of the political debates in Bahrain. Nevertheless, the distance created by the forced absence rendered this renewal shallow as it could not succeed in amending the structure of the Bahraini political system, for want of a proper reconciliation mechanism.

I. Waves and structure of Exiles

Bahrain has an established track record in deportation that comes very much as a legacy of the British rule on the island and the region as a whole. As early as in 1938, the leaders of the movement protesting against the high rate of Indian employment in the public administration and the discrepancy in salaries were banished to Bombay¹. Likewise, the episode of the Nationalist liberal movement from 1953-56, referred to as *الهيئة* ended with the imprisonment and exile of the three main leaders, an episode related in the memoirs of one of them Abd-al Rahman al-Bakir *From Bahrain to Exile-Saint Helena*.

Within the scope of this paper, two different waves of exile will be focused on: the Marxist and Arab nationalist movements of the 1960s-70s and the Shiite Islamist currents of the 1980-90s.

A. *The Marxist and Arab nationalist opposition*

When asked about the political affiliation that caused them to flee Bahrain, interviewees made straight a distinction between the members of the *جبهة التحرير الوطني البحرانية* and those of the *الجبهة الشعبية لتحرير البحرين*.

Fred H. Lawson (1989:85, *Bahrain the modernization of Autocracy*) described the two leftist movements as follow:

¹ Khuri (1980: 197-98)

Leftist political organizations have been active in Bahrain since the early 1960s [...]. Between 1968 and 1974, local activists associated with the Arab Nationalist Movement merged with cadres in Oman, Qatar, and the Trucial States to form the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arab Gulf (PFLOAG). This organization split in 1974, with the Bahraini section reconstituting itself as the Popular Front in Bahrain (PFB). Support for the PFLOAG/PFB has come primarily from disaffected professionals and intellectuals. The other significant clandestine organizations in the country, the National Liberation Front-Bahrain (NLFB) and the local branch of the Ba'th party, differed from the PFLOAG/PFB less in terms of principles [...] than with regard to more practical matters. The NLFB evidenced pronounced communist, even pro-Soviet, leanings during most of the 1970s and drew its primary support from the more radical trade unionists.

As highlighted here, apart from the fact that the Liberation front is anterior to the Popular Front and as such played a role in the March 1965 uprising, leading the way into exile, there is little difference as for the who and where of the exiled activists. The informants who belonged to these movements were either students, involved in the activities of the party' students union, or members of the underground labour movement, when they saw Bahrain for the last time.

They all left Bahrain between 1965 and 1975, whether for fear of repression, to get back to their studies, a conference or willingly but were not allowed back in again. The first runaways exited via the pre-independent Qatar, most transited through the pre-Saddam Ba'athist Iraq; all without exception settled for some time in Beirut and Syria, the policy of Ba'athist Syria being to grant residency to any Arab and all the more so in the case of nationalists and Gulf dissidents.

A difference though appears in their respective trajectories: the members of the Liberation Front benefited from training or higher education in Moscow while the militants of the Popular Front shared in the Dhofari revolutionary experiment, whether

in the revolution's schools or martyr's hospitals. They were also offered shelter and passports by the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

In the end, however, each wandering path is unique, but the party's transnational network played an essential role in the settlement and employment of its exiles cadres. As a result, the exile's locations of the Bahraini cadres of the leftist movements were limited mostly to Damascus and Aden up until the end of the Cold War.

B. *The Shiite Islamist movements*

With the socialist project lost its attraction power, the suppression of the strikes and trade unionists in 1974-5, the main opposition to the Bahraini rulers came from the Shiite segment of the population in the context of the Islamist revival that affected the whole region. Here, it is important to differentiate between two Shiite currents, the Shiraziyyin and the *Dawa* sympathisers, as analysed by Laurence Louër (*Transnational Shia Politics*, 2008). The Shiraziyyin, led by Hadi al-Mudarissi, opted around 1976 for a radical and confrontational strategy with the regime, showing great enthusiasm for and organising mass mobilisation in support of the Iranian revolution. When in December 1981, the Bahraini government announced it had foiled an attempt by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, created two years earlier by the deported Hadi al-Mudarissi in Tehran, to make a coup, the IFLB members who were not imprisoned fled to Iran. They were followed in the 1980 decade by some of the more grassroots Shi'ite deported by the Bahraini authorities.

In Iran though, when Ayatollah Montazeri, who was Khomeini's heir apparent and head of the liberation movements fell into disgrace in the eyes of the Supreme Guide, the Bahraini runaways migrated a second time. They headed in scattered ranks towards the countries they considered as most friendly to asylum seekers: Sweden, Canada and Denmark.

The other part of Shiite Islamist exiles stemmed from the Bahraini branch of *al-Dawa*, founded in 1972, and left Bahrain more gradually in the 1980s . Contrary to the

Shiraziyyin who did not shun from the armed opposition to the Bahraini regime, the *al-Da'wa* remained committed to the doctrine of progressive action through legal channels, having provided most of the MPs forming what came to be known as the parliamentary 'Religious Bloc' in 1973-1975. However, in the early 1980s, a few members headed by Saeed al-Shehabi and Mansur al-Jamri, son of one of the most notorious Shiite cleric in Bahrain, refused this line and founded an opposition movement in exile, the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement (*Harakat Ahrar al-Bahrain al-Islamiyya*) in London, also known under its English name Bahrain Freedom Movement that does subtly erase its Islamic character.

Finally, to complete the map of the Bahraini exiles, it should be noted that when spontaneous violence flared up between 1994-1998 as the youth of the western rural communities protested against corruption and deteriorating economic conditions, the *ad hoc* leaders of the movements including Sh. Ali Salman joined the London base when they were deported in January 1995.

II. Political strategies in Exile and their bringing back

Apart from a few individuals in London, notably Saeed al-Shehabi, all the Bahraini exiles went back home after the General Amnesty of 2001. Indeed, when asked about the motives that drove their decision to return, all my informants replied that the question made no sense to them, as staying in the asylum country was not considered an option. In the words of one of them, who left his academic position in Cambridge to come back:

"The question of the return should not be asked in terms of it being worthwhile or not: you *have* to go back to your country. Nobody wants to stay aboard "

This is confirmed by the fact that some of the former leftists tried an early return at the beginning of the 1990s, hoping to benefit from the *détente* that resulted globally from the end of the Cold War and regionally from the liberation of Kuwait. But the majority of those who tried their luck were put in custody at the airport and deported to a rather

new destination, the Emirates, where they usually start anew and gave up political activities.

This will to be back by all means is what essentially differentiate the exile from any other kind of migration or diaspora, as defined by Hamid Naficy². This affects both the relations exiles maintain with their home and establish with their host countries: exile is a form of emigration that is *not* accompanied by the objective of or efforts towards assimilation in the host country. The exiles long to come back to their country; they live physically in a place but mentally in an other; they construct an imaginary homeland, cut off the reality of their country of origin and their country of abode. From the political point of view adopted here, no wonder that Bahrain is depicted as the country of oppression, torture and detention, and more interestingly, in the most extreme versions, a land under the colonial rule of the Al-Khalifa, -the theme rather widespread and deep-rooted among the Baharna, the indigenous Shiite population, and resurfaces once and again to delegitimize the ruling family.

Like any others political exiles, the Bahraini took with them their political struggle abroad. They transplanted the Bahraini political space in wider national or international political arenas. The two intersected in the sphere of the defence of Human Rights as of the 1990s, culminating with the post-Cold War idea of 'ethical Foreign Policy' launched by the Labour Party in the UK. Two centres of Bahraini exiles emerged as particularly active in awareness raising and lobbying politicians and international organisations: first and foremost, the Bahraini Freedom Movement in London, and secondly the activists around Abd-al Nabi Al-Akry and Abd al-Rahman al-Naimi from the Popular Front in Syria.

In London, the BFM activists released press statements, organised demonstrations, created a very active website, 'Voice of Bahrain' in both Arabic and English, where they posted and still post regular reports on the human rights abuses carried out by the Bahraini government. They established *working relationships* with all the prominent

² Zaiki Laidi

Human Rights organisations, particularly Amnesty International and presented their case to the UNHCR, creating a strong pressure on the Bahraini government. They also approached British MPs, the most prominent of whom being Lord Avebury, who published his correspondence with the Foreign Office on the Human Rights situation in Bahrain in 1996 under the title *Bahrain the Brickwall*.

The strategy of talking the language of Human rights was also adopted by the leftists, whether they were trade unionists in contact with the ILO or militants who attended conferences and toured Europe and the US to gain support for their cause. What is interesting is that this period threw bridges between the various opposition currents from different ideological backgrounds. The leftists, *al khassirin*, (the losers), proclaimed their faith in reformism and liberal democracy; and so did the Islamists playing down the idea of implementing the Islamic Law, to lay the stress rather on democracy and the four claims that were the rallying cry of all the segments of the opposition: the restoration of the 1973 Constitution, the election of a Parliament, the lifting of the 1975 State security law and the release of political detainees and return of exiles.

In spite of this united front abroad, the exiles of different segments did not maintain the same kind links with their home country nor the same mobilisation capacities inside Bahrain. In the words of Laurence Louër:

Contrary to many exiled movements, including the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement succeeded in staying legitimate in the eyes of the opponents who remained at home and to coordinate with them. The task was especially difficult because charismatic leaders were among the insiders.

This is due partly to the fact that the very popular cleric figure Sheikh Al-Jamri, who played a prominent role during the 1994-98 *intifada* was the father of Mansur Al-Jamir, founder of the movement. These close ties were illustrated by the fact that although without any militant background, the leaders of the uprising went to London.

Indeed, and that is the aim of this paper, it becomes clear that the experience of ostracization had some substantial impact on the re-shaping of the opposition movements after the 2001 general amnesty.

III. Results of the Reintegration Process

What should be noted upfront is that, with few notable exceptions of exiles being integrated in state ministries, the majority of the political exiles have returned to political life, journalism or militancy in trade unions upon their return. Their political commitment is illustrated by the fact that many of them mentioned having declined the offer to sign a letter of apologies to be allowed back into the country before 2001.

The composition of the 'political societies' as registered in 2002 reflects the different opposition movements that have emerged since the independence of Bahrain: the Progressive Democratic Forum, the National Democratic Action, the Islamic Action and Al-Wifaq represent respectively the legacy of the Front of Liberation, the Popular Front, the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain and the Islamic Bahrain Freedom Movement.

When invited to reflect on the results of their ostracization experience, convergent remarks were made by my interviewees, best formulated by Murtadha Badr, a former activist of IFLB elected in 2002 at the head of Manama municipal council. The exiles, as opposed to the detainees, have learnt abroad the importance of the media and public relations; "they brought the problems of Bahrain to the world's attention". In other words, thanks to their constituting a wide-reaching network, including international pressure and lobbying groups, they placed their struggle at a transnational level. These powerful PR techniques and regional mobilization have benefited both al-Wifaq and more evidently the Haq, an offspring of al-Wifaq that opted against the participation in the 2006 elections and supports certain forms of street unrest. As a matter of fact, Badr talks about the shift of the political fight from a violent ground onto a peaceful political field. "We change and we also oblige the government to change its strategy from

violence to politics. Now the government does recognize the political societies, i.e. the reality of the ground". Acknowledging the reality is also the lesson that many leftists drew from their experience abroad as several confess having returned in a sectarian-torn society that their foreign ideological beliefs prevented to fully understand at the time they left.

Indeed, to borrow Nabokov's terms, the 'glorious repatriation' dreamt of by all the exiles did not happen. The reintegration process is full of bitterness, generated by the forced absence.

The years of violence and exile have naturally created a profound mutual mistrust. In spite of the amnesty, there is still a symbolic conflict of memory and legitimacy going on, that takes the form of a zero-sum game: the exiled political leaders came back having built their political legitimacy on the united and *uncompromising* call for the restoration of the 1973 Constitution. By this standard, accepting the Great Charter that does dilute the powers of the elected Parliament is undermining their own credibility – hence the 2002 boycott by three of the four opposition movements and the recurrent discourse about the 'incomplete', 'absence of real, true' reforms, and their lack of legitimate foundations. Moreover, there is a war of symbols being fought with economic implications: according to the Returnees' society, the government is reluctant to officially recognise the word 'political exiles' منفيين سياسيين, and prefer the neutral formulation of 'returnee' blunting any form of responsibility, which it refuses to bear. Likewise, while the returnees would like to obtain a 'right to work' and compensation, as a recognition of their unfair treatment, the Al-Khalifa do not want to engage in any policy that would seem to mean any acknowledging of their wrongs. They only passed a law obliging the re-employment of the returnees by their previous company –at the position they left.

As a form of **conclusion**, I would like very much to emphasise one point.

While it is often overlooked in the largely sectarian analysis of the deadlock of the post-2001 political system in Bahrain, I argue here that this form of mutual denial of legitimacy, generated by the experience of ostracization plays a significant role in the understanding of the confrontational politics in Bahrain nowadays. The notion of 'homeland politics' built thanks to the greater freedom of expression enjoyed in exile kept the political debates on Bahrain alive at a transnational level. Nevertheless, the distance created by the forced absence and the dispute over the recognition of a violated 'right to live in one's own country' (art 72) rendered the renewal of the terms of the debate shallow, as each of the political actors always keep the option to delegitimise the very claims of the others.