

Fragile Nationality and Permanent Precarity in Bahrain

by Andrew McIntosh and Jawad Fairouz

During February 2011, in what became known as the Pearl Uprising, thousands of Bahrainis gathered at the Pearl Roundabout in the capital Manama to protest corrupt practices and the ruling Al Khalifa family's failure to reform its autocratic rule.

Over the course of several weeks, dialogue with the political opposition broke down. Then, in March, the Government of Bahrain accused demonstrators and members of the opposition of orchestrating an "Iranian plot" to destabilise the country. The police violently suppressed protests using live ammunition while the government requested military support from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which deployed troops to Bahrain in a security operation. These actions preserved and strengthened Bahrain's ruling autocracy while suppressing the Pearl Uprising and its calls for reform.

Bahrain's uprising

Aside from prolific, institutionalised violence by the police, authorities in Bahrain have adopted another tactic to repress dissent: the arbitrary revocation of citizenship. This follows an ongoing trend across the Gulf since 2011, with violent and non-violent dissidents having their citizenships unilaterally revoked by the authorities. In Kuwait, 120 people were stripped of their nationality between 2014–2016. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), meanwhile, has revoked citizenship from 200 people due to alleged ties with the Muslim Brotherhood since 2011. Qatar has gone as far as to remove citizenship from an entire tribe. Over 5,000 Ghaftans have had their Qatari citizenship revoked since 2004.¹

¹ Economist, "To Silence Dissidents, Gulf States are Removing Their Citizenship", in *The Economist*, 26 November 2016, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/11/26/to-silence-dissidents-gulf-states-are-revoking-their-citizenship>.

Andrew McIntosh is Director of Research at Salam for Democracy and Human Rights. Jawad Fairouz is former Bahraini MP and Chairman at Salam for Democracy and Human Rights.

Since November 2012, 990 Bahrainis, mostly Shi'a political activists, have had their citizenships revoked.² Most were charged with terrorism or terrorism related offenses, whose definition is broad and ambiguous under Bahraini law. Some were detained and summarily deported to nations where they had alternative citizenship. Others who lacked alternative citizenship were simply rendered stateless via this revocation.³

As stateless individuals, these people have no right to work or a pension in Bahrain. They cannot hold a bank account, have no right to housing allowances and no longer possess official identification. In several instances, any money or properties they held in Bahrain were expropriated by the state.⁴ Many have since been forced to either seek asylum in other nations as stateless individuals or be labelled "illegal immigrants" in their own country, usually leading to arrest, torture and possible deportation to Lebanon, Iraq or Iran, countries where

most do not necessarily have ties.⁵

As noted by Giorgio Agamben, such practices forcibly and unilaterally bring human lives into a state of exception, reducing them to bare life, with no rights or protection, yet subject to the authority of the system all the same. Put more bluntly, the state sought to make examples out of them, a symbol of its absolute sovereignty, even in the face of Bahrain's own constitutional principles, national and international laws, which prohibit such practices.⁶

In April 2019, under international pressure, Bahrain restored citizenship to 551 people.⁷ Yet, these individuals are no longer entitled to the same rights

² Jawad Fairouz, "Advocacy Campaigns to Counter Deprivation of Citizenship: 'Ana Bahraini' and 'Ana Kuwaiti'", speak at the AUC Center for Migration & Refugee Studies conference on *Inauguration of the Statelessness Platform and Research and Advocacy on Statelessness in the MENA*, 7 December 2021.

³ Amnesty International, *Bahrain: Citizenship of 115 People Revoked in 'Ludicrous' Mass Trial*, 16 May 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/?p=139868>; Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain, *Anatomy of a Police State. Systematic Repression, Brutality, and Bahrain's Ministry of Interior*, 2019, p. 36, <https://www.adhrb.org/?p=17051>.

⁴ Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, *Decade of Oppression. Authoritarianism in Bahrain, 2011-2021*, 2021, p. 91, <https://salam-dhr.org/?p=4309>.

⁵ Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, MENA Stateless Network (Hawiati) and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *Arbitrary Revocation of Nationality in Bahrain. A Tool of Oppression*, 2021, p. 38, <https://www.institutesi.org/year-of-action-resources/report-arbitrary-revocation-of-nationality-in-bahrain>.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 17-18; United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, 16 December 1966, in United Nations, *Treaty Series*, Vol. 999, p. 171, https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?chapter=4&clang=_en&mtdsg_no=IV-4&src=IND; International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Judgment of 6 April 1955 in Nottebohm Case (Liechtenstein v. Guatemala)*, p. 23, <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/18>; League of Arab States, *Arab Charter on Human Rights*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/551368>; Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, MENA Stateless Network (Hawiati) and Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion, *Arbitrary Revocation of Nationality in Bahrain*, cit., p 17.

⁷ "Bahrain King Reinstates Nationality to 551 Citizens Tried in Courts", in *Reuters*, 21 April 2019, <https://reut.rs/2VWtoJr>; Human Rights Watch, "Bahrain", in *World Report 2020. Events of 2019*, 2020, p. 57, <https://www.hrw.org/node/336698>.

guaranteed to Bahraini citizens. Apart from being monitored by security services, they have received no financial compensation. They are reminded via formal and informal channels that their ability to live freely in Bahrain can be taken away as easily as it was restored. Their state of exception continues. Moreover, 343 Bahrainis still have not had their citizenship restored and do not have any indication this will ever occur.⁸ They are either living in exile or are incarcerated in Bahrain as political prisoners.

At the same time, the state has continued a systematic programme of naturalisation aimed of Sunni migrants in the Bahraini Security Forces, who are primarily utilised to police the country's majoritarian Shi'a population. Citizenship is conferred to them as a gift by the king.⁹ In many cases, this is bestowed because promotion in the military can only be awarded to Bahraini citizens. There is no sense of permanence, however, as 500 striking members of the security forces were stripped of their acquired Bahraini citizenships and deported to Pakistan in 2013 for example.¹⁰

⁸ Andrew McIntosh and Jawad Fairouz, "Liquid Nationality and Fixed Precarity in Bahrain", in *Salam Media*, 17 December 2021, <https://salam-dhr.org/?p=4804>.

⁹ Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, p 100.

¹⁰ "Bahrain Sent Back 500 Pakistani Security Personnel" [Urdu], in *Daily Pakistan*, 9 May 2014, <http://dailypakistan.com.pk/09-May-2014/100742>; Marc Owen Jones, *Political Repression in Bahrain*, cit., p. 103-104.

Precarious citizenship: A means to an end

Part of an ongoing trend in Bahrain, these developments also reflect a post-2011 paradigm shift, in which the concept of citizenship has grown increasingly fragile and contradictory. GCC countries such as Bahrain are sometimes described as a "pyramid", where rights and privileges are intrinsically ordered by ethnic, tribal and sectarian affiliations.

This classification is incomplete for Bahrain: rather than a fixed hierarchy that determines the rights and identities of citizens, the country is currently moving towards an impermanent form of national identity, where citizenship is arbitrarily granted, revoked and restored according to the whims of the ruler, making the basis of citizenship precarious: any citizen can be reduced to bare life and a state of exception, placing them in a state of permanent limbo. As former Bahrain parliamentarian, Abdulhadi Khalaf, whose citizenship was revoked and now lives in exile in Sweden has noted, "Our passports are not a birthright. They are part of the ruler's prerogative".¹¹

This crystallises the peculiar sovereignty of the state in Bahrain. Power has effectively been concentrated in the executive branch, led by a member of the royal family. Although Bahrain is officially a constitutional monarchy, neither parliament, the Shura council nor civil society are truly independent. Most of their members

¹¹ Economist, "To Silence Dissidents, Gulf States are Removing Their Citizenship", cit.

are government loyalists. The royal family is the state and there are no legitimate means to challenge it.

Benedict Anderson theorised that the identity modern nationalism creates – the imagined community – succeeded the concept of the sacred community, which emphasised the primacy of the monarchy and religion as a communal glue.¹² Unlike Anderson's analysis of European nation-states, Bahrain's ruling elites never adopted the arguably Eurocentric idea of the imagined community from below, determined by vernacular identities.

In Bahrain, the power of the sovereign allows the monarchy to determine the value of citizenship and an individuals' belonging to the imagined community from above. That cultivation is currently belied via the construction of state narratives, where Bahrain is depicted as a transnational, cosmopolitan business hub. These narratives promote an alternative social contract, where fundamental rights and a shared identity are increasingly sacrificed on the altar of financial growth and international allure.

This implies that instead of living within an imagined community, rights and national identity in Bahrain are a sovereign commodity in both an autocratic and neo-liberal context: a commodified citizenship that can always be revoked by the sovereign and provides neither protection nor identity.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed., London/New York, Verso, 2006, p. 22, 36.

This commodified social contract enables the state media to construct narratives for international audiences, depicting Bahraini society as pluralistic, diverse and centred on economic development, which in turn promotes common prosperity. In practice, however, Bahraini residents and citizens alike are largely kept segregated from one another, based on their ethnicity and religious affiliation.¹³

Society is therefore fragmented by design, where the ruling family has historically deployed "divide and rule" tactics to further regime survival and limit internal dissent. As a result, instead of an imagined community, Bahrain consists of siloed communities, living a state of semi-permanent precarity.

The vast majority of the citizens are aware that their residency or citizenship can be revoked, reducing chances for genuine state-society consultation, let alone dissent. Precarity and risks of bare life are not an exception to the rule in Bahraini society. They have instead become the rule. Not only is this paradigm an affront to human rights and international law, but it also inhibits forms of inclusive nationalism and national identity building, making Bahraini communities divided, afraid and ultimately easier to control.

¹³ Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, *Salam for Democracy and Human Rights, Decade of Oppression*, cit., p. 48; Anthony H. Cordesman, Max Markusen and Eric P. Jones, "Stability and Instability in the Gulf Region in 2016: A Strategic Net Assessment", in *CSIS Reports*, June 2016, <https://www.csis.org/node/36635>.

Affecting change: Ending international complacency

One of the primary ways this fundamentally undemocratic system is maintained is through the complicity of other nations. The message of human rights NGOs and the UN has been clear and consistent: Bahrain should end this practice and restore citizenship, along with the rights and privileges it entails, to all Bahrainis who have had them revoked for political crimes.¹⁴

In this, Bahrain would be adhering to international law, which stipulates that no country can legally revoke an individual's citizenship if it renders them stateless.

While the US, UK and EU have at times expressed concern or disappointment at Bahrain's refusal to abide by international human rights law, they have rarely chastised the government for these actions. Instead, these states have consistently prioritised their military and economic relationships with the country. Bahrain is home to the US Fifth Fleet, its largest naval detachment in the region, while the UK established a permanent military base there in 2018.

¹⁴ Fatiha Belfakir, "Activists: Bahrain Continues to Revoke Citizenship of Dissidents", in *VOA Extremism Watch*, 6 November, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/4647234.html>; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Bahrain Should Stop Persecution of Shi'a Muslims and Return Its Citizenship to Their Spiritual Leader*, 24 April 2014, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2014/04/bahrain-should-stop-persecution-shia-muslims-and-return-its-citizenship>.

For the European Union, its dealings with Bahrain must take Saudi Arabia and the UAE into consideration. As two of Bahrain's primary supporters, the EU, which does not have the same hard power at its disposal as the US and the UK, believes it must consider the risks of upsetting Bahrain's GCC allies, concerned about the economic and energy repercussions on Europe.

However, Bahrain's strategic importance in the region also means the West has the means to apply pressure for human rights reform. These powers have the wealth and geopolitical power to apply moral and ethical standards to their security and trade deals in conformity with international laws they themselves played a part in codifying.

If the US, UK, and EU applied even rudimentary democratic and human rights conditionality to its international agreements in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a country like Bahrain would likely be forced to make concessions. Such efforts would also amount to an investment in long-term stability, given that resurgent authoritarianism will only ensure the spectre of future political upheavals in the region.

Continuing with a business-as-usual approach to authoritarianism in the MENA will only prolong the enduring crisis affecting states and societies in the region. The Russian Federation's return to totalitarianism and its invasion of Ukraine should add further impetus for the adoption of a more values oriented foreign policy by the EU and US. In 2022, the prioritisation of short-term economic gains that supplement

Russian resources while effectively empowering authoritarianism in the MENA have negative implications for global stability and Western credibility. When regions like Eurasia and the MENA become unstable, the EU will be the first to suffer, due to geography and economic or energy dependencies.

Lasting international security and stability can be achieved via good governance and transparent consent between rulers and ruled, buttressed by a robust, independent civil society. Only sustained political reform, with a clear focus on promoting human rights and democracy, can ameliorate these internal, systemic problems affecting most, if not all, social contracts in the region. Leveraging gradual political reforms in Bahrain and the GCC, and connecting them with economic policy, aligns with the EU's long-term strategic interests as well as its identity and principled support for the rule of law and human rights.

In the 21st century, international human rights frameworks, and their primary geopolitical advocates in the US, UK and Europe have the means to disempower and eliminate the state of exception in Bahrain and the MENA. The greatest challenge ahead is for these advocates to find the political will to enforce such standards.

29 August 2022

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 22 | 36 Andrew McIntosh and Jawad Fairouz, *Fragile Nationality and Permanent Precarity in Bahrain*
- 22 | 37 Giulia Gozzini, *Lebanon's Perennial Limbo: A Paralysed System Teetering on the Brink*
- 22 | 35 Dario Cristiani, *The Killing of Al-Zawahiri and the Future of Al-Qaeda*
- 22 | 34 Akram Ezzamouri, *Transitional Justice: Lessons from Tunisia's Aborted Transition*
- 22 | 33 Rafael Ramírez, *The De-Globalisation of Oil: Risks and Implications from the Politicisation of Energy Markets*
- 22 | 32 Alessandro Azzoni, *European Defence: Time to Act*
- 22 | 31 Daniel Gros and Nathalie Tocci, *Sense and Nonsense behind Energy Price Caps*
- 22 | 30 Alessandro Marrone, *NATO's New Strategic Concept: Novelty and Priorities*
- 22 | 29 Lorenzo Mariani and Leonardo Bruni, *North Korea's Covid-19 Outbreak: An Opening for Engagement?*
- 22 | 28 Gabriele Abbondanza, *The Foreign Policy Challenges of Australia's New Labor Government*