

## Putting British-Bahraini relations in historical perspective<sup>1</sup>

My discussion of the historic perspective of British-Bahrain relations will be limited to general strategic and geo-political aspects of this relationship.

I would like to highlight the roots of the existing balance of power and examine current security arrangements from a historical perspective:

A- In the relationship between Britain and Bahrain there are three permanent historical factors

### **First: Common Security Concerns**

The British negotiated the 'Maritime Peace Treaty' of 1820 with the Gulf emirates of the Trucial Coast, including the rulers of Bahrain who signed the treaty in February of that year.

The terms and conditions of this treaty were reaffirmed by several other treaties signed between British authorities and the Al-Khalifa rulers in Bahrain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by 1880 Bahrain essentially became a British protectorate, until it gained its independence in 1971.

It is significant to note that the treaty of 1820 attempted to create a security system to safeguard maritime trade and naval transport in the Gulf, through committing all parties involved in combatting piracy, prohibiting arms and the slave trade, and establishing diplomatic missions between parties involved in the treaty.

Thus, since 1820, it was all about;

- arms control,
- prevention of armed conflicts,

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- solving conflicts through diplomacy

These components of the historical treaties remain essential elements relevant to the current issues faced by the British, the GCC countries and the Americans as in Iraq during the period 1991-2003, and are again grappling with in their relations with Iran.

## **Second: Geo-politics**

Between Hormuz, Basra and Bahrain, stretches a permanent geo-political strategic triangle in the Gulf.

- Hormuz is the key point to control one of the most important international transit trade routes,
- Basra is a major vein connecting overland trade routes to the Mediterranean,
- Bahrain is a key strategic hub enabling control of maritime transport within this triangle.

This was appreciated by the Portuguese who occupied Hormuz in 1507, invaded Bahrain in 1521, and gained a foothold in Basra in 1529.

Likewise the British established their agency in the Persian port of 'Jask', adjacent to Hormuz in 1616, expelled the Portuguese from Hormuz in 1622, and expanded their military and trade activity to Basra in 1640. Initial plans to establish political and military presence in Bahrain date back to 1700, which was later achieved when the British Political Residency was transferred from Bushire to Bahrain.

Today; an American military presence is clearly evident in these three locations, however due to recent US military strategy in the

region; Iran now has a stronghold in Basra, an unprecedented military presence adjacent to Hormuz and are using sectarian elements and political forces to exert control over Bahrain.

Despite the change of powers and political authorities; these geo-strategic elements remain critical.

**Third: British relationship with Bahrain was governed by a tri-dimensional Policy;**

- a- **Political:** through treaties that established a common security system,
- b- Military force was essential to ensuring the application of treaties and to safeguard interests.
- c- However both political and military activities, aimed at serving economic interests;
  - the spice trade was an essential factor in Portuguese military campaigns during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Dutch, French and British East India Companies competed in the Gulf region to gain economic concessions and political representation, a process in which the private sector played the dominant role.
  
  - More recently, in October 2010, Foreign Office minister Henry Bellingham stated; “The FCO is working closely with other government Departments and key multipliers to build a more coordinated approach to the UK-GCC relations, and Trade is a big part of this. But it is the private sector that should take the lead”.

B- In regard to the significant changes in the relationship between Britain and Bahrain; we can examine such changes by comparing

the earlier episode, in which a tri-dimensional policy was implemented, with today's British Coalition Government policies; Since its formation in May 2010, the British Coalition Government has faced many challenges including;

- Lack of resources
- Lack of public appetite for an interventionist policy,
- Economic austerity and stagnation at home,
- A rapidly changing geopolitical environment,

These circumstances have opened up opportunities in the GCC market to the British private sector.

In October 2010 Foreign Secretary William Hague summarized British policy towards the GCC by saying; "The Gulf is a region of great opportunity and promise. The UK and the Gulf states have historic ties on which we are determined to build, and we already work closely on regional issues including the Middle East peace process, combating nuclear proliferation and supporting stability in Yemen."

In early 2011, however, Political crisis erupted in the Middle East, in what came to be called 'the Arab Spring'. Some have argued that Britain's foreign policy has undergone radical change since then, particularly in regard to Bahrain after witnessing its political upheaval in February 2011.

However the basic framework of British policy towards the region, and Bahrain in particular, have not essentially changed.

Despite its economic problems, it is evident that Britain is still committed to play its tri-dimensional foreign policy (political, economic and military). Earlier this month (March 2012) it was

revealed that Britain has plans to strengthen its military presence in the Gulf region; stating that it will fly an infantry battalion to the UAE.

The UK has already increased its naval force in the region, and currently has seven warships in the Gulf.

In addition to nuclear submarine patrols in the Gulf, It has been revealed that another submarine with Tomahawk cruise missiles would be commissioned to the area as well as extra aircraft.

During the political crisis that swept the Middle East; GCC countries emerged as a force of stability and economic development, they continued to provide military bases and assistance to western powers, they continued to participate in combating terrorism.

GCC funding and security assistance was vital to consolidate the new emerging regimes in; Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and are currently working closely with the US, UK and the rest of the EU to put an end to the crisis in Syria.

c- In regards to regional aspect of the relationship between Britain and Bahrain, Britain should take into consideration; the increasing cooperation within the GCC which aims to collectively address security and economic strategy in the region.

Policies to increase cooperation were already active before the political crisis of last year; a Customs Union was agreed in January 2003, and a GCC Common Market was agreed in 2008.

The Manama Summit in 2000, endorsed a joint defense treaty committing the GCC countries to defend any member state against a threat or danger.

In their last meeting, the GCC States agreed upon establishing a regional joint military maritime centre with multiple responsibilities. Economically; the combined markets of the GCC have currently a GDP which is about half the size of the UK economy, the combined population of the region is now 44 million people and is growing fast.

The historical attachment between these countries must be considered too;

Unlike new born neighboring republics and revolutionary systems; Modern Gulf states do not date back to post independence in 1971, they rather have a well-established socio-economic and socio-political structures that date back to the eighteenth century, including;

- the Al-Subah rule in Kuwait established in 1700,
- the first Saudi state and the al-Busaid in Oman, both established in 1744,
- and Al-Khalifa rule in Bahrain established in 1783.

It must be emphasized that the tribal component of GCC societies is more dominant than the sectarian aspect. It is not only the ruling families of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait that are blood related, but also many many families, both Sunni and Shia, are closely interlinked.

Contemporary researchers and journalists calculate the composition of the various sectarian and ethnic groups within each GCC country, but many fail to appreciate that the largest and most influential social groups within GCC societies are

members of the tribal alliances that were formed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Any institutional reform within these states must take into consideration the significance of the social alliances that formed the modern Gulf States.

Such aspects have not diminished over time but have rather become stronger.

Thank you.

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