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THE BALOCH NETWORK BEHIND BAHRAIN'S REGIME STABILITY

AMEEM LUTFI

In early 2011, mass protests erupted in the Arab world, toppling decades-old regimes in what was to be known as the Arab Spring. Despite similar challenges from the ground, in Bahrain, the security forces were able to quell the uprising and help their century-old Al-Khalifa regime retain power. In this Insight piece, Ameem Lutfi highlights the network of ethnic Baloch mercenaries whom the Al-Khalifas have been relying on for nearly a century to fill the rank and file of their security services.

In early 2011, with the Arab Spring uprisings at full bloom, it seemed for a while that the winds of change that toppled decades-old regimes in Egypt and Tunisia might displace the century-old Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain. Just like in Egypt and Tunisia, the discontented urban middle and working classes, organised through social media and older community networks, had taken to the streets to demand reforms that challenged the very core of the incumbent regime. By February of that year, a sizeable contingent of protestors had occupied a prominent roundabout in the city centre. The state responded to these protests with the heaviest of hands, hoping to crush the resistance quickly but only managed to add flame to the fire. Nevertheless, the Al-Khalifa regime was eventually able to quell the uprising and carry on business as usual.

Those familiar with the modern history of the Persian Gulf would not have been surprised that the Al-Khalifas managed to hold on to power when even a strongman like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak could not. After all, the current rulers of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE have all kept state rule within their respective families for over a century. During this prolonged period, they have not only successfully resisted internal movements for reform but have also navigated many radical shifts in the regional and international political order: the rise and fall of the British empire, pan-Arabist movements, the Cold War, Third World nationalism and internationalism, neo-liberalisation and globalisation, the rise of competing and expansionist Saudi and Iranian sectarian regimes, and, more recently, the Arab Spring uprisings. But what makes regimes in Persian Gulf city-states like Bahrain so resilient?

The oil-rich rulers of Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Qatar have engendered this stability by sharing their wealth through tribal patronage networks broad enough to capture a large portion of their small citizen populations. Bahrain though has been without oil money for several decades. Bahrain's main source of income — refining oil provided at subsidised rates by Saudi Arabia — does not reach much beyond the few Sunni tribes loyal to the ruling Al-Khalifa dynasty. The majority of the citizen population in Bahrain — who make up just under 50% of the total resident population of about 1.4 million — receives very few benefits from the state. Yet, a small unpopular Sunni tribal elite continues to reign strong over a discontented Shi'a populace.

Credit for the Al-Khalifas' staying power cannot go entirely to the loyalist Sunni tribes who form the top layers of Bahrain's police, army and security forces. Since its ascension to the Bahraini throne in the late 19th century, the Al-Khalifa regime has relied less on domestic support and more on the protection of external actors. One of those external actors today is the United States. With its Fifth Fleet long headquartered in Bahrain, the United States serves as a guarantor for the Al-Khalifa regime against external aggression, while also training and helping to equip Bahrain's armed forces. Domestically, the US military presence in Bahrain serves largely as a symbol of support for the Al-Khalifa regime. The other external actors — the ones who provide real on the ground support to crush domestic resistance and keep the Al-Khalifas in power — are the foreign mercenaries who form the rank and file of Bahrain's police, army and security forces.

External protectors

As the historian James Onley has argued, the Al-Khalifas went from being just one of many tribes competing for power to the lone state sovereign through a series of mutual protection treaties with the British beginning in the early 19th century.[1] Under the agreements, the British undertook to protect the incumbent regime in exchange for stable and safe access to Bahrain's shores for their soldiers and bureaucrats overseeing the broader Indian Ocean.

[1] Onley, James. "Britain's informal empire in the Gulf." *Journal of social affairs* 22, no. 87 (2005): 29-45.

The agreement continued almost unchanged after the departure of the British, with the United States taking over the British naval base in Bahrain. Just like the British had done earlier, the Americans have used their base in Bahrain to expand and retract from neighboring states. For example, during the Gulf wars, Bahrain provided a base for "surgical strikes". Similarly, Bahrain and other Persian Gulf city-states provide American soldiers, security experts, intelligence agents, and diplomats a safe base to orchestrate the ongoing "war on terror".

American and British preference for the Persian Gulf as a strategic site for controlling and monitoring the Indian Ocean was contingent on their presence in the region not looking like a top-down colonial imposition. To maintain their image of being benevolent partners and not colonisers, the external protectors had to keep overt interference in internal affairs to a minimum. The more an empire gets its hands dirty in trying to support an unpopular regime against domestic opposition, the more it appears as a colonial force and risks re-directing that opposition to its own presence in the country.

It is thus not surprising that at the peak of the Arab Spring protests the American navy's continued presence in Bahrain came into question as journalists began criticising America's support for brutal authoritarian rule in the region. Wikileaks reports from the period even suggest American decision makers seriously contemplated abandoning the authoritarian regime in Bahrain they had long supported.

In order to preempt future uprisings that could both threaten their rule and prompt their American protectors to extricate themselves from the country, the Al-Khalifas undertook to bulk up their internal security in the wake of the Arab Spring uprising. They needed additional forces to protect the state establishment and infrastructure as well as provide security assurances to American soldiers and support personnel living outside the US naval base and the multinational corporations, oil firms and foreign expatriates whose presence in the country is implicitly conditional on the US security umbrella remaining in place. However, with the local population up in arms, loyal and willing recruits were hard to come by from within Bahrain.

Foreign mercenaries: The Baloch network

The search for rank and file soldiers has taken Bahrain to a range of different countries. A quick glance at Bahrain's history reveals that over the past century, faced with internal crisis and pressure from its external protectors, the Al-Khalifas have periodically turned from one mercenary exporting state to another. During the Arab Spring uprisings, Bahrain reached an agreement with a subsidiary of Pakistan's bloated army eager to offload some of its soldiers. A decade earlier, at another politically uncertain moment during the transition period marking King Hammad's ascension to the throne, Bahrain recruited soldiers through contracts with other Arab states like Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, and Egypt.

Frequent en masse changes in personnel are detrimental to military capability. They hinder both military readiness and troop solidarity, two quintessential qualities of modern militaries. Frequent swings in recruitment sources create transition periods in which the regime could be left vulnerable. Furthermore, constant changes in soldier demographics disturb military unity, making coordinated defence plans impractical. Thus, had the Bahrain military relied solely on state-to-state arrangements with countries not particularly known for stability like Pakistan, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria, which have frequently provided Bahrain with their retired and seconded soldiers, it would not have been able to sustain an unpopular regime for over a century.

To locate this stable element in the bottom tiers of Bahrain's security forces, one has to look away from high-level state-to-state dealings and towards everyday relations between the different tiers of the Bahrain military. Only then can one see that each time the top echelons faced problems in recruiting bottom-tier mercenaries from one state, they turned not to another state but to the soldiers already in service, urging them to help recruit their kin from outside Bahrain.

For example, soon after the Arab Spring uprisings, a sizeable contingent of Pakistanis freshly recruited into the Bahraini army organised themselves to protest for better wages. The anxious top-tier of the Bahraini military responded to these demands by swiftly rounding up all dissidents and sending over 400 of them back on the first flight to Pakistan.[2] According to those in service at that time, soon after the incident, top-level officials from the military sought out their foreign foot soldiers with over a decade of experience to use their ethnic networks to recruit other trustworthy soldiers in place of those recently fired.

As it turned out, most of Bahrain's lower echelon soldiers with over a decade of experience were ethnic Baloch. Soldiers with roots in parts of Balochistan — a region currently divided between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan — have been part of the military forces of the Al-Khalifa since the very beginning of their rule. When the Al-Khalifas decided to form their first standing army, the Levy Force, in 1923, they asked the British to help import an entire Levy unit from Muscat, Oman. It was only after the troops had arrived that the Bahrainis recognised that the majority of the Levies were Baloch. Despite the inadvertent initial recruitment, Bahraini authorities have regularly turned to the Baloch for more military recruits from abroad.

The Baloch presence in Gulf militaries, in fact, predates the Al-Khalifa regime. Baloch from lands located right across the Arabian Sea have been recorded as part of the Omani army since at least the 16th century. The Baloch have even been a significance presence in the military forces of Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. While many of the other Gulf states have significantly reduced the

[2] "Broken promises: Bahrain deports 450 Pakistanis after alleged torture," *The Express Tribune,* March 14, 2013, https://tribune.com.pk/story/520669/broken-promises-bahrain-deports-450-pakistanis-after-alleged-torture/

number of Baloch in their armies, in Bahrain's army the Baloch continue to constitute around 40% of the rank and file, according to some estimates.

Despite their persistent presence, one would be hard pressed to find a Bahraini state document expressing explicit preference for the Baloch. Bahrain's persistent reliance on the Baloch is less a result of their being racialised as a martial group, and more because of their easy availability. For example, months after importing its first set of troops from Muscat in 1923, a majority of the soldiers were dismissed for failing background and medical checks. Despite being ambivalent about the Baloch, the Bahraini authorities turned to the Baloch who remained in service to bring in a new set of recruits. The cycle of Bahraini authorities turning to the Baloch in service to quickly fill military manpower shortages has since continued uninterrupted.

During the previous century, many of the Baloch soldiers who had served a couple of decades in Bahrain settled permanently in the country. Since the Arab Spring uprisings though, many of the Baloch, who are mainly Sunni, have even received Bahraini citizenship, much to the angst of Bahrain's Shi'a majority, who have criticised this step as deliberate demographic engineering.

Moreover, over the years, the Baloch have made the transition from being outsiders to becoming part of the local social fabric. Unlike other mercenaries employed by Bahrain, Baloch soldiers generally chose to live in the densely populated neighborhoods of Manama instead of the secluded barracks and military towns. An increasing number of Baloch in Bahrain have adopted the Arabised term for Baloch, *Al-Balushi,* as their last name instead of the name of their tribe, clan, profession, or hometown. Some Baloch have even married into Sunni-Arab families in Bahrain, becoming almost indistinguishable from the Sunni-Arabs in language, dress, and name.

Nonetheless, the constant presence of the Baloch in the security sector is less because of their ability to become localised, and more because of their success in maintaining cosmopolitan ties. The localised Baloch families, who often had personal access to members of Bahrain's ruling tribes, were seldom approached for recruits. As I discovered during fieldwork in Bahrain, most of the key recruiters, celebrated and respected by several hundred Baloch who owe their jobs to them, were actually low-ranked soldiers with active social ties in places outside Bahrain.

Interestingly, many of these key recruiters were not employed in combat roles. Instead, they were deployed as chauffeurs, gardeners, chefs, and watchmen at the private residences of higher-ranked military officers. Notwithstanding their low formal ranks, these key recruiters had influence on account of their regular personal access to those in the higher ranks. More importantly, they held sway with the higher ranks because they offered swift access to military labour reserves from a geographically diverse diaspora.

All of the key recruiters I interviewed claimed to have recruited soldiers from not just Balochistan but also the Baloch diaspora. The Baloch diaspora, shaped by a series of movements and

migrations tracing back to the 16th century, has a significant presence in a range of cities around the Indian Ocean and agricultural tracts in the Indo-Persian landscape. Even after centuries of settlement across different political boundaries, the various pockets of Baloch have kept active ties with each other through shared histories, kinship ties, and mobility routes across this expansive geography. Using this fact to their benefit, the key recruiters offer Bahrain multiple alternate recruitment channels free from the burden of concluding formal recruitment agreements with other states.

For Bahrain, access to several parallel informal networks for recruitment means not having to worry about any foreign state blocking its military labour supply. If one route closes, it can simply turn to another. For example, during the 1970s an ongoing civil war between the Pakistani state and Baloch separatists seriously restricted mercenary exports from Balochistan. The increasingly violent war aroused paranoia in the Pakistani state about the Baloch getting military training abroad. It also allowed Baloch separatists to amplify their criticisms that able Baloch men were abandoning the cause at home to fight for a foreign power. To overcome this temporary shortage Bahrain simply looked to its Baloch soldiers who had personal connections to Balochs outside Balochistan.

Moreover, by switching between the different recruitment routes, Bahrain can subtly impress changes in political orientation while still preserving continuity in the demographic profile of its troops. When suspicions of Iranian support for anti-state elements in Bahrain grow strong, Bahrain can fill its intelligence agencies by recruiting Farsi-speaking Baloch from parts of Iran. When pressures to "Arabise" its military increase, Bahrain can start hiring Arabised Baloch from other parts of the Persian Gulf. If Bahrain has to modernise its military equipment, instead of spending on expensive training programmes for its soldiers, it can just import trained Baloch military officers retiring from the Pakistani army.

The Baloch thus not only provide Bahrain the security of multiple recruitment channels, but also the flexibility of adjusting to internal and external demands for reform while keeping the same elites in power. By switching between different Baloch networks, the Bahraini regime can maintain internal stability, even as it changes their external outlooks to accommodate shifts in geopolitical currents. Horizontal Baloch mercenary networks, one could thus argue, are just as important to the resilience of the Al-Khalifa regime as the top-down assistance of its external protectors and bottom-up support of domestic Sunni tribes.

This case of a mercenary network stabilising an unpopular regime for over a century stands in sharp contrast to other recent case studies of states recruiting foreign soldiers. Most of these studies, based on private military companies (PMCs) operating in war-torn parts of the third world, present mercenaries as a stop-gap solution, at best, and as agents of chaos, at worst. Neither at their best nor at their worst do such mercenaries appear as long-term keepers of political order. However, in Bahrain we have an example of a mercenary network, albeit a very

different one from PMCs, managing to do what states with massive standing citizens armies have only wished for — help maintain rule for over a century.

Dr. Ameem Lutfi is a Postdoctoral Fellow at The Czech Academy of Science's Oriental Institute--Prague, Czech Republic. Lutfi is currently working on a manuscript tentatively titled 'Conquest without Rule: Baloch Portfolio Mercenaries in the Indian Ocean'. His areas of specialization include Anthropology-History, Transnationalism, and Military Studies. Lutfi has a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University.