Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations: Bahrain's Spatial-Demographic Revolution

Omar Hesham Alshehabi

Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait

Published online: 28 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Omar Hesham Alshehabi (2014) Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations: Bahrain's Spatial-Demographic Revolution, Middle East Critique, 23:1, 29-51, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2014.896596

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2014.896596

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations: Bahrain’s Spatial-Demographic Revolution

OMAR HESHAM ALSHEHABI
Gulf University for Science and Technology, Kuwait

ABSTRACT This article approaches the developments in Bahrain during the first decade of the twenty-first century through a geographical, historical materialism perspective. It moves away from emphasizing the traditional narratives of events in the island as dominated by identity-based (and particularly sect-based) politics, arguing that the interactions between space, capital, and people over time are also central to explaining local dynamics. It argues that this period has been defined by a radical transformation of the spatial-demographic landscape of Bahrain, and that this perturbed state of creation and destruction on the spatial and demographic fronts crucially was reflected in a radical contestation of social identity, values and discourses. These play an important role in explaining the political explosion that occurred on February 14, 2011 and the subsequent political mobilization along sectarian and nationalist lines.

KEY WORDS: Arab Spring; Bahrain; demography; GCC; land reclamation; space; urban geography

One feature of Bahrain catches the eye even before setting foot in the country. Peering out of the airplane window, one’s gaze is transfixed by vast swaths of yet to be developed land, in pre-engineered geometric shapes, hugging the shoreline. This is the result of the reclamation of vast areas of the island’s sea, a process that has become the most striking feature of Bahrain’s spatial landscape in the opening decade of the twenty-first century. Over the past 30 years, more than 70 square kilometres of sea has been reconstituted into reclaimed land in the tiny Gulf kingdom, 1 50 square kilometres of which were reclaimed between 2001 and 2011. 2 In 2008, for example, 13 square kilometres of sea were reclaimed. 3 Reclamation has been concentrated mostly around the northern coastline of the island, with the land mass of Bahrain increasing by more than 10 percent in total. The


© 2014 Editors of Middle East Critique

The vast majority of reclaimed land has been allocated for creating new commercial and real estate ‘mega projects’ of the luxurious and gated community style. By 2008, more than 20 of these gated mega projects had been or were being built, with the aim to create more than 60,000 new residential units with corresponding commercial and office spaces.\footnote{DTZ Middle East Market Update Series (2008) Bahrain September 2008.}

One can relate the process that blurs the ‘natural’ and the ‘man-made’ to Neil Smith’s thesis on the ‘production of Nature.’\footnote{N. Smith (2001) \textit{Uneven Development} (Oxford, Blackwell).} In this case, ‘nature’, the actual physical land, becomes an essential part of the production process. Nature is part of the human construct, and the abundance of dredging ships, cranes, and lorries burying the sea and reconstituting it into land make this feature abundantly clear. Both society and nature are produced, transformable and capable of being recreated.

To understand this phenomenon better, one has to go back to the economic boom that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have experienced in the first decade of the twenty-first century, mainly fuelled by the meteoric rise in oil prices. Barrel prices rose from below $20 in 2000 to $80 in 2005, reaching a peak of more than $140 in 2008. The resultant oil export revenue in the GCC was estimated at nearly $1.5 trillion dollars\footnote{P. Devaux (2006) Oil Bonanza and Banking Activity in the GCC Countries, \textit{Conjuncture} (Economic Research – BNP Paribas, December).} in 2000–2005, with net foreign assets reaching more than $1.5 trillion by 2009.\footnote{Q. J. Minas (2008) GCC’s Private Wealth Reserves over $1.5 trillion, \textit{Saudi Gazette}, November 1. Available at http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentID=2008110120771, accessed June 14, 2011.}

The GCC countries have become an important nexus within the global capital circuit. Although a large portion of this excess capital was invested abroad, especially by the large sovereign wealth funds of several GCC countries, huge sums also were invested in the region. Bahrain became one of the main hubs for the investment of GCC money, both via its burgeoning finance sector and its real estate. There was an intimate relationship between the two, and in many instances it was difficult to tell the difference between them. Real estate and construction constituted 9.8 percent of GDP in 2007,\footnote{Global Investment House (2009) GCC Real Estate Sector—Changing Times!, Global Investment House, February.} with an annual growth rate of 7.1 percent, making up 33 percent of all domestic banks’ loans (the highest component within the Banking sector).\footnote{See further Ellaboudy (2010) The Global Financial Crisis: Economic Impact on GCC Countries and Policy Implications, \textit{International Research Journal of Finance and Economics}, 41, pp. 180–194.}

The GCC nature of these investments was underlined by the fact that the biggest real estate company in Bahrain was from the UAE, with the rate of inter-GCC investments in Bahrain’s six largest construction projects reaching 100 percent.\footnote{A. Hanieh (2011) \textit{Capitalism and Class in the Gulf Arab States} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 105.} These projects took on the form of the mega real estate developments that have become so fashionable in the gulf in the past decade, and they were built mainly on reclaimed land.
The most fruitful way of understanding this process of capital formation is via David Harvey’s theory of capital’s production of space, where capital creates new ‘spatial-temporal fixes’ (spatial-fix for short) to operate within. Both of Harvey’s two key features when discussing spatial-fix appear strikingly clear in Bahrain. The first, the literal meaning, refers to the ‘fixed’ part of capital, i.e., it is the built, non-mobile infrastructure of airports, roads and ports that is embedded on the land. Thus, it is necessary for capital to have a presence in physical space in order to move over space and induce profit-making activity.

The other meaning of ‘spatial fix’, the metaphorical, refers to capital’s problem of over-accumulation. With the lack of new productive ventures and the increasing competition between capital due its high mobility in the global financial markets, the over-accumulation of capital threatens to lower profit rates. The solution to this problem, or the metaphorical ‘fix,’ is for capital literally to create new markets for the absorption of capital via the creation of space. Thus, excess capital is invested in building new roads, ports, airports, and even cities, i.e., investing in building the infrastructure for the production of new space for capital to operate within. Once this is achieved, the surplus capital then can be used in the new markets and production activities that are created within this enlarged space, thus ‘fixing’ the problem of over-accumulation.

The sea reclamation in Bahrain is a novel and near-perfect example of capital’s ‘spatial fix.’ The large flood of regional capital created by the oil boom threatened to cause a serious case of capital-over-accumulation. A new regional outlet was needed. One of the main opportunities was to be found in the local real estate sector. By the nature of real estate and construction, large swaths of land are needed to render the sectors viable. Given Bahrain’s small size, and the fact that the most desirable and high value areas were to be found along the northern coast of the island and close to the two major cities of Muharraq and Manama, such high-value land came at a premium.

The sea was to prove a perfect solution. Literally, new land was to be created out of the sea by dredging 2.5 million tons of sand from the seabed annually to build new man-made islands. The newly created land required the necessary infrastructure, such as roads, fibre optic cables, electricity, water desalination, etc., in order to make economic activity operable in this created space. Most of Bahrain’s non-oil economic activity poured into this process. Although no overall figure exists, the value of 65 km of appropriated land handed over to private investors for this process (which comprised only a portion of the total land allocated for such projects) was valued conservatively at $40 billion, with no revenue to the government coffers in return. By 2010, the combined value of projects under construction in Bahrain was valued at $28.6 billion. This included such wide

---

13 Harvey calls this process ‘temporal deferral’ or ‘scale enlargement.’
14 Harvey calls this process ‘Absorption through Spatial enlargement.’
varying projects as the Formula 1 ($300 million), the Financial Harbour ($1.3 billion), and expanding the airport ($200 million).\textsuperscript{17}

This land reclamation presented a problem. The sea, although not owned by anyone and previously considered public property, represents an essential part of Bahrain’s social and physical make-up. Historically, the sea has been the main feature of society in Bahrain (with the term literally meaning ‘two seas’ in Arabic). It constituted the economic backbone and the major source of sustenance, shaping the lifestyle of the local inhabitants. The vast majority of the population was concentrated in villages and cities along coastline. Prior to the discovery of oil, the local economy concentrated on entrepôt trade, pearl diving, agriculture and fishing. Although the economic importance of pearl diving and fishing has declined, there still is a strong attachment to the sea in the community.

The newly created islands and the associated reclamation process had a devastating impact on those who depended on the sea. Ecologically, sea reclamation had three strong negative by-products. First there was the sea that was ‘buried’ (the word used to describe the process locally) to create the new land. The second impact was on the destroyed seafloor that was dredged for gathering the sand needed for reclamation. Finally, the dredging process created a trail of silt—clouds of sand—that extended far beyond the area where dredging occurred. This cloud of silt covers coral reefs, suffocating them in the process.\textsuperscript{18} As a result, the array of fish types found in Bahrain declined from over 200 to 50.\textsuperscript{19} Fishing production decreased from 16,000 tons to 6,000 tons annually in a period of four years from 2006 to 2010.\textsuperscript{20} An estimated 90 percent of fishing habitats were completely or partially destroyed,\textsuperscript{21} having a direct impact on 6,830 local fishermen in Bahrain.\textsuperscript{22}

As Harvey amply illustrates, ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ draws closely on Marx’s concept of ‘primitive accumulation’ of capital. To recall, ‘primitive accumulation’ for Marx marked the original process by which capital was accumulated, which was that necessary first step to create a sufficient amount of privately owned capital to set the process of capital formation in motion. Marx famously expounded his view on the enclosure of the ‘commons’ land in England between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, which laid the foundation for the development of modern capitalism. This enclosure did so in two forms, one by establishing the private properties and land needed

for capitalist production, and two by creating the necessary labour force by forcibly
driving the peasantry off the land. Notable examples were Parliament’s Acts for
Enclosures of Commons ‘by which the landlords grant themselves the people’s land as
private property, decrees of expropriation of the people.’ Harvey reformulated this
concept to ‘accumulation by dispossession’ to emphasize the fact that ‘primitive
accumulation’ keeps repeating in the history of capital and is not a one-off phenomenon:

What accumulation by dispossession does is to release a set of assets at very low
(and in some instances zero) cost. Over-accumulated capital can seize hold of such
assets and immediately turn them to profitable use.24

As is evident, the control and ownership over land often plays a crucial role in this process.
The transfer of the ownership of reclaimed land to private individuals and companies in
Bahrain is a novel innovation in the history of accumulation by dispossession. Overall, the
process began by registering the title deeds of large swaths of the sea, usually several
square kilometers in area, in the names of individuals or institutions with considerable
influence in the upper echelons of the political ladder. These large plots of yet to be created
land would then be divided into smaller plots that would be sold at extremely low prices to
real estate companies and project developers. These developers then would be in charge of
the reclamation process and seeing that the land is turned into profitable business projects,
most often mega real estate developments. The return to the state coffers in most of these
projects is negligible, and in fact in many cases the state had to contribute for building the
infrastructure for such projects. As a result, more than 90 percent of the coastline became
privately owned, with 90 percent of reclaimed land projects going to private ventures. At
least 65 square kilometres, with a combined value more than $40 billion, changed hands
from public to private. It is apparent that the spatial landscape of Bahrain has undergone
a radical transformation over the past ten years, with the destruction of the old shoreline
accompanied by the creation of new cities and physical space, driven by a process of the
spatial fixity of capital and accumulation by dispossession. How did such processes
interact with the people on the ground?

‘Natives,’ Expatriates and Naturalized Citizens

The population of Bahrain has undergone a radical transformation over the past ten years.
These demographic transformations are in large part a reflection of the twin processes of

25 The 2010 investigation by the ‘Investigative Committee in the State’s Public and Private Properties’ in the
Bahrain Chamber of Deputies provides in-depth examples of specific cases of public land appropriation for
private use.
26 H. Al-Madhoob (2010), ‘National Properties Committee: The struggle will Continue until the Retrieval of the
420213/1.html>.
Available at http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/bahraini-public-lands-sold-and-rented-
to-private-investors, accessed June 14, 2011.
capital’s spatial fix and the local political structure, largely built on demographic control and hegemony. This took on the form of engineering and segmenting the population into expatriates versus citizens in a unique case of divide and rule, with further segmentation within each group. A case in point is sect issues, always a point of contestation in Bahrain. There is a significant presence of both Sunnis and Shias, the two main branches of Islam. John Lorimer at the beginning of the twentieth century estimated the proportion among 99,075 locals at 60 percent Sunni and 40 percent Shia. The last available public census with religious affiliation, that of 1941, showed a roughly equal split, with 52 percent Shia and 48 percent Sunni Bahrainis, indicating a population composition that had shifted considerably, which is not unusual in an entrepôt state characterized by constant migration. Currently, Shias are estimated to make up 60–70 percent of the citizen populations, although no hard data is available. What is certain is that the sectarian composition of the island is a deeply contested issue. The ruling Al Khalifa family belongs to the Sunni branch, while the majority of other Sunnis are composed of either Arabs with tribal backgrounds, or Najdis—Sedentary Arabs from Najd province in Saudi Arabia, or ‘Huwalā’, Arabs who have come from the Eastern coast of the gulf. Shias, on the other hand, are mainly composed of ‘Baharna,’ sedentary Arabs concentrated in cities and agricultural villages, and ‘Ajam’ individuals of Persian origin. There is also a presence of other communities, including Afro-Arabs, Jews and Banya.30

Sectarian and ethnic delineations among citizens consistently have formed a part of the power and governance structure under the local rulers and British protection prior to independence in 1971. ‘Vertical segmentation’ was

... maintained through mobilisation of tribal, confessional, and ethnic myths, through appropriate parts of communal histories, through co-optation as well as through actual use of physical force. Top dogs within each vertical segment are strong enough to keep order within their sphere but not enough to prevent the regime from intervening, directly or indirectly, whenever need arises.31

Vertical segmentation has been a long-standing strategy employed by the local rulers to counter any potential political opposition. It was deployed in the period of the Higher Executive Committee of 1954–1956, the first cross-spectrum popular movement on the island to call for greater political representation. The government, then under British protection, tried to counteract the HEC by creating an alternative committee of Shia notables to split the ‘Shia street.’ The tactic was used again in the 1990s, when the rulers tried to counter the opposition, now mainly seen as Shia religious activists, by trying to

29 The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/149151 Population Census of Bahrain, December 31, 1955.
lure the ‘Sunni Street’ by painting the civil unrest as a Shia-led attempt to undermine the country and threaten the regime.

Beyond citizens, the other group that also plays a significant role in Bahrain’s demographic landscape are ‘expatriates,’ mainly composed of individuals working in the country and their families. Expatriate presence on the island took off in earnest with the boom that followed the discovery of oil in 1931 and its commercial production in 1932. By 1941, the number of expatriates was 16,000 out of a total population of 90,000, mainly concentrated in the oil industry and related sectors. The number of expatriates reached 24,401 out of a total population of 143,145 in 1957. Expatriate presence was to increase significantly after what is dubbed ‘the first oil crisis’ in the west, when oil prices spiked after the decision by Middle East oil producers to limit oil supplies to the global market in response to the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel. By 1975, the number of expatriates in the country had tripled to 60,000, constituting 22.9 percent of the population and 37 percent of the work force. By 2000, their numbers had more than quadrupled to 261,000, making up 40 percent of the population and 63 percent of the workforce. Once again the boom in the first decade of the third millennia accelerated the rise in expatriates even further, and by 2008 expatriates had for the first time become the majority in the country, with their numbers more than doubling in eight years to reach 570,000, making up 51 percent of the population and 78 percent of the work force.

The 2010 census shows that out of 666,000 non-nationals (54 percent of the population), the vast majority (562,000) were Asians, the majority of whom were from the Indian subcontinent (Indians alone are estimated to number about 300,000). Arabs (including GCC nationals) made less than 67,000, with their presence down from about half of total expatriates at the middle of the past century. North Americans and Europeans numbered nearly 16,000. Most of the expatriate labour force (307,000 in 2009) is concentrated in the unskilled worker category. The biggest employers were the construction sector (32.8 percent of total employment, with expatriates comprising 89.8 percent of construction workers), followed by wholesale and retail (17.9 percent of total employment, with 81.6 percent of workers being expatriates respectively), manufacturing (17.2 percent and 75.1 percent) and household domestic employment (9.1 and 87.9 percent). Given the type of work, males outnumbered female expatriates roughly 3 to 1. These numbers are certainly underestimates, as they do not include the large numbers of ‘illegal workers’, who number in the tens of thousands at least. For example, 60,000 ‘illegal residents’ took up a government amnesty that ran until January 31, 2008, and the general federation of Bahrain Trade Unions indicated there still were 46,000 ‘runaways’ after this period, amounting to 10 percent of the work force.

Data on class distribution among expatriates is non-existent, but some estimates can be reached based on the national census of 2010. The census shows that there were more than 24,500 GCC, North American and European residing in Bahrain; the vast majority of these

33 The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/149151, Population Census of Bahrain, December 31, 1955.
35 Ibid.
can be considered as upper to upper-middle class income earners. Another figure could be reached based on the number of expatriates who live in private or garden villas, which was 24,000.37 Both of these figures need to be used cautiously, as the second figure disregards wealthier expatriates who live in flats, while the first figure disregards wealthier expatriates who are not from the above nationalities.

Lower income expatriates may be estimated from the number of expatriate workers in construction, manufacturing, household domestic services, agriculture and fishing, and transportation and storage: over 200,000.38 This figure excludes those expatriates in limited-pay jobs such as municipal cleaning. The remaining expatriate community, no larger than 200,000, may be considered as middle class.

The most extensively researched phenomena in English about expatriates in the GCC is the ‘institutional violence’ practiced against them. Andrew Gardner,39 for example, carefully has documented the system of ‘institutional violence’ that expatriates face in Bahrain. Physical assault, abuse due to the Kafala system, and the outlawing of strikes and labour unions are but a few of the forms of segmentation and domination that occur within the system. It also is taken as accepted wisdom that the presence of such a large expatriate labour force in the region is due to the excess capital available locally, and subsequently the severe shortage and need for labour that this creates. This is certainly an important factor, but it is an incomplete explanation. It is not simply a matter of supply and demand, because it is necessary to understand the form that this expatriate influx has taken (including, e.g., the decreasing reliance on Arabs within the expatriate community). A much more fruitful understanding comes from interpreting the current demographic make-up as emerging from the twin processes of capital formation and demographic management for political and social control by the state. Both Adam Hanieh and John Chlacroft have emphasized this aspect in different ways.40 Hanieh employs a different variation of the concept of the ‘spatial fix’ of capital, where in this metaphorical meaning it is a solution to capital’s dilemma of requiring labour while also needing to guard against any potential unrest that might arise from the presence of a significantly large labour force in an industrialized society, including the development of a labour class consciousness. Capital’s fix is to create a space of labour that is global, relying on the global market as a whole for the provision for labour. Thus:

[T]he process of class formation in the Gulf has been spatially structured—institutionally reflected in the reliance on temporary migrant labour flows and an extremely restrictive notion of citizenship.41 ... Temporary migrant workers find

37 Author calculations based on the 2010 Bahrain Census.
41 Hanieh, Capitalism and Class, p. 19.
themselves competing with hundreds of millions of compatriots dispersed across the Middle East and South Asia. For these reasons, the spatialization of class—the fact that class is formed through a relationship established between spatially distinct sets of social relations—acts to depress the price of labour power and magnify the exploitation of these workers.42

Thus, capital found a ‘spatial fix’ by turning to the global labour market to provide the necessary labour for surplus capital, ensuring that this class of expatriates is from diverse countries and backgrounds to avoid any class or national solidarity that might develop, and which is endowed with very limited political, social or economic rights.

Chalcroft tackles the social and political control inherent within the expatriate-citizen distinction from a different angle, arguing that since the 1973 oil crisis, it has acted as a form of ‘hegemony’ in the Gramscian sense, where the threat of Arab nationalism or any other form of opposition from expatriates is minimized by their segmentation from different countries. The ‘native-foreigner’ divide also could be used as a method for the elite to appear as the defender of citizen’s interests, with the state able to portray itself as able to protect citizens from the threat of the ‘other’ outsider. Similarly, the expatriates would view the state as defending their interests locally against the ‘restless natives.’43

To these forms of control, we can add a further element. Another significant function played by the reliance on an expatriate workforce is to limit the influence of citizens within the productive sphere and contain any possible labour threats that might materialize from locals. Bahrain has a long history of labour unrest, with organized movements and strikes being a recurrent feature since the 1920s. A major feature from the reliance on expatriate labour was to weaken the influence of the local population in production and limit any strike possibilities. With citizens now constituting less than a quarter of the labour force, the ramifications of any potential industrial unrest would be minimized. The steady drop in the percentage of Arab workers since the 1970s—because the government perceives them as bringing in Pan-Arab and revolutionary ideas that might influence the local population—also reflects the changing labour force.44

A final social group in Bahrain illustrates further the use of population for social and political control: the ‘politically naturalized’ citizens. Since the mid-1990s, and increasingly in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the opposition in Bahrain has accused the government of fast tracking the citizenship of carefully selected foreigners in order to change the demographic make-up of the country. The ‘politically naturalized,’ as they are called, are Sunni Muslims mainly from Bedouin Arab tribes in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen, as well as ethnic Baluchis from Baluchistan province in Pakistan. These groups are perceived as having close ethnic and or cultural links to the local rulers. However, there are no official numbers on the extent of political naturalization. The most reliable estimates put the number of those politically naturalized

42 Ibid, p. 52.
44 I argue this point more in-depth in O. AlShehabi (2012) Uprooting: Mega Real Estate and the Aggravation of the Demographic Disorder in the GCC (Beirut, Centre for Arab Unity Studies).
between 2001 and 2007 at 61,000 to 62,000. This estimate was derived by taking the historical natural growth rate of the Bahraini population and looking at the difference in the population number based on historical growth rates and the official population number given by the ministry of information. The official number presents an impossibly high natural growth rate with an unexplained increase of at least 62,000 in the period under consideration, or approximately 15 percent of the citizen population.

In the strict sense, the politically naturalized do not seem to serve any direct economic purpose. They are employed in large numbers in the security and defence forces, however, increasing the perception that they have been brought in to control the local population. This systematic use of foreign forces is a tradition that goes back decades. The British first used this policy in the nineteenth century, when they brought to the Trucial coast—contemporary Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE—divisions composed of men from Baluchistan and the Indian sub-continent to help establish control over the local population. The use of foreign security forces limits the risk of identification with locals and of defection, and fears about loyalty are less of an issue, as long as they are provided the right material incentives.

Thus, the current population composition rose from the twin processes of capital accumulation and political and social control (including containment and even social engineering). Indeed, the large influx of non-Bahrainis to the island, both expatriates and naturalized citizens, signifies not only a transformation in the demographic characteristics of the population, but also a radical physical transformation of the population, as the people inhabiting the island have increased in numbers substantially with the composition of the population changing considerably as a result. Individuals increasingly are stratified as citizens or expatriates. Heavy reliance is placed on imported expatriates for productive labour use with limited political and labour rights, while the role of citizens in labour is extremely marginalized. Within each group there is further stratification based on nationality, ethnicity, class and sect. Thus, there is stratification and engineering of the population make-up into different categories, each with different rights, benefits, and there is little possibility for cross-interaction and solidarity between them.

**Urban Geography of Bahrain**

It is obvious that the spatial and demographic currents in Bahrain are intimately related, with both the size and the population of the island experiencing a simultaneous and significant expansion over the past few decades. How have these two currents interacted together to form the geographic landscape of Bahrain? This interaction involves a bewildering mix of class, nationality, ethnicity and sect in urban sprawl, historic city centres and the newly created mega-projects on reclaimed land. In what follows I provide a brief outline of the general themes and currents of this ‘uneven geographical development’ that characterizes the landscape of Bahrain. My main focus is on the general map, disbursement and interaction between the different currents, focusing

---


particularly on the historic city centres, rather than the conditions of life within each of them. In particular, two features of Bahrain give its development a unique trajectory when compared with other Arab states on the shores of the gulf. The first is historical continuity both on the spatial and the demographic front. Unlike other Arab cities along the Gulf coast, the cities and villages of Bahrain still retain a significant part of their old spatial configuration, with their old layout of narrow alleyways and neighbourhoods largely intact for more than a hundred years. On the demographic front, a sizeable proportion of citizens still live within the historical confines of these cities and villages, with a strong attachment to these areas. Thus, they continue to display a sense of historical continuity both on the spatial and population front.

The other unique factor is Bahrain’s spatial intimacy, characterized by the small geographic area of the country. Historic city centres, villages, new suburban areas, and the latest ‘mega real estate projects,’ all are within a stone’s throw of each other. This spatial intimacy, combined with the aforementioned historical continuity, has made the ‘old’ and ‘new’ meet within an extremely confined and interconnected area.

Historically, Muharraq and Manama were the two major urban centres of Bahrain, with 60 percent of the population in 1957 living within the confines of the two cities and the rest disbursed in villages across the island. This changed after the advent of the oil era, particularly following the first ‘oil crisis’ in 1973, which was a boom for oil producers like Bahrain and led to a rapid growth in both the citizen and expatriate population. In 1941, there were only 14,380 housing units in Bahrain, but by 2001 there were 106,000, and 151,580 units by 2010.

For citizens, the most preferred housing option was a private home in the urban sprawl that began developing on the island. Locally referred to as ‘villas,’ such homes comprise 54,983 of the total local households of 93,653. Urban sprawl began to develop mainly in the uninhabited parts in the middle of the island and on the outskirts of the old cities of Manama and Muharraq. The houses for citizens in these urban sprawls have been built with considerable subsidy from the government. This was part of the social contract underlying the rentier state, where the government would provide privileges and benefits strictly limited to local citizens (as opposed to expatriates), including free health, education and subsidized housing, in return for political allegiance. Between 1975 and 2002, a total of 61,509 families had benefited from Ministry of Housing loans. These houses were built in newly designed suburbs and model towns across the island, similar to those found in North American suburbs. An example of this is Isa town, the first model town that commenced work in 1967 in the middle of the main island.

Over the last decade, naturalized citizens also came to play a part in this process, with many of them living in the newly developed urban sprawl. Their presence led to tensions,
as they were seen as taking over housing that should have been allocated to ‘real’ citizens. Living in mixed areas also placed the naturalized citizens in direct contact with ‘native-born’ citizens, often leading to friction and even violence. For example, a well-known incident in 2009 involved clashes between members of a Sunni family and some of the politically naturalized, with the event becoming a cause célèbre on the island. Indeed, Sunnis frequently complained that they have suffered the most from the effects, as the politically naturalized tend to take up jobs in the security forces and live in areas that historically have been predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods.

From the expatriate point of view, the situation varied considerably depending on class. The majority live in flats (33,787), concentrated in Manama (21,920) and Muharraq (4,589). Most of the better off lived in gated compounds or villas in the leafy suburbs of Budaya or Saar in the northern or central parts of the island (more than 6,700 households). With the opening of the new mega-real estate projects on reclaimed land, a significant number moved to such developments, particularly the development on Amwaj island. Indeed, the overall image seems to be that these new mega projects are catering primarily for better-off expatriate residents in the islands.

A significant portion of lower-income expatriates concentrated in labour camps. No precise data is available on the number of these labour camps, but informal observation suggests that they hold a sizeable proportion of the households. Unfortunately, given the transient, undocumented or illegal nature of many expatriates, data is non-existent, and the 2010 census is not very useful in this regard. Labour camps generally would be on the outskirts of the cities or close to industrial areas, disbursed across the island, and sited away from the locals. Usually a company would rent the camp for its employees, mainly workers in the construction or industrial sectors.

The dynamics in the old city centres and their peripheries are probably the most interesting feature of the geographic map of Bahrain, as they represent the focal point where the different spatial and demographic forces intersect and often collide. Middle class expatriates—those in semi-skilled and skilled professions and services, and mainly hailing from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines or Arab countries—would generally live in apartments in or near to the two historic city centres, particularly in Manama. There are also a significant number of unskilled and lower class expatriates living within the confines of the old city, mainly in old houses in the historic city centre. These are houses whose original local inhabitants vacated and then turned into apartments and shops for rent, or just rented out in their original condition to expatriates. The majority of these houses are in Muharraq (more than 6,300) and Manama (4,300). More than 4,600 Bahraini households lived in these houses in Muharraq and more than 1,200 households in Manama. In contrast, the official 2010 census documents only 1,133 expatriate households living in these houses in Muharraq and 637 in Manama. This is probably an inaccurate statistic, given the status of most expatriates who live in these dwellings. Many would be low-paid

52 For example, the 2010 census documents only 46,554 expatriate ‘households’ with a total of 163,095 members. This compares with a total official number of expatriates of 666,000.
workers in the services industry who are ‘free-visas,’ an arrangement by which a local sponsors an expatriate to remain in the country, but who then has to make do by finding his own work with any third party employer, i.e., they are ‘illegal residents’ in Bahrain.

Another factor that complicates the changing demographics in the city centre of Manama has been Bahrain’s emergence as a well-known weekend destination for GCC nationals, mainly Saudis, who come to the island for pleasures that are not available in their country. This includes alcohol and prostitution, but also cinema complexes and retail shopping malls that offer a more relaxed social atmosphere where both sexes and families can mingle. In 2009, for example, 8.7 million tourists visited the island, including 6.8 million who came across the causeway that links Saudi Arabia to Bahrain. Most of the hotels that cater to the visitors are located in the city centre of Manama. Thus, the historic cities have become a fluid and increasingly shifting mix of commercial shops and hotels catering to Saudi and other GCC nationals on weekend pleasure trips, locals who are either too poor or too stubborn and rooted to move out (and are disproportionately of an older age), and increasingly expatriates of the lower to middle class.

This situation is not constant but is steadily changing. The ratio of nationals living in the old districts is decreasing, while the number of commercial shops, hotels and units rented out to expatriates is rising. There are no accurate data on this, but some statistics provide insight. For example, between 2006 and 2010, in the second electorate district in Muharraq, a district that lies in the heart of the historic city, the number of eligible voters fell by more than 40 percent. Such a decrease in four years shows the rate at which locals have been vacating the historic city centres. As more shops spring up, more houses are vacated to be rented to expatriates or turned into shops, and as the city becomes more congested and the number of familiar faces in the neighbourhood decreases, the push gets stronger for locals to move out. The opportunity to move to one of the new housing opportunities in the urban sprawl of the island, away from the historic centres, and to rent out the vacated old house for profit, further increases the incentives to move. These incentives get stronger the more the process accelerates, reaching a tipping point where locals no longer find the historic city centre desirable as a living space.

A final ingredient has to be considered in the mix of urban sprawl and historic cities. Most of the new mega projects on reclaimed land lie not far from the historic city centres, which (used to) lie on the shores of the island. Manama is a case in point: Overlooking the old city centres are the twin towers of the World Trade Centres and the twin towers of the Bahrain Financial Harbour, two of the most high profile mega projects built on reclaimed land and targeted mainly toward commercial clients. These mega projects are not very different in style or scale from the projects that have been developed in the other GCC states over the past 10 years. This phenomenon recently has generated the view of the ‘modern changing,’ or transient city in the GCC. In such a city, the architecture is dominated by a culture of change that looks for whatever is new, grand, and modern.

56 See, for example, M. Al-Nuaim (2009) The city in the Arabian Gulf Between the Oil Boom and the Financial Crisis: The case of Dubai and its Imitators, in A. Al-Kuwari (ed.) The Third Oil Boom and the Consequences of the Global Financial Crisis: The Case of the GCC (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies).
A discord occurs between the general architecture of the city and the people who inhabit it and their culture. What once was an old housing district, a palm grove, or even sea could change within a few months into a gleaning skyscraper or a shopping mall, with very little or no input from the actual inhabitants. Indeed, even the people become transient, both in terms of the fact that the majority are expatriates or tourists with a limited stay in the city, and the fact that the locals’ professions or even living locations have to alter to reflect these changes. A person who once was a fisherman might wake up to find that the sea is gone, and that he must cope with this new geographic and economic reality. Indeed, he even may find out that he has to move several kilometres away to a new urban sprawl because his current location is more desirable as a new shopping mall or apartment block.

In Bahrain, this new phenomenon of the transient city confronted the historical continuity of the old cities in both their spatial and demographic aspects within an extremely circumscribed area. This lies at the heart of the uneven geographical development that characterizes Bahrain. Centuries-old dilapidated dwellings lie juxtaposed next to shining new skyscrapers, with fishermen’s boats sharing the same seafront as private beaches of the gated real estate projects. Locals, expatriates of varying classes and newly naturalized citizens all interact and intermix within the confines of the historic cities and villages, creating a mix that can be bewildering, sometimes even jarring to an outsider.

Radical Transformations and Radical Contestations

It is quite clear that both the spatial and demographic spheres over the geographic landscape of Bahrain have undergone radical transformations. The discourse that emerges around such issues—that mix of viewpoints, opinions and memory that shapes the public and social outlook, although based on the material conditions on the ground, may not correspond exactly to them, and indeed is susceptible to shifting, altering and completely changing. It intersects with what media outlets report, previously held beliefs in society, and the general interactions and developments that happen on a social and political level. Indeed, as Harvey points out, social perceptions interact with objective material changes on the ground, with each feeding into the other. He elucidates that in great ‘space-time compression’ periods, society’s conception of space and time alters tremendously, and people inevitably experience strong contestations and a perturbed state of social values and perceptions, giving rise to various forms of nationalism, sectarianism and other reactions to such radical changes, which in turn also affect material factors on the ground:

A revolution in temporal and spatial relations often entails, therefore, not only the destruction of ways of life and social practices built around preceding time-space systems, but the ‘creative destruction’ of a wide range of physical assets embedded in the landscape. … Rapid changes in the objective qualities of social space and time are both confusing and disturbing, precisely because their revolutionary implications for the social order are so hard to anticipate.

Harvey uses as an example the massive changes in the social conceptions of space and time brought about in the first half of the nineteenth century through the advent of the rail network, which enabled many parts of the European continent to be connected together for the first time by trips of only a few hours. He connects the general ‘time-space compression’ experienced during the eventual culmination of the 1848 revolutions that swept across Europe.

Time-space compression certainly has played an important part in Bahrain over the past decade, but it does not quite capture the extent and form of the changes on the island. Bahrain’s spatial-demographic transformation over time involved the creation of new land and simultaneous destruction of the sea, the literal importation of a new population (both expatriates and naturalized citizens), among many other changes. Hence, I prefer to label these transformations simply as ‘radical spatial-demographic transformations’ over time, largely driven by capital and state interests. I use the term ‘radical’ in order to emphasize that these changes have been nothing short of deeply radical and indeed revolutionary. I use ‘spatial-demographic’ to emphasize that both the spatial and demographic landscape have been altered physically (as well as socially). Central to these processes, of course, has been the role of the state and capital in driving these spatial-demographic changes.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze each of the discourses that emerge among the different social groups and the interactions among them. It would be interesting, for example, to investigate the discourses prevalent in the different classes and nationalities of expatriates living on the island, or within the local business elites. Here, however, I focus on the discourse that has developed within the opposition circles of citizens. The focus will be particularly on two strong themes that have emerged within the politics of resistance around demography and space: demographic engineering by the government, and theft of public lands, particularly the sea. These two discourses have become a dominant theme in local politics of resistance to the state, and, other than the actual form of the political regime, have become the main focus within the political opposition, cutting across different divides within it. Both can be seen within a general movement for ‘the right to city,’ and for the right of citizens collectively to have a say and to participate in the process of urbanization engulfing the island and in shaping their own geographic space and environment.

The domestic political structure enabled in no small part the extreme form of urbanization and ‘spatial fix’ of capital that has taken place on the island. In its essence, political power over domestic matters is concentrated in the hands of a small ruling elite, while popular input in decision-making is severely limited, a situation that is similar in the rest of the GCC (with the possible exception of Kuwait). The executive branch of government is completely non-elected, while the legislative
assembly is partially elected via extremely distorted voting districts. The supervisory roles allocated to the legislative assembly are significantly weak, with minimal input in drawing up budgets or investigating institutional corruption. The judicial system lacks independence and relies on the executive branch both for funding and its composition.61 This lack of judicial and legislative autonomy is reflected in the public’s limited participation in the process of urban planning. Even though there are elected municipal councils, these bodies spend most of their time wrangling with the Ministry of Municipalities on daily maintenance issues and the operation of public services (garbage collection, inserting speed bumps on roads, etc.). Public input in formulating strategic economic policies and urban master plans is negligible, as foreign management consultancy firms mainly undertake such planning. The most important economic sector, oil, is in the hands of the government, which decides how and where to allocate oil revenues in the budget. In short, there are relatively few instruments by which the public can influence or shape economic and urban projects that have been sanctioned or approved at the highest level.

Over the past 30 years, the discourse in Bahraini politics has shifted from Arab nationalism and leftist opposition, which dominated in the 1950s to the 1970s, toward more religious and sect-based politics. By the first decade of the new millennium, groups that define themselves in Shia religious terms mainly influenced the opposition. This holds true for both formally recognized political societies, such as Al Wefaq, the largest political society on the island, and Haq, a movement that is not part of the formal system. Although Haq did include secular members, it is dominated by figures who define their identity and outlook in Shia religious terms. The main difference between the two groups revolves around acceptance of the political system imposed in 2001. Haq rejects this political system, which is based on a new constitution in 2002 that allowed for limited political participation via popular election of half of the legislative body. Al Wefaq, although acknowledging the limits of this system, chooses to participate in it. There are also secular-leftist organizations in the opposition, notably Wa’ad and Al Menbar Democratic Society, but their influence largely has waned since the 1960s and 1970s. The other significant political groups on the island are Sunni religious societies, in their Muslim Brotherhood branch (Al Menbar Islamic Society) or Salafist branch (Al Asala). Both are perceived as supporting largely pro-government positions.62

Apart from the structure of the political system, the issue of public land and political naturalization came to dominate the political demands of the opposition. In terms of public lands, this further was fuelled by the severe shortage in housing units for nationals, an issue that signalled a breakdown in the traditional rentier system’s pact of providing housing assistance to citizens. The shortage of housing is a constant feature and demand in Bahraini politics. The limited availability of public land, the ever-increasing prices, and the population growth have created an unending demand for housing. The waiting list for government-assisted housing exceeds 45,000 households, and it is increasing by 7,000 yearly. The average waiting time for a house has reached 17 years, and would require

---


In contrast, the new real estate mega projects, which promise to deliver 60,000 high-end luxury units, are out of reach for the vast majority of Bahrainis. Furthermore, these new developments are being built on what many Bahrainis view as expropriated public land (or more accurately sea), thus creating a perception of theft. Moreover, the situation threatens a breakdown in the traditional rentier system pact, which has been one of the main pillars of allegiance to the government.

Two parliamentary enquiries were launched on the issue, one as an enquiry into the theft of public lands and another into sea reclamation. Many of the statistics cited above are from these two enquiries. Interestingly, neither enquiry named any of the main culprits behind the expropriations of land, but instead their reports relied mostly on the passive voice (e.g., ‘the value of land stolen stood at . . .’). Crucially, the issue surrounding these lands cut across the political spectrum and society, bypassing the usual Shia-Sunni divide. Many parties, political societies, civil society groups and sections of the broader society coalesced around the issue. A loose coalition of environmental activists, fishermen, politicians and local councillors held several events, talks, and demonstrations on the consequences of land reclamation. This mobilization cut across all citizen groups and threatened to build a national opposition to the government on common, non-sectarian grounds. It worked as a way to lessen vertical segmentation and to strengthen the idea of citizenship through having common grievances and facing common threats. Indeed, for all intents and purposes, Bahrain had turned from a collection of scattered villages and towns, which were geographically distinct up until the mid-1970s, into one large urban city in terms of physical geography. The distinction between different villages and towns for the most part has become mental and based on familial ties and history rather than actual physical divides. This elimination of distance and actual space between the different parts of the nation (a clear case of what Harvey calls ‘time-space compression’), in conjunction with the common threats faced by them, started a common base for a united and even a national based consciousness for opposition.

Political naturalization also cut across the political spectrum, albeit, given its demographic dimensions, with a bit more reservation. The fact that that many of the politically naturalized work in jobs traditionally held by Sunnis and live in areas that are majority Sunni also helped in closing the divide on the issue, which became one that affected everyone on the political spectrum. One of the biggest demonstrations in the country’s history was on political naturalization, drawing tens of thousands of protestors in 2009.

---

64 This is a common phenomenon in Bahrain and other GCC states, where usage of passive voice constructions insulates the authors from having to identify directly the agents or culprits.
65 Sanabis, Jidhafs and Daih are good examples of this phenomenon. To an outside observer, the divide between these three villages is non-existent, with Sanabis and Daih being virtually contiguous and being separated from Jidhafs on the other side only by a two-lane road. The rivalry and distinctions between these villages still run strong, however. Never tell a person from Daih that he is from Jidhafs or vice versa!
Even the issue of expatriates living in historically local areas drew attention from across the political divide, particularly in the old city centres. ‘The bachelors,’ as many expatriates locally are called (referring to the fact that a majority of expatriates are males who live without their families), have become a feature in the political discourse, with calls to move them outside of the traditional city centres, and with members of Bahrain’s assembly (MPs) suggesting that Manama has become more like Kerala. It is interesting to note that, given that the economy is seen to depend on expatriates, and that expatriates are perceived as less of a threat to the benefits and privileges of citizens, the calls were much less about reducing their numbers and more about relocating them away from citizens. This contrasts with the case of the politically naturalized, seen as directly threatening citizens’ benefits and their identity. Thus, there are political demands centering on ending the naturalization process and rescinding the ‘illegally’ given citizenships. The extreme nature of these forces and the constant shifting and changing of the discourses that surround them, made for an explosive mix that threatened to erupt given appropriate circumstances.

February 14, 2011 Protests

Following the wave of uprisings across the Arab world that toppled two leaders in Egypt and Tunisia, mass protests reached Bahrain. Cyber activists chose February 14 to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the National Action Charter, a referendum intended to herald a new political era on the island after decades of political unrest. This signaled their belief that the new political system had not met their aspirations. The events between February 14 and March 15, at which point a state of emergency was declared that put a temporary halt to the mass demonstrations, present a perfect showcase of how the spatial and demographic currents within Bahrain came to dominate the local scene. They also illustrate the turbulent and explosive nature of the discourses associated with these changes. Indeed, the discourses would shift from day to day, illustrating the extreme impact of the forces involved.

The importance of the ‘appropriated public land’ discourse was exemplified when Sh. Ali Salman, head of the opposition Al Wefaq society, held up a deed in a press conference. He alleged that the deed showed the reclaimed land on which the Financial Harbor project was built had been sold to the prime minister for 1 Bahraini dinar ($2.5 US dollars). Subsequently, protestors held up 1 BD notes in demonstrations to highlight the issue. The impact of the demographic currents surfaced from the first day, when graphic videos of the security forces’ attacks against protestors allegedly showed actions involving some foreign or politically naturalized security forces. Such videos would reappear once again when fights allegedly broke out between Shia locals and recently naturalized students at schools. Scuffles also allegedly occurred between local and politically naturalized youth

in Hamad Town, a suburban town of mixed composition. These incidents left several injured.\textsuperscript{70}

Some expatriates on the island also were involved in the ensuing events. Groups of expatriates attended pro-regime demonstrations, whether willingly or not, helping to swell the size of the demonstrations. There also were reports of anti-government demonstrators attacking working class expatriates in Manama.\textsuperscript{71} The main local English-language newspaper, \textit{The Gulf Daily News}, carried several comments and letters by expatriates expressing their frustration with the anti-government demonstrators and highlighting their support for the government. The majority of expatriates, however, remained on the sidelines, with little direct input into the events.

The discourses regarding the ‘foreigner-native’ issue and the theft of public land gained ground during February and March 2011, and it seemed they might be able to unite citizens from across the political spectrum, providing a serious threat to the regime. The dominant discourse in the end, however, came to be an old-new one: the Sunni-Shia divide. Harvey comments that this is not surprising in periods of extreme space-time compression, where ‘more rather than less of the world’s population clings to place and neighborhood or to nation, region, ethnic grouping, or religious belief as specific marks of identity. Such a quest for visible and tangible marks of identity is readily understandable in the midst of fierce time-space compression.’\textsuperscript{72} Given the nature of the opposition over the past two decades, which was mainly organized around Shia-religious lines, the vast majority of demonstrators were Shias. The government over time came to push the argument that Iranian and Hizbullah-backed Shias had organized these protests. An anti-opposition and largely Sunni political group, ‘The National Unity Gathering,’ emerged to counter the demonstrators and provide a voice for the ‘Sunni street.’ After the declaration of a state of emergency on March 15, followed by a security clampdown, the dominant discourse was a split between pro-opposition Shias and anti-opposition Sunnis. Subsequently, talk of demographic engineering and the theft of public land took a back seat to daily updates regarding the security clampdown and the Sunni-Shia divide that has engulfed the island.

Nothing encapsulates the extreme spatial and demographic transformations and the associated revolutionary shifts in discourses and social perception as Lulu, or the Pearl Monument that was at the center of the opposition’s movement. Previously a busy traffic roundabout with no particular historical significance except for an eye-pleasing pearl monument at its center, Lulu became the focal point of Bahrain’s opposition protest movement, with thousands of individuals gathering there daily during the February-March period. Built on reclaimed land, it was located on what used to be ‘Sanabis’ sea, a coastline named after a nearby village that once overlooked the (now reclaimed) shoreline. On one side of the monument stood the Al Lulu Towers, a new real estate mega project on reclaimed land. On the other side lie the four villages of Burhama, Sanabis, Jedhafs and Daih, all Shia villages that used to be on the seashore but now are several kilometers inland. Close by is the


central market of Manama and the districts of Salmaniya and Nuaim, parts of the old city that are now inhabited largely by expatriates. Across the road from the roundabout rise the twin towers of Bahrain Financial Harbour, a busy commercial center that has come to epitomize the mega real estate projects erected on reclaimed land.

A combination of fate, quick thinking and Bahrain’s heavy traffic allowed the funeral procession for one of those killed on February 14 to reach Lulu, turning it into the protesters’ equivalent of Tahrir Square in Cairo. Different stalls, lectures, displays of public art and demonstrations took place daily at the site. Originally built on reclaimed sea, Lulu was reclaimed back as a public space for social protest. As the opposition’s protest movement developed during February and March, the National Unity Gathering in turn also chose a public location of their own to hold protests: The Al Fateh Mosque, which ironically also is built on reclaimed land. Two large-sized demonstrations were held at Al Fateh between February 14 and March 15, emphasizing that the group had their own demands, which were different and often directly opposed to those of the protestors at Lulu. In fact, Al Fateh and Lulu became the two icons of the diverging political movements on the island.

In a remarkable showcase of the contradictions involved, the government abruptly tore down ‘Lulu’ one day after it had cleared the protestors from its premises. Thus, what once was Sanabis sea, which land reclamation then turned into a traffic roundabout, which in turn the opposition then turned into a public space at the heart of their activities, suddenly was turned into a pile of rubble, with the destruction broadcast on national television. The memory of Lulu in turn become a symbol of resistance and ‘steadfastness’ for the opposition, one which for them encapsulated their fight against oppression, with its image adorning most of the opposition’s pictures and paraphernalia. Many opposition protests since then have faced off with the police in attempts to march back to where the roundabout once stood, with several individuals succeeding in darting across heavy police presence to reach the former site of Lulu. The area remains a closed area heavily fortified by security and military personnel.

For many in the Al Fateh group, Lulu became a symbol of treason: The birthplace of a coup attempt by one side of the population against the other without any attempt at consultation or reaching out to the other side. For the government, it was a memory of a dangerous revolt best erased through physical destruction, although it still is forced to guard its location heavily lest the opposition return to the original site of their movement. The authorities even withdrew the local ‘500 fils’ coins, which carry the symbol of the pearl roundabout. The memory of Lulu is a powerful symbol in today’s Bahrain, evoking the simultaneous creation and destruction of space, identity, memory and their different contestations across extremely politicized and opposed demographic groups. Many more detailed and elaborate accounts, no doubt, will be written on the spatial, social and mental significance of this monument.

---


74 For more on the powerful role of memory, see T. C. Chang and S. Huang (2005) Recreating Place, Replacing Memory: Creative Destruction at the Singapore River, Asia Pacific Viewpoint, 46(3), pp. 267–280.

75 For details on the memorialization of Lulu, see Amal Khalaf (2013) Squaring the Circle: Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout, Middle East Critique, 22, 3 (Fall).
What next?

The future path for Bahrain remains uncertain, but what is clear is that the extreme transformations on the spatial and demographic fronts and the associated contestations between the different political factions will continue to play a pivotal role. On the spatial front, too much has been invested by too many vested interests in the mega-real estate projects on reclaimed land, many of which lie in a state of unfinished limbo. Indeed, if one is to set foot in Bahrain, the current landscape would look like a jumble of half-finished highways and buildings, as well as yet to be developed reclaimed land. The importance of the spatial spheres also could increase with the incessant demand for housing from citizens.

The demographic front, currently enveloped within a discourse of the Shia-Sunni divide, also will continue to play a dominant role, probably in more ways than one. The interplay between expatriates, locals and naturalized citizens will be crucial. Shifts within the dominant discourse could occur here. If citizens start viewing naturalized individuals or expatriates as a threat, the discourse once again could shift from the current Shia-Sunni split to a more nationalist tone. However, if the Sunni-Shia discourse continues, then some Sunnis who are loyal to the government could start aligning with ‘naturalized citizens’ and ‘expatriates’ against ‘Shias’ much more explicitly. Another factor could be a movement emerging within expatriates for better living, economic and political rights. This would not be far-fetched, as there already have been recent strikes by expatriates over living conditions and pay.76 Many decision-makers, including those in the government, would like to think that they are able to predict which of these factors and corresponding discourses will come to dominate the scene, hence enabling them to plan how best to manage and control them. The radical nature of the local spatial and demographic transformations, as well as the fact that the ‘Bahrain issue’ has become politically regionalized to incorporate US, Iranian, Saudi and GCC involvement, makes any notion that one accurately can predict or tightly control what will emerge from these highly charged, constantly shifting and extreme forces seem like wishful thinking.

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was carried out with the support of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences: ‘Inequality, Mobility and Development in the Arab Region’ Program 2013–2014. The author is grateful for comments received on a draft version of the paper presented in the migration workshop at the 2011 annual Gulf Research Meeting in Cambridge, UK.

References


