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**BAHRAIN,**  
a Regional Stake

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# Bahrain, a regional stake

Bahrain, a small island of 778 km<sup>2</sup>, occupies a key geopolitical position in the Persian Gulf, as it lies between Saudi Arabia to the west and Iran to the east, and close to Qatar. It is unique in that it is governed by a Sunni minority: the Al Khalifa clan, who conquered it from the Persians in 1783. Its population is predominantly Shiite, around 70%, sharing a common interest with Iran. As a result, Bahrain finds itself at the heart of a rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with both countries keen to maintain their influence over the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia uses its portfolio diplomacy to maintain its influence on the island, especially as it grants Bahrain all revenues from the Persian Gulf's offshore oil field. Indeed, in 1996, an agreement was signed between Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, under which Bahrain receives all revenues from oil production in the Abu Safah field. This is to compensate for its limited oil resources compared with neighboring Saudi Arabia. This partnership is vital for Bahrain, as revenues from Abu Safah contribute significantly to its economic development.

As for Iran, it is seeking to reshape the region to ensure its leadership by granting protection to its Shiite minority. Inter-community tensions are high, as Bahrain's Shiites are marginalized and discriminated against, with limited access to positions in the civil service, armed forces and public enterprises. They also complain of land-use policies that put them at a disadvantage. <sup>(1)</sup> Iran is accused by Bahrain and other Gulf states of using Shiite tensions as a tool of influence. Teheran supports some Shia movements to strengthen its "axis of resistance" against the Sunni states and their Western allies. This instrumentalization reinforces the Bahraini monarchy's suspicions of the local Shiite community, exacerbating internal divisions. <sup>(2)</sup> In the shadow of the Iranian threat, Bahrain relies on the American umbrella for its internal security. The country is home to the US Fifth Fleet, which plays a crucial role in maritime security in the Gulf and in the fight against Iranian interference.

However, the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, signed under the aegis of China in 2023, has brought a breath of fresh air to the Gulf states.

Indeed, according to an American think tank, the pressure exerted by Saudi Arabia on Bahrain to maintain its hard line

towards Iran has eased considerably. Saudi-Iranian détente has paved the way for a policy of social inclusion for Bahrain's Shiite community. As for normalization, the two countries are sticking to their position of defiance. <sup>(3)</sup>

As Giorgio Cafiero, a geopolitics expert at the Atlantic Council, points out, "Bahrain's strategic position in the Persian Gulf and its sectarian composition make it a focal point for the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, where Riyadh views the island as a critical buffer against Iranian influence, and Tehran seeks to leverage its Shia connections to challenge Sunni monarchies in the region", underlining the hold of these two countries over the Kingdom under their influence. <sup>(4)</sup>

**Douraya Asgaraly**

<sup>(1)</sup> The situation of Shia in the world - Orient le Jour - November 20, 2017

<sup>(2)</sup> Iran is making perfect use of the difficulties faced by the Shiites and local conflicts to create militias in the Middle East - Conflits magazine - January 29, 2024

<sup>(3)</sup> Will Bahrain and Iran turn a new page? There's been talk of it - Atlantic Council - June 12, 2024

<sup>(4)</sup> Atlantic council, *ibid*.

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Référence Bahrain - Manama Yousef

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