

Common Features of Iranian and Bahraini Identities as a Factor in the Dynamics of Iran–Bahrain Relations

This research is relevant due to the rising importance of identity in international relations and the need for political pragmatism in the Middle East, especially after the 2023 Iran–Saudi Arabia normalization, which opened the door for renewed Iran–Bahrain dialogue. In 2024, Tehran and Manama announced plans to restore ties, but no particular steps have followed.

Despite political differences, Iran and Bahrain share cultural, religious, and historical ties, including pre-Islamic trade and Safavid-era influence. Bahrain's Shia majority and cultural proximity, especially among the Ajam, have fueled Iran–Saudi competition for influence in Bahrain, additionally given the context of pan-Iranian trends and the Greater Iran concept. Yet, these shared identity elements also present opportunities for rapprochement.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary approach to identity as a factor in Iran–Bahrain relations, with historical, cultural, and religious aspects taken into account. Unlike the dominant geopolitical and sectarian approaches in academic literature, the impact of identity on bilateral relations has been studied in less detail.

Research Goal was to Identify shared elements of Iranian and Bahraini identities and their impact on bilateral relations.

Objectives include:

1. Identify religious, ethnocultural, and symbolic similarities via political and cultural interaction analysis;
2. Assess the Bahraini Shiite community's role in Iran's political discourse, including based on political statements by Iranian leadership (Radio Farda, 2019; VOA Farsi, 2022) and Iranian media content, as well as in Iran's regional strategy, using constructivist approaches (Alekseeva, 2014; Wendt, 1994);
3. Characterize the Bahraini elites' perception of Iran through securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998);
4. Determine identity's influence on negotiation positions using structural-system analysis (Istomin, 2018; Khrustalev, 2015);

5. Explain how Bahrain's domestic politics affect its Iran policy via R. Putnam's two-level game theory (Putnam, 1988).

Methods: Historical, empirical, comparative analysis; structural-system analysis (including M. Khrustalev's interest matrix, I. Istomin's negotiation framework); game theory (R. Putnam); and constructivist approaches (A. Wendt, B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde).

H. Katouzian (Katouzian, 2009) and L. Potter (Potter, 2008) highlight Iran's cultural and political influence on Bahrain, especially among the Shiite majority. E. Melkumyan (Melkumyan, 2016) mentions Iran's territorial claims as a factor perceived by Bahrain's Sunni leadership as a threat to sovereignty. F. Wehrey (Wehrey, 2014) and L. Louër (Louër, 2008) draw attention to the perception of the Shiite factor as a security threat. N. Kozhanov, A. Bogacheva (Kozhanov & Bogacheva, 2020), and Yu. Ilyina (Ilyina, 2016) examine the Shiite factor as a tool for legitimizing Iran's foreign policy actions. Research on Bahraini identity remains fragmented; local publications such as *Derasat* (Derasat Journal, n.d.) offer few materials on domestic issues. However, the works of I. Sarkisyan (Sarkisyan, 2018) and A. Barinov (Barinov, 2024) show that Bahrain's national identity is constructed in opposition to Iran and in alignment with Riyadh's policies.

This study employs a broad range of methodological approaches, exploring both the historical roots of shared identity traits between Iran and Bahrain and their impact on current political processes, including the prospects of restoring diplomatic ties between Tehran and Manama. The research systematizes the common historical, cultural, and religious elements that influence the dynamics of bilateral relations.

The study finds Iran–Bahrain relations are shaped by shared Shia identity and deep cultural ties, especially among Bahrain's Baharna community. Yet, Iran's post-1979 role as Shia protector raises suspicion among Bahrain's Sunni rulers. Though economic and cultural exchanges are possible, identity-driven polarization prevails. Shared Shia Islam and Persian heritage could foster dialogue but are increasingly securitized amid Iran–Saudi rivalry and Bahrain's sectarian divide. Bahraini authorities depict Shia mobilization as an Iranian threat to justify repression and align with anti-Iranian forces. Core tensions stem from an ethnoconfessional Arab–Persian and Sunni–Shia divides, but identity should neither be over- nor underestimated. Unlike Saudi–Iran reconciliation in 2023, Bahrain's 2024 normalization with Iran saw no real progress due to economic or security incentives, too. Bahrain follows Saudi policy without Riyadh's autonomy, while Iran gains little from ties with a dependent minor Gulf monarchy. Thus, despite cultural links, conflict dynamics outweigh shared identities, keeping the states apart.

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