

# The Shiites of Saudi Arabia

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**S**INCE THE FALL OF SADDAM HUSSEIN IN 2003 AND THE ENSUING alteration of the regional balance of power in favor of Iran, Saudi Arabia has looked at the world through an Iranian and Shiite prism. This prism affects the way it views its neighbor across the Gulf, its position in the Arab and Islamic world, and its own Shiite population.

Saudi Arabia's current regional political troubles are nearly entirely connected to the rise of Iran and the Shiites in the region. Saudi Arabian involvement in the West Bank and Gaza—and in particular in the agreement to establish a national unity government, signed on February 8, 2007 by Fatah and Hamas—was meant to lower the flames in the region in order to limit Iran's influence. Saudi involvement in Lebanon also stems from this desire to check Iran, as do several meetings between Saudi and Israeli officials and the revival of the Saudi initiative for a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup>

As the Saudis move to restrain the rising strength of Iran and the Shiites outside the kingdom, they keep an ever-watchful eye over their own Shiite population. The ascendancy of the Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon has given rise to a feeling of empowerment amongst the Shiites of Saudi Arabia. They are proud of the accomplishments of their brethren. At the same time, they are cautious in what they hope for and how they express themselves, because much of the Wahhabi *ulama* in Saudi Arabia fears the rise of Shiism, and vocally opposes it. The Saudi Shiites expect the government to condemn anti-Shiite fatwas, and act as a protector, but the government has not done so.

The Saudi government, in fact, has its own concerns. Its base of support is

amongst the Wahhabi, anti-Shiite majority. It is a religious state that derives its legitimacy from a form of Islam that is, almost by definition, anti-Shiite. Indeed, there is a long history of Wahhabi anti-Shiite polemics.<sup>2</sup> The Wahhabi majority expects the Saudis, as the leaders of the Sunni world, to put the Shiites, led by Iran, in their place. The government therefore cannot be seen as trying to placate its own Shiites at this time.

The Shiites of Saudi Arabia have the misfortune of outside forces—be they the Saudis of Najd or the Persians of Iran—always determining their fates. The Saudis and the Iranians have a long history of enmity, punctuated with periods of good relations. Saudi Arabia's Shiites have often found themselves caught in the middle. They have been both the object of Saudi persecution and disdain and the subject of Iranian recruitment to subvert the Saudi regime.<sup>3</sup> Historically, their response has moved between dissimulation, accommodation, attempted reconciliation, and terrorism.<sup>4</sup> They reject the official narrative of Saudi history, which portrays the capture of the area where most of the Shiites live—al-Hasa—as a mythological “unification” of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> For many of the Shiites, their homeland has been occupied since the capture of al-Hasa by Ibn Saud in 1913.

There are two important political elements that constantly impact the fate of Saudi Shiites. One is internal—the Wahhabi ulama and their rank-and-file followers. The other is external—Iran, Saudi Arabia's main political and religious rival across the Gulf.

**I**T IS IMPOSSIBLE TO ARRIVE AT AN EXACT DETERMINATION OF THE NUMBER of Saudi Shiites. They constitute between ten and fifteen percent of the population, and about thirty-three percent of the population in the Eastern Province.<sup>6</sup> They reside primarily in the Eastern Province, where Saudi Arabia's oil is located, with a small number living in Medina.

While the most important Shiite centers have always been Iran and Iraq, the eastern part of Arabia has always held significant Shiite populations. Prominent historical Shiite *mujtahids* include Ibrahim al-Qatifi (sixteenth century), Ahmad Zayn al-Din al-Ahsai (d. 1801), and Ali al-Khunayzi (d. 1944). Until the Saudi occupation of the Eastern areas, Shiite mosques and *husayniyyas* (community centers) were allowed to develop. Learning centers, known as *hawzas*, were allowed to exist until the mid-1940s. The connection of Saudi Shiites to Iraq is a strong one. Upon the closing of Shiite learning centers in Saudi Arabia, most religious studies students went to Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

Deep in Shiite historical memory rests their persecution by the Saudis during the 18th and 19th centuries. Expanding into Iraq in the early 19th century, Saudi warriors famously destroyed the tomb of Imam Husayn in Karbala and the tombs of the Prophet's companions (the *sahaba*) in Mecca and Medina, demonstrating the extreme enmity

the Saudi Wahhabis held towards the Shiites. For the Wahhabis, grave worship was the paramount act of *shirk*, or polytheism, a severe accusation, so its practice by the Shiites became a source of constant suffering.

The Shiites of Saudi Arabia do not represent a threat to the government or the state. They are too small in number and too unpopular with most Saudis. But what they do, and how the Saudi government reacts to and treats them, are important for both domestic and foreign policy.

Saudi Shiites have never felt part of the state, and the government has rarely given them reason to. There are several factors influencing the government's treatment of the Shiites: Wahhabi ideology, pressure from and response to the Wahhabi ulama, the presence of the Shiites in the sensitive oil region, and the government's relations with Iran. These four factors have combined to influence the fate of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia throughout their history.

Modern Saudi Arabia is the result of an 18th century alliance between the Saudi family of Najd in Central Arabia and an extremist shaykh of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhabism was a powerful and fanatic ideology that served the regime well in mobilizing the disparate tribes and casting the Shiites in the role of the quintessential "Other." Muslims who were worse than Jews or Christians. To Sunnis in general, the Shia are known as *rawafid*, those who reject the first three "Rightly Guided" Caliphs in favor of Ali and the Prophet's House, known as *Ahl al-Bayt*. But for the Wahhabis, they are worse than rejectionists: they are associationists and polytheists (*mushrikin*) who associate people (such as Ahl al-Bayt) and objects with God. Many Shiite beliefs and practices stand in stark contradistinction to the Wahhabi creed, with its strong emphasis on *tawhid*, or the uncompromising unity of the Divine.

The Saudi ruling family's legitimacy is religiously based. The family claims to rule in the name of Islam, as interpreted by the Wahhabi clerics. The commitment of the Saudi family to Wahhabism has often been measured by the way they treated the Shiites under their control. Throughout their history, the Shiites have paid the price of the Saudi family's quest for religious legitimacy. And religious legitimacy has been the maidservant of political aspirations and expansion.

The modern misfortunes of the Shiite community of Saudi Arabia began in 1913, with the capture of the eastern oasis of al-Hasa by the recently resurgent Saudis. They were subject to depredations and persecutions under the rulers of the governors of al-Hasa, the Jiluwi family, relatives of the Saudi royal family. Many Shiites were killed by Ibn Saud's *Ikhwan* warriors when they refused to convert.

Religiously and socially, the Shiites were marginalized by the emerging Saudi state. Sunni merchants were encouraged to settle in al-Hasa and take over traditional Shiite commercial ventures, such as the trade in dates.<sup>9</sup> Shiite critics would later

complain that the traditional interdependence between Najd, the Hijaz, and al-Hasa had been violated by the Saudis, who made all regions dependent on Najd.<sup>10</sup>

Shiite religious practices and institutions were severely curtailed. In 1927, the Wahhabi ulama published a fatwa calling upon the Shiites to “convert” to Islam. Some Shiite notables complied, while others left the country.<sup>11</sup> The publication and distribution of religious texts was forbidden, the Shiite call to prayer was outlawed, and centers of religious studies were dismantled. Specific Shiite customs such as grave visitation (*ziyarat al-qubur*) were forbidden, as were the Ashura commemorations.<sup>12</sup> The Shiites have been vilified in textbooks, and generally have been made to feel like outcasts.

Economically as well as socially, the Shiites have rarely been treated or led to believe that they are part of a common Saudi experience. For example, in the 1950s there were labor riots in the oil fields run by Aramco, where most of the workers were Shiites. At the time, the ideologies that were gaining ground in the Arab world, such as socialism and communism, seemed attractive to many Shiites who felt discriminated against by the Saudi authorities. The Shiites felt that they were not part of the wealth that was beginning to flow to the kingdom as a result of the oil industry.<sup>13</sup> These riots were put down very harshly by the Saudi Arabian National Guard. In 1979 and 1980, encouraged by the success of the Iranian revolution they again rioted in demonstrations which became known as the “Intifada of the Eastern Province.” These riots were firmly crushed as well. The government did not hesitate to use helicopter gunships against the demonstrators.<sup>14</sup> Many leaders of the Shiite community went into exile or were arrested following these protests.

Fouad Ibrahim, a Saudi Shiite scholar and former activist, relates that the main Shiite opposition body, the Organization of the Islamic Revolution (*Munazzamat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya*), was established by Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar, a Shiite cleric, in December 1979, following the first burst of rioting. Saffar, who participated in the uprising, was inspired by the revolutionary reading that the Iranian Ali Shariati gave to the battle of Karbala. The group functioned as a political and religious outlet for feelings of oppression and insult.<sup>15</sup>

Shaykh Saffar was echoing the thought of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini when he wrote:

We are genuinely part of the realm of the downtrodden [*mustadafun*] while the despots of Al Saud...are genuinely part of the realm of oppressors...and colonizers. The ongoing battle is now between these two realms.... Our struggle against...tyrannical rule is a cycle of a long chain of a universal revolution which will, inevitably, lead to the collapse of imperialistic superpowers and the rise of the world of the downtrodden.<sup>16</sup>

After the uprising Saffar found asylum in Iran; his organization established offices in Tehran, London and Washington, where it was concerned primarily with the publication of *al-Thawra al-Islamiyya*.

**D**URING THE 1990S THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SAUDI regime and the Shiites changed from confrontational to accommodating. The Shiite opposition turned its attention to a search for cultural authenticity, a creative and less violent way to relate to the Saudi state. This change stemmed from a realization that confrontation provided limited or no results, and that a revolutionary stance had little chance of success. They therefore tried to find another way to give expression to their Shiite identity while demanding social change. To this end, the organization changed its name to *al Haraka al-Islahiyya* (the Reform Movement), and in 1991 it began to publish *al-Jazira al-Arabiyya* in London and *Arabian Monitor* in Washington. The journals were moderate in tone and tended to highlight human rights abuses. They called for a progressive agenda in the kingdom and addressed non-Shiite issues. Until the Sunni Committee for the Defense of Legitimate Rights (CDLR) began publishing in 1994, these Shiite publications were the only overseas voice of the Saudi opposition.<sup>17</sup>

The Shiite opposition tried to open avenues of communication with some of the Sunni opposition during the 1990s, but, as could perhaps be expected, they were rebuffed. The Saudi regime noticed and welcomed the shift in Shiite tactics and apparent goals, for it faced a more radical and more threatening Sunni opposition. In the autumn of 1993, and after negotiations carried out by the Saudi ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ghazi al-Qusaybi, several members of the Shiite opposition returned to Saudi Arabia.<sup>18</sup>

For the Saudi government, accommodating the Shiite opposition seemed a relatively easy way to temper a serious conflict, even at the cost of angering radical Sunni fundamentalists at home. Saudis already owned most of the international Arab press, and for a small price they could shut down two major opposition publications. Moreover, Saffar's group appeared to have settled for a separate deal with the Saudis, accepting commitments to improve the situation of the Eastern Province Shiites and agreeing not to press their demands for general reform and human rights domestically. Compared to the tougher and potentially more dangerous demands of groups such as the CDLR, reaching a separate *modus vivendi* with the Shiite opposition was a small price to pay and also prevented a temporary but potentially damaging alliance between the opposition movements.

Tawfiq al-Sayf, a leader of the Saudi Shiite opposition in exile, led a large delegation to Saudi Arabia in October 1993 to meet with King Fahd and other Saudi officials. According to the few press reports available, Fahd instructed his son, Prince Muhammad,

governor of the Eastern Province, to carry out Shiite demands, which included allowing the practice of Shiite religious rites previously outlawed, returning canceled passports, allowing exiles to return, and guaranteeing that those who returned would not be arrested or questioned. As a result of these contacts, the authorities released scores of Shiite prisoners and issued travel documents previously denied to Shiite activists. In a development the Shiites perceived as highly significant, the Saudi regime reportedly reissued a school text that had referred to Shiites as one of the heterodox sects. The new edition mentioned that there were now five Islamic *madhahib* (schools of jurisprudence) in Saudi Arabia: four belonging to Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamaa (Sunnis) and one belonging to the imamiyya or ithna ashariyya (Shiites). The Shiite publications *al-Jazira al-Arabiyya* and *Arabia Monitor* published their last issues in August 1993.

Both sides kept the news of the agreements fairly quiet;<sup>19</sup> the Saudi domestic and overseas press ignored it, and opposition activists suddenly assumed a very low profile. This reaction probably resulted from a mutual understanding that too much publicity would draw the fire of radical Sunni fundamentalists, who were troublesome for both the Saudis and the Shiites.

Both the government and the Shiite opposition seemed to greatly desire some arrangement, although it appeared that the Saudi authorities emerged victorious, successfully silencing several of its major critics. There was no evidence that certain other key Shiite demands had been met, including the official recognition of Shiism as a Muslim *madhhab* and the right to implement Shiite law accordingly; recognition of the rights to build and to worship in Shiite holy places—husayniyyas and mosques—and to repair graves destroyed by the Saudis in the al-Baqi cemetery in Medina; freedom to hold Shiite religious celebrations; an end to discrimination against Shiites in government and in universities; and general improvements in the Eastern Province.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, not all Shiites accepted the new accommodation with the regime, and some members of the overseas opposition did not return.

Shiite activists led by Saffar accepted the principle of engagement as the best way to achieve Shiite rights and inclusion in Saudi society. Saffar and his followers tend to accept the religious leadership of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shiites, but distinguish between religious and political leadership. Like Sistani, Saffar does not accept the principle of *wilayat al-faqih*, the rule of the jurist.<sup>21</sup>

But one organization accepted neither Saffar's policy of engagement nor the accommodation with the Saudi regime. This was Hezbollah al-Hijaz, known also as Saudi Hezbollah and Ansar Khat al-Imam (Followers of Imam Khomeini). They follow the *marjaiyya* of Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader (*rahbar*) of Iran, and they are politically loyal to him. Unlike Saffar's group, they accept *wilayat al-faqih*.<sup>22</sup> These two remain the major trends in the Shiite population today.<sup>23</sup>

Hezbollah al-Hijaz came out strongly against the accommodation of 1993 and treated Saffar's group like traitors, although it profited from the arrangement. "Let the cowards leave and let the people choose and pave the way, which will lead to the emergence of sincere and committed men."<sup>24</sup> It is this group that is usually held responsible for the bombing of the Khobar Towers complex in Dhahran in 1996, which killed 19 American servicemen. The attack was carried out with Iranian support.<sup>25</sup>

**T**WO THOUSAND AND THREE WAS A CRUCIAL YEAR FOR THE SHIITES OF Saudi Arabia. As part of the general reform trend that swept the country after 9/11, and fearful of the extremism represented by al-Qaeda, leading Saudi Shiites joined liberal Sunni Islamist reformers in publishing a January petition entitled, "Vision for the Homeland."<sup>26</sup> This was a landmark event since leading Islamists had previously not agreed to sign petitions with Shiites. Several of the signatories were received by then-Crown Prince Abdallah. The petition called for an end to corruption and greater accountability, but did not call for the overthrow of the regime.

But there can be no doubt that the most significant recent event for Saudi Shiites was the downfall of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in April 2003. The Shiites felt empowered—even emboldened. Najaf, the heart of Shiism, had been liberated. Seeing millions of their Iraqi brethren freely carrying out the rituals of Ashura, they felt their time had now come within Saudi Arabia—a Shiite state in Iraq would bring Saudi Shiites their due. One Shiite religious official, who preferred to remain anonymous, told a reporter: "If a Shia state takes place in Iraq, we can be assured that there will be justice. It will be based on the religious teachings of the prophet, and after that, the Saudi Shia will be in a better situation." In an uncharacteristically public move, Shiite leaders expressed their satisfaction with the end of the Baath regime, but followed their expression of happiness with a call to improve their own situation. The leading Shiite figure, Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar, said that now Saudi Shiites were "determined to claim some of their rights while defending the nation's unity."<sup>27</sup> Saffar's views epitomized the dilemma of the Saudi Shiites—making an effort to achieve equality while trying to avoid a backlash that could put the Shiites back many decades.

While the Shiite rise in Iraq planted hope in the hearts of Saudi Shiites, it also brought their problematic situation into focus. For this reason Saffar felt obligated to stress national loyalty in order to avoid an accusation of Shiite separatism.

Fortunately for the Shiites, then-Crown Prince Abdallah was a supporter of reconciliation. The Shiites published a memorandum signed by 450 activists, which some delivered personally to Abdallah on April 30, titled "Partners in the Homeland." The title reflected Shaykh Saffar's moderate tone as a loyal Saudi Arabian Shiite who

was only seeking integration into Saudi society. The fact that they were received by Abdallah gave them hope. They were particularly concerned about heading off Wahhabi extremists, who might be worried about Shiite triumphalism. The memorandum demanded a public declaration of equality among all citizens, specifically including Shiites. It demanded Shiite representation in Saudi-led international Islamic forums and charities, and asked the royal family to issue and express support for dialogue between ulama of all the religious sects in the kingdom. They were at pains to emphasize their loyalty, particularly at a time when they were accused of being more loyal to Iran than to Saudi Arabia. Further demands included letting Shiites into government positions, official statements against discrimination, an end to detentions and travel bans, the right to publish Shiite material and perform Shiite rituals, and an end to the publishing of official texts that discriminate against the Shiites. The petitioners also demanded the recognition of an independent Shiite judiciary. If there was one overarching point it was to demonstrate loyalty, while demanding in return public statements by members of the royal family that the Shiites were equal citizens and that their rights should be respected.<sup>28</sup>

The signatories emphasized that the request for equality did not contradict their loyalty to the state. While aware that the royal family bases its legitimacy on being a Wahhabi state, by definition anti-Shiite, they are equally aware that the Al Saud represent their main defense against unrestricted Wahhabi fanaticism.

But as luck would have it, less than a month after the audience with Crown Prince Abdallah, Saudi Arabia was hit by a series of devastating terrorist attacks. On May 12 al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula carried out its biggest operation in over a decade, attacking simultaneously three Riyadh compounds used to house foreigners. Dozens were killed. A full-scale al-Qaeda insurgency was underway.<sup>29</sup> It was likely that there were members of the royal family who wondered if it was the right time to begin a serious dialogue with the Shiites, who were anathema to extremist Wahhabis like al-Qaeda and its supporters.

But Crown Prince Abdallah was determined to make some progress with the Shiites, come what may, and his views carried the day. In June 2003, the first “National Dialogue” was held in Riyadh. It lasted four days, and brought together more than fifty clerics and intellectuals, both Sunni and Shiite. This was the first time that such a meeting had been held, and it involved establishment Wahhabi ulama as well as some former oppositionists who had termed the Shiites infidels. While the content of the discussions were not made public, the official Saudi Press Agency praised the gathering and quoted Abdallah as favoring such “quiet dialogue.”<sup>30</sup>

For the Shiites, the fact that the dialogue took place at all was an achievement, particularly since it was attended by both establishment Wahhabi ulama and more radical figures. After all, these ulama had met with Muslims who worshipped in

ways and had beliefs that were not in accordance with Wahhabi practice. But at the same time, the Shiite leadership did not receive any direct support from ulama or royal family members for integrating them into the political and economic life of the country. It is likely that the Saudi leadership believed that while a dialogue was desirable, under the current situation overt support for the Shiites was a risk they were not willing to take. Moreover, the ongoing al-Qaeda-led Sunni insurgency had dampened the regime's enthusiasm for any real reconciliation with the Shiites. In sum, one could say that the Shiites had gained some points in the dialogue, but remained far from any serious change in their basic situation.

There were two important events in 2005 for Saudi Arabia's Shiites. One was the accession of Abdallah to the throne in August, following the death of King Fahd. The other was the elections held for the Saudi municipal councils. When Abdallah became King, the Shiites thought their moment had finally arrived. He was the champion of reform and religious tolerance. A busload of leaders and clerics from the Eastern Province traveled to Riyadh to pledge their loyalty, or *baya*. A Shiite activist was quoted as saying, "I have never seen anything like this."<sup>31</sup>

In the spring of 2005, national elections were held for municipal councils. These were the first such elections in over forty years. Although some more radical Shiite clerics declared a boycott of the elections, Shaykh Saffar's policy of engagement carried the day. Coming on the heels of the Shiite victory in the January 2005 Iraqi elections, Saffar pointed to Iraq as an example of the need to participate in the process. The turnout was relatively high, even higher than in the rest of the kingdom. Even though the actual positions contested were for half the seats in powerless municipal councils (the other half being appointees), the campaign itself and the very fact that their vote counted was reason for great optimism among the Shiites. They won nearly all of the seats they contested.<sup>32</sup>

While Shiite participation in elections was reason for celebration, the Shiite ascendancy, which became evident in Iraq during 2005 and into 2006, increased tension between Sunnis and Shiites in the kingdom. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's remarks in March 2005 that Shiites were more loyal to Iran than their own countries elicited a flood of protests from Saudi Shiites, particularly since no one in the Saudi government found it necessary to contradict Mubarak and attest to the loyalty of Saudi Shiites.<sup>33</sup> But the perception on the part of Saudi Sunnis that Saudi Shiites were more loyal to Iran was very widespread, according to leading liberal Turki al-Hamad. "I'd say 90 percent of the people in Saudi Arabia don't trust the Shiites," he averred.<sup>34</sup>

The war in Lebanon in 2006, during which Hezbollah attacked Israeli cities and appeared triumphant, only worsened matters for Saudi Shiites. While Abdallah had been ready to meet publicly with Shiites (he was photographed with Saffar at the 2003 National Dialogue),<sup>35</sup> Hezbollah's popularity in the Arab world and its

destabilization of the pro-Saudi government in Lebanon was more than he could bear. The government came out strongly against Hezbollah and Iran, calling Hezbollah's kidnapping of Israeli soldiers Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser "rash adventures carried out by elements inside the state and those behind them." At the same time, there were pro-Hezbollah demonstrations in the Eastern province.<sup>36</sup> With this background, Abdallah was not able—or did not want—to restrain the traditional Wahhabi anti-Shiite polemics from bursting forth. At a time of Shiite ascendancy, the leading Sunni state could not be seen as coddling the Shiites.

The prominence of Hezbollah during the July 2006 war led to a discussion of the organization in particular, and by implication the Shiites in general, as well as the Shiites in Saudi Arabia. Safar al-Hawali, once of the opposition "Awakening Shaykhs," who became popular in the 1990s and still maintained his distance from the regime, castigated Hezbollah (the Party of God) as "Hizb al-Shaytan" (the Party of the Devil), and said that it was forbidden to pray for it or to support it in any way. His former partner in the opposition of the 1990s, now closer to the regime, Salman al-Awda, exhibited a more Arab nationalist bent, saying that while there were disputes with the Shiites, "I, as a Muslim and an Arab, feel happy when Hezbollah inflicts damage on the Zionists, and we should praise the resistance in the media."<sup>37</sup> The dividing line between the two oppositionists was clear. Hawali had boycotted the 2003 National Dialogue with the Shiites, while Awda had attended.

Extremist Wahhabi shaykhs continued to point out the "evil nature" of the Shiites. During the Lebanon war, a fatwa appeared on the internet by leading Sunni Shaykh Abdallah bin Jibrin, a former member of the establishment Senior Ulama Council, calling on Sunnis to disavow Hezbollah as a party of rawafid that was anti-Sunni.<sup>38</sup> Although Bin Jibrin later said this was an old fatwa that was no longer applicable to the present situation,<sup>39</sup> his anti-Shiite views were well known, and he had even called for Shiites' deaths in a fatwa published in 1991.<sup>40</sup>

Websites run by less established but still popular clerics published virulently anti-Shiite polemics. The Nur al-Islam website even had a special page dedicated to articles on the subject, entitled, "The Rawafid are Coming," and illustrated with bloody graphics.<sup>41</sup> Shiite websites castigated Bin Jibrin, warning him not to forget that he would have to face God on judgment day. The radical Hezbollah al-Hijaz issued a statement saying that Bin Jibrin had angered "all the sons of the Arabian Peninsula, not to mention the entire Islamic nation. This occurs while the Islamic nation is at the peak of its feelings of pride, dignity, and joys of victory over the sons of Zion, the victory that is recorded by the hand of the mujahidin of Lebanon's Hezbollah."<sup>42</sup>

The intensification of Sunni-Shiite strife in Iraq was reflected in a fatwa signed by 38 radical Sunni ulama in December 2006. Although it was addressed to the Sunnis of Iraq as a message of support, it was strongly anti-Shiite in general, complaining

about their un-Islamic practices. This fatwa had been organized by Shaykh Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, a radical cleric who still occasionally appeared on Saudi TV.<sup>43</sup> Barrak also issued his own fatwa proclaiming the infidelity (*takfir*) of the Shiites and their polytheistic practices, and repeated the old accusation that the sect had been founded by a Jew.<sup>44</sup> In January 2007, Bin Jibrin let his true colors fly, and published a fatwa on his own website giving eight reasons why the Shiites should be considered polytheists (*mushrikin*). He distinguished between the Shiites and “true Muslims.”<sup>45</sup>

For the Saudi Shiites who supported a model of cooperation with the regime, Shiite identification with Hezbollah proved particularly problematic. Saudi Arabia is a Sunni religious state. To identify with a Shiite movement, and, by implication, the Shiite state of Iran, ran counter to the normative Saudi ethos. As time wore on and Shiite regional ascendancy became more apparent, the Saudi Shaykh Salman al-Awda sounded the alarm about Sunni conversion to Shiism (*tashayyu*), expressing his fear that Shiite victories in Lebanon and Iraq might draw Sunnis away.<sup>46</sup> Many Saudi newspapers carried warnings from Wahhabi clerics against conversion to Shiism.<sup>47</sup> King Abdallah himself addressed this issue in an interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyasa* in late January. The interviewer referred to a “campaign” of Shiite proselytism and asked to know what Saudi Arabia’s position on the issue was as the source of religious authority (*marja*) for Sunni Muslims and protector of the law of God and His creed. Abdallah, accepting the premise of the question regarding the campaign and Saudi Arabia’s role as protector of the Sunnis, said that the Saudi leadership was following the issue, but that the Shiite campaign would fail because Sunnis held fast to their beliefs.<sup>48</sup> The presentation of Saudi Arabia as the source of religious authority for Sunni Muslims drew a stark distinction between Shiite Iran and Sunni Wahhabi Saudi Arabia.

**T**HE SAUDI REGIME IS CAUGHT BETWEEN ITS WAHHABI ROOTS AND WISHES by some in the royal family, particularly Abdallah, to effect reconciliation with the Shiites. A graphic illustration of this dilemma is shown by examples from two websites. A Saudi Sunni rabidly anti-Shiite website, *al-Furqan*, published a “document” stating that according to Shiite calculations, Abdallah would be killed on December 18, 2007, which is one month before the coming of the Shiite Mahdi.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the Shiite al-Rasid site published a tongue-in-cheek article entitled “King Abdallah is a Shiite” which expressed support for Abdallah, as a challenge to those who would say that they were more loyal to Iran than Saudi Arabia.<sup>50</sup>

In May 2007, Sunni activists hacked Saffar’s website and published the following message: “In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate: All rawafid websites will be attacked and all sites belonging to the *Majus* (pagan Zoroastrians—a reference to Iran) will be removed from the Internet.”<sup>51</sup>

In general, over the years there has been some improvement in the lot of the Shiites of Saudi Arabia. They are allowed to hold Ashura commemorations, publish Shiite works, open Shiite mosques and Shiite schools, albeit all in a very slow and highly scrutinized manner.<sup>52</sup> Even so, Saudi Shiites never stop worrying that their hard-won gains may evaporate one day and they do not have faith in the government. Paradoxically, the gains of their Iraqi brethren might cause them to lose what they have achieved in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Sunnis accuse Saudi Shiites of funding terrorism against Sunnis in Iraq, while Saudi Shiites accuse Saudi Sunnis of funneling funds to Sunni terrorists in Iraq. Saudi Shiites are also worried about extremists in their midst.<sup>53</sup> In the village of Awwamiya, some residents were reported to be carrying automatic weapons and wearing necklaces with a picture of Hezbollah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah.<sup>54</sup>

Saudi Shiites continue to be divided between those who favor further dialogue and those who want a more confrontational approach, while all Shiites perceive a lack of momentum regarding reform. Leaders such as Ja'afar al-Shayib, Muhammad Mahfuz and Hasan al-Saffar support continued engagement with the regime and the conservative Sunni elements of Saudi society, while others, such as the cleric Nimr al-Nimr pursue a more militant line. Some leaders have even proposed the establishment of a Saudi Shiite *marja al-taqlid* (source of religious emulation) in order to allay Sunni fears that the Saudi Shiites are influenced by Shiite clerics in Iran and Iraq.<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, those Shiite activists favoring dialogue are reaching out. Saffar has traveled to the Wahhabi stronghold of Unayza to meet clerics, and has invited them to visit him in the Eastern Province.<sup>56</sup> In April 2010, Saffar appeared on a televised debate with al-Barrak. While no progress was made, the Shiites could point to the fact that Barrak was willing to appear with Saffar as an indication that the approach of those favoring dialogue was making headway.<sup>57</sup>

In order to preserve their gains, the Shiites believe it is necessary for King Abdallah to speak out against anti-Shiite fatwas; indeed, they argue that such fatwas should be criminalized.<sup>58</sup> Otherwise, they maintain, matters run the danger of returning to the problematic 1980s. But it is likely the Saudi Shiites will be disappointed. Relations between the regime and the Shiite population are fraught with difficulty. Given the reliance of the regime on the Sunni Wahhabi clerics, it is unlikely that they will rein them in. The situation in Iraq has made it much harder to do so. The royal family feels keenly its role as a leader of the Sunni world, and local Sunnis are pressuring the regime to support the Sunnis in Iraq. In the face of the regional Shiite ascendancy marked by Hezbollah's performance against Israel, a possible Shiite state in Iraq, and a powerful Iran, it is likely that Saudi Shiites will continue to pay the price of being the ultimate "Other," sacrificed on the altar of the Wahhabi legitimacy on which the regime is so dependent.

## NOTES

1. On Saudi regional mediation efforts, see Joseph Kostiner, "Saudi Regional Strategy: The Power of Mediation," *Tel Aviv Notes*, March 25, 2007, online at <http://www.dayan.org>.
2. See Meir Litvak, "Worse than the Jews: The Anti-Shiite Polemics of Sunni Islamic Radicalism," in Tamar Yegnes (ed.), *Sunna and Shi'a: The Changing Balance of Power* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center, 2008), pp. 43-57 (Hebrew).
3. On the history of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia, see: Guido Steinberg, "The Shiites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia al-Ahsa, 1913-1953," in Rainer Brunner and Werner Ende (eds.), *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), pp. 236-251; Fuad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi, 2006). See also Werner Ende, "The Nakhawila: A Shiite Community in Medina, Past and Present," *Die Welt des Islams*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (November 1997), pp. 263-348.
4. On Shiite terrorism, see Joshua Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou: Saudi Arabia's Islamic Opposition* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), chapter 6.
5. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 199-200.
6. "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia," International Crisis Group, September 19, 2005; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Franke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), p. 180.
7. The Qatif hawza was known as "little Najaf." The authorities appear to be exercising benign neglect with two currently operating hawzas: one in Qatif and one in al-Hasa. "Shiite Question."
8. For more details on the implications for the Shiites of the capture of al-Hasa, see Steinberg.
9. "Shiite Question." Steinberg raised the possibility that until the Saudi conquest Shiites may have even formed the majority in al-Hasa.
10. Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 199-200.
11. Steinberg, pp. 248-249.
12. "Shiite Question."
13. Ibrahim, p. 33.
14. Toby Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Modernization, Marginalization, and the Shia Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May 2006), pp. 213-233. While the regime was busy putting down a Shiite uprising in the Eastern province, Wahhabi radicals took over the Great Mosque in Mecca. On this incident, see Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 19-22, and Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al-Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).
15. Ibrahim, p. 33.
16. Hasan al-Saffar, *Kalimat al-Haraka al-Islamiyya*, p. 30, quoted in Ibrahim, p. 132.
17. Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 49-71.
18. Madawi Al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25 (1998), pp. 121-138; Mamoun Fandy, "From Confrontation to Creative Resistance," *Critique* (Fall 1996), pp. 1-27; Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia," in Ami Ayalon, (ed.), *Middle East Contemporary Survey (MECS) 1993* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995), pp. 575-600; "What Future for the Saudi-Shiite Accord?," *Mideast Mirror* Vol. 8, No. 54, March 18, 1994.

19. See al-Diyar, October 13, 1993; Youssef M. Ibrahim, "Saudi Officials Reporting Accord with Shiite Foes," *New York Times*, October 29, 1993, p. A11; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, November 1, 1993; *al Alam*, November 13, 1993; for Shiite oppositionist attacks on the Saudi regime, see various issues of *al-Jazira al-Arabiyya* and *Arabia Monitor*, as well as the article in the summer 1993 issue of *Arab Review*, detailing Saudi abuse of holy sites in Mecca and Medina."
20. See *al Alam*, November 13, 1993.
21. "Shiite Question."
22. "Shiite Question."
23. "Shiite Question."
24. *Al-Nasr*, October 1993, quoted in Ibrahim, p. 196.
25. Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, pp. 84-94. The most recent study of Hezbollah al-Hijaz and its clerical wing, Tajammu Ulama al-Hijaz, is Toby Matthiesen, "Hezbollah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group." *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010), pp. 179-197.
26. *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, January 30, February 14, 2003; "Shiite Question."
27. *Washington Post*, April 22; *AFP*, 23, 24 April; *arabicnews.com*, April 24; *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 1; *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2003.
28. For the text of the petition, see *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 1, 2003.
29. Joshua Teitelbaum, "Terrorist Challenges to Saudi Arabian Internal Security," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 1-11.
30. *AFP*, June 18, 21 2003; "Shiite Question."
31. Toby Jones, "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report*, No. 237 (Winter 2005).
32. "Shiite Question;" *AFP*, March 3, 2005.
33. April 10, 2006, <http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=10664>;  
April 12, 2006, <http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=10698>;  
April 17, 2006, <http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=10771>. Al-Rasid is a Saudi Shiite website.
34. *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 2006.
35. F. Gregory Gause, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (March 2007),  
<http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/archivebydate.html#vol6>.
36. Demonstrations with participants carrying pictures of Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah were reported to have been held in Qatif in July and August. Several arrests were made. In October, during Ramadan, the authorities arrested four more Shiites after they brandished a Hezbollah dinner at an *iftar* gathering. July 21, 2006, <http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=12054>; *Haaretz (English edition)*, October 17, 2006.
37. *AP*, August 4, 5, 2006.
38. Federal Broadcast Information Service, OSC Report, August 16, 2006; *Middle East Times*, July 24, 2006.
39. See the article explaining Bin Jibrin's position on the al-Arabiyya website at <http://www.alarabiya.net/Articles/2006/08/08/26443.htm>.
40. Ibrahim, p. 197; Teitelbaum, *Holier Than Thou*, p. 46.
41. <http://www.islamlight.net/Files/Rwafeth/>.
42. Federal Broadcast Information Service, OSC Report, August 16, 2006.
43. December 11, 2006, <http://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=3818>; *Reuters*, December 11, 2006.
44. December 17, 2006,  
[http://albarrak.islamlight.net/index.php?option=com\\_ftawa&task=view&id=18080&Itemid=7](http://albarrak.islamlight.net/index.php?option=com_ftawa&task=view&id=18080&Itemid=7),  
cited in Gause. See also FBIS, Saudi Clerics Roundup, 19-23 February 2007.

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48. *Al-Siyasa*, January 27, 2007.
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55. Fred Wehrey, "Shi'a Pessimistic About Reform, but Seek Reconciliation," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, August 19, 2008.
56. Wehrey, "Shi'a Pessimistic."
57. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 15, 2010.
58. *Christian Science Monitor*, January 18, 2007.