



**Combating Terrorism Center**  
at West Point



## **Occasional Paper Series**

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Shi'a Militancy Program

# **Embattled in Arabia**

**Shi'is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia**

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## Preface

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In the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point has extended significant efforts to understand the ideologies and strategies guiding terrorist groups, as well as the tactics and techniques they employ to inflict damage on their adversaries. As became painfully evident on 9/11, Al Qaeda and its associated groups and networks—Sunni extremist movements—posed the most formidable terrorist threat to U.S. national security. For that reason, the CTC’s research program focused on analyzing trends pertaining to Sunni militant groups.

Although there is little reason to believe that threats emanating from Sunni extremist groups will subside in the foreseeable future, a number of recent international developments suggest that activities involving Shi’i state and non-state actors also have the potential to affect U.S. national security interests. The deliberate strategy pursued by Iran to extend its influence abroad; the military build-up of Hizballah and the global diffusion of its cells; sectarian violence in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Gulf States, and other regions; and the emergence of previously unknown militant Shi’i groups in places such as Iraq are only a few examples for why the growing specter of Shi’a militancy deserves closer attention among scholars and policymakers.

Recognizing a glaring gap in informed and objective scholarship on Shi’a militancy, and devoted to help the academic and policymaking communities better grasp current and future trends in political violence used by a wide variety of actors, the CTC established the Shi’a Militancy Program in 2008. Directed by Dr. Assaf Moghadam, Senior Associate at the CTC and Assistant Professor at the U.S. Military Academy, the CTC’s Shi’a Militancy Program aims to investigate the real or potential emergence of Shi’a militancy, as well as its causes, nature, and potential implications for U.S. national security. The program will center around three main subject areas: Shi’a militancy, terrorism, and political violence; Shi’i radicalization; and Sunni-Shi’a sectarian violence.

The CTC’s attention to Shi’a militancy will balance its ongoing dedication to the understanding of Sunni extremism and other forms of terrorism and political violence by non-Islamic groups. In line with its overall research philosophy, the CTC’s products related to the Shi’a Militancy Program will result from inductive, objective, and dispassionate analysis. The products will emphasize and utilize empirical evidence in order to reach sound conclusions.

The present monograph, *Embattled in Arabia: Shi`is and the Politics of Confrontation in Saudi Arabia* by Dr. Toby Jones, is the third monograph to be published under the framework of the Shi`a Militancy Program. It follows the publication, in 2008, of *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and 'Other Means'* edited by Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, and of *Sunni and Shi`i Terrorism: Differences that Matter* by Thomas F. Lynch III. *Embattled in Arabia* is the first of three monographs to appear in 2009 that examine Shi`a militancy in a specific country, with the second installment appearing in the fall and the third in the winter. *Embattled in Arabia* and its two follow-on monographs are chapters from a forthcoming volume edited by Assaf Moghadam titled *Shi`a Ideology and Militancy after 1979*.

*Embattled in Arabia* is important in that it provides little known background to Sunni-Shi`a tensions in the heart of the Islamic world and the seat of Islam's holiest sites. It is especially timely in light of the fact that sectarian violence in Saudi Arabia has escalated during 2009—violence whose underlying causes, as this report makes clear, remain inadequately addressed.

#### **About the Author of "Embattled in Arabia"**

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**The opinions expressed in this report are the author's and do not reflect the official positions of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other U.S. government agency.**

## Executive Summary

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Sectarian ferment has reached a fever pitch in Saudi Arabia. In a country where religious difference is typically met with antagonism, the kingdom's 2 million Shi'is today face even more alarming levels of hostility than usual. In February 2009, Saudi religious and security forces assaulted hundreds of Shi'a pilgrims in Medina. In the months that followed, tensions between Shi'is, the government, and prominent Sunni religious scholars has escalated. Adil al-Kalbani, called the Saudi Obama for being the first black imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca and for having a reputation as a moderate, recently denounced Shi'ism as a form of apostasy. Kalbani's provocation is particularly disturbing, as it seems to signal the government's willingness to condone an escalation of sectarian rancor. Some Shi'a leaders have also fanned the flames of discord. One prominent cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, recently called for Shi'is, most of whom live in the oil rich Eastern Province, to secede from the kingdom. He subsequently went into hiding to avoid a state manhunt.

The rapid poisoning of Shi'i-Sunni relations in Saudi Arabia is alarming as is the government's role in enabling the worst excesses of the religious establishment's anti-Shi'a tendencies. One of the most worrisome trends in recent months, however, is the radicalization of the Shi'a community. The specter of Shi'a militancy hangs over Saudi Arabia, as potentially violent groups of Shi'is are agitating for confrontation. These include the reemergence of Hizballah in the Hijaz (Saudi Hizballah), the group many believe was responsible for the 1996 bombings in al-Khobar that killed 19 American military personnel.

Considering the depth of anti-Shi'a sentiment historically and today in Saudi Arabia, the potential for Shi'a radicalism is perhaps unsurprising. There have been violent trends in the Shi'a community in the past, most notably during a mass rebellion in 1979. But, as *Embattled in Arabia* argues, the dominant political trend in the Shi'a community has not been violent. For the most part, the community and its leaders have and continue to seek protection from religious extremism as well as social and political justice. They have promoted and sought accommodation rather than confrontation. This pursuit of integration and tolerance is under considerable pressure today. Under fire from the government and the religious forces in the kingdom, the conditions for a new Shi'a militancy are taking shape. *Embattled in Arabia* examines the recent political history of Saudi Arabia's Shi'is, the terms of their relations with a hostile government, and the patterns of confrontation that have emerged in the past three decades.

## Introduction

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On June 25, 1996, the detonation of a massive truck bomb, a converted fuel tanker laden with as much as 25,000 pounds of explosives, ripped through an apartment building in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, shattering the quiet of this former fishing village on the Persian Gulf coast.<sup>1</sup> The blast, which left a crater 85 feet deep and 35 feet wide, took aim at a residential complex being used to house foreign military personnel, killing 19 American servicemen and wounding almost four hundred others.<sup>2</sup> The bombing sent shockwaves throughout both Saudi Arabia and the United States. The strike forced the United States to reposition thousands of its military personnel to more secure facilities deeper in the heart of the kingdom. It also sent American investigators and politicians scrambling to figure out who was responsible. Despite the magnitude of the attack, its deadly toll, and what would appear to be the clear anti-American political message behind it, little is known for certain about the identities of the attackers or their networks of support in Saudi Arabia, and perhaps more importantly, their foreign loyalties.

Initial speculation and subsequent investigation strongly suggested that those responsible for the bombing were members of Hizballah in the Hijaz (Saudi Hizballah), a Shi'i organization founded in 1987 in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province. Saudi authorities immediately rounded up hundreds of suspects in Shi'i communities, including Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Hubail, one of Saudi Hizballah's founders.<sup>3</sup> The Saudi government refused to share intelligence or evidence with American investigators, preferring to treat the incident as an internal security matter. In 2001, a Virginia-based federal grand jury issued indictments against 13 Saudi Shi'is and one member of Lebanese Hizballah suspected of complicity in the bombing. The indictment was announced at a press conference held by Attorney General John Ashcroft and mapped out an argument that the real responsibility for the bombings lay with Iran. It further

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates for the amount of explosives used in the Khobar Towers bombing range from 3,000 to 20,000 pounds. See *The Khobar Towers Bombing Incident* (Washington, D.C.: House National Security Committee, 14 August 1996); *Report to the President and Congress on the Protection of U.S. Forces Deployed Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 15 September 1996); and *Independent Review of the Khobar Towers Bombing* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Air Force, 31 October 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Islamic Extremism in Saudi Arabia and the Attack on al-Khobar* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2001), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report No. 45, 19 September 2005, p. 6. The Saudi based and illegal Shi'i website [www.rasid.com](http://www.rasid.com) claims that over 200 Shi'is were arrested by Saudi authorities in the aftermath of the bombings. See "Sujana' mansiuun" [The Forgotten Prisoners], 15 June 2004 (<http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=1921>). Last accessed 12 May 2008. Several of those arrested in 1996 remain in prison.

claimed that Saudi Hizballah was “inspired, supported, and directed by elements of the Iranian government.”<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the evidence marshaled by the U.S. government, considerable mystery continues to surround the bombing. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States there has been some speculation, including from the 9/11 Commission, that al-Qaeda may have been responsible for the bombings or that it may have coordinated the strike with Saudi Hizballah.<sup>5</sup> Al-Qaeda’s culpability in the 1996 bombing seems unlikely, although it cannot be definitively dismissed.<sup>6</sup> More worrisome, as outlined in the 2001 indictment, is the apparent involvement of Iran in a major act of terrorism against the United States and its interests abroad. Indeed, the Khobar Towers bombing is often held up as primary evidence of Iran’s role as a sponsor of global anti-American terrorism.

Yet, while the bombing raises important and disturbing questions about Tehran’s complicity in international terrorism, discussions of Saudi Hizballah rarely address the local political context that gave rise to the organization or that fueled its radicalization. Indeed, most commentary on the bombings and on Shi’is in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf more generally assume a preternatural link between them and Shi’i Iran. Indeed, since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Shi’a politics and activism in Saudi Arabia has typically been characterized as inspired, influenced, and even directed by Iran. These assumptions are wide of the mark. Although Iran’s revolutionary turn galvanized political activism abroad—it did help inspire a revolt in Saudi Arabia in 1979—the politicization of the kingdom’s Shi’is was more the result of domestic political, social, and economic factors than of external influence. Moreover, while the radicalization of 1979 and the outbreak of violence in 1996 seem to suggest that Shi’is in Saudi Arabia have been quick to embrace violence to achieve political ends, these episodes have in fact been aberrant. Assumptions that Saudi Arabia’s Shi’is are pawns of Iran, that they harbor irredentist sentiments toward Iran, and that they are easily radicalized, overlook their complex political background. Most importantly, such claims ignore a long history in which Saudi Shi’is have sought to co-exist peacefully with Sunnis in Saudi Arabia. But while Shi’is have historically preferred accommodation and co-existence, the heavy hand of an

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<sup>4</sup> Cordesman, *Islamic Extremism*, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report* (W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), p. 60; and author’s interviews in Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of claims of al-Qaeda’s involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing, see Thomas Hegghammer, “Deconstructing the Myth about al-Qa’ida Khobar,” *CTC Sentinel*, February 2008, Vol. 1, Issue 3, p. 21.

oppressive state has occasioned their embrace of violence. Events in early 2009, including an assault by Saudi religious and security forces on Shi'a pilgrims in the holy city of Medina, have heightened the possibility that Shi'is will respond to government oppression by lashing out violently. A turn to confrontation must be understood as the outcome of the many difficulties endured by the kingdom's Shi'is and by the Saudi government's continued unwillingness to address the community's long-standing frustrations and grievances. It is unlikely that Saudi Shi'is will embrace militancy as a long-term political strategy. Given, however, that they face deeply rooted sectarian antipathy and a state that condones the worst excesses of anti-Shi'a extremists, a violent outburst may only be a matter of time.

To understand the depth of Shi'a anger and desperation, and the specter of their radicalization, this monograph examines the history and politics of Saudi Arabia's Shi'is and their goals. The study seeks to address these questions by examining the history of political Shi'ism in Saudi Arabia as well as the present political posture of the kingdom's leading Shi'i activists.

### **Conquest and Suppression under the al-Sa'ud**

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The vast majority of Saudi Arabia's estimated 2 million Shi'is make their home in the Eastern Province, which is also home to all of the kingdom's oil reserves.<sup>7</sup> Most are Twelvers, putting them in line with the majority of Shi'is globally who believe that the twelfth Imam went into occultation in the ninth century.<sup>8</sup> In addition to a small community of Shi'is in Mecca, Medina, and Riyadh, around 100,000 Ismailis live near the Yemeni border in Najran.<sup>9</sup> Historically, and in spite of almost continuous Sunni domination since the fourteenth century, eastern Arabia—known as al-Hasa—has been an important Shi'i cultural and religious center.<sup>10</sup> Local residents regularly attended mosques and *husseiniyyas* (community centers), participated in significant religious rituals such as Ashura

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<sup>7</sup> There are no reliable census data for Saudi Arabia. The kingdom's indigenous population is estimated at around 17 million. Estimates for the Shi'a population range from 5 percent to 15 percent.

<sup>8</sup> Twelver Shi'is believe that the twelfth Imam, the final spiritual and political successor to the prophet Muhammad, was sent into hiding by God in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Most Shi'is believe he will eventually return as the Mahdi, the Muslim savior of humankind.

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question*, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Notable religious figures from eastern Arabia include the sixteenth century scholar Ibrahim al-Qatifi, Ahmed Zayn ad-Din al-Ahsa'i (d. 1801), and Ali al-Khunayzi (d. 1944). See Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture, and History of Shi'ite Islam* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001).



and, until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were even able to study in local *hawzas* (seminaries).<sup>11</sup> Al-Hasa was also incorporated into regional networks of learning, as aspiring religious scholars regularly ventured to Iraq for higher education.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the rapid dismantling and suppression of Shi'i institutions and cultural life. In 1913, backed by a zealous militia known as the *ikhwan* (brothers), the al-Sa'ud defeated an Ottoman garrison in al-Hasa and established a military and political occupation instead.<sup>12</sup> The Saudi conquests were motivated by a combination of political, economic, and ideological interests.<sup>13</sup> The two main settled communities in Qatif and the al-Hasa oasis (from which the entire region derived its name) were notable for their fertility and commercial vibrancy, particularly compared to the austere environs and isolation of the al-Sa'ud's Najdi homeland in central Arabia. Blessed with sprawling palm gardens and reservoirs of fresh spring water, Hasawi and Qatifi farmers harvested and exported dates for both local and foreign consumption. Qatif was also an important commercial center, as imports from central Asia and even eastern Africa made their way from the local port to markets across the peninsula.<sup>14</sup>

While the Saudis' imperial ambition was driven in large measure by aspirations of wealth and the desire to grab hold of Qatif's and al-Hasa's natural bounties, these were not the only motivators. Fears of military invasion of the sort that had toppled earlier Saudi polities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century drove the al-Sa'ud to secure a broad defensive perimeter on the peninsula, enabling them to push back foreign and preempt local threats. In addition to security concerns, Saudi imperial expansion was also shaped by the family's embrace of Wahhabism. Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the al-Sa'ud had aligned themselves with the

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<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question*, p 1. See also interview with Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the preeminent Shi'i religious and political figure in Saudi Arabia today, in *al-Medina*, 8 October 2004. According to al-Saffar, the *hawza* in Qatif was known as Little Najaf.

<sup>12</sup> See Hamza al-Hassan, *Shia fi al-Mamlaka al-Arabiyya al-Sa'udiyya*, Vol. 2. (1993); and John S. Habib, *Ibn Sa'ud's Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in the Creation of the Sa'udi Kingdom, 1910-1930* (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> The al-Sa'ud and the *ikhwan* would subsequently conquer the cities of Mecca and Medina between 1924 and 1926. The *ikhwan* eventually revolted against the al-Sa'ud, but were defeated militarily in 1930. Abd al-Aziz Ibn Sa'ud declared the creation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. The 20<sup>th</sup> century incorporation of al-Hasa into the Saudi political realm was not the first time that the al-Sa'ud had exercised dominion over the area. Saudi leaders had extended their dominion into al-Hasa in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and again in the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, only to have their rule shortened by foreign interventions. See Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Chapters One and Two.

<sup>14</sup> Guido Steinberg, "Ecology, Knowledge, and Trade in Central Arabia (Najd) during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, Madawi al-Rasheed and Robert Vitalis, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 77-102.

descendants and adherents of the reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Successive Saudi leaders have forged and maintained a partnership with leading Wahhabi religious scholars who, in exchange for authority over spiritual and cultural matters, have bestowed religious credibility on the political leadership of the al-Sa'ud.<sup>15</sup> The Saudi-Wahhabi alliance, and the indoctrination of the *ikhwan* with a belief that Islam demanded perpetual conquest, further fueled imperial growth. Wahhabism also shaped the ways the conquered communities would be treated. For al-Hasa's Shi'is, the arrival of Wahhabism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was portentous.

Although Shi'i religious community leaders negotiated a quick surrender and recognition of Saudi political authority in 1913 in exchange for leniency, the Shi'a communities in al-Hasa and Qatif were subjected to harsh oversight and cruelty.<sup>16</sup> In the 1920s some of the most outspoken members of the *ikhwan* advocated that conquered Shi'is either be forced to convert to Wahhabism or be killed—demands that would be repeated decades later. Although Saudi leaders historically restrained those advocating genocide, the government consistently and vigorously oppressed and discriminated against Shi'is over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> Shi'i institutions, including mosques, community centers and local *hawzas* were shut down and the annual Ashura mourning commemorations were banned. Part of the explanation for the Saudi heavy-hand had to do with the strictures of Wahhabism itself, which declared Shi'ism a form of heresy.

Given Wahhabism's exalted status in Saudi Arabia, anti-Shi'ism was built into the structure of political and religious authority and became pervasive in cultural and social institutions. The Saudi education system, for example, has historically preached intolerance for religious views that diverge from core Wahhabi tenets. Not only has Shi'ism been singled out as apostasy in the Saudi curriculum, but Shi'i students have been forced to endure direct sectarian reprobation in the classroom. Shi'is also have historically faced considerable discrimination in public and private employment, struggling to land jobs, and advance professionally.

Anti-Shi'i enmity intensified considerably after the 1979 Iranian revolution, when Iran's leader Ayatollah Khomeini regularly called for the overthrow of the al-

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<sup>15</sup> See Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> See Guido Steinberg, "The Shiites in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (al-Ahsa), 1913–1953," in *The Twelver Shia in Modern Times: Religious Culture and Political History*, ed. R. Brunner and W. Ende (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Sa'ud. Iranian-Saudi tensions peaked in 1987, when hundreds of Iranian pilgrims staged an anti-Saudi demonstration while on the Hajj in Mecca. Saudi authorities responded violently, killing almost three hundred Iranians and over a hundred others. During the 1980s and early 1990s, prominent Saudi religious scholars routinely denounced Shi'is and even justified ethnic cleansing against them. A series of books and pamphlets were circulated around the kingdom that sought to discredit Shi'a theology and even exhorted violence against the minority.<sup>18</sup> In 1991 Nasir al-'Umar, a popular cleric who rose to prominence in the 1980s as part of the *al-sahwa al-Islamiyya* (the Islamic Awakening), published a widely distributed sectarian screed called "The Rafida in the Land of Tawhid."<sup>19</sup> Abdullah bin Jibrin, a member of the Higher Council of 'Ulama, even issued a *fatwa* (religious ruling) condoning the killing of Shi'is. While sectarian acrimony quieted some in the late 1990s, anti-Shi'i fulmination spiked in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the political empowerment of Iraq's Shi'i majority.<sup>20</sup>

### **Toward Political Shi'ism in Saudi Arabia**

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Given the considerable degree of anti-Shi'a opprobrium in Saudi Arabia today and historically, the community's leaders have mostly sought to distance themselves from the political arena. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Shi'i religious scholars generally followed the path of political quietism, preferring to focus their energies on protecting what remained of their juridical and religious authority in the face of significant sectarian pressures and restrictions. They avoided direct confrontation with the powerful Saudi state and the religious establishment, partly out of fear of a more repressive crackdown but also partly as a product of the historical social and political relations that had long prevailed in Shi'a communities. Whatever the impetus behind their quietist approach to politics, the combination of Saudi-Wahhabi oppression and the clergy's caution contributed to the erosion of their standing. As the International Crisis Group

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<sup>18</sup> Some of the key anti-Shi'i treatises include Ibrahim Sulayman al-Jabhan's 1980 book *Removing the Darkness and Awakening to the Danger of Shi'ism to Muslims and Islam* [abdid al-zalam wa tanbih al-niyam ila khatar al-tashayyu' 'ala al-muslimin wa al-islam]. Other inflammatory texts include a series of popular volumes by the Pakistani author Ihsan Ilahi Zahir, *The Shi'a and the Sunna*, *The Shi'a and the Qur'an*, and *The Shi'a and the Prophet's Family*.

<sup>19</sup> See Toby Jones, "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report*, 237, Winter 2005. The article states that "Rafida, or rawafid, is a pejorative term meaning "rejectionists," a reference to how radical Sunnis consider the Shi'a to be outside Islam.

<sup>20</sup> See Toby Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shiism," *Middle East Report*, 242, Spring 2006, for details about the most recent sectarian vitriol coming out of Saudi Arabia.

has written, “with the dismantling of local *hawzas* and religious schools, Shiites grew almost totally dependent for guidance on foreign instruction and senior clerics from abroad. Most importantly, the loss of independence led to the eclipse of senior *mujtahids*, the most senior religious authorities.”<sup>21</sup> Clerics and community leaders did periodically attempt to press local and central authorities for relief from discrimination, but they did so quietly and without significant success.<sup>22</sup>

In spite of the quietism of the religious leadership, Shi’is from the Eastern Province were politically active as early as the 1940s, supporting secular nationalist political movements including Nasserism and Arab nationalism, and creating local Ba’th and communist parties, most of whose leadership were Shi’a.<sup>23</sup> After World War II, thousands of local residents left their towns and villages in al-Hasa and Qatif to work for the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco), whose operations and oil exploration activities were concentrated in the Eastern Province. Poor working and housing conditions at Aramco, including overt racism and what Robert Vitalis calls the importation of Jim Crow, politicized much of the labor force in the 1950s and 1960s, leading to regular work-stoppages and demands by labor that the oil company and the state undertake measures to improve their lot.<sup>24</sup> Instead, both Aramco and the Saudi government cracked down on workers, arresting the principal organizers and crushing union activity. The creation of local Ba’th and Communist parties were direct results of labor radicalization and harsh treatment of the workforce.<sup>25</sup>

Politics in Saudi Arabia’s Shi’i communities began to transform in the late 1960s and 1970s, a period marked by political ferment and, most importantly, by the emergence and crystallization of modern political Shi’ism, which rejected the political quietism of earlier generations. It was from this period that the leaders of today’s Shi’a leadership emerged and in which their approach to politics and ideology took shape. A young generation of aspiring Saudi religious scholars,

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<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Hassan, *Shi’a fi al-Mamlaka*.

<sup>23</sup> See Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia in the Oil Era: Regime and Elites: Conflict and Collaboration* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1988); and *Saudi Arabia: Society, Government and the Gulf Crises* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> The Saudi Ba’ath party published a monthly newsletter from 1973 to 1980 called *Sawt al-Tal’iyya*. The newsletter frequently published stories about the relationship between oil and authoritarianism, the corruption of the al-Sa’ud, American imperialism, as well as gossip about the idiosyncrasies, infidelities, and excesses of the royal family. Although many of the leading members of the Ba’ath were Shi’a, sectarianism and anti-Shi’ism did elicit much comment from the publishers of *Sawt al-Tal’iyya*.

including Hassan al-Saffar and Tawfiq al-Sayf, came of age during this period while studying in Najaf, Iraq, the spiritual heartland of global Shi'ism.<sup>26</sup> The young Saudi students were deeply influenced by the rise of political Shi'i groups such as Hizb al-Da'wa in Iraq. In the mid-to-late 1970s, the emergence of Ayatollah Khomeini as a revolutionary figure also proved influential. His call for revolutionary politics helped stir Shi'is to action in the late 1970s and he remained symbolically important for Saudi political activists into the 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

Iraq's Ba'thist authorities drove the Saudi contingent out of Najaf in 1973, claiming that several were engaged in espionage.<sup>28</sup> Hassan al-Saffar, who would shoot to prominence in the late 1970s and is today the Shi'a community's most powerful political activist, initially fled to Qom, Iran. Al-Saffar recalled in an interview given to a major Saudi newspaper in 2004 that he and his peers, as Arabs, felt uncomfortable in Iran. Within a year of their arrival in Qom, they departed for Kuwait, where they began a course of studies with Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husseini al-Shirazi and his nephew, Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi. The two Iraqi clerics had relocated from Karbala, also as a result of the poisoned and dangerous political climate in Ba'thist Iraq. Al-Shirazi established a religious school in Kuwait and promoted an approach to politics that would subsequently become synonymous with his name (Shiraziyya) and whose influence profoundly shaped Shi'a politics throughout the Gulf, particularly in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.<sup>29</sup>

Although al-Shirazi agreed with Khomeini's view that the clergy should form a political class and assume positions of political responsibility within the state, he disagreed with the absolute power that Khomeini had reserved for a single individual in his vision of *velayat-e-faqih*, the rule of the jurisconsult. Al-Shirazi

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<sup>26</sup> Hassan al-Saffar is the most notable of the young activists to emerge in the 1970s. Today he is the most important political and religious figure in the Shi'a community. Tawfiq al-Sayf was also a prominent figure. Today he is a well-known newspaper columnist, where he denounces sectarianism and promotes religious tolerance. Other prominent members of this generation include Mahmud al-Sayf, Yusuf Salman al-Mahdi, Hassan Makki al-Khawayldi, Musa Abu Khamsin, and Hussein Abu Khamsin. See *al-Medina*, 22 October 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization, and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 38 (2006), pp. 213-233.

<sup>28</sup> *Al-Medina*, 15 October 2004. For more on Ba'thist paranoia of Shi'is in Iraq see Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada* (New York: Scribner, 2008); Gareth Stansfield, *Iraq: People, History, Politics* (New York: Polity, 2007), Chapter Five; Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Chapter Six; and Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> See Laurence Louër's fantastic study of Shi'ism in the Persian Gulf for an extended analysis of the Shiraziyya. Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008). See also International Crisis Group, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, Middle East Report No. 40, 6 May 2005.

and al-Mudarrisi also incorporated political Islamist texts from around the region, including the works of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Abul Ala Mawdudi, into their core curriculum.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the 1970s, al-Saffar and his supporters would periodically return to Qatif and al-Hasa, where they attempted to organize a grass-roots political organization called the Shi'a Reform Movement. They also "circulated audiocassettes, delivered Friday sermons and distributed literature advocating a more politically minded brand of Shiism," one that directly challenged the quietism of their more senior elders.<sup>31</sup>

The Shirazi network in Saudi Arabia advocated a limited set of objectives. In the mid-to-late 1970s it did not call for the overthrow of the al-Sa'ud or violent radicalization. Instead, it sought the amelioration of anti-Shi'a discrimination and the improvement of environmental, economic and social conditions in Qatif and al-Hasa. In spite of the massive revenues generated by the oil boom earlier in the decade, Shi'is saw little of the largesse. Most lived in considerable squalor and lacked access to basic health care and other social services.<sup>32</sup> In 1977, al-Saffar returned to Saudi Arabia for good and began a more concerted campaign to build up local networks and support. He and his supporters failed, however, to produce any significant changes in the difficult conditions that most Shi'is faced, as the Saudi state exerted little effort to improve the conditions of Qatif and al-Hasa.<sup>33</sup> As government neglect and discrimination continued to fuel intense bitterness amongst Saudi Shi'is, the Shi'a Reform Movement was able to make limited initial headway in eroding support for the established religious elite. Within two years, however, al-Saffar and the partisans of the Shiraziyya would not only command widespread respect in Qatif and al-Hasa, but also lead a popular protest movement that took the streets to oppose Saudi tyranny.

## The Revolutionary Turn

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The Shiraziyya's change in fortunes and their rise to political prominence was partly driven by the energizing impact of the Islamic revolution in neighboring Iran on Saudi Arabia's Shi'is, but was also fueled by local frustrations and the

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<sup>30</sup> *Al-Medina*, 15 October 2004.

<sup>31</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question*, p. 3. See also Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York: Palgrave, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> See Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, pp. 217-222.

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," in *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, eds., Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 239.

course of local events in 1979. The combination of local and foreign factors not only galvanized local Shi'i politics but also radicalized it, as evidenced in late November 1979, when thousands of Shi'is in Qatif and the surrounding villages staged mass demonstrations against the Saudi regime.

In the months leading up to the 1979 uprising, local leaders had grown increasingly bold in asserting Shi'i interests, while Saudi authorities grew increasingly anxious about the tone of political rhetoric inside the kingdom as well as that emanating from Iran. Shortly after returning to Iran in February 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini began calls to export the revolution to Iran's neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia. Tehran even beamed a powerful radio signal into Saudi Arabia, exhorting Saudis to revolt against the kingdom and overthrow the al-Sa'ud.<sup>34</sup> In response, local security forces in Qatif began systematically rounding up and detaining Shi'is suspected of sympathizing or even coordinating with Iran. While the state had exerted pressure in the past, the resort to a police crackdown was considered particularly excessive. Local religious leaders further aggravated the government's anxieties in late summer 1979, when they announced their intention to observe the Muharram commemoration for the first time in decades and, more importantly, in direct opposition to the Saudi state's ban on public rituals.<sup>35</sup> The heightened political atmosphere and the expectation of a confrontation was compounded by the organizational efforts of Shi'i students at the University of Minerals and Petroleum in Dammam, the capital of the Eastern Province.<sup>36</sup>

On November 26, 1979, the first public processions commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein took place in Safwa, an exclusively Shi'i village adjacent to Qatif, with around 4,000 observers turning out, in spite of government warnings that it would not tolerate them. Two nights later, the Ashura commemoration in Sayhat, a village north of Qatif, turned violent as marchers taunted Saudi National Guardsmen with anti-regime slogans.<sup>37</sup> A tense standoff between the demonstrators and the National Guard evolved into a violent melee, in which several marchers were killed. Several dozen Shi'is died in what turned into a week of violent street clashes between 20,000 Saudi National Guard and thousands of rebels. The violence ebbed in early December, after demonstrations spread to Dammam and al-Hasa. Subsequent

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery," p. 222.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*.

<sup>37</sup> The main taunt was "ya Khalid shil idak, kul al-sha'b ma yuridak." [Oh [King] Khalid release your hands [from power], the people do not want you.] Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery," p. 223.

demonstrations would erupt in January and February, but a severe government crackdown prevented a more sustained rebellion.<sup>38</sup>

The intensity of the uprising was driven in large part by the cumulative effect of years of frustration, but the heavy-handed government response to unfolding events also fed the energy. Early turnout for the first Ashura processions was unprecedented, but the numbers of marchers swelled from a few thousand to tens of thousands *after* the deployment of the Saudi National Guard and the first violent confrontations between security forces and local residents. The spontaneous nature of the rebellion and its rapid intensification underscored its local roots. Those who took to the streets were certainly emboldened by events across the Persian Gulf in Iran, but the Saudi uprising was not coordinated with or by Iranian agents. Nor did it reflect irredentist sentiment on the part of Saudi Shi'is. The rebels were neither calling for secession from Saudi Arabia, nor for becoming part of a regional Shi'i state. The dominant political discourse called for the extension of human rights, the end of Saudi authoritarianism, political pluralism, and an end to discrimination.

Saudi security eventually quelled the uprising by cordoning off the area and successfully using force to break the strikers' ability to sustain momentum. But while the rebellion ran out of steam in little more than a week, it marked a profound turning point in the evolution of political Shi'ism in Saudi Arabia, as well as relations between Shi'is and the Saudi state.

Hassan al-Saffar and the Shi'a Reform Movement played an important role in the events of 1979 and certainly helped shape what would become the dominant political discourse of the uprising and the decade that followed. In one

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<sup>38</sup> Saudi authorities were understandably concerned that the rebellion in the Eastern Province represented a threat to their authority and to the stability of the regime. Several of the communities in which the violence was most intense, such as Sayhat, are located close to vital and vulnerable oil facilities, such as the refinery at Ras Tanura. It was also alarming that the Shi'a rebellion occurred at precisely the same moment as the occupation of the Mecca mosque by Juhayman al-'Utaybi and his band of rebels. In fact, early speculation by American and Saudi observers was that the two events were coordinated. They were not. Al-'Utaybi was a Sunni descendent of one of the original ikhwan warriors who helped Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud conquer Arabia. He was primarily driven by a sense of disillusion with the corruption of the royal family and what he considered their abandonment of the principles of Wahhabism in the 1970s. For an account of the Mecca incident see Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of al-Qaeda* (New York: Doubleday, 2007); and Thomas Hegghammer and Stephane Lacroix, "Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-'Utaybi Revisited," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (2007), pp. 103-122. Although the two events were not coordinated, Saudi Shi'i activists would attempt to cast them as part of a popular Islamic uprising against secular authoritarianism in later years. For their part, the Shi'is were attempting to mitigate the appearance that theirs was a sectarian movement as well as attempting to overcome their minority status in the Islamist political landscape.



important development, the increasingly radicalized followers of al-Saffar framed the protests as a rejection of both Saudi rule and American policy in the region. Criticism of American imperialism featured prominently in the uprising's rhetoric. A group of al-Saffar's supporters even issued a pamphlet threatening American employees of Aramco working in the Eastern Province if the United States continued to aid Saudi oppression of Shi'is in the kingdom.

As a result of their leadership during the rebellion, al-Saffar and his followers not only benefited the most from the uprising, but their response to and handling of the rebellion would help the group establish itself as the main force in Saudi Shi'a politics up to today. As a result of the state's brutal response, the Shi'a Reform Movement abandoned its earlier modest political objectives and embraced revolutionary politics. The organization re-branded itself *Munathammat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya fi al-Jazira al-Arabiyya* (Organization for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula, OIR). From late 1979 through the late 1980s, the OIR called for a revolutionary pan-Islamist movement to overthrow the al-Sa'ud, echoing the calls of Khomeini. Although the group made little headway appealing to non-Shi'is, it enjoyed widespread support in the Eastern Province.

The state pursued participants in the uprising over the course of 1980, arresting hundreds of those suspected of responsibility. As a result, hundreds of OIR members and sympathizers fled Saudi Arabia for the safety of exile. Leading members of the network sought refuge in the United States, England, Syria, and Iran. Al-Saffar eventually settled in Damascus. Tawfiq al-Sayf, Hamza al-Hassan and Fouad Ibrahim relocated to London, while Ja'far al-Shayeb and several others traveled to the U.S.<sup>39</sup> For its part, the Saudi government responded by promising to address grievances about social and economic despair that had accounted for much of the anger leading up to 1979. Saudi officials traveled to Qatif and its surrounding communities and assured residents that the state would commit the necessary resources to modernize health care facilities, repair crumbling public health systems such as broken sewage lines, develop new infrastructure, and stimulate economic growth. In the wake of its repression in 1979-80, the vast majority of Saudi Shi'is were justifiably suspicious

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<sup>39</sup> Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia* (London: Saqi Books, 2007). Hamza al-Hassan and Fouad Ibrahim continue to live in London today, where they remain outspoken critics of the Saudi government. Increasingly, al-Hassan has also become a critic of the Shi'a community's most powerful leaders, who he argues have proven too accommodating and so far unable to secure important social and political concessions from the government.

of the state and its motives, a bitter legacy that remains powerful three decades later.<sup>40</sup>

From exile, the OIR remained a powerful and active representative of the Shi'a community. The organization regularly published subversive monographs and pamphlets that circulated inside Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. The primary publication was a monthly newsletter called *al-Thawra al-Islamiyya (Islamic Revolution)*, but the OIR also published a series of monographs on corruption in the royal family, Palestine, Aramco, and the corrosive impact of oil on Saudi society and its cultural values. In fact, it was the organization's work documenting, analyzing, and disseminating information on politics and news in the kingdom that made it the most relevant.

While the group's leadership council was committed to the principle of revolution in Saudi Arabia, and it laid out lengthy arguments advocating for the need to overthrow the al-Sa'ud, the network was aware that it lacked the capacity to put the idea into practice. By the end of the 1980s the OIR's main leaders came to realize that their radical posture was unlikely to produce tangible results in the Shi'a community, let alone lead to a change in government. The death of Ayatollah Khomeini sapped energy from even the most ardent proponents of revolution. Hassan al-Saffar began to moderate his message from Damascus as early as 1988, shifting his emphasis to the need for human rights, religious tolerance, coexistence, the need for political pluralism, and equal citizenship for all Saudis. This remains the substance of his political position today.

### **From Radicalism to Rapprochement and Back Again**

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The Saudi state was slow to acknowledge or take seriously the moderation in the OIR's position in the 1980s. By the middle of the 1990s, however, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd reached out to several Shi'i activists in London and the United States, including Ja'far al-Shayeb, Sadeq al-Jubran, Issa al-Mu'zil, and Tawfiq al-Sayf, and invited them to meet the King in Jeddah in 1993 in an effort to reconcile.

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<sup>40</sup> See Goldberg, "The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia;" and Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery." In spite of its lofty promises, the Saudi government failed to seriously address any of the socio-economic complaints of the Shi'a community.

This move allowed many of the community's most visible and respected leaders back to the kingdom, where they have remained politically active.<sup>41</sup>

The impetus behind King Fahd's gesture of reconciliation was an effort to silence what had become a sophisticated Shi'i media and information operation, one that openly criticized the Saudi government in a highly visible monthly newsletter that ran from 1991 to 1993, *al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya*. Yitzhak Nakash has written that the "Shi'is seized on the upheaval generated by the Gulf War of 1991 to wage an information campaign that both undermined the Saudi government's media monopoly and constituted a bold attempt to redraw the social contract between the Shi'is and the state."<sup>42</sup> Contributors used the pages of the newsletter to press for the opening of political space in Saudi Arabia not only for Shi'is, but for all citizens based on their shared faith in Islam, including urging the state to "create a sense of partnership between the government and the people, and to build a national identity based on the people's desire to preserve the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia."<sup>43</sup>

By 1993 Saudi anxiety about the impact of *al-Jazira al-'Arabiyya* had grown significant enough to broker a rapprochement, forgiving the past radicalism and revolutionary politics of the OIR's leaders. The government also agreed to release political prisoners and restore passports to those in exile. King Fahd promised once again that the government would address social and economic imbalances in the Shi'a community and rein in discriminatory practices. In reality, however, the Saudi-Shi'i rapprochement produced very few results. The state made no sustained effort to address structural problems in the Eastern Province. More worrisome, the government continued to condone rampant anti-Shi'a sectarianism. Nasr al-'Umar and Safar al-Hawali, two prominent religious scholars with university positions, along with Abdullah bin Jibrin, a member of the kingdom's highest official *'ulama* council, openly advocated for anti-Shi'i violence.

Not all Saudi Shi'is welcomed the OIR's moderate shift in the late 1980s. A group of clerics that remained in Saudi Arabia after the 1979 uprising, including Hashim al-Shukus, Abd al-Rahman al-Hubail and Abd al-Jalil al-Maa, founded

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<sup>41</sup> Several prominent activists have remained in exile, suspicious of the Saudi government's willingness to tolerate even mild dissent. Hamza al-Hassan and Fouad Ibrahim live in London and Ali al-Ahmed lives in Washington D.C., where he runs the Gulf Institute. International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 130.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

an alternative political network in 1987 modeled on and named after a similar organization in Iran, the Followers of the Line of the Imam, also known as Hizballah in the Hijaz, or Saudi Hizballah.<sup>44</sup> Members of Saudi Hizballah were not adherents of the Shiraziyya. Rather, they followed the *marja'iyya* of Khomeini in the 1980s, completely embracing the principle of *velayat-e-faqih*. The group also fully rejected any negotiation or interaction with the Saudi government and dismissed the 1993 reconciliation as a form of surrender. Support for Hizballah remained small compared to that for the OIR, but it enjoyed pockets of enthusiastic support in Qatif and several surrounding villages.<sup>45</sup>

With backing from Iran, Saudi Hizballah also embraced confrontation with the government, encouraging resistance to the al-Sa'ud. Members of the network traveled frequently to Lebanon and Syria, where they likely received military training. The group is suspected of being responsible for the 1996 bombing of the U.S. military barracks in al-Khobar. The Saudi government arrested hundreds of members of Hizballah in the aftermath of al-Khobar, decimating the organization and driving most of its members away from politics.

From the mid 1990s, Shi'is in Saudi Arabia struggled to achieve even modest results. Although it was King Fahd who had reached out to al-Saffar and his lieutenants, the Saudi government continued to view the Shi'is as a security threat.<sup>46</sup> But while Saudi Shi'is received little support or amelioration for their grievances from the state, the decision to embrace the offer of reconciliation in 1993 not only fundamentally reshaped their ideology and political message, but also the strategic approach to achieving concrete results. The OIR once again re-branded itself in the 1990s, this time as the Islamic Reform Movement (IRM). And although the decision to abandon the radicalism of the 1980s yielded few tangible gains in the 1990s, it did pave the way for some success a few years later.

## **The Shi'i Political Landscape in Saudi Arabia Today**

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For almost a decade after striking the deal with King Fahd that allowed them to return to Saudi Arabia, the leading members of the Islamic Reform Movement

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<sup>44</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question*, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Author's interviews, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, June 2005.

<sup>46</sup> Nakash, *Reaching For Power*, p. 131. Nakash plausibly argues that Saudi leaders also used the Shi'is as a scapegoat for al-Khobar to distract from the emerging Sunni terrorist threat.

continued to quietly press for greater religious tolerance and more political rights from the central government. Hassan al-Saffar emphasized the need for expanded notions of citizenship, while intellectuals like Muhammad Mahfuz called for political pluralism and nonsectarian co-existence throughout the 1990s. Activists such as Ja'far al-Shayeb also set up local institutions in Qatif and surrounding communities that aimed to address social problems, distribute charity, and promote piety. Thanks to their leadership in the 1980s, their struggles in exile, and their continued activism and work on the ground after 1993, these former members of the revolutionary movement reintegrated quickly into local social and political life. Throughout the 1990s, the IRM retained links to the Shiraziyya network in Qom, where Grand Ayatollah Imam Muhammad al-Shirazi had relocated after the 1979 revolution. With al-Shirazi's death in 2001, and the fading of revolutionary politics, most Saudi Shi'is embraced the *marja'iyya* of Grand Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf.

For its part, the Saudi government continued to view the Shi'i community primarily as a security threat. The 1996 bombing at al-Khobar reinforced the state's anxiety about the community. In spite of promises made to Shi'i community leaders, however, the government made no effort to rein in anti-Shi'i discrimination or to address enduring socio-economic problems in Qatif and al-Hasa.

Shi'i politics in Saudi Arabia remained mostly out of sight until 2003, when the kingdom was swept up in a wave of domestic political activism. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a Saudi-based political reform movement, calling for wide-ranging reforms to the kingdom's political system began to emerge. In January 2003, 104 reformers, including Islamists, liberals and Shi'is, submitted a petition to then-Crown Prince Abdullah, calling for an end to corruption, expanded opportunities for Saudis to play a more direct role in shaping policy, and religious tolerance.<sup>47</sup> At the end of April, 450 Shi'i men and women penned and signed a separate petition, entitled "Partners in One Nation." Crown Prince Abdullah received a delegation of the petition's authors, who presented him with the document in Riyadh. While emphasizing Islamic and national unity, and clearly stating their support for the leadership of the al-Sa'ud, "Partners in One Nation" also laid out a long list of grievances and appeals for an end to anti-Shi'ism in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, the petitioners asked for better representation in national institutions such as the Majlis al-Shura (a 120 member

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<sup>47</sup> International Crisis Group, *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?*, Middle East Report No. 28, 14 July 2008. See also Stephane Lacroix, "Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New "Islam Liberal" Reformists," *Middle East Journal*, Volume 58, No 3, Summer 2004, pp. 345-365.

quasi-legislative council that has never had more than 4 Shi'i members), the cabinet, and diplomatic positions abroad, as well as the institutionalization of religious courts in the Eastern Province that better represented Shi'i theology and law.<sup>48</sup> In addition to calling for an end to oppressive security measures that targeted Shi'is, the petition also implored the state to undertake comprehensive educational reform and to wipe out the practice of using classrooms as sites to promote sectarian rancor.<sup>49</sup>

The reform movement's efforts and Shi'i activism appeared to pay early dividends. In the summer of 2003, Abdullah responded to calls for reform by instituting a National Forum for Dialogue. Held in Riyadh in the early summer, the first National Dialogue meeting suggested that the kingdom's rulers would now take seriously calls for tolerance, diversity, and incorporating a disparate array of voices in defining a new Saudi identity. Among the attendees were Wahhabi/Salafi religious scholars (including some who had launched vicious sectarian attacks in the 1990s), Twelver Shi'is, Ismailis, Sufis, and non-Wahhabi Sunnis, marking the first time that the past antagonists sat down with one another. The discussion focused on promoting Islamic unity and protecting against the fragmentation of the nation along sectarian lines. Although the National Dialogue did not address the political concerns raised in the January petition, it did suggest the possibility of a new state-sponsored drive for tolerance.<sup>50</sup>

In spite of its promising beginning, however, the reform push quickly succumbed to various internal and external forces. In May 2003, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula carried out the first in a series of attacks on Western and non-Western targets in Saudi Arabia.<sup>51</sup> From May 2003 through mid-2005, the state responded to the Sunni terrorist threat through heavy-handed security tactics. Leading members of the royal family justified their halting of meaningful reform by citing national security concerns. In September 2003, reformers sensed that

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<sup>48</sup> Since 1913 Shi'is in Saudi Arabia have been forced to work through a legal system that follows Hanbali and Wahhabi Islamic legal tradition.

<sup>49</sup> Toby Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report*, 228, Fall 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia."

<sup>51</sup> For more on al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, see Thomas Hegghammer, "Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Policy*, Volume 13, No 4 (2006), pp. 39-60; Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," *Middle East Journal*, Volume 60, No 1 (2006), pp. 11-32; International Crisis Group, *Saudi Arabia Background: Who are the Islamists?*, Middle East Report No. 31, 21 September 2004; Roel Meijer, "Re-reading al-Qaeda: Writings of Yusuf al-Ayiri," *ISIM Review*, 18, Autumn 2006, pp. 16-17; and Roel Meijer, "The 'Cycle of Contention' and the Limits of Terrorism in Saudi Arabia," in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 271-300.

the government was already backing away from reform. In response to the government withdrawal from the process, over 300 Sunnis and Shi'is signed a third major petition, "In Defense of the Nation," that reiterated previous calls for political change. They also warned that an 'iron fist' response to terrorism alone would not undermine the forces radicalizing some segments of Saudi society.<sup>52</sup>

Over the course of late 2003 and 2004, Saudi leaders became increasingly confrontational with the reform movement. In October 2003, Saudi police used live ammunition to break up a demonstration in Riyadh, where protesters assembled outside a human rights conference to call for the pace of reform to be accelerated.<sup>53</sup> After al-Qaeda carried out a second bombing in Riyadh in November 2003, Saudi authorities expanded their crackdown to the reform movement itself. In December, Prince Nayif, Minister of the Interior, threatened leading reformers to cease from their activities or else face imprisonment. He carried through on this threat in March 2004, when Saudi security forces arrested several leading voices for reform, including Abdullah al-Hamed, Ali al-Dumayni, and Matruk al-Faleh. All three were held in prison until August 2005, when Abdullah pardoned them after he took over the throne.

It is difficult to determine precisely what explained the royal family's anti-reform turn in late 2003. It is tempting to attribute Nayif's confrontational posture toward the reformers as an indication of a split within the ruling family, with Nayif representing the old authoritarian guard and Abdullah the liberal-minded reformer.<sup>54</sup> This most likely oversimplifies the complex dynamics that exist within the family. It also overstates Abdullah's reformist impulse.<sup>55</sup> The most likely explanation for the state's decreasing tolerance for the reformers was that Saudi leaders believed the activists had grown too bold too quickly and that the movement was poised to win over a significant base of popular support—a possibility that would have threatened the al-Sa'ud's own political legitimacy.

The state did take several cosmetic measures to address demands for reforms. Most notably, in 2005 the country held the first elections for Municipal Councils in four decades. Although councils are minor administrative bodies with only limited authority, Shi'is responded enthusiastically to the opportunity. In fact,

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<sup>52</sup> Toby Jones, "Violence and the Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report Online*, 13 November 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Jones, "Violence and the Illusion of Reform in Saudi Arabia."

<sup>54</sup> Michael Scott Doran, "The Saudi Paradox," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 83, Number 1, February/January 2004.

<sup>55</sup> I challenge the argument that Abdullah is a reformer in Toby Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Silent Spring," *Foreign Policy.com*, February 2009.

Shi'is turnout was among the highest in the country.<sup>56</sup> In addition to demonstrating their sense of political opportunism and pragmatism, favoring participation when the opportunity arose, the elections also demonstrated the continued hold that the old Shiraziyya revolutionaries continued to exercise on Shi'i politics in Saudi Arabia. The winners were all supporters of, or sympathetic to, Hassan al-Saffar.

The state's oppression of the reform movement once again meant the marginalization of the kingdom's Shi'is from national politics. In the absence of a viable national coalition of activists dedicated to nonsectarian objectives, the Shi'is were left to look after their own interests. Their open and enthusiastic embrace of the Municipal Council elections further drove the Shi'i political focus inward. This has been a risky gamble. Because the councils enjoy little executive authority, and because only half of the seats on the councils were elected (the other half were appointed), those elected have no power to pursue an agenda. In fact, the government waited until 2006 to fill the appointed positions. In the years since, Shi'i members of the councils have expressed disgust that the councils have achieved virtually nothing of note.<sup>57</sup> The Saudi government has further added to Shi'a, and national, frustration about the councils when it failed to hold the next round of scheduled elections in 2009. In May 2009, the government announced that the term of the current councils will be extended for two years.<sup>58</sup>

In recent years, disappointment over the councils led some in the Shi'a community to challenge the current leadership. That disappointment was accompanied by a general frustration that the government had moved very slowly, if at all, to address Shi'a complaints about discrimination, religious intolerance, and socio-economic hardship. In some Shi'i quarters, skeptical voices emerged already in 2005. In al-'Awwamiyya, a small village north of Qatif and one with a history of radicalism, the religious scholar Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr denounced the decision to engage the state in dialogue and to expect the government to give Shi'is any rights. He has made clear that he believed Saudi Shi'is will have to fight to achieve anything of substance.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Author's interviews with Saudi Shi'is, 2005-2008.

<sup>58</sup> Rasid.com, May 18, 2009.

<sup>59</sup> International Crisis Group, *The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia*, p. 8. See also the blog of Rasheed Abou Alsamh, <http://rasheedsworld.blogspot.com/2007/02/saudi-shiites-fear-backlash-if-war.html>, last accessed 28 May 2008.



Al-Nimr had been a minority voice in the Shi'a community, but that changed quickly in early 2009. As a result of ongoing state-backed violence and continued intolerance against the Shi'a community, Al-Nimr's hard-line approach found increasing support this spring. In late February, hundreds of Shi'a pilgrims were attacked by Saudi security forces and members of the religious police, the Commission of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, while visiting the al-Baqi' cemetery in Medina, one of Islam's holiest sites. The cemetery is home to the graves of several of the prophet's wives, other family members, as well as several men considered by Shi'is to be the rightful successors of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>60</sup> Both male and female Shi'is congregated in the cemetery and staged processions during which they chanted in honor of the prophet and his family—an act that followers of the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, the official religion of Saudi Arabia, deem heretical. A video of the incident showed young Shi'a boys collecting dirt from one of the graves, which Saudi security and religious authorities considered a justification for violence. The assembled authorities assaulted the pilgrims, at least one of whom was stabbed by a Sunni assailant. It is noteworthy that the Medina attacks occurred on the same day that Saudi Arabia's king sacked the head of the religious police, the very institution that led the charge against the pilgrims. Many interpreted this move as evidence that the country could be charting a more moderate ideological path.

Still, the attacks in Medina outraged Shi'is in the Eastern Province, stirring a wave of ominous posturing and threats of confrontation and an escalation of sectarian tensions. As Toby Matthiesen has recently documented, the fallout encouraged an array of new activism in the region. A previously unknown group called the Free Men of Qatif as well as a group of anonymous religious scholars issued statements and petitions calling for civil disobedience and public demonstration in the face of official oppression.<sup>61</sup> In addition to mobilizing new political actors, the state's heavy-handed treatment of Shi'is in Medina also awoke previously dormant activists from a lengthy slumber. Most notably, Hizballah in the Hijaz, all but eviscerated by the crackdown that followed the 1996 al-Khobar bombings, reappeared and responded to the violence by issuing its first public statement in over a decade, saying that the time has arrived for renewed confrontation. These calls for action resulted in limited public protest. Still, the state responded harshly to political gatherings, arresting over 30 people

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<sup>60</sup> For an excellent account of the Medina disturbances and the fallout, see Toby Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads," *Middle East Report Online*, May 6, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

in mid-March.<sup>62</sup>

In the most recent strife, it is Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr who has proven the most potent and popular symbol for Shi'a discontent. From his home base in al-'Awamiyya, al-Nimr, whose past antagonisms have landed him in jail, launched a scathing assault on the kingdom's leaders. In a rousing Friday sermon in his mosque in late March 2009, al-Nimr warned the Saudi government that if it did not radically alter its support for anti-Shi'a extremism, he and his supporters would fight for secession. He also remarked that "our dignity is more precious than the unity of this land."<sup>63</sup> The state responded by surrounding and choking off access to al-'Awwamiyya, provoking protests within the village. Al-Nimr immediately went into hiding in order to avoid arrest, and supporters across the Eastern Province threatened to use violence if the government attempted to detain him.

In the months since the attacks in Medina and the initial angry response, an uncertain calm has prevailed in the Eastern Province. While the attacks sparked fury, it is too early to tell if the initial outrage and the emergence of a new generation of confrontational activists, as well as the re-emergence of Saudi Hizballah, has tipped the political balance in the community away from the accommodating leaders of the former Shiraziyya. For now, it seems that the anxious quiet will persist, although the state has taken steps to punish the greater Shi'i community by restricting opportunities to practice their beliefs. Saudi authorities arrested a prominent Shi'a cleric in the oasis of al-Hasa, Sheikh Ali Hussein al-Amar, for funding a husseiniyya, a Shi'a cultural center of sorts that has long been illegal in Saudi Arabia, but that until recently was allowed to operate somewhat widely.<sup>64</sup>

The Saudi government has also lent official sanction to increasingly shrill sectarian commentary from inside the kingdom, including from Adil al-Kalbani, the Imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca who recently denounced Shi'is as non-Muslims, and has thus rekindled outrage in the Eastern Province that could potentially bolster support for radicalism there.<sup>65</sup> For now, at least, it seems that al-Saffar and his followers still dominate the political landscape and will

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<sup>62</sup> <http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=28176>, Rasid.com, April 11, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia."

<sup>64</sup> <http://rasid.com/artc.php?id=29145>, rasid.com, May 18, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> The first black imam in Mecca in modern Saudi history, Kalbani has been referred to as the Saudi Obama. He has also been thought of as a moderate figure, a cleric who purportedly denounced the most extreme interpretations of Islam. See "A Black Imam Breaks Ground in Mecca Shaykh Adil Kalbani," *New York Times*, 11 April 2009.

continue to serve as the main interlocutors between the community and the government. But, whatever assurance this brings, is tenuous at best.

## Conclusion

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Cynicism and anxiety about their fate will continue to keep the potential for radicalism and violence alive in Saudi Arabia's Shi'a community. Through a combination of neglect and confrontation, the Saudi government is making matters considerably worse. The government has long been slow to crack down on Sunni scholars and clerics who regularly levy verbal assaults on Shi'is not only in the kingdom, but in Iraq and other countries around the region as well. The Saudi state has not only failed to keep the sectarian vitriol in check, but in fact has fanned sectarian flames.<sup>66</sup> Saudi leaders rightfully worry that Iran's rise (and its influence on Syria and Lebanon's Hizballah) and the empowerment of Iraqi Shi'is threaten the kingdom's hegemony in the region. But while King Abdullah has so far refrained from playing the sectarian card directly, it is clear that he and other Saudi leaders are allowing, and likely encouraging, their henchmen to do just that.<sup>67</sup>

Saudi Shi'is feel as though they are in the direct line of fire, and the events in Medina in early 2009 confirm that the environment they live in is turning increasingly toxic. Many Shi'is express a sense of fatalism that attacks on their community are just a matter of time. Even absent violence against them, however, most Shi'is have resigned themselves to the gloomy prediction that they will remain on the outside looking in. The community's old revolutionary leadership will almost certainly continue to call for co-existence and tolerance, and will promote political pluralism and reform as the principal means to protect the interests of Saudi Shi'is. Since 2005, al-Saffar and his lieutenants have attempted to hitch the Shi'i wagon to King Abdullah in the hope that he would steer the kingdom onto a more liberal and tolerant trajectory. So far, this strategy has yielded few tangible results. What remains to be seen, and what cannot be ruled out, is that in the face of continuing sectarianism, state oppression, and the disregard of Shi'i grievances, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, Saudi Hizballah, or some other political network will take their angry rhetoric one step further and pursue a direct confrontation. Given the present course of the Saudi government—

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<sup>66</sup> Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not-so-New Anti-Shi'ism."

<sup>67</sup> Toby Jones, "Driven by a Sense of Urgency," *Bitterlemons-International*, Edition 16, Vol 5, 27 April 2007.

stoking anti-Shi'a opprobrium and using police force to brutalize the community – the likelihood for a violent encounter between Shi'is and the government appears very high.

A Shi'a turn to militancy, if it occurs, would be tragic. Historically, the community has proven very slow to embrace violence. Even in the current tense environment, the community's main leaders are actively seeking accommodation and ways to prevent an escalation of tensions and the dangerous outcomes it would produce. They know well that Shi'a acts of terrorism or the rise of Shi'a militancy will be met with the superior fire-power of the Saudi state, which will almost certainly crack-down brutally in response to an escalation. Violence is entirely avoidable, but it depends on the community finding support from a government that too often has sought to manage sectarianism and anti-Shi'ism by relying on such sentiments when convenient, rather than working earnestly to eliminate them. The Saudi government continues to deal with Shi'is as though they are a security problem rather than a minority community that seeks amelioration from social and religious discrimination, an approach that exacerbates the very problems facing the community. The government's anxieties about the rise of Iran and Shi'a Iraq have clouded its ability to see clearly on domestic policy, increasing rather than diminishing the potential for a more serious clash.