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## Syria's Sectarian Ripples across the Gulf

### Summary

- Like the Iraq war and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon's 2006 war, Syria's internecine conflict has enabled the Gulf's ruling families, media commentators, clerics, parliamentarians, and activists to invoke and amplify Sunni-Shia identities, often for goals that are rooted in local power politics.
- By-products of the mounting sectarian tension include the fraying of reform cooperation among sects and regions, and pressure on the Gulf's formal political institutions.
- Traditional and social media have served to amplify the most polarizing voices as well as provide reform activists new means for cross-sectarian communication that circumvent governmental efforts to control or block such activities.

### Background

The Gulf Arab states have been major players in Syria's war and, in turn, the war's effects have rippled across the domestic landscapes of the Gulf in ways that are often unseen but nonetheless significant. Chief among these has been a rise in sectarian partisanship by official and non-official actors alike. Like the Iraq war and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon's 2006 war, Syria's internecine conflict has enabled the Gulf's ruling families, media commentators, clerics, parliamentarians, and activists to invoke and amplify Sunni-Shia identities, often for goals that are rooted in local power politics. There is little danger that sectarianism will escalate into violent conflict across the Gulf, but it has nonetheless fostered a toxic political environment, casting a chill over cross-sectarian reform cooperation, eroding the position of moderate bridge-builders, and potentially radicalizing segments of Sunni and Shia youth. Gulf regimes are mindful that managing these consequences requires a delicate balancing act: They are fearful of sectarianism's potential to spin out of control, yet they also see in it a useful reminder of monarchy's indispensability as an arbiter over a fractious and divided citizenry.

### A Chilling Effect on Cross-Sectarian Reform Activism

In Saudi Arabia, these effects have been particularly malignant. As Salafi clerics frame the civil war in sectarian terms—demonizing the Alawis—the Shia of the Eastern Province have come under increased pressure. Many are believed to sympathize with the Syrian regime, despite the fact that Nimr al-Nimr, an outspoken and immensely popular Shia cleric who received part of his seminary training in Sayida Zaynab in Damascus, has publicly called for the downfall of Bashar al-Assad. Yet as the Syrian opposition has taken on a more jihadist, takfiri hue, the Shia of Saudi Arabia—and elsewhere in the Gulf—have grown increasingly ambivalent about backing the uprising. As hinted at by one Shia interlocutor in early 2013: "Initially, we all supported the Syrian opposition – but now it is an all out civil war."<sup>1</sup>

“At various points in history... sectarian identity has assumed greater prominence. Elites have instrumentalized it and ordinary citizens have defined themselves by it to the exclusion of other affinities. In this regard, sectarianism should be regarded as a symptom of longstanding deficits in Gulf governance and the unequal distribution of political and economic capital.”

A by-product of this mounting tension has been the fraying of reform cooperation among sects and regions. Shia reformists who once lauded the willingness of Sunni activists elsewhere in the country to engage now detect a new reticence borne of the Syrian war. This is especially evident regarding the Sahwa cleric Salman al-Awda, a towering figure in the Kingdom's clerical universe who has moderated his views toward the Shia, distinguishing between "political Shiism" and Shiism as a sect. But Shia interlocutors argue that the "sectarianization" of the Syria war has imposed limits on al-Awda's burgeoning rapprochement. "He is fearful that too much contact with the Shia in such a climate will alienate his Sunni base," noted one activist in the Eastern Province in early 2013.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this erosion of potential bridge-builders between the sects is not new—it echoes similar tensions that afflicted Saudi Arabia and the Gulf during the height of the Iraqi civil war. In both cases, the ultimate victors have been the ruling families. The Syrian war has provided a useful distraction for Gulf citizenry and a cautionary exemplar of the dangers of revolutionary upheaval in fractured societies.

## Polarized Political Institutions

Aside from affecting societal relations at the informal level, sectarianism has also buffeted the Gulf's formal political institutions. This is particularly evident in the parliaments of Kuwait and Bahrain. On February 28, 2012, a Sunni-sponsored proposal in the Kuwaiti National Assembly to recognize the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people spurred significant clashes that fell along sectarian lines. Forty-four MPs including all Cabinet ministers in the session backed the proposal, five voted against it, one abstained while three MPs refused to vote. Most of those who opposed the motion were Shia MPs, leading to heated debate and accusations of disloyalty to the state. "The Syrian people are resisting the Iranians, Hizballah and the Iraqi militias," argued the Salafi MP Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri, "yet the agents sitting among us in the National Assembly remain silent about this matter." In the aftermath of these clashes, Kuwaiti newspaper columnists lamented that sectarianism had "derailed the National Assembly from its straight path."<sup>4</sup>

In Bahrain, the flawed and largely powerless parliament has long been an arena of sectarian wrangling. In the midst of the Syria war, pro-government Salafis with close ties to royal hardliners have increasingly used the Syrian conflict to galvanize their Sunni constituents. In August 2012, social media in Bahrain was abuzz with news that prominent Salafi MPs from the al-Asala society had visited the Free Syrian Army to deliver humanitarian aid to hospitals and shelters. Citing the "calls of religion and pan-Arabism," the Salafis' visit was widely publicized with photos. In the ensuing weeks, however, the visit stoked acrimony, with Shia oppositionists arguing that it had violated Bahraini laws on supporting terror groups and money laundering, but pro-government voices defending it as a private, humanitarian mission. Shia commentators found the visit especially ironic because the government in usual circumstances heavily scrutinized and regulated the transfer of Shia charitable donations (khums) outside Bahrain.<sup>5</sup> In early and mid-2013, there was additional evidence that al-Asala's support to Syrian jihadists had grown more formal and robust, with reports that five Bahraini Salafis had been killed fighting alongside Syrian jihadists from the Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>6</sup> Although the Foreign Ministry distanced itself from these activities and urged Bahrainis to avoid traveling to conflict zones, pro-government commentators lambasted the Shias' criticism of their visit as yet another sign of their perfidy, "sectarian bigotry," and support for the Assad regime.<sup>7</sup>

Like the Iraq war, the 2006 Lebanon war, and the Huthi rebellion in north Yemen, the Syria conflict pushed the Bahraini Shia to defend their nationalist legitimacy against accusations of outside loyalty. For many Bahraini Sunnis—officials and opposition—ongoing protests in Manama's Shia suburbs were seen as a sort of retaliation by Iran for Gulf Arab support for the anti-Assad uprising. "You pinch me here, I'll pinch you there," noted one senior official in the Bahraini Foreign Ministry.<sup>8</sup> Hardliners in the regime have echoed this: the commander of Bahrain Defense Forces (BDF), Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmed Al

Khalifa has repeatedly argued that the anti-Assad forces represent the only true, homegrown popular uprising in the Arab world; other revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, and especially Bahrain have been the products of foreign incitement.<sup>9</sup>

## Sectarian Freelancers and the Double-Edged Sword of Media

Traditional and social media have proven to be double-edged swords regarding sectarianism in the Gulf. On the one hand, Twitter and Facebook amplified the most polarizing voices on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide, creating a cycle of escalation that provided a pretext for regimes to enact sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression. At the same time, social media has given Shia and Sunni reform activists new forms of cross-sectarian communication that circumvent governmental efforts to either block such activities or channel them into regime-sponsored venues.

In Kuwait, this dynamic has been particularly evident in the efforts of Salafi charities to fundraise for Syrian jihadist groups. The Salafi cleric, Dr. Shafi al-Ajmi has been among the most vitriolic purveyors of sectarianism, calling for the torture of Syrian soldiers and demonizing the Shia. Although the Kuwaiti government has attempted to muzzle him by cancelling his TV show and shutting down his sermons, he is still actively fundraising on Twitter.<sup>10</sup> The government's ambivalent view about curtailing his activities reflects its desire to manage the sensitive balance of power between the royal family and powerful tribal blocs with a Salafi orientation.

In Saudi Arabia, there has been a long trend of hardline Salafi voices appropriating regional conflicts and invoking sectarian solidarity. The Syria crisis has been no different. In most cases, clerical statements adhered closely to the official Saudi line on Syria, providing helpful theological top cover to Saudi foreign policy. In Friday sermons, Tweets, and Facebook posts, the clerics have demonized the Assad regime and the Alawis, expressed solidarity with civilian suffering, and pushed for greater Gulf involvement, to include arming the Syrian opposition. Yet there have also been more militant calls for jihad and independent aid to the Syrian opposition—many of them by the very same jihadi-takfiri clerics who exhorted young Saudi volunteers to kill Shia in the Iraq War. In other cases, newer figures with weak clerical pedigree have exploited the Syria crisis and its attendant sectarianism to increase their popularity and rally constituents. Fearful that this freelancing could produce a replay of the Iraq and Afghan experience, when battle-hardened jihadists returned to the Kingdom to attack the monarchy, the Saudi government has shut down the clerics' independent fundraising drives and censored their media platforms.<sup>11</sup> These efforts extended to modest curtailments in sectarian vitriol in the government-controlled media. In interviews in early 2013, Eastern Province activists spoke approvingly of these improvements. That said, there are still polarizing voices, particularly in the social media realm, that raise doubts in the Eastern Province about the government's true intentions. To counter such actors, Saudi youth from both sects have utilized Twitter to promote cross-sectarian understanding. A government crackdown against Shia protestors in 2012 spawned a popular hashtag, "#Kulna Qatif" (We are all Qatif), that offered expressions of solidarity by Sunnis. For their part, a group of Shia youth launched a Twitter campaign in 2013 to invite Sunnis from Jeddah to a celebration of the night of the Prophet's birth in the Eastern Province. A similar initiative of dialogue, known as the Qatif Outreach (Tawasul Qatif), has been ongoing for nearly four years.<sup>12</sup> Yet there are limits to this youthful activism. Older activists lament that this virtual outreach has yet to translate into any sort of sustained, coordinated action because of the ruling family's successful efforts to circumscribe political space in the Kingdom.

## Treat the Root Causes, Not the Symptoms

Contrary to some assumptions, Gulf governments did not manufacture sectarianism from thin air, nor does it arise solely from the contagion of regional crises or the clashing foreign policies of the region's

## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

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sectarian rivals, Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is also not a primordial, immutable feature of Gulf political and social life. Like any identity, sectarian affiliation has coexisted alongside a number of other frequently competing attributes—class versus class, tribal versus nontribal, indigenous versus immigrant, settled versus nomadic, generation versus generation, and so on. At various points in history, however, sectarian identity has assumed greater prominence. Elites have instrumentalized it and ordinary citizens have defined themselves by it to the exclusion of other affinities.

In this regard, sectarianism should be regarded as a symptom of longstanding deficits in Gulf governance and the unequal distribution of political and economic capital. Specifically, the dearth of inclusive, participatory institutions; discrimination in key sectors like education, clerical establishments, and the security services; the absence of civil society; and uneven economic development are the real culprits of sectarianism. Certainly, media—and in particular, social media—has played a significant role in inflaming and entrenching Sunni-Shia passions, offering the most polarizing voices a highly visible platform to peddle a sectarian narrative. But Gulf rulers who wish to de-escalate these passions would do well to look beyond media censorship to genuine, lasting reforms in the political and economic realm.

## Notes

1. Author's interview with a Shia youth activist, Tarut Island, Saudi Arabia, January 24, 2013.
2. Author's interview with a Shia writer, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, January 26, 2013.
3. Kuwait Times, "Sparks Fly as Kuwaiti MPs Vote to Recognize Syrian Council," February 29, 2012, [http://www.bridgingthegulf.org/en/news/news/Sparks\\_fly\\_as\\_Kuwaiti\\_MPs\\_vote\\_to\\_recognise\\_Syrian\\_council\\_\\_\\_\\_.html?id=239](http://www.bridgingthegulf.org/en/news/news/Sparks_fly_as_Kuwaiti_MPs_vote_to_recognise_Syrian_council____.html?id=239).
4. Muhyi Amir and Hasan al-Muhanna, "Jalsa Suriyya . . . Tafiya" (A Sectarian Session on Syria), *al-Jaridah* (Kuwait), March 2, 2012.
5. "Bahraini Group Denies Flouting Rules to Aid Syria Rebels," *Gulf News*, August 12, 2012, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/bahraini-group-denies-flouting-rules-to-aid-syria-rebels-1.1061012>.
6. Husein Marhoon, "Bahraini Salafists in Spotlight," *al-Monitor*, June 18, 2013. <http://www.almonitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/bahrain-jihadists-syria-salafism.html>
7. See for example, Sawsan al-Sha'ir, "al-Ta'assub ma Sabiq al-Israr wa al-Tarasid" (Bigotry with Pre-meditation and Surveillance) *al-Watan* (Bahrain), August 13, 2012. <http://www.alwatannews.net/ArticleViewer.aspx?ID=Q78Tx4xWG2aKB733337GUx5va4Q93339933339>
8. Personal interview with a senior member of the Bahraini Foreign Ministry, Manama, Bahrain, February 29, 2012.
9. Husayn al-Harbi, "Al-Mushir Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa li- al-Ra y : Naam hunaka muamara li-qalb nidham al-hukm . . . wa laysa li-muarada sila bi-al- Rab alArabi" (Field Marshal Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa to a l-Ra y : Yes, There Is a Conspiracy to Overthrow the Ruling System . . . and There Is No Connection Between the Opposition and the Arab Spring), *a l-Ra y*, March 11, 2011.
10. See his Twitter account at: @sHaFi\_Ajmi
11. See Frederic Wehrey, "Saudi Arabia Reins In Its Clerics on Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 14, 2013. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/06/14/saudi-arabia-reins-in-its-clerics-on-syria/bu10>
12. See the program's Twitter account, [https://twitter.com/tawasul\\_qatif](https://twitter.com/tawasul_qatif). Author's interviews with activists in Riyadh and the Eastern Province, January 2013.



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