Arabian Peninsula Background Notes
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The Shiʿah Dimension in Gulf Politics

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There has been much talk in recent months about a Shiʿah crescent sweeping across the Middle East, threatening the long-established Sunni supremacy. The pertinent question is the relevance of this idea for the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council – the GCC states or Gulf states.

In order to appreciate the Shiʿah dimension in the Gulf states, it is necessary to review the situation when this questions last arose, i.e., the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) and the early years of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Perhaps the most dramatic impact came from the eruption of unrest in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province in November 1979. It arose from a combination of a Saudi crackdown to prevent local activities similar to what was happening in Iran and Bahrain and an attempt by the region's Shiʿah to resurrect public observance of Ashura. It also partially overlapped with the shocking seizure of the Great Mosque in Makkah by Juhayman al-ʿUtaybi.

The result was street violence, a heavy response by Saudi security forces, and the death of several dozen demonstrators. Although there was a strongly religious character to the leadership and organization of the dissidents, leftist elements also played a dominant role. The trouble spurred the founding of the Organization of the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIRAP) under the leadership of Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar. While inspiration was derived from Iran, actual connections appear to have been nothing more than symbolic.

The principal causes of the eruption can be summarized as social and economic discrimination against Shiʿah in Saudi Arabia, the long-standing Wahhabi attitude that the Shiʿah are apostates or polytheists, and the inspiration of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic revolution in Iran. The consequence was almost-immediate government attempts to defuse the situation by stepping up some development efforts in the area but these were viewed as a stop-gap measure and not a long-

term commitment.

Sunni-Shiʿi relations were also tense elsewhere in the Gulf. The period of 1979 through the early 1980s also saw considerable unrest in neighboring Bahrain with the government charging Iran with actively supporting dissidents and seeking to overthrow the Bahraini government. In 1987, some young Kuwaiti Shiʿah (including sons of prominent families such as Behbehani and Dashti) were arrested for a series of bombings, and minor demonstrations were observed in the other GCC members.

Social Composition of Shiʿah in the Gulf

What makes the current atmosphere different? Addressing this question requires a closer look at the social composition and political attitudes of the Gulf states' Shiʿah communities. Broadly speaking, these fall into two distinct categories: large-scale peasant communities and small urban groups consisting mostly of merchants and tradesmen.

Bahrain. A majority of Bahrain's population – variously estimated at 60% to 80% – is Shiʿah. The great majority of these are al-Baharinah, the originally rural (although increasingly urbanized) and presumably indigenous population of the islands. The Baharinah have long experienced discrimination under the rule of the Sunni Al Khalifah and their Najdi tribal allies. Bahrani villages are clearly poorer and have less public improvements than Sunni villages. The Baharinah were the principal movers during the sustained unrest and violence of the 1990s. The remainder of Bahrain's Shiʿah are Persian, whose origin in Bahrain stems from the turn of the 20th century and then immigration later in the same century in search of employment. Many are not assimilated into Bahraini society and a sizeable proportion remain *bidun* (i.e. stateless).

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's Shiʿah population numbers at least one million and quite likely close to two million. There are three distinct communities. One is the Nakhawilah of al-Madinah, perhaps 10,000 in number. As can be discerned from the name, they originally performed work in the date gardens but have become urbanized and have assimilated into the larger population. Their presence in al-Hijaz is supplemented by a few Shiʿi sections of *badu* tribes such as al-Harb and al-Juhaynah.

A second community is that of the Ismaʿilis of Najran, who may number as many as 100,000. This community constitutes the only significant non-Jaʿfari (Twelver or Ithnaʿashari) subsect of Shiʿah in the GCC. Their relations with the Saudi government were disturbed by clashes in 2000 when an Ismaʿili mosque was closed (the government contended that the arrest of a sorcerer provoked protests). One policeman died as a result of the disturbances. More recently, Najran witnessed a demonstration by Ismaʿilis for more rights in 2006.

The great majority of Shiʿah in Saudi Arabia, however, are to be found in the Eastern Province, particularly in the two great oases of al-Hasa and al-Qatif. More than 95% of the population of al-Qatif is reckoned to be Shiʿi but only half of al-Hasa (although this figure has been challenged as being too low). As a consequence, the Shiʿah of al-Qatif are more integrated and concentrated socially while those of al-Hasa are spread across the towns, villages, and farming areas of the oasis and are intermixed with the Sunni population. This provides an important reason why the 1979-1980 unrest was restricted mainly to al-Qatif.

Discrimination against the Shiʿah remains widespread. Promotion of Shiʿi employees of Saudi ARAMCO is said to be difficult and the Shiʿah are largely prevented from joining the army and police. In this climate, there was considerable motivation for the development of political opposition to the government and the

OIRAP and other groups in exile regularly denounced the government.

By the late 1980s, however, the OIRAP and its allies adopted a less confrontational approach, largely because the long, divisive Iran-Iraq War finally came to an end and because of a view that the demographics of Saudi Arabia doomed confrontation to failure. Instead, Shaykh Hasan al-Saffar and others negotiated a compromise with the government in 1993 that allowed the release of political prisoners, the return of exiles, and a promised end to discriminatory practices. The radical wing of the Shiʿah opposition refused to participate in this compromise and formed the Saudi branch of Hizbullah, accused by the United States of responsibility for the bombing of the US military barracks at al-Khubar in 1996.

More recently, it can be seen that the attacks of 11 September 2001 and al-Qaʿidah's campaign of violence in Saudi Arabia since 2003 have spurred some measure of rapprochement and common outlook between Sunni and Shiʿi groups. On the other hand, events in Iraq have created a new centripetal pull for some Shiʿah, as illustrated by the circulation of a document in 2003 welcoming the demise of the Saddam Husayn government in Iraq.

In the midst of these events, the Saudi government appears to have become more response to Shiʿi demands. A 2003 Shiʿi petition for greater rights resulted in an audience with then-Heir Apparent ʿAbdullah and the participation of some Shiʿah in the National Dialogue. Certainly, there seems to be greater recognition that Shiʿi rights and benefits can best be obtained through partnership with a régime that is able to mediate between conflicting groups, leading an emphasis on national unity and the centrality of Islam. The strongest indication of Shiʿi willingness to work within the system appears to be their enthusiastic participation in the 2005 municipal elections.

The influence of Iran amongst Saudi Shiʿah appears to be muted. After the death of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi in 2001, the Shiʿah of the Eastern Province have tended to follow Ayatollah ʿAli al-Sistani rather than Shirazi's successors (apart from Hizbullah, which follows Khomeini and later Khamanei as its *marjaʿs*).

Kuwait. The Shiʿah population of Kuwait, often said to be as much as a third of the total citizen population, is mixed between Persians on the one hand and Hasawis and Basrawis on the other. Persians have ventured across the Gulf since shortly after the arrival of the Al Sabah, The greatest influx into Kuwait, however, occurred in the 1930s and 1940s in search of jobs and a better way of life, as well as an escape from problems in Iran. These Persian immigrants were predominantly Shiʿi. Unlike the *badu*, Shiʿi Iranians were employed as tradesmen and skilled and unskilled labor. In addition, the government encouraged thousands of Shiʿah to immigrate in the early years of independence in the 1960s because they were seen as natural supporters of the government.

In part, this has been borne out over the years. Shiʿah are more naturally urban and many are ambitious businessmen, thus more politically aware, organized, and allied to the ruling family (since they had no tribal support system). Less prosperous Shiʿah found themselves dependent on the government for services and social support.

The Iranian Revolution had considerable impact in Kuwait. Most young Sunnis and Shiʿah alike supported the revolution in the early stages. By 1980, however, it was concluded that Khomeini was foremost a Persian Shiʿi and the Iran-Iraq War eroded any remaining Sunni attachment to the Iranian example. As a result of the war, Sunnis became suspicious that the Shiʿah could serve as a fifth column, which in turn encouraged Shiʿah to turn to Iran for protection. It also spurred the formation of specifically Shiʿah political societies, a few of

which were relatively radical and pro-Iranian. Others participated loyally within the system and served in the National Assembly.

For many and probably most Shi'ah, Iran no longer serves as a respected example or source of guidance. There are still Shi'i complaints in Kuwait, notably under-representation in the National Assembly and on the municipal council. Furthermore, the Shi'ah community mirrors the Sunni community in the increasingly bitter struggle between the Islamists and the liberals.

United Arab Emirates. Nearly all Shi'ah in the UAE are to be found in Dubai and secondarily Sharjah. These are mostly Persians, although it should be noted that not all Persians are Shi'ah (but all *hawwalah*, i.e. the Arabs from the Persian coast who have returned to the Arab coast, are Sunni). The majority of Dubai's big merchant families are of Persian origin and ties are strengthened by the heavy trading patterns between Dubai and Iran. There are also some al-Baharinah.

Qatar. Once again, the majority of Qatar's Shi'ah are Persians with a few al-Baharinah. Together, the two communities may constitute as much as 25% of the original Qatari population.

Oman. The numbers of Shi'ah in Oman are small, undoubtedly less than 5% of the total Omani population. Nevertheless, their influence is out of proportion to their numbers. The Lawatiyah form the largest of three distinct Shi'i communities. Living in the past in a walled quarter of Matrah, the origins of al-Lawatiyah are unknown although they appear to have arrived from India over the course of three or more centuries. Predominantly businessmen, there are also Lawatis in prominent government positions, notably the ministers of commerce and industry and of tourism. The Baharinah consist of only a dozen families or so but they are well represented in big business and ministerial positions. The smallish Persian population may have existed in Muscat for many centuries but, moved from its original neighborhoods, it is increasingly assimilating into the larger Omani society. The first two groups are notably pro-government. At the height of the Iranian Revolution, a few of the younger members marched in its favor but these did not last.

Political Allegiances

In most of the GCC states, the Persian Shi'ah are merchants and consequently allied to ruling families. Their allegiance is unquestioned because in the past they depended upon the support of ruling families to do business. Now they have been more or less accepted into the establishment and are citizens like the others. As merchants, they tend to be conservative and pro-status quo. The tradesmen among them are also dependent on the government and a stable economic environment. In Bahrain and Oman, however, Persians tend to be of lower socioeconomic status. They are quiescent and assimilating in Oman while more activist in Bahrain – although their role is secondary to the larger al-Baharinah (with whom they do not necessarily get along).

It is the two large indigenous rural Shi'ah populations of the Gulf that present the most worries, i.e., al-Baharinah of Bahrain and the Shi'ah of al-Qatif in the Eastern Province. But to what degree are their allegiances shaped or influenced by external sources? There are two magnetic poles for Shi'ah in the Gulf states: Iran and Iraq. The political aspect of Iranian influence, such as the initial revolutionary excitement, has passed: Iran has not proved to be such a great model to emulate after all. How much does Shi'ah ascendancy in Iraq excite Shi'ah ambitions elsewhere in the Gulf? Probably in Bahrain, secondarily in al-Qatif, and very little elsewhere. How much does Sunni-

Shi'ah civil war in Iraq affect other Shi'ah? Probably in similar ways to Sunnis, i.e., regret and disgust over the killings but provoking real activism only among a few.

There are perhaps four principles to guide thinking about political attitudes of Shi'ah in the Gulf. First is the primacy of nationalism. Nationalism trumps sectarianism and is growing stronger as the individual states of the Gulf acquire more legitimacy and their citizens feel greater national identity (and as a secondary GCC identity grows). Second is the primacy of economic well-being. Material comforts and economic advancement affect the attitude of all citizens, Sunnis and Shi'ah. Those who have prosperity want to preserve it, not risk it. Third, conflict or tension involving Shi'ah in the Gulf states is fundamentally oriented around economic issues and discrimination, only secondarily on sectarian issues and a distant third on ideological issues. Fourth, Shi'ah activism, like Sunni activism, is likely to reflect general differences.

The conclusion from the foregoing is that the Shi'ah of the Gulf states are not likely to be a source of disloyalty or worry to régimes and citizenries, let alone dissidence, in the foreseeable future. There are, however, two flash-points. The first of these is the Eastern Province. Potentially, it is the more worrisome but in practical terms it is the lesser. This is because of remedial steps towards integration, the co-optation of dissident leadership, the geographical concentration of Shi'ah in one region of a much larger entity, and their minority status in a considerably larger population.

Bahrain is definitely the more serious flash-point because the cracks in Bahraini society and polity have only been papered over in the last eight years and not eliminated. In October 2006, the largest opposition party in Bahrain, the largely (but not exclusively) Shi'i and Islamist al-Wifaq Society reversed its position and participated in parliamentary elections. This provoked a split in the party with the hardliners withdrawing to form al-Haq and reject the legitimacy of the elections.

But the more dangerous split may only be potential at present. How long will the Shi'ah youth, those who threw the stones and placed the bombs (and gave the movement its martyrs) during the 1990s unrest, regard their leadership as representing their interests. Rampant unemployment, continued discrimination, and increasing alienation may create a generational split that will see a new, younger, and more radical, movement emerging.

1. In keeping with the oral nature of the original presentation, this essay is not footnoted. The information and interpretation contained within it is derived from a number of published sources (which are among the citations in the extensive "Arabian Peninsula Bibliography" residing on www.JEPeterson.net) and personal interviews and observations in the Gulf over many years.