

# **THE SHIITE QUESTION IN SAUDI ARABIA**

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## THE SHIITE QUESTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From Saudi Arabia's establishment in 1932, its minority Shiite population has been subject to discrimination and sectarian incitement. Beginning in the early 1990s, with then Crown Prince Abdullah's active support, the government took steps to improve inter-sectarian relations. But the measures were modest, and tensions are rising. The war in Iraq has had a notable effect, strengthening Shiite aspirations and Sunni suspicions and generally deepening confessional divisions throughout the region. King Abdullah needs to act resolutely to improve the lot of the two-million strong Shiite community and rein in domestic expressions of anti-Shiite hostility.

While resisting calls from tribal warriors to suppress Shiites violently, the Kingdom from the outset pacified and marginalised them. Shiites remain under-represented in official positions, and students complain of open hostility from Sunni instructors. Jobs in the police and military are rare and promotion prospects there rarer still. While restrictions have loosened, Shiites continue to face obstacles to the free and open observance of their faith.

During much of the nation's history, Shiites were passive but stimulated by events in neighbouring Iran in 1979, their leaders mobilised youth around a message that directly challenged the regime, resonated with feelings of religious and community oppression, and triggered significant mass civil disobedience. Although this phase lasted less than a decade, the events, and the state's heavy-handed response, figure prominently in collective memories.

The Shiite leadership gradually moderated its views, recognising the limitations of agitation and violence and seeking improved ties with a regime whose legitimacy it came to acknowledge and whose role as a bulwark against more extreme Sunni militants it came to accept. In a 1993 meeting, King Fahd promised Shiite leaders to relax political restrictions in exchange for their ending active opposition from abroad. The relative quiet that has prevailed since reflects the enduring impact of that agreement and acknowledgment by Shiite leaders that violence is unlikely to yield results. But it is a quiet that, without further concrete progress, risks exhausting itself.

Saudi Arabia faces a new opportunity and a new urgency, both fuelled in part by external events. The 11 September 2001 attacks and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's subsequent terror campaign inside the Kingdom focused government attention on the most militant forms of religious extremism. They also spurred rapprochement between non-violent Islamists and liberals, Sunni and Shiite, who, faced with the threat of violent Sunni militancy, joined in calling for political and religious reform.

But if al-Qaeda's activities offered a chance to improve sectarian relations, the war in Iraq has pulled in the opposite direction. Emboldened by the example of Iraqi co-religionists, some Saudi Shiites believe they ought to press further, while the sight of Shiite dominance in a neighbouring country heightens Sunni suspicion. Ominously, a rising number of Saudi Sunni *jihadi* militants have been drawn to Iraq, motivated by opposition to the U.S. but also to the Shiites' increased role. The eventual return of perhaps several hundred battle-tested Saudi *mujahidin* seems inevitable, raising the possibility that -- like their predecessors from Afghanistan -- they will seek a new battlefield and threaten Western and governmental targets, as well as the Shiite minority.

While sectarian tensions arguably are higher than at any time since 1979, there appears little risk today of violent sectarian confrontation, but that is no reason for complacency. Instead, steps should be taken now to defuse a potential crisis. King Abdullah signalled his support while Crown Prince for more Shiite rights, most importantly by promoting inclusive national dialogues and bringing key members of the Sunni clergy along. But his true test comes now. Moving forward will require a long-term commitment to political and social integration and to combating domestic hate-speech, including:

- ❑ expanding Shiite presence in government institutions, in particular in national and local councils including the *Majlis al-Shura* and Regional Councils;
- ❑ lifting remaining restrictions on Shiite religious rituals and practices, specifically by allowing

construction of mosques and community centres (*husseiniyyas*) and the production, printing, and circulation of religious materials within their communities. The decision by the government to permit observance of Ashura in 2004 was an important first measure; and

- encouraging tolerance, eliminating anti-Shiism in mosques and schools, and curbing statements that incite anti-Shiite violence. Alongside its crackdown on al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the government spearheaded an effort to promote tolerance and diversity. But, expressions of sectarian hatred remain common, including by persons in positions of religious authority. The government should organise a national information program encouraging tolerance and emphasising national unity.

Western governments are justifiably concerned about restrictions on religious freedom; in 2004 the U.S. State Department listed Saudi Arabia as a country of concern in this respect. But foreign pressure directly targeting the issue, especially in light of growing suspicions that the U.S. is hostile to Islam and championing Shiites regionally, could backfire. The U.S. and the EU would do better by focusing their public efforts on the need for broad reform, with the goal of expanding the rights and political participation of all Saudis, irrespective of sect.

**Riyadh/Amman/Brussels, 19 September 2005**

## THE SHIITE QUESTION IN SAUDI ARABIA

### I. INTRODUCTION: SHIISM IN SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia's roughly two million Shiites represent between 10 and 15 per cent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Most live and work in the Eastern Province, which they dominate demographically and which is also home to the largest oil fields and most expansive processing and refining facilities. While a small number reside in Dammam, the Eastern Province's capital and largest city, the overwhelming majority live in the towns and villages of the two large oases, Qatif and al-Hasa.<sup>2</sup> Small Shiite communities also exist in Mecca and Medina, and a sizeable Ismaili community<sup>3</sup> of roughly 100,000 lives in and around Najran in the remote border region close to the Yemeni border.

Shiism in the Arabian Peninsula dates back to Islam's first century, when residents rejected the passing of the Caliphate from Muhammad to Abu Bakr instead of Ali. While Iraq and Iran are the heartland of Shiism today,

eastern Arabia also has been an important centre of Shiite spiritualism.<sup>4</sup>

From the fourteenth century until early in the twentieth, Shiites in the Arabian Peninsula fell under virtually continuous foreign domination. With the exception of three quarters of a century of Portuguese presence in the sixteenth century, this typically meant rule by foreign Sunnis.<sup>5</sup> Even so, Shiism remained the dominant spiritual authority. Clerics and followers kept alive important religious institutions, such as mosques and *husseiniyyas* (community centres),<sup>6</sup> until the advent of Saudi rule. They openly observed annual rituals such as the public mourning processions in honour of the martyrdom of Hussein (Ashura). Similarly, until the mid-twentieth century those pursuing religious learning studied in local *hawzas* (centres of learning) overseen by senior clerics and funded by the local *khums* (religious tithes).<sup>7</sup> Ties also were retained to Shiite communities abroad, as students and aspiring clerics regularly travelled to Iraq to complete religious training. Underscoring the historical connection to that country, Qatif's *hawza* was known as little Najaf until the 1940s.<sup>8</sup>

In 1913, the al-Saud conquered the Eastern Province, wresting control from its Ottoman rulers and incorporating it into what would become the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Driven primarily by economic and political ambition, the al-Saud nonetheless relied heavily on religiously impassioned tribal warriors (*ikhwan*)<sup>9</sup> to consolidate their

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<sup>1</sup> There are no reliable figures for minorities. According to a 2004 government census, Saudi Arabia's total population was 22,670,000, including 16,529,302 citizens. The 10 to 15 per cent figure refers to "Twelvers", who are the majority of Shiites and believe that the twelfth Imam, their supreme spiritual guide on earth and direct descendant of the prophet, went into occultation in the ninth century. For a brief description of the origins of the dispute between Shiites and Sunnis, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 18-19.

<sup>2</sup> Qatif, the name of a mid-size city and an oasis home to dozens of small villages, is approximately 40 km. north of Dammam. It is surrounded by smaller towns and villages. The much larger al-Hasa oasis is approximately 125 km. south of Qatif. In addition to the dozens of predominantly Shiite villages that ring the oasis' palm groves, al-Hasa has two large cities, Hofuf and Mubarraz, home to both Shiites and Sunnis.

<sup>3</sup> The Ismailis or "Seveners" recognise Ismail (the eldest son of the sixth Imam Ja'far) as the seventh imam, and the line of imams descended from him to the present; the imam of the main body of Ismailis is the Agha Khan, the 49<sup>th</sup> in line of descent from the Prophet Muhammad". Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

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<sup>4</sup> Among those from eastern Arabia who achieved theological prominence are Ibrahim al-Qatifi (sixteenth century), Ahmed Zayn ad-Din al-Ahsa'i (d. 1801), Ali al-Khunayzi (d. 1944).

<sup>5</sup> Juan Cole, *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi'ite Islam* (New York, 2001), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Husseiniyyas* originally were built to observe Ashura, the date when Imam Hussein was martyred. In Saudi Arabia their role evolved over time, serving as centres for social, cultural and religious activities.

<sup>7</sup> The oasis of al-Hasa now maintains the *hawza al-'ilmiyya*; a new *hawza* opened in Qatif in 1996 and recently moved to a new building. A community leader told Crisis Group that, "although officials know about it, they are being passive about it". Crisis Group e-mail correspondence, 25 August 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See *al-Medina*, 8 October 2004.

<sup>9</sup> The *ikhwan* should not be confused with the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-ikhwan al-muslimin*), which emerged in Egypt

control. Central to the *ikhwan*'s belief was the call for *jihād*, particularly against those deemed unbelievers and apostates, among whom Shiites figured prominently. The *ikhwan* exerted considerable pressure on the future King, Abd al-Aziz, either to forcibly convert or kill them. His refusal led in part to the *ikhwan*'s 1926 uprising, which the al-Saud ultimately crushed. Nevertheless, the *ikhwan* appear to have taken matters in their own hands, killing a large, albeit unknown, number of Shiites.

Established in 1932, the Kingdom pursued a variety of means simultaneously to pacify and marginalise its Shiite minority. With encouragement from the new rulers, thousands of Sunni settlers and aspiring merchants from Najd and Qasim flooded the eastern communities, helping build new cities and centres of commerce that seldom benefited Shiites. This influx undermined old trading and agricultural networks that traditionally had sustained local economy and society. For the most part, Sunni settlers and visiting merchants bypassed local Shiite businessmen, opting instead to trade with co-religionists from central and western Arabia. Shiite date farmers, who once traded with merchants from as far as Central Asia and East Africa, saw their produce and resources seized by the state. Shiites found work at the Arabian American Oil Company (Aramco) but rarely moved into management positions.

At the same time, Saudi rulers and local overseers severely constrained Shiite religious observance and practice. Restrictions included injunctions against publicly broadcasting calls to prayer, a ban on publishing and distributing religious or political texts, limits on mosque construction, the destruction of shrines, the dismantling of centres of religious learning, and prosecution and even persecution of those observing Shiite rituals, including Ashura and grave visitation. The net effect, beginning with the founding of modern Saudi Arabia and accelerating with the building of the state, was to weaken Shiite institutions seriously.

While many remained devoted to the tenets of faith, and clerics retained authority over elements of spiritual life, other pressures diminished the broad appeal and local dominance of Shiism in the mid-twentieth century. Oil discovery and Aramco's expansion -- which brought jobs for local residents as well as thousands of expatriate labourers from the Middle East and further abroad -- exposed eastern Arabia residents to ideological alternatives, which were embraced to varying degrees from the 1950s to the 1970s. Communism, Nasserism and Baathism each enjoyed some following among Shiite labourers and local residents.

in 1928. Although the Muslim Brotherhood did enjoy popularity in Saudi Arabia after the 1960s, the earlier *ikhwan* was a tribal force subordinated to the authority of King Abd al-Aziz.

## II. POLITICAL SHIISM

### A. THE RISE OF POLITICAL SHIISM

Under tremendous internal and external pressure, Shiite authority was restructured after the Kingdom's founding. Stripped by the state of their public role, Shiite religious authorities carried on in private, offering limited instruction in drastically reduced institutions and observing important rituals only in the safety of homes and mosques. Clerics continued to oversee important social and quasi-political matters, including family law, although the scope of their power was curtailed. 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>10</sup>

Although they bristled under Saudi rule and lamented the loss of their highest local authorities, Shiites mostly adapted to rather than resisted their change in status. Clerics justified quietism by pointing out that Shiite orthodoxy historically discouraged them from interfering in political matters.<sup>11</sup> While quietist juridical theory no doubt influenced some clergy to eschew political matters, the decision to accommodate Saudi rule was also pragmatic. Rather than challenging Saudi power, which would have invited repression, Shiite clergy endured under difficult circumstances. Neither religious nor other community activists spoke out or forcefully advocated greater freedom.<sup>12</sup> Instead, local representatives periodically and quietly petitioned the state for relief from most extreme forms of discrimination.

The more activist political leadership and structures that dominate Saudi Shiite politics crystallised abroad and

<sup>10</sup> "Seeking guidance from or emulating leading clergy (*marja' al-taqlid*) occupies a central place in Shiite theology. Current structures, in which the most respected clergy acquire large followings, evolved gradually. Although the terms of emulation have changed over time, the act of following living clerics is based on the singular importance of *ijtihad*, the independent exertion of the intellect in the interpretation of scripture. *Mujtahids*, those who are qualified to issue interpretations and rulings based on their knowledge of *Shari'a* (Islamic Law) and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), are widely respected figures and only achieve their status after years of study". Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°40, *Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, 6 May 2005, pp. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven, 1985), pp. 195-196.

<sup>12</sup> There were periods of unrest in the East, particularly in the 1950s when labourers at Aramco rebelled against low wages, poor living conditions and discriminatory practices.

coincided with broader trends in Shiite outlook in the 1960s and 1970s. Most prominent was the call for greater political power and authority for jurisprudents (*vilayat-e-faqih*) issued by the Iranian Ayatollah, Ruhollah Khomeini. As was the case with other aspiring Shiite clerics from the Gulf, his influence was more symbolic than direct. He was an inspiring force but the content of his message ultimately mattered less than his example of defiance. Those active at the time told Crisis Group that they were not inspired to spread Khomeini's revolution but rather to demand greater religious rights at home.<sup>13</sup>

The present generation of Shiite political leaders from Qatif and al-Hasa studied religion in Najaf, where they gradually discarded their quietist outlook. After an Iraqi government crackdown in 1973 on charges that they were Saudi spies, several fled to Qom, Iran, among them Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, the current pre-eminent Saudi Shiite political figure. In 1974, their migration took al-Saffar and his colleagues to Kuwait, where Ayatollah Muhammad al-Hussayni al-Shirazi, a senior cleric from Karbala, had relocated along with his nephew Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi to establish a religious school.<sup>14</sup> Their school also attracted followers from Iraq and Bahrain.

Kuwait proved fertile ground for Gulf political Shiism. In partial agreement with Khomeini, al-Shirazi argued that clerics should play a more direct role in local and national politics and Shiites should be more assertive in demanding respect for religious and political rights.<sup>15</sup> Differing from Khomeini, however, al-Shirazi and al-Mudarrasi also relied heavily on contemporary Sunni Islamist texts to promote religiosity and advocated the organisation of grass-roots political Shiism. Reflecting on his time in Kuwait, al-Saffar remarked that among the most influential materials he studied were those of the Muslim Brothers and Sunni Islamists, including Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb from Egypt as well as Abul Ala Mawdudi from Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Iraqi Shiite activists, particularly members of the militant *Hizb al-Dawa*, also spent time in Kuwait and influenced their Saudi counterparts.

Applying these lessons, al-Saffar and his followers helped create the political-religious networks that dominate Saudi Shiite politics to this day.<sup>17</sup> Students in Kuwait periodically returned to Saudi Arabia in the mid 1970s and in 1975 set up the underground Shiite Reform Movement. The group circulated audiocassettes, delivered Friday sermons, and distributed literature advocating a more politically-minded brand of Shiism.<sup>18</sup>

## B. FROM POLITICISATION TO CONFRONTATION

In 1977, al-Saffar and his colleagues returned to Qatif, where their claim to both political and religious authority and calls for activism challenged quietest clerics and secular ideologues alike. Within two years, events in Iran -- and in particular Tehran radio broadcasts criticising the Saudi royal family -- gave them added prominence. Political Shiism became a powerful albeit only loosely controlled force in eastern Saudi Arabia. Tapping into ferment created by events abroad, particularly the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the local vacuum, al-Saffar and his colleagues energised large numbers of Shiite youth, building support for a message that directly challenged the regime, spoke to Shiite religious and community grievances, and ultimately, in 1979, triggered the most significant mass civil disobedience by Saudi Shiites in the century.<sup>19</sup>

Although Khomeini advocated toppling the al-Saud, more realistic Saudi activists were focused on specific grievances: the right to observe Shiite rituals; an end to discrimination; a greater oil revenue share; job opportunities; and modernising Shiite communities plagued by crumbling infrastructure, sewage-filled streets and rampant disease. Reflecting regional tensions, they also condemned the Riyadh-Washington alliance and the U.S. presence in the region.

Popular anger gave way to mass protest in November 1979, when several thousand Shiites in Safwa defied the government ban and turned out to commemorate Ashura.<sup>20</sup> The National Guard responded forcefully and,

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group interview, Safwa, 23 April 2005.

<sup>14</sup> *Al-Medina*, 8 October 2004. In addition to al-Saffar, a handful of other students who form the nucleus of the contemporary Saudi Shiite political network spent time in Kuwait. They include Tawfiq al-Sayf and his brothers Fawzi al-Sayf and Mahmood al-Sayf (from Tarut), Yusuf Salman al-Mahdi (Safwa), Hassan Makki al-Khawayldi (Safwa), and Musa Abu Khamsin and his brother Hussein Abu Khamsin (al-Hasa). *Al-Medina*, 22 October 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Followers of al-Shirazi told Crisis Group that he did not fully endorse Khomeini's view of *vilayat-e-faqih*. While al-Shirazi supported a political role for clerics, especially in running state affairs, he preferred rule by committee rather than concentrating political power in one jurisprudent.

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Medina*, 15 October 2004.

<sup>17</sup> For information on the Shiite Reform Movement in Saudi Arabia, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent* (New York, 1999), p. 198.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 19 July 2005.

<sup>19</sup> A Shiite who was active politically in the late 1970s told Crisis Group they hoped to use Shirazi's message to build local credibility and political capital. He claimed they did not seek violent revolution or links with foreign groups. Crisis Group interview, Safwa, 23 April 2005.

<sup>20</sup> See Jacob Goldberg, "The Shi'i minority in Saudi Arabia", in Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie (eds.), *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New York, 1986); Joseph Kostiner, "Shi'i unrest in

over subsequent days, killed more than twenty. The state's heavy-handed reaction lasted well into the following year, leading to many arrests and driving several hundred into exile; al-Saffar himself took refuge in Iran before settling in Damascus.<sup>21</sup> Widespread participation in the 1979 protests reflected the merging of a popular message with new Shiite political organisations. In the months prior, al-Saffar renamed the Shiite Reform Movement as the Organisation for the Islamic Revolution in the Arabian Peninsula (OIR, *Munathammat al-Thawra al-Islamiyya fil-Jazira al-Arabiyya*)<sup>22</sup> and distributed flyers urging public dissent, warning the Saudi and U.S. governments, and demanding that Shiite grievances be addressed. These events still figure prominently in the collective imagination of Saudi Shiites and transformed the nature of Shiite politics. They also helped establish al-Saffar and his closest colleagues -- most of whom also were in exile by 1980 -- as unrivalled community leaders.<sup>23</sup>

The confrontational phase of political Shiism's mainstream lasted less than a decade. Beginning in the late 1980s, the exiled leadership moderated its views; as told by former OIR members, they grew tired of aggressive messages and tactics and recognised that, given demographic realities, Shiites could not wage a successful revolution. However inspiring, the example of Iran was of little relevance; violence was unlikely to achieve concessions on religious, political or social issues.<sup>24</sup> The 1988 end of the Iran-Iraq war also likely led to the realisation that Iran would not liberate the region's Shiites.

Instead, they gradually shifted to a two-track approach in which they both expressed grievances and sought improved relations with a regime whose legitimacy they

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the Gulf", in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, 1987); James Buchan, "Opposition in Saudi Arabia", in T. Niblock (ed.), *State, Society and Economy in Saudi Arabia* (London, 1982); Hussein Musa, *al-Ahzab wa al-harakat al-islamiyya fi al-khalij wa al-jazira al-arabiyya* (Manama, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Many important exiled figures now play central roles in Shiite community politics, including Shaykh al-Saffar, Ja'far al-Shayeb (recently elected to the Municipal Council in Qatif), Tawfiq al-Sayf (a London resident who writes a weekly column for *Okaz*, a Saudi-based daily), Issa al-Mu'zil (elected to the Municipal Council in Qatif), and Sadeq al-Jubran (political activist now living near Hofuf, al-Hasa).

<sup>22</sup> Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (New York, 2001), p. 147.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Eastern Province, May 2005. Al-Saffar and dozens of exiles pursued their efforts abroad, engaging in a fifteen-year anti-government media campaign, while maintaining a network of activists inside the Kingdom. Hundreds of followers provided details of arrests, governmental abuse and community developments. Crisis Group interview, Manama, 19 July 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interview with Ja'far al-Shayeb, June 2005.

acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> Initially reluctant to engage with individuals it deemed dangerous activists, the Kingdom's rulers eventually responded.<sup>26</sup> In 1993, in the wake of efforts by Saudi officials in the U.S. and UK, King Fahd invited four Shiite leaders and supporters of al-Saffar (Ja'far al-Shayeb, Sadeq al-Jubran, Issa al-Mu'zil, and Tawfiq al-Sayf) to Jeddah to discuss their grievances. In exchange for their ending active opposition from abroad, the government released political prisoners held since the 1980s, allowed hundreds of exiles to return, restoring their passports and right to travel. Importantly, Saudi Shiites also were assured that fundamental social and religious issues would be addressed. According to various observers, Saudi rulers ordered government departments to curb discriminatory practices and that school text books "be amended to remove disparaging references to Shi'ism".<sup>27</sup>

The agreement produced mixed results. Shiites claim that with only few exceptions (particularly in healthcare), little has been done to address their needs.<sup>28</sup> Nor did all Shiites acquiesce in the conciliatory approach. In 1987, a small number founded Saudi Arabia's Hizbollah, reportedly with Iranian help; militants are said to have travelled to Iran and Lebanon, where they allegedly trained in Hizbollah camps.<sup>29</sup>

The 25 June 1996 attack against an American military housing compound in al-Khobar, which killed nineteen and wounded 350, was seen as a reminder that Shiite militancy remained a serious threat. While responsibility has yet to be established and the event remains clouded in mystery, from the outset suspicion centred on Saudi Hizbollah with possible involvement by Iran.<sup>30</sup> After the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S., speculation mounted that al-Qaeda might have been involved in the Khobar bombings, a theory long suggested -- albeit without evidence -- by some Saudi Shiites.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview with a group of liberal Saudi activists, Sayhat, 19 April 2005; Crisis Group interview with former political exiles, May-June 2005. See also Fandy, op. cit., pp. 195-228.

<sup>26</sup> *Al-Medina*, 29 October 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Graham E. Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims* (New York, 1999), p. 190.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Eastern Province, April-May 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, "Islamic extremism in Saudi Arabia and the attack on al-Khobar", CSIS, June 2001. Other Shiites chose neither accommodation nor confrontation, opting instead for isolation and refusing to deal with the royal family or government.

<sup>30</sup> In June 2001, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted thirteen Saudi Shiites for their alleged role in the attacks.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Saudi Arabia, April-May, 2005; Crisis Group interview in Tarut, 20 April 2005. Others Shiites are more circumspect, pointing out that Saudi Shiites had



### III. SHIITE POLITICS TODAY

#### A. COMMUNALISM AND CONCILIATION

Eschewing more confrontational and political efforts, the focal point of Shiite activism after the leadership's return from exile in the mid-1990s was essentially communalist, devoted above all to defending community interests vis-à-vis other sectarian groups and the state.<sup>32</sup> But another series of external and internal events -- the 11 September attacks, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's terror campaign inside the Kingdom, and the war in Iraq -- provoked a further significant readjustment. Islamist and liberal secularist Shiites, faced with clear manifestations of violent Sunni Islamist militancy, joined with others urging political and religious reform to stem the tide of home-grown extremism. Some Shiite activists became prominent members of the reform lobby that emerged on the national stage in 2003.<sup>33</sup>

Breaking from a narrowly sectarian agenda, some Shiite political activists called for broad institutional and political reform, the easing of restrictions on speech and a more participatory political system. Several signed the January 2003 petition, "A Vision for the Present and Future of the Nation", that sparked broader discussion of reform.<sup>34</sup> At the core of their approach is the conviction, expressed by Najib al-Khunayzi (a Shiite liberal activist who signed the petition, was arrested in March 2004 and has since been released), that change was inevitable but the country would be better served if managed by the al-Saud.<sup>35</sup>

The war in Iraq added another layer of complexity: some Shiites were emboldened, persuaded the U.S. invasion would result in pressure on the regime to loosen its grip; others were fearful it would set back local reform efforts by raising fears of Shiite empowerment; and many felt both ways at once.<sup>36</sup> Seeking to take advantage of the new

situation while insulating themselves from charges of disloyalty, 450 Shiites from different political groupings followed up the national petition with one of their own in late April 2003, "Partners in the Nation". While principally intended to demonstrate their allegiance, it also emphasised ongoing community grievances, called for sweeping changes to end discrimination, allow greater freedom of worship and speech, expand political opportunities for Shiites and curb sectarian hatred, in effect emphasising the signatories' commitment to the nation while asserting the need for a more secure place for Shiites within it.<sup>37</sup> In a rare audience with then Crown Prince Abdullah, the Shiite leaders allegedly were promised their concerns would be addressed.<sup>38</sup>

Greater willingness to work within the system, renounce confrontation and assert loyalty to the al-Saud reflects another realisation on the Shiite leadership's part. Most now appear to have concluded that their community's security is intimately bound up with the survival of a regime that alone can mediate between various and often competing groups while keeping the most extreme elements at bay. Hence the emphasis on national unity, coexistence, cooperation, the centrality of Islam, all of which are designed to refute suspicions of disloyalty to the regime or central state. In the words of an activist who played down the community's more confrontational period, "Shiites have long expressed a willingness to participate in the state and to support partnership".<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Mahfuz, a political philosopher and co-editor of the Shiite journal *al-Kalima (The Word)*, explained: "Sharing power and being a partner is the only way to unity and security for the community". He reiterated to Crisis Group the theme of his most recent book, *Dialogue and National Unity in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, calling for a political system "that permits different interpretations of Islam" and stressing that the source of the problem is not the al-Saud but "their reliance on *salafis*".<sup>40</sup>

Whether this will persuade other Saudis is uncertain. The belief remains strong among Sunnis that Shiites are merely biding their time, banking on external support -- U.S. or other -- to establish their own independent state. Such views regularly find their way to internet sites and chat rooms; some clerics have explicitly warned of a Shiite-U.S. connection. Anti-Shiite suspicion extends as far as Sunni opponents of the regime. Saad al-Faqih, a London-based dissident who calls for the royal family's

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trained abroad, and bomb materials had been smuggled across the Saudi-Jordanian border. Crisis Group interview, Dammam, 18 April 2005.

<sup>32</sup> See generally Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., pp. 20-22.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°28, *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?*, 14 July 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Three Saudi reformers edited and published a collection of commentary and documents on reform, *The Saudi Spring and the Exit from Oppression: The Call for Political Reform (Rabi'a al-sa'udiyya wa mukhrajat al-qama': da'wat lilislah al-siyasiyya)*, including articles by leading reformers as well as the petitions from 2003. The text is banned in Saudi Arabia. One of the editors provided Crisis Group a copy.

<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sayhat, 18 April 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Eastern Province, April-May 2005.

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<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°31, *Saudi Arabia Background: Who Are the Islamists?*, 21 September 2004, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sayhat, 19 April 2005.

overthrow, suggested to Crisis Group that Shiites hope to win U.S. support and gain independence. "They are taking advantage of the regional crisis to further their own agenda".<sup>41</sup>

How the royal family will react is another critical question. Frustrated Shiites and other reformers sharpened their critique of religious extremism, calling for effective measures to reform institutions and roll back Wahhabism. This culminated in December 2003 with a petition urging the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. The government responded angrily and in March 2004 arrested activists, including three prominent Shiites involved in the national reform project, Najib al-Khunayzi, Adnan al-Shukhus and Amr Abu Khamsin. The three were released after promising not to sign petitions critical of the government.<sup>42</sup> Judged by temperament and past pronouncements, King Abdullah appears relatively open to change but his willingness and ability to confront others within the royal family is untested.

## B. POLITICAL STRUCTURES

While there are no legal Shiite political organisations or societies, informal networks exist. Most are Islamist and tied to prominent clergy members, though a smaller number of secular activists also have emerged.

**Shiite Islamic Reform Movement.** The most powerful and popular religious-political network is led by activists who helped transform Shiite religious and political authority in the late 1970s and share personal bonds and a common experience in confronting the regime. It is a loose network, lacking central coordination, an office and official membership. Although al-Saffar clearly is its leader, others such as Ja'far al-Shayeb, Tawfiq al-Sayf and Fawzi al-Sayf enjoy a measure of autonomy. While its popular support cannot be precisely assessed, its unofficial candidates swept the 2005 municipal elections in predominantly Shiite communities.

Programmatically, the group has shed its 1970s radicalism. Its focus chiefly has been on education, charities, counselling programs and mosque maintenance. The most prominent leaders, including al-Saffar, also aspire to a national role as interlocutors between the rulers and Shiites. In recent years, they registered some success, carving out space for Shiites. Through al-Saffar's efforts, notably, Shiites have been permitted to observe Ashura

publicly (albeit only in predominantly Shiite towns and villages, not mixed cities like Dammam).<sup>43</sup>

The term *Shiraziyya* is used by many Shiites to describe the movement because al-Saffar and the activists who returned from exile in 1993-1994 had been al-Shirazi followers but it is misleading. After al-Shirazi's death in 2001, al-Saffar (and, following him, most Saudi Shiites) chose to emulate Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani rather than al-Shirazi's successors, Ayatollah Sadeq al-Shirazi in Qom or Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi in Karbala.<sup>44</sup> Former al-Shirazi followers point out that the *marja'iyya* plays a less unifying and significant role today than 30 years ago, with Saudi Shiites turning to different clerics for emulation, including Ayatollah Fadlallah in Lebanon, al-Mudarrasi, and al-Shirazi.<sup>45</sup>

**Saudi Hizbollah/Followers of the Line of the Imam (*Ansar Khat al-Imam*).** The next largest Islamist group is Saudi Hizbollah, also known locally as the Followers of the Line of the Imam [Khomeini].<sup>46</sup> Founded in 1987 by several prominent clerics, including Sheikh Hashim al-Shukhus, Sheikh Abdulrahman al-Hubail and Abduljalil al-Maa, it is a clergy-led, religious-political organisation whose leaders come from the Eastern Province.<sup>47</sup> The organisation is distinguished from the Shiite Islamic Reform Movement in two important ways. First, it espouses Khomeini's principle of *vilayat-e-faqih*, and most members emulate the *marja'iyya* of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.<sup>48</sup> The difference in juridical theory is small yet important. While the Shiite Islamic Reform Movement calls for greater clerical involvement in politics, it does not insist that the clergy supervise political affairs. Secondly, the Followers of the Line of the Imam reject al-Saffar's more conciliatory approach, wholly distrusting the ruling family and government. For the most part, that sentiment has translated into isolation (as opposed to al-Saffar's engagement) though it reportedly slipped into periodic violence. The Khobar attack of 1996 is typically highlighted, despite continued uncertainty as to whether organisation was behind the bombing and whether, assuming the perpetrators belonged to Hizbollah, they were directed by its leaders.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, London, 14 June 2005.

<sup>42</sup> According to al-Khunayzi, he still is barred from travelling outside the Kingdom. Crisis Group interview, Sayhat, April 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Crisis Group interview with Shiite journalist, Dammam, April 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Eastern Province, April-May 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dammam, April 2005.

<sup>46</sup> A local Shiite activist told Crisis Group that the group took its name from the Iranian students who occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979. The Persian name for the group was *Daneshjuyan-e khat-e Emam*. Crisis Group e-mail correspondence, 26 August 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Current leaders include Sheikh Hashim al-Hubail, Sheikh Hassan al-Nimr and Sayyed Kamal al-Sada.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 19 July 2005. The group attracted some Shirazis who opposed the conciliatory approach.

The government cracked down in the wake of the Khobar bombing but there are some indications Hizbollah/The Followers of the Line of the Imam may have increased their presence and influence of late by focusing on social and cultural activities to the exclusion of politics.<sup>49</sup> Various observers surmise that some members may be tempted to follow the Islamic Reform Movement's approach but are awaiting the results of its efforts before engaging the government. Should this occur, internal splits are likely.<sup>50</sup>

**Traditionalists and Rejectionists.** The smallest Islamist political grouping is composed of a limited number of independent clerics who, lacking any genuine organisation, play a marginal role as opponents to al-Saffar and other advocates of national integration. They include quietist religious figures displaced by al-Shirazi's supporters in the 1970s as well as followers of other Shiite religious and political tracks who fundamentally distrust the Sunni-dominated regime, hold that the community ought to avoid national politics altogether, and opt for an exclusive focus on community affairs. One such rejectionist cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, head of a mosque in the village of 'Awamiyya north of Qatif, typically speaks against any engagement with the al-Saud.<sup>51</sup>

**Shiite Liberals.** As with their Sunni counterparts, Shiite secularist liberals are a relatively small minority within their community and considerably less organised than the Islamists. While some, such as Najib al-Khunayzi, have garnered national and international attention, on the whole they enjoy only marginal influence. Lacking organisational structures, protected forums or natural leaders -- unlike Islamists who control mosques, *husseiniyyas* and other religious networks, and are led by clerics -- liberal Shiites rely on weekly salons in private homes and with limited public impact. Compounding these difficulties, they so far have failed to develop a message that resonates widely with the community. Their focus on broad national matters to the detriment of more local, immediate concerns limits their appeal, while their call for religious reform and secular institutions has triggered strong objection from the Shiite clergy.<sup>52</sup>

## C. ELECTIONS AND THE ISLAMIST-LIBERAL FALLOUT

Saudi Arabia's first national elections in four decades, on 3 March 2005, were a coming-out party of sorts for Shiites. Even though only very minor local government positions were at stake, and only half the seats were in play (the king appointed the other half) hundreds of candidates competed in the Eastern Province for seats on municipal councils responsible for overseeing public health, infrastructure maintenance, garbage collection and other similar tasks. A banker from Qatif, who was unsuccessful, later remarked: "the election period was like a wedding. It was a time of great joy. The people had a great thirst".<sup>53</sup> Voter participation also was comparatively high, with Shiites turning out in greater numbers than elsewhere in the Kingdom.<sup>54</sup> Of the twelve seats available in Qatif and al-Hasa, eleven went to Shiite; the only one they lost was due to a candidate disqualification on election eve.<sup>55</sup>

Neither the relatively strong turnout nor the high interest was a foregone conclusion. Two weeks prior to the elections, one candidate -- an eventual winner -- expressed scepticism that it was worth the effort.<sup>56</sup> Religious leaders throughout the region initially questioned whether participation would serve the community's interests.<sup>57</sup> At least one prominent cleric from the village of al-'Awamiyya, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr (a follower of Taqi al-

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<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview with Zaki Abu al-Saud, Sayhat, 18 April 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Out of approximately 320,000 eligible voters in the two main Shiite residential areas, almost 110,000 -- 34 per cent -- registered to vote. In Riyadh and surrounding regions, which together have a population of approximately 3.7 million, only 148,337 -- between 16 and 19 per cent -- registered to vote. The figures provided to Crisis Group by Saudis in Eastern Province and Riyadh were only estimates but whatever the actual percentage, it is undisputed that Shiites turned out in the highest numbers.

<sup>55</sup> John R. Bradley, "Saudi Shi'ites walk tightrope", *Asia Times Online*, 17 March 2005. Citing commentary provided by the disqualified candidate Hussein abd al-Rahman al-Khamis, Bradley suggested that the disqualification likely resulted from fear that voting procedures would allow al-Khamis to win in a predominantly Sunni district. Indeed, election rules permitted voters to cast a ballot in each district where a seat was being contested for their local Municipal Council. In al-Hasa, this meant each voter had the right to vote for each of the six available seats. Because Shiites are the majority in al-Hasa and registered to vote in much greater numbers than Sunnis, it was likely that voters from around the oasis would have provided enough votes for al-Khamis to win in his district, even though it was predominantly Sunni.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 11 February 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 11 February 2005.

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<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dammam, 18 April 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 19 July 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama 19 July 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Expressing a view held by many liberals, one activist complained that "political reform cannot come before reform of the religious establishment". Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

Mudarrisi), rejected the elections.<sup>58</sup> To persuade fence-sitters, election supporters launched a coordinated public campaign; in the weeks leading up to candidate registration, community leaders formed ten-person committees in villages, each responsible for hosting seminars, printing stickers and distributing election news. As many as 50,000 newsletters were published and distributed weekly. Later, the committees focused on informing prospective candidates and instructing eligible voters on how to register. To persuade voters that the councils would accurately represent the province's demographic make-up, Saudi rulers acceded to local activists' requests to establish a separate Municipal Council for Qatif and surrounding villages, a significant gesture to the Shiite community.

Once the campaign was underway, coordination between Shiite leaders partially gave way to competition, primarily between the Shiite Islamic Reform Movement, independent Islamists and liberals. With only ten days to campaign, candidates erected tents and hosted nightly speakers in an attempt to distinguish themselves in a crowded field.<sup>59</sup> Technically, they were barred from forming interest groups or blocs resembling political parties, but, as happened throughout the Kingdom, Shiite candidates did just that. Lists drawn up and supported by religious and other figures were distributed by text-messaging to cell phones and word of mouth.<sup>60</sup> At least the top four vote getters in Qatif came from the same list.<sup>61</sup> And, similar to a pattern seen across the Kingdom, Islamists scored impressive victories.

Although clerical involvement clearly helped certain candidates, it would be wrong to assume it alone explains the outcome. Interviews with candidates and voters suggest that the Islamists, and particularly members of the Shiite Islamic Reform Movement, possessed superior organisational skills and ties to the public, in addition to a prior history of activism that burnished their credentials. Ja'far al-Shayeb, an Islamist who maintains close ties to liberals, signed both major 2003 petitions and met with King Fahd to help broker the 1993 compromise ending the Shiite leaders' exile, told Crisis Group that, "the majority of Shiites are conservative Muslims, and Islamist candidates did a better job of communicating with voters by going to villages".<sup>62</sup> He emphasised his own Islamic credentials rather than his liberal political tendencies and received the second most votes for the Qatif council.

Politically, the elections carried several messages and produced tensions akin to those witnessed throughout the Kingdom. Islamists won, but on a platform of conciliation, national unity and political participation.<sup>63</sup> The liberal elite was shut out, straining their relations with Islamists and undermining short-term prospects for enhanced partnership.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, Ja'far al-Shayeb, Manama, 10 August 2005.

<sup>59</sup> 9,330 candidates contested 178 seats across the Kingdom. There were more than 148 candidates for six seats in Qatif.

<sup>60</sup> The lists were highly controversial. Defeated candidates across the Kingdom expressed outrage at the unfair advantage afforded to candidates who were backed by popular religious figures. In Riyadh, Dammam, Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, "Golden Lists" sponsored by popular clergy won every seat. Crisis Group learned during interviews in Riyadh and in the Eastern Province that list coordinators in Jeddah purchased registration files recorded on CDs and smuggled from local administrative offices for a reported 35,000 Saudi Riyals (\$9,333). In Jeddah, the CDs, complete with voter information such as cell phone numbers, were sent to India where messages expressing religious backing for specific candidates (usually identified by family name and ballot number) could not be traced, and were subsequently text-messaged back to Saudi Arabia. Supporters of successful candidates in Shiite areas confirmed that similar lists existed in the East, although the same accusations about illegal smuggling were not made. Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh and Eastern Province, April-May 2005. Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Safwa, 23 April 2005.

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<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Dammam, 19 April 2005, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Saudi Arabia Background*, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

## IV. SHIITE GRIEVANCES

Sectarianism is endemic in Saudi Arabia, with anti-Shiite discrimination manifesting itself in several ways. Historically, the Kingdom bears considerable responsibility, a product of its alliance with the Wahhabi movement and the pact that marked the foundation of the first Saudi state.<sup>65</sup> Although its authority and autonomy have been much reduced, the Wahhabi religious establishment provides the regime with legitimacy; in turn, the al-Saud refrain from challenging its core tenets, among which anti-Shiism figures prominently. In the past, sectarianism also proved a valuable strategic tool, deployed to check the perceived threat represented by Iran's Islamic revolution in the 1980s and expand Saudi influence throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.<sup>66</sup> Clerics in official and unofficial positions, in state-funded religious institutions, schools, and even private businesses preach and often practice virulent anti-Shiite discrimination and hatred.

Many discriminatory practices go back to the state's founding and early development. Yet sectarian tensions arguably are higher than at any time since Iran's 1979 revolution. This largely is the outgrowth of events in Iraq: increased Shiite power, the marginalisation of traditionally dominant Sunnis, and violent Shiite-Sunni political and military competition. For many Saudis, as well as Sunnis elsewhere in the region, anxiety over a Shiite-dominated Iraq is compounded by fear it will embolden their own Shiite populations. Such anxieties are finding an outlet in increasingly strident rhetoric, with serious prospect of sectarian violence.

### A. DISCRIMINATION

One of the more visible manifestations of discrimination involves the under-representation of Shiites in major official positions. There have never been any Shiite ministers or members of the royal cabinet, and the only Shiite ambassador was Jamil al-Jishi, envoy to Iran from 1999 to 2003. When in 2005 King Fahd expanded the Majlis al-Shura (the quasi-legislative consultative body that advises the royal family) from 120 to 150 members, only two additional Shiites were nominated, doubling their numbers to four. The simultaneous re-configuration of the fifteen-member regional council in the Shiite-dominated Eastern Province -- a body that directly reports to the provincial governor and wields considerably more

power than the elected Municipal Council -- saw a reduction in Shiite membership from two to one.<sup>67</sup>

Shiites confront multiple layers of discrimination. Education is particularly difficult. Shiite students complain of prejudice and open hostility from Sunni instructors, who regularly refer to them as *kuffar* (infidels), *mushrikuun* (polytheists) or *rafida* (rejectionists) -- the code word for Shiites.<sup>68</sup> A copy of an exam recently administered to a middle school history class and provided to Crisis Group asked students to discuss why "the *ahl al-Sunna* [Sunnis] prefer to characterise Shiites as *al-rafida*". Religious textbooks in primary and secondary schools, including predominantly Shiite schools, contain similar material. The first section of a popular collection of religious rulings (*fatwas*) singles out and disparages "the *rafida*".<sup>69</sup> In a 2004 announcement calling for a public seminar to discuss discrimination in schools, Shiite activists described an incident at a Riyadh primary school where a teacher "vilified" a Shiite student and "described Shiites as [guilty of] apostasy" (*takfir*).<sup>70</sup>

Shiites are not well represented on school faculties and administrations in the Eastern Province, again despite constituting the overwhelming majority. Women and girls are especially affected. There is not a single Shiite principal in any of the region's girls' schools, leading a group of prominent Shiite women activists to lament that they were not able to look after their own children's education.<sup>71</sup> Shiite teachers at schools around the East are warned to keep their faith private, with heavy penalties for violations, while Wahhabism is emphasised throughout the curriculum. Saudi police records obtained by Crisis Group document the 2004 case of a 49-year-old male Shiite middle school teacher from al-Hasa who was fired and imprisoned for a month for building a meeting room in his home where Shiites could gather, practice religious rituals, and discuss community matters. The police records referred to the centre as a *husseiniyya* -- a Shiite community centre -- and "a heretical innovation [*bid'a*]", a particularly damning charge that Wahhabis often invoke as a pretext for violence.<sup>72</sup>

Once out of school, Shiites face additional pressures. Jobs in the security apparatus -- police and military -- are rare and promotion prospects for those who get them virtually

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Saudi Arabia Background*, op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group Asia Report N°95, *The State of Sectarianism in Pakistan*, 18 April 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interview with two Saudi Shiite political leaders, Manama, 17 May 2005.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview with university students from Dammam, 20 April 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, Dammam, 17 April 2005.

<sup>70</sup> The student's parents lodged a complaint with the Ministry of the Interior, which called for an investigation and issued an order "forbidding this problem in all levels of education".

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, Safwa, 23 April 2005.

<sup>72</sup> Decision number 4/T, 2004, al-Hasa investigative branch.

non-existent.<sup>73</sup> Although more difficult to document, discrimination also appears prevalent in the private sector.<sup>74</sup> The result is disproportionate poverty and harsh social conditions for Shiites which, in the absence of official records, a visit to the East readily establishes.<sup>75</sup>

## B. SHIITES AS THE ENEMY

Anti-Shiite principles outlined by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century retain much of their resonance in the twenty-first.<sup>76</sup> For some Sunnis, Shiites are infidels, promoters of polytheism (*shirk*) who transgress the principle of God's unity (*tawhid*) and guilty of heresy (*bid'a*) -- a sin punishable by death. The scorn has theological roots, as Shiites are deemed to have committed the ultimate act of betrayal by rejecting the caliphate of the prophet Muhammad's immediate successors, Abu Bakr and Omar.<sup>77</sup> Muhammad bin Salih al-Othayman (d. 2001), formerly a high-ranking cleric on the Higher Council of Ulama, called this a greater act of treachery than any of those committed by Jews and Christians. He also claimed that Shiites "were responsible for the fall of the Islamic Caliphate in Baghdad, the Mongol invasion, and the killing of many *ulama*".<sup>78</sup>

Prejudice can take other extreme forms, with clerics and others denouncing Shiites as the principal enemy. In 1991, Abdullah bin Abd al-Rahman al-Jibrin, then a member of

the Higher Council of Ulama, issued a *fatwa* designating Shiites as apostates and condoning their killing.<sup>79</sup> In January 1994, responding to a question about the *rawafid* (alternative of *rafida*) praying in Sunni mosques, he issued a *fatwa* asserting "they are the enemy and may God fight those that lie".<sup>80</sup> In another *fatwa* that year in answer to a question about how to deal with Shiites in the workplace, he stated that, "it is necessary to display abhorrence, loathing, and hatred [toward them]...and the priority is to strive to restrict/oppress (*tadayiq*) them".<sup>81</sup>

Some of the most egregious examples abated after 11 September 2001, when the government clamped down on radical speech more generally and warned clerics on its payroll to tone down their rhetoric. Still, institutions under less direct oversight continue propagating anti-Shiite sentiment in the most vituperative of terms. In 2002, the powerful Jeddah-based International Islamic Relief Organisation (IIRO), a leading Saudi charity, disseminated a book in al-Hasa, *One Hundred Questions and Answers on Charitable Work*, which claimed it:

was necessary for Sunni Muslims to hate (*baghida*) the people of heresy (*ahl al-bid'a*), to loath them and to scorn them as *rafida*, deniers of God, grave visitors [an act of heresy according to Wahhabis], and as apostates. It is incumbent on the Muslim according to his ability...to get rid of their evil.<sup>82</sup>

Regarding distribution of such texts, a government official recently remarked: "I know these books are being distributed, and I know we are not doing anything about it. It fills me with despair".<sup>83</sup>

The war in Iraq and the concomitant empowerment of the country's Shiites again fuelled anti-Shiite hostility. Posters on a popular web-forum stressed that, "they are the enemy, they are the enemy, they are the enemy", adding "God damn the *rafida*".<sup>84</sup> In 2003, Nasir al-Omar, a popular anti-Shiite cleric who rose to prominence in the 1990s and wrote a tract entitled "The Rafida in the Land of Tawhid" (Monotheism), accused Iraq's Shiites of alignment with U.S. forces, claiming they:

have begun killing our brothers the *ahl al-Sunna*, which is what our brothers feared before the war. Although

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interviews in the Eastern Province and Riyadh, April-May 2005.

<sup>74</sup> An application for work at a Dammam-based, Sunni-owned heavy machinery company obtained by Crisis Group asks potential employees to note whether they are Shiite, an unusual request suggesting at a minimum different treatment on a confessional basis. Shiites make frequent claims that they are prevented from occupying management and other top posts in private business. Crisis Group interview with a Shiite journalist, Dammam, April 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Shiites are certainly not alone in facing socio-economic challenges. Per capita income dropped precipitously from a high of \$18,000 in 1980/1981 to less than \$9,000 in the late 1990s. But there is every indication that Shiites have been hardest hit; indeed, during the oil boom of the 1970s, they did not experience a significant improvement in living conditions.

<sup>76</sup> On the Wahhabi movement, see Crisis Group Report, *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?*, op. cit. Although the term is not useful in capturing the full complexity of Saudi religious thought or the landscape of Islamist diversity inside the Kingdom, there is remarkable coherence and agreement amongst various groups that Shiites are and should be an object of contempt. While anti-Shiism is not powerful enough to bridge other differences between Islamists, it is a point most agree on.

<sup>77</sup> Salman al-Awdah wrote in a July 2000 *fatwa* that the rejection of the two Caliphs after Muhammad accounts for the usage of *rafida* to describe Shiites. See [www.fwaed.org](http://www.fwaed.org).

<sup>78</sup> *The Fatawa of Shaykh Ibn Othayman*, vol. 3, pp. 86-88.

<sup>79</sup> Fandy, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>80</sup> Copy of *fatwa* obtained by Crisis Group, dated 2 January 1994. Lying here refers to the Shiite practice of dissimulation, in which Shiites conceal their faith in order to avoid persecution.

<sup>81</sup> Copy of *fatwa* obtained by Crisis Group, dated 13 June 1994.

<sup>82</sup> Text excerpted in *al-Medina*, 22 October 2004. The IIRO text was distributed in the mixed Shiite-Sunni communities of al-Hasa.

<sup>83</sup> BBC, 18 July 2005, at [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).

<sup>84</sup> See [www.alsaha.com](http://www.alsaha.com).

they initially resisted the U.S. occupying forces, [their] real [attributes], are now revealed. This is shown in the strong relationship between America and the *rafida*.

As evidence that Shiites have long been U.S. sympathisers, he asserted that "most of those greeting the Americans when they entered Baghdad were *rafida*", before warning "we will never meet on the [same] road. Do not be deceived by what they say, for they are the biggest liars through the passage of history".<sup>85</sup>

Even Safar al-Hawali, a well-known and respected religious scholar who spent time in prison for political activities, boycotted the 2003 National Dialogue due to Shiite participation.<sup>86</sup> Saudi Shiites told Crisis Group that similar episodes also occurred at the local level. In the run-up to its widely publicised Counter-Terrorism Conference in February 2005, the government sponsored talks and seminars denouncing militancy around the Kingdom. At one panel discussion on the need for greater tolerance at King Faisal University in Hofuf, a mixed Shiite-Sunni city in the Eastern Province, Sunni religious figures reportedly stormed out because local Shiite religious leaders refused to move from front row seats.<sup>87</sup>

### C. SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

Acts of violence against Shiites have been rare since the early twentieth century.<sup>88</sup> As tensions have risen over recent years, however, uncorroborated rumours of planned or failed attacks have spread rapidly within the community.<sup>89</sup> Many take as an article of faith the existence of a plot to kill al-Saffar during Ashura in 2004, reportedly thwarted when two militants were apprehended in Qatif.<sup>90</sup> A similar attempt is believed by Shiites to have

been foiled on the eve of Ashura in 2005, when militants spotted photographing Shiite mosques and *husseiniyyas* allegedly were arrested. Over the past two years, incidents with an apparent sectarian connotation include the burning of Shiite mosques in Qatif and community centres in Tarut, as well as vandalism against a Shiite cemetery at Annak.<sup>91</sup> Random vandalism -- such as burning cars in communities around Qatif -- also has heightened anxiety.<sup>92</sup>

Overall, in the words of a Shiite journalist, "Sunni-Shiite issues are taking on greater public importance in Saudi Arabia. This is the Iraq effect. Old issues, like Palestine, are being replaced with anti-Shiite anger".<sup>93</sup>

### D. THE LOST SAUDIS

Of particular concern for the future of Sunni-Shiite relations has been the alarming rise in the number of Saudi *jihadi* militants drawn to Iraq. Their motivations include, prominently, opposition to the U.S., its policies and presence in the region figure,<sup>94</sup> as well as the need to flee the Kingdom because of the anti-militant crackdown. But hostility to Shiites and their growing role in Iraq also is important. A Saudi political observer who has interviewed countrymen familiar with the *jihadis* and their activities in Iraq as well as Iraqi officials concluded that many went "to kill Shiites".<sup>95</sup> As sectarian violence rises there, in other words, it risks spreading.<sup>96</sup>

Estimates of the number of Saudis joining the Iraqi insurgency range from several hundred<sup>97</sup> to several

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<sup>85</sup> Al-Omar made his remarks on 18 March 2003 at the Khalid bin Walid Mosque in Riyadh. The text was published on Salman al-Awdah's website [www.islamtoday.net](http://www.islamtoday.net).

<sup>86</sup> See Crisis Group Report N°31, *Saudi Arabia Background*, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> The incident prompted local Shiites to ask, "how can we wipe out terrorism, when terrorists are running the system?" Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

<sup>88</sup> Episodes of anti-Shiite violence, most notably the destruction and looting of the Shiite shrine city Karbala (in present-day Iraq) and the killing of many of its Shiite inhabitants by the al-Saud in the early nineteenth century, retain powerful resonance among Saudis, both Sunni and Shiite. See al-Rasheed, op. cit., p. 22.

<sup>89</sup> Shiites concede that the government is not promoting sectarian violence and is actively rooting out militants in the area who may be seeking to strike.

<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Eastern Province, April 2005. A *salafi* group posted the story on its website, <http://www.d-sunnah.net>.

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<sup>91</sup> Toby Craig Jones, "Seeking a 'Social Contract' for Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Report*, fall 2003.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005. At least one militant group, the al-Haramain Brigades, issued a public threat that it would target Shiite *husseiniyyas* during Ashura 2005. Some of the group's leaders were apprehended in Kuwait before they could carry out their threat. *Elaph* (Arabic online news service), 27 January 2005.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sayhat, 18 April 2005.

<sup>94</sup> On 3 November 2004, the eve of the American siege of Fallujah, Saud al-Otaybi, an al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula ideologue, broke with the group's past emphasis on the domestic *jihadi*, calling for greater participation in the *jihadi* in Iraq.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, the Netherlands, 17 June 2005.

<sup>96</sup> Muhammad Mahfuz, an exiled Saudi Shiite intellectual, told Crisis Group that "rather than spreading democracy in the region, the war in Iraq is spreading sectarian violence". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 17 May 2005.

<sup>97</sup> According to some U.S. intelligence analysts, the number of foreign fighters, including Saudis, ranges between 500 and 1,000. Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, August 2005. U.S. officials, such as Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware and General John Abizaid, Commander, U.S. Central Command, claim that Saudis make up a "disproportionate number" of the foreign jihadis in Iraq. *The New York Times*, 22 June 2005.

thousand.<sup>98</sup> Anecdotal evidence gathered by Crisis Group suggests that Saudi youth from across the Kingdom are attracted.<sup>99</sup> One who recently returned to his native Qasim (a province north of Riyadh widely considered the heartland of Wahhabi religious conservatism), estimated that as many as 300 young militants from his region alone had joined the *jihād*.<sup>100</sup> Well-known members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula -- on the run due to the domestic crackdown -- also have ventured to Iraq in recent months.<sup>101</sup>

Arabic media reports suggest that the Iraqi *jihād* has wide appeal, with Saudis from Riyadh, Jedda, Burayda, Ha'il, al-Khobar, al-Hasa, al-Jawf, Hafar al-Batin and elsewhere among those listed as having been captured or killed there.<sup>102</sup> The numbers of Saudis detained in Iraq and Syria -- whose more porous borders has made it the preferred transit area for *jihādīs* from around the Middle East -- as well as of those killed in recent months have risen considerably.<sup>103</sup> The majority are between 20 and

30, educated, and cross at the Iraqi-Syrian border. Many leave families behind. Unlike the *mujahidīn* who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s, today's militants do not benefit from official support; indeed, the Kingdom openly condemns foreign *jihād* and has been pressuring clerics to denounce it. Parents often are caught unaware that their "lost" sons have left the country, many being informed of their deaths via brief phone calls from surviving insurgents.<sup>104</sup>

The prospect of eventual return of some hundreds of battle-tested Saudi *mujahidīn* seems inevitable, raising the possibility that -- like their predecessors returning from Afghanistan -- they will look for a new battlefield and so pose a potential threat to Western and government targets, as well as to the Shiite minority.

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President Bush noted in his 28 June 2005 speech at Fort Bragg, North Carolina that Saudis were playing a central role in the foreign jihadi phenomenon in Iraq, remarking that "some of the violence you see in Iraq is being carried out by ruthless killers who are converging on Iraq to fight the advance of peace and freedom. Our military reports that we have killed or captured hundreds of foreign fighters in Iraq who have come from Saudi Arabia and Syria, Iran, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Libya and others". See [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov); also Associated Press, 1 July 2005

<sup>98</sup> Various Arabic language newspapers cite analysts from the region who place at 2,500 the number of Saudis who entered Iraq in 2003 and 2004. See *al-Hayat*, 9 May 2005. Officials dispute that the numbers are that high. See *ar-Riyadh*, 2 June 2005 for comments by the spokesperson for the interior ministry, General Mansour al-Turki. Citing the recent arrest by Syrian security forces of 1,200 would-be jihadis there, al-Turki claimed that "no more than one third were Saudi". Whatever the precise figure, there is little dispute that a significant, and likely increasing number of Saudi militants are going to Iraq.

<sup>99</sup> In interviews in both the Eastern and Central Provinces, Saudis routinely told Crisis Group that they personally knew of friends or neighbours who had ventured to Iraq for *jihād*. Crisis Group interviews, Saudi Arabia, April-May 2005.

<sup>100</sup> See *al-Watan*, 18 May 2005.

<sup>101</sup> Abdullah al-Rushud is one such militant who is said to have entered Iraq. According to a 23 June 2005 report on the satellite network al-Arabiyya, al-Rushud may have been killed by U.S. air strikes.

<sup>102</sup> For articles containing biographical information on Saudi *mujahidīn*, see *al-Watan*, 19 January 2005; al-Arabiya.net, 20 February 2005; Associated Press, 28 February 2005; Reuters, 20 March 2005; *al-Hayat*, 4 April 2005; *al-Watan*, 18 May 2005; *al-Hayat*, 18 June 2005.

<sup>103</sup> An Agence France-Presse report on 6 May 2005 claimed that 137 Saudis were arrested on their way to Iraq that month. They subsequently were added to the already sizeable Saudi prison population in Syria comprised mostly of suspected

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*jihādīs*. In late May, Syrian authorities turned 30 Saudis over to the Kingdom. Reuters, 30 May 2005.

<sup>104</sup> According to the Saudi-owned *al-Hayat*, one family learned of its son's presence in Iraq by watching him confess on Iraqi television. *Al-Hayat*, 4 April 2005.



## V. THE FUTURE OF SUNNI-SHIITE RELATIONS

Saudi policy towards Shiites has evolved: from the inherent hostility of the origins, to additional suspicion born in 1979 that Shiites embraced Khomeini's call for revolution and aspired to independence, to a mix of confrontation and cooptation following the November 1979 events, and, more recently, to *détente* born of the 1993 meetings. Throughout, however, relations have been characterised by sectarian discrimination, deep anti-Shiite sentiment and incitement, and an approach that treated Shiites more as a security threat to be contained than a community to be integrated.<sup>105</sup> This does not mean that Saudi rulers have given free rein to the most extreme forms of intolerance, but rather that they have imposed limits only intermittently and with caution.

King Abdullah, widely believed to have been at the forefront of efforts to engage Shiites and promote their integration, may now be in a position to effect greater change. Already, in 2003, while Crown Prince, he took an important step by creating a framework for Sunni and Shiite religious leaders to engage in direct dialogue, and there is reason to believe he wishes to pursue this path. But even assuming this goal, he faces considerable obstacles.

Two are divisions within the royal family and his advanced age. The octogenarian likely will have little time to accomplish his objectives and will have to contend with inevitable succession battles more likely to favour the status quo than bold change. Resistance will emanate from mid-level bureaucrats who, out of inertia or ideological conviction, may thwart calls for change.<sup>106</sup> Officials hesitate to speculate about the political consequences of a crackdown on anti-Shiism, part of a broader reluctance to discuss sectarian issues. Significantly, details of Abdullah's 2003 meeting with Shiites came to light only through the London-based *al-*

*Quds al-Arabi*. Still, in private, officials point to some reasons why change must come slowly and deliberately. Most often invoked is the argument that rapid and controversial reform would play into the hands of the most extreme Wahhabi activists.<sup>107</sup> In this sense, the gravest threat is seen as coming less from potential Shiite unrest than from Sunni militants agitated by attempts to stifle anti-Shiite sentiment and turning their anger against the regime.

Dr. Abdullah al-Tuwarki, a member of the *Majlis al-Shura*, echoed this view, averring that undue speed would lead to "something disastrous", and accelerated change would bring to power people "who would not let me sleep in peace".<sup>108</sup> Self-serving as they are, such concerns cannot be dismissed out of hand given the Kingdom's heavy reliance on religious legitimacy and the prominent ideological role of anti-Shiism. Turki al-Hamad, a prominent reformist known for his denunciation of religious extremism, acknowledged that the state "cannot abandon Wahhabism. It needs it for legitimacy".<sup>109</sup> Sensitivity among officials has been compounded of late by resurgent fears of a regional Shiite ascendance. Officials at the foreign ministry expressed concern about Iranian meddling in Iraq and its potential effect in Saudi Arabia and the region as a whole.<sup>110</sup>

Paradoxically, by pointing to the threat posed by militant *jihadism*, the violence of the recent past may offer the best opportunity to date to tackle sectarianism. Reacting swiftly to the string of attacks in May 2003, the government arrested and killed hundreds of suspected militants. Under Crown Prince Abdullah's guidance, and with a push from reform-minded citizens,<sup>111</sup> the Kingdom also organised meetings to promote national unity and tolerance.<sup>112</sup> Among the most meaningful was the first national dialogue, in July 2003, where Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, and Ismailis discussed rolling back militancy and promoting Islamic pluralism.

<sup>105</sup> Referring to Damman, a mixed Shiite-Sunni city, a Shiite journalist expressed the view that "the government sees the Shiite community as though it were transient rather than central to the community". Crisis Group interview, Tarut, 4 April 2005. As an indication of the level of suspicion, a Shiite activist suggested the existence of a deal between the state and Sunni hard-liners whereby the latter moderates its criticism of the regime and its ties to Western powers while the former "permits radical clerics to engage in promoting anti-Shiism at home". Crisis Group interview, Manama, 19 July 2005.

<sup>106</sup> A female Sunni educator and strong supporter of the royal family reflected a common belief by asserting that "the problem is not political will at the top, but an inability to match the wishes of the rulers with policy". Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, 4 May 2005.

<sup>107</sup> Various officials in the Saudi government articulated this worry to Crisis Group, including recently elected councilmen in Riyadh and members of the *Majlis al-Shura*. Many Saudis outside of government also share this view. Crisis Group interviews, Riyadh, May 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, 7 May 2005.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turki al-Hamad, Dammam, 20 April 2005.

<sup>110</sup> At the same time, the official dismissed concerns expressed by King Abdullah II of Jordan in December 2004 about the dangers of a Shiite crescent extending from Iran to Lebanon. Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, 8 May 2005.

<sup>111</sup> For a description of the domestic groups that mounted a spirited campaign for political reform in 2003, see Crisis Group Report, *Can Saudi Arabia Reform Itself?*, op. cit.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

A series of unprecedented side encounters and conversations were held between al-Saffar, the Shiite leader, and prominent Sunni clerics (including Salman al-Awdah, Ayidh al-Qarni and Awadh al-Qarni) who previously had castigated Shiites as infidels.<sup>113</sup> Although they did not produce concrete results, the meetings legitimised Shiite-Sunni dialogue and paved the way for further encounters. Responding to an open invitation from al-Saffar, Awadh al-Qarni travelled to Qatif in 2004 to participate in the Shiite leader's weekly salon (*majlis*) and listen to Shiite attendees vent their anger at decades of sectarian discrimination. Subsequent meetings between Shiite figures and a leading Sunni cleric took place in 2005 and focused on strengthening inter-sectarian relations.<sup>114</sup>

The Saudi press likewise has addressed sectarianism more openly, albeit still indirectly -- reporting, for example, on sectarian violence in Pakistan and Iraq and calling on Muslims in general and Saudis in particular to recognise the danger and prevent escalation.<sup>115</sup> In its weekly insert dedicated to Islamic issues, *al-Medina* published a lengthy interview with al-Saffar, giving him an unprecedented platform to appeal to Sunnis which he used to emphasise his commitment to national unity, coexistence and improved Shiite-Sunni relations.<sup>116</sup> Emphasis on national unity by the al-Saud and allies within the clerical establishment is another hopeful if uncertain sign.

The Shiite response has been mixed. Some welcomed al-Qarni's willingness to meet and discerned a change in attitudes: "Look at the Salafis now. Those we considered extremists are changing. This is in the country's interest. The government has handled this well".<sup>117</sup> On the whole, however, sentiment remains cautious. As a community leader put it, the test is whether hate speech diminishes.<sup>118</sup> Residents of Qatif, Al-Hasa, Sayhat, and Tarut pointed out to Crisis Group that so far the meetings have had little effect. A resident of al-Hasa caustically suggested that Sunnis were engaging in *taqiyya* (dissimulation), a practice traditionally attributed to Shiites who mask their faith when fearful of persecution.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> *Al-Medina*, 22 October 2004. While al-Saffar's position was not surprising (he has promoted tolerance and coexistence since the late 1980s), al-Awdah's willingness to meet Shiites marked a significant change.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damman, 19 April 2005. Because the issue remains sensitive, Crisis Group was asked not to reveal the identity of the cleric.

<sup>115</sup> See *al-Medina*, 6 June 2005.

<sup>116</sup> *Al-Medina*, the interview was published in full over five weeks in September and October 2004.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview with Fawzi al-Sayf, a Shiite cleric, Tarut, 20 April 2005.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Manama, 11 February 2005.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hofuf, 22 April 2005.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Sectarian relations in Saudi Arabia are far from the boiling point, and the risk of imminent violent confrontation is low. This typically leads officials to downplay the issue. As *al-Sharq al-Awsat* columnist Mshari al-Zaydi, who is both supportive of the government and highly critical of extremist Wahhabis, remarked, although "there is still anti-Shiite discrimination", the danger of escalating tensions is marginal. "Shiites in Iraq are targeted because they are the majority. In Saudi Arabia they are not a priority".<sup>120</sup> But that is no reason for complacency; rather, there is every reason to take steps now to defuse a potential crisis and seize the moment to create more inclusive politics.

King Abdullah's accession offers cautious reason for hope. After less than three weeks, he again signalled his interest in strengthening relations with Saudi Shiites, when he hosted a meeting in Jeddah with a Shiite delegation from the Eastern Province, headed by Hassan al-Saffar, in which the delegates appealed for clemency for various Shiite political prisoners.<sup>121</sup> The results of the meeting have not been made public but Abdullah's readiness to meet the Shiites and discuss their grievances is encouraging. In the past, he has shown unusual willingness to tackle sectarian relations, most notably by bringing a cross-section of religious figures and activists together. But, while such meetings are an essential first step, that is all they are. The meetings pave the way for some follow-on private gatherings, but given the vulnerability of prominent Sunni clerics to attack from colleagues, rivals and followers, the state needs to play a sustained and leading role.

This means continuing to hold and participate in regular national dialogue and, in particular, focusing on Islamic pluralism and sectarian tolerance over a sustained period as opposed to a one-time event.<sup>122</sup> Direct government sponsorship of ongoing, issue-specific dialogues would give willing clerics necessary political cover and signal the royal family's support.

In addition to improving relations between Shiite and Sunni religious leaders, Saudi rulers should bring Shiites into local and national government, breaking with decades of discrimination, especially in the Eastern

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<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Riyadh, 6 May 2005.

<sup>121</sup> *Gulf News*, 23 August 2005.

<sup>122</sup> Saudi Arabia holds four National Dialogue meetings every year and has established the King Abd al-Aziz Centre for National Dialogue in Riyadh to sponsor broader discussion. But while selected topics have included women, youth, and extremism, they have not put the spotlight on Sunni-Shiite relations specifically.

Province. This would increase inter-sectarian interaction throughout the bureaucracy and government branches, while addressing a primary source of tension among Shiites.

Saudi rulers also should be more open to Shiite religious expression. That has begun; both local and national officials increasingly permit Shiite religious practices, including Ashura observance, the unofficial operation of *hawzas* in Qatif and al-Hasa, the sale of banned books on the black market, and even the construction of some new mosques. The next step is to formalise these practices and give them overt government sanction.

Finally, the authorities must confront the most extreme instances of sectarianism. This would necessitate strong measures against anti-Shiism in its various forms: discriminatory practices, propagation of religious hatred, and sectarianism in educational curricula. Anti-Shiite rhetoric should be condemned publicly, and incitements to violence should trigger legal action where appropriate, including stripping scholars on the state's payroll of funding and, in the most extreme cases, ordering their arrest.

For their part, Shiites should emphasise their commitment to national unity and rejection of violence. For now, internal pressures are unlikely to generate widespread Shiite activism, but the emergence of more militant violent groups cannot be ruled out and should be pre-empted.

**Riyadh/Amman/Brussels, 19 September 2005**

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF SAUDI ARABIA



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin