The Politics of Sectarianism in the Gulf
Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, 2003-2011

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April 2012

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of DPhil in International Relations in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Shi'a-Sunni relations in Gulf politics during a period of regional upheaval, starting with the 2003 invasion of Iraq through the Arab revolts of early 2011. It seeks to understand the conditions under which sectarian distinctions become a prominent feature of the Gulf political landscape, focusing on the three Gulf countries that have been affected most by sectarian tensions: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

The study analyzes the contagion effect of the civil war in Iraq, the 2006 war in Lebanon, and the Arab Spring on local sectarian dynamics in the three states. Specifically, it explores the role of domestic institutions—parliaments and other quasi-democratic structures, the media, and clerical establishments—in tempering or exacerbating sectarianism. It finds that the maturity and strength of participatory institutions in each state played a determinant role in the level of sectarianism resulting from dramatic shifts in the regional environment since the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

I conclude, therefore, that the real roots of the so-called "rise of the Shi'a" phenomena lie in the domestic political context of each state, rather than in the regional policies of Iran or the contagion effect of events in Iraq or Lebanon. Although the Gulf Shi'a took a degree of inspiration from the actions of their co-religionists in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, they ultimately strove for greater rights in a non-sectarian, nationalist framework. The rise of sectarianism in the Gulf has been largely the product of excessive alarm by entrenched Sunni elites or the result of calculated attempts by regimes to discredit Shi'a political actors by portraying them as proxies for Iran, Iraq, or the Lebanese Hizballah. What is qualitatively different about the post-2003 period is not the level of mobilization by the Shi'a, but rather the intensity of threat perception by Gulf regimes and Sunni Islamists.

CONTENTS

Abstract iii

Contents iii

Figures vi

Tables vii

Acknowledgements ix

List of Acronyms xi

Introduction 1
The Engima and Persistence of Sectarianism 1
The Purpose of This Study 3
Contextualizing Sectarian Politics: Domestic, Transnational, and Historical Factors 4
The Cases of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait 6
Sources and Methodology 9
Implications of the Study 10
Structure of the Study 10
Part One: The Socio-Political and Historical Foundation. 10
Part Two: Bahrain. 11
Part Three: Saudi Arabia. 11
Part Four: Kuwait. 12
Part Six: The Arab Spring and Conclusion. 12

1 Sectarian Identity in the Gulf—An Empirical Literature Review 13
1.1 Introduction 13
1.2 Pre-2003 Studies of Shi'ism in the Gulf: The Iranian Revolution and the Struggle for Shi'a Rights 14
1.3 Post-2003 Studies: The Iraq War, Transnationalism and the So-Called "Rise of the Shia" 17
1.4 Arabic Secondary Scholarship 21
1.5 Conclusion 23

PART ONE: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATION

2 Setting the Stage: Society, Governance, and the Shi'a in the Gulf 24
2.1 Introduction 24
2.2 The Gulf as a Security System 24
2.2.1 The Shi'a Sub-Set: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait 26
2.3 Identity Politics in the Gulf 27
2.3.1 Degrees of Inclusion: Islam, Arabism, and Sunnism 28
2.3.2 National Identity and Sectarian Challenges 29
2.4 State Structures, Society, and the Shi'a 31
2.4.1 Bahrain 31
2.4.2 Saudi Arabia 36
2.4.3 Kuwait 40
2.5 Conclusion 43

3 The Historical Context: The Legacy of the Iranian Revolution 45

3.1 Introduction 45
3.2 Gulf Domestic Conditions on the Eve of Revolution 46
3.2.1 Bahrain 47
3.2.2 Saudi Arabia 47
3.2.3 Kuwait 49
3.3 The Threat From Iran: Incitement and Contagion 50
3.4 Shi'a Mobilization and Regime Response 52
3.4.1 Bahrain 53
3.4.2 Saudi Arabia 56
3.4.3 Kuwait 60
3.5 Conclusion 63

PART TWO: BAHRAIN

4 Bahrain: Shi'a Mobilization and Regional Upheaval 65
4.1 Introduction 65
4.2 Shi'a Political Activism 66
4.2.1 *Al-Wifaq* 67
4.2.2 *Al-Amal* 69
4.3 The Participation Debate Among the Shi'a 69
4.3.1 *Al-Wifaq*'s Alliance with *al-Wa'ad* 71
4.3.2 The Impact of al-Sistani on Bahraini Shi'a Strategies 72
4.3.3 The Rise of the Confrontationalists 73
4.4 Regional Upheaval and the Bahraini Shi'a: An Assessment 78
4.4.1 The Limits of Clerical and Foreign Influence 79
4.5 Conclusion 81

5 Bahrain: The Regime Response to Shi'a Activism 83
5.1 Introduction. 83
5.2 The Electoral Counterweight of the Sunni Islamists 83
5.2.1 *Al-Minbar* 84
5.2.2 *Al-Asala* 85
5.2.3 Cooperation between the Sunni Islamists 87
5.3 The Bandar Report and the Naturalization Debate 88
5.4 Managing Sectarianism: Parliamentary Politics 89
5.4.1 The Parliamentary "Reprieve," 2002-2005 90
5.4.2 Deadlock and Disenchantment, 2006-2009 92
5.5 Sectarian Polarization in the Bahraini Parliament 94
5.6 Conclusion 99

PART THREE: SAUDI ARABIA

6 Saudi Arabia: Shi'a Mobilization and Regional Upheaval 100
6.1 Introduction 100
6.2 Containing the Spillover: Shi'a Reform Initiatives 101
6.2.1 Initial Shi'a Reactions to the Iraq War 101
6.2.2 The Shi'a Petition Campaign 103
6.2.3 Shi'a Efforts at Sectarian Dialogue and Cooperation 104
6.2.4 Shi'a Efforts to Contextualize the *Marja'iyya* 108
6.2.5 Distancing the Community from Iran 110
6.3 The Shi'a Rejectionist Challenge 112
6.3.1 The Rise of Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr 113

6.3.2 The Medina Clashes and their Aftermath: The New Rejectionists 114
6.3.3 The Moderates under Pressure 116
6.4 Conclusion 117

7 Saudia Arabia: The Regime Response and the Salafi Counter-Mobilization 118
7.1 Introduction 118
7.2 The Strategic Context: Saudi Threat Perceptions of Iran 118
7.3 Saudi Salafi Reactions to a Shi'a "Ascendency" 120
7.3.1 Alarm Over Iraq Strife 123
7.3.2 Fears of the Lebanese Hizballah 125
7.3.3 Vitriol toward the Zaydi Rebellion in Yemen—and Reflection 128
7.3.4 Salafi Opposition to 'Abdallah's Reform Initiatives—at Home and Abroad 129
7.4 The Regime's Policies Toward the Shi'a Opposition 130
7.4.1 Pre-Emptive Reform: The Municipal Council Elections 131
7.4.2 The Policy of Divide and Rule 132
7.5 Conclusion 134

PART FOUR: KUWAIT

8 Kuwait: Shi'a Mobilization and Regional Upheaval 136
8.1 Introduction 136
8.2 Shi'a Political Activism 137
8.2.1 The Initial Push for Rights—with Mixed Results 138
8.2.2 Sectarian Partisanship after the Iraq Invasion 141
8.2.3 The Escalating Media War 144
8.2.4 The Debate over National Loyalty 145
8.3 The Iraq War and the Fracturing of the Shi'a Bloc 147
8.3.1 Defections from the Pro-Iranian Current 147
8.3.2 The *Shiraziyyin* versus the INA/*Khat al-Imam* 149
8.4 Conclusion 151

9 Kuwait: The Regime Response and the Sunni Counter-Mobilization 153
9.1 Introduction 153
9.2 The Sunni Islamists: From Regime Bulwarks to Opposition 154
9.2.1 HADAS: The *Hadhar* Bulwark 155
9.2.2 The Salafis 156
9.2.3 The Tribal Defection to Salafism, 2005-2006 158
9.3 Sectarianism and Parliamentary Crises 160
9.3.1 The Earthquake of the Mughniyah Eulogy 160
9.3.2 The 2008 Elections 165
9.3.3 The Salafi Assault on the Government 166
9.3.4 The Row over Yasser al-Habib 169
9.4 Conclusion 172

PART FIVE: THE ARAB SPRING AND CONCLUSION

10 The Arab Spring in the Gulf: Contagion and Sectarianism 175
10.1 Introduction 175
10.2 Bahrain 176
10.2.1 The Catalysts for Bahraini Shi'a Mobilization 176
10.2.2 The Revolt Unfolds: Escalation and the Fracturing of the Opposition 178
10.2.3 The Saudi Intervention: Regionalizing the Crisis 181

10.2.4 Government Reponses: Delegitimizing *al-Wifaq* 184
10.2.5 Counter-Mobilization in the Media 187
10.2.6 The False Promise of Dialogue 189
10.3 Saudi Arabia 193
10.3.1 Dissent in the Eastern Province: Local versus National Agendas 193
10.3.2 Shi'a Protests Erupt … and then Dissipate 196
10.3.3 Media Counter-Mobilization 199
10.3.4 Pre-Emptive Subsidies and Reform 200
10.4 Kuwait 202
10.4.1 Polarization over the Peninsula Shield Intervention in Bahrain 202
10.4.2 Escalation and Anti-Shi'ism by Sunni Islamists 204
10.5 Conclusion 205

Conclusion 207

Bibliography 215
Books 215
Journal Articles 222
Conference Proceedings 227
Newspapers 227
Websites 228
Government Publications 229
Arabic Pamphlets 229

FIGURES

4.1 Political Map of Bahrain Showing Manama and Major Towns 77

8.1 Kuwait City's Five Electoral Districts and Demographic Characteristics 154

TABLES

5.1 Bahraini Parliamentary Election Results, 2006 96
8.1 Kuwaiti Shi'a Political Organizations, Post-2003 152
9.1 Kuwaiti National Assembly (Parliamentary) Election Results, 2008 167

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people provided invaluable support throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis. My supervisor Philip Robins was a tremendous mentor, coach, and critic. His thoughtful and frequently incisive comments on numerous drafts of this study not only improved the final version but made me a better scholar. I also appreciate the helpful reviews of my assessors during the transfer of status and confirmation processes. At various stages of the thesis, my parents offered guidance, love, and, at times, much-needed motivation. I would also like to thank friends, family, and colleagues for their encouragement, assistance, and companionship throughout this endeavor: Jerry Green, Michele Barwell, Larry Rubin, Michael Doran, Rory Brown, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Aurorae Khoo, Toqir Mukhtar, Elena Minina, Sam Blatteis, Eliot Hen-Tov, Toby Craig Jones, Tim Schey, Richard Phillips, Geneva Phillips, and Glenn Yeck. I owe a special debt to the RAND Corporation, whose support made this doctoral program possible. In particular, I would like to thank Jim Thomson, Frank Carlucci, Jack Riley, John Parachini, Jim Dobbins, and Richard Darilek. Many of the findings of this thesis resulted from the numerous interviews I conducted in the Gulf; I extend my gratitude to the officials, clerics, youth activists, politicians, scholars, journalists, and astute observers in the region who shared their insights with me. Finally, I would not have been able to attend Oxford without the generous financial aid provided to U.S. veterans under the Post 9/11 GI Bill.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

Symbol	Definition
AMAL	*Afwaj al-Muqawama al-Lubnaniya* (Lebanese Resistance Detachments)
ARAMCO	Arabian American Oil Company; now Saudi ARAMCO
AWAC	Airborne Warning and Control System
BAPCO	Bahraini Petroleum Company
BCHR	Bahrain Committee for Human Rights
BFM	Bahrain Freedom Movement
BIFM	Bahraini Islamic Freedom Movement
BTV	Bahraini Television
CPVPV	Committee for the Prevention of Vice and the Protection of Virtue (Saudi Arabia)
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
HADAS	*al-Haraka al-Dusturiya al-Islamiya* (Islamic Constitutional Movement – Kuwait)
HAMAS	*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya* (Islamic Resistance Movement – Palestine)
IAO	Islamic Action Organization (Iraq)
IFLB	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain
INA	Islamic National Alliance (Kuwait)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
ISA	Islamic Salafi Alliance (Kuwait)
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
MP	Member of Parliament
MVM	Movement for Vanguard Missionaries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait)
NDAS	National Democratic Action Society (Bahrain)
NDI	National Democratic Institute (U.S.A.)
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
OIR	Organization for the Islamic Revolution (Saudi Arabia)
PAB	Popular Action Bloc (Kuwait)
UN	United Nations

INTRODUCTION

The Engima and Persistence of Sectarianism

This study is an exploration of an important, but frequently misunderstood source of tension and instability in the Arab Gulf—the divide among Shi'a and Sunni adherents of Islam. It aims to offer an explanation for the conditions under which sectarianism became a prominent feature of Gulf political life and it assesses the impact of sectarianism on the domestic politics and international relations of the Arab Gulf states.

The Shi'a-Sunni split has long attracted the interest of scholars and observers of the Middle East, particularly since 2006. During this momentous year, the civil war in Iraq had risen to a steady crescendo of violence and it seemed, at least from the outside, that the warring protagonists were lining up neatly along Shi'a and Sunni lines. Elsewhere in the region, the Lebanese Hizballah had electried the Arab world with its battlefield performance against the vaunted Israeli army—a triumph that further sharpened Sunni Arab fears about an inexorable "rise of the Shi'a" and the expanding influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the Gulf, officials, commentators and everyday citizens grew increasingly wary of the ripple effects of this regional turmoil on their own affairs, with some going so far as to warn that their normally tranquil corner of the Middle East was not immune from the calamity of sectarian strife. Regardless of such forecasts, virtually every institution in Manama, Riyadh, and Kuwait City appeared to be shaken by the seemingly tectonic shifts at work in the region: parliaments, media, and schools were all increasingly buffeted by Shi'a-Sunni discord.

Half a world away, in Washington, policymakers, analysts and academics latched on to a reading of the Middle East map that lent primacy to sectarianism—an interpretation advanced and popularized by Vali Nasr's famous book, *The Shi'a Revival*.[1] The new Middle East, Nasr argued, would be marked by increasing Shi'a politicization and assertiveness, which would in turn produce a Sunni counter-mobilization. There were corresponding discussions in the U.S. government that the newly empowered Arab Shi'a—in particular, the Shi'a seminaries in Najaf, Iraq—might prove a useful counterweight to the Islamic Republic of Iran.[2] Others believed that an ascendant Shi'a bloc could help America wean itself away from its frequently problematic

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[1] Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, London: W.W. Norton, 2007.

[2] This line of thinking is reflected in Yitzhak Nakash, "The Shi'ites and the Future of Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 17–26.

alliance with Saudi Arabia.[3] Regardless of its policy implications, the sectarian paradigm proved extremely appealing for policymakers grappling with a rapidly changing Middle East.[4]

And it persisted, even in the face of other seismic shifts in the region. In the wake of the Arab revolts of 2011, when it seemed that Shi'a-Sunni tensions had been eclipsed by a potent blend of youthful rage, populism, and class dissent, the sectarian bogeyman lingered. In part, its lease on life was the result of a strategy by monarchies in Riyadh, Manama and, to a lesser extent, Kuwait City to paint the protests as Shi'a-inspired and Iranian-guided. A few western policy analysts echoed this refrain, arguing that the revolts had taking a decidedly sectarian turn and that Iran, as a patron and provocateur of the Shi'a, was poised to reap the benefits.[5]

The fixation on sectarian affinity carried over into academic studies. Studies on the Arab Shi'a post 2003, particularly those in the Gulf, tended to emphasize transnational communal identity to the exclusion of the state and its political institutions.[6] In particular, there has been no sustained, scholarly treatment—especially from a comparative international relations perspective—of how the institutional weaknesses of the state and the legitimacy deficit of Arab

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[3] The most notorious example of this is the 24-slide Powerpoint Briefing to a Pentagon advisory panel by French-born defense analyst Laurent Murawiec, which argued for the effective partition of Saudi Arabia and the creation of a separate state in the Eastern Province. Thomas E. Ricks, "Briefing Depicted Saudis as Enemies," *The Washington Post*, August 6, 2002.

[4] As noted by Francis Fukuyama, "The problem with the current Middle East debate is it's completely stuck. Nobody knows what to do. Vali Nasr offers a plausible alternative that may gain traction." See, Peter Waldman, "Rising Academic Sees Sectarian Split Inflaming Middle East," *Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2006.

[5] Vali Nasr, "The Dangers Lurking in the Arab Spring," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2011. Also, Edward Luttwak, "Revenge of the Sunnis," *Foreign Policy*, December 7, 2011. For the argument that Iran is poised to exploit the Arab revolts, see Michael Scott Doran, "The Heirs of Nasser: Who Will Benefit from the Second Arab Revolution?" *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.

[6] Examples includeYitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shia in the Modern Arab World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006; Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, London: Saqi Books, 2006; Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in Ofra Bengio, Gabriel Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999; Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (May, 1998), pp. 121-138; Assaf Moghadam, ed., *Militancy and Political Violence in Shiism: Trends and Patterns*, London: New York, 2012. One exception is Michael Herb, who applies game theory and rational choice theory to assess state-Shi'a relations. Michael Herb, "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neighboring Regime: Iran and the Shi'a of the Arab States of the Gulf," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics of the Middle East*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida Press, 1999, pp. 155-180. Laurence Louër has published a new volume on Gulf Shi'ism. See Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, London: Hurst and Company, 2008

rulers bear upon perceptions of the Shi'a threat.[7] Put differently, there has been scant consideration for the fact that the most salient split defining the Middle East may not be sectarian at all, but is rather the widening gap between rulers and their subjects—and that the post-Iraq hysteria over Shi'ism is fundamentally a *symptom* of this underlying weakness.

The Purpose of This Study

Based on these observations, several questions emerge regarding sectarianism in the Arab Gulf. First, how did the regional shocks of the post-2003 environment affect Shi'a activism in the Gulf states? In what way did elections in neighboring Iraq, the empowerment of Shi'a religious authorities in Iraq, the outbreak of sectarian strife in Iraq, and the rise of Iranian power in the Middle East have a demonstration effect on Gulf Shi'a actors? Second, how have regimes in the Gulf and Sunni actors responded to these same events and the perceived threat of Shi'a mobilization? Underpinning both these questions is a simple, unsolved puzzle: what are the underlying roots for the persistence of sectarianism in Gulf political life?

This study aims to tackle these questions by examining the interaction between the Gulf Shi'a, regimes, and Sunni actors in the context of external "shocks" to the Gulf system from 2003 through early 2011. It will explore how regimes and domestic Shi'a actors have responded to the demonstration effect of post-2003 regional events: the invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Husayn, elections in Iraq, the escalation of internecine strife in Iraq in 2006, the summer 2006 war in Lebanon, and the Arab revolts of 2011. I am especially interested in understanding how these events were received, debated and exploited by Shi'a actors in each state. Concurrently, I address the way they were interpreted, filtered, and managed by Gulf regimes and Sunni actors.

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[7] An exeception is F. Gregory Gause III, "Threats and Threat Perception in the Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 119-124. Gause notes that, "While transborder ideological and political challenges in the Persian Gulf region are real, the local states have developed relatively strong state structures to maintain their regimes in power. However, they continue to conduct their foreign policies on the assumption that such transborder challenges are major threats… The current focus on the "Shia threat" in the Middle East is only the latest example of regional states overestimating the danger emanating from transborder political/ideological challenges." The argument is also briefly discussed in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era* New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 38-49. Older studies that address the interplay between external threats and internal domestic weaknesses include Adeed Dawisha, "Internal Values and External Threats: The Making of Saudi Foreign Policy," *Orbis*, Vol. 23 (Spring 1979), Ralph Magnus, "The GCC and Security: The Enemy Without and the Enemy Within," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Spring 1997), pp. 72-94.

My central argument is that political institutions in each state played a crucial, determinant role in the level of sectarianism that resulted from dramatic shifts in the regional environment since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I contend that the real roots of the so-called "rise of the Shi'a" phenomena lie in the domestic political context, rather than in the regional policies of Iran or the contagion effect of events in Iraq or Lebanon. Although the Gulf Shi'a took a degree of inspiration from the actions of their co-religionists in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, they ultimately strove for greater rights in a non-sectarian, nationalist framework, frequently cooperating with liberal Sunni Islamists and secularists. In light of this observation, I conclude that the rise of sectarianism in the Gulf has been largely the product of excessive alarm by entrenched Sunni elites or the result of calculated attempts by regimes to discredit Shi'a political actors by portraying them as proxies for Iran, Iraq or the Lebanese Hizballah.

Contextualizing Sectarian Politics: Domestic, Transnational, and Historical Factors

Much of this study rests on the assumption that Shi'a and Sunni identities are not fixed and immutable. Like any social and political identity, sectarian affiliations co-existed alongside a number of other frequently competing attributes—class, tribal versus non-tribal, indigenous versus immigrant, settled versus nomadic, and so on. Moreover, the doctrinal split between Sunnis and Shi'as is not itself an *a priori* determinant of conflict or tension. The main disagreement, after all, is over the historical succession to the Prophet Muhammed and many of the resulting debates about law, rituals, and daily practice are relatively arcane in nature. At various points in history, however, sectarian identity has assumed greater prominence. The roots of this lie in the way the Shi'a-Sunni divide has affected the uneven allocation of power, institutions, and resources. To fully understand the roots of the split it is therefore necessary to shift the focus from religious and historical explanations to domestic institutional ones.

A second, frequently misunderstood dimension of sectarianism concerns the impact of regional events on the Gulf Shi'a and their transnational linkages. With the exception of Oman, all of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are ruled over by Sunni monarchies and three of them—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait—contain significant Shi'a populations who have been afflicted with varying levels of political marginalization, economic deprivation, and religious discrimination. Bereft of social capital and access to political power, the Shi'a of these states frequently have looked outside the Gulf for empowering, revolutionary ideologies to challenge the monarchical status quo—at various times, these included Nasserism, Ba'athism, communism and revolutionary Islamism from Iran. Much of this diffusion was facilitated by familial and clerical ties that link the Gulf Shi'a to their co-religionists in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Among these, the most prominent is the uniquely Shi'a religious institution of the *marja' al-taqlid*

(literally, "source of emulation;" in practice, venerated senior Shi'a clerics whose edicts provide non-binding guidance over spiritual, social, juridical and, in some cases, political matters). Because the authority of the *marja'* is theoretically not limited by national borders, the institution has proven problematic for Shi'a integration by fueling Sunni suspicions of Shi'a disloyalty to the state.[8]

The 1979 Revolution in Iran cast these divisions into even sharper relief by adding an explicitly revolutionary dimension to longstanding Sunni fears of the Shi'a. Ayatollah Khomeini personalized the *political* power of the *marja'* and the new regime pursued a revolutionary foreign policy that provided inspiration and material support for disenchanted Shi'a in the Arab Gulf. Faced with a revolutionary challenge from their Persian, Shi'a-dominated neighbor, the Gulf Arab regimes, particularly Saudi Arabia, deployed Sunni Arabism as part of a counter-mobilization strategy, both at home and abroad, to block the contagion of the Islamic Revolution. Although the local Shi'a benefitted from institutional and economic improvements in the wake of the Revolution, they were also subjected to mounting religious discrimination and were forced to demonstrate their nationalist bona fides.

The 1990s tempered this pressure somewhat; Iran attempted to repair its relations with the Gulf. Gulf Shi'a organizations, for their part, abandoned militancy in return for regime promises of political reform and economic improvements. At the regional level, the two sides of the Persian Gulf settled into the uneasy equilibrium of "dual containment," with a weakened Saddam Husayn hemmed in by international sanctions and, from the GCC perspective, playing the useful role of a Sunni buffer against the Islamic Republic.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Husayn effectively shattered this equilibrium and re-invigorated the sectarian divide as a feature of Gulf politics. From the Gulf perspective, the fall of the Iraqi dictator raised the specter of a Shi'a-dominated Iraq that would form linkages with co-religionists in Iran and, more ominously, might inspire the Shi'a in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait toward greater agitation and even militancy. In conjunction, Iranian foreign policy took a sharply activist and nationalistic turn, with the rise of the so-called "new conservatives" led by President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Buoyed by windfall oil prices, Ahmadinejad adopted a strident, jingoistic tone toward the Gulf that stood in stark contrast to the more conciliatory approach of presidents Muhammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani. In 2006,

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[8] For background on the institution, see Linda Walbridge, ed., *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja' Taqlid*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, and Sajjad H. Rizvi, "Political Mobilization and the Shi'a Religious Establishment (Marja'iyya)," *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, Issue, 6, 2010, pp. 1299-1313.

the sectarian divide sharpened even more with the outbreak of internal strife in Iraq and the Hizballah-Israel war in Lebanon, where's Hizballah's battlefield success against the Israeli military prompted euphoric applause among Arab publics across the region.

From the perspective of the increasingly besieged Gulf regimes, the Shi'a across the region—and by extension, the Islamic Republic of Iran—appeared to the "winning side."[9] Much of the alarm, however, was ultimately over the symbolic damage that the regional tide of events was inflicting on the legitimacy of Arab rulers. There was little danger that Iran or the Shi'a posed a real *material* threat to the security of Arab regimes, particularly in the Gulf. Nevertheless, Gulf Arab governments became increasingly discomforted by what they saw as the appropriation of traditional pan-Arab virtues—upon which they had attempted to build their domestic legitimacy by a rival Islamic sect and their strategic competitor.

The Cases of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait

To fully illuminate the dynamics of sectarianism in the Gulf, this study examines the three states that are most afflicted by it: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.[10] Each state contains Shi'a populations who suffer from varying degrees of political exclusion and cultural discrimination by a Sunni-dominated monarchy. That said, the Shi'a of each state are hardly monolithic. There is sufficient variance among the characteristics, histories, and political

[9] For a sampling, "Al-Sira' al-Ta'ifi fi al-Iraq wa al-Mintaqa" (The Sectarian Conflict in Iraq and the Region). *Al-Jazeera*, "Bila Hudud" (Without Borders) program, aired January 20, 2007. http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/0CC386B3-DF0D-42B3-8F80-C26148784DE8; 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, "Li Hathahi al-Asbab, Nukhasha Iran" (For These Reasons, We Fear Iran) *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 April 2006; Mishari al-Zaydi, "Uhadhir 'an Taqdhi Alihi al-Ama'im" (I Warn against the Religious Establishment), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 19, 2007. For a Shi'a counter-perspective, see Hamza Hassan, "'Alaqat al-Shi'a al-Saudiya al-Madhhabiya wa al-Siyasiya," (The Political and Sectarian Relations of the Saudi Shia), *al-Jazeera*, October 3, 2004; available at http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F79762CF-6D0D-471A-AA57-6BD052C9240A.htm; accessed on April 27, 2009.

[10] Other cases have been ruled out; Oman's Shi'a population is miniscule and well-integrated. Moreover, the country is ruled over by the Ibadi sect, which is quite remote from the anti-Shi'ism that has generally characterized the dominant current of Salafism in Saudi Arabia. This has important implications for how the sultanate has weathered post-2003 regional shocks. According to one Omani interlocutor, "Oman is not concerned about the aftershocks of a Shi'a-dominated Iraq. Oman does not have discriminatory policies toward its Shi'a and there is a low likelihood of strong dissent." Personal, unattributed interview with a senior Omani government official, Muscat, Oman, February 15, 2006. Similarly, Qatar and the UAE have been ruled out because the politicization of Shi'a identity has not occurred and Shi'a communities are relatively well-integrated. In the UAE, most of the 300,000 Shi'a are of Iranian descent and many hail from prominent merchant families, such as the Ghaladari, who are closely tied to the ruling family. In Qatar, roughly 20 percent of the population are Shi'a of Iranian descent, but enjoy cultural freedoms and are economically well-off. In 2005, the Qatari government formally recognized the authority of Ja'afari jurisprudence over Shi'a marital, family, and inheritance matters.

strategies pursued by Shi'a actors in each state, as well as the regimes and Sunni actors, to permit a fruitful comparison.

Bahrain stands at one end of the continuum. The archipelago's Shi'a population—70 percent of the total—have long suffered from political exclusion and economic marginalization. A key grievance is Shi'a non-representation in the Bahraini security forces and army. Compounding this, Shi'a activists point to a recent government policy of recruiting foreign Sunnis from Yemen, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria into the security forces and then rapidly naturalizing them as citizens; according to critics, this is a thinly-disguised tactic to tip the demographic balance in favor of Sunnis.[11] In recent years, there has been some progress in political integration, with Shi'a participating in the national parliamentary elections in 2006. Yet the inability of this body to enact any legislation or exert oversight over the executive branch and, more importantly, to effect any real improvements in Shi'a living conditions has reportedly fueled mounting frustration with political participation as an avenue to secure greater rights.[12]

Saudi Arabia is somewhere in the middle. The Shi'a of the Eastern Province—roughly 10 percent of the total population—enjoy better economic conditions and political access than their counterparts in Bahrain, yet face greater repression in religious and cultural life. Censorship, restrictions on *husayniyat* (traditional Shi'a "mourning houses" that serve as centers of social life) and the frequent desecration of Shi'a graves by Salafi hardliners are continuing sources of tension.[13] Many Shi'a commentators attribute this uneven progress to pressure from the country's Salafi establishment and also the Ministry of Interior, which since 2001 has endeavored to co-opt some of the more anti-Shi'a Salafi clerics. According to this logic, the regime has tacitly permitted anti-Shi'a vitriol to deflect Salafi criticism away from the regime and as a sort of *quid pro quo* with the clerics in exchange for their cooperation against al-Qa'ida.[14] More recently, the sectarian strategy has been useful in building popular antipathy against the

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[11] Anon., "al-Tajnis bi al-Bahrayn: Al-Tabdil al-Dimughrafi," (Bahrain Naturalization: the Demographic Shift)." Bahrainonline.org, April 12, 2008; http://www.bahrainonline.org/showthread.php?t=199585; accessed on April 23, 2009.

[12] Jane Kinnemont, "Assessing al-Wefaq's Parliamentary Experiment," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, October 2007, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

[13] Author's interviews in the Eastern Province, March 2007. Also, International Crisis Group, "The Shiite Question in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report* No. 45, September 19, 2005.

[14] Anon. "Al-Shi'a fi al-Sa'udiya asbaha la-hum sawt munthu al-harb fi al-'Iraq," (The Shi'a in Saudi Arabia Raise their Voice Since the Iraq War), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, September 6, 2003. Anon., "Al-Shi'a fi al-Mamlaka al-Sa'udiya: Taqrir al-Haquqi al-Thani," (The Shi'a in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Second Human Rights Report) April 24, 2007, *Al-Rasid*; available at http://www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=16142; accessed on April 23, 2009.

kingdom's strategic rival, Iran. In spite of this, Shi'a activists have been successful in building ties with moderate Sunnis and other reformists in the country, although, as this study will highlight, this outreach was fractured by the impact of the wars in Iraq and Lebanon and most recently, the Arab Spring.[15]

In contrast to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait has been the most proactive in meeting the challenge of external shocks through pre-emptive reform; its parliament and constitution are often cited as models by other reformists in the Gulf. More significantly, perhaps, has been the integration of the Shi'a into the nationalist narrative of the state—Kuwaiti Shi'a formed the backbone of the anti-Iraqi resistance during Iraq's 1990-1 occupation of the country, earning them gratitude from the ruling family and increased political rights in the decade that followed.[16] That said, Kuwait's oft-lauded participatory institutions have been buffeted by regional shocks and the resulting sectarian tensions have created an increasingly dysfunctional government.

Relations between each state and Iran are another filter that affects how external regional events impacted sectarian dynamics. Each of the regional shocks examined in this study is connected in the minds of Arab regimes to the expansion of Iranian influence. Bahrain's views of Iran are colored by the Islamic Republic's historic claim to the archipelago as a province of Iran and the enduring memory of an aborted coup attempt by an Iranian-backed Shi'a dissident group in 1981.[17] For its part, Saudi Arabia views Iran as a strategic competitor in the region. Riyadh has typically portrayed the Islamic Republic's policies in narrowly sectarian terms to undercut its potential appeal to Arab publics, who have at times applauded Iran's rejectionist stance on the Palestine question. Historically, Kuwait has tended to adhere more closely to the Saudi view of Iran than other Gulf states, in part because of the Iran-Iraq War when Iranian forces launched attacks on Kuwaiti-flagged shipping, rocketed Kuwait from the al-Faw Peninsula in Iraq, and sponsored terrorist attacks on Kuwaiti soil.[18] Yet the al-Sabah's perception of Iran is also less alarmist than either Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, particularly on the question of Iranian meddling in domestic affairs, because of Kuwait's relative success in integrating its Shi'a population.

Aside from these variables, there are a number of oft-overlooked linkages between each state. The regimes of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait form a sort of triumvirate when dealing

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[15] Frederic Wehrey, "Saudi Arabia: Shiites Pessimistic on Reform, But Seek Reconciliation," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, July 2007, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

[16] Louër, pp.45-65.

[17] Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation and Implications for U.S. Policy*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009, pp. 45-75.

[18] For background on Kuwaiti threat perception of Iran, see Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic Wehrey, "A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours," *Survival* 49:2 Summer 2007, pp. 111-128.

with Shi'a opposition. They cooperate in managing this dissent, but often employ different tactics domestically, whether pre-emptive reforms, forcible repression, or a strategy of "sectarian balancing," i.e. co-opting Sunni Islamists as a political counterweight to Shi'a activism. Below the regime level, there is a long history of political and cultural interactions among Shi'a activists and reformists in the three states, with each group coordinating and drawing lessons from the other.[19]

Sources and Methodology

In analyzing sectarian dynamics in the Gulf, this study relies on a diverse range of sources. Although scholars of the Gulf are unable to utilize government records, it is possible to discern official regime thinking through editorials in key outlets. For example, in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, the leading Saudi-owned pan-Arab daily, pieces by the editor-in-chief Tariq al-Humayd are often considered to signal official thinking by King 'Abdallah. On the Shi'a, there exists a rich array of Arabic sources via web sites, journals, sermons, and memoirs. In particular, this study makes use of recently published Arabic scholarship that deals either wholly or in part with the Gulf Shi'a. These include Ibrahim al-Hatlani's *Al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiyun: Qira' Ta'rikhiyah wa Siyasiyah li-Namadthij Matlabiyah* (The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Historical and Political Inquiry Into Patterns of Activism), Baquer al-Najjar's *Al-Harakat al-Diniyya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi (Religious Movements of the Gulf*), and Muhammad Shahatah Nasir's *Siyasat al-Nitham al-Hakima fi al-Bahrayn, wa al-Kuwayt, wa al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya fi Ta'amil ma al-Matalib al-Shi'a (2003-2008): Dirasa Muqarna* (The Policies of the Ruling Regimes in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia in Dealing with Shi'a Demands (2003-2008): A Comparative Study).[20] Similarly, major

[19] Speaking on Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, noted Bahraini scholar 'Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri has argued that "… when real reformists in countries consolidate their efforts, both governments coordinated their harassment of the opposition." Later he adds, " The basic policy of the GCC member states has been discourage the interaction of opposition and civil society organizations, groups or individuals the different GCC states with one another." Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri, "Bahrain: Reform Project: Prospect and Limitations," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSC) European University Institute, Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting (16-20 March 2005), p. 15.

[20] Ibrahim al-Hatlani, *Al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiyun: Qira' Ta'rikhiyah wa Siyasiyah lil-Namadthij al-Matlabiyah* (The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Historical and Political Inquiry Into Patterns of Activism), Bierut: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 2009; Baquer al-Najjar, *Al-Harakat al-Diniyya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Religious Movements of the Gulf), Beirut: Dar a-Saqi, 2007; Muhammad Shahatah Nasir, *Siyasat al-Nitham al-Hakima fi al-Bahrayn, wa al-Kuwayt, wa al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya fi Ta'amil ma al-Matalib al-Shi'a (2003-2008): Dirasa Muqarna* (The Policies of the Ruling Regimes in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia in Dealing with Shi'a Demands (2003-2008): A Comparative Study), Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiya (Center for Arab Unity Studies), 2011.

regime constituents such as Salafi clerics have their own media platforms, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and these have been exploited extensively. Most importantly, this study relies on extensive interviews with nearly every major Shi'a leader, opinion-shaper, and activist in the Gulf Arab states, as well as prominent Sunni voices. These meetings occurred in November 2006, March 2007, November 2010, and February 2012.

Implications of the Study

This study will be of interest to scholars studying the comparative politics of the Gulf and will be especially valuable to those attempting to situate the role of identity in explaining Gulf political dynamics. From a more empirical standpoint, the study aims to provide a historical narrative of the Shi'a in the Gulf from 2003 to the eve of the so-called Arab Spring, tracing the political strategies and ideological debates of these oft-neglected communities, their relations with their respective regimes and Sunni actors, and their transnational linkages. In this respect, it provides historic context for the recent unrest in the Gulf, particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, which has prompted many scholars to reexamine previously held assumptions about stability and security in the region. Scholars working outside the Gulf and the Middle East will find helpful insights into the interaction between domestic societal groups, transitional identity, and external threat perception.

Structure of the Study

The next chapter, ***Chapter One,*** provides a survey of English- and Arabic-language studies on Shi'ism, sectarian identity, Islamism, and political dynamics in the Gulf, as well an overview of the relevant theoretical concepts. The study then unfolds in the following structure:

Part One: The Socio-Political and Historical Foundation.

- ***Chapter Two*** provides an overview of the Gulf system, Shi'a communities in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, and the political structures and institutions in each country.
- ***Chapter Three*** sets the historical context for the post-2003 period by exploring state-Shi'a dynamics and threat perception in the Gulf in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. To set the stage for the comparative approach that follows, it will examine Shi'a strategies and regime response, up to the early 1990s. The chapter frames the 1979 Revolution and its aftermath as a "lens" through which Shi'a-state relations in the post-2003 period are viewed by both regimes and sub-state societal actors.

Part Two: Bahrain.

- ***Chapter Four*** explores Shi'a strategies in Bahrain, post-2003, focusing on how Bahraini Shi'a actors adapted their domestic activism to the new balance of power in the region. Particular attention is paid to how the growing perception of an ascendant Iran obliged the Shi'a to demonstrate their nationalist bona fides to an increasingly suspicious regime and its supporters. The chapter also analyzes how post-2003 events—the Iraqi elections, the re-emergence of Najaf as a center for Shi'a jurisprudence, Iraq's descent into civil war, and the 2006 Lebanon War—impacted Shi'a calculations and political strategies.
- ***Chapter Five*** addresses the Bahraini regime's counter-mobilization in the post-2003 period, focusing on its accommodative and coercive tactics—the 2006 parliamentary elections and the tactic of "sectarian balancing," i.e. co-opting Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood groups to balance the Shi'a-leftist coalition. Additionally, the chapter probes how accusations of Shi'a disloyalty and allegiance to Iran have been used instrumentally by the regime to discredit Shi'a demands for reform and produce fissures in the opposition. I argue that the weakness of Bahraini domestic institutions and the absence of Shi'a representation are better explanations for regime alarm about the Shi'a threat than any shift in tactics by the Shi'a themselves or change in policy by Iran.

Part Three: Saudi Arabia.

- ***Chapter Six*** explores variants of Shi'a activism in Saudi Arabia after 2003, highlighting Shi'a efforts at national integration and sectarian reconciliation in the face of increased Saudi-Iranian tensions. I demonstrate how Shi'a actors formed coalitions with other reformists in the kingdom and participated in the municipal council elections as part of a broader strategy to "de-politicize" their communal identity in the post-2003 climate. I also argue that Shi'a militancy among the Sadrists in Iraq and Hizballah in Lebanon contributed to splits in the Saudi Shi'a movement between those espousing accommodation and a more rejectionist current.
- ***Chapter Seven*** shifts the focus to the regime, highlighting the tension between the co-optive and coercive responses of the Saudi regime toward Shi'a activism. It pays particular attention to how the influence of the Salafi establishment constrained the regime's ability to manage and mediate the systemic shocks of the post-2003 period. I argue that external events related to Iran's growing power (elections in Iraq and the 2006 Lebanon War) created the perception of Shi'a empowerment among segments of the regime and the Salafi establishment, thus undermining nascent reform processes such as the National Dialogue sessions and the 2005 municipal council elections.

Part Four: Kuwait.

- ***Chapter Eight*** explores the Kuwaiti Shi'a response to the post-2003 environment, focusing on how Kuwait's relatively advanced level of participatory politics informed Shi'a strategies. It argues that the Kuwaiti Shi'a have, for the most part, pursued their communal rights through existing state institutions, but that their efforts were nonetheless affected by events in the regional environment and the resulting changes in the Kuwaiti regime's threat perception.
- ***Chapter Nine*** discusses how the uniquely Kuwaiti institution of the *diwan* (plural, *diwaniya*) and other participatory structures mediated the regional tensions arising from the post-2003 environment. At the same time, it highlights the state's coercive responses to Shi'a mobilization, arguing that these tactics are rooted in the regime's perception of pressure from Sunni Islamist oppositionists. Despite these setbacks, the chapter concludes that Kuwait has been the most successful in managing the shocks of the post-2003 era because of its high level of participatory institutions.

Part Five: The Arab Spring and Conclusion.

- ***Chapter Ten*** provides a discussion of Shi'a dissent in the Gulf from 2010-2011, specifically focusing on how events in Tunisia and Egypt (the so-called Arab Spring) affected the Shi'a of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. It pays particular attention to the way in which Gulf regimes are attempting to frame the uprisings as sectarian in nature to discredit and contain what has been essentially a broad-based demand for political reform.
- The ***Conclusion*** presents a comparison of the three countries and the study's key findings.

1 SECTARIAN IDENTITY IN THE GULF—AN EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Many analyses of Shi'a identity in the Gulf since 2003, whether of an academic or policy nature, have implicitly adhered to what can best be described as the Vali Nasr thesis—the argument that sectarian tensions resulting from the demonstration effect of Shi'a empowerment in Iraq and Lebanon and increased activism from Iran will combine to exert an increasingly important influence over the Gulf's foreign and domestic policies.[21] Speaking to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 2007, Nasr noted that:

> sectarianism will play an important role in deciding regional alliances in the Middle East and how various states and sub-state actors will act. Sectarianism will compete with as well as interact with other concerns, such as the Arab-Israeli issue, political and economic reform, and support for U.S. policies, most notably, the global war on terror.[22]

To date, however, this assertion of sectarianism's determinant role has not been subjected to serious empirical inquiry or theoretical testing. Scholars of international relations and the Gulf have, for the most part, neglected the interplay between sectarian identity and regime behavior and, more broadly, how the phenomenon of sectarianism itself has been influenced by regional events since 2003.

This chapter will offer an empirical framework for exploring these questions, advancing the argument that domestic vulnerabilities and the maturity of domestic participatory institutions are a more appropriate lens for understanding Gulf threat perceptions and foreign policy

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[21] Recent discussion of Gulf Shi'a identity has often taken place in larger Western language studies dealing with Arab Shi'a. These include: Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shia in the Modern Arab World*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999; Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, London, Saqi Books: 2006; Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in Ofra Bengio, Gabriel Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999; Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (May, 1998), pp. 121-138.

[22] Vali Nasr, Prepared Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 17, 2007. http://www.cfr.org/publication/12437/prepared_testimony_before_the_senate_committee_on_foreign_relations.html; accessed on April 17, 2009.

calculations since 2003 than sectarianism per se. The first section will begin by surveying recent studies of Shi'ism in the Gulf since 2003, highlighting the predominance of sociological and theological approaches and identifying analytical gaps resulting from this focus. Especially important in this regard is the failure to link the question of sectarian identity with the threat perceptions and policies of Gulf regimes. Particular attention will also be paid to studies of Gulf states' reactions to post-2003 regional "shocks," such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi elections, and the 2006 war in Lebanon, all of which played into escalating fears of Shi'a ascendency by Gulf regimes. The second section will offer a theoretical framework for the rest of the study that draws from constructivism and work on transnational diffusion and threat perception. The goal of this approach is to develop an analytical lens for understanding Shi'a-state relations in the context of the international relations of the region.

1.2 PRE-2003 STUDIES OF SHI'ISM IN THE GULF: THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SHI'A RIGHTS

Most studies of the Gulf Shi'a tend to analyze these communities as an aggrieved minority pushing for greater political and cultural rights in Sunni-dominated states. In tandem with this center-periphery framework, analyses of the Gulf Shi'a tend to view Shi'a activists as transnational actors with political and cultural loyalties outside the states where they reside, whether to Iraq or Iran. This latter prism is heavily influenced by the legacy of the Iranian Revolution and its apparent demonstration effect on Gulf Shi'a. Although several authors have offered a corrective to this misperception, much of the focus still remains on situating Gulf Shi'a actors in relation to external patrons.[23] What is largely missing is an in-depth examination of Shi'a-state relations in the Gulf and in particular how Sunni perceptions of Shi'ism as a mobilizing identity impacts domestic political dynamics.

One of the central, pre-2003 works that adopt the minority-majority framework is Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke's *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*.[24] The monograph is important for exploring the fundamental political dilemmas faced by Shi'a actors in the Gulf; if assimilation is attempted, the authors assert, the Shi'a find they are denied access to political

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[23] A representative work is Toby C. Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 38 (2006), pp. 213-233. Jones writes, "Although the symbolic power of Iran was central—images of Iran's revolution such as images of Ayatollah Khomeini were common in Saudi Arabia—the 1979 uprising reflected the convergence of external factors with specifically local grievances and objectives."

[24] Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

institutions and social networks by Sunni dominated regimes. Yet if the Shi'a emphasize their communal identity and religious distinctiveness, they are branded as promoting discord or *fitna* within the Muslim community.[25] The study also highlights the divergent strategies pursued by Shi'a oppositionists and the external resources (whether media or state patronage) these actors employ. But the authors are also careful to emphasize how Gulf Arab Shi'a have taken pains to distinguish themselves from Iran's agenda, out of sensitivity to the historic fears of their host governments. Most importantly, Fuller and Francke argue that the underlying roots of the Shi'a "problem" stem from the absence of pluralism and democracy in the Arab world. "This larger problem," they write, "affects not only Shi'a but all Arabs, and all share equally in a solution."[26]

One of the richest chapters in this work concerns Bahrain, whose Shi'a community provides an important case study for observing the interplay between class and sectarian identity. Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner continue Fuller and Francke's line of inquiry, but make the important observation that for many Bahraini Shi'a activists in the mid-1990s, class-based opposition subsumed more parochial sectarian objectives. "Class provided intercommunal cooperation," they note, "an arena in which to pursue universal goals and a framework for organizing political action where they could also uphold their religious identity."[27] Echoing this theme, Fred Lawson has produced an illuminating study of Bahraini Shi'a strategies from 1994 to 1998 that borrows heavily from Charles Tilly and Sydney Tarrow's paradigm of contentious repertoires. Lawson is careful to emphasize the class-based foundations of much of the violent dissent and, quoting F. Gregory Gause III, he notes that the ruling al-Khalifa family "have been very skillful in framing political dissent in *sectarian* terms to divide potential opposition movements."[28] Taken in sum, these two studies have important implications for this thesis, particularly for illuminating how cross-sectarian opposition bonds may be frayed by external

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[25] Ibid., p. 253-254.

[26] Ibid., p. 253.

[27] Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in Ofra Bengio, Gabriel Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World* , Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, p. 184. For more on the economic roots of Shi'a dissent in Bahrain, see Bahry, Louay, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Summer 2000.

[28] Fred H. Lawson, "Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 89-111.

regional events such as the wars in Iraq and Lebanon and how this dissolution may play into the hands of regimes.[29]

The issue of sectarian divisions raises a related point about authenticity and national identity, which has been tackled by several scholars in the Saudi context. Anthropologist Madawi al-Rasheed has offered an illuminating examination of Saudi Shi'a efforts at a nationalist self-narration during the 1990s, citing the work of the Saudi Shi'a historian Hamza Hassan.[30] Drawing from the anthropological theory of "hidden transcripts," she explores the way Shi'a oppositionists, eschewing open confrontation, have attempted to revise and re-interpret the dominant Sunni narrative of the regime, which places Saudi Shi'a outside the process of Saudi state formation.[31] Her work is important for highlighting how the Shi'a have attempted to frame their opposition in regional, rather than sectarian terms, as a reaction to *siyasat al-tanjīd* (the policies of "Najdization," i.e. regime efforts to subsume peripheral Saudi identities under that of the historically dominant Najd region.) She also argues that the regime's reconciliation with the Shi'a in the mid-1990s was a largely tactical ploy, to prevent the community from joining forces with Wahhabi (*salafi*) dissidents.[32]

While these scholars have provided penetrating accounts of Shi'a identity formation, anti-regime activism and center-periphery dynamics using sociological and anthropological approaches, they have largely neglected the issue of Gulf Shi'a external linkages, particularly to Iran, and have not attempted to situate Shi'ism in the international relations of the region. This dimension was most thoroughly explored in a chapter by Michael Herb entitled "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neighboring Regime: Iran and the Shi'a of the Arab States of the Gulf."[33] Here, Herb frames the Gulf Shi'a as rational actors living in an informal "ethnic contract" within Sunni-dominated states, who engage in a carefully calibrated game of bargaining with their home-country regimes. He makes the important point that sectarian tensions in the Gulf often occur in the unofficial realm, where nongovernmental actors

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[29] According to this logic, the presence of an immature and fractious body politic, rife with Shiite-Sunni tensions, requires a firm, paternalistic form of rule, i.e. the al-Khalifa. "Without the al-Khalifa," a *majlis al-shura* member told me in 2006, "Bahrain would go the way of Iraq or Lebanon." Personal unattributed interview with a *majlis al-shura* member, Manama, Bahrain, November 20, 2006.

[30] Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (May, 1998), pp. 121-138.

[31] Al-Rasheed, p. 124.

[32] Al-Rasheed, p. 138.

[33] Michael Herb, "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neighboring Regime: Iran and the Shi'a of the Arab States of the Gulf," in Leonard Binder, *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics of the Middle East*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida Press, 1999, pp. 155-180.

from the dominant ethnic group (Sunnis) impose costs on the Shi'a through acts of exclusion, such as denying the Shi'a access to business opportunities and professional groups.[34] As rational actors, he notes that Shi'a activists have for the most part avoided leveraging their communal ties with Iran as a bargaining chip to counter this discrimination, because they (rightly) perceive that this tactic would provoke a response of repression, rather than appeasement, from their host regimes. Citing the geographic concentration of Shi'a communities in Gulf urban centers, Herb argues that withdrawal from the state (into an ungoverned zone, for instance, or a rural hinterland) or outright secession is simply not an option, making Shi'a communities vulnerable to retribution and therefore increasing their incentives to work "within the system."

Although this framework has merits in applying game theory to the Shi'a issue in the Gulf, Herb overstates the primacy of sectarian affinity between Gulf Shi'a and Iran as a bargaining chip among the *majority* of Shi'a activists. As will be discussed later, even in the immediate period following the Iranian Revolution, Gulf Shi'a groups balanced their patronage from Iran with support and inspiration from Shi'a networks in Syria, Kuwait, Iraq and Europe. That said, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, Shi'a figures have at times "played the Iran card," possibly to provoke a repressive response from the regime and thus undermine more moderate, conciliatory rivals in the Shi'a community. While such demands for militancy and secession have been mostly confined to the margins of Shi'a activism, the post-2003 regional environment has undoubtedly impacted the assertiveness of certain Gulf Shi'a voices, provoking Sunni fears of Shi'a ascendancy.

1.3 POST-2003 STUDIES: THE IRAQ WAR, TRANSNATIONALISM, AND NEW APPROACHES TO GULF POLITICS

Since the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, three studies in particular are relevant for exploring how external regional events have impacted local political dynamics, Sh'ia strategies and regime responses.

In *Transnational Shi'a Politics* (2008), Laurence Louër traces the political and ideological geneology of Shia dissident movements in the Gulf to Iraq and Kuwait, rather than Iran, highlighting frequent schisms and tensions between the clerical leadership and "lay" activists. Her work is especially important for demonstrating the role of external *maraja'* in guiding and influencing, but not in determining, Gulf Shi'a strategies. Like Lawson, she explains that class

[34] Herb, p. 159.

and locale play a critical role in shaping grassroots dissent that is often misrepresented as purely sectarian in character. In Bahrain, for example, she notes that Shi'a activists take great pains to portray regime discrimination as being directed not against the Shi'a as a sect per se, but rather the *baharna* (the indigenous, mostly Shi'a inhabitants of Bahrain, who lived on the archipelago before the Arab tribal conquest from central Arabia). Importantly, she tackles the impact of the dynamic regional environment on Shi'a identity mobilization in Gulf, but only briefly and not in a way that fully illuminates regime responses.[35]

Some of Louër's reservations about the impact of the Iraq war are directed against works which frame the collapse of the Saddam regime as having a profound and far-reaching demonstration effect on Shi'a across the Gulf. Yitzhak Nakash's *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World* (2006) is representative of this school. Nakash's work offers an in-depth survey of Shi'a politics in the Gulf, drawing from a wealth of historical primary Arabic sources. His work is particularly valuable in identifying Gulf Shi'a journals (published in London, Beirut and Qom) from the 1980s and 1990s that help illuminate the historical backdrop behind recent Shi'a activism. Much of this activism, Nakash writes, is facilitated by globalization and the new media, which has made Shi'as in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Lebanon "increasingly aware of developments in Iraq and Iran."[36] Yet Nakash imputes too much homogeneity to the Shi'a as a political actor and too much agency to events in Iraq. He writes that "a dynamic political process in Iraq, even if influenced by Shi'i Islamists, could reinvigorate the reform movement in Iran and inspire change in the Arab world."[37] And like Louër, he is less concerned with situating Shi'ism as a factor in the international politics of the Gulf and more focused on analyzing it within the domestic context of individual Gulf states.

Both Louër and Nakash's books are academic studies, yet both have implicitly operated under the shadow of Vali Nasr's *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, a work that, by its author's own admission, is geared toward more general audiences and "is not a work of historical scholarship."[38] Nevertheless, Nasr's thesis has shaped both academic

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[35] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, Hurst Publishers, London, 2008. See also, Laurence Louër, *Chiisme et Politique Au Moyen Orient* (Shi'ism and Politics in the Middle East), Paris: Editions Perrin, 2009 and "Shi'i Identity Politics in Saudi Arabia," in Anh Nga Longva and Anne Sofie Roald (eds), *Religious Minorities in the Middle East. Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.

[36] Nakash, p. 162.

[37] Nakash, p. 162.

[38] Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future*, London: W.W. Norton, 2007.

discourse and policy deliberations, and many of his arguments comprise an important foundation for further inquiry. In particular, he notes the reverberating effect of the 2006 Lebanon War on Shi'a activism in the Gulf and, importantly, he frames Sunni Islamist reactions to Shi'a ascendancy as being couched as a defense of pan-Arab norms. This argument sheds light on the threat perception of Gulf leaders, who have increasingly conflated Sunnism with pan-Arab norms, and who appear to see any competing narratives of religious identity as an explicit attack on their regional and domestic legitimacy. Yet few scholars of the Shi'a have attempted to tackle Nasr's thesis with theoretical and methodological rigor and, in some cases, his underlying argument has been repeated uncritically.[39]

One exception to this trend is F. Gregory Gause III, who has presented a convincing assertion that fears of Shi'a empowerment in the Gulf have less to do with sectarian tensions per se and more to do with Iranian foreign policy, domestic structures in Arab states, and the lingering belief among Gulf rulers that their societies are vulnerable to meddling and incitement from abroad.[40] This paradigm draws from Gause's previous work on the impact of the Iranian Revolution on Gulf states, in which he focuses on the maturity of domestic structures in the Gulf—bureaucracies, political institutions and economic resources—as a more convincing explanation for why the Revolution failed to gain traction in the Gulf than arguments about its particularist appeal and sectarian exclusiveness.[41]

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[39] For example, see the edited work on Shi'a militancy edited by Assaf Moghadem, *Militancy and Political Violence in Shiism*, New York: Routledge, 2012. In a chapter on the Shi'a of Kuwait and Bahrain, Uzi Rabin writes, "It is difficult to gauge the precise degree of influence that Hizballah, Iran, and Iraq's Shiis have had on Bahrain's Shi'as, but it is beyond doubt that the latter have been inspired by this regional "Shii revival." (p. 214). In contrast, a few regional specialists have offered revisions of the Nasr thesis. For example, Augustus Richard Norton writes, "Reverberations from the 2003 invasion of Iraq may last for decades. But an inexorable spread of Sunni-Shi'a conflict is only the worse case, and frankly it is not very likely." See, Augustus Richard Norton, "The Shiite 'Threat' Revisited," *Current History* (December 2007). Also, Joost Hiltermann, "Iraq and the New Sectarianism in the Middle East" Synopsis of A Presentation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, November 12, 2006; available at http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4558; accessed on April 10, 2008 and Omayma Abdel-Latif, "The Shia-Sunni Divide: Myths and Reality," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, March 1-7, 2007.

[40] This argument is spelled out in F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance, and the Sectarian Question, *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 2 (March 2007) and in a January 25, 2007 post to the online blog of Arab media and political affairs run by Marc Lynch, Abu Ardvaark, entitled, "Anti-Shia or Anti-Iran? Balance of power politics, not a new sectarianism." See also F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 6-7.

[41] F. Gregory Gause III, "Revolutionary Fevers and Regional Contagion: Domestic Structures and the "Export" of Revolution in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. XIV, No. 3, Spring 1991.

Importantly for this thesis, he writes that the "institutional strength of the state and the extent of its control over society are the filter through which international forces affect politics in specific domestic contexts."[42] Examining the post-2003 environment and fears of Shi'a ascendancy, he argues that analyses which emphasizes the transnational sectarian character of this political phenomenon do not give enough attention to the *state* and the "coercive and co-optive resources" available to it.[43] Gause is also one of the few scholars to assert that Gulf regimes may be underestimating their ability to manage transnational ideological threats through state structures and that the resulting *overestimation of threat* plays a determinant role in shaping foreign policy. He notes that, "it is analytically important to recognize that transborder ideological and political threats continue to drive Gulf-state foreign policies."[44] In many respects, then, Gause's work is a call for a more systematic inquiry into post-2003 Shi'a-state relations, bringing the "state back in."

Since Gause's article, a number of recent studies on the politics and international relations of the Gulf have advanced our understanding of Shi'a-state dynamics—not by tackling the issue directly, but by re-examing long-held assumptions about security, reform, and identity in the region. Gause himself has offered a more fully-developed exposition of the ideas contained in these earlier articles with the publication of *International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (2010). In a 2011edited volume, *International Politics of the Persian Gulf* (2011), Mehran Kamrava and his co-authors provide illuminating insights into the interplay between local and regional variables in Gulf dynamics. Particularly noteworthy on these issues are the respective essays by Fred Lawson and Katja Niethammer on Gulf security and the nexus between domestic reform and foreign policy.[45] The issue of political reform is taken up more thoroughly in Joshua Teitelbaum's edited volume, *Political Liberalization in the Gulf* (2009); the chapter by J.E. Peterson on Bahrain is especially helpful in explaining in the impact of sectarianism on electoral politics.[46] More recently, two important studies have offered a reinterpretation of traditional norms of Gulf politics that pays closer attention to issues of demography, sub-state identity, and political

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[42] Ibid., p. 10.

[43] F. Gregory Gause III, "Threats and Threat Perception in the Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 123.

[44] Ibid., p. 124.

[45] Mehran Kamrava, ed., *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

[46] Joshua Teitelbaum, ed., *Political Liberalization in the Gulf*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009

economy: Christopher Davidson's edited volume, *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies* and Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen's *Insecure Gulf*.[47]

1.4 ARABIC SECONDARY SCHOLARSHIP

Arabic secondary literature on Shi'ism in the Gulf and sectarian identity is sparse. Historically, Arabic works on the Gulf Shi'a have tended to be highly partisan accounts, authored by individuals who were more often participants than detached observers. A notable example is Hamza al-Hassan, a longtime ideologue of the Saudi-based Organization for the Islamic Revolution (OIR) and a former ally of the leading Saudi Shi'a cleric and activist, Hassan al-Saffar. In his principal work, *al-Shi'a fi-l Mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya* (1993) he presents a historiography implicitly designed to counter the Saudi regime's narrative of excluding the Shi'a from the Kingdom's national formation.[48] In the same vein is Fouad Ibrahim's *al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiya* (2007), which also appeared in English in 2006. Ibrahim, a member of the Saudi Shi'a opposition in the 1980s and 1990s, offers an analysis of the Saudi Shi'a's evolving nationalist discourse and identity that is similar to that elucidated by Madawi al-Rasheed. Importantly, he makes a brief reference at the end of his study to the shifting regional context after 2001 and 2003, but does not fully elucidate its implications for Shi'a-state relations in the Kingdom.[49] A more recent—and somewhat more balanced—addition to these works is Ibrahim al-Hatlani's *Al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiyun* (2009), which offers a detailed historical account drawn from interviews and primary sources, to include rare statements and tracts from Hizballah al-Hijaz.[50]

The partisan trend has been offset in the last three years by the publication of more rigorous, objective works on Islamist movements and sectarian relations in the Gulf. Many of these follow in the comparative sociological tradition of the Kuwaiti scholar Falah 'Abd al-

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[47] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Insecure Gulf: The End of Certainty and the Transition to the Post-Oil Era*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011; Christopher Davidson, ed., *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

[48] Hamza al-Hassan, *al-Shi'a fi-l Mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya* (The Shi'a in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Baqi` li-Ihya' at-Turat, 1993. Al-Hassan has also written a series of articles on the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia for *al-Jazeera*, which includes section on the Shi'a's external relations at the political, social and theological level. Here, he emphasizes that any foreign activities by the Shi'a are ultimately geared toward advancing reform within a peaceful domestic framework. Hamaz al-Hassan, "al-Shi'a fi al-Saudiya," (The Shi'a in Saudi Arabia), *al-Jazeera*, October 3, 2004; available at http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/C65C2C02-0CF9-4B10-8CD3-5B63F1EDBF51.htm; accessed on May 14, 2009..

[49] Fouad Ibrahim, *al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiya* (The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia) Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007.

[50] Ibrahim al-Hatlani, *Al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiyun: Qira' Ta'rikhiyah wa Siyasiyah lil-Namadthij al-Matlabiyah* (The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia: A Historical and Political Inquiry Into the Patterns of Activism), Beirut: Riad al-Rayyes Books, 2009.

Mdeires, who, in the late 1990s, authored authoritative studies on the Salafi, *Ikhwan*, and Shi'a movements in Kuwait, and, in 2001, a work on the Shi'a of Bahrain.[51] Among this new trend, Muhammad Shahatah Nasir has produced a rich examination of Gulf government policies toward the Gulf Shi'a during the tumultuous period of 2003 to 2008.[52] This 2011 monograph draws from a range of Arabic and English sources and provides an illuminating framework for understanding how regional pressures affected both government and Shi'a opposition strategies. What is largely missing from this work, however, is a discussion of major non-state Sunni actors in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and their impact on sectarian dynamics. Filling this gap, but without the explicit goal of explaining sectarianism, the Bahraini sociologist Baquer al-Najjar authored a comparative study in 2007 of Islamist movements in the Gulf that is particularly insightful on his home country and the post-2003 factionalization of the Bahraini Shi'a movement.[53] Al-Najjar has also contributed an important essay on Saudi, Iranian, and Iraqi influences on local sectarian dyanmics in Bahrain in a 2009 volume on Sunni-Shi'a relations in the Middle East edited by Hazim Saghiyah, the political editor at the pan-Arab daily, *al-Hayah*.[54] Informing all of these works, as well as this thesis, is the enduring legacy of seminal Arabic scholarship on state-society relations in the Gulf by Khaldun Hassan al-Naqib, Faysal al-Marhun, Gamal Matar and 'Ali al-Din al-Hillal Dessouki.[55]

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[51] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, *al-Haraka al-Shi'a fi al-Kuwait* (The Shi'a Movement in Kuwait), Kuwait City: Qurtas, 1999; *Dirasat hawl al-Harakat al-Islamiyya fi al-Bahrain, 1938-2001* (Study of Islamic Movements in Bahrain, 1938-2001), Beirut: Dar al-Kanuz al-Adabiyya, Beirut, 2004; *al-Jami'yat al-Salafiyya fi al-Kuwayt* (Salafi Groups in Kuwait), Kuwait City: Dar Qurtas lil-Nashr, 1999; *Jami'yat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fi al-Kuwayt* (Muslim Brotherhood Groups in Kuwait), Kuwait City: Dar Qurtas lil-Nashr, 1999.

[52] Muhammad Shahatah Nasir, *Siyasat al-Nitham al-Hakima fi al-Bahrayn, wa al-Kuwayt, wa al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya fi Ta'amil ma al-Matalib al-Shi'a (2003-2008): Dirasa Muqarna* (The Policies of the Ruling Regimes in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia in Dealing with Shi'a Demands (2003-2008): A Comparative Study), Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiya (Center for Arab Unity Studies), 2011.

[53] Baquer al-Najjar, *Al-Harakat al-Diniyya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Religious Movements of the Gulf), Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007.

[54] Hazim Saghiyah, *Nawasib wa Rawafidh: Al-Munadha'at al-Sunna wa al-Shi'a fi al-'Alam al-Islami al-Yawm* (*Nawasib* and *Rawafidh*: Sunni-Shi'a Disputes in the Contemporary Islamic World), Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2009.

[55] Khaldun Hassan al-Naqib, *al-Mujtama wa al-Dawla fi al-Khalij al-Jazira al-Arabiyya* (Society and State in the Arabian Peninsula Gulf), Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-Arabiyya, 1987; Faysal Marhun, *Al-Bahrayn: Qadaya al-Sulta wa al-Mujtama'* (Bahrayn: Matters of State and Society), London: Dar al-Safa, 1988; Madawi al-Rasheed, *Mazaq al-Islah fi al-Saudiya fi al-Qarn al-Wahid wa al-Ishrin* London: al-Saqi Books, 2005; Gamil Matar and 'Ali al-Din al-Hilal Dessouki, *Al-Nizam al-'Iqlimi al-'Arabi* (The Arab Regional Order), Beirut: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi, 1983.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has surveyed existing literature on Shi'ism in the Gulf, highlighting the predominance of sociological, anthropological and political approaches. Many of these studies are helpful in illuminating the interplay between Shiism as a political identity and the frequently contending loyalties of class, tribe and locale. Similarly, they highlight recurring patterns in the political strategies pursued by both regimes and Shi'a activists.

What is missing is an understanding of how Shi'ism as a non-state identity with transnational linkages has impacted regime and Sunni threat perception, and also how Shi'a-state relations have been influenced by external forces and events since 2003. As noted above, the conventional narrative of Iraq's "demonstration effect" has influenced most studies on this dimension of Gulf politics; what is needed is a more nuanced application of international relations theory to the issue. Specifically, greater attention should be paid to the role of domestic institutions as a buffer that mediates between the regional system and the mobilization of sectarian identity. The following chapters aim to do this, integrating structured fieldwork and textual analysis with a pluralistic conceptual framework.

2 SETTING THE STAGE: SOCIETY, GOVERNANCE, AND THE SHI'A IN THE GULF

2.1 INTRODUCTION

To fully gauge how post-2003 changes in the regional environment have impacted internal dynamics in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, this chapter will assess the local context: the sub-regional security system of the Gulf, identity politics, government structures, and Shi'a communities. First, it will argue that the three states comprise a sub-set within the larger Gulf security system where regimes share similar perceptions of threat about transnational ideologies and the potential mobilization of their respective Shi'a populations. In each case, this perception is tempered by the state's resources—a shared sense of national identity and political institutions. In addition to resources, these states are also defined by their fissures—societal and political vulnerabilities that expose them to shocks in the regional environment. The chapter will then contain an overview of the Shi'a communities in each state, focusing on their respective histories, political, economic and social grievances, and patterns of activism before 2003. Having set this foundation, subsequent chapters will explore how post-2003 shocks to the regional system have impacted regime threat perception, reform, and relations between the Shi'a and the state.

2.2 THE GULF AS A SECURITY SYSTEM

To facilitate comparison among the three cases in this study, it is helpful to conceive of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf as a security system where member states share similar political characteristics and perceptions of threat.[56] Linked together by familial ties and dynastic structures, the rulers of these states comprise a sort of club that is highly conservative in outlook and has proven surprisingly resilient to the ideological forces, revolutions and coups that have buffeted the rest of the Arab world. At the regional level, these states are part of a multilateral security structure, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), that was formed in response to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. At the individual state level, security policies have typically followed a time-tested pattern: the dispersal of oil rents to placate potential opposition, the reliance on an external security guarantor, tribal patronage and intermarriage, the construction of nationalist narratives that link the ruling families with the state, and, most recently, carefully calibrated political

[56] This point is argued by Fred Lawson, "From Here We Begin: A Survey of Scholarship on International Relations of the Gulf" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2009, pp. 337-357.

reforms.[57] Finally, the Gulf system is marked by a high-degree of cross-border exchange: people, goods, and, most significantly for this study, ideas.

Aside from these linkages, the Gulf Arab states are united by a shared perception of threat and a shared discourse on security. For Gulf ruling elites, national security is frequently conflated with regime security, and the lines between external and internal security are similarly blurred.[58] F. Gregory Gause III has deployed Barry Buzan's concept of a "security complex" to argue that the Gulf states, as a whole, spend most of their energy and resources worrying about threats emanating from other states in the Gulf, rather than states outside the region.[59] Most importantly for this study, he argues that the Arab Gulf states are distinguished by the fact that transnational *ideological* threats—rather than conventional *military* ones—tend to define Gulf regime behavior. Throughout the modern history of the Gulf, these threats have included Nasserism, Ba'athism, Communism, and revolutionary Shi'ism from Iran. Post-2003 fears in the Gulf of the so-called "Shi'a crescent" are only the latest variation of this trend.[60] However, as I will argue in the following chapter, this threat is *not* a return to the revolutionary agitation that defined Iran's policy in the Gulf after the 1979 Revolution. But it nevertheless embodies many of the same features that proved so alarming to Gulf regimes in the 1980s: populism, rejectionism, and pluralism.[61]

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[57] For explanations of Gulf regimes' longevity: Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies*, New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 1999; Gerd Nonneman, "Security and Inclusion: Regime Responses to Domestic Challenges in the Gulf," in S. McKnight, et al, eds., *Gulf Security: Opportunities and Challenges for the New Generation*, London: Royal United Services Institute, September 2000, pp. 107-116; Anoushirvan Ehteshami, "Reform from Above: The Politics of Participation in the Oil Monarchies," *International Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1, 2003, pp. 53-75.

[58] Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Internal and External Security in the Gulf" *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 2009, pp. 39-58.

[59] F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 6-7. Gulf Arab authors themselves have echoed this paradigm, albeit with a more realist, balance-of-power approach. For an example, see 'Abd al-Jalil Zaid al-Marhun, *al-Amn al-Khaliji b'ad al-Harb fi al-'Iraq* (*Gulf Security after the Iraq War)*, Riyadh: Institute for Diplomatic Studies, 2005.; and Gamil Matar and 'Ali al-Din al-Hilal Dessouki, *Al-Nizam al-'Iqlimi al-'Arabi* (*The Arab Regional Order)*, Beirut: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-'Arabi, 1983.

[60] This argument is made by F. Gregory Gause III, "Threats and Threat Perception in the Gulf," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 2007, p. 123; and "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran and the Regional Power Balance and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights*, February 2007.

[61] Morten Valbjørn and André Bank, "Signs of a New Arab Cold War: The 2006 Lebanon War and the Sunni-Shi'i Divide," *Middle East Report*, Spring 2007, p. 7.

2.2.1 The Shi'a Sub-Set: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait

Because of their Shi'a populations, the regimes of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have been particularly concerned about the demonstration effect of post-2003 regional upheaval on their respective Shi'a populations. They thus form a sort of sub-set within the Gulf security system. In managing—and in some cases exploiting this threat—the regimes of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait have frequently cooperated to suppress Shi'a activism within their respective borders.

Much of this coordination over the Shi'a is rooted in fears of a contagion of political liberalization throughout the Gulf—the belief that parliamentary elections or constitutionalism in one state will inspire similar demands in another.[62] As will be discussed below, in campaigning for their communal rights, Shi'a activists often push for political liberalization and frequently cooperate with like-minded reformists, whether secular, leftist or even Sunni Islamist.[63] It is in the interests of the three regimes, therefore, to emphasize the narrowly sectarian character of Shi'a political demands and to exaggerate their linkages to Iran. These tactics appear calculated to divide the Shi'a from other reform activists, discredit their liberalizing agenda, and alienate them from the general population.[64]

Below the regime level, there is a long history of political interactions among Shi'a activists and oppositionists in the three states, highlighting the potential diffusion effect of Shi'a empowerment within the GCC. Much of this is not surprising, given the familial, tribal and clerical linkages between the Shi'a in each state, to be discussed below. With regard to political activism, the Shi'a in each state offer material and moral support for one another. In 2005, for example, wealthy Kuwaiti businessman reportedly financed several Shi'a candidates in Saudi Arabia's municipal elections in the Eastern Province.[65] The Gulf Shi'a blogosphere and internet community offers a wealth of evidence of these rhetorical linkages; a notable example includes

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[62] The demonstration of effect of political liberalization has been noted in the Gulf context by Gerd Nonneman, "Political Reform in the Gulf Monarchies: From Liberalization to Democratization? A Comparative Perspective," in Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright, *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*, New York, NY: Ithaca Press, 2008, p. 26. He writes, "The regional environment is important in a number of ways. The effects can either enhance or inhibit the prospects for political reform; they can do so either by affecting elites perceptions or calculations or by influencing popular perceptions and aspirations; and they can arise from, and affect, both material facts/interests and ideas."

[63] This is particularly the case in Bahrain, where much of the Shi'a opposition has been class-based.

[64] Ulrichsen, 2009, p.44.

[65] Personal interview with Shi'a politician, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 8, 2007.

the posting of declarations by Hizballah al-Hijaz, a Saudi Shi'a group with close ties to Iran, in support of imprisoned Bahraini and Kuwaiti Shi'a.[66]

That said, there are sufficient differences in outlook and strategies, in addition to the distinctive histories and local context of each state, to undermine the notion of a *deliberately coordinated* Shi'a movement in the Gulf. Shi'a leaders themselves frequently acknowledge that the unique religious and socio-political context of each state demands tailored approaches. For example, in commenting on Sunni-Shi'a relations in Kuwait, Hassan al-Saffar, a key clerical figure in the Saudi Shi'a movement, observes that the dominant *madhhab* (Islamic school of jurisprudence) in Kuwait is the Maliki school, which is doctrinally less hostile toward the Shi'a than that of the Hanbali *madhhab* in Saudi Arabia, which in his view creates more favorable conditions for Sunni-Shi'a dialogue.[67] In other cases, Shi'a activists are harshly critical of the missteps and mistakes of their co-religionists in other states. As noted by a Saudi Shi'a reformist in a 2007 interview:

> The Bahraini Shi'a made a huge mistake by siding with Iran. We are more mature than the Bahrainis; we have more discussions at the local level. In Bahrain, they are too busy with demonstrations to formulate a long-term agenda. The Saudi Shi'a, on the other hand, have the *Partners in One Nation* document."[68]

2.3 IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE GULF

Having established that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait comprise a "system-within-a-system" due to their shared perceptions of threat and the ties among their respective Shi'a communities, this section will turn to exploring the politics of identity in the Gulf. Unpacking the overlapping and frequently competing forms of Gulf identity is important for understanding how states and non-state actors responded to post-2003 events.

In terms of governance, identity can be a resource to be mobilized or exploited by rulers. But it is also vulnerability—a fissure that is susceptible to external ideologies or regional shocks.

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[66] See the website Alhramain.net and the sub-file entitled, "Hizballah al-Hijaz," as of November 14, 2010: www.alhramain.net

[67] *Madhhab* refers to the four traditional schools of Islamic jurisprudence: Hanbali, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanafi, each exhibiting distinctive legal interpretations of the canonical Islamic sources. In other instances it is used to denote a specific sect or current within Islam, i.e. the Shi'a or Sufis. Hassan al-Saffar, *al-Madhhab wa al-Watan* (Sect and Homeland), Beirut: al-Mu'assasah Arabiyah lil-Dirasat wa-al-Nashr, 2006, p. 85.

[68] Personal, unattributed interview with a Shi'a activist, Qatif, March 5, 2007. The "Partners in One Nation" document (*al-Shariq fi al-Watan al-Wahid*), April 30, 2003, was an important cross-sectarian petition submitted to the Saudi king by Shi'a and Sunni oppositionists, intended to pre-empt any accusations of disloyalty in light of the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq.

When it is institutionalized, it can become a filter through which policymakers view the world.[69] For the Gulf states under examination, the key question is the extent to which Sunnism and Shi'ism have been meaningful categories of identity, at what level, and how they have been mobilized or exploited by various actors. [70] Similarly, what are the other competing forms of identity (nationalism, Arabism, or ecumenical notions of Islamic solidarity) that are either imposed from above or have emerged from below?

2.3.1 Degrees of Inclusion: Islam, Arabism, and Sunnism

Of the six states of the GCC, five are ruled over by Sunni families.[71] Despite this, sectarian primacy has generally not been one of the central ideological pillars of official governance in the GCC. As noted by Michael Herb, the regimes of the GCC "do not stress Sunnism as the cornerstone of their identity…the GCC states are not Sunni in the sense that the Turkish state is Turkish."[72] At the ideational level, therefore, the regimes of the Gulf have historically deployed ecumenical forms of Islam and Arabism to buttress their standing, both domestically and within the broader inter-Arab and regional arena. The legitimacy of Gulf rulers is thus partly tied to how well their domestic governance and foreign policy reflects these norms, particularly in times of regional challenges on the Arab-Israeli front or from the Islamic Republic of Iran. It is important to note, however, that in the post-2003 environment, the norms of Arabism and Islam in the Gulf became increasing conflated with Sunnism by a variety of official and semi-official actors. This, I will argue in subsequent chapters, was largely a defensive reaction to the regional rise of Iran and its usurpation of causes that had traditionally been the sole purview of Sunni Arab powers.

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[69] A useful definition of identity politics is offered by Lisbeth Aggestam: "The *politics of identity* refers to a particular set of ideas about political community that policy-makers use and drawn on to mobilise a sense of cohesion and solidarity to legitimate the general thrust of foreign policy." See, Lisbeth Aggestam, *Role Conceptions and the Politics of Identity in Foreign Policy*, Oslo, Norway: Center for European Studies, ARENA Working Papers, April 28, 1999.

[70] For more on this in the Gulf context, Faisal al-Salem, "The Issue of Identity in Selected Arab Gulf States," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, 1981, pp. 21-32.; and Ghassan Salamé, "Perceived Threats and Perceived Loyalties" in B.R. Pridham, *The Arab Gulf and The Arab World*, London: Croom Helm, 1988.

[71] The exception is Oman, which is ruled over by the Ibadis, a sect that is doctrinally distinct from both Sunnism and Shi'ism.

[72] Michael Herb, "Subordinate Communities and the Utility of Ethnic Ties to a Neighboring Regime: Iran and the Shi'a of the Arab States of the Gulf," in Leonard Binder, ed., *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics of the Middle East*, Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida Press, 1999, pp. 155-180.

2.3.2 National Identity and Sectarian Challenges

More recently, several Gulf states have undertaken ambitious projects for inculcating their respective publics with state-centric nationalism. This is a relatively novel form of self-identification, given the longstanding importance of tribal ties and Islam as pillars of governance, and the fact that the Gulf did not experience the wrenching process of violent de-colonization that produced a more dialectical form of nationalism in other Arab states.[73] A number of post-colonial shifts in the regional and global environment have aided regimes in implementing these programs. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the external specter of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its aftermath helped solidify nationalist sentiment in the Gulf, while at the same time bolstering the role of conservative Islam in political and public life.

This was particularly so in Saudi Arabia, which mounted a concerted attempt to "out-Islamicize" the Islamic Republic. In the case of Kuwait, the Iraqi occupation of 1990-1991 had a galvanizing effect on national self identification—especially among the Shi'a, who were able to parlay their prominent role in the anti-Iraqi resistance into greater recognition by the state. In Saudi Arabia, the post-9/11 environment, with its attendant threat of American intervention and the rumored dismemberment of the kingdom, helped rally the Saudi populace behind the idea of national unity.[74] Finally, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the resulting fear of Iranian power have also aided regime-sponsored nationalist projects in the Gulf. At least in the official realm, then, Gulf regimes have a history of deploying relatively inclusive forms of identity among their citizenry.

However, it is at the level of sub-state and semi-official actors where sectarianism has existed as a marker of identity—and a societal division that is vulnerable to upheaval in the regional system or manipulation from abroad. For certain Sunni actors, particularly the clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia, sectarianism has very real, material benefits; it ensures their continued and exclusive access to political power. The formal recognition of Shi'a identity—whether in the political, legal or cultural sphere—would effectively undermine this primacy. In other cases, sectarianism can be a useful instrument for political elites, particularly candidates in elections or parliamentary members, to rally constituents or deflect criticism over their failings in office. As mentioned previously Gulf regimes themselves have at times found it useful to paint

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[73] Neil Partrick, *Nationalism in the Gulf States*, London School of Economics, Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States, October 2009.

[74] Paul Aarts, *The Internal and the External: The House of Saud's Resilience Explained*, European University Institute, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Mediterranean Programme Series, EU Working Paper RSCAS No. 2004/332004.

the reformist opposition as explicitly sectarian in character as a sort of divide-and-rule tactic or to deflect U.S. pressure for democratization. In other cases, self-awareness of sectarianism has increased in public space because of regional events. Commentators frequently blame this phenomenon on external manipulationas—the product of a Saudi-Iranian proxy struggle or even a U.S.-inspired plot to weaken and divide the Islamic *ummah*.[75]

Among the Shi'a of the Gulf, sectarian identity has historically co-existed alongside a number of other, frequently competing affiliations—class, tribal versus non-tribal, indigenous versus immigrant, settled versus nomadic, and so on. At various points in history, however, sectarian identity has become "politicized" and a more prominent marker than other forms of affiliation. A common refrain in the Gulf is that the 1979 Iranian Revolution was responsible for this "activation" of Shi'a identity in the Gulf and that the process was repeated in the wake of the 2003 Iraq invasion and the subsequent rise of Iranian power.[76] Similarly, outside observers and Gulf regimes themselves frequently point to the uniquely Shi'a institution of the *marja'iyya* and its transnational authority as an obstacle to Shi'a integration and a recurring source of sectarian tensions.[77]

A more nuanced interpretation, however, acknowledges the contributing effect of these regional events and transnational influences, but locates the causal roots of this politicization (the so-called "Shi'a revival") in the *domestic* distribution of power in the Gulf states themselves—specifically, the exclusion of the Shi'a from governance and economic resources, and the capacity

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[75] For an example, see the interview with Shi'a cleric Hassan al-Nimr by the Saudi Shi'a website, *al-Rasid*, August 16, 2006 and Shi'a activist Fouad Ibrahim, January 23, 2007. Also, personal interviews in Manama and Riyadh, November 2006 and March 2007, respectively.

[76] Personal interviews with officials in Manama, Bahrain, November 2006 and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 2007. For representative examples from the local media, see 'Abdallah al-Askar, "al-Ta'ifiyya fi al-Khalij" (Sectarianism in the Gulf), *al-Riyadh* (Saudi Arabia), June 20, 2007; Karim 'Abed "Khalfiyat wa Ahdaf al-Tadakhul al-Irani fi al-Iraq (The Background of and the Goals behind the Iranian Interference in Iraq)," *al-Hayah*, May 20, 2007; 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, "Lihathihi al-Asbab Naksha Iran (For These Reasons We Fear Iran)," *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, April 18, 2006; Ghassan Charbel, "Iran al-Kha'ifa... wa al-Mukhifa (The Frightened and Frightening Iran)", *al-Hayah* (in Arabic), January 17, 2008. http://www.daralhayat.com/opinion/editorials/01-2008/Item-20080116-84559eef-c0a8-10ed-01ae-81ab20e27512/story.html;

[77] Saud Sirhan, "Nahwa *Marja'iya* Shi'a Mustaqlila fi al-Khalij" (Toward an Independent Shi'a Source of Emulation in the Gulf), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 24, 2003; Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, "La wa Lan Nuqbil Aya' Marja'n Takfiri'an wa Arfad Tadkhal aya' Marja' fi al-Shu'un al-Siyasi al-Dakhili li-Biladna (We Do Not And Will Not Welcome Any *Marja'* That Promotes *Takfir* (Excommunication) And We Oppose The Interference of Any *Marja'* in the Internal Political Affairs of Our Country," *al-Risalah*, February 16, 2007.

(or incapacity) of the state's institutions. These institutions and Shi'a marginalization are covered next.

2.4 STATE STRUCTURES, SOCIETY, AND THE SHI'A

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait share both similarities and differences in their domestic structures and resources: bureaucracies, participatory institutions, and oil wealth. It is important to understand these variables as both tools for governance—the capacity to co-opt and coerce political opposition—but also filters through which regimes mediate the impact of the regional environment.[78] In many respects, then, these institutions act as a sort of buffer between Gulf societies and transnational forces, i.e. ideologies, ideas and events. Their maturity and strength, this study will argue, has played a determinant role in shaping perceptions of the Shi'a threat after 2003 and in managing sectarianism in the domestic politics of each state. This, in turn, has important implications for the pace and scope of reform.

To set the stage for this analysis, the following section will include a case-by-case overview of each state's political structures, societal divisions and reform processes, as well as their respective Shi'a communities. It is important to note here that the Shi'a communities in each state do not constitute a monolithic bloc. Shi'a politics are stratified by class, ideology, clan, and personality distinctions. That said, within the larger context of Gulf reform and threat perception, it is analytically useful to speak of Shi'ism as a form of identity.

2.4.1 Bahrain

Bahrain's domestic context is distinguished from the other states of the GCC by several factors that are relevant to this study. Bahrain is the Gulf's first post-oil economy—unlike the other GCC states, it is largely bereft of petroleum reserves and depends on income from tourism, banking, heavy industry, and Saudi subsidies. The absence of rent has significantly impacted the regime's calculations and strategies toward domestic reform. Since 1999, it has used carefully calibrated liberalization and the provision of social services as a means to stave off domestic dissent, while also proving adept at playing societal and political groups against one another.[79]

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[78] This argument is developed in F. Gregory Gause III, "Revolutionary Fevers and Regional Contagion: Domestic Structures and the "Export" of Revolution in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Spring 1991.

[79] This was conveyed in a personal interview with a member of the appointed consultative council (*majlis al-shura*) in Manana, Bahrain, November 12, 2006. This individual noted that the "king is above sectarian passions" and that the consultative council is a "buffer" against sectarianism. See also, Frederic Wehrey, "Bahrain: Elections and Managing Sectarianism," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007; Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain:

2.4.1.1 Political Institutions and Reform

To understand the nexus between external events and sectarianism in Bahrain, it is important to trace the legacy of the country's brief democratic experiment in the early 1970s. From 1961 through 1999, Bahrain's political landscape was effectively dominated by a partnership between the Emir, Shaykh 'Isa bin Salman, and his brother, the Prime Minister, Shaykh Khalifa bin Salman. Under the two, a sort of division of labor emerged, with the Emir enjoying greater popularity because of his accessibility and espousal of reform, and the Prime Minister, who supervised much of kingdom's bureaucracy, budget and security forces, acting the part of the authoritarian overseer.

In 1973, the Emir oversaw the opening of a 30-person elected parliament with full legislative power, inaugurating a brief period of participatory politics in Bahrain.[80] But in 1975, the Emir abruptly closed the parliament due to a burgeoning alliance between leftist and religious blocs that would have effectively overturned a repressive state security law. As Bahraini scholar Abdulhadi al-Khalaf has argued, the first parliament was never a truly democratic body, but rather a form of institutionalized tribalism and sectarianism with certain rules of conduct; once those rules were breached by an emerging nationalist coalition that sought to erode the al-Khalifa's absolutism, the experiment was ended.[81] The parliament thus served as a template for the way quasi-democratic structures are used to manage and exploit sectarianism—a trend to be discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters.

Democratic reforms during the first half of the 1990s were mostly cosmetic. In 1993, the Emir created an unelected *majlis al-shura* (consultative council), which possessed no legislative power and did not lead to any significant policy changes. The outbreak of major political violence in 1994 and extending through 1999 (whose roots will be discussed in greater depth below) injected an economic urgency to the demands for more substantial political reforms.

From Ethnic to National and Vice Versa," Paper Presented at the *Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies: The Middle East in a Globalizing World*, Oslo, Norway, August 13-16, 1998, As of June 10, 2007: http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/khalaf.html.

[80] For accounts of the uprising, see, Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment," in Gary Sick and Lawrence Potter, eds., *The Persian Gulf at the Millennium: Essays in Politics, Economy, Security and Religion*, New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillian, 1997, pp. 167-188; Fred H. Lawson, "Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington, 2003, pp. 89-111; Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims*, , New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillian, 1999, pp. 121-154. On the continued importance of the 1973 Constitution, Herb, *All in the Family*, pp. 173-177. This sentiment was also borne out during the author's discussions with Shiite and liberal activists in Bahrain on the eve of the November 2006 parliamentary elections.

[81] Khalaf, n.p.

Aside from Saudi oil subsidies, Bahrain's economy is largely dependent on financial services, off-shore banking, tourism, and some heavy industry—all of which were threatened by anti-regime unrest.[82]

It was not until the 1999 accession of Crown Prince Hamad to the throne that more substantial reforms began to take shape. Here again, the driver appears to have been largely economic and pre-emptive—a tactic to reassert state control after nearly six years of unrest, but without fundamentally altering the relationship between ruler and ruled.[83] The new reforms, framed by the Emir as "concessions," included the right to form political parties or "associations," the curtailment of state security laws, the release of 320 political prisoners—including a revered Shi'a cleric who had been a major inspiration behind the dissent of 1994—the pardoning of dissidents abroad, and the creation of a 40-person elected parliament.[84] The removal of the despised British chief of the Bahraini security services, Ian Henderson and the disbandment of the security agency responsible for the mid-1990s crackdown was greeted with particular applause. In 2001, the Emir introduced the National Action Charter, which called for the creation of a constitutional monarchy, a bicameral legislative structure comprised of an elected parliament (lower house) and an appointed consultative council (the *majlis al-shura* or upper house), an independent judiciary and women's political participation. It also gave all men and women over the age of twenty the right to vote. The document was widely endorsed in a national referendum in February 2001. The net effect of these initiatives was to create a state of near euphoria, particularly among lower-class Shi'a.[85]

By 2002, however, these reforms had either stalled or evaporated, fueling new levels of cynicism and resentment, particularly among the Shi'a. In October 2002, the Emir, having now designated himself as King and his son Salman the Crown Prince, issued restrictive "Press and Publication Laws" which gave the regime widespread censorship power. More importantly, the King unilaterally revised the 1973 constitution, subordinating the elected parliament to an appointed *majlis al-shura*, and depriving the parliament of the ability to formally introduce new

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[82] Katja Niethammer, "Voices in Parliament, Debates in Majalis, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain," European University Institute Robert Shuman Center for Advanced Studies, *Mediterranean Programme Series*, No. 27, 2006, p. 2.

[83] Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri, "Bahrain: Reform Project: Prospect and Limitations," *Paper Presented at the Sixth Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting*, Montecatini, Terme, March 16-20, 2005.

[84] Author's interview with a Bahraini sociologist, Manama, Bahrain, November 11, 2006.

[85] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge" *ICG Middle East Report*, No. 40, Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 6, 2005, p. 7.

legislation or exert financial oversight over government ministries.[86] The weakening of this elective body, along with electoral gerrymandering designed to ensure Sunni dominance, spurred a widespread Shi'a and leftist boycott of the 2002 parliamentary and municipal elections. The result was a National Assembly dominated disproportionately by Sunni Muslim groups.

2.4.1.2 The Bahrani Shi'a

Alone among the other Gulf states, Bahrain has a majority Shi'a population, estimated at 70 percent.[87] A strong narrative of disenfranchisement informs the Shi'a's collective memory; historic Shi'a control of Bahrain since 1500 was overturned in 1782 with the conquest of the island by the al-Khalifa. A long period of feudal-like governance thus ensued, with the al-Khalifa relegating the Shi'a to the status of tenant cultivators—a relationship that was buttressed by assistance provided to the ruling family by Sunni Arab peninsular tribes like the al-Dawasir. In the Shi'a collective memory, therefore, the al-Khalifa and their tribal allies are frequently described as usurpers and conquerers.

In recent years, the Shi'a have enjoyed the freedom to express their religious identity through their own mosques and mourning houses or *ma'atim*. For example, the government does not hinder the two-day Shi'a celebration of *Ashura* and the Bahraini Ministry of Information has provided full media coverage of this event. Yet Shi'a continue to suffer politically and economically. They are underrepresented in key government ministries and are prohibited from serving in Bahrain's security forces. According to some figures, only 10 percent of the top 500 government positions are filled by Shi'a; there is only one Shi'a among 40 undersecretaries; and none of the 600 officers of the royal court are Shi'a.[88] In the economic sphere, the Shi'a constitute Bahrain's labor force, a legacy of their historically lower status as pearl divers, cultivators and employees of Bahrain's oil company, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO), before the decline of Bahrain's oil reserves in the 1970s.[89] A strong sense of class-based

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[86] Niethammer, "Voices in Parliament, 2006, p. 5. Personal, unattributed interview with a Shi'a activist, Manama, Bahrain, November 8, 2006. According to one activist, the parliament cannot formally introduce legislation but rather "suggest a desire" (*iqtarab al-rughba*) to the consultative council.

[87] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population," January 17, 2011. Available at http://pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-sunni-and-shia.aspx; accessed on April 12, 2011. Bahrain does not account for sectarian affiliation in its official census.

[88] J.E. Peterson, "Bahrain: Reform—Promise and Reality," in Joshua Teitelbaum, ed., *Political Liberalization in the Gulf*, New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2009, p. 180.

[89] Yitzhak Nakash, *Reaching for Power: The Shi'a in the Modern Arab World,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 54-71.

discrimination therefore fuels Shi'a activism. Many of their grievances stem from the uneven distribution of resources, housing shortages, unemployment, corruption, and perceived nepotism of the ruling family—concerns they share with lower- and middle-class Sunnis.

Overlaying the class and political dimension, there are divisions along ethnic lines between *baharna* and *'ajam* Shi'a that have important implications for understanding sectarian dynamics in the kingdom. The *baharna* are Shi'a of Arab origins who migrated to Bahrain to escape political and religious persecution during the 'Abbasid and 'Ummahyad caliphate. The *baharna* are the principal proponents of the narrative of Shi'a "authenticity," arguing that the archipelago was a Shi'a Arab state before its conquest by the Sunni al-Khalifa and their allied tribes in 1783. There are strong familial linkages between the *baharna* Shi'a and the Shi'a of the Qatif and al-Ahsa oases in Eastern Saudi Arabia. The *baharna* have typically filled Bahrain's working class: laborers, cultivators, pearl divers and oil workers.

The *'ajam* are ethnic Persians who came to Bahrain from Iran over and the last century and currently occupy positions in the merchant class and intelligentsia. Historically, they have suffered the greatest repression from the Bahraini regime because of their ties to Iran; until 2000, they were denied full citizenship. That said, they have tended to avoid political activism, given their dependence on the regime. Historically, there has been little intermarriage or interaction between the *'ajam* and the *baharna*. However, one by-product of the 2011 Arab Spring revolt (discussed at length in Chapter Ten) has been increased cooperation between the *'ajam* and *baharna*.[90]

Shi'a activism in Bahrain has been the most vocal and, at times, militant among the three cases under examination. As will be discussed in the next chapter, there is a strong legacy of distrust informing the regime's views of the Shi'a that stems from the 1980s and early 1990s,

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[90] Personal unattributed interview with a Bahraini activist, Manama, Bahrain, February 25, 2012. Also, Fuad I. Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 4-11. Among Bahraini Sunnis, there are important distinctions as well between tribal Arabs of the Najd, non-tribal Arabs and the *hawala*. The tribal Arab tribes from the Peninsula who are linked by marriage to the ruling al-Khalifa and who accompanied the al-Khalifa to Bahrain in 1783. Unsurprisingly, this class occupies key posts in the government, military, business and bureaucracy. They tend to be vigorous opponents of concessions to the Shi'a. The non-tribal Arabs from the Najd are those Sunni Arabs that, while not enjoying tribal pedigree and not linked to the al-Khalifa, still enjoy preferential status. The Najdi, non-tribal Arabs comprise the bulk of Bahrain's Salafi movement and are also involved in banking and business. The so-called *hawala* (derived the Arabic verb, "to revert back") are comprised of Sunni Arabs who migrated to western Iran and then returned back to Bahrain. The *hawala* tend to be prominent businesspeople who co-exist with the Shi'a in mixed neighborhoods like Muharraq and evince a more accommodating attitude toward the Shi'a than the tribal and Najdi Sunni Arabs. Membership in the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood is drawn overwhelmingly from the *hawala*.

when Iranian-backed Shi'a groups such as the Bahraini Hizballah and the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), called for the overthrow of the al-Khalifa. The decline of these groups was the result of changes in Iranian policy as well as the holding of parliamentary elections, which facilitated the ascendancy of Shi'a moderates while marginalizing hardliners.[91] That said, post-2003 disenchantment with the scope and results of Bahrain's reform efforts has produced splits in the Shi'a movement between those willing to participate in the country's parliamentary elections and those espousing a more rejectionist, militant stance.

2.4.2 Saudi Arabia

Among the case countries, Saudi Arabia is unique because of the magnitude of oil rent and the influence of its Salafi[92] religious bureaucracy on domestic policies—particularly toward Shi'a cultural and religious identity.

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[91] Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," in Ofra Bengio, Gabriel Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, p. 184. For more on the economic roots of Shi'a dissent in Bahrain, see Louay Bahry, "The Socioeconomic Foundations of the Shiite Opposition in Bahrain," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Summer 2000.

[92] Broadly defined, *Salafism* is a strand of Sunni Islam seeks to emulate, in all spheres of human activity, the example of the "pious predecessors" (*al-Salaf al-Salih*)—the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and the first three generations of his followers. Somewhat paradoxically, the modern *Salafi* movement has its proximate origins in a number of a relatively progressive 19th century thinkers who were a part of the Islamic revival of the time, notably including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Mohammed Abduh (d. 1905), Rashid Rida (d. 1935), and fellow Islamist and Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949). The influence of these *Salafi* thinkers generally has been eclipsed however by much more conservative Arabian thinkers such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1318) and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), and such present-day *salafi* ideologues as the Saudis Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda, as well non-Saudis such as the Indian jurist Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, the Palestinian-Jordanian Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, and the Kuwaiti cleric Hamed al-Ali. *Wahhabism* is often incorrectly applied to *Salafi* ideology within Saudi Arabia, after its progenitor Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Adherents of the Salafi creed in Saudi Arabia consider this appellation derogatory and refer to themselves instead as *Ahl al-Sunna*, *Ahl al-Tawhed* or *al-Muwahidun*. These terms more accurately convey Salafism's emphasis on scriptural orthodoxy and the unity of God (*tawhid*), and its opposition to doctrinal innovation (*bid'a*) and polytheism (*shirk*)--embodied most explicitly in the practice of the Sufis, Shi'as and other heterodox sects. It should be pointed out, however, that Salafism is not synonymous with terrorism. There are varying degrees of orthodoxy and practice within this current, with the vast majority rejecting violence and even political activism, in favor of the cultivation of inner piety and proselytization. Nevertheless, the teachings of Salafi scholars form a mobilizing idiom that connects and inspires many recruits, adherents and leaders of al-Qaeda. For more on Salafism and its manifestation in the Saudi context, see Hamid Algar, *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, North Haledon, NJ: Islamic Publications International, 2002, pp.31-36; Khaled Abou El-Fadl, *The Great Theft*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005, pp. 45-94; Oliver Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 232-289; Mansur al-Nuqaydan, "al-Kharita al-Islamiya fi al-Sa'udiya wa Qadiyat al-Takfir," The Islamist Map in Saudi Arabia and the Question of Repudiation, *al-Wasat* (Bahrain), February 28, 2003.

2.4.2.1 Political Institutions and Reform

The main contours of the kingdom's first push toward reform occurred in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. It is important not to overstate these initiatives as truly democratic in character; as will be discussed later, the country has been consistently placed at the bottom of the Freedom House rankings and remains one of the most closed, authoritarian states in the world. Instead, these moves should be viewed as proto-democratic, but significant in the Saudi context, in the sense of opening channels of communication between ruler and ruled in a society where political quietism was both expected and largely embraced.

Ironically, some of the kingdom's initial steps in this direction were the result of pressure from decidedly undemocratic quarters—the grouping of Salafi clerics outside the religious bureaucracy, who later came to be known as the *Sahwa* or "awakened" clerics.[93] Enraged by the al-Saud's decision to allow U.S. troops on Saudi soil and critical of the clerical establishment's sanctioning of this move, these figures became increasingly politicized, airing their grievances against the regime in public through popular TV programs and sermons, and submitting a set of petitions in 1991 and 1992.[94] Although these petitions sought to bolster clerical primacy in the kingdom's social affairs, they also called for an end to corruption and nepotism, the appointment of a consultative council free from government influence and increased freedom of expression.[95] This had a ripple effect on subsequent reform initiatives with a more universal focus. As Gwenn Okruhlik notes, "Islamists opened the floodgates of criticism in the kingdom by invoking the Islamically grounded right to advise the ruler."[96] At the same time, petitions emerged from Shi'a clerics and activists also endorsing a consultative council but with more emphasis on ending sectarian discrimination.

These early petitions are significant for several reasons. First, the very act of submitting them marked the injection of "issues" into the public realm, a radical departure from the closed

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[93] Sa'ud al-Qahtani, "Al-*Sahwa* al-Islamiyya," (The Islamic Awakening), *Gulf Issues*, 2002. As of May 2, 2007: http://www.gulfissues.net/mpage/gulfarticles/article53-1.htm; Toby Craig Jones, "The Clerics, the *Sahwa* and the Saudi State, *Strategic Insights*, Vol. 4, No. 3, March 2005. As of June 10, 2007: http://www.ccc.nps.navy.mil/si/2005/Mar/jonesMar05.asp; Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Saudi Arabia*, Cambrige, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011.

[94] David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, New York, N.Y.: I.B. Tauris, 2006, pp. 181-183. The first petition was signed by over 400 religious scholars.

[95] It is important to not over-characterize these early demands as democratic in nature. As Michael Herb notes, "The writers of the *muthakirrat* (memoranda) did not call for elections and little in their program can be described as liberal." Herb, p. 171.

[96] Gwenn Okruhlik, "Networks of Dissent: Islamism and Reform in Saudi Arabia," *Current History*, January 2002, p. 26.

nature of governance deliberations in the kingdom and the clerical practice of offering *nasiha* (advice or exhortation) to the al-Saud *in private*.[97] Several activists, including a Salafi reformer close to the *Sahwa*, noted that the establishment of public channels of communication with the ruler—whether through petitions, the series of National Dialogues begun in 2003, or the municipal councils—has increased the legitimacy of the al-Saud and fostered a normative shift in respect for dissenting opinions, thereby addressing some of the roots of terrorism in the kingdom. Secondly, the clerical nature of these early demands enabled the regime, via quasi-democratic reforms, to co-opt and split the *Sahwa* clerics, some of whom were a major ideological source for al-Qa'ida, both in its domestic and international manifestations.[98]

Responding to the petitions, in 1992, the King promulgated the "Basic Laws" – a semi-constitutional document that set up the 60-person[99] consultative council or *majlis al-shura*, whose membership is technocratic and geographically diverse, and whose statutes include the right to question cabinet members and review government social and economic policies before promulgation. Although this body has fallen short of its original mandate, it provides an aspirational framework for democracy activists in the kingdom today; during March 2007 fieldwork, reformists in Jeddah, Riyadh and the Eastern Province listed direct elections to the *majlis al-shura* as one of their top reform priorities. Secondly, as will be discussed in later chapters, it gave the regime a participatory, proto-democratic institution to co-opt Islamist oppositionists drawn from the *Sahwa* camp.[100]

2.4.2.2 The Saudi Shi'a

In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a comprise an estimated 10 percent of the population and are concentrated in the eastern provinces of the country.[101] As in Bahrain, they have been systematically excluded from major government ministries, the armed forces, and the security services. Also like Bahrain, Shi'a-Sunni tensions are overlaid with center-periphery tensions and class differences. In 1913, the predominately Shi'a areas of al-Ahsa and al-Qatif were brought

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[97] Author's discussion with noted Salafi reformer, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 13, 2007.

[98] Hegghammer and LaCroix note that "Ideologically, bin Ladin was at heart a *Sahwis*t, whose views were shaped by (Safar) al-Hawali," International Crisis Group, "Sa'udi Arabia Backgrounder: Who are the Islamists?" *ICG Middle East Report*, Brussels: International Crisis Group, No. 31, 2004, p. 6.

[99] Currently, the membership stands at 140.

[100] Author's discussion with Jedda-based reformist and political science professor, Jedda, Saudi Arabia, March 6, 2007 and an Eastern Province activist, March 15, 2007.

[101] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population," January 17, 2011. Available at http://pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-sunni-and-shia.aspx; accessed on April 12, 2011.

under the control of Ibn Saud and his tribal allies from the central Najd region, and later incorporated into the modern Saudi state in 1928. In the subsequent period of nation-building, the eastern areas remained subordinated to the central Najd region—in economic development, political power, and prominence in the official narratives of the state. Authenticity and colonial subjugation are therefore prominent themes in Saudi Shi'a discourse—Saudi Shi'a activists, like the *baharna* in Bahrain, typically emphasize their indigenous roots with self-referential terms as *al-asala al-shi'iya* (Shi'a authenticity) and *ibna al-mintaqa* (sons of the region). Government policies, on the other hand, are denounced for their exclusive character with such neo-logisms as *al-asabiya al-madhhabiya* (sectarian solidarity) and *tajnid* (literally, "to make something Najdi").[102]

This political and provinicial marginalization has been compounded by religious discrimination that is largely a function of the symbiotic and pragmatic alliance between the ruling al-Saud and the Salafi religious establishment. In return for legitimating the family's rule, the Salafi establishment is allowed a prominent place in the kingdom's public and social discourse. While the clerics are hardly uniform in their outlook toward the Shi'a, they are generally united in the view that the Shi'a are deviants from the Salafi view of Islamic orthodoxy, and are consequently denigrated as *rawafidh* (rejectionists, singular, *rafida*). Adding to this rhetorical exclusion, the Shi'a are unable to openly have their own mosques, practice the Ja'afari code of jurisprudence, or maintain mourning houses (*husayniyat* – the equivalent of Bahrain's *ma'atim*).[103]

Yet, as will be discussed in the next chapter, the Saudi Shi'a have generally eschewed militancy or ties to Iran. In the 1990s, the militant Shi'a leadership of the Organization for the Islamic Revolution on the Arabian Peninsula (OIR) returned home from exile and, in return for promising to abandon violence, received assurances from the Saudi government regarding reform and a redress of Shi'a grievances.[104] Saudi Shi'a opposition activity since then has largely consisted of petitions, participation in municipal council elections, and cooperation with like-minded reformists among Saudi liberals and Sunni Islamists. In tandem, Saudi Shi'a intellectuals

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[102] Personal interviews with Shi'a activists, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 2007. See also, Madawi al-Rasheed, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: a Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity" *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1998, pp. 121-138.

[103] Human Rights Watch, "Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shi'a Citizens," September 2009; Toby Craig Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 242, Spring 2007 and the "Human Rights Reports" issued by the Saudi Shi'a news service *al-Rasid*, December 2005 and April 2007.

[104] Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, London, Saqi Books, 2006, pp. 140-177.

and writers have offered counter-narratives of state-formation, deploying the vocabulary of authenticity and national belonging.[105]

Some Shi'a lay activists have gone further, arguing that reform *within* the Shi'a community itself is a prerequisite for any national integration—specifically, a re-thinking and reinterpretation of the institution of the *marja'iyya*.[106] In contrast to these reform minded activists and intellectuals, a few Saudi Shi'a clerical figures continue to adopt a more rejectionist view, advocating a boycott of Saudi state institutions and open support for Iranian Supreme Leader Khamene'i as their *marja.'* Farther out on the fringes, there are those in the Shi'a blogosphere who call for outright secession.[107] Subsequent chapters will explore how the balance of power between these currents in the Shi'a community was affected by post-2003 changes in the regional environment.

2.4.3 Kuwait

Kuwait differs significantly from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in a number of areas: the strength of its participatory institutions and the integration of its Shi'a into political life, the economic realm, and the narrative of the state's formation. It is frequently held up as the success story among the three cases—a state where a strong constitution, an empowered parliament, a relatively independent press, and a civil society embodying the tribal precepts of *shura* and *diwaniya* have combined with plentiful oil reserves to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling family and mitigate social dissent. That said, a number of scholars have recently challenged this narrative, highlighting the salience of sectarianism as a political fissure and critiquing the shortcomings of the state's political institutions.[108] Kuwait, like the rest of the Gulf, has not been completely immune to transnational ideological threats with the potential to mobilize opposition to the ruling family. However, as this study will argue, it has been more proactive in using political reform in the post-2003 period to mediate and dampen these threats.[109]

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[105] Al-Rasheed, pp. 130-134.

[106] Some of these disagreements stem from longstanding tensions between the major Shi'a families and notables of the Eastern Province.

[107] For example, the secessionist website *Dawlat al-Ahsa wa al-Qatif*. As of November 14, 2010: http://www.alahssa-alkateef.com

[108] Mary Anne Tetreault has noted that "sectarianism remains an important mobilizing force for Sunni Kuwaitis." Mary Anne Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy*: *Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 119. Echoing this, Jill Crystal notes that "one of the most important divisions in Kuwait is the sectarian division between Sunni and Shi'a" Jill Crystal, *Kuwait: The Transformation of an Oil State*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992, p. 76.

[109] As noted by Lori Plotkin Boghardt: "Regional events have inspired particular communities in Kuwait to challenge Kuwaiti rulers' policies, practices and legitimacy." Laurie Plotkin Boghardt, *Kuwait*

2.4.3.1 Political Institutions and Reform

Kuwait's progress on reform, while notable and significant in the Gulf context, has been far from even or linear. Many of the ruling family's initial steps toward liberalization were prompted by the perception of external threat and the need to solidify the loyalty of its constituents.[110] The first constituent assembly (*majlis al-tassīs*) was elected in 1961 and a 50-member National Assembly or parliament (*majlis al-ummah*) was elected in 1963. Compared to the rest of the Gulf, the parliament is endowed with broad powers of accountability and oversight. While it cannot issue a vote of no confidence for an entire cabinet, it can still declare that it cannot cooperate with it or the Prime Minister and subject individual ministers to questioning or "interpellation"—in Arabic, *istijwāb*.[111]

Despite this progress, limits exist. The ruling family maintains broad control over key ministry posts and can exercise ultimate control over the parliament through the threat of suspension—a threat that technically violates the constitution, but which has nevertheless implemented on two separate occasions when the Emir believed the parliament had grown too powerful (1976-1981;1986-1992). Yet the most glaring defects of Kuwait's reform process derive from within the parliament itself. Specifically, a lack of coordination among deputies and the tendency for representatives to use the parliament as a platform for parochial skirmishing rather than legislating programs has limited its legislative and oversight ability. Moreover, as later chapters will show, in times of regional conflict, the parliament has been buffeted by increased sectarian wrangling and grandstanding. Such fissures have important implications for Kuwait's democratic progress. As Michael Herb has argued, "Kuwait tends to make progress toward democracy only when the parliamentary opposition overcomes its internal differences and demands concessions from the ruling family."[112] In addition, the extent of parliamentary criticism is further circumscribed by the al-Sabah's control of oil rents. Kuwaiti citizens know that their livelihood depends in large measure on this regime-controlled resource. Thus, oppositionists rarely overstep certain red lines in criticizing the ruling family.

Amid War, Peace and Revolution: 1979-1991 and New Challenges, London: St. Antony's College: Palgrave MacMillan Press, 2007, p. 11.

[110] For example, in its first week of independence the tiny emirate was faced with the threat of annexation from Iraq. This point is made by Abdul-Reda Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: A City-State in World Politics*, Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990, p. 7.

[111] The process of Kuwait's steps toward reform is covered in Paul Salem, *Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2007.

[112] Michael Herb, "Kuwait: The Obstacle of Parliamentary Politics," in Teitelbaum, ed., *Political Liberalization in the Gulf*, p. 133.

In tandem with the formal institution of parliament, Kuwaiti politics is distinguished by a strong associational life and nascent civil society. Much of this openness dates back to 18th century concepts of *shura* (consultation). In the 1990s and early 2000 period, this informal participation was given structure in the practice of the *diwaniya*. In these semi-private, salon-like venues political matters, justice, the economy and societal issues are aired, discussed and debated. The *diwaniya* are therefore important accommodative resources for the Kuwaiti government. Though not completely egalitarian in nature they serve an important function by fostering an informed citizenry and creating a sense of political community. Added to this is Kuwait's liberal print media and television coverage. As noted by Mary Anne Tetreault, "One of the strongest democratizing institutions in Kuwait is the space created by widespread consumption of news and opinion in the print press and at *diwaniya*."[113]

2.4.3.2 The Kuwaiti Shi'a

Kuwaiti Shi'a have historically enjoyed better access to Kuwaiti political institutions and economic resources than their counterparts in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Unlike in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, there are no historical narratives of resistance to territorial usurpation that inform the collective memory of Kuwaiti Shi'a. Kuwaiti Shi'a make no claim of being the original inhabitants of Kuwait and in fact acknowledge their diasporic identity. That said, a number of societal divisions exist which have fractured the parliamentary opposition and enable the ruling family to employ divide and rule tactics. Most significantly, the *hadhar-badu* divide is a key fissure that straddles sectarian boundaries. The *hadhar* are Kuwait's settled, merchant class centered in Kuwait City, while the *badu* are the rural, historically nomadic inhabitants in the districts outlying the capital.[114] These identity categories have important implications for understanding political mobilization in Kuwait—the wealthier *hadhar* have formed backbone of support for the al-Sabah, while the historically marginalized *badu* have frequently comprised the opposition, often forming the core of Kuwait's Salafi movement. Kuwaiti Shi'a themselves are further divided between Arab Shi'a who hail from the al-Ahsa oasis in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the *hasawi* and *baharna*, respectively) and the *'ajam*—those of Iranian descent. The '*ajam*, by

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[113] Mary Ann Tetreault, "Kuwait: Slouching Toward Democracy?" in Teitelbaum, ed., *Political Liberalization in the Gulf*, p. 127.

[114] Anh Nga Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on Hadhar and Badu in Kuwait, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, 2006, pp. 171–187. The *hadhar* are also known as *ahl al-sur* or "people of the belt" while the *badu* are termed, "*kharij al-sur*"--from "beyond the belt."

and large, are allied with the al-Sabah, while the Hasawis and *baharna* have demonstrated their loyalty to the state by following a Kuwaiti *marja'*.

The Kuwaiti Shi'a possess relative freedoms in multiple areas. In the economic sphere, the Shi'a of Kuwait occupy a different social strata than their counterparts in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. They are largely middle class and comprise some of Kuwait's most important merchant families. In the religious realm, the Kuwaiti Shi'a enjoy freedom of worship and the ability to practice the *Ja'afari* creed in school. For its part, the al-Sabah have relied on the Shi'a as counterweights to political challenges from Kuwaiti Sunni notables and, later, Arab nationalists. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this contract endured from 1938 until the post-1979 period and the brief period of political violence, when the Shi'a community fell under the leadership of Iranian-inspired clerics and when Shi'a deputies in parliament began to openly challenge the al-Sabah. The relationship was later repaired, but never fully restored, through the ruling family's judicious use of reforms and liberalization following the Iraqi occupation of 1990-1991.

Thus, in the run-up to the 2003 period, Kuwaiti Shi'a had much more favorable perceptions of the al-Sabah's legitimacy then their counterparts in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Shi'a oppositionists today attached themselves to the Kuwaiti reform movement, allying themselves with liberal Sunni Islamists.[115] Yet, as we shall see, these bonds were frayed the post-2003 regional events that buffeted Kuwaiti politics, exposing underlying disparities in power and mistrust.

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided an exploration of state-society relations in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to set the foundation for understanding how Shi'a actors and regimes reacted to the regional pressures of the post-2003 era. It first established that the three countries comprise a unique security "sub-system" because of their regimes' shared perception of the Shi'a threat, albeit at different levels. It then focused on the importance of identity norms as pillars of governance and legitimacy, demonstrating how sectarianism has presented a challenge to these norms, often as a result of external regional events. In other cases, sectarianism has served as an instrument for elites to deflect pressures for reform or for mobilizing their populations against

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[115] Personal interview, Shi'a human rights activist, Kuwait City, Kuwait, February 2006. Also, Graham Fuller and Rend Rahim Francke, *The Arab Shia: The Forgotten Muslims*, New York, N.Y.: St. Martin's Press, 1999, p. 159.

Iran. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the variables that affect sectarianism and regime threat perception—political institutions, reform processes, and the distinctive characteristics of each state's Shi'a population.

As subsequent chapters will argue, the regional shocks of the post-2003 environment—the empowerment of the Shi'a in Iraq and the perception of Iran's rise—were mediated and filtered by domestic institutions, capabilities, and fissures in each state. Specifically, popular perceptions of regime legitimacy and the degree of Shi'a participation in political structures has had a determinant effect in tempering or exacerbating sectarianism. Thus, I will argue that the real roots of the so-called "rise of the Shi'a" phenomena lie in the domestic political context, rather than in the regional policies of Iran, Iraq, or the transnational activism of the Shi'a themselves. Nevertheless, regimes in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait have frequently shifted the blame for sectarianism to incitement by an outside actors—usually Iran, but also Iraq and the Lebanese Hizballah .

While part of this shift is instrumental and tactical, it also reflects the lingering influence and historical memory of the 1979 Iranian Revolution on the threat perceptions of each regime and, consequently, their policies toward their respective Shi'a populations. The next chapter will explore this legacy in greater depth.

3 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE LEGACY OF THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

3.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand the interaction between the Shi'a and the state in the post-2003 era, it is important first to examine the seminal impact of the Iranian Revolution on Gulf societies. This chapter explores how the historical memory of the Iranian Revolution comprises a lens or a framing device through which Gulf actors have interpreted and responded to the regional shocks of the post-2003 era. Gulf media, official statements and Sunni websites draw frequent analogies between Iran's incitement of Gulf Shi'a after 1979 and the contagion effect of Iran's post-2003 expansion of power.[116] Frequent accusations against Gulf Shi'a as Iranian fifth columns bear a striking resemblance to charges levied after the Iranian Revolution, with many anti-Shi'a tracts and materials being recycled and re-distributed. For their part, Shi'a actors are careful to distance themselves from the revolutionary decade, asserting that both the domestic context in the Gulf and Iran's external policies have evolved significantly.

In this chapter, I will argue that the post-revolutionary era established a pattern of strategies by regimes and Gulf Shi'a that continues to be relevant in the period under examination. Gulf regimes since 2003 have deployed tactics that bear a striking resemblance to those pursued in the aftermath of the Revolution: pre-emptive reforms to mitigate Shi'a discontent, "sectarian balancing" (co-opting Sunnis to balance the Shi'a), tacitly encouraging vitriolic anti-Shi'a discourse by Sunni clerics, and repression and censorship. Most significantly, however, the revolutionary decade highlighted the importance of domestic structures (political institutions and state resources) as buffers against external ideological influences and as determinants of regime threat perception.

This chapter unfolds in three sections. The first will discuss political conditions in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait on the eve of the Revolution, highlighting the key grievances of the Shi'a and the institutional shortcomings in each case. I will then briefly discuss Iranian linkages and policies toward the Gulf Shi'a. Understanding this dimension is important for establishing the degree to which Shi'a activism in the 1980s was externally influenced or whether it was an emulative process informed by domestic variables in the three Gulf states.

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[116] Examples include Radhi al-Musawi, "Thalathin 'Amin b'ad al-Thawra al-Iraniya" (30 years after the Iranian Revolution), *al-Waqt* (Bahrain), February 5, 2009; and Muhammed Alush, "Taftit al-'Iraq wa Mutamah Iran fi al-Khalij" (The Fragmentation of Iraq and Iran's Ambitions in the Gulf), *Majalat al-Asr*, November 5, 2006.

Having set this context, the final section will examine Shi'a and regime responses in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, to identify similarities and differences between the 1980s and the post-2003 era. A key finding here is that nascent participatory structures (or their absence) affected the nature of Shi'a-state dynamics in the wake of the Revolution. The degree to which the Revolution emboldened the Shi'a to assert their communal identity depended more on the domestic institutional contexts in each case than on transnational religious linkages between Iran and the Gulf Shi'a or any policies of incitement by Tehran itself.

3.2 GULF DOMESTIC CONDITIONS ON THE EVE OF REVOLUTION

Contemporary Arab commentators since 2003 frequently assign Iran a high degree of agency in inspiring Gulf Shi'a on the basis of shared transnational linkages (clerical, sectarian, familial, and ideological). Similarly, the appearance of Sunni-Shi'a divisions as markers of identity, both in the post-1979 context and since 2003, is often thought to be the result of a deliberate Iranian strategy.[117] Such assertions, however, discount the importance of the domestic structural context in determining Gulf Shi'a receptivity to the message and model of the Revolution. In each country, Shi'a on the eve of the Revolution were faced with a combustible blend of rising expectations, poor living conditions, and limited avenues for political participation. But the degree to which these grievances were translated into militancy depended more on state resources and institutions than Tehran's policies of incitement or religious ties between the Shi'a of the Gulf and Iran.

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[117] Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, "Escalating Sectarian Conflicts," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (in English) October 3, 2010; Muammar Fawzi Khalil, "Mustaqbal al-Shi'a fi al-Khalij," (The Future of the Shi'a in the Gulf), *al-Muslim* website, June 2, 2003: http://albainah.net/index.aspx?function=Item&id=1236&lang= as of May 15, 2009. A representative example includes a rich media debate over the Iraq War's impact on the Gulf: Al-Sira' al-Ta'ifi fi al-Iraq wa al-Mintaqah (The Sectarian Conflict in Iraq and the Region). *Al-Jazeera - Bila Hudud* (Without Borders) Program, aired January 20, 2007. http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/0CC386B3-DF0D-42B3-8F80-C26148784DE8; Abed al-Ilah Bilqaziz, "Al-Arab wa Iran: Min al-Ummah ila al-Madhhab" (The Arabs and Iran: From the Umma to the Sect); Harakat al-Adalah al-Watanya (National Justice Movement), February 20, 2007. http://www.3dala.org/print.php?id=1313&PHPSESSID=abaf5ea087b1cf63bfbe02d8776a2db0 "Al-Nufuth al-Irani fi al-Mintaqa *al-Arabiya*" (The Iranian Influence in the Arab Region) *Al-Ittijah al Mu'akis* (Opposite Direction), *Al-Jazeera*, February 4, 2007. http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/7CD25C46-A887-424E-AB08-BCCA7EF0FD25; Abdallah al-Askar, al-Ta'ifiya fi al-Khalij Lam wa Lan Ta'arif al-Harb al-Ta'ifiya fi al-Khalij (Sectarianism in the Gulf Does Not Mean a Sectarian War in the Gulf), *al-Riyadh* (Saudi Arabia), July 20, 2007.

3.2.1 Bahrain

In Bahrain, Shi'a grievances on the eve of the Revolution were fueled by rising birth rates, declining oil rents, and a widening gap between the living standards of Sunnis and Shi'a. Poor economic conditions were compounded by increased political repression, culminating in the declaration in 1974 of a state security law that gave the regime the right to arbitrarily arrest and imprison for three years anyone deemed a threat to the state.[118] The move provided the catalyst for a burgeoning alignment between liberal, leftist and Islamist parliamentarians, which the ruling family attempt to split by offering inducements to the Islamist deputies.[119] After this tactic failed, the regime decreed the suspension of the parliament in 1975.[120] According to several Bahraini interlocutors interviewed in 2006, the suspension of parliament helped amplify the effects of the Revolution, particularly Khomeini's rhetorical criticism of the Gulf's hereditary rulers.[121]

3.2.2 Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a proved receptive to the Revolution's message due to the economic and social marginalization of the Eastern Province and, in particular, disappointment that the oil wealth of the region had not improved local conditions.[122] Added to this, the government's official discourse on modernization raised the expectations of the Eastern Province's inhabitants and sharpened the contrast between the eastern periphery and the central Najd region.[123] In the political realm, Shi'a frequently complained about the lack of constitutional guarantees for freedom of speech and the press.[124] Increased discrimination in the cultural sphere (such as the banning of *Ashura* mourning processions in public) were further

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[118] Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain: From Ethnic to National and Vice Versa," *Fourth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies: The Middle East in a Globalizing World*, Oslo, Norway, August 13-16, 1998, http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/khalaf.html.

[119] The state security law was presented as a measure against communism and a strong appeal was made to solicit the support of conservative Islamists on the grounds that communism was "heretical." Another important tactic used by the regime was its reliance on a constitutional stipulation that all 14 ministers were ex officio full members of the parliament. See Khalaf, "Contentious Politics."

[120] Fuad Khuri, *Tribe and State in Bahrain: The Transformation of Social and Political Authority in an Arab State*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 231-233; Uzi Rabi and Joseph Kostiner, "The Shi'is in Bahrain: Class and Religious Protest," Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor, eds., *Minorities and the State in the Arab World*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999, pp. 180-187.

[121] Personal interviews with 'Abd al-Jalil al-Sinqays of *al-Haq* and a foreign policy advisor of *al-Wifaq*, Manama, Bahrain, November 15-16, 2006.

[122] Toby Craig Jones, "Rebellion on the Saudi Periphery: Modernity, Marginalization and the Shi'a Uprising of 1979," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*,Vol. 28, 2006, pp. 217-222.

[123] Najib al-Khunayzi, "Tansheet Siyasi al-Shi'a fi al-Sa'udiya" (Political Activism of the Saudi Shi'a) *al-Jazirah*, June 2, 2002.

[124] Jones, citing a pamphlet by the OIR, p. 218.

sources of resentment, stemming in part from the al-Saud's increased reliance on the Salafi clerical establishment to legitimate their rule—a trend that was accelerated by the ideological challenge posed by revolutionary Iran.[125]

Yet within the marginalized Eastern Province, economic, demographic and doctrinal differences affected levels of Shi'a sympathy for the Revolution, particularly between the two principal Shi'a hubs, the oases of Qatif and al-Ahsa. Qatif evinced the highest sympathy for the Revolution and, as will be discussed later, served as the epicenter of the 1979 *intifada* because its inhabitants suffered the most from a lack of social services and infrastructure. Qatifis are both urban and rural dwellers, occupying a broad swathe of the social spectrum: Saudi ARAMCO workers, university students, and middle classes, who had a long tradition of leftist and labor activism.[126] Qatifis also had a long tradition of cosmopolitanism and interaction with outside ideological forces, whether Nasserism, Ba'athism or Marxism. According to an early member of the OIR:

> Qatif always interacted with the Arab world. In 1962, for example, we celebrated the liberation of Algiers and applauded Nasserism. Iranian influence was helped by organic factors—but it was certainly not greater than Cairo's influence. After all, our teachers in Qatif were all Egyptians.[127]

For their part, the dwellers of al-Ahsa landless peasants and more inward looking. Their expectations were not raised by narrative of modernization and who seemed ambivalent about openly protesting the regime.[128] Doctrinal religious distinctions further sharpened the differences in living standards between the two communities. Qatifis follow the Usuli school of Shi'a thought, whose interpretation of jurisprudence mandates stricter obedience to Shi'a *maraja'* (clerical sources of emulation); Hasawis follow the Akhbari school, which tends to rely more on the canonical Islamic texts—the Qur'an and the *hadith*.[129] Finally, interviews with Shi'a activists

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[125] Hassan al-Saffar, *Al-Madhhab wa al-Watan* (Sect and Homeland), Beirut: Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, 2006, pp. 122, 166.

[126] Madawi al-Rashid, "The Shia of Saudi Arabia: A Minority in Search of Cultural Authenticity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, May, 1998, p. 122. Many of the Saudi Shi'a ARAMCO workers developed labor activism skills through contact with Bahraini oil workers who sought work in Saudi Arabia after the decline of Bahraini oil reserves. Ibrahim al-Hatlani, *al-Shi'a al-Sa'udiyun*, Beirut: Dar Riyad al-Rayyis, 2009, pp. 141-150.

[127] Personal interview with Saudi Shi'a dissident, United States, May 24, 2011.

[128] Jones, p. 217.

[129] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 127.

reveal an entrenched ambivalence and tension between the inhabitants of al-Ahsa and al-Qatif; according to one prominent Qatifi activist the Hasawis were a "backwater" who were "always following us (Qatifis)."[130]

3.2.3 Kuwait

As noted in the previous chapter, Kuwait stands in marked contrast to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in terms of its participatory institutions, civil society and the favorable views of the ruling family among nearly all sectors of the citizenry. That said, as in Bahrain, shifting economic conditions and demographics during the mid- and late-70s created receptive audiences to the Revolution's message. Declining oil revenues spurred a demand by traditional Shi'a merchant families for a greater voice in politics. At the same time, an emerging Shi'a middle class was challenging the wealthier Shi'a merchant families, demanding greater political participation to compensate for their lack of financial resources.[131]

Added to these economic grievances, the Shi'a suffered from a continuing lack of political access in Kuwait. The Kuwaiti council of ministers contained only one token Shi'a and Kuwaiti Shi'a were forbidden from serving in sensitive posts in the military and oil industry.[132] More significantly, the principal channel for the Shi'a to influence regime decision-making—the National Assembly (parliament)—had been dissolved since 1976. As in the case of Bahrain, the absence of this participatory structure amplified the Revolution's impact.[133]

In sum, the Shi'a in all three cases possessed a strong revolutionary potential, rooted in frustrated expectations for economic improvement, political marginalization, and growing cultural discrimination. Additionally, demographic fissures within each country's Shi'a community—tensions between lay and clerical activists and between traditional elites (landed notables) and an emerging middle class—intensified the Revolution's impact. Iran's revolutionary rhetoric and ideology was seized upon by the clerical and middle classes to challenge the old social hierarchy. As will be discussed in depth below, the ultimate outcome of

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[130] Personal interview with Saudi Shi'a activist, United States, June 2011.

[131] Lori Plotkin Boghardt, *Kuwait Amid War, Peace and Revolution, 1979-1991*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 32. Abdul-Reda Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990, p. 66.

[132] Plotkin Boghardt, p. 32.

[133] Personal interviews with political scientist 'Abd al-Reda Assiri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 12, 2010 and Shi'a member of parliament, Saleh Ashur, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 8, 2010. Even worse from the Shi'a perspective, in the fall of 1979 the royal family outlawed *diwaniya* gatherings that exceeded 20 people. Although not explicitly anti-Shi'a in nature, the measure nonetheless deprived the Shi'a of an important civil society venue.

the Revolution's contagion effect in each case was mediated and tempered by domestic structures and state capacity or their absence.[134] To fully understand this interplay between external shock and domestic response (both among Shi'a actors and the state) it is important to understand the actual intent and policies of the Iranian Revolution toward the Gulf.

3.3 THE THREAT FROM IRAN: INCITEMENT AND CONTAGION

Even if the transnational affinities to Iran are not as great as commonly assumed, the Gulf Shi'a are intensely cognizant that events, statements and policies from Iran affect their domestic standing—by either heightening or dampening regime suspicions. Much of Iran's media overtures since 2003 have been decidedly non-sectarian, emphasizing the gap between ruler and ruled, and trumpeting the Islamic Republic's continued steadfastness to pan-Arab causes like Palestine. In the decade following the Iranian Revolution, however, Tehran did explicitly adopt a more strident religious tone that, while appealing to both Sunnis and Shi'a, was nonetheless interpreted by Gulf regimes as serving the narrow communal interests of the Shi'a.[135]

Iran's policies toward the Gulf during and after the Revolution exploited a number of channels and tactics, most significantly clerical networks, media, and the training and funding of Shi'a militant cadres. Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Friday prayer leaders in Gulf countries who would later play a pivotal role in mobilizing Gulf Shi'a via mosque sermons and *husayniyat*. In Bahrain, a key interlocutor was Hadi al-Mudarrisi, an Iranian cleric exiled to Bahrain by the Shah. In 1978, Iranian media announced that he had been appointed as the personal representative (*wakil*) of Khomeini in Bahrain. By early September, his activities were augmented by Ayatollah Sadiq al-Ruhani, who made explicit threats to overthrow the Bahraini regime if it did not adopt a more Islamic form of government. In Kuwait, Abbas al-Muhri, an Iranian cleric who held Kuwaiti citizenship, was appointed as Khomeini's representative.[136]

Tehran also pursued a policy of clandestine military support to Shi'a networks in the Gulf—a role it repeatedly denied. In 1981, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)

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[134] As noted by F. Gregory Gause III, the "trend of increasing state capacities to control society paid off for regimes during the 1980s as they scrambled to meet the threats posed by the Iranian Revolution as ideology and the revolutionary state." F. Gregory Gause III, "Revolutionary Fevers and Regional Contagion: Domestic Structures and the 'Export' of Revolution in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Spring 1991, p. 17.

[135] R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends and Means," John L. Esposito, ed., *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, Miami, FL: Florida International University Press, 1990, pp. 40-62.

[136] Joseph Kostiner, "Shi'i Unrest in the Gulf," Martin Kramer, ed., *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987, p. 178.

established of the Office of Liberation Movements, headed by Mohammed Montazeri and Mehdi Hashemi, who reportedly visited Kuwait and Bahrain on several occasions.[137] Gulf Shi'a clerical figures and lay activists affiliated with Movement for Vanguard Missionaries (MVM)—many of them followers of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, the so-called "*Shiraziyyin*" current—had particularly close ties with this office and with the Revolutionary Guards more broadly; many were reported to have received military training in Iran.[138] These individuals later proved instrumental in setting up the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) and the Organization for the Islamic Revolution on the Arabian Peninsula (OIR) in Saudi Arabia as local branches of the MVM, with the goal of extending the Iranian Revolution.

Iran's dissatisfaction with its ability to control the OIR, along with shifting factional politics inside Tehran, led it to establish a more pliant group in Saudi Arabia, the so-called Hizballah al-Hijaz.[139] By the late 1980s, Iranian figures such as future Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei and then-president Hashemi Rafsanjani questioned the OIR and MVM's enthusiasm for exporting the Revolution, resulting in strained ties and an eventual loss of patronage.[140] In Kuwait, Iran played a direct hand in sponsoring terrorist attacks by members of the Iraqi *Da'wa* party and Lebanese Hizballah (with marginal involvement by Kuwaiti Shi'a), as a strategy to dissuade Kuwait from supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. In the media realm, Iranian-backed radio stations such as *Radio Tehran* and *Radio Ahvaz* and a number of monthly written periodicals in the Gulf provided a steady attack on the Islamic legitimacy of Gulf royalty and the gap between ruler and ruled.[141] Many of the statements, as noted, were decidedly non-sectarian

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[137] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, London: Hurst & Company, 2008, p. 179.

[138] Tobias Matthiesen, "Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 2, Spring 2010, p. 182.

[139] BBC Summahry of World News Broadcast, *Pars News Agency*, "Interview with Arabian Peninsula Organization Member," August 7, 1980.

[140] Matthiesen, p. 184. According a former member of the OIR, Iran wanted to use the OIR to conduct a retaliatory attack against the Saudi government following the deaths of Iranian pilgrims during *hajj* riots in 1987. Al-Saffar refused, thus chilling relations with Tehran. Personal interview with a Saudi Shi'a dissident, United States, May 24, 2011.

[141] For an illustration of the importance the Islamic Republic attached to transnational media, see the Arabic tract by Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i, *Dur Wasa'il al-A'lam fi al-Sira' al-Siyasi wa al-Thaqafi* (The Role of Media in Political and Cultural Conflict). The book praises the effects of radio, TV and other media in cultivating Islamic ideals after the revolution and deflecting Western misrepresentations of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i, *Dur Wasa'il al-A'lam fi al-Sira' al-Siyasi wa al-Thaqafi* (The Role of Media in Political and Cultural Conflict), Shaykh 'Ali Dhahir, ed., Beirut: Dar al-Hadi for Printing, Publishing and Distribution, 2006, pp. 39-59.

and universalist in their appeal—an effort by Tehran to break out of the narrow parochialism the Revolution's Shi'a roots.

The Iran-Iraq War proved to be a powerful, if oft-overlooked, determinant of Iran's policies toward the Gulf. The status and orientation of Iraq has always been an important factor in the Gulf geometry of power and especially so for Riyadh and Tehran; a weak Iraq can arguably be said to increase rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran whereas a strong Iraq can stabilize or moderate the tensions. Iran viewed the unprovoked attack by Saddam Husayn as having been undertaken partially in the service of Saudi interests to eradicate the Revolution. Saudi Arabia supported Iraq as a buffer against Iran. Yet it was the war's impact on changes in the regional order that further strained relations. The war provided the context for the massive introduction of U.S. military aid and forces into the region, largely at Riyadh's invitation, which in Tehran's view fatally tipped the local balance-of-power to its disadvantage. The Iran-Iraq ceasefire in 1988 apparently vindicated the Saudi policy of using Iraq as a local buffer against Iran, while in Tehran, the war's termination spawned an intense reformulation of Iranian Gulf policy toward a less antagonistic stance.

Taken in sum, the Iranian Revolution, and Tehran's subsequent policies toward the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War presented a direct threat to Gulf regimes and raised the specter of revolutionary contagion throughout the region. Yet in each case, the Revolution's impact and Tehran's policies were filtered and tempered by the local context—the distinctive histories and culture of each country's Shi'a community, pre-existing Shi'a grievances and societal fissures, and the resources that their respective regimes brought to bear. These variables combined to affect how the Gulf Shi'a interpreted and responded to the Revolution.

3.4 SHI'A MOBILIZATION AND REGIME RESPONSE

In each country, Shi'a responses to the Revolution spanned a broad continuum: from peaceful demands for reform and political activism, to boycott and riots, to calculated acts of violence and terrorism against the state. Characterization of these activities varies widely among scholars. Some have portrayed them as being initially spurred by the Revolution, but following a logic and pattern that was entirely dictated by local conditions. Others have framed them as an "emulative" process, in which the Gulf Shi'a saw the Revolution as a model and their own activism as a sort of re-enactment. A small minority of scholars and observers see the Gulf Shi'a

as veritable extension of Iranian policy.[142] While elements of each are present, it is more accurate to describe the Revolution as providing the framework for social mobilization—an empowering vocabulary of political action that proved highly appealing to segments of the Shi'a polity. Contemporary observers recall that the Revolution emboldened the Shi'a to assert their communal identity against a long history of marginalization—for the first time, the Gulf Shi'a were "proud" of their sectarian pedigree.

It is difficult, however, to assign direct causality to the Revolution—in many cases, the roots of Shi'a Revolution activism in the Gulf began much earlier, as witnessed by the founding of the OIR in Saudi Arabia in 1975 under the supervision of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi. Several pre-existing Shi'a networks in the Gulf aligned themselves with the Revolution in the hopes of bolstering their appeal and legitimacy among their constituents.

The following sub-sections will focus less on establishing the correct genealogy of Gulf Shi'a activism and more on understanding how the post-revolutionary era revealed patterns of Shi'a mobilization and regime responses that continue to inform Shi'a-state dynamics after 2003.

3.4.1 Bahrain

In Bahrain, the Revolution spurred spontaneous demonstrations and organized resistance, but it also exposed fissures among the Shi'a community over ideology, strategy and goals. The more violent, radical strain of Shi'a activism that sought to replicate the Iranian Revolution in Bahrain failed to attract a significant following and was significantly weakened after its thwarted coup attempt in 1981. Yet the regime's ability to fully placate Shi'a dissent was limited by demographic reality and its fear that incremental reforms would eventually lead to the unseating of the royal family.

Before the Revolution, most Shi'a had lobbied for their rights as part of a broad-based, largely non-sectarian movement led by leftists, B'athists, and Nasserists. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of clerical leaders began to emerge, encouraged by the formation of like-minded Shi'a groups in Lebanon (AMAL), Saudi Arabia (the OIR), and Iraq (the Islamic Action Organization or IAO).[143] In 1968, a young Bahraini cleric, Shaykh 'Isa al-Qasim, helped

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[142] Kostiner and Jones point to the indigenous, communal and populist nature of the dissent while Jacob Goldberg argues that the Revolution "seems to have produced a new consciousness among the Shi'is in Hasa and served as a model for their future conduct." Jacob Golberg, "The Shi'i Minority in Saudi Arabia," Juan R.I. Cole and N. R. Keddie, eds., *Shi'ism and Social Protest*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 239.

[143] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, "Shi'ism and Political Protest in Bahrain," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 21-23.

found the *Jam'iyyat al-Taw'iyya al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Enlightenment Society), which attracted a large following of judges, doctors, and engineers and secured a parliamentary voice as part of the *Kutla al-Dinyiya* (Religious Bloc). These figures and their networks were aided in their efforts to mobilize Bahraini Shi'a by longstanding Shi'a cultural institutions, such as the *ma'atim* (mourning houses), and the recent establishment of Shi'a cultural journals such as *al-Mawqif*. In the run-up to the Revolution, members of the Enlightenment Society began their first correspondence with Ayatollah Khomeini during his residence in Najaf and later sent congratulatory telegrams to the post-revolutionary government. The first distinctively Shi'a protests in Bahrain occurred after the arrest of a Bahraini Shi'a leader, Muhammad 'Ali al-Akri, followed by similar unrest after the Saddam regime's execution of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.[144]

After the Revolution, the secular opposition effectively disappeared, and activism among the Bahraini Shi'a was marked by competition between two opposing Shi'a religious currents, that disagreed on goals and tactics of opposition, and also drew their support from different demographic segments of Bahraini society. The first, the Bahraini Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), was formed by Bahraini students studying in London. The BIFM was effectively an extension of the Enlightenment Society, comprised overwhelmingly of Bahraini Shi'a of Arab origin (*baharna*).[145] It pushed for peaceable reform within the framework of existing political structures, calling for a restoration of the parliament.

The second current was the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB), formed in late 1979 under the leadership of Hadi al-Mudarrisi. The IFLB drew its membership from Bahrainis of Iranian origin and followers of Grand Ayatollah al-Shirazi.[146] Backed by Iran, it explicitly called for the overthrow of the Bahraini government and its replacement with an Islamic Republic.[147] The IFLB also expressed solidarity with other Shi'a Islamist movements in the Gulf, holding *Ashura* processions that coincided with the *intifada* of the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia. After May 1980, the IFLB shifted its tactics from protests to clandestine violence concluding that protests would not be sufficient to bring down the regime after the Bahraini security forces had killed a number of protesters and expelled the leadership of the IFLB (Ruhani

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[144] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, "Shi'ism and Political Protest in Bahrain," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring 2002, p. 30.

[145] Personal, unattributed interview with a Bahraini sociologist, Manama, Bahrain, March 3, 2012.

[146] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, *Dirasat hawl al-Harakat al-Islamiya fi al-Bahrain, 1938-2001* (Study of Islamic Movements in Bahrain, 1938-2001) Beirut: Dar al-Kanuz al-Adabiyya, 2004.

[147] Al-Mdeires, "Shiism and Political Protest in Bahrain," p. 30.

and Mudarrisi). In 1981, the Bahraini regime announced it had thwarted a coup attempt by the IFLB, arresting over 300 suspects and later charging a core cadre of 73 with receiving arms, funding and training from Iran. Although the majority were Bahrainis, the group also included Saudis, a Kuwaiti and an Omani.[148] The coup attempt had a number of important implications for the course of Shi'a state relations through the 1980s and 1990s. The arrest, trial and deportation of the IFLB's key leaders marked the start of a steady decline for the militant organization.[149] The BIFM saw its fortunes rise as the sole remaining opposition umbrella.

The Bahraini government's response to the Revolution's effect blended coercion, punishment and inducement. Its goals were five-fold: to weaken or destroy the radical, Iranian-inspired opposition; to co-opt and placate the moderates; to build legitimacy for the ruling family; increase the size of the middle class and bureaucracy; reduce the demands on the welfare state by increasing other modes of production.[150] It offered a number of concessions and improvements to Shi'a living standards and political participation—tactics that were designed to win over the moderates by demonstrating a modicum of progress on reform, while further marginalizing hardliners.

At the same time, the government portrayed all Shi'a activists as fifth columnists for Iran, thus splitting them from their secular and liberal allies.[151] Much of this followed a time-worn pattern of inflating the external influences on domestic opposition movements, depending on whatever ideology was ascendant at the time. As noted by the Bahraini cleric 'Ali Salman, the head of the largest Shi'a political grouping:

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[148] See the book published by the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, "Tajribat 73 Sujana' fi Sijun Bahrayn" (The Experience of the 73 Prisoners in Bahraini Prison), n.p., 1996 available at the website of the IFLB; http://www.shaheed-bh.com/forumdisplay.php?f=169. For a more recent treatment, see Tariq Hassan Hassan, "The Role of Iran in the Failed Coup of 1981: The IFLB in Bahrain," *Middle East Journal*, Vol 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2011), pp. 603-617.

[149] Munira Fakhro, "The Uprising in Bahrain: An Assessment" in Gary G. Sick and Lawrence G. Potter, eds., *The Persian Gulf at the Millenium: Essays in Politics, Security, Economics and Religion*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997, pp. 179-180. By the mid-1990s the IFLB enjoyed a rebirth under the leadership of a Bahraini cleric affiliated with the Shirazi current, Shaykh Muhammad Mahfouz. Although the IFLB called for the overthrow of the al-Khalifa during the mid-1990s uprising, it subsequently adopted political participation as its strategy as part of the general amnesty offered by the new Emir, Hamad in 2002, changing its name to the Islamic Action Society and later the Islamic Action Movement.

[150] Personal interview with Bahraini government official, Manama, Bahrain, November 10, 2006.

[151] Mansur al-Jamri, "Ba'ad Sanawat al-Harakat al-Shi'a fi al-Bahrain" (Some Years of the Shi'a Movement in Bahrain) *al-Wasat*, August 5, 2005.

> The regime has played the Iran card against the Shi'a since 1979, but in the 1920s it was the communists; in the 1950s it was the Nasserists.[152]

In many cases, evolving regional events, particularly the Iran-Iraq War, influenced the regime's strategy. When Iran had the upper hand, Bahraini authorities took a number of conciliatory gestures to the Shi'a; when Iraq gained ground, there were further restrictions. Another important effect was the closure of Najaf by Saddam Husayn as a seat of Shi'a learning. Bahraini seminary students increasingly went to Qom in the 1980s for study, but the regime banned them from returning—a move that further weakened the opposition's leadership and organizational structure. In the early 1990s, under a general amnesty decree, these clerics returned, providing mobilizing guidance for the uprisings of the mid-1990s.[153]

Many of the regime's efforts proved insufficient to fully placate the underlying power inequalities that fueled Shi'a activism. By the early 1990s, the absence of participatory structures had fueled a broad-based constitutional movement, whose demands included a restoration of the 1973 constitution and the parliament, the freeing of political prisoners, and further improvements in Shi'a living conditions. Once again, the regime responded with a mix of cosmetic concessions such as the creation of a thirty person consultative council (*majlis al-shura*) with no real legislative powers, representing both Sunnis and Shi'as. Importantly, the latter were drawn from wealthy merchant families, rather than the middle and lower classes that constituted the bulk of the opposition.[154] These measures did little to alleviate the Shi'a's class-based grievances, which fueled the uprising of 1994-1998.

3.4.2 Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Revolution presented the Shi'a with similar choices between peaceful activism and militancy. Reactions to the Revolution were varied and diverse: spontaneous demonstrations, clandestine opposition activity, and demands for political reform. The Saudi Shi'a failed to develop a coherent, organized movement of resistance for several reasons: intra-Shi'a divisions based on locale, clerical pedigree and family; the absence of a

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[152] Personal interview, Shaykh 'Ali Salman, Manama, Bahrain, November 21, 2006.

[153] Mansour al-Jamri, "The Shia and the State in Bahrain: Integration and Tension," *Alternative Politics*, Special Issue, November 2010.

[154] Muhammad 'Izz al-Arab, "*Al-Nukhba lil-Islah al-Siyasi fi al-Bahrain*" (The Choice of Reform in Bahrain), *Arab Journal of Democracy*, January 1, 2010. These measures did little to alleviate the class-based grievances, which fueled the uprising of 1994-1998.

charismatic unifying leader; and differing levels of grievances among the Eastern Province's towns and villages which impacted Shi'a calculations about activism.[155]

For the Saudi Shi'a, the 1979 Iranian Revolution spurred a shift from quietism to activism. The catalyzing event in Shia' activism, which continues to dominate the Saudi Shi'a historical memory, was the seven-day clashes of November 1979, known among the Shi'a as the *intifada* of Muharram 1400. The protests began after leaders of the Shirazi-inspired MVM—Hassan al-Saffar and Tawfiq al-Sayf—organized public *Ashura* processions in Qatif, in direct violation of a ban that had been in place since 1913.[156] The revolt quickly spread to nearby villages and the regime's repressive response—via the Saudi National Guard—was swift. At least two dozen Shi'a protesters ultimately perished. By December, the MVM leaders of the uprising had formally declared the Organization for the Islamic Revolution (OIR).[157]

Although partly inspired by the Iranian Revolution, many of the mobilizing grievances of the protestors were domestic and in some cases non-sectarian. The late 1970s saw growing disappointment among the Shi'a at the government's failure to deliver on its promises of modernization to the Eastern Province, where living conditions contrasted sharply with the growing opulence of Saudi elites in the central Najd region. In a manifesto of seven statements released in December 1979, the OIR listed three reasons for the uprising: marginal living conditions in the Eastern Province; lack of freedom of expression; and the Saudi regime's hostility toward the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Water shortages in Shi'a villages and town were a particularly onerous grievance, especially when compared to the nearby Sunni enclaves of Dammam and Khobar.

Participants in the demonstrations were diverse, reflecting the broad, non-sectarian nature of these economic grievances. Oil workers from Saudi ARAMCO and university students comprised a large majority of the protestors.[158] Many of their demands reveal a generational conflict that was exacerbated by the Revolution—the younger generation of protest organizers questioned the accommodating stance of Shi'a notables, landowners and merchants.[159]

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[155] Jones, pp. 216-17.

[156] Personal interview with Shi'a activist, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007. Also, al-Saffar, pp.166-167. For the Saudi regime, this act of defiance carried particular significance, coming just days after the Juhayman al-Utayba uprising in Mecca. It also followed disturbances in Bahrain in early September, which the Saudi regime publicly accused Iran of inciting.

[157] Jones, pp. 227-29.

[158] Jones, pp. 220-21.

[159] Ibrahim, p. 122.

The aftermath of the uprising had important implications for the Saudi Shia. The Shirazi leadership of the OIR left Saudi Arabia, establishing themselves in Iran, Syria, the United States and Europe. In Iran, the Office of Liberation Movements repeatedly pressured the OIR to resume militant activity in Saudi Arabia, but the remaining leadership saw further violence as futile in the wake of the post-*intifada* crackdown.[160] The OIR saw its fortunes further decline as factional politics in Iran shifted toward Supreme Leader.[161] By the mid-1980s, it grew increasingly estranged from the new centers of power in Iran and began focusing itsmedia and propaganda attacks on the Saudi regime. The death of Khomeini, the warming of Saudi-Iranian relations, and the 1991 Gulf war were further drivers of an ideological shift among the OIR's leadership. "When Khomeini died, the idea of *velayet-e faqih* died with him," noted Hassan al-Saffar, one of the OIR's key theorist and the senior Shi'a cleric in the kingdom.[162]

By the early 1990s, the OIR was increasingly framing the struggle for Shi'a rights as part of a nation-wide campaign to develop the peripheral provinces and recognize the diversity of the kingdom's local identities. In 1993, the exiled OIR leadership in London and the Saudi regime began a series of talks, resulting in a general amnesty offer and a promise by the OIR to cease its publications that were critical of the regime and to reject any fealty to Iran.[163] The regime released a number of Shi'a political prisoners, re-hired sacked Shi'a employees of ARAMCO, and promised to undertake reforms that would remove discrimination against the Shi'a in the political and cultural realm. That said, the numbers of Shi'a employed by ARAMCO steadily dwindled as new hires came from Sunni-dominated parts of the country, particularly from the Ghamid tribe in the southwest—leading Eastern Province Shi'a to derisively refer to ARAMCO as "GHAMIDCO."[164]

Another consequence of the OIR's shift in strategy and distancing from Iran was the establishment of Hizballah al-Hijaz, a smaller, cell-like organization that explicitly advocated the establishment of an Islamic Republic on the Arabian Peninsula using violent means.[165] A key catalyst for the formation of the group and its sponsorship by the Iranian regime was the death of over 400 Iranian pilgrims during a 1987 *hajj* riot—an event that led to a precipitous decline in Saudi-Iranian bilateral relations. For the next decade, Hizballah al-Hijaz remained the most

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[160] Louër, p. 167.
[161] Al-Hatlani, p. 145.
[162] Personal interview with Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.
[163] The amnesty offer included members of Hizballah al-Hijaz. Ibrahim, p. 178.
[164] Louër, p. 249.
[165] Ibrahim, pp. 195-6; Matthiesen, pp. 183-5.

militant Shi'a movement in Saudi Arabia, opposing the OIR's reconciliation with the regime and carrying out a series of attacks on Saudi soil, which culminated in the 1996 bombing of the U.S. Air Force barracks at Khobar Towers in Dharan. It also conducted an extensive propaganda campaign against the regime with the publication of a monthly journal, *Risalat al-Haramayn*, from 1989 to 1995.[166] Following the 1996 Khobar bombings, the arrest of several high-ranking members, and the warming of Saudi-Iranian relations, Hizballah al-Hijaz focused increasingly on propaganda (via the web) and social activism.[167] Former leaders have coalesced into a trend currently known as the *Khat al-Imam* (Imam's Line) among Eastern Province Shi'a, whose leadership remains unapologetic defenders of *velayet-e faqih* as a governing principle and Iran as a patron.[168]

The Saudi regime's response to the domestic effects of the Revolution was diverse, incorporating both coercive and conciliatory measures. Importantly, it focused most of its efforts in alleviating the material hardships of the Eastern Province Shi'a. It announced new development projects on the eve of *Ashura* in 1980 and it pardoned several prisoners.[169] Roads and schools proliferated, although the region's first hospital was not opened until 1987. The ruling family replaced the notoriously harsh governor of the Eastern Province, bin Jiluwi, with Prince Muhammad bin Fahd. It allowed greater openness in the public display of Shi'a rituals, allowing the Shi'a call to prayer with the uniquely Shi'a mention of 'Ali.[170]

Yet there were limits to the regime's recognition of Shi'a identity because of the royal family's partnership with the Salafi clerical establishment, whose interpretation of Islam is doctrinally hostile toward Shi'ism. One collateral result of the Revolution was the royal family's gradual empowerment of the clergy to burnish their Islamic credentials in the face of the Iranian challenge and to insulate themselves from domestic criticism of their "impiety." Tacitly encouraging the proliferation of anti-Shi'a *fatawa* (formal clerical pronouncements or edicts) was a way to close ranks with Sunni opposition clerics and it served the additional purpose of countering the ideological challenge from Iran. The regime formally sponsored the publication of

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[166] Matthiesen, pp. 188-9. A typical table of contents included articles on U.S. policy in the Gulf, attacks on the "Wahhabis" and the al-Saud, Shi'a rituals, and Arabic poetry. The journal featured commentary by Saudis, as well as Iraqi Shi'a and members of Lebanese Hizballah—apparently aimed at fostering a transnational sense of Shi'a political identity.

[167] Today, its principal website is www.hrmain.com.

[168] Personal interview with Hassan al-Nimr, Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 17, 2007.

[169] Louër, p. 166.

[170] Personal interview with Shi'a activist, Jafar al-Shayeb, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

a number of influential anti-Shi'a tracts, which achieved wide circulation after the Revolution and, as will be discussed later, were reprinted and re-distributed in the post-2003 period.[171]

3.4.3 Kuwait

The Kuwaiti case differs from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia in a number of respects. As noted in the previous chapter, Kuwaiti Shi'a enjoyed greater levels of integration in the state's political life, economic prosperity and narrative of nation-formation. In turn, the ruling family enjoyed a greater degree of legitimacy among Kuwaiti Shi'a than their counterparts in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Kuwait's tradition of *diwaniya* and parliament provided the citizenry with access to decision-making.[172] Taken in sum, these structural factors helped temper the impact of the Revolution and informed the strategies of the Shi'a in Kuwait.

Two broad political trends emerged among the Shi'a in Kuwait reflecting the demographic split between indigenous Kuwaiti Shi'a and Iranian-born Shi'a. The strategy and tactics of each group differed significantly, with the indigenous Shi'a preferring to use peaceful means to press for political reforms—namely, the restoration of the suspended parliament—while the Iranian Shi'a, along with Shi'a from Iraq, formed the core of those who were involved in terrorist attacks and strikes. Yet as will be discussed at length below, a broad government crackdown against the Shi'a, beginning in 1983, spurred the Kuwaiti-born Shi'a to become increasingly involved in acts of terrorism.[173]

The central mobilizing figures in the Kuwaiti Shi'a response to the 1979 Revolution were Sayyid 'Abbas al-Muhri and Muhammad al-Shirazi—both Iranian-born clerics. Al-Muhri served as a clerical leader for the Kuwaiti *'ajam* (Persian-born), while al-Shirazi enjoyed greater support among the indigenous Arab Shi'a. Al-Muhri's activism began in August 1979 with a series of conferences and sermons focused on advancing political reform in Kuwait and restoring the parliament, rather than Shi'a communal rights. His audience reportedly included a broad swathe of Kuwaiti Shi'a, from both the *Da'wa* and *Shiraziyyin* currents, as well as Sunnis.[174] For his part, al-Shirazi pursued a somewhat bifurcated role: among Kuwaitis, he focused principally on religious and humanitarian affairs, setting up the country's first *hawza* (seminary) and

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[171] Personal interview with Shi'a intellectual Muhammad Mahfouz, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007. For the Saudi regime, this act of defiance carried particular significance, coming just days after the Juhayman uprising in Mecca. It also followed disturbances in Bahrain in early September, which the Saudi regime publicly accused Iran of inciting.

[172] As noted previously, the parliament had been suspended since 1976.

[173] Louër, p. 173.

[174] Louër, pp. 169-170.

establishing an important charitable institution that survives to this day.[175] In tandem with this, he used Kuwait as a base to inspire and instigate Shi'a movements elsewhere on the Peninsula, such as the OIR in Saudi Arabia and the IFLB in Bahrain.[176]

The month of November 1979 provided to be a catalyzing moment for the Shi'a in Kuwait, with important ramifications for the future course of Shi'a activism. On November 16, several hundred Iranian Shi'as demonstrated in front of the American embassy in Kuwait in solidarity with the Iranian seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Fifteen days later the U.S. embassy was again besieged, this time by over a thousand Kuwaiti and Iranian Shi'a, who broke through the embassy's walls only to be repulsed by Kuwaiti security forces. The protest coincided with the *intifada* in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, demonstrating the importance of cross-border solidarity among the Gulf Shi'a in the wake of the Revolution. A key instigator was Muhammad al-Shirazi, who delivered a sermon exhorting his listeners to besiege the embassy.[177]

From the regime's perspective, al-Shirazi's involvement demonstrated the potentially dangerous mobilizing capacity of clerics and, more broadly, Iranian Shi'a on Kuwait's indigenous Shi'a populace. One of its key objectives, therefore, was to split the two groups to prevent collaboration and to channel Shi'a demands toward more narrowly communal aims, rather than broad-based political reforms.[178] It pursued these objectives through a widespread policy of "criminalizing" the Iranian Shi'a—publicizing the seizure of Iranian arms caches and explosives, enacting laws that forbade the ownership of Kuwaiti land by non-Kuwaitis, and, most importantly, by deporting Iranian Shi'a starting in the fall of 1979.[179] In September, the regime stripped 'Abbas al-Muhri of his citizenship and deported his entire family back to Iran. This reportedly came on the heels of a government effort to persuade him to redirect his activism toward more parochial Shi'a demands, i.e. the construction of mosques and *husayniyat*. Muhammad al-Shirazi was deported shortly thereafter in 1980.[180]

In tandem with this, the regime undertook a number of structural reforms intended to solidify the loyalty of the indigenous Shi'a merchants, marginalize the Iranian clerics and unify

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[175] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, *al-Haraka al-Shi'a fi al-Kuwait* (The Shi'a Movement in Kuwait), Kuwait: Qurtas, 1999, p. 156.

[176] *Kuwait News Agency*, September 27, 1979.

[177] Al-Mdeires, *al-Haraka al-Shi'a fi al-Kuwait*, p. 173.

[178] Plotkin Boghart, p. 30.

[179] According to Lori Plotkin Boghardt, the Kuwait government increased its deportations of Iranians from 100 in September 1979 to 421 in January 1980. Ibid., p. 38.

[180] Al-Mdeires, *al-Haraka al-Shi'a fi al-Kuwait*, pp. 175-8.

the Kuwaiti polity as a whole. The intent, according to many interlocutors, was to create a pressure release for deliberation and debate that would undercut the propaganda appeals of Iranian agitators. Additionally, the regime hoped that a National Assembly would provide it a window into the public's emerging issues of concern, before they fueled antagonism against the government.[181] Restrictions on the press were also loosened—a measure that was calculated both as a pressure release and as a means for the ruling family to be cognizant of the issues being debated and circulated.[182]

The spate of terrorist attacks and bombings that afflicted Kuwait in the early and mid-1980s have often been ascribed to the impact of the Iranian Revolution on Kuwaiti Shi'a. More accurately, the first attacks, conducted overwhelmingly by Iraqi *Da'wa* cadres living in Kuwait, the Islamic Action Organization directed by Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarassi, and Hizballah in Lebanon, and should be seen as the playing out of the Iran-Iraq War on Kuwaiti soil, rather than an expression of Kuwaiti Shi'a sympathy with the Revolution.[183] The goal of these attacks was to affect a change in Kuwait's foreign policy—a curtailment of its support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War—rather than improvements in domestic governance. The most damaging of these attacks—in terms of repercussion for the Shi'a in Kuwait—was the bombing of seven sites on December 12, 1983, including the U.S. embassy and Kuwait's airport. The campaign culminated with an attempt on the life of the Kuwaiti Emir by Lebanese Hizballah member Imad Mughniyah in 1985.

The consequences for Shi'a activism were profound. The period of 1983 to 1986 saw a further decline in the fortunes of the Kuwaiti Shi'a as the regime stepped up its deportations to include not just Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese born Shi'a but those born in Kuwait, purged Shi'a from sensitive positions, and arrested peaceful dissenters in a broad dragnet. The Kuwaiti press contributed to a growing climate of hysteria and fear regarding Iranian fifth columns and the Shi'a more broadly. The period of 1986 to 1988 saw a marked increase in the number of Kuwaiti Shi'a citizens involved in terrorist attacks, many of them unplanned or undirected by the *Da'wa* cadres. These so-called "citizen bombers" were drawn from prosperous merchant families who would not otherwise have grievances against the regime. One possibly explanation is that the repressive and expansive regime response—specifically by the Ministry of Interior—to the Mughniyah attacks turned sectors of the Kuwaiti Shi'a populace against the regime, making them

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[181] Al-Mdeires, *al-Haraka al-Shi'a fi al-Kuwait*, p. 179.
[182] Plotkin Boghart, p. 47.
[183] Kostiner, p. 181.

more responsive to appeals for violence.[184] The post-Mughniyah period was marked by increased surveillance of Shi'a *husayniyat,* purges of Shi'a from military, security and education posts, and mass firings from oil refineries—all of which contributed to a growing sense of Shi'a estrangement.[185]

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the multiple dimensions of the Iranian Revolution's impact on Shi'a-state relations in the Gulf. It examined the roots of Shi'a grievances, the nature of the Revolution's threat to the Gulf, and the responses of Shi'a groups and regimes. Accurately characterizing these dynamics and their legacy is important for understanding Shi'a-state relations post-2003 for a number of reasons. First, the Revolution and its aftermath continue to exert a powerful influence on the historical memory of Gulf regimes and Shi'a actors. It provides a lens and a framing device through which the external shocks of the Iraq War and the attendant rise of Iran are filtered. It offered lessons in political strategies for both Shi'a actors and regimes that informed post-2003 policies and actions. For governments in the Gulf, it demonstrated the utility of a divide-and-rule approach to the Shi'a opposition and the benefits of mitigating dissent through political and economic reform.

A key finding of this chapter is that domestic political structures and state resources, rather than ideological affinity with Iran or specific actions by Iran, played a determinant role in framing Shi'a responses and strategies. The absence of pluralistic institutions and poor living conditions were among the principal grievances of the Shi'a who responded to the Revolution. Shi'a strategies were subsequently informed by the presence or absence of institutions that offered channels to redress grievances.

In Bahrain, the availability of a parliament and a constitution (albeit in a suspended form) produced a bloc of Shi'a opposition that was willing to use peaceful means, in contrast to a more violent trend that aimed for the overthrow of the ruling family. The regime made limited progress on mitigating these grievances—a shortcoming that eventually helped fuel the uprising of the mid-1990s.

In Saudi Arabia, the absence of any sort of participatory structure that could act as a pressure release combined with the economic marginalization of the Eastern Province to spark the *intifada* of Muharram 1400. The regime's subsequent efforts to improve living conditions in the

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[184] Louër, pp. 171-2.

[185] Plotkin Boghardt, pp. 121-122.

Eastern Province, along with promises of political reform and an end to cultural discrimination, helped fracture the Shi'a opposition between the OIR and the more militant Hizballah al-Hijaz.

In Kuwait, the parliament and *diwaniya* helped temper the impact of the Revolution and exposed a split between the peaceful strategies of the Kuwait-born Shi'a and the militancy of those hailing from Iran. The regime tried to co-opt the non-violent trend through calibrated reforms, while pursuing a harder line of arrest and deportation toward the militant strain. Yet the inclusion of Kuwait-born Shi'a in a repressive dragnet against terrorism suspects in 1986 proved to be a major error by the regime that radicalized a segment of the citizenry. From 1986 onward, Kuwaiti Shi'a participated in violent acts that previously had been conducted almost entirely by Iraqi, Iranian and Lebanese Shi'a.

As explored in the following chapters, the legacy of the Iranian Revolution continues to shape Shi'a-state relations in the Gulf post-2003, informing both the strategies of Shi'a actors and the policy responses of Gulf regimes.

4 BAHRAIN: SHI'A MOBILIZATION AND REGIONAL UPHEAVAL

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Of the three case countries under examination, none was more affected by the systemic changes of the Iraq War and the perception of Iranian ascendency than Bahrain. The collapse of the Saddam regime in Iraq and the political empowerment of Iraq Shi'a left Bahrain the only country in the Arab world where a Sunni minority rules over a Shi'a majority. The ensuing civil war in Iraq exacerbated the island's longstanding sectarian tensions, sharpened the opposition's critique of the regime, and put strains on Bahraini participatory institutions like the parliament. The dramatic, unfolding narrative in Iraq—the re-emergence of Najaf as a center of Shi'a religious authority, the 2005 National Assembly (parliamentary) elections, the sieges of Najaf and Fallujah, and the sectarian strife that followed the early 2006 bombing of the Shi'a al-Askari mosque[186]—became a filter through which Bahrainis interpreted their own contentious politics. Put differently, the Iraq War was a form of political theater that compelled Bahraini elites and ordinary citizens to not simply observe, but to participate and "re-enact" in a highly partisan manner.

This participation took a number of forms and was frequently accompanied by fierce debate. For a sizeable bloc of the Shi'a, elections in Iraq provided the impetus to end their previous boycott of Bahrain's parliament. The re-emergence of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani as a respected spiritual and, increasingly, political figure with transnational influence among the Shi'a, spurred a debate about the scope and role of clerical authority in Bahrain. Among Sunnis, there were frequent and vocal expressions of solidarity with embattled Sunnis in Fallujah and also a rising sense of alarm at Shi'a triumphalism, particularly after the bloody campaign against Iraqi Sunnis carried out by Shi'a paramilitaries affiliated with the Sadrist movement and the Maliki government.

Closely related, the rise of Iranian power injected a new dynamic into identity politics and political liberalization in Bahrain. It gave regime supporters and hardline Sunnis a useful bogeyman to discredit Shi'a oppositionists as puppets controlled by Iran. For some Shi'a political actors, it provided leverage against the regime; if reforms stalled, they warned, the Shi'a

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[186] Built in 944 C.E., the mosque is a major religious site for Shi'a, housing the remains of the 10th and 11th *imam*s. Its golden dome was destroyed in a bombing by Sunni militants in February 2006, and the minarets were demolished in another attack in July 2007. The February 2006 bombing is widely believed to have sparked a wave of sectarian violence in Iraq

would have no choice but to turn to Iran. Most importantly however, Iran's growing assertiveness in the region decreased the willingness of the Bahraini government's principal patron, Saudi Arabia, to support liberalization on the island. Riyadh saw any loosening of political control in Bahrain, and in particular, the holding of elections as a net gain for its strategic rival.

This chapter will explore how these regional and local dynamics impacted Shi'a-state relations from the period 2003 to 2009. It will first examine how the post-2003 regional environment presented a number of dilemmas to Shi'a political actors at key junctures in the political life of Bahrain—the parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2006. It will discuss the platform, objectives and tactics of the key principal Shi'a parties and how each actor grappled with the decision about whether to participate or to boycott, the degree to which cooperation with Sunni Islamist and leftist parties was advisable, and the role of clerical authority in shaping Shi'a political activism. The next chapter will cover the regime's response, and the way that the Bahraini parliament became a mechanism to manage the regional shocks of the post-2003 environment.

4.2 SHI'A POLITICAL ACTIVISM

To understand the degree to which regional events outside Bahrain influenced the Shi'a, it is first necessary to canvass the various Shi'a political societies, their leaders and platforms. As noted in Chapter Three, Bahraini Shi'a society is marked by ethnic, theological, and class differences, to say nothing of disagreements over political strategies. The Shi'a of Bahrain have long enjoyed a rich tradition of association and civil society, of which formal political parties (known as "societies" under Bahraini law) are only one part.[187] The formalization of Shi'a politics first occurred as a result of the sweeping changes brought by the accession of the new Emir (later, King), Hamad bin 'Isa in 1999, discussed in Chapter Three. On February 5, 2001, a broad-ranging amnesty allowed the return of 108 dissidents abroad, many of them prominent Shi'a clerics and lay leaders who would later form the core of the Shi'a political leadership.[188] Under the National Action Charter in 2002, the King allowed for civil "societies" to register as de-facto political parties, although the law that governed their funding and scope was not

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187 Rosemary Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States* (London: Ithaca Press, 1988), p. 53.

188 These included Shaykh 'Isa al-Qasim, Shaykh 'Ali Salman, Sayyid Haydar al-Sitri, Mansur al-Jamri. J.E. Peterson, "Bahrain's First Reforms Under Amir Hamad," *Asian Affairs* (London), Vol. 33, Part 2 (June 2002), p. 222.

formalized until 2005.[189] Municipal council elections were then announced for May 9 and parliamentary elections on October 24 of 2002—both of which proved to be crucial testing grounds for the newly formed Shi'a blocs.

Although there are over 24 political societies, the most active and influential Shi'a Islamist groups in the post-2003 period are the *Jama`iyyat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Islamiya* (The National Islamic Accord—referred to henceforth as *al-Wifaq*) and *Harakat al-'Amal al-Islamiya (*Islamic Action Movement—referred to henceforth as *al-Amal*).[190] The period 2003-2010 saw the Shi'a political field marked by intense fissures and debates regarding participation or boycott (first in 2002 and then in 2005), as well as the role of clerical authority in shaping strategy. Most significantly, *al-Wifaq* was confronted with defections in 2006 from its senior leadership, resulting in the formation of the *Harakat Haq al-Huriyat wa al-Dimuqratiya* (the Movement for the Right of Liberty and Democracy—referred to henceforth as *al-Haq*), which rejected electoral participation and called for a continued boycott on the basis that the 2002 constitution was illegal. Both movements grappled with how to balance the imperative of national loyalty with transnational ties outside Bahrain.

4.2.1 Al-Wifaq

With a reported 65-70,000 active members, *al-Wifaq* is Bahrain's largest Shi'a Islamist political society.[191] It was formed around the exiled leadership of the Islamic Enlightenment Society and the Bahraini Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM—which later became the Bahraini Freedom Movement or BFM) and draws its base of support from clerics and laypersons among Bahrain's middle and lower classes.[192]

Ideologically, its membership incorporates Bahrain's *al-Da'wa* current, and adherents of multiple *maraja'*. Many of *al-Wifaq*'s members, particularly the leadership, are drawn from the *baharna* Shi'a—a strong narrative of nativism thus informs its discourse.[193] In addition, there

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189 Katja Niethammer, "Voices in Parliament, Debates in *Majalis*, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain," European University Institute Robert Shuman Center for Advanced Studies, Mediterranean Programme Series, No. 27, 2006 (September 2006).

190 Both compete for the *baharna*. A third bloc is comprised of Shi'a of Persian descent, the so-called *al-Ikha* society. International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge," Middle East Report Number 40, May 6, 2005.

191 This figure is cited by Katja Niethammer, citing an interview with *al-Wifaq* chairman 'Ali Salman.

192 Personal interview with Shaykh 'Ali Salman, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006. Also Niethammer, p. 6.

193 For example, its leaflets and manifestos frequently refer to the "state of Bahrain" rather than the "Kingdom of Bahrain."

has been longstanding tension between leftist leaders of the 1990s who were integrated into its ranks and the clerical leadership, which quickly assumed dominance. Perhaps to assuage these tensions, the society has emphasized that its goals are largely secular—political and economic reform—although its *identity* is firmly Islamic.

At the center of the movement is its charismatic young leader, ‘Ali Salman, born into a poor Shi’a family, who later studied on a fellowship in King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and then theological training in Qom, Iran. The cleric has long exerted a powerful magnetism on Bahraini Shi’a politics and popular mobilization. It was his detention on December 5, 1994 that reportedly sparked the five-year *intifada*.[194] Yet his grip is not all-encompassing. *Al-Wifaq* is governed by an 11-member board and receives spiritual and sometimes political guidance from Bahrain’s senior Shi’a clerical body, the Islamic Scholars Council, whose chairman is Shaykh ‘Isa al-Qasim.[195] ‘Ali Salman is thus forced into a position of building consensus. As will be discussed at length below, he reportedly opposed a boycott of the 2002 parliamentary elections (a position that was shared by ‘Isa al-Qasim), but was forced into recanting this position because of the weight of popular opinion in *al-Wifaq*.[196]

Since its inception, *al-Wifaq*’s key demands have included a contractual constitution that would permit the elected parliament to have a greater range of legislative and oversight powers. Specifically, *al-Wifaq* has opposed the 2002 amended constitution’s expansion of powers to the royalty, and especially the King.[197] A strong class-based agenda informs its platform—it has pushed for the alleviation of unemployment, which it sees as stemming from excessive corruption and discrimination. Relatedly, it seeks transparency in government budgeting and increased

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194 Fred H. Lawson, *“*Repertoires of Contention in Contemporary Bahrain,” in Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003, p.89.

195 Al-Qasim set up this council in 2005. Although in theory it has its own board and is run by consensus, al-Qasim exerts a preponderance of influence over it. The council as a whole looks to Najaf for guidance, although al-Qasim follows Khamene’i as his *marja’*. For a discussion about Qasim’s ambiguous views of the *marja’iyya*, see Sajjad H. Rizvi, “Shi’ism in Bahrain: *Marja’iyya* and Politics,” *Orient* IV (2009), pp. 16-24.

196 Much of this was because of tensions among exiles. Personal, unattributed interview with an *al-Wifaq* activist, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

197 In an interview, ‘Ali Salman noted, “The upper house now has the upper hand. Under the 1973 constitution, the King had 3 duties; now he has 12. The royalty sit on top of the judiciary council and the head of the council that oversees finance – these roles should properly be with the parliament.” Personal interview with ‘Ali Salman, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

hiring of Shi'a in key ministries and in the armed forces. It has also sought to enact a law on political parties that would make state funding mandatory and permit foreign funding.[198]

4.2.2 Al-Amal

Aside from *al-Wifaq*, the other significant Shi'a grouping that participated in the 2002 boycott and later competed against *al-Wifaq* in the 2006 elections is *al-Amal*. *Al-Amal* was formed in 2001 from remnants of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain (IFLB) in the wake of the general amnesty that accompanied King Hamad's reforms. Its adherents follow the *Shiraziyyin* current, represented by Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi in Qom and Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi in Karbala. Despite its militant history and ties to Iran it has generally the same goals as *al-Wifaq*.

Although continually viewed with suspicion by Bahraini Sunnis, *al-Amal* has largely abandoned its radical agenda since the 1990s, has participated in elections, and has pushed for political reform via peaceful channels. In arguing for participation in democratic structures, a prominent *Amal* leader noted in a 2006 interview, "We are working within the system, because if you have a system, you can make corrections. The problem is when that system becomes dominated by a family (the al-Khalifa)."[199] *Al-Amal*'s shift from militant activism in the 1980s and 90s is therefore instructive for what it reveals about the co-optive and accommodating capability of Bahraini political reform.

Once *al-Wifaq* had consented to participating in the elections, competition and tension arose between the two Shi'a parties. In the run-up to the 2006 elections, *al-Amal* charged that 'Isa al-Qasim and the Islamic Scholars Council had unfairly endorsed *al-Wifaq*, arguing that it was not appropriate for clerics to be politically partisan.[200]

4.3 THE PARTICIPATION DEBATE AMONG THE SHI'A

The decision of whether or not to participate in parliament created significant fissures among the Shi'a, specifically within *al-Wifaq* and later, between *al-Wifaq* and the break-away grassroots group, *al-Haq*. The first litmus test occurred in the October 2002 elections. Having secured a majority of council seats in Shi'a-dominated areas in the May 2002 municipal council elections, *al-Wifaq* seemed assured of a second victory in the October 2002 parliamentary elections. But the municipal voter turnout was only 47 percent. The leadership cadre of *al-Wifaq*

198 Personal interview with *al-Wifaq* representative, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.
199 Personal interview with Shaykh Muhammad Mahfouz, Manama, Bahrain, November 12, 2006.
200 Habib Toumi, "Bahrain Shiite Body Accused of Bias," *Gulf News*, November 14, 2006.

was faced with the prospect of an even lower turnout in the upcoming parliamentary elections, given mounting opposition to the King's recent edicts to circumscribe the parliament's legislative and oversight powers. This was particularly evident within *al-Wifaq* itself, where a radical, hard-line current led by the deputy chairman Hasan Mushayma and the revered *intifada* leader 'Abd al-Wahhab Husayn was challenging the more conciliatory approach of 'Ali Salman.

To manage these tensions, *al-Wifaq* formed a formal alliance with four other societies to boycott the 2002 elections. The coalition, known as the *tahalluf al-ruba'i* (the Four Way Alliance) was composed of *al-Wifaq*, *al-Amal*, *al-Amal al-Watani al-Dimuqrati* (the National Democratic Action Society, a leftist and liberal/secular society, which changed its name to "*al-Wa'ad*" in 2005), and *al-Tajammu al-Qawmi al-Dimuqrati* (the Nation Democratic Coalition, a Ba'athist group). As noted earlier, there was reportedly opposition to this move by senior clerics such as 'Isa al-Qasim and even 'Ali Salman himself, both of whom were forced to switch their position in the face of popular opposition to participation.[201] From this point until the 2006 elections, the alliance sought to exert pressure on the regime through petitions as a way to convey its opposition to the 2002 constitution. In April 2004, for instance, the coalition submitted a petition to the King, reportedly signed by 70,000 people, objecting to the amended constitution and calling for exclusive legislative power for the elected parliament, rather than the appointed consultative council. Yet, the government's repeated response was that the time for petitions had ended with the formation of the parliament. Additionally, it arrested scores of activists from *al-Wifaq*.[202]

In the face of this deadlock, there emerged growing splits within the *al-Wifaq* society between pro-participation currents and those favoring a continued boycott. In 2004, the moderate wing of the *al-Wifaq*'s leadership—comprised of Nizar al-Baharinah, Shaykh 'Abd al-Nabi al-Darrazi, and Khalil al-Marzuq—resigned from the society's board of directors in protest of the ongoing boycott. Al-Baharinah announced his intention to form a separate political society that would participate in the upcoming 2006 elections.[203] Later that year, Hassan Mushayma issued a scathing attack on "separatists" within *al-Wifaq*'s ranks, arguing that this dissension would

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201 Louër, p. 285.

202 Mahdi Rabi,' "Bahrayn: al-Tahallaf al-Rabi'Yashtirat 'Ta'dilat al-Mujziya' l-Khoda al-Intikhibat," (Bahrain: The Four-Way Alliance Cites "Arbitrary Amendments" in its Boycott of the Elections) *al-Hayah*, February 2, 2005.

203 Mahdi Rabi, "Bahrayn: Bawadr Istiqaq fi al-Tiyar al-Islami al-Shi'i" (Bahrain: Signs of a Split in Shiite Islamic Current), *al-Hayah*, August 24, 2004; available at http://international.daralhayat.com/archivearticle/53482; accessed on June 10, 2011.

dilute the position of the Shi'a and bolster the regime's by enabling it to dispense "crumbs" to the newly-formed party.[204]

By the fall of 2005, however, *al-Wifaq* and its allies had apparently shifted its tact toward participation, with 'Ali Salman making a number of speeches in Friday sermons and local *majalis* about the need to field candidates in elections.[205] The impetus that prompted the change was the belief that nearly four years of boycotting had yielded little in the way of material improvement for the Shi'a. Another motive was the 2005 enactment of a new law that would criminalize existing societies, including *al-Wifaq*, unless they registered as "official" political societies.[206] The law was seen by critics as a thinly guised attempt to force the opposition into the system and secure their de facto endorsement of the 2002 constitution.[207]

4.3.1 *Al-Wifaq*'s Alliance with *al-Wa'ad*

One important result of *al-Wifaq*'s decision to participate was the formalization of its longstanding ties with the leftist-nationalist *al-Wa'ad* society. The partnership proved mutually beneficial to both sides. *Al-Wa'ad*'s chairman described the relationship as stemming from three common goals: an end to discrimination of all forms, a strong constitution, and better distribution of wealth.[208] An unstated goal of the alliance was to deflect any moves by the government that *al-Wifaq* was challenging the government out of parochial sectarian motives—the presence of its *al-Wa'ad* allies added an important secularist and nationalist dimension to its activism. Additionally, *al-Wa'ad* had hoped that a presence in parliament would keep the legislature focused on holding the regime accountable and improving the lives of its constituents, rather than on sectarian wrangling. "*Al-Wa'ad* has a healing power in parliament; it stands in the middle between the Shi'a and the Sunnis," noted *al-Wa'ad* chairman Ibrahim Sharif.[209] Yet as will be discussed at length in the next chapter, this attempt at neutral mediation in a climate of sectarian

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204 Ibid.

205 Mohammed al-Ali, "Al-Wefaq to Vote on Political Societies Law Today," *Gulf Daily News,* October 6, 2005.

206 See: United Nations Development Program, Program on Governance in the Arab World. Available: http://www.pogar. org/countries/civil.asp?cid=2 (May 2008). Al-Wifaq, al-Amal and al-Wa'ad also organized sit-ins to protest the new law. Muhammad al-'Aali, "Hundreds Rally Over New Law," Gulf Daily News, July 30, 2005. The law also stipulated that societies could not be formed with a sectarian or religious bias and it raised the age for participation to 21. Both of these were seen by many Shi'a as efforts to co-opt and effectively disarm the Shi'a opposition.

207 Edward Burke, "Bahrain: Reaching a Threshold," *FRIDE Working Paper* 61 (June 2008), pp. 9, 14.

208 Personal interview with Ibrahim al-Sharif, Manama, Bahrain, November 8, 2006.

209 Personal interview with Ibrahim al-Sharif, Manama, Bahrain, November 8, 2006.

polarization led Sunni Islamists and some regime actors to view *al-Wa'ad* as a "traitor" to the Sunni cause.

4.3.2 The Impact of al-Sistani on Bahraini Shi'a Strategies

An important development that spurred the shift toward participation was the December 2005 parliamentary elections in Iraq which secured the Iraqi Shi'a a large majority. In speeches and articles, *al-Wifaq* and its supporters set about trying to draw parallels between the Bahraini and Iraqi contexts, citing the hazards of boycotting by pointing to Iraq's Sunnis while applauding the "political maturity" of the Iraqi Shi'a.[210] According to an editorial in *al-Wasat*:

> Participation does not mean accepting the political outcome to which the U.S. occupation has led. However, it is a sign of willingness to join the struggle and to take part—from a legislative position—in resolving the many crises and the other expected repercussions in the Land of the Two Rivers [Iraq] … participation is not the final act of the political scene. Instead, it is the first.[211]

The society also began a concerted effort to seek an endorsement of its position from Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Al-al-Sistani's role is a matter of much debate and speculation. He is widely believed by many Shi'a interviewed in November 2006 to have issued a *fatwa* or edict endorsing participation in the elections. Yet this assumption obscures the nature of his authority and, as noted previously, his reticence to explicitly intervene in the political affairs of other states. The pattern of local actors attempting to appropriate his consent and authority for local leverage is not unique to Bahrain. Rather, it is found throughout the region—so much so that al-Sistani's office has issued several statements decrying the use of the Grand Ayatollah's imprimatur for local political agendas.

What is clear is that al-Sistani's newfound maneuverability and profile in Iraq enabled Bahraini actors to harness his transnational authority in the service of local agendas. A critical test of his authority came in February 2006 in the aftermath of the bombing of the al-Askari

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210 *Al-Wasat* (Bahrain), December 17, 2005. *Al-Wasat* is a centrist, semi-independent newspaper founded in 2002 by Mansur al-Jamri, a Shi'a activist and the son of the revered Shi'a cleric, 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri (1937-2006) and leader of the 1990s uprising. Laurence Louër has noted: "The idea was to not only obtain a communiqué from the *marja'* enjoining Bahrainis to participate but, more broadly, to create a process of emulation between the Bahraini and Iraqi situations that would lead Bahrainis to identify their situation with that of Iraq, where Shias went in large numbers to the polls in December 2005." Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, London: Hurst & Company, 2008, p. 289.

211 *Al-Wasat* (Bahrain) December 17, 2005.

mosque in Samarra, Iraq—one of Shi'ism's most revered sites in Iraq. al-Sistani issued a call for demonstrations across the Middle East, which was heeded in Bahrain when over 100,000 protestors took to the streets the Friday following the attack.[212]

In Bahrain, the first outreach to solicit his backing was made by the Islamic Scholars Council, led by 'Isa al-Qasim, through al-Sistani's son.[213] In parallel, another Bahraini cleric, Husayn Najati, who is al-Sistani's formal representative in Bahraini, claimed to have received guidance from al-Sistani, endorsing the elections. But he was completely excluded from the Islamic Scholars Council's outreach because he is a rival of 'Isa al-Qasim and a recent arrival to the Bahraini clerical scene.[214] The dispute shows that the local context—clerical rivalries and institutions—were key factor in mediating transnational influences.

This is was the also the case regarding the *al-Haq* movement, *al-Wifaq*'s principal rival for Shi'a support, which also sought to leverage clerical authority and external influences as part of a local political struggle.

4.3.3 The Rise of the Confrontationalists

In the midst of this initiative, longstanding splits among the Shi'a re-emerged and a more hardline faction, led by Hasan Mushayma, split from *al-Wifaq*. He was joined by other *intifada* luminaries such as Said Shehabi, 'Abd al-Wahhab Husayn, and 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja. Mushayma subsequently formed the *al-Haq* movement, which from 2006 onward mounted a serious challenge to *al-Wifaq*'s strategy of peaceful engagement.[215]

Al-Haq announced its creation in November 2005, with the argument that *al-Wifaq*'s participation in the elections made it a compromised party. As noted, well before 2005 tensions were brewing in *al-Wifaq*'s ranks, between clerics and seasoned lay activists of the *intifada*. It is likely that the decision to form *al-Haq* was as much a result of these cleric-lay tensions as it was a dispute over political strategy and the merits of boycotting versus participating. In the context of the Iraq War and *al-Wifaq*'s solicitation of al-Sistani's backing, these tensions would only worsen.[216]

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212 Anon., "Bahraini Shiites Answer Sistani Call to Protest Bombing," *Khaleej Times*, February 23, 2006.

213 Louër, p. 290.

214 Ibid., p. 291.

215 *Al-Haq*'s early founders also included prominent leftist activists like 'Ali Rabi'a from the *al-Wa'ad* society.

216 According to one *Haq* member "*Al-Wifaq* used *fatawa* in the 2006 elections because they cannot compete against us." Personal interview with *Haq* member, November 6, 2006.

Broadly speaking, *al-Haq*'s strategy and goals include an abolition of the 2002 constitution, which it considers to be illegal, and a return to the 1973 one. Given its constituency of lower-class Shi'a in marginalized suburbs like Sitra, Jid Hafs, Muharraq and Senabis (**Figure 4.1**), it has also made housing improvements one of its key priorities, although it sees an empowered parliament as a means to remedy the housing situation.[217]

According to *al-Haq* leaders, a key obstacle to reform has been the Prime Minister, Khalifah bin Salman al-Khalifah, whom *al-Haq* perceives as spearheading Shi'a repression and being exceptionally hardline on matters of reform, particularly when compared to the more progressive and open-minded Crown Prince. Another key goal was the removal of the Minister for Cabinet Affairs, who was alleged by the so-called "Bandar Report" in September 2006 to be the architect of a secret plot to tip Bahrain's sectarian balance in the favor of the Sunnis (to be discussed at length in the next chapter on the Sunni counter-mobilization).[218]

Figure 4.1: Political Map of Bahrain Showing Manama and Major Towns[219]

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217 Personal interview with Hassan Mushayma, Manama, Bahrain, November 11, 2006.

218 The full report is available at http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/albandar.pdf; accessed on April 18, 2011.

219 Central Intelligence Agency (2003), Perry Castenada Map Collection, University of Texas, Austin.

Al-Haq's tactics have included a variety of public disobedience measures: street protests, barricades, destruction of traffic lights, boycotts and marches, which have earned its followers the appellation of "Trotskyites" from its detractors and rivals. Its confrontations are deliberately provocative, in an attempt to elicit a crackdown by the security forces, thus drawing more Bahrainis into its ranks. At key junctures, *al-Haq* has appeared to escalate the level of violence of these tactics to include Molotov cocktails and firebombs—possibly as a means to subvert initiatives from its rival, *al-Wifaq* or to exert increased pressure on the government. In tandem, it has mounted a skillful public relations campaign with Western governments that has focused on publicizing Bahrain's official discrimination toward the Shi'a and human rights abuses. In August 2006, this culminated in a petition to the United Nations calling for a referendum on the 2002 constitution.[220] Much of this outreach is coordinated with two other rejectionist groups—the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM).

4.3.3.1 The BCHR and the BFM

Aside from *al-Haq*, the other grassroots Shi'a movement that continued to boycott the parliament was the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR) and the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM). The BCHR was founded in 2001 by 'Abd al-Hadi al-Khawaja, an activist affiliated with the IFLB who had been exiled to London after the mid-1990s *intifada* and returned to Bahrain in 2000 as part of the general amnesty. The society was initially registered with the government as a non-governmental organization in 2002, but this license was revoked after al-Khawaja gave a speech in 2004 criticizing the Prime Minister's economic policies. Al-Khawaja's subsequent imprisonment sparked weeks of rioting. Although it included a number of leftists and liberals in its ranks, its goals reflect a Shi'a Islamist agenda close to that of *al-Wifaq*'s. Yet there are also several important distinctions. In contrast to *al-Wifaq*'s decidedly non-sectarian approach, the BCHR frequently used Shi'a symbology in its banners and propaganda, to include depictions of 'Ali and the battle of Karbala. Additionally, the organization has focused almost exclusively on drawing attention to the government's human rights abuses and, occasionally, calling for the removal of the royal family.[221]

The BFM was founded by former *al-Wifaq* luminary Sa'id Shehabi, who resigned in 2005 and rejected the government's amnesty offer to return to Bahrain, preferring instead to stay

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[220] Unattributed with newspaper editor, Manama, Bahrain, November 9, 2006.

[221] International Crisis Group, p. 14; Niethammer, p. 20.

in London. The organization continues to be based in London, where its media organ, the Voice of Bahrain, draws public attention to human rights abuses and calls for a return to the 1971 constitution.[222]

4.3.3.2 **Al-Haq** *and Clerical Power*

An important dimension of Bahraini Shi'a politics in the post-2003 era is a struggle between *al-Haq* and *al-Wifaq* to win clerical endorsement for their respective political strategies. *Al-Haq*'s leaders, in numerous interviews in late 2006, bemoaned *al-Wifaq*'s ability to secure the backing of senior clerics and in some cases denigrated the political maturity of Bahraini Shi'a for falling under the sway of clerical influence.[223] In particular, *al-Wifaq*'s attempts to solicit the endorsement of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani created significant challenges for *al-Haq* to mobilize Shia sentiment in favor of its boycotting strategy. According to a *Haq* official:

> *Al-Haq*'s job is difficult after al-Sistani ruling. We don't want to move in the direction of provocation. In principle, we are not in favor of elections but we don't want to be seen as opposed to clerical rulings. We know religion plays a big part in 'popular' movements, but in some cases this religious aspect is demeaning.[224]

Al-Haq tried to circumvent clerical power through a number of tactics. First, it attempted to portray its movement as non-sectarian, thus attracting more lower class Sunnis who would be immune to the appeals of *maraja'* like al-Qasim. This was reportedly aided by the fact that its informal leadership includes a number of Sunni leftists, such as the esteemed *intifada* activist 'Ali Rabi'a.[225] Second, *al-Haq* appears to have orchestrated a whisper campaign suggesting that the regime had reached a quid pro quo with prominent Shi'a clerics like 'Isa al-Qasim to secure their support in rallying the Shi'a to participate the elections. In return for their pro-participation stance, this narrative went, the government agreed to drop the controversial Family Law that would erode clerical power over Shi'a social affairs.[226]

Second, *al-Haq* leaders noted in interviews that they were playing a waiting game, simply letting *al-Wifaq*'s parliamentary experiment run its course. When the society failed to deliver

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[222] Ibid.

[223] Aside from al-Sistani's influence, *al-Haq* must compete with local clerics affiliated with *al-Wifaq*. Field interviews in 2006 suggested that *al-Wifaq*-affiliated cleric 'Isa al-Qasim visited Sitra in early April asking people to vote. Personal interview, Manama, Bahrain, November 12, 2006.

[224] Personal, unattributable interview with *al-Haq* official, Manama, Bahrain, November 5, 2006.

[225] Ali Rabi'a reportedly quit *al-Haq* in mid-2009.

[226] Personal interviews, Manama, Bahrain, November, 2006.

meaningful improvements to the lives of its constituents, the weight of Shi'a support would shift back to *al-Haq*'s camp. To further erode public confidence in *al-Wifaq*, *al-Haq* sought to portray the society—in leaflets, sit-ins, and web material—as conspiring with conservative Sunni Islamist in parliament to enact restrictive social codes on divorce, inheritance and other social matters, while ignoring the promises about economic and political change that had secured its electoral victory in the first place.

Importantly, the growing prominence of the Lebanese Hizballah movement gave the *al-Haq* movement a model of steadfastness and resistance which it used to critique *al-Wifaq*'s pro-participation stance.[227] This development came at a time when Bahraini youths became increasingly enamored of Hizballah's battlefield performance against Israel in 2006 and when Hizballah CDs, posters, billboards and other memorabilia appeared widely in Shi'a suburbs such as Sitra, Senabis and Jid Hafs. *Al-Haq*'s secretary general went so far as to warn of the Hizballah "model" taking root in Bahrain if the regime did not enact substantial reforms.[228]

Finally, *al-Haq* sought to deploy its own cleric to counter *al-Wifaq*'s clerical support. *Haq* supporters regard a Qom-trained cleric, Khalid Hamad Sanad as their *marja*'. Sanad hails from a prominent family in Manama and follows the current of the *Shiraziyyin* and al-Mudarassi, but he enjoys far lesser clout in Bahrain than al-Qasim, al-Ghurayfi or al-Sistani's intermediary, Husayn Najati. He only spends two months out of the year in Bahrain, limiting his domestic appeal. That said, he has lent *al-Haq* a degree of clerical credibility, particularly after he affixed his names to the list of signatories on the *al-Haq*-sponsored petition to the United Nations demanding a referendum on the 2002 constitution and an inquiry into the illegal granting of Bahraini citizenship to Sunni Arabs from Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other states.[229]

In December 2005, shortly after *al-Haq*'s formation, Sanad was arrested at the Manama airport after returning from a trip abroad. The incident provided *al-Haq* a ready-made opportunity to mobilize the street; the movement organized a sit-in and demonstration in Muharraq, near the airport where he was detained. Violence quickly broke out, leading to several arrests. Shi'a protestors descended on Bahrain's main shopping mall and the Formula One race track, leading to further arrests and violence. Weekly sit-ins were subsequently held, for both the imprisoned cleric and for the arrested protestors.[230] The entire aftermath of Sanad's arrest proved to be a boon for both the stature of the previously obscure cleric and *al-Haq's* campaign against

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[227] Louër, p. 257.
[228] Personal interview with Hassan Mushayma, Manama, Bahrain, November 11, 2006.
[229] Louër, p. 257.
[230] Ibid.

al-Wifaq. In the words of one observer, an activist with *al-Wa'ad*, the Sanad affair provided "clerical top cover" for *al-Haq* as a counterweight to al-Sistani's endorsement of *al-Wifaq*.[231]

4.4 REGIONAL UPHEAVAL AND THE BAHRAINI SHI'A: AN ASSESSMENT

As noted in the previous chapter, the stigma of foreign—and specifically Iranian—influence has long bedeviled Gulf Shi'a actors. In the post-2003 regional environment, this dynamic in Bahrain was exacerbated by the escalation of sectarian strife in Iran, tensions over Iran's nuclear program and Iran's gains in Lebanon. Regime actors and their Sunni allies frequently accused the Shi'a societies of being guided by the hand of Iran, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the Lebanese Hizballah or by Bahraini clerics loyal to Iranian Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i.[232] As noted by a prominent Salafi cleric and regime supporter:

> Shi'a policies in Bahrain depend on who is ruling in Iran and in Najaf. Most of their decisions are made outside the country. This is our main problem with them—the *marja'iyya*. We say to them, 'if you are Bahrainis, then make decisions as Bahrainis.'[233]

Echoing this, a Sunni hardline member of the *al-Minbar* (Muslim Brotherhood) society, Muhammad Khalid Ibrahim, noted that the Sunnis are "outgunned" by the *maraja'*. Multiple Sunni interlocutors described Shaykh 'Isa al-Qasim as the "most powerful man in Bahrain" or Bahrain's "third government" who sought to blackmail the government by threatening to mobilize *al-Wifaq*'s supporters in protest.[234] According to this narrative, he opposed the government's attempts to pass Family Law, with a provision for *Ja'afari* legal code, because it would undercut his influence over Bahrani Shi'a social matters. "He wants to be the godfather of the Shi'a," noted a prominent Sunni newspaper editor.[235] When al-Qasim in 2008 attempted to press the government to release prisoners, an outspoken independent Salafi MP, Jasim al-Saidi attacked his nationalist bona fides in parliament, saying:

> Had you been in Iran, which you love and defend, you would not have dared - even one in a million - to criticize its government or attack its leaders or interfere in what does not

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231 Personal interview with Ibrahim al-Sharif, Manama, Bahrain, November 8, 2006.
232 Personal unattributed interviews in Manama, Bahrain, November 15-17, 2006.
233 Personal interview with Adl al-Mawada, Manama, Bahrain, November 10, 2006.
234 Personal unattributed interviews in Manama, Bahrain, November 15-17, 2006.
235 Personal interview with Ibrahim al-Bashmi, Manama, Bahrain, November 9, 2006.

concern you. Had you dared and done this, your head would have rolled or you would have disappeared in the jails of anger.[236]

4.4.1 The Limits of Clerical and Foreign Influence

Yet *al-Wifaq*'s close ties to Shaykh 'Isa al-Qasim and its relations with *maraja'* outside the country are tempered by several factors. First, there are limits to clerical power over the political choices of Bahraini Shi'a and specifically *al-Wifaq*. In the society's early days, previously dominant clerics of the al-*Da'wa* current such as 'Isa Qasim, 'Abdallah al-Ghurayfi, and 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri, lacked the legitimacy that many lay activists and younger clerics had earned during the 1990s *intifada*. They therefore assumed a secondary role in the society's formal leadership structure.[237] More importantly, however, the Shi'a constituencies of these *maraja'* are not unthinking supplicants who will blindly follow their political edicts—many interlocutors stated that clerics should stick to matters of *fiqh* and spirituality. On political matters, they have frequently deferred to seasoned lay activists and younger clerics who have on-the-ground experience. [238]

Added to this, senior *maraja'* outside Bahrain, particularly the politically quietist Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani are careful to avoid issuing explicit guidance on political matters in countries outside their own. 'Ali Salman noted as much in a 2007 interview, saying, "The *marja'iyya* doesn't interfere in affairs outside their countries of origin."[239] Local clerics will frequently inflate their relationship with external *maraja'* to bolster their own prestige—a tactic that inadvertently fuels Sunni suspicions about the loyalty of the Shi'a. For example, in the run-up to the 2006 parliamentary elections, 'Isa al-Qasim's website displayed statements from foreign *maraja'* such as Fadlallah, al-Sistani, and Khamene'i enjoining Bahrainis to vote. In fact, these directives were issued to the Shi'a as a whole throughout the region and were not directed to Bahrain specifically and certainly not to Qasim personally.[240]

Another key example is 'Isa al-Qasim's opposition to the government's Family Law. According to diplomatic reporting, the *al-Wifaq* parliamentary bloc opposed the government's attempts to pass Family Law under instruction from 'Isa al-Qasim, who argued that the provisions had not been approved by al-Sistani. Yet when the *Wifaq* parliamentarians met with al-Sistani

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236 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 21, 2008. The accusation subsequently fueled rioting by outraged Shi'a in Manama in July 2008.

237 Louër, p. 28.

238 Personal interviews in Sitra and Manama, Bahrain, November 2006. Also, Louër, pp. 287-288.

239 Personal interview with 'Ali Salman, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

240 Personal interview with Husayn Najati, Manama, Bahrain, November 11, 2006.

personally in 2009, he argued that it was not his place to interfere and that Qasim himself was qualified to decide the matter. In other instances, clerics will also wait to gauge the winds of public sentiment and then issue an edict or endorsement to make it appear as if their influence is greater than it actually is.

The pragmatic, nationalist political outlook of ‘Ali Salman has meant that *al-Wifaq* is sensitive to how public opinion perceives the society’s linkages to actors and entities outside the country. He has sought to balance expressions of support for external clerics (which can be used to bolster the society’s credibility among its constituency) with the need to avoid antagonizing both the regime and potential Sunni partners. For example, in the run up to the invasion of Iraq, he was careful to emphasize that *al-Wifaq* supported a secular, democratic Iraq.[241] At the same time, he has organized popular demonstrations of solidarity for Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani such as a sit-in to support the cleric’s mediation efforts in al-Najaf. On the issue of Iranian support, he has been adamant about the society’s independence and autonomous decision-making. In a 2007 interview, he stated:

> I have been involved in political activity since 1992 as a leader of the opposition. I can swear by God's book that from that time until now, we have not received a single dinar from Iran. If Iran supported Hizballah with money and weapons, it has no foothold in Bahrain and has no influence on the Shiite position. We are extremely clear in Bahrain. Iran is a neighboring Muslim country, but it is a country and we are a country. We are independent in our decisions and do not allow anyone to interfere in our internal affairs.[242]

Finally, toward the Lebanese Hizballah, he has been similarly guarded and cautious. “We respect Hizballah’s organizational skills, but we are not emulating them,” he said in 2006. “In fact, they can learn from us.”[243] Much of the society’s adulation of Hizballah was for the same reasons it was adored by Arabs across the Middle East—for its battlefield successes against Israel, rather than as a Shi’a party with ties to Iran. The same logic applied to the Bahraini Shi’a’s embrace of the Palestinian *intifada* of Gaza—the dramatic images frequently inspired protests, graffiti, and other demonstrations of solidarity. For example, in December 2008, Bahraini Shi’a staged protests in support of Palestinians in Gaza, prompting the Bahraini Minister

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241 Anon., “Bahraini Shiites Want a Secular Iraq,” *Gulf News*, January 27, 2005.

242 Salman al-Dawsiri, “Interview with‘Ali Salman,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 22, 2007. *Al-Wifaq*’s Facebook page on March 21, 2011 also contained a refutation of the accusation of Iranian influence. *Al-Wifaq*’s detractors would argue that ‘Ali Salman’s protestations are an example of the Shi’a practice of *taqqiya* (religiously sanctioned dissimulation or obfuscation of one’s true intention or loyalty).

243 Anon., “Interview with ‘Ali Salman,” *Gulf States Newsletter*, Vol. 30, No. 795, December 8, 2006.

of Interior to ask the parliament to enact legislation making street protests subject to harsher penalties.[244]

These expressions of support illustrate an important point about the impact of the regional environment on Bahraini Shi'a sensitivities and in particular the limits of foreign influence on Shi'a activism. In some cases, events that were unconnected to the rise of Iran or the ascendancy of Shi'a power in Iraq had an equally strong effect on Shi'a sensitivities. Protests in Sitra and Manama in March and May of 2005 were inspired more by Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution than any incitement from Iran or exhortation from Najaf-based Shi'a authorities. In particular, these national-based demonstrations appear to have resulted in a "re-branding" of Shi'a protest symbols, discarding Iranian and Hizballah flags in favor of the Bahraini flag, emblazoned with the slogan "Constitutional Reform First."[245]

The case of Muqtada al-Sadr in neighboring Iraq offers another useful illustration of the limits of transnational authority or influence. Despite his clerical lineage and role in opposing U.S. forces in Iraq, Sadr held little sway over Bahraini youth. Many interviewees cited his lack of clerical training and his youth, arguing that his efforts were essentially "an Iraqi project," with little bearing on Bahrain's affairs.[246] Unlike Nasrallah, his photos did not adorn the houses and streets of Manama's Shi'a suburbs.

What is qualitatively different about the post-2003 period, therefore, is not necessarily the level of mobilization by the Shi'a or any incitement strategy by Iran, but rather the intensity of the regime's (and the Sunni Islamists') threat perception. As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, this alarmism is often instrumental—part of a deliberate regime effort to discredit the Shi'a opposition.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how the changing context of the post-2003 environment impacted Shi'a goals and strategies in Bahrain. It highlighted the way in which external events were filtered and assessed by Bahraini Shi'a political actors and applied to the local political scene. *Al-Wifaq*'s calculations about ending its four year boycott were legitimated by the emergence of independent Shi'a religious authorities in al-Najaf. It is inaccurate, however, to say

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244 *Akhbar al-Khalij*, December 22, 2008.

245 Niethammer, p. 18.

246 Personal unattributed interviews in Sitra and Muharraq, Bahrain, November 20-21, 2006.

that Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani directly influenced the society's decision-making. The Iraqi cleric, as well as his local Bahraini interlocutors—'Isa al-Qasim and Husayn Najati—continually emphasized that it was not the place for foreign-based *maraja'* to interfere in local politics. Nonetheless he played a pivotal role in providing the post-facto justification for *al-Wifaq*'s parliamentary "experiment."

The decision to participate in parliament provoked deep fissures within the Bahraini Shi'a political movement. *Al-Haq*'s emergence signified the continued appeal of a radical, rejectionist posture for many disenchanted Shi'a, particularly youth in long-marginalized suburbs. The rising profile of the Lebanese Hizballah and its war with Israel provided a useful model for *al-Haq* to legitimate its own decision to boycott the elections and to contrast its "steadfastness" with the more accommodating stance of *al-Wifaq.*

The stigma of foreign influence has continually dogged the Shi'a as a whole, and formed an important part of the regime's counter-mobilization, to be discussed in the next chapter. To overcome the stigma, *al-Wifaq* has been careful to frame itself as a loyal opposition, using nationalist symbols such as the Bahraini flag. In addition, he allied itself with the secular, leftist group *al-Wa'ad* in an attempt to deflect the regime's timeworn accusation that it was acting out of parochial sectarian motives. As the next chapter will discuss, the presence of *al-Wa'ad* did play a role in mediating between *al-Wifaq* and Sunni Islamists. Yet rising regional tensions and the worsening conflict in Iraq undermined this strategy, creating a parliament that became increasingly polarized along sectarian lines to the detriment of legislation that would hold the regime accountable or improve the lives of Shi'a constituents.

5 BAHRAIN: THE REGIME RESPONSE TO SHI'A ACTIVISM

5.1 INTRODUCTION

As noted earlier, Bahrain's Shi'a population is thought to be Iran's main vector of influence for destabilizing domestic affairs and exerting pressure on the al-Khalifa. The al-Khalifa have thus reacted to the 2003 Iraq War and the ensuing regional upheaval using a variety of means, resources, and institutions. This chapter will explore how the ruling family sought to manage Shi'a mobilization.

First, it will discuss how the regime encouraged cooperation between two previously antagonistic Sunni Islamist societies (the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi blocs) as a counterweight to the Shi'a-leftist coalition. Second, it will cover the allegations of the so-called "Bandar Report," which presented evidence of an officially-sanctioned policy of naturalizing foreign Sunnis, election rigging and increased surveillance to mitigate any Shi'a victory in the elections. I will then explore how the parliament became a forum for the regime to co-opt and divide the Shi'a opposition and blunt the mobilizing appeal of foreign influences.

Although this strategy yielded short term gains, it created an increasingly polarized political climate, where the parliament became an arena for sectarian wrangling rather than a real legislative body. Much of this instability was the result of regional turmoil, which exacerbated pre-existing fissures among the parliamentary representatives. The result was growing frustration among lower class Shi'a that the parliamentary "experiment" had yielded little real improvement in their living conditions.

5.2 THE ELECTORAL COUNTERWEIGHT OF THE SUNNI ISLAMISTS

Bahrain's two Sunni Islamist parties—the *Jama`iyat al-Minbar al-Islami al-Watani* (the National Islamic Platform Society, an organization that follows the ideology and strategy of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, henceforth referred to as "*al-Minbar*") and the *Jama`iyat al-Asala al-Islamiya* (the Islamic Authenticity Society, a Salafi organization, henceforth referred to as "*al-Asala*")—proved to be critical bulwarks for the regime in both managing and exploiting the sectarian aftershocks of the Iraq War. The Sunni parties themselves were both animated and, in some cases, radicalized by the effects of the Iraq War and the regional rise of Iran that played out in Bahrain—in particular, the perception of Shi'a ascendancy after the 2005 elections in Iraq, the rise of the Sadrists, Bahrain's worsening bilateral relations with Iran, and the corresponding sense of Sunni decline that was manifested in the U.S. siege of Fallujah. Contrary to the received wisdom about Islamist groups, the inclusion of Sunni Islamists into the highly polarized

parliament did not make them more vocal proponents of reform and democracy, but rather more entrenched supporters of the sectarian status quo.

5.2.1 Al-Minbar

Al-Minbar is the political wing of the *al-Islah* Society formed in 1984 under the patronage of Shaykh 'Isa bin Muhammad al-Khalifa, a former labor and social affairs minister and one of the king's uncles.[247] As a Muslim Brotherhood entity, the society has strong linkages to other Brotherhood groups, particularly in Kuwait (the *al-Islah* society) and, to a less degree, Egypt. Members of *al-Minbar* are quick to point out the divergence between the Brotherhood's program in Egypt and its own platform in Bahrain, which reflects the island's more liberal social mores, cosmopolitanism, and unique political culture.[248] *Al-Minbar* counts among its members a number of Sunni *hawala*, and has a largely middle class constituency (teachers, professionals, and, reportedly, a high number of police officers). Its platform includes programs for social welfare, education, justice, the arts, women's rights, and market liberalization.

On political matters, it adheres squarely to the royal line. Indeed, its secretary general, Saleh 'Ali, has stated repeatedly that the appointed upper house or *majlis al-shura* is a necessary interim step in the process of educating Bahrain's citizenry. "The problem is a lack of parliamentary education in the ranks of the ordinary people," he noted in a 2006 interview. "People don't understand the role of parliament; they think it is always about 'services.'"[249] Although this lament refers principally to the Shi'a's demand for an empowered parliament, many *al-Minbar* interlocutors also pointed to political apathy among Bahrain's Sunnis, noting that they were politically "outgunned" by the Shi'a. "The Shi'a are focused on politics, the Sunnis are focused on their cell phones," quipped a *Minbar* MP in 2006.[250]

Despite hewing to the royal line on politics and reform, *al-Minbar* has emphasized its conciliatory approach to the Shi'a. In 2002 for example, *al-Minbar*'s parent entity, *al-Islah*, held a meeting chaired by Shaykh 'Isa, which included the revered Shi'a cleric 'Abd al-Amir al-Jamri as one of its attendees. After the 2006 elections, *al-Minbar* began cooperating with *al-Wifaq* on social issues and women's rights.

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[247] Baquer al-Najjar, *Al-Harakat al-Diniyya fi al-Khalij al-Arabi* (Religious Movements of the Gulf), (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007), pp. 30-45. The website of *al-Islah* is www.eslahhwf.org.

[248] Personal interview with *Minbar* member 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jannahi, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

[249] Anon., "Interview with Saleh 'Ali," *Ikhwanonline*, November 17, 2006.

[250] Personal interview with Muhammad Khaled Ibrahim, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

That said, the society also has hard-line adherents who adopted an increasingly vociferous stance against the Shi'a in the midst of the ongoing turmoil in Iraq. Among these, an MP affiliated with the *al-Minbar* society, Muhammad Khalid Ibrahim, has been vocal about linking the spread of sectarianism in the Bahraini parliament to Iraq's sectarian strife. Democracy, he has argued, has exacerbated sectarianism in Bahrain rather than dampened it—and much of the blame is due to the Shi'a, who have adopted maximalist demands under inspiration from Iran. Yet Ibrahim himself has hardly been a neutral bystander. In 2004 he submitted a motion for a resolution in support of Iraq's besieged Sunnis in Fallujah, which triggered a swift Shi'a rejection by the *al-Wifaq* bloc.[251] He has also repeatedly called for increased collusion against the Shi'a between the *al-Minbar* bloc and Bahrain's other Sunni Islamist party, the Salafi bloc, *al-Asala*.[252]

5.2.2 Al-Asala

Al-Asala is the political wing of the *Tarbiya al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Education) Society.[253] Founded in 2002, it draws its support from lower class Sunnis, principally in Muharraq and Riffa. As is typical with Salafi groups, *al-Asala* members adopt a more doctrinaire interpretation of Islam that is reflected in dress, social mores, and political practice.[254] Indeed, many have arrived at Salafism after a long journey through other Islamic trends and organizations, which they found unsatisfying or insufficiently rigorous.[255] Historically, the *al-Asala* bloc has been more apolitical and, at the same time, more critical of the ruling family than *al-Minbar*, because the Salafis have less vested economically and less to lose by challenging the status quo.[256] One important effect of the Iraq War and the subsequent perception of Shi'a ascendancy was the reversal of both these trends: Bahrain's Salafis became more supportive of the ruling family and also more political,

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[251] *Al-Jazeera*, November 24, 2004. Also, *al-Hayah*, November 23, 2004.

[252] Personal interview with Muhammad Khaled Ibrahim, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

[253] The society's background is found on its website http://www.alasalah-bh.org/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2; accessed on April 18, 2011.

[254] Muhammad 'Uthman al-Muharraq, "al-Faruq al-Salafiya fi al-Bahrayn," (Salafi Groups in Bahrain," *al-Wasat*, June 29, 2005.

[255] The case of the former secretary general Adl al-Mawada is instructive in this regard. He began as a young man as part of the *Jama'iat al-Tabligh*, then became a Sufi, then a member of the Muslim Brotherood, and finally a Salafi, which he noted offered a set of principles that was authentic and fundamental. Personal interview with Adl al-Mawada, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

[256] Hamdi 'Abd al-Aziz, "Al-'Unf fi al-Bahrayn: Tahlil Mawaqif al-Islamiyin," (Violence in Bahrain: An Analysis of the Position of the Islamists), *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, March 4, 2004.

fielding candidates. Indeed, one independent, non-aligned MP noted in 2006 that the royalty "made politicians out of the Salafis, in order to counter the Shi'a."[257]

There is a strong Saudi influence on the society's outlook that includes moral support and, reportedly, funding. Shaykh Adl al-Mawada, a key figure in the society who up until 2005 served as its secretary general, has looked to the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia for guidance on jurisprudence and social matters. During the siege of Fallujah, a local Bahraini reportedly asked al-Mawada for guidance about whether it was theologically permissible to attack Westerners in Bahrain in solidarity with Iraq's Sunnis. Al-Mawada, citing the Saudi Grand Mufti, replied in the negative; as non-believers residing in an Islamic land, Westerners were a protected category under the Islamic juridical concept of *ahd* (covenant).[258]

The post-2003 environment and the growing fear of Shi'a ascendency, both in Bahrain and throughout the region, had a polarizing effect on the *al-Asala* society. It created a climate where more moderate voices were drowned out by hardliners evincing a more doctrinaire and hostile attitude toward the Shi'a. Two notable examples occurred in 2004 and again in 2005. In 2004, a prominent Salafi figure and member of the *al-Asala* board of governors, Salah al-Jawdar, invited the *al-Wifaq* leader 'Ali Salman to his home and was subsequently also removed from the board. In 2005, al-Mawada, the *al-Asala* secretary general, visited the home of the speaker of the parliament, 'Abd al-Hadi al-Marhun, affiliated with the leftist, secular society *al-Wa'ad*, and gave a speech referring to the Bahraini Shi'a as "Muslims" rather than the more dogmatic and derogatory term, "*rawafidh*" (rejectionists). He was subsequently forced out by the *al-Asala*'s board of governors. [259]

As will be discussed below, more hardline politicians came to represent the voice of Bahraini Salafis, particularly in parliament, which they used as a forum to attack the Shi'a. These included the MP Jasim al-Saidi, an independent Salafi, whose denigration of 'Isa al-Qasim in June 2008 sparked weeks of rioting by the Shi'a, and Muhammad Khalid Ibrahim, an MP who is

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[257] Katja Niethammer, "Stubborn Salafis and Moderate Shiites: Islamic Political Parties in Bahrain," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, Hilton Chicago, CHICAGO, IL, USA, Feb 28, 2007.

[258] Personal interview with Adl al-Mawada, Manama, Bahrain, November 10, 2006. Saudi clerical influence is prominent elsewhere in the society's rallies and material; at a 2006 rally attended by the author, a prominent Saudi cleric was featured as the guest speaker.

[259] Personal interview with Bahraini activist, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006. Muhammad 'Uthman al-Muharraq, "al-Faruq al-Salafiya fi al-Bahrayn," (Salafi Groups in Bahrain), *al-Wasat*, June 29, 2005.

technically aligned with the *al-Minbar* bloc but whose anti-Shi'a views caused several Shi'a to view him as the "Salafi" wing of the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood.[260]

5.2.3 Cooperation between the Sunni Islamists

One important by-product of the Sunni sense of siege was increased collusion between the normally antagonistic *al-Minbar* and *al-Asala*. During the 2002 elections, relations between the two blocs were marked by antagonism, with the key points of divergence being doctrinal views about loyalty to the Bahraini state and constitution. Salafi parliamentarians, in contrast, refused to swear allegiance to Bahraini constitution based on their doctrinal view about the inviolability of the Qur'an as the only legitimate source of law.[261] *Al-Minbar* members have chided *al-Asala* for this doctrinaire practice. "The Salafis demand total obedience to the ruler and the principle of *takfir* (excommunication); they alternate between extremes. *Al-Minbar* doesn't have extremes," noted one *al-Minbar* activist and middle class engineer.[262] For its part, *al-Asala* criticizes *al-Minbar* as too opportunistic. "*Al-Minbar* needs the Salafis; but quite frankly they will only be friends with you if they need you," noted the former *al-Asala* secretary general Adl al-Mawada.[263]

Aside from doctrinal differences, the two societies represent different socio-economic sectors of Bahrain, with *al-Minbar* appealing to a middle class constituency drawn from the *hawala*, while the *al-Asala* is more lower class and tribal.[264] In the 2002 elections, several interlocutors noted that the *al-Asala* bloc had effectively "outgunned" the *al-Minbar* society through the provision of social services during the pre-election campaign. According to some observers, the *al-Asala* was further aided by the perception that the *al-Minbar* society was penetrated by the Bahraini security services.[265]

But in the run-up to the 2006 elections, the two societies appeared to have shelved their differences to avoid splitting the Sunni Islamist vote and to counter an emerging coalition between the Shi'a *al-Wifaq* society and the leftist *al-Wa'ad*. Shi'a activists and their leftist allies allege that this cooperation was deliberately fostered by the al-Khalifa as a sort of sectarian

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[260] Personal interviews with Bahraini Shi'a in Sitra, Bahrain, November 2006.

[261] Katja Niethammer, "Stubborn Salafis and Moderate Shiites: Islamic Political Parties in Bahrain."

[262] Personal interview with 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jannahi, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

[263] Personal interview with Adl al-Mawada, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

[264] Muhammad 'Uthman al-Muharraq, "Al-Faruq al-Salafiya fi al-Bahrayn," (Salafi Groups in Bahrain), *al-Wasat*, June 29, 2005.

[265] Personal interview with Bahraini sociologist, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

balancing strategy (two other Sunni Islamist parties, the *Shura* and *Wasit* societies were excluded from this alliance because they were perceived as too critical of the regime). Those Sunnis who tried to remain independent or engaged in outreach to the Shi'a were increasingly criticized. For example, 'Aziz Abul, a Sunni independent candidate in a largely Shi'a district, was criticized by *al-Asala* for running on an *al-Wifaq* ticket and "betraying" the Sunnis.[266]

5.3 THE BANDAR REPORT AND THE NATURALIZATION DEBATE

In September 2006, a Sudanese-born adviser to the Bahraini Cabinet Affairs Ministry, Saleh al-Bandar released a 240-page report alleging a secret plot by members of the royal family to exploit the island's sectarian fissures and marginalize the Shi'a in advance of the parliamentary elections. The report accuses the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and member of the royal family, Shaykh Ahmed bin Atiyatallah al-Khalifa, of orchestrating the payment of more than 6 million U.S. dollars for operatives to establish a secret spying cell on the Shi'a, the creation of official non-government organizations, the sponsorship of a proselytization campaign of converting Shi'a to Sunnism, and the creation of Internet forums and text messages intended to spread sectarian strife.[267]

The report was a watershed event in Bahraini politics that profoundly impacted the climate of sectarian relations. For many Shi'a oppositionists it confirmed longstanding fears about the regime's intent and the growing menace from Sunni mobilization. "The Bandar report brought to the surface what many people already suspected; what is new is the documentation," noted a longtime activist.[268] The report's disclosures also proved to be a boon to *al-Haq* and its efforts to undermine the pro-participation stance of *al-Wifaq*.

Among the report's most damning revelations was confirmation of a long-standing trend by the government of recruiting foreign Sunnis from the tribal areas of Pakistan, Yemen, Syria and Saudi Arabia into the Bahraini security services and then granting them citizenship.[269] From

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[266] Personal interview with Aziz Abul, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

[267] In subsequent interviews, Bandar, who was quickly deported by Bahraini authorities to the United Kingdom, emphasized that the King and the Prime Minister were not implicated in the report, only Shaykh Atiyatallah, in his capacity as the head of the Central Informatics Office—Bahrain's version of the CIA or MI6. The full report is available at http://www.bahrainrights.org/files/albandar.pdf; accessed on April 18, 2011. As of early 2012, Atiyatallah held the position of Minister of the Royal Court for Follow-Up Affairs.

[268] Personal interview with activist, Manama, Bahrain, November 2006.

[269] Habib Trabelsi, "Bahrain's Shiite Muslims Cry Foul over Dual Nationality Plan," *Khaleej Times* (June 16, 2002). Also, *al-Arabiya* , "Ma Haqiqat Qidiya al-Tajnis fi al-Bahrayn," Panorama TV, February 9 2009.

the perspective of Shi'a oppositionists, this practice was a dangerous escalation and, potentially, a Faustian bargain with the regime for three reasons. First, granting citizenship rights to these soldiers was seen as part of the larger strategy to tip the island's demographic balance and making the Shi'a a minority. Second, several Shi'a oppositionists pointed out that, given the soldiers' origins in the tribal areas of Pakistan, Yemen, and Syria, the recruitment practice could be inadvertently creating a backdoor for the importation of al-Qa'ida's ideology.[270] And lastly, it was further illustration of the divide between rulers and ruled, creating what one activist called a "cordon sanitaire" for the regime. [271]

5.4 MANAGING SECTARIANISM: PARLIAMENTARY POLITICS

Parliamentary politics from 2002 to 2009 were a critical test of the state's ability to manage the shocks of the post-2003 regional upheaval. In some respects, they created a climate of hope for positive change that acted as pressure release. Groups that otherwise might have been inspired toward radicalism by the unfolding events in Iraq and the rise of Iran were effectively "nationalized" and developed vested stakes in the Bahraini political project. At the same time, the efforts of the reformist wing of the regime—led by the Crown Prince—were undone by the disclosure of the Bandar Report. The unelected *majlis al-shura* continued to exist as the principal obstacle to real reform; oppositionists frequently pointed to the unicameral legislature of 1973-75 as the starting point for any reform.

In the years following the 2006 elections, parliamentary life became increasingly polarized and rife with sectarian wrangling. Deputies spent excessive time trying to mark their identity, rather than responding to their constituents' needs. The Salafi groups sponsored by hardline elements in the royalty—led by the Prime Minister, Shaykh Khalifa bin Salman — became more entrenched and publicly hostile toward the Shi'a. Rather than acting as more

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[270] Personal interview with 'Abd al-Wahhab Husayn, Manama, Bahrain, November 12, 2006.

[271] Mansur al-Jamri, "State and Civil Society in Bahrain," *Society for Gulf Arab Studies Newsletter*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 2000), p. 5. The naturalization of foreign Sunnis was widely believed to have impacted the outcome of the 2006 parliamentary elections. Yet 'Ali Salman denied this in a 2006 interview, arguing that "(*al-Wifaq*'s) districts were not affected by naturalization or the military's participation But we are against participation of newly naturalized because the law stipulates that 10 years should pass since their naturalization before being allowed to vote. Article 6 in the 1963 law that organizes naturalization states that people cannot vote until 10 years after naturalization." Anon., "Interview with 'Ali Salman," *al-Elaph*, November 29, 2006.

forceful proponents of reform once in parliament (as the literature on Islamist inclusion would suggest), they became more unyielding supporters of the status quo.[272]

5.4.1 The Parliamentary "Reprieve," 2002-2005

The aftermath of the 2002 elections and the escalation of conflict in Iraq had several important effects on parliamentary dynamics. The boycott of the elections by the Shi'a meant that the parliament was stacked with pro-regime supporters whose legislation alienated the Shi'a. The inclusion of the Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood blocs helped solidify the Sunni Islamist alliance with the regime that would become even more important in the run up to the 2006 elections.

From the regime's perspective, the period of 2002 to 2005 was a sort of grace period. It allowed the government to foster greater collusion between the Sunni Islamist societies and encourage their participation. According to an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

> The (Shi'a) boycott was good. It gave breathing space for the government and allowed it to brush up on its performance. The 2002 elections were a good trial run. Nobody else had the guts to do anything like this in the region.[273]

Interlocutors describe the post-electoral mood in 2003 after the elections as calmer and more optimistic. Yet doubts remained and suspicions mounted about the government's commitment to real reform. The widely despised Prime Minister, Shaykh Khalifa bin Salman, retained control of important government portfolios. Senior positions were reserved for the royalty and the issue of corruption had not been touched. Moreover, there was no opposition bloc in parliament; the ten Shi'as who did hold seats were all loyalists.[274]

During this period, the appointed upper house (*majlis al-shura*) emerged as lightening rod around which debates about the pace and scope of reforms would revolve. Under the 2002 constitution, the *majlis al-shura* vets all legislation submitted by the parliament. Oppositionists frequently charge that there are "too many safety valves" for the regime—the government can submit its own proposals which take precedence over those submitted by the parliament. Even if

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[272] Katja Niethammer, "Stubborn Salafis and Moderate Shiites: Islamic Political Parties in Bahrain" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association 48th Annual Convention, Hilton Chicago, CHICAGO, IL, USA*, Feb 28, 2007 <Not Available>. 2011-03-13 <http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p181437_index.html>

[273] Personal interview with a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Manama, Bahrain, November 13, 2006.

[274] Personal interview with 'Abd al-Nabi al-Ekri, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

a measure passes the *majlis al-shura*, the King can veto it. The entire process can take up to two years. "The elongation of the process equals veto power," noted the *Wa'ad* politician Ibrahim Sharif.[275]

Many oppositionists spoke admiringly of the Kuwaiti parliament, arguing that the institution, and also the traditional of *diwaniya*, helped defuse sectarianism and promote "real democracy."[276] For its part, the Bahraini government maintained that the bicameral parliamentary structure, and in particularly the appointed *majlis al-shura*, was necessary to prevent the excessive religiosity, political immaturity and sectarian passions of the parliament from destabilizing the country. Regime supporters argued that the more liberal leaning members of the *majlis al-shura* were a necessary check against the Islamist-dominated parliament.[277]

In the wake of the Bandar report, popular seething against the regime reached levels not seen since the mid-1990s *intifada*. In April 2006, the newly formed *al-Haq* group began a campaign of bombings and organized riots to demonstrate its capacity as a spoiler. In leaflets distributed in mosques, it stated that violence would continue until the Bahraini Shi'a were better represented in a parliament that was fully endowed with legislative power. In several interviews, leaders of *al-Haq* told the author that the Bahraini Shi'a would endure roughly one year of no-movement from the new parliament before Shi'a public opinion would once again swing back toward *al-Haq*'s confrontational militancy.[278] Many respondents warned that the expiration of the "grace period" of *al-Wifaq*'s parliamentary tenure without any tangible benefits could push many Shi'a into the ranks of *al-Haq* and toward more violent expressions of dissent.[279]

The regime made several attempts to regulate sectarian tensions. Just prior to the 2006 elections, the regime convened a series of multi-party debate forums, the *Muntadyat*, on topics

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[275] Personal interview with Ibrahim Sharif, Manama, Bahrain, November 8, 2006.

[276] Personal interviews in Muharraq, Bahrain, November 2006.

[277] Habib Toumi, "Bahrain King Appoints a Liberal Upper Council to Offset Islamists," *Gulf News*, December 7, 2006. The former secretary general of *al-Asala*, Adl al-Mawada argued that an appointed *majlis al-shura* "is an ordinary thing, especially at the beginning of the democratic process." Anon., "Interview with Adl al-Mawada," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 22, 2005. An official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, "The parliamentary structure was devised so it couldn't be hijacked by extremists. We don't want a 40-member house composed of religious clerics who will ban alcohol, ban women driving, take Bahrain backwards and drive away the foreigners who enjoy our liberal society." Personal interview with a member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Manama, Bahrain, November 13, 2006.

[278] Personal interviews 'Abd al-Jalil al-Sinqays and Hassan Mushayma, Manama, Bahrain, November 11, 2006.

[279] Author's discussions with Shi'a in Sitra, 'Isa Town, Bilad al-Qadim, Muharraq, Senablis, November 2006. Also, Michael Herb, "Emirs and Parliaments in the Gulf," *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 13, Number 4 (October 2002), pp. 41-47.

related to economic reform, civil liberties and media freedom. According to the forum's organizer, these sessions were designed to implement the regime's "incremental" approach to "change management"—equipping parliamentary candidates and voters in the skills of consensus-building, debate, and tolerance for opposing viewpoints.[280] Yet while attending these sessions, the author noted a conspicuous absence among the debate participants—the two key Sunni Islamist societies, *al-Asala* and *al-Minbar*. Subsequent interviews with Bahraini analysts and a Muslim Brotherhood member indicated that this lack of attendance was because they did not have well-developed campaign platforms to address the forum's issues.[281] Inevitably, this absence fueled the perception among the Shi'a and other oppositionists that the *Muntadyat*—while appearing on the surface to promote the norms of civil debate and pluralism—were simply a regime ploy to allow liberals and Shi'a to blow off steam.

5.4.2 Deadlock and Disenchantment, 2006-2009

The run-up to the 2006 elections was marred by widespread charges of gerrymandering, so-called "floating" voting stations, and voting by recently naturalized Sunnis. Nevertheless, *al-Wifaq* secured 17 out of 40 seats—a significant gain, but one that was still short of the majority necessary to enact legislation. *Al-Wifaq*'s liberal allies from *al-Wa'ad* failed to gain a seat, thus depriving the parliament of a potential secular mediator—the role that the *Wa'ad* politician 'Abd al-Hadi al-Marhun had played in the previous parliament. Sunni Islamists from *al-Asala* and *al-Minbar* gained 5 and 7 seats respectively. Independent Sunni Islamists secured another 9 seats.[282] The final electoral results (**Table 5.1**) were an even split between Sunni and Shi'a, suggesting a parliament that would grow increasingly polarized. *Al-Wifaq* thus emerged facing a two challenges: Sunni Islamists in parliament and the militant activism of *al-Haq* and the BCHR/BFM, which threatened to siphon away Shi'a support as disenchantment grew.

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[280] Personal interview with regime official and organizer of the *Muntadyat*, Manama, Bahrain, November 13, 2006.

[281] This observation was buttressed by the comments of a *Minbar* member who noted that the "Sunnis are disorganized. They have civil society leaders; but no *marja'* like the Shi'a. The morale of Sunnis is low." Personal unattributed interview with a *Minbar* member, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

[282] Salman al-Dossari, "Roundup: Bahrain Elections, 2006," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 28, 2006. Also, F. Gregory Gause III, "Bahrain Parliamentary Election Results," *International Journal of Middle East Studie*s 39 (May 2007), pp. 170-1.

Society	Seats
al-Wifaq	17
al-Minbar	7
al-Asala	5
al-Wa'ad	0
Independent Sunni Islamist (pro-government)	9
Independent (pro-government)	1
Independent opposition (aligned with *al-Wifaq*)	1
Total	40

Table 5.1: Bahraini Parliamentary Election Results, 2006[283]

In its first year in parliament, there were mounting signs that *al-Wifaq* was being co-opted by the government and was softening its advocacy of Shi'a issues.[284] Much of this cooperation may have stemmed from 'Ali Salman's belief that Bahraini's Sunni Islamists were dominated by moderates, who could be engaged with a view toward marginalizing the hardliners. In a 2006 interview, 'Ali Salman noted:

> The *takfiri* strand of the Salafis is a minority; we have moderate Salafis here. There won't be a clash in Bahrain—we can weather the storm, despite the war in Iraq.[285]

Regardless of intent, *al-Wifaq* faced increasing criticism, from within the society and without, that its parliamentary "experiment" was failing to yield concrete results. From December 2006 until April 2007 there were nearly weekly protests, tire burnings and barricades in Shi'a villages – events that *al-Wifaq* routinely denounced. In addition, *al-Wifaq* frequently mobilized its own counter-marches, usually numbering 20 to 40,000 people.[286] Inside parliament, *al-Wifaq* increasingly resorted to walk-outs to register its displeasure and frustration. In May, for example, *al-Wifaq*'s MPs left parliament to protest the deadlock on legislation, taking advantage of a rare admission by the more liberal-minded Crown Prince that economic reform was stalled because of a lack of cooperation between the Economic Development Council—

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[283] F. Gregory Gause III, "Bahrain Parliamentary Election Results: 25 November and 2 December 2006, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39 (2007), pp. 170-171.

[284] A prominent women's rights campaigner noted tacit cooperation between Salafis and *al-Wifaq* over morality issues and social matters, such as inheritance and divorce laws. A prominent *al-Haq* leader also accused *al-Wifaq* of "flirting" with the Salafis. Personal interviews with a women's rights campaigner and 'Abd al-Jalil al-Sinqays, Manama, Bahrain, November 13 and 5, respectively.

[285] Personal interview with 'Ali Salman, Manama, Bahrain, November 6, 2006.

[286] Ibid.

which he chaired—and the regime.[287] In mid-2008, *al-Wifaq* was forced to publicly defend its parliamentary record after repeated attacks in the Bahraini press.[288]

Faced with mounting accusations of collusion with the government, *al-Wifaq* launched a concerted campaign to challenge the government's naturalization policy. In March 2008, 'Ali Salman submitted a motion to compel the Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs, Shaykh Atiyatallah, to appear before the parliament for questioning about his role in the allegations of the Bandar report. The measure marked the first time the parliament had sought to question a government figure—a potential watershed for opposition politics in the country.

In response, the Sunni speaker of the parliament submitted a counter-motion for deliberation, arguing that calling ministers before the parliament was unconstitutional. The Sunni loyalists rallied behind the government, defeated the measure and submitted their own proposal to summon the Shi'a Minister for Municipalities and Agriculture, Mansour bin Rajab, on charges of corruption. The resulting deadlock paralyzed the parliament for six weeks. In the end, 'Ali Salman reportedly reached a deal with the government to withdraw its summons of Atiyatallah, if it could submit questions about the government's naturalization policy. In return, *al-Wifaq* would not oppose the questioning of bin Rajab.

Subsequently, *al-Wifaq* later joined forces with *al-Amal* to form a "National Committee to Combat Naturalization," culminating in the submission of a series of recommendations on naturalization to the parliament on October 15, 2008.[289] These included forming a regulatory body to monitor officials and departments involved in the naturalization process and enforcing greater transparency in the granting of citizenship.[290] By late 2009, *Al-Wifaq* had shifted tactics once again. Its representatives began negotiations with regime supporters in parliament, including Sunni Islamists from *al-Asala* and *al-Minbar* to enact constitutional amendments, in an effort to show increasingly frustrated constituents that it was keeping its pre-election promises.[291]

5.5 SECTARIAN POLARIZATION IN THE BAHRAINI PARLIAMENT

In each period of parliamentary politics, the regional crises of Iraq, Iran's rise and the 2006 Lebanon War impacted the regime-constructed status quo. As noted, the crescendo of

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[287] *Al-Arabiya.net*, May 13, 2008.

[288] *Al-Ayyam*, May 29, 2008.

[289] Anon., "Al-Hakuma Tahil Qanun al-Jansiya 'ila Majlis al-Nuwwab al-Dur al-Muqbil" (The Government Refers the Naturalization Law to the Parliament for the Next Session) *al-Waqt*, October 15, 2008.

[290] Ibid.

[291] *Al-Wifaq* needed 21 votes for a proposed constitutional amendment.

violence in Iraq became a sort of prism through which the Bahraini Shi'a and Sunnis viewed their politics.[292] Marches and rallies in support of the protagonists in Iraq polarized the already tense political field in Bahrain. As noted by a prominent member of the *al-Wifaq* bloc in parliament:

> In every multi-sect society, sometimes incidents occur that can be construed as a kind of sectarian feud … and that is due to the transnational cultures that occur in the region, similar to the sectarian conflict that is taking place in Iraq or Afghanistan. Naturally there are those that sympathize with this or that sect.[293]

The initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the U.S. assault on Najaf in May 2004, the November 2004 battle of Fallujah, and the February 2006 bombing of the Shi'a al-Askari mosque in Samarra all served as catalysts for demonstrations in Bahrain that exacerbated local power inequalities.[294] The battle of Fallujah in particular provoked fierce parliamentary skirmishes. Deputies from *al-Minbar* argued that the fighting against U.S. troops was "legitimate resistance," while Bahraini Shi'a deputies labeled the city's defenders as "terrorists." By late 2004, 'Abd al-Hadi al-Marhun, a member of the liberal *Wa'ad* society, noted that the parliament had become excessively focused on partisan expressions of solidarity with Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a protagonists. Al-Marhun subsequently proposed a "code of honor" that would eschew expressions of sectarian solidarity and would "put Bahrain first."[295] The code and al-Marhun's mediation role highlight the important functions that *al-Wa'ad* played in the first Bahraini parliament—as a sort of interlocutor and intermediary between Sunni and Shi'a deputies.

The July 2006 Lebanon War injected a further destabilizing dynamic into Bahraini politics. The charismatic figure of Hassan Nasrallah and Hizballah's battlefield performance against Israel proved to be a powerful inspiration to Shi'a who opposed participation in the

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[292] Said Shehabi, "Iba'ad Mahaliya wa 'Iqlimiya lil-Tawtr fi al-Bahrayn" (Local and Regional Dimensions of Tensions in Bahrain), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, February 17, 2004

[293] Shakyh 'Abdallah al-Aali quoted in Salman al-Dawsiri, "Argument Over 'Early Signs' of Sectarian Sedition in Bahrain: When Parliament Becomes a Stage for Sunni-Shiite Friction," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 6, 2006.

[294] One telling example of these tensions is popular perceptions of the Bahraini media. A Bahraini activist noted that different transnational media outlets in Bahrain display a decidedly sectarian bias: *al-Jazeera* is regarded by many Bahrainis as a "Sunni channel," while the Lebanese Hizballah's popular TV station *al-Manar* helps promote Shi'a identity. *Al-Arabiya* appears to be the most balanced in its sectarian orientation. More locally, *al-Watan* newspaper – dominated by a Salafi board of advisors - serves as a counterweight to the Shi'a-dominated *al-Wasat*. *Al-Watan* is heavily influenced by Saudi Arabia and, the activist asserted, frequently tried to inflame Sunni opinion. One example of this newspaper's purported indifference to Shi'a concerns was its failure to mention the February 2006 al-Askari mosque bombing in Iraq. Personal interview with Bahraini activist, Manama, Bahrain, May 10, 2006.

[295] *Al-Hayah*, November 26, 2004.

elections. The presence of Hizballah banners and posters throughout the Shi'a areas and particularly in the headquarters of *al-Wifaq* and home of *al-Haq* leader Hassan Mushayma, stirred further suspicions by the regime and played into the hands of those accusing the Shi'a of being foreign proxies. This was exacerbated in mid-2008, with Hizballah's May 8 move into West Beirut against the predominantly Sunni Future Movement. In Bahrain, this assault was widely interpreted as a blow to Sunnis everywhere and further evidence of Shi'a ascendancy. An editorial in the pro-government *al-Watan* argued that the Bahraini Shi'a were emulating Hizballah's strategy of "continually raising the ceiling of demands and creating crises."[296]

Yet there was little concrete evidence of Hizballah's involvement in the Bahraini political scene, either rhetorically or materially. If it did intervene, it was to emphasize that Bahraini politics was the autonomous preserve of the Bahrainis themselves, and not for a Lebanese national entity to influence or determine. In 2004, for example, a Bahraini activist reportedly asked Hizballah for assistance in hospital administration and charitable work; Hizballah refused, citing the need to preserve Bahraini sovereignty.[297] Later, on the eve of the 2006 elections, *al-Haq* secretary general Hassan Mushayma reportedly met with the deputy secretary general of Hizballah, Shaykh Na'im Qasim while on the *hajj* to solicit his views on how to approach the upcoming elections. Qasim's declined to comment, stating that the matter was for *al-Haq* to decide as a Bahraini entity.[298]

The longstanding accusation against the Bahraini Shi'a as agents of Iran intensified in the context of rising regional tensions with the Islamic Republic. In some cases, tactical errors by the Bahraini Shi'a fed regime paranoia and empowered hardline voices. In late 2008 for example, a local Shi'a group called the *Tajdid* (Renewal) Cultural Association contacted the Iranian and Iraqi embassies in Bahrain to seek the advice of Najaf- and Qom-based Shi'a *maraja'* about violations of the Bahraini constitution. Predictably, Bahrain's Sunnis responded that Shi'a were loyal to Iran, and the head of the Bahraini National Security Agency, Khalifa bin Abdullah bin Mohammed Al-Khalifa, warned of banning the group if it persisted in its foreign outreach.[299] In a 2008 interview with the liberal magazine *al-Afaaq*, the founding president of the BCHR, Nabil

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[296] *al-Watan*, June 19, 2008.

[297] Personal unattributed interview with a Saudi Shi'a dissident, United States, May 24, 2011.

[298] Personal unattributed interview with a member of *al-Haq*, Manama, Bahrain, November 12, 2006.

[299] Anon., "Jami'at Mahalia Shia' Tawjiha Bayan li'l Marajiat al-Shia 'Abr al-Safarati Baladayn," (A Local Shi'a Group Sends an Message to Shi'a *Maraja'* By Way of Two Embassies), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, September 21, 2008. Also, Anon., "BCR: We Talked to Religious Authorities in Iran, Iraq to Avoid Problems in the Country," *Al-Aafaq*, September 22, 2008.

Rajab threatened that if their demands were not met, the Bahraini Shi'a might turn to Iran. "There is no guarantee," he warned, "that future frustration will not force people to adopt extremist views and seek help from foreign powers not liked by Bahrain, such as Iran."[300]

The escalating tensions in north Yemen between Zaydi Shi'a rebels (which Saudi Arabia and the government of Yemen allege are backed by Iran) and the Yemen government injected more tension into the Bahraini parliament. In late 2009, the hardline Salafi MP Jasim al-Saidi accused *al-Wifaq* of having met with 'Abd al-Malik al-Huthi, the field commander of the Zaydi insurgency.[301] Later, Bahrain's parliament introduced a motion to issue a statement expressing solidarity with Saudi Arabia in its struggle against the Zaydis. *Al-Wifaq*'s representatives abstained, arguing that Bahrain's foreign policy should avoid interference in other countries' affairs—a move that created even more suspicion about the nationalist bona fides of the Shi'a.[302]

That said, there were also instances where the inclusion of *al-Wifaq* into the parliament also provided an opportunity for the society to demonstrate its nationalist bona fides. In July 2007 Husayn Shariatmadari, editor of the Iranian newspaper *Kayhan* and a confidante of the Iranian Supreme Leader, argued that Bahrain was rightfully a province of the Islamic Republic. More than 500 Bahrainis, including *al-Wifaq* lawmakers, gathered outside the Iranian Embassy in Bahrain to protest the statement.[303] Later, in February 2009, *al-Wifaq* MPs responded harshly to a statement by Iranian MP Darioush Ghanbari that if there were a referendum, Bahrainis would vote overwhelmingly in favor of union with Iran.[304]

In response to these regional challenges, some Bahraini officials, led by the Crown Prince, appeared to believe that economic reform, rather than lasting political changes to Bahrain's participatory institutions would be the surest way to insulate the Shi'a against potential mobilization and incitement by foreign influences. If political reform was mentioned at all, it was as a process rather than a desired end-state. A high-ranking member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted in 2006:

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[300] Anon., "Nabil Rajab to Afaq: Bahrain's Ruling Class Exercises Apartheid Against Shiites," *al-Aafaq*, October 26, 2008.

[301] *Al-Jazeera*,August 27, 2009. The northern rebellion by followers of Zaydi cleric Husayn al-Huthi (d. September 2004) was reportedly triggered in late 2004 by Zaydi alarm that the government was playing "sectarian politics," i.e., co-opting radical Salafi factions against the marginalized northern Zaydi tribes. The conflict, however, is not merely a sectarian one but is rather rooted in longstanding center-periphery tensions that afflict Yemen as a hole.

[302] Anon., "Bahrain: Yemen's Rebellion Adds to Sectarian Tensions," *Oxford Analytica*, January 12, 2010.

[303] Anon., "Bahrainis Protest Against Iran Province Claim" *The Pennisula*, July 14, 2007.

[304] Anon., "Bahraini Shiite Group Flays Iran Rhetoric," *Gulf News*, February 8, 2009.

> There is no doubt that Iran, Iraq and Hizballah are playing a role in instigating something we've never seen before. But we can absorb it with economic reform. Most people are focused on their personal standard of living, not sectarian issues. It is easy to convince unemployed youth if religious scholars preach that the Shi'a are being targeted. But people believe in Bahrain more than Shi'ism or al-Qa'ida. Reform has given them hope.[305]

Pro-regime voices not only tolerated this fractiousness but appeared to deliberately encourage it to bolster the role of the al-Khalifa as "indispensable" mediators over an immature citizenry and buffers against Iranian encroachment. "There are two ways," argued a member of *al-Minbar*. "Saddam's way or the al-Khalifa's way. The al-Khalifa are mediators; without them, Bahrain would go the way of Lebanon or Iraq."[306]

During this period, the role of Saudi Arabia became increasingly important for the al-Khalifa—as a counterweight to Shi'a activism and the perceived threat of Iranian encroachment. Many interlocutors in Bahrain pointed to Saudi influence as playing a determinant role in preventing the al-Khalifa from accommodating the Bahraini Shi'a or liberalizing the political system. According to a senior member of *al-Haq*, "The Saudi perception is that the liberalization of Bahrain equals the 'Iranization' of Bahrain."[307] Echoing this, a senior Saudi diplomat in Manama noted on the eve of the 2006 Bahraini parliamentary elections that "We are watching the elections very carefully. The Iranian hand is very strong. We don't want the country handed over to Iran."[308] In the run-up to the 2006 elections, a video reportedly surfaced showing members of the al-Dawasir tribe in Saudi Arabia signing up to vote in the Bahraini parliamentary elections—an effort to tip the sectarian scales by soliciting Saudi support.[309] Other interviewees suspected that Saudi opposition to reform was frequently used as a pretext by the al-Khalifa to defer on democratization. According to one activist in Bahrain:

> The al-Khalifa tell us, 'Our hands are tied because of our Saudi patrons.' This is complete rubbish. The Saudis have tolerated liberalization in nearby Qatar and Kuwait.[310]

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[305] Personal interview with member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Manama, Bahrain, November 13, 2006.

[306] Personal interview with *al-Minbar* member, Manama, Bahrain, November 14, 2006.

[307] Personal interview with senior *al-Haq* member, Manama, Bahrain, November 10, 2006.

[308] Personal interview with senior Saudi diplomat, Manama, Bahrain, November 12, 2006.

[309] International Crisis Group, op. cite.

[310] Personal interview with Ibrahim Sharif, Manama, Bahrain, November 13, 2006.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how the regional context of the Iraq War and rising tensions with Iran impacted the Bahraini's government's response to Shi'a activism. By facilitating Shi'a participation in parliament, the Bahraini regime sought to insulate the Shi'a opposition from the mobilizing appeal of outside actors. At the same time, it pursued a strategy of blunting Shi'a activism by sponsoring the formation of a united Sunni Islamist bloc and pursuing a policy of naturalizing foreign-born Sunnis to offset the Shi'a's growing demographic weight.

As a contested institution and the perceived gateway to Shi'a empowerment, Bahraini's flawed and fragile parliament stood at the center of the post-Iraq sectarian and geo-political turbulence. Parliamentary politics became steadily polarized in the wake of Iraq's escalating strife and post-2003 regional tensions. MPs used parliamentary sessions to make increasingly strident expressions of solidarity with Iraq's warring factions. This, in turn triggered gestures of support by their sectarian counterparts and, occasionally, walk-outs.

That said, the parliament, despite its flaws, also served as an important institutional buffer against the regional shocks of the post-2003 period. It offered disenfranchised Shi'a an opening to express their grievances and push for redress in a peaceful, non-violent manner. But the inability of the *al-Wifaq* bloc to deliver real reforms created a climate of mounting cynicism and frustration that would eventually spark the revolts of early 2011.

6 SAUDI ARABIA: SHI'A MOBILIZATION AND REGIONAL UPHEAVAL

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Shi'a-state relations in Saudi Arabia are distinguished from the other cases by three factors related to demographics, regime type and the kingdom's geostrategic position. First, the Shi'a of Saudi Arabia constitute only 10 to 15 percent of the total population, meaning that political reforms do not carry the implicit threat of a Shi'a takeover, as they do in Bahrain.[311] As noted in Chapter Two, the Saudi Shi'a enjoy more economic advantages and a higher standard of living than their Bahraini counterparts, but suffer from greater religious persecution stemming from the monarchy's alliance with the Salafi clerical establishment. Unlike Bahrain and Kuwait, there are limited venues for political participation, resulting in Shi'a strategies that are focused more on intellectual activism and securing cultural rights.

Regional tensions with Iran have also impacted Shi'a-state relations in Saudi Arabia to a greater degree than the other cases. The Saudi monarchy is acutely sensitive to how its rivalry with Iran impacts its legitimacy at home and abroad, and this vulnerability has obstructed reform progress on the Shi'a issue. Finally, the "Twelver" Shi'a in Saudi Arabia are a relatively compact demographic group and reside near the kingdom's richest oilfields, making the fear of secession more acute than the other cases.

This chapter will explore how Shi'a political activism in Saudi Arabia was both enabled and constrained by shifts in the post-2003 regional environment. It will first discuss the initial post-invasion push by the Saudi Shi'a to demonstrate their nationalist bona fides and deflect criticism that they were susceptible to potential manipulation by Iran or resurgent Shi'a authorities in Iraq. Particular attention will be paid to understanding how the Saudi Shi'a tried to situate the institution of the *marja'iyya* in a national context and build cross-sectarian ties with other reformists. The chapter will then cover splits in the Shi'a movement that emerged as Saudi reforms stalled after 2008. The next chapter will cover the regime's strategies toward the Shi'a in the context its worsening threat perceptions of Iranian power.

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[311] The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "The Future of the Global Muslim Population," January 17, 2011. Available at http://pewforum.org/future-of-the-global-muslim-population-sunni-and-shia.aspx; accessed on April 12, 2011. Some estimates put the figure as low as five percent and as high as 20 percent. See U.S. State Department, "Saudi Arabia: Report on International Religious Freedom," 2010; available at http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148843.htm; accessed on August 30, 2011.

6.2 CONTAINING THE SPILLOVER: SHI'A REFORM INITIATIVES

As noted earlier, by the mid-1990s, a core of moderate Shi'a leadership had coalesced around the exiled *Shiraziyyin* membership of the OIR, who returned to Saudi Arabia in 1993. In the post-2003 era, this cadre—centered on clerics and lay activists like Hassan al-Saffar, Tawfiq al-Sayf, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, and Muhammad Mahfouz —pursued a number of tactics intended to manage and contain the spillover of the post-2003 Iraq upheaval and demonstrate their loyalty to the monarchy. These included launching a petition campaign for greater rights, participating in municipal council elections, promoting sectarian dialogue, and attempting to define the limits of the *marja'iyya*'s influence.

6.2.1 Initial Shi'a Reactions to the Iraq War

In many respects, the run-up to the 2003 Iraq War proved to be a boon to the Shi'a reform movement in Saudi Arabia. As noted in Chapter Two, much of the Shi'a reconciliation with the Saudi regime had taken place in the 1990s as a result of an improvement in Saudi-Iranian bilateral relations, the chilling of relations between the OIR and their supporters in Iran, and the Saudi regime's amnesty offer to exiled Shi'a oppositionists.

The rapprochement can also be attributed to the growing Sunni Islamist threat—specifically, the so-called *Sahwa* movement (see Chapter Two)—faced by the Saudi regime and the royalty's desire to contain the *Sahwa* and avoid a "two-front war" with the *Sahwa* and the Shi'a.[312] As argued by Stephane Lacroix, the Saudi regime "played the card of the Shirazi Shiite opposition" to manage the *Sahwa* challenge. The first goal was to relieve pressure on the Saudi regime, but also to prevent the *Sahwa* from developing contacts with the Shirazi opposition in exile.[313] For their part, the Shi'a grew closer with moderate, liberal Sunni Islamists who felt threatened by the growing trend of jihadi extremism. These figures included notable reformers like Hassan al-Maliki, 'Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, Abdullah Hamid, and Matruk al-Falah.[314] Like

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[312] Madawi al-Rashid, "al-Shi'a al-Saudiyya: Bayn Aqra' al-Hakim wa Fatawa al-Mashaykh" (Saudi Shi'a Between the Ruler's Enticement and the Clerics' *Fatawa*), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, January 15, 2007. Anon., "al-Taqrir al-Thani lil-Haquq al-Insan" (The Second Human Rights Report), *al-Rasid* website, December 21, 2005; available at www.rasid.com; accessed on May 3, 2011. Stephane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011). pp. 223-224.

[313] Lacroix, p. 224.

[314] Personal unattributed interviews with Sunni reformists in Jeddah and Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 2007. Also, Stephan Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's New "Islamo-Liberal" Reformers," *Middle East Journal*, 58:3 (Summer, 2004), p. 360.

the Shi'a, these so-called "Islamo-liberals" believed that political reforms within the framework of the monarchy represented the best counter-measure to radicalism.[315]

Aside from these burgeoning contacts, the invasion of Iraq accelerated the regime's desire for rapprochement and reform by raising the specter of Shi'a agitation or even secession inspired by the ascendency of Shi'a in Iraq.[316] Saudi Shi'a leaders and activist, however, were careful to situate their demands in the local context and to downplay any notions of triumph in Iraq. Hassan al-Saffar, in repeated interviews, sermons, and writings, emphasized that what was happening in Iraq was not so much the empowerment of the Shi'a but a redressing of a previous power imbalance. In 2004 he lauded the ability of Shi'a and Sunni in Iraq to bridge their differences and avoid sectarian strife, particularly in the wake of the assassination of al-Hakim and a spate of retaliatory killings of Sunni imams in 2004.[317]

At the same time, several activists saw in the regime's growing fears an opportunity for leverage—a way to remind the al-Saud that although the Shi'a were loyal for now, this loyalty should not be taken for granted, particularly in the context of rapidly escalating regional tensions.[318] In a 2003 interview with a western reporter, Muhammad Mahfouz, a key Shi'a intellectual who would later spearhead al-Saffar's efforts at sectarian reconciliation, warned, "If secession means that we'd get our rights, of course we'd want it."[319] Writing on *al-Jazeera*'s website in 2003, Hamza al-Hassan, a longtime ideologue with the OIR, wrote that the Saudi Shi'a's propensity to look outside the kingdom for guidance, inspiration and support would continue, as long as the community faced discrimination:

> In light of the continuation of the policy of discrimination on a denominational basis, the Shi'a exterior, whether it is in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, or Bahrain, will play a role in the manifestation of the Saudi Shi'a personality psychologically, politically, and religiously. In the absence of domestic inclusion in the national crucible, eyes look outward to seek assistance, ideas, and positions …[320]

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[315] Interview with Fouad Ibrahim by the *al-Aafaq* website, available on the *al-Rasid* website, December 23, 2007; www.rasid.net; accessed on June 9, 2011.

[316] Mai Yamani, "The Rise of Shia Petrolistan," *Project Syndicate*, March 3, 2004.

[317] Interview with *al-Arabiya*, July 19, 2004.

[318] Louër writers, "The rumour culminated in the weeks preceding the American invasion of Iraq and was cleverly used by the *Shiraziyyin* to show the rulers that improving the lot of their Shi'a citizens was not only a matter of justice but a strategic choice for the kingdom's security." Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, London: Hurst & Company, 2008, p. 246.

[319] *Wall Street Journal*, February 3, 2003.

[320] Hamza Hassan, "Al-'Alaqat al-Kharijiya al-Shi'a al-Saudiya al-Madhhabiya wa al-Siyasiya," (The Foreign Political and Sectarian Relations of the Saudi Shi'a), *al-Jazeera*, October 3, 2004; available at

6.2.2 The Shi'a Petition Campaign

Despite these warnings of looking outside the kingdom for patronage, the main thrust of the Shi'a reform initiative was to lobby peaceably for change, demonstrating continued Shi'a fealty to the kingdom. The principal vehicles for accomplishing this immediately following the 2003 invasion were petitions to the royal family—a traditional and uniquely Saudi venue for communicating with the monarchy. In 2003, the Crown Prince received a total of five petitions from clerics and activism across the sectarian and political spectrum that called for a range of reforms: a constitutional monarchy, a loosening of media restrictions, judicial reform, economic liberalization and greater respect for the kingdom's sectarian, tribal and regional diversity. The first petition, "A Vision for the Present and the Future of the Nation" (*Ru'ya li-Hadir al-Watan wa Mustaqbalihi*) was the product of over five months of debate and discussion by Sunni, Shi'a and liberal intellectuals, clerics and community leaders.[321] Importantly, sensitive issues such as women's rights and school curricula reform were dropped from the petition in order to preserve consensus between the clerical and secular wings of the petition-drafters. A total of 20 Shi'a activists signed the petition, representing a circle of liberal intellectuals who would later play prominent roles in pushing for sectarian dialogue: Muhammad Mahfouz, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, Najib al-Khunayzi and Zaki al-Milad.[322] According to several Shi'a liberal activists in the Eastern Province, the document remains the cornerstone for reform.[323]

In April 2003, the Shi'a submitted their own petition, "Partners in the Nation" (*al-Shurka fi al-Watan*), signed by 450 clerics, intellectuals, notables and community leaders.[324] The document is remarkable as an unprecedented assertion of Shi'a identity in a state that eschewed recognition of sectarian diversity. The document went beyond the traditional Shi'a demands for religious recognition and demanded political representation and power sharing. At the same time, it pledged unconditional loyalty to the ruling family and tried to deflect any accusations of Saudi Shi'a susceptibility to foreign influence. It was also notable that it included signatories from

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http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/F79762CF-6D0D-471A-AA57-6BD052C9240A.htm; accessed on April 27, 2009.

[321] Stephan Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's New "Islamo-Liberal" Reformers," *Middle East Journal*, 58:3 (Summer, 2004), p. 360. The petition is available at "Ru'ya li-Hadir al-Watan wa Mustaqbalihi" (Vision for the Present and the Future of theHomeland"), *Al-Quds al-'Arabi*, January 30, 2003.

[322] Ibid. Importantly, Hassan al-Saffar did not sign the petition.

[323] Personal interviews in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 2007.

[324] The Arabic document is available at http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/D06168A6-DA8B-4339-9FB7-82A66AE12A3C.htm. A full translation in English is found in Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*, London: Saqi Books, 2006, p. 257-262.

diverse and doctrinally distinct Shi'a communities in the kingdom—the oases of al-Ahsa and Qatif and the miniscule Shi'a community in the western city of Medina.[325]

The response from the regime helped stir Shi'a expectations. For the first time, the 10-day *Ashura* commemoration was allowed in public, political prisoners were released, and Shi'a publishing flourished, albeit in an incremental manner.[326] Reflecting on these gains, Hassan al-Saffar proclaimed in 2007 that the Saudi government was "much more focused now on delivering rights than ever before."[327] Yet he was also careful to emphasize that these successes were not the result of the rise of the Shi'a in Iraq, but were rather a "correction of the situation," i.e. a granting of legitimacy that had previously been denied.[328]

Fewer restrictions emboldened some Shi'a activists and their liberal allies to assert their demands with even more force. The campaign culminated with the December 2003 submission of a petition demanding a constitutional monarchy. This proved to be a red-line for the royal family—the regime's response was delayed, but harsh. Prominent liberal activists and three Shi'a were arrested and imprisoned in March 2004.[329] The crackdown, and 'Abdallah's subsequent silence over the detentions served as a visible reminder to the Shi'a of the limits of reform and stirred considerable suspicions about 'Abdallah's motives. According to the noted Shi'a activist and author Fouad Ibrahim:

> The sudden campaign of detentions of March 15, 2004 ended any expectations of supposed reforms by Crown Prince 'Abdallah. The deal was broken after that man ['Abdallah] resorted to silence over the arbitrary detentions of the symbols of the reform trend… the word reform has since been replaced by the word 'development.'[330]

6.2.3 Shi'a Efforts at Sectarian Dialogue and Cooperation

Aside from petitions, Shi'a activists pursued a second strategy aimed at building bridges with moderate Sunni liberals and Islamists. This served a twofold purpose of strengthening the push for reform and isolating more radical Salafi voices opposed to liberal reforms. In interviews and in published works, many leading Shi'a and their Sunni counterparts believed that sectarian

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[325] Ibid., p. 215.

[326] Ibid.

[327] Hassan M. Fattah and Rasheed Abou Samh, "Saudi Shi'a Fear Gains Could Be Lost," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2007.

[328] Anon., Interview with Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, *al-Elaph*, June 25, 2007.

[329] For more on the constitutional movement, Abdalhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani, eds., *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006.

[330] Anon., "al-Taqrir al-Thani lil-Haquq al-Insan" (The Second Human Rights Report), *al-Rasid* website, December 21, 2005; available at www.rasid.com; accessed on May 3, 2011.

identity was itself not an important fissure or marker among the general populace. The recurring problem, they argued, was ultimately extremists on both sides, whose vociferous posturing tended to drown out voices of reconciliation. According to ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, a noted Sunni Islamist and interlocutor with the Eastern Province Shi’a:

> Sectarian dialogue in the kingdom has progressed thanks to the maturity among the ‘center’ on both sides. The key problem is that the moderates are forced to retract under pressure from extremists.[331]

Initially, the Shi’a pursued this dialogue in the context of official, regime-sanctioned channels. Starting in 2003, then Crown-Prince ‘Abdallah held a series of well-publicized and high-level National Dialogue sessions that focused on discussing socio-economic issues and on bridging the gap between Sufis, Salafis, Shi’a and other sects. Much of the initial impetus was framed as a counter-terrorism measure. In a speech accompanying the opening of the first National Dialogue Center in Riyadh in 2003, Abdallah argued that the dialogues were intended to “provide an atmosphere where … new ideas that reject terrorism and extremist thought can emerge.”[332] In subsequent sessions, discussions focused on women’s rights, youth and regional and tribal identity.[333]

In tandem with these domestic forums, ‘Abdallah sought to broker sectarian dialogue outside the kingdom. Under the auspices of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Saudi Arabia convened a 2005 conference in Mecca that passed a resolution recognizing the four Sunni *madhahib* (*Hanbali, Shafi’i, Maliki* and *Hanafi*), plus two Shi’a schools, the *Zaydi* and *Ja’afari* schools, as legitimate and sacrosanct expressions of Islam. Given the kingdom’s long history of religious exclusivity, this was a remarkable step toward reform. The former leadership of the OIR (al-Saffar, al-Shayeb and others) participated, as did some former members of the Hizballah al-Hijaz.[334] In 2008, a similar conference was held in Mecca from June 4-6, with the intent of preparing for dialogue with non-Muslims. Yet King ‘Abdallah used the opportunity to also explore greater rapprochement with the Shi’a. Three Shi’a attended, including Hassan al-Saffar and Iran’s Expediency Council chairman, ‘Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Both were

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[331] Personal interview with Shaykh ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Qasim, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 13, 2007.

[332] The speech is available at http://www.saudinf.com/display_news.php?id=859

[333] Naeem Tamim al-Hakeem, “Tribal, regional identity under Dialogue Center spotlight,” *Saudi Gazette*, December 28, 2010.

[334] Toby Matthiesen, “Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of the Most Radical Saudi Shi’a Opposition Group,” *Middle East Journal*, 64:2 (Spring 2010), p.195-196.

photographed with the King in highly publicized meetings.[335] Yet the dialogue sessions had no effect on the exclusionary views of the Saudi Salafi establishment. Many of these figures grew increasingly anti-Shi'a in their outlook due to the perception of Sunni losses in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as rumors of region-wide conversions from Sunnism to Shi'ism, particularly after the 2006 Lebanon War.[336]

By 2007, there was growing Shi'a disenchantment with the National Dialogue sessions, with one reformer denigrating the meetings "hollow debating societies while another stated it was designed to keep the Shi'a "talking rather than acting."[337] Still other figures believed that the government had effectively "stolen" the idea of sectarian dialogue from the Shi'a and their Sunni allies, with the intent of regulating and controlling it to prevent coordinated opposition activity.[338] These critics pointed out that in many cases, the dialogue sessions, particularly the fifth one in 2006, were focused on respecting the *external* "other" rather than on promoting *domestic* dialogue among Saudi Arabia's various sects.[339] And as will be discussed at length in the next chapter, the dialogues came under increasing attack from hardliners within the Salafi clerical establishment. For example, on May 30, five days before the start of the Mecca Conference, a group of 22 Salafi clerics issued a statement denouncing Shi'a Islam as "the most evil sect" of the nation.[340]

To counter these official obstacles, moderates such as Hassan al-Saffar, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, and Muhammad Mahfouz adopted a more informal strategy starting in 2006 that focused on circumventing the regime-sanctioned channels and building cross-sectarian ties. The ultimate goal, according to al-Saffar, was to create "space for the moderate middle" and to diminish the standing of Shi'a and Sunni radicals. A key foundation of this initiative was the practice of

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[335] *Saudi Press Agency*, June 4, 2008.

[336] Exact numbers are murky and hard to verify, but the issue of Sunni to Shi'a conversion (*tasha'yu*) is closely linked to popular acclaim for the Lebanese Hizballah after 2006 and the sense that Shiism is now the "winning sect. Iran is typically described as orchestrating these conversions. The post-2006 phenomenon of conversions appears particularly pronounced in Syria. For a report on Shiism by the Syrian opposition, The Movement for Justice and Democracy in Syria. Available http://forsyria.org/newsletterpdf/ShiiasmInSyria.pdf (accessed on May 8, 2008). This report alleges that 70 percent of conversions to Shiism in Syria took place among the country's ruling Alawite sect, which is much closer doctrinally to Twelver Shiism than Sunnism.

[337] Personal interviews in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 2007.

[338] According to one interlocutor, Hassan al-Saffar had originated the idea of Sunni and Shi'a dialogue in 2002 with a planned meeting at his *husayniya* in Qatif. The meeting was canceled by the Minister of Interior and the government subsequently announced its own dialogue sessions in 2003. Personal interview with Saudi Shi'a dissident, United States, May 24, 2011.

[339] Personal interview with a Sunni human rights activist, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 12, 2007.

[340] *Nur al-Islam* website, May 30, 2008.

holding weekly "salons." These were informal gatherings for discussion of intellectual, social and political topics, not unlike the *diwaniya* in Kuwait and the more formal *ma'atims* of Bahrain. Al-Shayeb's salon, known as the "*Salon al-Thulatha*" or "Salon of Tuesday," acquired particular prominence among the Shi'a and later among Sunni liberals outside the Eastern Province.[341] Topics ranged from organizing Shi'a cultural festivals to social issues such as women's rights, inter-sectarian dialogue, and youth. Toward the end of 2010 to 2011, the forums increasingly focused on Shi'a rights in neighboring Bahrain and Kuwait.[342]

In addition to these meetings, the Eastern Province Shi'a traveled to liberal Sunni salons. The earliest of these initiatives occurred in 2001, with a visit by Hassan al-Saffar to a weekly salon in Riyadh organized by the Sunni reformist 'Abdallah al-Hamid.[343] In subsequent years, al-Saffar and other *Shiraziyyin* conducted numerous other dialogue sessions, which culminated in al-Saffar's unprecedented visit to the Salafi strongholds of al-'Unayza and al-Qasim in 2007. Even former Shi'a radicals such as Hassan al-Nimr were also firm supporters and participants of the dialogue.[344]

At the intellectual level, the push for reconciliation was spearheaded by the Shi'a writer Muhammad Mahfouz, who published a series of works on doctrinal understanding among the kingdom's diverse Islamic sects. A key example is a 2007 book entitled, *al-Hiwar al-Madhhabi fi al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya* (Sectarian Dialogue in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), which includes contributions from noted Sunni and Shi'a scholars across the country—Malikis, Hanbalis, Shafi'is, Hanafis, Zaydis, Isma'ilis and Twelver Shi'a.[345] Yet as will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, this effort at dialogue was undermined by the worsening conflict in Iraq and the 2006 war in Lebanon, both of which stirred suspicion between Sunni liberals and their Shi'a allies. It was also torpedoed by a regime-sanctioned policy that sought to prevent the formation of a united, Sunni-Shi'a opposition. By mid-2007, a noted Sunni human rights activist lamented that "Sunni-Shi'a dialogue has collapsed. The liberals accuse the Shi'a of not

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[341] The author attended the salons of Ja'afar al-Shayeb and Hassan al-Saffar in Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 13 and March 15, respectively, 2007.

[342] E-mail correspondence from the "Thulatha Cultural Forum" 2008-2011.

[343] Lacroix, p. 358.

[344] Interview with Hassan al-Nimr by Imam Qahtani, *al-Rasid* website, August 16, 2006

[345] Muhammad Mahfouz, ed., *Al-Hiwar al-Madhhabi fi al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiya al-Sa'udiya* (Sectarian Dialogue in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) , al-Qatif, Saudi Arabia : Atyaf lil-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 2007.

criticizing [Iraqi Shi'a cleric Muqtada] al-Sadr enough; the Shi'a accuse the liberals of being closet Wahhabis."[346]

6.2.4 Shi'a Efforts to Contextualize the *Marja'iyya*

As noted in the previous chapters on Bahrain, the issue of the *maraja' al-taqlid* (literally, "sources of emulation"—venerated senior clerics who exert influence over Shi'a religious, social, cultural and, in the case of Iran, political affairs) has been a powerful lightening rod for Sunni criticism of Shi'a national loyalty. Many of the Shi'a reform movement's efforts, therefore, were aimed at placing the institution in a local context and assuaging Sunni fears about the political influence of foreign—and specifically Iranian—*maraja'*.

Interviews in the Eastern Province indicate that the most popular *marja'* by far is Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, based in Najaf, Iraq. According to some interlocutors, 70–80 percent of Saudi Shi'a follow his guidance. Much of this support stems from the fact that Hassan al-Saffar, the leading local cleric, "chose" al-Sistani as his *marja'* after the death of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi. In a 2007 interview, al-Saffar stated that he had weighed choosing Shirazi's younger brother and successor, Sadeq, as his *marja'*—a natural choice given al-Saffar's long affiliation with the *Shiraziyyin*. But al-Saffar found his views too explicitly sectarian and pro-Iranian.

In writings and statements, al-Saffar went to great lengths to distance himself from *maraja'* outside the country. In an early 2007 interview, he downplayed al-Sistani's role in Saudi affairs, saying, "I never receive formal guidance from al-Sistani."[347] In a February 2007 newspaper article, al-Saffar further explicated his views during a heated correspondence with the prominent Salafi cleric Sa'ad al-Burayk, who had accused al-Sistani of labeling Sunnis as infidels and interfering in Saudi domestic affairs.[348] Al-Saffar mounted a lengthy rebuttal, citing al-Sistani's own writings on the limited spiritual role of the *marja'* in the affairs of other countries.[349] In another interview with *al-Arabiya*, al-Saffar argued that Sunni Islamists themselves look to external sources of religious authority:

> … in all religions and sects scholarly and religious links are not limited by geography and political borders. There are Sunnis throughout the world who follow the *fatawa* of

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[346] Personal interview with Sunni human rights activist, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 12, 2007.

[347] Personal interview with Hassan al-Saffar, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

[348] *Al-Risalah*, February 2, 2007.

[349] Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar, "La wa Lan Nuqbil Aya' Marja'n Takfiri'an wa Arfad Tadkhal aya' Marja' fi al-Shu'un al-Siyasi al-Dakhili li-Biladna," (We Do Not And Will Not Welcome Any Marja' (Spiritual Reference) That Promotes Takfir (Excommunication) And We Oppose The Interference of Any Marja' in the Internal Political Affairs of Our Country," *al-Risalah* (Saudi Arabia), February 16, 2007.

> [Saudi] Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz. Does that disturb their national affiliation and loyalty? Another example is that many Muslims outside Egypt follow the opinions and *fatawa* of the al-Azhar mosque, and this does not contradict their patriotism.[350]

Aside from al-Saffar, even the staunchest Shi'a defenders of *velayet-e faqih*, which accords significant political power to the *marja'*, argued for a more nationalist interpretation of the concept which would allay Sunni anxieties in the kingdom. For example, the former Hizballah al-Hijaz cleric and fervent Iran supporter Hassan al-Nimr argued in a 2007 interview that the institution of the *marja'iyya* by nature precludes clerics from commenting on the affairs of other states. Al-Nimr cited the example of Ayatollah Khomeini, noting that even when the Iranian cleric was residing in Iraq, he refused to discuss domestic Iraqi affairs.[351]

Other reform activists asserted that the very process of engaging in dialogue with the monarchy and formulating a "roadmap" of desired improvements helped build confidence with the regime and removed the external *marja'* as a source of suspicion.[352] Several contrasted this with the case of the Shi'a of Bahrain, where, as discussed in the last chapter, local Shi'a actors tried to solicit a formal endorsement by al-Sistani to legitimate their political strategy. As noted by the Saud Shi'a intellectual Muhammad Mahfouz:

> We are more mature than Bahrain – there is more local discussion about the local agenda. [Unlike in Bahrain] Nobody here expects a statement from al-Sistani because he himself knows that Saudis will do what they need to do.[353]

Seeking to bolster their nationalist bona fides even further, some Shi'a intellectuals pushed for a Saudi-based *hawza* for training Shi'aclerics, to create an indigenous, Saudi-born *marja'*.[354] In their view, this institution would remove any basis for accusing the Saudi Shi'a of loyalty to foreign authority. "The government says we are loyal to Iran and Iraq, and this would undercut their argument," noted the key proponent of this school, Muhammad Mahfouz.[355] Mahfouz and others argue that the al-Saud and their Salafi allies set a precedent for using indigenous religious training as a counterweight to foreign ideological interference. In the 1970s, for example, the

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[350] Anon., "Interview with Hassan al-Saffar," *al-Arabiya*, September 19, 2004.

[351] Personal interview with Hassan al-Nimr, Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 17, 2007.

[352] Personal unattributed interviews with Saudi Shi'a reformists, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 2007.

[353] Personal interview with Muhammad Mahfouz, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

[354] Saud Sirhan, "Nahwa Marja'iyya Shi'a Mustaqlila fi al-Khalij" (Toward an Independent Shi'a Source of Emulation in the Gulf), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 24, 2003.

[355] Personal interview with Muhammad Mahfouz, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

regime's establishment of Imam Ibn Saud University to train Saudi Salafi scholars was meant to end the longstanding influence of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood over religious affairs inside the kingdom.

It should be noted, however, that the *hawza* initiative did not enjoy universal support among Shi'a activists. First, several Shi'a interlocutors argued that the relevance of the *marja'* in Saudi Shi'a social and political affairs was declining; most ordinary Shi'a are simply not versed in the minutiae of Shi'a jurisprudence to discern the differences among various *maraja'*. The idea of "emulation," they argued, is largely a symbolic function. More importantly, much of al-Sistani's prestige among the Saudi Shi'a is rooted less in his mastery of jurisprudence and more in his political role as an Iraqi statesman and a defender of the Iraqi Shi'a (despite the fact that al-Sistani himself vigorously denies this role). Moreover, secular, leftist figures argue that reducing the profile of the *marja'iyya* should itself be a first step in reforming the sect of Shi'ism, before any national integration can be accomplished.

6.2.5 Distancing the Community from Iran

Closely related to this effort, Saudi Shi'a figures have tried to distance themselves from Iranian influence—a difficult task given the regime's enduring memory of the 1979 *intifada* in the Eastern Province. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the main pro-Iranian group in Saudi Arabia, the Hizballah al-Hijaz, was effectively decimated after the Khobar Tower bombings and the warming of Saudi-Iranian relations in the late 1990s. The remnants of the organization have focused mostly on charitable and religious activities, as well as Internet activism. Several key individuals have reportedly attained positions in the Saudi educational and judicial realm, without abandoning their allegiance to Khamene'i as their *marja'*. These include Dr. 'Abd al-Hadi al-Fadli, who became the head of the Arabic language department at King 'Abd al-Aziz University in Jeddah and Ghalib al-Hamad, who was temporarily appointed as a Shi'a judge in Qatif in 2005.[356] Despite their inclusion in the regime's educational bureaucracy and legal sphere, these individuals remain unapologetic supporters of Khamene'i, Iran, and *velayet-e faqih*.

As regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran rose—particularly after the 2006 Lebanon War—this allegiance provided the pretext for Salafi attacks on the nationalist loyalty of the Shi'a, prompting a counter-campaign by the main current of the Shi'a reform movement, led by the *Shiraziyyin*. On the issue of *velayet-e faqih*, Hassan al-Saffar in particular has gone to great lengths to emphasize that the idea belongs solely in the Iranian context and has no

[356] Matthiesen, p. 196.

applicability in Saudi Arabia. The concept, he argued in a 2007 interview with the author, was inextricably linked to Ayatollah Khomeini. "When he died," al-Saffar stated, "the idea died with him."[357] In a separate press interview, al-Saffar reminded readers that although the OIR enjoyed safe haven in Iran after the 1979 *intifada*, Iranian authorities gradually restricted his activities because of his ambivalence over *velayet-e faqih*, which culminated in the expulsion from Iran of the OIR leadership in 1988.[358]

Al-Saffar's criticism of *velayet-e faqih* was echoed by the noted intellectual and OIR ideologue Tawfiq al-Sayf. Al-Sayf's major work on Shi'a political thought, *Nathriyat al-Sulta fi Fiqh al-Shi'i* (Theories of Political Power in Shi'a Jurisprudence) criticizes the excessive politicization of the Shi'a clergy, singling out Iran's *velayet-e faqih* for special attention.[359] In a 2007 interview with *al-Hurra* TV, al-Sayf noted that a *marja*'s authority transcends modern state boundaries, but that this does not extend into political affairs. Many of the Sunni accusations against the Shi'a, he argued, stem from conflating the Shi'as' affinity for religious authorities with loyalty to the states where they reside.[360] Al-Sayf also played a major role in translating the works of Iranian clerics opposed to *velayet-e faqih* into Arabic and disseminating their ideas to Saudi audiences. A key example is his translations of Shaykh Muhammad Hussayn Na'ini (1860-1936), who exerted a strong influence on the intellectual lineage of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. Na'ini was a major advocate of Islamic constitutionalism and devoted a particular focus to the rights of minorities in Islamic societies. His book *Tanbih al-Ummah wa-Tanzih al-Milla* (Admonishing the Community of Believers and Cleansing the Sect) demolishes the Shi'a idea of waiting for the Hidden Imam, which underpins the legitimacy of clerical rule in Iran.[361] Al-Sayf believed it has also hindered Shi'a efforts at national integration in Saudi Arabia.

For its part, Iran has taken care to avoid the appearance of deliberately inciting the Saudi Shi'a toward confrontation with the Saudi regime or Sunni citizens. For example, in 2007, the Qom-based Ayatollah Nasir Makarim al-Shirazi issued a statement exhorting the Saudi Shi'a to avoid provoking Sunnis. He implied that Iran was sensitive to the Saudi Shi'a's delicate balance between national loyalty and sectarian identity: "We are observing your conditions carefully and

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[357] Personal interview with Hassan al-Saffar, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

[358] Anon., Interview with Hassan al-Saffar, *al-Elaph*, June 25, 2007.

[359] Personal interview with Tawfiq al-Sayf, Tarut Island, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.

[360] Interview with Tawfiq al-Saif, *al-Hurra TV*, December 10, 2007 available at http://www.saudishia.com/?act=artc&id=82; accessed on June 6, 2011.

[361] Based in Najaf, Muhammad Husayn Na'ini taught Ayatollah Abu'l-Qassim al-Khoei, who was the mentor of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani.

cautiously because of the exceptional situation you are living."[362] As will be discussed in the next chapter, however, Iran did not exhibit a similar discretion toward the Saudi regime and the Salafi establishment, which it accused of distorting Islam and exacerbating regional tensions with support for Sunni jihadists in Iraq.

The effort to de-link the Saudi Shi'a from Iran suffered a disastrous setback during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Hizballah's battlefield performance against Israel spurred widespread Saudi Shi'a demonstrations of solidarity and support. Yet these protests and outpourings of support had less to do with sectarian solidarity or endorsement of Iran and more with Hizballah's (and particularly Nasrallah's) populist and rejectionist appeal.[363] Shi'a across the spectrum expressed adulation for the Lebanese militant group and its war with Israel, which contrasted sharply with the antagonistic stance of the Salafi establishment. Even moderates like al-Saffar evinced unqualified support for Hizballah; in an article on the website *al-Tawafuq* he exhorted Muslims everywhere to support Hizballah.[364]

Yet as will be discussed in the next chapter, the most significant impact of the Lebanon War was not on the Shi'a, but rather the regime and the Salafi establishment, who unleashed a torrent of anti-Shi'a invective in the wake of the war. This, in turn, triggered a series of articles, speeches and web commentary by the moderates reiterating their loyalty to the al-Saud and arguing that it was the Salafis' *fatawa*, rather than any Shi'a actions, which were eroding the unity of the country. These growing tensions also inspired an emerging Shi'a radical faction, who saw in the rise of Hizballah an opportunity to pressure the al-Saud and to undermine the conciliatory approach of Shi'a moderates.

6.3 THE SHI'A REJECTIONIST CHALLENGE

As noted in Chapter Two, the Saudi Shi'a community always contained strong links to Iran, given the influence of Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, who remained an unapologetic defender of *velayet-e faqih* until his death in 2001 and Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrisi, the head of the Islamic Action Organization (IAO) in Iraq. Yet with the warming of relations

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[362] *Al-Rasid* website, June 13, 2007.

[363] According to one respondent, a noted Shi'a intellectual, even Hizballah's television station *al-Manar* was not popular among Saudi Shi'a because it consistently adopted a tone that was critical of Iraqi Shi'a parties, such as Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (later the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council), toward whom the Saudi Shi'a showed a strong affinity. It was not until the 2006 Lebanon War that *al-Manar*'s resonance increased, largely due to its compelling battlefield footage. Personal interview with Shi'a activist, Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 18, 2007.

[364] Hassan al-Saffar, "al-Muqawama," *al-Tawafuq* website, July 24, 2006. Also, *IslamToday* website, August 4, 2006.

between the Eastern Province Shi'a and the Saudi regime in the mid-1990s and the general sense of hope that accompanied the accession of Crown Prince 'Abdallah to the throne, this current became marginalized. By 2008, the pendulum had swung again in the opposite direction: when it became apparent that the moderate, conciliatory approach of al-Saffar and the reform-oriented *Shiraziyyin* had failed to deliver, radical, pro-Iranian voices secured an ever increasing constituency.

6.3.1 The Rise of Shaykh Nimr al-Nimr

The key figure of this current was the cleric Nimr al-Nimr, based in the village of al-Awamiya near Qatif.[365] Hailing from a clerical family with a long pedigree of anti-regime activity, al-Nimr was a student of al-Mudarrisi in Tehran and later studied in Sayida Zaynab in Damascus before returning to Saudi Arabia in 1999.[366] When al-Saffar broke with al-Mudarrisi in the late 1980s, al-Mudarrisi turned to al-Nimr as his principal interlocutor in Saudi Arabia and a local counterweight to al-Saffar's *Shiraziyyin* current. At a time when al-Saffar was emphasizing Shi'a loyalty to the Saudi government, al-Nimr was deploying Khomeini's concept of the *taghut* (tyrannical rule) to provide juridical support for his repeated exhortations that the Shi'a should unequivocally reject the al-Saud. In January 2008, he called for the formation of a new "Righteous Opposition Front" (*Jabhat al-Mu'arada al-Rashid*) that would constitute a sort of umbrella group for Shi'a clerics and lay activists to attack the corruption of the Saudi state and the anti-Shi'a vitriol of the Salafi establishment.[367] Much of his rhetoric is decidedly pan-Shi'a—it argues for a united Shi'a *ummah* and unqualified support for Shi'a *maraja'* as political leaders.[368]

In the context of rising Saudi tensions with Iran, al-Nimr's rhetoric grew even more strident. During the 2006 Lebanon War, for example, he instigated daily protests and shows of solidarity with Hizballah in Awamiya. From July to August 2008, he gave a series of speeches declaring support for Iran's nuclear program, arguing that Saudi Shi'a should stand with Iran "heart and soul," and warning that if Saudi Shi'a demands were not met, they should turn to

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[365] Many of al-Nimr's supporters hail from the town of al-Awamiya. Comprised entirely of Shi'a and isolated by a forest of palm trees, the town suffers from high unemployment, crime and school dropout rates. It had long existed as an enclave of rejectionism and pro-Iranian sentiment; many of the second and third-tier leaders of the OIR were born here. In the 1979 *intifada*, the town was reportedly known as the Islamic Republic of Awamiya. Personal unattributed interviews in Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 10, 2007.

[366] Details of his biography are found on the *IslamOnline* website, July 22, 2008.

[367] *Al-Rasid* website, January 20, 2008.

[368] *Shiavoice.com* website, May 23, 2008.

Iran.[369] For the Saudi authorities, this provocation crossed a red line and the cleric was subsequently arrested. His release came only after he promised not to lead Friday prayers in his hometown of al-Awamiya.[370] Al-Nimr later emerged as a cause célèbre after he defied the ban on preaching following rioting by Shi'a pilgrims at the Baqi' cemetary in Medina in February 2009. These disturbances and the subsequent crackdown by Saudi security forces resulted in a significant boost to the more hard-line currents in the Shi'a polity.

6.3.2 The Medina Clashes and their Aftermath: The New Rejectionists

On February 20, clashes broke out between Shi'a pilgrims visiting the graves of revered Shi'a imams in Medina and members of the Committee for the Prevention of Vice and the Protection of Virtue (CPVPV)—the regime's so-called "morality police." Although accounts differ, the trigger for the unrest was the CPVPV's reported videotaping of female Shi'a pilgrims. The security forces moved into the Shi'a neighborhoods of Medina, beating and arresting its residents.[371] Dozens were injured. From the Shi'a's perspective, the regime's response to the CPVPV's crackdown was ambivalent, suggesting that the CPVPV's provocation had been partially condoned at official levels. The newly-appointed second-in-line, Prince Nayif, equivocated in his condemnation of the incident, further incensing the Shi'a.[372] In a subsequent press interview with the Saudi newspaper *Ukaz*, Nayif appeared to justify the heavy handed response, stating that Saudi Arabia follows "the doctrine of Sunnis" and while some citizens "follow other schools of thought … the intelligent among them must respect this doctrine."[373]

For Shi'a in the Eastern Province, the disturbances proved to be a catalyzing event. The regime's ambivalent response seemed to confirm the growing suspicion of a halt or reversal to the royal family's 15-year outreach with the Shi'a. Demonstrations quickly broke out in al-Qatif, al-Awamiya, and Safwa, marking the most serious outbreak of Shi'a dissent since the 1979 *intifada*. Indeed, many Shi'a—and in particular, the long-dormant Hizballah al-Hijaz—dubbed the Medina riots the *Intifadat Muharram 1400* in a clear reference to the 1979 uprising in Qatif.[374] In London, Shi'a of different nationalities protested in front of the Saudi embassy, while in Kuwait,

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[369] *Al-Awamiya.com* website, July 13, 2008.

[370] Ibid.

[371] Habib Trabelsi, "Heightened Shiite-Sunni Tension in Medina," *Middle East Online*, February 24, 2009.

[372] Human Rights Watch, *Denied Dignity: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility toward Saudi Shi'a Citizens*, September 2009, p. 16.

[373] Caryle Murphy, "Shiite Bias Claim Laid Bare After Showdown," *The National*, April 26, 2009.

[374] Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads."

the radical Shi'a cleric Yasir al-Habib called for the creation of a "Greater Bahrain" that would encompass the Eastern Province, Bahrain, Kuwait and Basra.[375]

From al-Awamiya, Nimr al-Nimr used the disturbances to break his ban on preaching. His Friday sermon on March 13 called for secession, attracting large crowds of young men and quickly gained currency on the internet as the "dignity speech."[376] Unsurprisingly, it provoked the ire of the security forces which cut off electricity to al-Awamiya. Although the original protestors in Medina were released, dozens were rounded up in al-Awamiya and a curfew was imposed. The detentions spurred widespread sit-ins and a petition campaign to release the protestors.[377]

The unrest also inspired the creation of hitherto unknown Shi'a groups who adopted an increasingly militant line toward the government and put pressure on the moderates like Hassan al-Saffar. In January 2009, a militant Shi'a website, *al-Shahid*, announced the formation of previously unheard of group, the "Movement of Free Men of Qatif" (*Harakat Ahrar al-Qatif*), which called for demonstrations in Qatif.[378] The group also addressed its calls to non-Twelver Shi'a living in Medina and Najran (the so-called Nakhawila and the Isma'ilis, respectively), calling for an "armed struggle" against the Saudi state that would aim for secession.[379] Another rejectionist group, the "*Khalas* ("Enough") Movement in the Arabian Peninsula" (*Harakat Khalas fi al-Jazira al-Arabiya*), emerged in early March, with its members citing the sluggish pace of reform as the key driver behind its formation.[380] According to Iran's Arabic language TV station *al-Alam*, the group staged a sit-in across from the Saudi embassy in London to protest the Medina unrest.[381]

A pro-secession website, the State of al-Ahsa and Qatif (*Dawlat al-Ahsa wa al-Qatif*) also stepped its activity, calling for renewed protests. Active since 2005, the website contains a number of statements and commentary from the "Shi'a Fighting Formation Brigades" (*Kata'ib al-Tashkil al-Shi'i al-Muqatila*), which claimed responsibility for a 2005 terrorist attack on an airport in al-Qasim and reportedly maintains links with the Iraqi Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's

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[375] Personal interviews with Kuwaiti Shi'a activists, Kuwait City, November 2010. Also, Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads."

[376] Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads."

[377] Human Rights Watch, *Denied Dignity*, pp. 19-21.

[378] *Al-Shahid* website, March 17, 2009.

[379] Importantly, at least one interlocutor argued that Iran was actually against secession, believing it would encourage similar breakaway tendencies among its own minorities. Personal interview with a Saudi Shi'a dissident, United States, March 25, 2011.

[380] *Al-Multaqa* website, March 4, 2009.

[381] *Al-Alam* website, March 7, 2009.

Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army) in Iraq.[382] The chief of the "fighting brigade" subsequently appointed Nimr the political wing of the movement and increasingly criticized moderates like al-Saffar for their naïveté in hoping for change by political reform and working through government channels.[383] This criticism was joined by a number of the voices after the Awamiya crackdown, suggesting that the weight of Shi'a opinion was shifting away from the moderates.

6.3.3 The Moderates under Pressure

The most significant impact of the Medina clashes and the crackdown in al-Awamiya—aside from its effect in mobilizing Sunni opinion against the Shi'a—was the sharpening of divisions within the Shi'a community about the pace and scope of reform. Following the security forces' intervention, a group of 60 Shi'a personalities, including 18 prominent clerics (al-Saffar, Muhammad Mahfouz, and Hassan al-Nimr, among others), issued a statement expressing solidarity with the inhabitants of the village.[384] In March, al-Saffar and a Shi'a delegation traveled to Riyadh to secure the release of the detainees from King 'Abdallah—an apparent move to demonstrate their continued viability.[385] Although the request was successful, there was mounting evidence of dissent within al-Saffar's circle. Most significantly, Hamza al-Hassan, who had long served as one of Hassan al-Saffar's key ideologues and was a major figure in the 1993 reconciliation with the regime, emerged as the spokesman for the aforementioned *Khalas* movement. Together with Fouad Ibrahim, also an early member of OIR and a key Shi'a intellectual, the two launched a new website with a more militant slant that derided al-Saffar's followers as the "new notables."[386]

By late 2010, the marginalization of the moderate wing of the *Shiraziyyin* was nearly complete, with al-Saffar and his cohort increasingly viewed by the Shi'a community as lackeys of the royalty. This estrangement was partly the result of the regime's tactic of cultivating Salafi alarmism over the rise of the Shi'a, pursuing a strategy of calibrated reforms designed to manage, but not meet, Shi'a expectations, and an attempt to split the Shi'a away from their Sunni reformist allies. These tactics are explored at length in the next chapter.

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[382] The website is at http://www.alahssa-alkateef.com.
[383] *Dawlat al-Ahsa wal-Qatif* website, July 27, 2006.
[384] *Al-Rasid* website, April 6, 2009.
[385] *Al-Rasid* website, March 3, 2009.
[386] Matthiesen, "The Shi'a of Saudi Arabia at a Crossroads."

6.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how the Saudi Shi'a adapted to the regional upheaval of the post-2003 era. Faced with initial suspicion that they would seek to mimic the newly empowered Shi'a of Iraq, the Saudi Shi'a went to great lengths to demonstrate their continued loyalty to the Saudi state and re-emphasize that their push for reforms would respect the territorial integrity of the Saudi state and the sovereignty of the House of Saud. Shi'a figures affiliated with the *Shiraziyyin* current pursued a three-pronged approach: using the long-standing practice of the petition to voice their demands; attempting to situate the institution of the *marja'iyya* in a local context, while distancing the community from Iran; building bridges with other sects and reform currents and participating in the municipal council elections.

Yet their approach, and the royal family's ability to accommodate it, was blocked by hardline members of the Salafi establishment, whose anti-Shi'a views and sense of siege became more pronounced as a result of the conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon. With these tensions, a new more, radical Shi'a current threatened the pro-participation stance of the moderates by pointing to the stalling or curtailment of reforms. What becomes apparent, therefore, is that sectarian tensions in the kingdom were not so much a product of external influences on the Shi'a as much as heightened threat perception by the Salafi clerical establishment and the stalling of political reforms. This dynamic is explored more thoroughly in the next chapter.

7 SAUDIA ARABIA: THE REGIME'S RESPONSE AND THE SALAFI COUNTER-MOBILIZATION

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The Saudi regime's response to Shi'a activism during the period 2003 to 2011 incorporated a mix of co-option and dialogue, political reform, repression, and sectarian balancing, i.e. co-opting the Salafi establishment against the Shi'a. This chapter will explore these varied responses to Shi'a activism, highlighting how domestic vulnerabilities and regional interests impacted the al-Saud's approach to sectarianism

First, it will discuss how Saudi Arabia's strategic rivalry with Iran impacted domestic policies toward the Shi'a. While it is inaccurate to characterize Shi'a-state relations in the kingdom as being solely a function of the two states' bilateral relations, mounting regional tensions nonetheless created a polarized domestic climate. From 2003 onward, it became increasingly difficult to de-link the Saudi Shi'a from their co-religionists in Iraq and Iran and to address the "Shi'a issue" in a national framework, i.e. through political reforms.

The second part of this chapter will cover these dynamics in greater depth, highlighting the way in which the Iraq War, the 2006 Lebanon War, the Zaydi rebellion in neighboring Yemen, created a domestic backlash among the Salafi clerical establishment. Many of these figures, holding powerful positions in education, censorship and social affairs, were doctrinally opposed to Shi'ism and saw any formalization of Shi'a rights as a threat to their power and privileged access to the royal family. Popular Salafi clerics and non-governmental religious organizations agitated for a greater Saudi role in defending Iraq's Sunnis from Iranian-backed Shi'a militias. To close ranks with these figures, the monarchy tacitly permitted the proliferation of anti-Shi'a tracts, sermons and web statements, many of them recycled from the kingdom's ideological counter-offensive against the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

The final section will analyze the balance sheet of the regime's policies toward the Shi'a, highlighting its Janus-faced approach in the post-2003 environment: using the 2005 municipal council elections as a pre-emptive and co-optive mechanism, while at the same time pitting Sunni and Shi'a reformists against one another to prevent the emergence of a united opposition.

7.2 THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT: SAUDI THREAT PERCEPTIONS OF IRAN

In assessing the regime's strategy toward its Shi'a population, it is important to characterize Saudi Arabia's strategic threat perception of Iran since 2003 and the way this perception influenced its domestic policies toward its Shi'a population. The converse must be considered as well—that is, the way in which domestic tensions over Shi'a integration impacted

the regime's external threat perception toward Iran is an oft-overlooked dimension of Saudi policy.[387]

For the al-Saud, Iran has long represented a strategic and ideological rival that threatened the ruling family's legitimacy on the domestic and regional stage. The removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 upset a traditional equilibrium of power in the region that, while largely psychological, was nonetheless significant. According to this narrative, Iraq has served as a gateway for Iran to project its influence across the region, upstaging Arab governments on traditional pan-Arab concerns like Palestine and Lebanon, and allegedly meddling in newer, more peripheral conflicts like the Zaydi rebellion in Yemen.[388] In these areas, Iran has pursued what can best be described as an aggressively non-sectarian, "Arab street" strategy that appeals to Arab publics by emphasizing Iran's commitment to the Palestinian cause and resistance to U.S. pressure on the nuclear issue.[389] This activism contrasted sharply with the posture of Arab rulers, particularly the al-Saud, and thus formed an indirect critique of their legitimacy.

On the domestic front, King 'Abdallah's response to this regional upheaval has been a tenuous balancing act. On the one hand, the monarch has had to mediate between the competing demands of two important constituencies, both of whom are susceptible to external manipulation or ideological mobilization against the regime. The first are the Shi'a, whom he has tried to inoculate against Iranian-inspired agitation through political reforms and cultural concessions.

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[387] Gerd Nonneman is the only scholar to address this hypothesis and does so at the conceptual level. Gerd Nonneman, "Analyzing the Foreign Policies of the Middle East and North Africa: A Conceptual Framework," in Gerd Nonneman, ed., *Analyzing Middle East Foreign Policies and the Relationship with Europe* , New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 14-15. Similarly, F. Gregory Gause III discusses the nexus between internal fissures and external policies. F. Gregory Gause III, "Threats and Threat Perceptions in the Persian Gulf Region," *Middle East Policy*, 14:2 (Summer 2007), p. 120. Classic works that omit this dimension include those that interpret Saudi foreign policy through the lens of petro-diplomacy and/or the kingdom's relationship with its principal patron, the United States.

[388] For a representative editorial, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, "Li Hathahi al-Asbab, Nukasha Iran (For These Reasons, We Fear Iran)," (Arabic), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, April 18, 2006, available at http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issue=10003&article=358858&search=ايران&state=true. See also, Mamoun Fandy, "al-'Iraq: Ja'izat al-'Arab al-Kubra," (Iraq: The Great Arab Prize), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 9, 2008. http://www.asharqalawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=10786&article=474218. Fandy writes that, "a non-nuclear Iran uses Iraq as a platform for its influence and dominance in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen, Bahrain, Kuwait and other Gulf countries."

[389] Joost Hiltermann has noted, "[Iran] wants to have the greatest influence possible, and it can only do that if it is not a sectarian actor … It can be more effective if it does not play the Shiite card." Quoted in Scott Peterson, "Saudi Arabia, Iran Target Mideast's Sectarian Discord," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 5, 2007. This was noted in an op-ed by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, the director of *al-Arabiya* and a frequent contributor to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. See 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, "Nijad Yil'ab fi al-Saf al-'Arabi" (Ahmadinejad Plays on the Arab Field), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 7, 2007.

The second are hard-line currents within the Salafi establishment, who perceived the regional rise of Iran and Shi'a empowerment in Iraq as a net loss for Sunni Arabs. The more radical of these figures pressured the monarchy to take a more partisan stand in assisting Iraq's Sunnis, while avoiding any concessions to the Shi'a at home. As Iraq descended into internecine strife, these pressures on the monarchy grew in intensity, and Sunni-Shia distinctions became more of a marker of political and social identity.[390]

7.3 SAUDI SALAFI REACTIONS TO A SHI'A "ASCENDENCY"

In managing Shi'a mobilization post-2003, the Saudi regime's policies were both constrained and enabled by the al-Saud's symbiotic relationship with the Salafi establishment, many of whom were implacably opposed to any formalization of Shi'a identity in the kingdom.[391] Despite their animosity toward the Shi'a, the Saudi clerical field is hardly a monolithic bloc. Indeed, the clerical landscape can be divided into three broad currents that reflect their proximity to and dependence on the monarchy: the establishment clerics, the *Sahwa*, and the *takfiri* clerics.

The establishment clerics are the official '*ulema* occupying key positions in the government's religious bureaucracy. As such, they exert substantial control over censorship, social and cultural affairs. Given their dependence on the royal family for their financial livelihood, these figures are generally responsive to regime interests and requests. At the same time, the regime relies upon these figures for the imprimatur of religious legitimacy.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the *Sahwa* are clerics who, inspired by Muslim Brotherhood ideology, emerged in the late 1980s as opponents of the al-Saud's close relationship with the West and critics of the royalty's excesses and corruption. Traditionally, the *Sahwa* have occupied the lower strata of the clerical bureaucracy or been excluded altogether—but have enjoyed greater legitimacy than the establishment clerics because of their personal charisma. Many hail from less prominent families in regions outside the Najd. Two of their main proponents, al-Hawali and al-Awda, were imprisoned (with the backing of a *fatwa* from establishment clerics) in the mid 1990s due to their belligerence against the Saudi regime, and their support for al-Qa'ida. Upon their

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[390] Personal unattributed interview with a *majlis al-shura* member, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 12, 2007.

[391] Toby Craig Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shi'ism," *Middle East Report*, Vol. 242, Spring 2007. For a broader exploration of Salafism's intellectual tradition of anti-Shi'ism, see Guido Steinberg, "Jihadi-Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of anti-Shi'ism," in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 117-126.

release, however, al-Hawali and al-Awda—together with other *Sahwa* clerics—drew increasingly closer to the regime's orbit. Many were used by the Ministry of Interior as interlocutors with al-Qa'ida fugitives.[392]

The *takfiri* clerics are so-named for their embrace of the Islamic precept of *takfir*—to repudiate a person or social entity as un-Islamic and therefor liable to a range of sanctions ranging from estrangement from the rest of the Islamic community to death. Many of these figures were former *Sahwa* clerics who were imprisoned in the mid-1990s and subsequently radicalized. Indeed, the so-called "*takfiri* troika"—Nasr al-Fahd, 'Ali bin Khudayr al-Khudayr, and Nasr al-'Umar—appear to have coalesced in prison—in the notorious Ha'ir prison and Burayda. With regard to the Shi'a, they have been the most vitriolic opponents of any concessions to the Shi'a and, in some cases, have called for their death. They have also provided exhortations for jihad in Iraq and attacks on Americans. In response to the 2003 residential compound attacks, the Saudi regime arrested a number of *takfiri* clerics. The movement was further weakened by recantation of public recantation of al-Khudayr, al-Fahd and al-'Umar in 2003. In appearances on Saudi television in November and December of 2003, al-Khudayr argued that *takfir* must be applied carefully and with restriction. All three clerics have subsequently professed opinions on *takfir* that are much more closely aligned with those of the establishment clerics such as bin Uthaymin. Critics and reformists argue that the influence of this school continues to influence Saudi youth via sermons and websites.[393]

In many instances, these groupings reflect geographic origin—the establishment clerics are drawn primarily from the province of Riyadh, while many of the *Sahwa* and *takfiri* clerics hail from Qasim, Asir or the Hijaz.[394] Institutional affiliation (whether university, mosque, or prison) are further factors in their alignment, as is tribe.

As will be discussed below, it is important to note that Salafi positions on Iraq, Hizballah and the Shi'a frequently reflect a clerical jockeying for power—between the "center" (the Najdi-Riyadh establishment) and "periphery" (*Sahwa* clerics from the Hijaz, Asir, or Qasim). In this

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[392] Ibid.

[393] The seminal works condoning *takfir* against the al-Saud and attacking the official clerical establishment for tolerating their excesses include, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, *Al-Kawashif al-Jaliyya fi Kufr al-Dawla al-Sa'udiyya* (Clear Evidence on the Infidel Nature of the Saudi State), (1990 or 1991); available at http://www.tawhed.ws and Safar al-Hawali, *Dhahirat al-'Irja* (The Specter of '*Irja* or Prevarication), 1985 doctoral dissertation at Umm al-Qura University, Mecca, available at http://www.tawhed.ws. This argument can also be found an article entitled, "Who Has the Right to Takfir?" by noted Saudi cleric 'Ali Bin Khudayr al-Khudayr. 'Ali bin Khudayr al-Khudayr, "Who Has the Right to Takfir?" available at http://www.tawhed.ws; accessed on December 12, 2005.

[394] Ibid.

struggle, sparring factions use anti-Shi'ism as a normative weapon against their clerical rivals and against the al-Saud. As in the case of Bahrain, Salafi alarm over Shi'a mobilization in Saudi Arabia was ultimately rooted more in domestic power rivalries—and, in particular, the fractured nature of Saudi clerical politics—than any shift in strategy by the Shi'a themselves.

The role of the regime in managing, suppressing or encouraging Salafi clerical discourse on the Shi'a has been the subject of some debate. Some see 'Abdallah as well-meaning in his intentions toward reform but hamstrung by hardline elements in the religious bureaucracy and non-governmental organizations. Others take a more cynical view, interpreting anti-Shi'ism as a useful political weapon for the monarchy itself—a means to close ranks with the potential critics in the Salafi establishment, deflect popular sentiment away from the regime's failings, and toward an internal "other" and to secure the cooperation of the Shi'as themselves by portraying the monarchy as a "buffer" against the Salafis.[395]

What is likely is that the ambivalent relationship between the royalty and the Salafi establishment, particularly the so-called *Sahwa* clerics, is a product of the government's longstanding practice of co-option and divde-and-rule toward the kingdom's diverse religious currents. As noted in the previous chapter, the government in the early 1990s tacitly sanctioned the emergence of *Shirazi* Shi'a activism as a counterweight to the *Sahwa* movement. The goal was not so much to enlist the Shi'a in inducing defections from the *Sahwa*'s ranks, but to relieve pressure on the regime so it could focus on addressing the more pressing threat from the *Sahwa*. A similar dynamic was at work with the regime's loosening of strictures on Sufi movements in the Hijaz.[396] By the early 2000s, however, the regime faced a concerted threat from al-Qa'ida; the establishment and *Sahwa* clerics became useful interlocutors and allies in the ideological

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[395] Several Shi'a activists in the Eastern Province portrayed King 'Abdallah as constrained by his reliance on the Salafi clerical establishment. Personal, unattributed interviews in al-Qatif, al-Ahsa and al-Dammam, March 10-11, 2007. In contrast, two noted scholars of the kingdom take a more instrumental approach. Toby Craig Jones as written, "Unlike in the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia met the ideological threat posed by Khomeini head-on, the kingdom's rulers have not consistently manipulated sectarian hostility ... Yet he later concludes that "managing and strategically deploying anti-Shiism is nevertheless an important part of (King 'Abdallah)'s government's political calculus. Toby Craig Jones, "Saudi Arabia's Not So New Anti-Shiism." F. Gregory Gause III has argued for a similar ambivalence in Saudi policy, noting that "the Saudi government itself has not played the sectarian card in recent crises" but still frames it as a form of "cynical manipulation" and likens it to "playing with fire." F. Gregory Gause III, "Saudi Arabia: Iraq, Iran, the Regional Power Balance and the Sectarian Question," *Strategic Insights* (February 2007). See also, Mansur al-Nuqaydan, "al-Kharita al-Islamiya fi al-Sa'udiya wa Qadiyat al-Takfir," (The Islamist Map in Saudi Arabia and the Question of Takfir) *al-Wasat* (Bahrain), February 28, 2003.

[396] Stephane Lacroix has written that the Saudi regime "played the card of the Shirazi Shiite opposition." The first goal was to relieve pressure on the Saudi regime, but also to prevent the *Sahwa* from developing contacts with the *Shirazi* opposition in exile. Lacroix, pp.223-224.

struggle to turn young Saudis away from al-Qa'ida. It can be argued that the "price" of this cooperation was increased tolerance for the Salafi clerics' anti-Shi'a outlook. And at any rate, this outlook itself became a useful tool in the Saudi balancing strategy against Iran, particularly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

7.3.1 Alarm Over Iraq Strife

Salafi alarmism toward the escalating violence in Iraq and the rise of the Shi'a began shortly after the invasion. In 2004, a group of Saudi Salafi clerics, many drawn from the *Sahwa* camp, issued a *fatwa* on the eve of the U.S. assault on Fallujah, tacitly endorsing jihad against American forces. Importantly, the document called for Sunni-Shi'a cooperation against the occupying U.S. forces.[397] Yet after the Sunni boycott of elections in Iraq and mounting sectarian tensions, Saudi Salafi figures increasing conflated Shi'ism with U.S. imperialism—resurrecting a longstanding trope of the Shi'a as internal traitors to Islam. In particularly, one Salafi website carried a picture of Iraqi Shi'i national guardsmen holding pictures of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani together with photographs of U.S. tanks in Baghdad with rosaries hanging from their barrels.[398]

The bombing of the Shi'a al-Askari mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006 and Iraq's subsequent descent into internal strife brought new exhortations by Saudi Salafi clerics for Saudi volunteers to rush to the aid of their embattled co-religionists in Iraq. In December 2006, Saudi clerics joined Iraqi clerics in signing a statement that denounced the killing of Iraqi Sunnis at the hands of Shi'a. "We should openly side with our Sunni brothers in Iraq," the document read, "and lend them all appropriate forms of support." The signatories included noted *Sahwa* clerics Safar bin 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hawali and Nasir al-'Umar.[399] Other clerics soon followed suit, including moderate *Sahwa* clerics who had been previously known for their outreach to the Shi'a, such as Salman al-Awda.[400] On January 21, 2007, the cleric 'Abd al-Rahman bin Jibrin posted

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[397] The *fatwa* was originally posted on *Islamtoday*, the website of the Saudi Salafi cleric Salman al-Awda. For the signatories of the so-called "jihad *fatwa*" on Iraq, see Salman al-Awda's website, http://www.islamtoday.net/articles/show_articles_content.cfm?id=72&catid=76&artid=4436. For an English translation, see http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saud/etc/*fatwa*.html; accessed on July 24, 2011.

[398] Toby Craig Jones, "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia," *Middle East Report* 237, Winter 2005.

[399] The text of the *fatwa*, "Nida' li Ahl al-Sunna fi al-'Iraq wa Ma Yajib 'ala al-Umma min Nasrathim," is available at the website of Saudi cleric Nasr al-Umar, *Muslim.net*, http://www.muslim.net; accessed on April 14, 2008.

[400] Anon., "Shaykh Salman al-Awda Warns of Sectarian War in Iraq; Holds the U.S. Responsible," *Islam Today* website, November 5, 2006.

another exhortation for jihadi volunteers to Iraq, accusing the Iraqi Shi'a of mounting atrocities against the Sunnis and lambasting the Shi'a as un-Islamic.[401] All of this occurred in a more generalized climate of anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian seething that followed the execution of Saddam Husayn at the hands of the Shi'a dominated government in Iraq, which created further pressures on the Saudi Shi'a.[402]

From early 2006 into 2008, popular Salafi clerics or their supporters were issuing a flurry of anti-Shi'a, anti-Iranian *fatawa*, tracts, sermons and Internet postings, calling for violence agains the Shi'a in Iraq and sectarian repression at home. From the Shi'a point of view, the Saudi government appeared to be complicit in this vitriol—much of it bore a strong resemblance to the kingdom's ideological offensive against the Iranian Revolution in the 1980s. Indeed, many of the same anti-Shi'a texts and tracts deployed in that campaign now enjoyed new currency in the context of the increasingly polarized sectarian climate of the Iraq War. Of critical importance, Salafi and Shi'a interlocutors in Saudi Arabia highlighted the ideological impact of a key Salafi figure in the 1970s, Muhammad Surur Zayn al-'Abidin, whose anti-Shi'a, anti-Iranian writings acquired new currency within Saudi Arabia.[403] Another important marker in the rising pre-eminence of anti-Shi'ism as a feature of modern Salafi discourse was the proliferation, since roughly 2005, of Salafi websites explicitly devoted to anti-Shi'ism. Many frequently cite anti-Shi'a rhetoric drawn from the pantheon of Salafi ideologues, including Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Ibn Taymiya, 'Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz , and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.[404]

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401 Anon., "Fi al-Sa'udiya Tada'u Fatawa ila Hudum Darih Imam Husayn wa Sayida Zaynab," (In Saudi Arabia, Fatawa Call for the Complete Destruction of the Imam Husayn and Sayida Zaynab Shrines," *Nahrain.Net* website July 19, 2007.

402 The execution was interpreted by many Sunni Arab audiences through a sectarian lens, because of the timing of the execution (December 30, 2006, the first day of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha) and the disclosure (via cellphone video recording) of the Shi'a guards shouting "Muqtada al-Sadr" as Saddam was executed. Both these features of the execution contributed to the perception that the death of Saddam was a blow to Sunnism and by the ascendant Shi'a in Baghdad. Donna Abu-Nasr, "Sectarianism Casts Shadow Over Mideast," *Associated Press*, January 29, 2007.

403 Muhammad Surur Zayn al-Abidin, *Wa Ja'a Dur al-Majus*" (And Then Came the Turn of the Magi); available at http://www.tawhed.ws/a?i=402; accessed on October 19, 2007. For other Saudi clerical *fatawa*, 'Ali bin Khudayr al-Khudayr, "*Fatwa* on the Shi'a" (Arabic) n.d.; available at http://www.tawhed.ws; accessed on 12 April 2006. Also, Nasr al-Fahd, "Letter on the Legitimacy of Swearing at the Shi'a" (Arabic), n.d.; available at http://www.tawhed.ws; and "Response to the Rafida on Their Indictment of the Companions" (Arabic); n.d.; available at http://www.tawhed.ws; accessed on 12 April 2006.

404 This list includes: http://www.albainah.net (November 2003), http://www.d-sunnah.net (May 2002), http://www.wylsh.com (October 2004), http://www.khomainy.com (March 2004).

7.3.2 Fears of the Lebanese Hizballah

Adding to the alarm over Iraq, the 2006 Lebanon War provoked further vitriol by the Salafi establishment, which accused the Saudi Shi'a of being proxies for Hizballah. As noted in the last chapter, there were sporadic demonstrations in Shi'a communities in the Eastern Province in solidarity with Hizballah and, indirectly, with Iran.[405] Yet these were likely motivated by the same sentiment that spawned similar street demonstrations in Cairo, Amman, and elsewhere—applause for Hizballah's brazen challenge to the status quo, rather than any expressions of sectarian affinity.

Regardless of motive, Shi'as in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia during this period were subjected to growing pressures from hardline Salafi clerics who launched a barrage anti-Shi'a invective to counter the mobilizing appeal of Hizballah's battlefield victory. Yet the Lebanon War also opened up significant debate within the Salafi establishment, revealing longstanding class and ideological fissures, and demonstrating that anti-Shi'ism was a useful political weapon in a struggle for privilege and access to power.

7.3.2.1 Salafi Debates on Hizballah and the Shi'a: The Bin Jibrin Fatwa

It is critical to emphasize that, like the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 2006 Lebanon War was interpreted by Salafi factions in Saudi Arabia through different lenses depending on their proximity to the al-Saud. Those with a vested interest in the monarchy—the so-called establishment clerics—decried Hizballah for provoking an Israeli attack, sowing *fitna* (chaos), and pursuing narrowly sectarian goals.[406] Those farther out from the circle of power tacitly endorsed Hizballah's brazen victory to highlight the immobility, impiety, and illegitimacy of the Saudi regime.[407]

Much of Salafi clerical debate and discourse on the Shi'a centered around a *fatwa* banning Sunni support for Hizballah issued by 'Abdallah bin 'Abd al-Rahman bin Jibrin, a respected member of the Senior 'Ulema Council who in 1991 had issued an edict authorizing the killing of Shi'a.[408] Bin Jibrin's *fatwa* on Hizballah was originally issued in April 20, 2002 and

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[405] Anon., "Al-Qatif: Tumultuous marches with shouts 'death to Israel," *al-Rasid* website, August 2, 2006.

[406] Faris Bin-Hizam, "Disagreements Within the Salafi Trend in the Stand on Lebanon War," *al-Hayah*, August 25, 2006.

[407] Faraj Ismail, "Bin Jibrin confirms that his *fatwa* doesn't apply to Hizballah," *Al-Arabiya*, 8 August 2006, available at http://www.alarabiya.net; accessed on July 24, 2011.

[408] Ibrahim, p. 197.

reposted to Salafi web forums in July 2006.[409] By early August bin Jibrin had reversed his position, possibly under pressure from the al-Saud.[410]

Despite this volte face, the *fatwa* and the issue of support for Hizballah became a lightning rod for a wrenching intra-Sunni debate about sectarianism and tolerance of Shi'ism inside the kingdom. Within the *Sahwa* camp, ultra-conservative clerics issued similar *fatawa*, decrying Hizballah as a blasphemous organization and, by extension, denigrating the Saudi Shi'as as *rawafidh* (rejectionists) and disloyal citizens. The prominent *Sahwa* cleric Safar al-Hawali, who boycotted King Abdallah's 2003 National Dialogue because of Shi'a participation, condemned Hizballah as the *Hizb ash-Shaytan* or "Party of Satan."[411] On his website, Nasr al-Umar asserted that Hizballah's war had diluted and distracted attention from the Sunni resistance against the forces of oppression and aggression.[412] More moderate clerics such as Awadh al-Qarni, Salman al-Awda, and Muhsin al-'Awaji took a more tempered view, framing Hizballah as a legitimate "resistance movement" and arguing that doctrinal differences between Sunnis and Shi'as should be temporarily shelved. According to Salman al-Awda:

> We have our differences with Hizballah; they are substantive and deeply-rooted like the rest of our differences with the Shi'a. However, this is not the time to play out our differences and be divided...our main enemy is the Jews and criminal Zionists."[413]

For their part, establishment clerics like Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali and 'Abd al-Muhsin al-'Ubaykan supported the original bin Jibrin *fatwa* as a means to insulate the monarchy from the mobilizing appeal of Hizballah's battlefield success.[414] In particular, the prominent judiciary

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[409] Faraj Ismail, "Bin Jibrin confirms that his *fatwa* doesn't apply to Hizballah," *Al-Arabiya*, 8 August 2006, available at http://www.alarabiya.net; accessed on July 24, 2011.

[410] For the full *fatwa* in Arabic, see http://www.islamway.com/?iw_s=Article&iw_a=view&article_id=1876; accessed on September 18, 2006.

[411] Anon., "Saudi Cleric Issues Anti-Hezbollah Edict," *Associated Press*, August 6, 2006.

[412] Faraj Ismail, "Ibn Jibrin confirms that his *fatwa* doesn't apply to Hizballah," *Al-Arabiya*, August 8, 2006, available at http://www.alarabiya.net; accessed on September 20, 2006.

[413] *Islamonline.com*, July 22, 2006.

[414] Born in Jizan in 1931, al-Madkhali studied under the Ethiopian-born cleric Muhammad Amin Jamii at the Islamic University of Medina and later taught *hadith* there. In the early-1990s, al-Madkhali emerged as the most prominent figure of what was known ast he "Jamii" or "Medina Salafi" clerical school. One of the key tenets of this current was its opposition to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and Brotherhood thought, unquestioning loyalty to the Saudi regime, and, most importantly, its criticism of *Sahwa* clerics such as Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda. For opposing the *Sahwa*, Madkhali was reported to have received extensive support from the Saudi government, through the Ministry of Interior. In Saudi clerical discourse, the term "Madkhali" is used derisively to refer to an obsequious, careerist and excessively quietist brand of Salafism. 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan was born in 1952, studied at the

cleric al-'Ubaykan challenged Hizballah's authority to call for jihad, citing the well-trod Islamic precept that only the *wali al-amr* (commander of the faithful) can call for jihad.[415]

In the Eastern Province, the Shi'a perceived the entire debate over the bin Jibrin *fatwa* as a critical litmus test of the regime's commitment to reform. In opinion pieces and interviews, Shi'a clerics and activists pointed to the regime's silence on the *fatawa* of bin Jibrin—and his anti-Shi'a supporters Nasr al-Umar and Safar al-Hawali—as a telltale sign that the monarchy was either powerless to confront these Salafi voices or, more ominously, saw a utility in not censuring them. In a July 15 newspaper editorial in *al-Riyadh*, Hassan al-Saffar called on the government to implement legislation that would criminalize sectarian incitement, while at the same time urging moderate Sunnis to confront the *takfiri* statements.[416] A prominent Shi'a journalist, Husayn Allaq, published an article attacking the bin Jibrin *fatwa*, arguing that sectarian discrimination was harmful to the unity of the nation.[417] For their part, Hizballah al-Hijaz carried a statement on its website, *al-Haramayn*, stating that the bin Jibrin *fatwa* was an affront to the entire nation of Islam.[418] The more moderate *Rasid* website carried an editorial attacking the Saudi media's apparent endorsement of the bin Jabrin *fatwa*.

> No matter how hard the Saudi media tries to justify this strange position, its efforts will not hide the truth that such a position will only serve Israel's interests and its aggression and is absolutely contrary to the people's and the Lebanese Government's position, not to mention the Islamic Resistance's position.[419]

Faculty of Shari'a in Riyadh and later became a judge. An early member of the *Sahwa*, he later moved into the regime's camp, becoming the vice minister of justice and a strong proponent of dissuading Saudi youth from volunteering for jihad in Iraq. Lacroix, p. 212 and Mansur al-Nuqaydan, "al-Kharita al-Islamiya fi al-Sa'udiya wa Qadiyat al-Takfir," (The Islamist Map in Saudi Arabia and the Question of Repudiation) *al-Wasat* (Bahrain), February 28, 2003.

[415] 'Abd al-Muhsin al-Ubaykan: MEMRI, Special Dispatch No. 1222, "Saudi Shura Council Member Sheikh al-'Obikan: According to Shari'a Hizbullah Operations are Illegitimate; A Temporary Peaceful Settlement with Jews is Needed," August 1, 2006, http://www.memri.org.

[416] *Al-Riyadh*, June 15, 2006.

[417] Anon., "Security Authorities Summon Writer al-Alaq for Critcizing Takfiri *Fatwa*s", *al-Rasid*, October 4, 2006.

[418] Anon., "Statement by Hizballah al-Hijaz Follows the Heroic Odysseys in Lebanon and the Treacherous Statement by the Sons of Sa'ud," *al-Haramayn* website, http://www.alhramain.com/hiic/index.php?sec=V1d4a1IySm5QVDA9&sub=V1cweFYwMHlUak5RVkRBOQ==&r={000CF6F/000054374BAA23D3F3233/000000062626352BEC262309/000054374BAA23D3F3233/0000000B19B02A924BE1CBAF}&Sectyp=190; accessed on July 23, 2011.

[419] *Al-Rasid* website, July 15, 2006.

As in the case of Iraq, anti-Shi'ism engendered by the Lebanese conflict proved to be a disastrous setback to the Saudi Shi'as' efforts to de-link themselves from the regional environment and the timeworn accusations of loyalty to Iran. This dynamic resurfaced again in 2009, with the Zaydi rebellion in neighboring north Yemen.

7.3.3 Vitriol toward the Zaydi Rebellion in Yemen—and Reflection

The long-running conflict in neighboring Yemen between Zaydi Shi'a insurgents in the northern Sa'ada province and the regime in Sana'a reverberated strongly inside Saudi Arabia. Although the Zaydi Shi'a are doctrinally distinct from the "Twelver" Shi'a that predominate in eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iran, many in the Saudi Salafi establishment interpreted the conflict through a Sunni-Shi'a lens.[420] This was particularly so in light of the Saudi government's repeated charge that Iran was providing financial and lethal aid to Yemeni insurgents, know as "Huthis" after the prominent Zaydi leader Husayn al-Huthi (d. September 2004). Media accusations of Iranian involvement intensified after Saudi Arabia's unilateral military intervention in north Yemen on November 5.[421] Even more reformist papers such as *al-Watan* condemned the Huthis as "agents of Iranian sectarian expansionism."[422] Like the Lebanon War, the Huthi conflict provoked a flurry of anti-Shi'a invective from hardline Salafi clerics that placed further pressure on the Saudi Shi'a. In November 2009, for example, the conservative Salafi cleric Nasir al-'Umar published a lengthy anti-Huthi and anti-Shi'a tract, entitled "The Declaration of the *'Ulema* Regarding the Aggression of the Huthi *Rawafidh* (Rejectionists)," on his website, *al-Muslim.*[423] The tract was signed by 40 other Salafi clerics.

In response to this attack and others, the Saudi Shi'a launched a stream of editorials and statements to demonstrate their nationalist bona fides and de-link themselves from any association with the Zaydi Shi'a. The website *al-Rasid* published a lengthy rejoinder to al-Umar's treatise, while prominent clerics and activists like Hassan al-Saffar, Tawfiq al-Sayf and Najib al-Khunayzi argued in other forums that the Saudi Shi'a position on the Huthis was indistinguishable from that of the Saudi regime.[424] "We are all partners in this country," wrote

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[420] In reality, however, the sectarian factor played a relatively minor role; the insurgency is rooted in complex center-periphery, tribal, and class tensions that afflict Yemen as a whole. For more on the Zaydi/Huthi conflict, see Barak Salmoni, Byrce Loidolt, and Madeleine Wells, *Regime and Periphery in Northern Yemen: The Huthi Phenomenon* , Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010.

[421] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 6, 2009.

[422] *Al-Watan*, November 5, 2009.

[423] Nasir al-Umar, "Bayan al-'Ulema Hawl al-'Adwan al-Huthiyin al-Rafidah" *al-Muslim* website, November 12, 2009, available at www.almoslim.net; accessed on August 5, 2011.

[424] *al-Rasid*, November 19, 2009.

al-Saffar, "and we must close ranks with our leadership to prevent any attack."[425] At the same time, these Shi'a figures opposed Saudi Arabia's military invention into north Yemen, with both al-Sayf and al-Saffar arguing that the conflict should be solved by Yemenis themselves. Predictably, this caveat incurred further suspicion from their Salafi detractors.

Aside from the Shi'a response, a number of liberal Sunni writers used the Huthi conflict to obliquely argue for a re-examination of the kingdom's discriminatory policies toward its own Shi'a population. For example, the liberal writer Turki al-Hamad argued that the reasons the Huthis in Yemen had turned to Iran for support was not due to sectarian affinity, but rather because of a lack of political participation and economic opportunity. This phenomenon, he noted, would replicate itself in any Arab state where tribalism and sectarianism had displaced civil society.[426] Echoing this, an unattributed editorial in the reformist daily *al-Watan* offered a rebuttal to al-'Umar's tract, asserting that continued marginalization of the Shi'a would further entice Iran to meddle in the affairs of both Yemen and Saudi Arabia.[427]

7.3.4 Salafi Opposition to 'Abdallah's Reform Initiatives—at Home and Abroad

An important effect of these regional tensions was a hardening of Salafi views toward domestic reform.[428] As noted in the earlier chapter, one of the most important avenues for Shi'a mobilization was participation in King 'Abdallah's dialogue sessions. Yet the ability of the monarchy to accommodate Shi'a demands was hampered by opposition from the powerful Salafi establishment, whose influence was felt not just on domestic religious affairs but on the kingdom's legitimacy and standing abroad.

On May 30, 2008, five days before the start of King 'Abdallah's conference on sectarian dialogue in Mecca in early June, a group of 22 hardline Salafi clerics issued a statement on the internet denouncing Shi'ism as "the most evil sect of the nation, and the most hostile and scheming against the Sunnis and Muslims collectively."[429] The statement was posted on the website of the hardline, anti-Shi'a cleric Nasr al-'Umar and was signed by other prominent clerics such as 'Abdallah bin Jibrin and 'Abd al-Rahman bin Nasir al-Barrak. Al-Barrak followed up

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[425] *Al-Riyadh*, November 10, 2009.

[426] Turki al-Hamad, "Al-Maskut 'Anhi fi Masa'lat al-Huthiyin wa Masa'il Akhra," (That Which Is Not Discussed On the Huthi Dilemma and Other Dilemmas), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 19, 2009.

[427] *Al-Watan*, November 19, 2009.

[428] Personal unattributed interviews in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia, March 12-13, 2007. Also, unattributed interview with Saudi Shi'a activist / researcher, Fouad Ibrahim on *al-Rasid*, January 23, 2007; accessed on November 24, 2008.

[429] *Nur al-Islam* website; May 30, 2008.

with a statement of his own on his website *Nur al-Islam* on June 15, which directly attacked 'Abdallah's reconciliation policy, stating that Sunnism and Shi'ism were irreconcilable doctrines.[430] In response, the Shi'a website *al-Rasid* published a lengthy Shi'a counter to the Salafi statement, arguing that the signatories suffered from "psychological complexes."[431] Al-Saffar later called on the Saudi government to enact the necessary legislation to criminalize sectarian hatred and incitement to violence. He also exhorted moderate Sunnis to confront *takfiri* statements.[432]

In May 2009, King 'Abdallah's outreach to the Shi'a suffered a further blow when the newly-appointed *imam* of the Grand Mosque, Adil al-Kalbani, labeled the Shi'a infidels during an interview with the BBC. As the first Grand Mosque *imam* of African descent, al-Kalbani was widely thought to signify 'Abdallah's commitment to greater tolerance and pluralism in the kingdom (he was nicknamed the "Saudi Obama.") The comments elicited a mild to non-existent response from the mainstream Saudi media, which only confirmed Shi'a suspicions about the regime's ambivalence on Salafi vitriol.[433]

7.4 THE REGIME'S POLICIES TOWARD THE SHI'A OPPOSITION

Faced with concerted opposition to the Shi'a by the Salafi establishment, the royal family grappled with the double-edged nature of political reform. On the one hand, there was recognition that calibrated and managed reforms, particularly in the cultural and religious realm, could serve to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling family and temper Iran's mobilizing appeal among the Shi'a. Both at home and abroad, King 'Abdallah sponsored cross-sectarian dialogue, attempting to bridge societal fissures. At the same time, the monarchy recognized that Shi'a activists frequently allied themselves with liberal Sunni reformers to demand political changes that the ruling family perceives as a threat to their survival—namely, constitutionalism. What resulted from this dilemma was a Janus-faced approach toward the Shi'a after 2003: co-option into participatory institutions in tandem with a divide-and-rule strategy that exploited, rather than dampened, sectarian tensions.

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[430] This was noted in an op-ed by 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rashid, the director of *al-'Arabiya* satellite news channel and a frequent contributor to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*. See "Nijad yil'ab fi al-Saf al-'Arabi" *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, January 7, 2007.

[431] *Al-Rasid*, website, November 15 2006.

[432] *Al-Rasid* website, June 21, 2008.

[433] In May 2009, Hassan al-Saffar called for al-Kalbani's dismissal. *Al-Rasid* website, May 9, 2009.

7.4.1 Pre-Emptive Reform: The Municipal Council Elections

On March 3, 2005 Saudi Arabia held elections for local municipal council—the first elections held on a nation-wide basis in over four decades. Unlike Bahrain, the issue of participation in elections did not spur significant debate among the Shi'a. The stakes were relatively low—the municipal councils oversaw basic services, and in the Eastern Province, half of the seats were appointed by the government. Participating did not carry political costs for the moderate branch. Even former radicals such as Shaykh Hassan al-Nimr, a key leader in the Hizballah al-Hijaz, participated in the elections, while at the same time remaining an adherent of *velayet e-faqih* and embracing Khamene'i as his *marja.*'[434] Part of the Shi'a enthusiasm for participation was rooted in the euphoria and inspiration that accompanied the Shi'a electoral victory in neighboring Iraq. "There was the sense that 'we'll do it like the Iraqis," noted a Saudi Shi'a activist.[435]

In many respects, the Saudi Shi'a saw the elections as the culmination of promises made during the initial dialogue with then-Crown Prince 'Abdallah. Many of the moderates saw political participation as a way to demonstrate to their constituency their ability to deliver services and other material benefits. Even if the scope of the councils was limited, they were still seen as a way to educate the citizenry in the skills of grassroots democracy. "Municipal elections play a limited role," noted Ja'afar al-Shayeb, the mayor of Qatif, "but at least it allows people to speak up."[436] A Shi'a member of the appointed *majlis al-shura* echoed this, arguing that the councils were designed to give the citizenry rudimentary practice in democracy

> The municipal council elections are in effect a socio-economic reform—some people view it as a political reform, but this is stretching it. The municipal councils start us on the learning curve. To effectively delegate power the regime must know that people are accountable.[437]

In the final tally, voting in the Eastern Province fell along sectarian lines, with Shi'a securing all five municipal council seats in Qatif and five out of six in al-Ahsa.[438] In the predominately Sunni municipality of Dammam, Sunni businessman swept the elections.[439] Unlike Bahrain, there was little evidence of gerrymandering by the regime to preserve Sunni

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[434] Personal interview with Hassan al-Nimr, Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 17, 2007.
[435] Personal unattributed interview with Saudi Shi'a activist, United States, May 25, 2011.
[436] Personal interview with Ja'afar al-Shayeb, Qatif, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007.
[437] Personal interview with member of the *majlis al-shura*, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, March 12, 2007.
[438] Joe Avacena, "EP Vote May Reflect Split Electorate," *Saudi Gazette*, March 2, 2005.
[439] P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Prominent Figures Win EP Elections," *Arab News*, March 5, 2005.

dominance. Rather, the opposite occurred—districts were reshaped to guarantee the Shi'a a voting majority in Shi'a areas. A key gesture by the regime before the elections was the separation of the predominantly Shi'a city Qatif from the mixed city of Dammam as a separate municipality by the minister for municipal affairs, Mita'ab bin 'Abd al-Aziz. Given Qatif's importance as the epicenter of the 1979 *intifada*, the government's willingness to recognize and formalize a Shi'a role in local governance is significant. Similarly, the municipality of al-Ahsa is a sensitive area for the government—it covers the sprawling Ghawar oilfield.[440]

In interviews, major Shi'a leaders in the east appeared pleased with the results, asserting that the elections were the natural continuation of a process that included the National Dialogue, the National Society for Human Rights. At the same time, there was caution about excessive expectations of change and that Saudi policy was "always a deliberate, gradual process."[441] Shi'a commentators argued that because the municipal councils received their budgets from the Ministry of Muncipalities, they were hamstrung in their ability to affect meaningful reforms and improvements to the Eastern Province's material grievances. Their role was ultimately consultative—to submit recommendations to the Ministry rather than to enact legislation.[442]

7.4.2 The Policy of Divide and Rule

As noted, one result of the escalating regional tensions in Iraq and Lebanon was a fraying of cooperation between Sunni reformists and their Shi'a allies. Even moderate Saudi Sunnis who had been previously aligned with Shi'a reformists interpreted Saudi Shi'a expressions of solidarity for Muqtada al-Sadr and Hizballah as a worrisome form of triumphalism—what one interlocutor called, "a winner take all mentality."[443] For their part, Shi'a activists grew increasingly suspicious that their erstwhile allies in the Sunni reform camp were, in the words of one activist, "closet Wahhabis."[444] As noted by a Sunni liberal writer on the Shi'a website *al-Rasid*:

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[440] Anon., "Religious Rights and Political Enfranchisement Provide the Basis of a New Compact with the Shi'a," *Gulf States Newsletter*, December 23, 2005.

[441] Ibtihal Mubarak, "Islamic Scholars See New Era of Unity, Openness," *Arab News*, August 7, 2005.

[442] Personal, unattributed interview with a liberal reformist based in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 8, 2007.

[443] Personal unattributed interview with a liberal reformist based in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 8, 2007.

[444] Personal, unattributed interview with a liberal reformist based in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, March 8, 2007.

> It is very clear that the consequences of the recent war [the 2006 Lebanon War] have caused an unexpected fissure in the invisible alliance between Saudi Shi'a and the Sunnis who are categorized as liberal or secular.[445]

In the wake of the Lebanon War, it appeared that the Saudi government was encouraging these splits, harnessing regional tensions to fracture the opposition. In November 2006, for example, the regime disbanded a burgeoning attempt by Shi'a religious scholars to coordinate with the national astronomical society to formulate a common, cross-sectarian method for forecasting the arrival of the new moon. Although seemingly esoteric, from the regime's point of the view this would have marked the breaching of a major conceptual barrier that had kept the two sects divided.[446] "The government doesn't want cooperation among the sects; it tries to be the doorway through which all dialogue must pass," noted the Shia activist Muhamamd Mahfouz. "There will never be reform as long as the regime enforces a policy of *tasnif* (segregation)," noted another prominent activist in al-Ahsa.[447]

Another illustrative example occurred when a number of Sunni and Shi'a moderates tried to dampen the inflammatory effects of the Salafi establishment's anti-Hizballah and anti-Shi'a *fatawa*. Most notably, the Sunni activist, Shaykh Mikhlif bin-Dahham al-Shammari conducted joint Sunni-Shi'a prayers at a Shi'a mosque in the Eastern province. The Shi'a website *al-Rasid* reported that al-Shammari was physically harassed by "Salafi extremists" and that the prayers were cancelled indefinitely.[448] Later, in February 2007, al-Shammari was arrested by the Saudi security services for having visited Hassan al-Saffar. Ostracized by his own tribe (which received substantial patronage from the Saudi government) and frequently in prison, al-Shammari has since become an icon of sympathy and support among the Saudi Shi'a; the *Rasid* website frequently reports on his predicament and prominently displays his photo.

Aside from these instances, some Shi'a activists wondered whether tacitly promoting sectarianism might have a certain utility for 'Abdallah—to deflect potential criticism by Salafi clerical constituents and also to undercut the mobilizing appeal of Iran's anti-Western rhetoric on

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[445] Habib Mahmud, "An-Nas Yakhtalif ma al-Hukam—Wayn al-Mushkila?" (People Differ with Authority—Where is the Problem), *al-Rasid* website, October 25, 2006.

[446] Human Rights Watch, "Dignity Denied: Systematic Discrimination and Hostility Toward Saudi Shia Citizens," September 2009, p. 8; available at http://www.hrw.org.

[447] Personal interview with a Shi'a activist in al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia, March 15, 2007. This was echoed by another reformist Shi'a cleric in Qatif, who noted that there is "some (Shi'a) cooperation with the Salafis but many are afraid of pressure from the extremists. There is an exchange of e-mails and ideas, but there is no institutionalized framework for reform cooperation." Personal interview with Shi'a cleric, Qatif, March 12, 2007.

[448] Ibid.

the Arab street. This argument holds that Salafis are the "stick" wielded by the al-Saud to secure Shi'a cooperation, with the royals portraying themselves as benevolent protectors against the Salafi extremists.[449] There is also a political and economic utility to his. According to a former member of the Saudi Ministry of Interior's *Mabahith al-Amma* (General Investigation Directorate—the principal regime organ for the collection of intelligence on domestic opposition), the security services are widely spread throughout the country, with the majority—roughly 1000—focused on the Qasim region alone. In contrast, there are only 100 officers assigned to the so-called "Shi'a Department" (*Qisim al-Shi'i*).[450]

7.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored how the Saudi regime's strategy toward domestic Shi'a activism was influenced by a convergence of domestic vulnerabilities and regional interests: the ruling family's symbiotic relationship with the Salafi establishment, which was doctrinally opposed to Shi'ism, and the kingdom's geo-strategy rivalry with Iran.

This was apparent in two areas. First, the initial invasion of Iraq raised the specter of Shi'a mobilization to a degree that was not found in Bahrain and Kuwait. This was partly because the Saudi Shi'a are concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province. In the run-up to the war, there was growing fear in Saudi officialdom that, inspired by Shi'a empowerment in Iraq or encouraged by Iran (or even the United States) the Eastern Province Shi'a might move toward secession. The Saudi regime launched a number of preemptive reform measures designed to placate Shi'a unrest.

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[449] Personal interview with a former member of the Saudi security services, assigned to the Eastern Province, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., July 15, 2011.

[450] Personal interview with a former member of the Saudi security services, assigned to the Eastern Province, Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., July 15, 2011. Qasim province and the city of Burayda in particular, appears to be a fertile breeding ground for both Salafi scholars and anti-regime jihadists. More particularly, many are graduates or dropouts of the Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Qasim branch: Salman al-Awda, Hamud bin 'Uqla al-Shuaybi and the "imam" of the 9/11 hijackers, 'Abd al-Aziz al-'Umari. See Guido Steinberg, "The Wahhabi Ulama and the Saudi State," in Paul Aarts and Gerd Nonneman, eds., *Saudi Arabia in the Balance: Political Economy, Society and Foreign Affairs*, New York: New York University Press, 2006, p. 23. Aside from playing Sunni off against Shi'a, there is also a subtle regime policy of attempting to split and fracture the Shi'a opposition itself. This occurs at both the political and geographic level. As noted in the earlier chapter, the moderate *Islahiyya* current led by Hassan al-Saffar was increasingly perceived after 2008 as being too close to the regime. There was also an attempt to play off al-Ahsa and al-Qatif by dispensing greater cultural and religious freedoms to Qatif, and by inviting Qatifi delegations to Riyadh while excluding Hasawis. The regional dimension also played a role; according to one activist, many Shi'a oppositionists in the 1980s hailed from al-Ahsa and forged strong links with their expatriate co-religionists in Syria and Iran. The regime thus perceives that al-Ahsa is a potential entry point for foreign influence by Syria and Iran.

Second, the period 2003 to 2010 witnessed the stalling or reversal of many post-9/11 reforms as a result of the sense of siege engendered by the Iraq War and perceptions of Iran's ascendency.

Outside scholars and the Saudi Shi'a themselves have long debated the regime's role managing these regional shocks. Some have argued that the al-Saud were tacitly complicit in this rhetoric, seeing in it a useful lever to secure Shi'a cooperation. Others believe that pro-reform segments of the royal family— specifically then-Crown Prince 'Abdallah—were hamstrung by their reliance on the Salafi establishment. A more convincing argument is that the al-Saud sought to deploy anti-Shi'ism as a useful pressure valve to deflect Salafi criticism away from the al-Saud and toward an internal "other."

As in the case of Bahrain, the perception of Shi'a ascendency and the very problem of sectarianism had less to do with shifts in strategy by the Shi'a themselves or even qualitative changes in the regional environment. Rather, it was the absence of power sharing mechanisms—an effective parliament, most notably—that could temper the shocks of the regional chaos and prevent the emergence of sectarianism as a mobilizing identity. As will be argued in the following chapters, such a structure did exist in Kuwait, offering a compelling explanation for why Shi'a mobilization and sectarian tensions were markedly less prominent in the emirate than in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

8 KUWAIT: SHI'A MOBILIZATION AND REGIONAL UPHEAVAL

8.1 INTRODUCTION

At first glance, Kuwait shares many similarities with the Bahraini case. Like Bahrain, the emirate's small size, proximity to Iraq and Iran, and history of Shi'a agitation after the Iranian Revolution have combined to produce a heightened threat perception of external meddling. Although frequently overlooked, its sectarian and tribal diversity has resulted in regional conflicts having a strong demonstration effect on domestic politics. Yet what distinguishes Kuwait from Bahrain—and Saudi Arabia—are the co-optive and accommodative resources available to the ruling family. Added to this, the ruling al-Sabah enjoy greater domestic legitimacy than the al-Khalifa; Kuwait's wealthy Shi'a families have historically served as bulwarks for the royal family.

Among Kuwait's co-optive institutions, the most important are the *diwaniya* and a parliament endowed by the constitution with powerful oversight and legislative authority.[451] According to one longtime observer, these structures have effectively co-opted citizens whose loyalties might otherwise lie outside the country (the Shi'a toward Iran and Iraq, and the tribal Sunnis toward Saudi Arabia).[452] In the economic sphere, the country's oil wealth has been skillfully deployed by the ruling family to construct a web of dependency among its constituents. Given the welfare advantages and high standard of living enjoyed by Kuwaitis, political opposition in even the worst of times has been confined to agitation, rather than posing a serious threat to survival of the royalty. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the legitimacy of the al-Sabah has long rested on a symbiotic relationship with powerful societal segments—especially, the Shi'a merchant sector. The economic clout of Kuwaiti Shi'a, along with their demographic weight (roughly 30 percent of the population), enables them to occupy a sort of middle ground in the emirate. As noted by one scholar, they are "too few to aspire to dominance and too many to be completely marginalized."[453]

That said, like their counterparts elsewhere in the Gulf, the Shi'a have been faced with discrimination and marginalization in the areas of education, religious practices, and representation in key ministries and the cabinet. And, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti

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[451] For background on the *diwaniya*, see Chapter Two.

[452] Personal interview with 'Abd al-Rada Assiri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 12, 2010.

[453] Mary Ann Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 121.

Shi'a have frequently been subjected to pressure and hostility from hardline Sunni Islamists, particularly the tribal Salafi figures who came to dominate the political opposition starting in 2008. Regional events such as the Iraq War, Hizballah's rise in Lebanon, and growing fears over Iran exacerbated this tension in Kuwait, stirring Sunni alarm over Sh'ia ascendency. In the post-2003 era, the greatest threat to Kuwaiti stability and a major enabler of sectarianism came not from Shi'a political or economic marginalization, but from Sunni tribes and Salafis, who felt excluded from the urban "center" and grew increasingly resentful of the alliance between the al-Sabah and the Shi'a merchant class.

This chapter will explore how the Shi'a of Kuwait navigated these regional shocks and domestic pressures. Like their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti Shi'a used the invasion of Iraq as an opening to demand greater concessions in the cultural and religious sphere, while at the same time taking care to highlight their continued loyalty to the monarchy. At the same time, the post-2003 period also witnessed increased factionalism among the Kuwaiti Shi'a. Encouraged by the re-emergence of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, the *Shiraziyyin* in Kuwait attempted to marginalize their Shi'a rivals in the pro-Iranian Islamic National Alliance (INA).

I argue that Kuwait's quasi-democratic structures and media freedom proved to be mixed blessing in the midst of this tension. On the one hand, they provided a pressure release for sectarian passions and a buffer against the external chaos of the Iraq War and growing alarm over Iran. At the same time, this very openness seemed to encourage and harden sectarian identities in the emirate. This was particularly so after the parliamentary victory in 2008 of a tribal Salafi bloc, which launched a concerted campaign to bring down the government of the reform-minded Prime Minister, whom it accused of neglecting the emirate's rural constituencies. In this struggle, the tribal Salafis frequently stirred up sectarianism and accused the Prime Minister of a pro-Shi'a, pro-Iran bias. The ongoing conflict in Iraq and growing fears over Iran fed into this strategy, polarizing the parliament along sectarian lines and making it increasingly dysfunctional. For its part, the government was forced into a rearguard action, curtailing many of the reforms it had granted the Shi'a and, more worrisomely, undoing many of Kuwait's much-vaunted political freedoms.

8.2 SHI'A POLITICAL ACTIVISM

In the immediate aftermath of 2003, Shi'a activists sensed a window of opportunity for advancing their rights. The immediate impact of the regional environment was manifested in a concerted Shi'a push for greater religious, cultural and legal rights. In tandem, with the holding of parliamentary elections, the Shi'a community was marked by increased fracturing and

factionalism between the pro-Iranian INA and the more moderate, nationalist faction of the *Shiraziyyin*.

8.2.1 The Initial Push for Rights—with Mixed Results

As noted in Chapter Two, the Kuwaiti Shi'a were among the most vociferous opponents of the Saddam regime, given their prominent role in the Kuwaiti resistance to the 1990-1 occupation. Added to this, many had demonstrated their opposition to the Iraqi dictator much earlier, during the Iran-Iraq War, at a time when it was unpopular to do so. Several prominent Shi'a personalities paid for this stance with prison time and other punishments. As early as the fall of 2002, many of these figures were offering vocal and approving endorsements of a U.S. strike on Iraq.[454] With the fall of Saddam, these activists attempted to parlay their longstanding opposition to Saddam into greater political and cultural rights.

A central figure in this group was the cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, the scion of a prominent Shi'a family with ties in both Iran and Iraq. Based in Iraq during the 1970s, al-Muhri came to Kuwait in the 1980s where he was a vigorous opponent of Saddam. He rose to prominence after the 1991 invasion and since 2003 has acted as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's representative in Kuwait.[455] To impart greater cohesion and authority to Kuwait's clerics, he formed the *Tajammu' al-Ulama' al-Shi'a* (the Association of Shi'a Clerics) in 2005. Much of the group's initial activism focused on securing concessions to Shi'a identity in the public and media realm, such as the televised and unfettered observance of the *Ashura* celebration.[456] It also sought the establishment of a separate Shi'a department in the Ministry for Religious Endowments (*awaqf*), and a special Shi'a court of appeal.[457]

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[454] *Al-Watan*, September 8, 2002.

[455] Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shi'a Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* London: Hurst Publishers, 2008, p. 252.

[456] Personal interview with Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 19, 2010. This sentiment was increasingly echoed by other figures. "It is time for the government to recognize *Ashura* as a day off in the country," the parliamentarian Saleh Ashur told *al-Hayah* in 2004. Quoted in Vincent Vulin, "After Saddam, Shiites in Kuwait Becoming Vocal About Rights," *Gulf News*, March 12, 2004.

[457] Anon., "Kuwait's Shiite Muslims Press for Religious Education," *Agence France Presse*, September 21, 2004. Hamad al-Jasir, "Deputies, Former Ministers Hold Protest Meeting: Kuwaiti Shi'is Express Reservations Over their 'Exclusion' from Posts," *al-Hayah*, June 11, 2005 (*BBC Monitoring Middle East*, June 13, 2005).

Yet these goals met with stiff opposition from Sunni Islamists.[458] In particular, the Salafi tribal MP, Walid al-Tabtaba'i—who would emerge in later years as the most vociferous opponent of Shi'a rights—criticized the government for excessive deference to Shi'a demands, citing, in particular, the public commemoration of *Ashura*. In mid-2004, al-Tabtaba'i launched a concerted campaign to remove the Shi'a Minister of Information, Muhammad 'Abd al-Hassan, who had spearheaded the policy of greater media freedom in Kuwait in the wake of the Iraq invasion and was thus, from a Sunni perspective, the principal culprit behind Shi'a empowerment in Kuwait. Despite an attempt at mediation by the Prime Minister, the Minister of Information submitted his resignation in December 2004, leaving the government bereft of a Shi'a minister for the first time since the 1970s. The Emir refused to appoint another Shi'a in his place, a move that some Shi'a observers interpreted as an effort to placate the Sunni tribal opposition and a subtle signal that they had perhaps grown too bold in their demands for reform in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.[459]

As late as 2010, there was growing resentment among lay and clerical Shi'a figures that reforms had stalled or had been curtailed because of Salafi pressure. A key unmet demand was that the Shi'a department be completely independent from the Ministry of Religious Endowments.[460] Education was another target for reform. Middle and high school textbooks continued to teach derogatory views of Shi'ism; Shi'a critics singled out the use of the dogmatic and discriminatory terms "*rawafidh*" and "*takfir*" as particularly damaging.[461] According to the Shi'a MP Saleh Ashur:

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[458] A common refrain from Sunni opponents was that Shi'as in Kuwait enjoyed far better rights than Sunnis in Iran. A editorialist in Kuwait opposing concessions to the Shi'a pointed to a purported comment by Ayatollah Khomeini, when asked about building mosques for Sunnis in Iran: "Why don't they pray in the mosques of their Shiite brothers?" Anon., "Kuwait: What do Kuwaiti Shiites Actually Want?" *Right Vision News*, April 1, 2010.

[459] Ibid. When the next Shi'a was appointed to the cabinet, it was Dr. Ma'suma Mubarak, a professor of political science, to the ministry of planning. Many Shi'a clerics and Islamists were offended by the appointment, interpreting it as an insinuation by the government that the Shi'a community had no competent male figure to fill the role. This appointment elicited strong criticism from al-Muhri, who argued that if the Shi'a were to have a ministerial representative, it had to be a male. In response, the government argued that the new minister was not a "Shi'a representative" per se, and that her appointment had been made without regard to her sectarian affiliation or her gender. Personal interview with a Bahraini sociologist, Manama, Bahrain, November 15, 2006.

[460] Personal interview with Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 19, 2010. As currently configured, Shi'a financial transactions had to be vetted and were subject to veto by the ministry's leadership, which was dominated by conservative Sunni Islamists.

[461] *Rawafidh* ("rejectionists"; singular: *rafidha*) is a derogatory term used by opponents of Shi'ism to denigrate the sect by portraying them as having strayed from Islamic orthodoxy. *Takfir* (the act of pronouncing a Muslim or a non-Muslim an unbeliever or *kafir*) is theological precept rooted in early

> If you talk about Islam (in textbooks), talk about it in general terms. But the textbooks talk about Shi'a/Sunni differences; this is *halal* (religiously permissible), this isn't, and so on.[462]

At the university level, Shi'a clerics like al-Muhri's Association of Islamic Shi'a Scholars issued appeals for Shi'a teachers at the College of Islamic Studies at University of Kuwait.[463] Similarly, Shi'a reformists frequently complained about the lack of indigenous seminaries for the training of Shi'a judges in Kuwait. Importantly, this was framed as means to bolster the national integration of the Kuwaiti Shi'a and allay Sunni suspicions—in the absence of Kuwait-based schools, aspiring Shi'a judges were forced to travel to Iran or Iraq.[464]

Kuwaiti Shi'a also voiced criticism of continuing discrimination by police. Even the smallest infractions tended to escalate in parliament as opposing MPs seized upon the issue to undermine their rivals. In 2005, there was also a push by Kuwait's Ministry of Islamic Affairs to monitor mosques—both Sunni and Shi'a. Since the ministry was dominated by Salafis, Shi'a figures, particularly al-Muhri, interpreted the move as explicitly sectarian in nature.[465] In April 2010, for instance, Kuwaiti customs officials detained a group of Kuwaiti Shi'a pilgrims returning from Najaf and seized several of their religious books. The Minister of Finance (whose portfolio included the customs department) subsequently intervened, but the affront was quickly criticized by three Shi'a MPs, Adnan al-Mutawa, Faisal al-Duwaysan and Saleh al-Ashur.[466] Sunni MPs, however, argued that the Shi'a's pressure on the government represented an unwarranted attempt to circumvent the law.

Islamic tradition. Islamic scholars and jurists are divided over the term's scope and applicability, and who can actually use it. Doctrinaire Salafis believe it is incumbent on all practicing Muslims to denounce as unbelievers those they witness transgressing Islamic norms. More liberal writers argue the term can only be used by qualified scholars after a lengthy juridical process. For Shi'a the term is especially abhorrent; opponents of Shi'ism frequently deploy it to denigrate and delegitimize the sect. B. Izzak, "Cancel 'Sectarian' Education: Shatti," *Kuwait Times*, May 9, 2008. Personal interview with Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 19, 2010.

[462] Personal interview with Saleh Ashur, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 8, 2010.

[463] Anon., "Kuwait's Shiite Muslims Press for Religious Education," *Agence France Presse*, September 21, 2004. Also, United States Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report: Kuwait, 2010, http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148828.htm (accessed March 14, 2011).

[464] Ibid. Also, Louër, p. 250.

[465] Anon., "Government move to monitor Shiite mosques stirs row in Kuwait," *Agence France Press*, March 15, 2005.

[466] Anon., "Sectarian controversy over Abdalli border incident," *Kuwait Times*, April 5, 2010.

8.2.2 Sectarian Partisanship after the Iraq Invasion

As the Iraq War unfolded, sectarian relations in Kuwait grew increasingly strained.[467] Much of the partisanship for events in Iraq was instigated by Sunni Islamists, who felt increasingly embattled by the rise of Shi'a power in the region. The U.S. siege of Fallujah, in particular, provoked strong expressions of outrage by Salafi deputies in parliament, who demanded the government take a more explicit stance in favor of Iraq's Sunnis. "We will apply all forms of pressure on the Kuwaiti parliament and groups in Kuwait in order to stand by our brothers in religion, language and nationality," a spokesman for the Kuwaiti Salafi movement told *al-Jazeera* in 2004.[468] Hinting at the royalty's apparent pro-Shi'a bias, he went on to exhort the regime to "show the same solidarity toward the defenders of Fallujah that it had shown toward the Shi'a in al-Najaf and Karbala."[469]

As will be discussed in the next chapter, this tactic may have been partly calculated by the tribal (*badu*) Salafis to win the Sunni *hadhar* and merchants (many of them part of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood affiliate) over to their side in a contest against the government.[470] The most expeditious way to do this was by pointing to the threat of Shi'a ascendancy to enforce a sort of sectarian solidarity. As noted by an NGO head in Kuwait City and longtime observer of Kuwaiti politics:

> The Sunni *hadhar* in Kuwait are afraid that the *badu* will overwhelm them eventually. The *badu* for their part, are telling the *hadhar* to watch out for the Shi'a. The Shi'a are telling the *hadhar*: 'We have to watch the *badu*'[471]

By early 2005, the holding of Iraqi parliamentary elections and the Sunni boycott stoked further alarm among Kuwait's Sunnis about Shi'a ascendency in the region. For their part, Kuwaiti Shi'a leaders—like their counterparts in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain—were careful to avoid excessive applause for Shi'a victories in Iraq, lest they create suspicion about where their loyalties lay. For example, the Shi'a cleric al-Muhri:

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[467] Hamza Hendawi, "Worsening Shiite-Sunni tensions seen even in affluent, tolerant Kuwait," *Associated Press*, November 1, 2006.

[468] *Al-Jazeera*, April 11, 2004.

[469] Ibid.

[470] Personal, unattributed interview with a Sunni government official, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 21, 2010.

[471] Personal interview with Salah al-Ghazali, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 24, 2010.

> We look to the Iraqi polls as a democratic process to elect a legitimate government. It will not be a sectarian Shi'a government, but rather a national Iraqi government in which Sunnis and Kurds will take part.[472]

At the same time, al-Muhri and other figures tried to leverage Iraq developments to push for political reforms and greater concessions to Shi'a identity. Al-Muhri, as noted, made increasingly frequent references to the edicts of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani—an effort that other Shi'a regarded as ill-timed and designed solely to bolster his own modest clerical credentials.[473] In 2004, he called for the inclusion of Shi'a (*Ja'afari*) jurisprudence into the school curriculum, citing political change in Iraq and the growing concern of the United States for Shi'a rights in Kuwait:

> Political change in Iraq and the international community's call for the governments of the region to guarantee religious freedoms has now given Shi'a in Kuwait an incentive to achieve some of their old demands[474]

Other politicians were even more explicit about drawing linkages between the shifting balance of power in Iraq and the necessity of similar changes in Kuwait. The Shi'a politician and businessman 'Ali al-Matruk noted that "regional and international changes have taken place, and these should be taken into consideration. I believe boosting Shi'a rights is overdue."[475]

Unsuprisingly, the Shi'a's ill-conceived analogies to Iraq seemed to confirm the worst Sunni fears that the balance of power was shifting to their disadvantage. Salafi figures, citing al-Muhri's solicitation of U.S. support, accused the Shi'a of attracting unwanted external interference in the domestic affairs of Kuwait.[476] The Salafi deputy, Walid Tabtaba'i, argued that forcing 85 percent of the student body (the Sunnis) to study Shi'a jurisprudence would only

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[472] Omar Hassan, "Gulf Arab Shiites Want Non-Sectarian Rule in Iraq," *Agence France Presse*, January 26, 2005.

[473] Louër, p. 252.

[474] Hamid Jasr, "Mutallibat Shi'a fi al-Kuwayt bi Adkhal al-Fiqh al-Ja'afari fi Manahij" (Shi'a of Kuwait Demand the Inclusion of Ja'afari Jurisprudence in the Curriculum), *al-Hayah*, September 22, 2004. Al-Muhri specifically mentioned the U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Report on Kuwait to buttress his demands.

[475] Omar Hassan, "Gulf Arab Shiites Want Non-Sectarian Rule in Iraq," *Agence France Presse*, January 26, 2005.

[476] Ibid. Also, Hamid Jasr, "Mutallibat Shi'a fi al-Kuwayt bi Adkhal al-Fiqh al-Ja'afari ila al-Manahij" (Shi'a of Kuwait Demand the Inclusion of Ja'afari Jurisprudence in the Curriculum), *al-Hayah*, September 22, 2004.

promote "sectarian sedition" and would represent a capitulation to a "bullying superpower."[477] The Emir himself eventually weighed in on the side of the Salafis (and prudence), warning that, given the chaos of Iraq, now was not the time to stir up sectarian passions.[478]

In October 2005, Sunni recriminations against the Shi'a shifted from rhetoric to violence. A group of about 50 youths from the predominantly Sunni district of al-Jahra attempted to set fire to the Muhammad Bin Abi Bakr Mosque in the district, pelting worshippers with stones and shouting anti-Shi'a slogans that denigrated the Shi'a as collaborators with the U.S. occupation of Iraq.[479] The Minister of Interior subsequently visited the mosque and assured Shi'a deputies in the ministry at the time that the incident was "a childish action that had no sectarian implications."[480] Yet parliamentarians from both sides—Shi'a and Sunni—interpreted the event as a watershed escalation between the two groups. The Shi'a deputy Saleh al-Ashur criticized the protest as a "major infraction" that demanded a swift government response. From the Sunni side, a Salafi deputy, Awwad Barad, demanded that the attackers be released immediately from custody.[481] Partly in response to Barad's demand, a group of 30 Shi'a scholars and clerics—among them, al-Muhri—issued a statement denouncing the event as an "alarm bell," condemning the government of failing to protect the mosque, and warning against the growth of increased intolerance among the "*takfiri*" strand of Kuwait's Salafis.[482]

As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, the government's policy to such incidents was initially balanced—but by 2010, it had increasingly yielded to pressure from Salafi tribal parliamentarians. At times, it permitted displays of sectarian partisanship and in other instances it cracked down on them. For example, in 2007, it refused to grant permission to a group of hard-line Sunni Islamists to stage a demonstration in support of what they called, "the plight of Sunnis in Iraq." Concurrently, however, the government demurred on permitting the public celebrations of *Ashura* by the Shi'a, for fear it would provoke a Sunni backlash.[483] The

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[477] Anon., "al-Shaykh al-Sabah Yurfad Adkhal al-Fiqh al-Ja'afari ila al-Manahij wa Yadhir min 'al-Tasrihat al-Ta'ifiyya," (Shaykh al-Sabah Rejects the Inclusion of Ja'afari Jurisprudence into the Curriculum and Warns Against 'Sectarian Statements'), *al-Hayah*, September 24, 2004.

[478] Ibid.

[479] Anon., "Kuwait: Youths Attack Shiite Mosque, Creating Fear of Sedition," *al-Elaph* via BBC World Monitoring, October 10, 2005.

[480] Ibid.

[481] Ibid.

[482] Anon., "Jahra Mosque Attack Sparks Security Fears: Al-Zarqawi influence growing?" *Kuwait Times*, October 16, 2005.

[483] Anon., "Kuwaiti Emir Warns of Lessons of Iraq," *Agence France Presse*, January 29, 2007.

regime's attempts to maintain sectarian harmony became increasingly difficult in the face of an escalating media war between Kuwait's Sunnis and Shi'as.[484]

8.2.3 The Escalating Media War

As noted earlier, in the polarized climate of regional sectarian tensions, Kuwait's media freedom proved to be a double edged sword. On the one hand, it acted as a pressure release. But it also increased the fever pitch of sectarian partisanship for regional conflicts, particularly in Lebanon and Iraq. As noted by the MP Saleh Ashur, himself an owner of several media outlets in Kuwait:

> In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, people didn't talk about Shi'a or sectarian rights. What has changed? Transparency and the spread of media. Today, if something happens in Bahrain, everyone knows about it.[485]

In the years that followed, Shi'a media power effectively outgunned that of the Sunnis, prompting the Salafi tribal opposition to attack the government for failing to crack down on "divisive" media. In the period 2004-2009, a number of new, explicitly Shi'a TV stations flourished. Among the most prominent, was *al-Anwar*, founded in 2004 and owned by Saleh Ashur, the prominent MP from the *Shiraziyyin* current.[486] The station advances the views of Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi (the younger brother of Muhammad al-Shirazi and his successor as *marja'*) on religious matters, but steers clear of political issues. Another key station affiliated with the *Shiraziyyin* is *al-Zahra*, established by the Kuwaiti cleric Habib al-Kazmi.[487] Like *al-Anwar*, its programming focused on the themes of Sunni persecution and Shi'a victimization in Iraq. In 2006, for instance, *al-Zahra* referred to the February bombing of the Shi'a Hadi al-Askari mosque in Samarra as the "Karbala of our times."[488]

Such stations, in turn, provoked the formation of anti-Shi'a channels. One of the most prominent was the channel *al-Safa*, which broadcast out of Egypt. An unnamed official from the

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[484] The cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri echoed this theme, arguing that the Shi'a should use every means possible to defend themselves against Salafi critics and press for their rights, to include satellite TV and Internet. Omar Hassan, "Gulf Arab Shiites Want Non-Sectarian Rule in Iraq," *Agence France Presse*, January 26, 2005.

[485] Personal interview with Saleh Ashur, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 8, 2010.

[486] According to Ashur, the channel broadcasts mainly from Washington and has offices in Kuwait, Syria, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Isfahan. Personal interview with Saleh al-Ashur, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 8, 2010.

[487] *Al-Anwar* website; www.alanwartv.com; accessed on September 7, 2011.

[488] *Al-Zahra* website, June 20, 2006; www.alzahra.tv; accessed on September 7, 2011.

channel told *al-Jazeera* in 2010 that the channel "adopts a Sunni line that opposes attempts to disseminate Shiite ideology to the Arab region."[489] In October 2010, NILESAT had suspended the channel, along with 11 other channels for promoting sectarian violence. Officials at the channel denied the suspension, arguing instead they themselves had shut down the station because of repeated jamming by a foreign country in the region "with wide influence," i.e. Iran.[490]

Even non-sectarian, mainstream Kuwaiti TV frequently carried anti-Shi'a programming. A particular source of resentment among Kuwaiti Shi'a was the planned airing of a 30-episode miniseries during Ramadan that revolved around the Shi'a practice of *muta'a* or temporary marriage. The plot was widely interpretated by Shi'a in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as a direct attack on a legitimate religious precept and a number of Shi'a clerics and parliamentarians issued statements against the transmission of the series.[491]

8.2.4 The Debate over National Loyalty

As in the case of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, the moderate *Shiraziyyin* endeavored to assert their nationalist bona fides in the face of attacks about their loyalty to Iran. As will be discussed below, this effort was hampered by the presence of a parliamentary bloc that explicitly and unapologetically affiliated itself with Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Among the *Shiraziyyin* and *Da'wa* currents, however, there was more circumspection and a concerted attempt to distinguish between the religious and spiritual appeal of the Islamic Republic and its political manifestations. This effort reflected the previous efforts of *maraja'* like Muhammad al-Shirazi and Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarassi to distance themselves from the pro-regime clerics of the Islamic Republic. The problem was that an increasingly polarized regional environment lent credence to more radical voices and forced the moderates (from both the Sunni and Shi'a camps) into a corner.

As in the case of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Kuwaiti Shi'a clerics publicized and inflated their access to foreign *maraja'* to boost their authority and popularity. These pronouncements provided fodder for political opponents—particularly from the more conservative Salafi currents—who accused the Shi'a of being disloyal to the state. A key example is al-Muhri, whom many interlocutors accused of trying to inflate his stature as a *wakil* (representative or emissary)

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[489] Anon., "NILESAT Suspends Another Religious Satellite Channel Amid Conflicting Reasons," al-Jazeera.net website, October 17, 2020 (*BBC Monitoring Middle East*, October 19, 2010).

[490] Ibid.

[491] Omar Hassan, "Kuwait: Shiite marriage TV drama hits sectarian nerve," *Agence France Presse*, September 16, 2007

of al-Sistani.[492] In January 2007, al-Muhri sparked another uproar when he appeared to implicitly endorsed the wave of bombings and assassination attempts that wracked Kuwait in the late 1980s. He told *al-Seyassah* that "What happened in the past was patriotic because the Shi'a were aware that Saddam Husayn was a criminal and that he was going to invade Kuwait." Muhri's office later argued that he had been misquoted and issued a clarification in *al-Watan*.[493]

Another lightening rod was the Shi'a cleric Yasser al-Habib. A young cleric (he was only 21 when he was first attracted public attention), al-Habib issued a series of vitriolic, anti-Sunni statements that, over the course of the next six years, would place Shi'a moderates under pressure, provoke the vitriol of Sunni extremists, and force the government in the role of referee and arbiter. In November 2003, al-Habib was arrested and sentenced to 10 years for an audiotaped sermon (in a private gathering) that allegedly slandered the first two Muslim caliphs (whom Sunnis regard as sacrosanct). In February 2004 he was pardoned by the Kuwaiti Emir, but then re-arrested and fled to London before he could be sentenced.[494]

From London, he formed the *Khaddam al-Mahdi* (Servants of the Mahdi) organization and continued to mount a series of attacks on the royal family, Shi'a persecution, and the very creed of the Sunnis—all of which stirred Kuwaiti sectarian tensions.[495] In 2009, for example, he made several speeches exhorting the Shi'a of the Eastern Province to declare their independence and merge with Kuwait and Bahrain as part of a "Greater Bahrain."[496] In September 2010, he launched an exclusively Shi'a satellite TV station, *al-Fadak*, with the banner, "The Middle East Witnesses a Shi'a Media Revolution" emblazoned on its home page.[497] He also owns two websites and a newsletter for British Shi'a Muslims which disseminate his religious teachings and carry provocative statements such as calling for "revolutionary change on the occasion of *Ashura"* and a "Shi'a *intifada*."[498] As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, al-Habib, brazen statements contributed to 2010 government crackdown and the curtailment of the emirate's relatively liberal media freedom.

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[492] Personal interview with Shi'a Islamist parliamentarian, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 20, 2010.

[493] Anon., "Kuwait Sunni Group, MP blast Shiite leader," *Agence France Presse*, January 30, 2007.

[494] Anon., "Kuwaiti Emir Pardons Shiite Activist Who Abused Muslim Caliphs," *Agence France Presse*, February 26, 2004.

[495] See his website, *al-Qatrah* ("the Drop") at http://www.alqatrah.net; accessed on September 13, 2011.

[496] A. Saleh, "Habib Sees Kuwait as Part of Shiite Nation," *Kuwait Times*, March 8, 2009

[497] *Al-Elaph*, September 20, 2010.

[498] Ibid.

8.3 THE IRAQ WAR AND THE FRACTURING OF THE SHI'A BLOC

From 2003 to 2009, the Kuwaiti Shi'a political field became increasingly factionalized, due, in part, to the regional upheaval of the Iraq War. Unlike Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, these splits were not the result of a disagreement about tactics or the efficacy of participating in the political process. All Kuwaiti Shi'a groups were dedicated to affecting change peacefully, through the institutions of the *diwaniya* and the parliament. Even the most radical of the pro-Iranian figures, accepted the legitimacy of the al-Sabah, the parliament, and the *diwaniya*.[499] A key catalyst for the fracturing of these currents was the re-emergence of Shi'a clerical authorities in Iraq, such as Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and, to a lesser extent, the Hakim family. The growing power of these figures provided inspiration in Kuwait for a brewing mutiny against the old Shi'a merchant class (who had traditionally followed Iranian *maraja'*) by a newer generation of Shi'a activists.[500]

8.3.1 Defections from the Pro-Iranian Current

One of the first instances of fracturing of the Shi'a polity was a four-way split between the *Khat al-Imam* (those who identified Iranian Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i as their *marja'* and embraced the political philosophy of *velayet-e faqih*), the *Shiraziyyin* and the *Da'wa* currents. In 1998, prominent lay activists of the *Khat al-Imam*, 'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad and 'Abd al-Muhsin Jamal, as well as younger clerics such as Husayn al-Ma'atuk founded *al-Tahallaf al-Islami al-Watani* (the Islamic National Alliance or INA). Following the death of Khomeini, the group regarded Khamene'i as their *marja'*, but its members also took guidance from other Iran-born *marja*' such as al-Sistani, Mirza Jawad al-Tabrizi, and Muhammad Taqi Bahjit.[501] The grouping was the first Shi'a party to field parliamentary representatives after the first elections in 1981.

Yet in 2003 ideological splits began to emerge, specifically over the alliance's continued fidelity to *velayet-e faqih*. The 2003 Kuwaiti parliamentary elections dealt it a further blow to the party. Despite its strength, it won only one of the five Shi'a seats; the other four winners hailed from the *baharna*, *Da'wa*, *Shirazi* and non-affiliated Shi'a merchant currents.[502] Outside observers have interpreted the party's loss and diminishing support as at least partly a function of

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[499] Salah al-Ghazali, *Al-Jam'iyat al-Siyasiya al-Kuwaytiya fi Qurn* (Political Parties in Kuwait throughout the Century), Kuwait City: Jami'yat al-Haquq Mahfudha, 2007.

[500] Personal interview with Shi'a parliamentarian, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 25, 2010. See also, J.E. Peterson, "Political Activism Among the Shi'a of Kuwait," Arabian Peninsula Background Note, No. APBN-008, July 2009; available at www.JEPeterson.net; accessed on September 7, 2011.

[501] Al-Ghazali, p. 398.

[502] Al-Ghazali, p. 400.

the rise of Grand Ayatollah ‘Ali al-Sistani in Iraq, which emboldened the *Shiraziyyin* and *Da’wa* supporters who had previously toed the line of the INA to break away from the party, forge a partnership, and chart an independent course.[503]

Among the first groups to split from the INA/*Khat al-Imam* was a faction led by the prominent Shi’a businessman, former minister of commerce, ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Wazzan.[504] Taking inspiration from the burgeoning reform movement underway in Iran under then-president Muhammad Khatami, al-Wazzan formed the *al-Tawafuq al-Islami al-Watani* (Islamic National Accord) in 2003.[505] In its organization and mission, the party was self-consciously modeled after Khatami’s Combatant Clerics Association in Iran. That same year, the *Shiraziyyin* formed the Assembly for Justice and Peace (*Tajammu’ al-Adala wa al-Salam*) as a counterweight to the INA/*Khat al-Imam*. The Assembly counted 110 active members, of whom, over 30 were women. The grouping was able to leverage the *Shirazi* current’s vast and longstanding network of charitable foundations and cultural centers that had been set up in Kuwait in the 1970s. One of the party’s principal aims was to advance Ayatollah Shirazi’s more quietist interpretation of *velayet-e faqih* as an alternative to the pro-Khomeini platform of the INA.[506]

The third party, the Assembly of the National Pact (*Tajammu’ al-Mithaq al-Watani*), was formed in July 2003 under the aegis of the *Da’wa* current. Since its inception, the party was under continual suspicion by critics inside the regime and among the Sunni Islamist currents because of its historic links with the Iraq-based *Da’wa* current, which had fomented bombings in Kuwait in the 1980s.[507] When asked about the party’s affiliation with *Da’wa*’s violent past, its secretary general, ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Salah, prevaricated:

> If the intent of *Da’wa* was to fight Saddam, then we are honored to be affiliated with it. However, if the intent is to say that *Da’wa* was behind the campaign of assassinations and bombings then no, I beg your pardon, we are not part of it.[508]

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[503] Personal unattributed interviews with Shi’a Islamists in Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 2010.

[504] For background on al-Wazzan, see his memoir, ‘Abd al-Wahhab Muhammad al-Wazzan, *Hajis al-Watan wa al-Dawla* (The Concept of the Nation and the State) Kuwait City: Jamiya al-Haquq Mahfudha lil-Majmu’a, 2007.

[505] Al-Ghazali, p. 394.

[506] Al-Ghazali, p. 391.

[507] Louër, p. 253.

[508] Al-Ghazali, p. 392.

8.3.2 The *Shiraziyyin* versus the INA/*Khat al-Imam*

In the ensuing year, the *Shiraziyyin* had become increasingly assertive against their rivals in the *Khat al-Imam*, and pushed for the establishment of several umbrella groupings that were explicitly framed in the press as as "anti-Hizballah," i.e. against the INA/*Khat al-Imam*. The first of these was formed in 2005 as the Front for Justice and Peace (*Jabha li-Adala wa Salam*).[509] The grouping was subsequently disavowed, however, by a prominent cleric Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri and other personalities. In 2005, on the eve of the parliamentary elections, the *Shiraziyyin* made another attempt to isolate their rivals in the INA/*Khat al-Imam* current with the formation of the National Coalition of Assemblies (*I'tilaf al-Tajamu'at al-Watani*). The Coalition was modeled on the al-Sistani-backed Shi'a bloc that had dominated the 2004 Iraqi parliamentary elections. It included the *Da'wa* and Khatami factions, as well as Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri's clerical association.[510] **Table 8.1** below depicts the major Shi'a currents in Kuwait discussed this far, along with their ideological orientation and key members.

Party Name	Founding Date	Ideological Current	*Marja'*	Key Members
al-Tahallaf al-Islami al-Watani (The Islamic National Alliance or INA)	1998	*Khat al-Imam* (pro-Iranian). Also derisively known as Kuwaiti Hizballah	'Ali Khamene'i. To lesser extent, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani and Jawad Tabrizi (Qom-based; died in 2006)	'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad, Husayn Ma'tuk, Hassan 'Abdallah Jawhar, Ahmed Lari, and 'Abd al-Muhsin Jamal
al-Tawafuq al-Islami al-Watani (The National Islamic Accord)	2003	Reformist, pro-Khatami	al-Sistani, Tabrizi, Shirazi	Abd al-Wahhab al-Wazzan
Tajammu' al-Adala wa al-Salam (The Justice and Peace Assembly)	2004	Shirazi	Muhammad Sadeq al-Shirazi, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani	Saleh Ashur, Rajib 'Ali, 'Abd al-Husayn Sultan
Tajammu' al-Mithaq al-Watani (The National Pact Assembly)	2005	*Da'wa*	Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah	Abd al-Hadi al-Salah, Yusuf al-Zilzila
I'tilaf al-Tajammu'at al-Watani (National Coalition of the Assemblies)	2005	Shirazi-led, anti-INA	Muhammed Sadeq al-Shirazi, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani	'Abd al-Husayn Sultan, Saleh Ashur, Ali al-Baghli, 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Wazzan

Table 8.1. Kuwaiti Shi'a Political Organizations, Post-2003[511]

The *Shiraziyyin* were able to strike an important blow against the INA with a leak to the press about the INA's meetings in May 2004 with representatives of Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i at the Iranian embassy in Kuwait City.[512] The entire incident tarnished the legitimacy

[509] Samih Shams al-Din, "Jabha Shi'a Jadida li-Muharaba Hizballah," (A New Shi'a Front to Fight Hizballah)" *al-Seyassah* (Kuwait), December 30, 2004.

[510] Fawzi Uways, "The National Groupings Coalition: We Are Prepared To Include any Sunni Forces," *al-Seyassah* (Kuwait), October 22, 2005.

[511] Al-Ghazali, pp. 381-407 and Louër, pp. 217-19; pp. 253-255.

[512] Ghazali, p. 401. Louër, p. 251.

of the INA, provoking the ire of both the Salafi opposition and the government. The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry later summoned the Iranian chargé d'affaires to lodge a protest about the meetings.[513] The issue of fidelity to Iran thus emerged as one of the central fault lines within the Shi'a community—a fissure that widened with the escalation of regional tensions, particularly after the 2006 Lebanon War.

The run up to the 2006 parliamentary elections proved to be a further dividing line between the currents. Specifically, a debate emerged over the reduction of electoral districts, with a group of 29 parliamentarians submitting a motion to reduce the number from 25 to 5 on the grounds that it would reduce tribal clientalism, vote-buying and government interference, while encouraging the growth of larger, more organized, disciplined political parties.[514] The motion was buttressed by a broad-based youth campaign, the so-called "Orange Movement," that relied extensively on text-messaging and innovative social media—a precursor to the Arab Spring of 2011.[515] Importantly, Shi'a deputies from the *Shiraziyyin* like Saleh al-Ashur and Yusuf al-Zilzila opposed the measure, believing that the existing district structure allowed them to form alliances with moderate Sunnis against their rivals in the INA. For its part, the INA joined with the opposition in supporting the measure. The redistricting measure ultimately passed. **Figure 8.1** below shows this post-2006 district division in Kuwait City, with demographic traits overlaid.

Ironically, the new system backfired. The next parliament, elected on May 17, 2008, was even more fractious, tribal and sectarian. Sunni Islamist and tribal deputies won 24 of the parliament's 50 seats. Moreover, the *Shiraziyyin* failed in their bid to weaken the INA in the 2006 parliament—of the four Shi'a deputies elected to parliament, three were from the INA and one (Saleh Ashur) was from the *Shiraziyyin*.[516] Nevertheless, the result was a highly polarized parliament, in which Sunni deputies latched on to the Shi'a's pro-Iranian orientation as a means to discredit the Shi'a bloc as a whole and to pressure the government into greater concessions for the Sunni tribes.

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[513] Anon., "Kuwaiti PM says Iran not a rival," *Xinhua General News Service*, May 15, 2004.

[514] As Nathan Brown has argued, the redistricting measure was supposed to "recast Kuwaiti elections from neighborhood contests fought over hundreds of votes to more ideological competitions favoring groups with clear programs" Nathan Brown, "Kuwait's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A Setback for Democratic Islamism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Web Commentary, May 2008.

[515] Mary Ann Tetreault, "Kuwait's Annus Mirabilis" *Middle East Report*, September 7, 2006.

[516] Anon. "Kuwait: Assessment of the Electoral Framework," Democracy Reporting International – Kuwait Transparency Society (Berlin/Kuwait, November 2008).

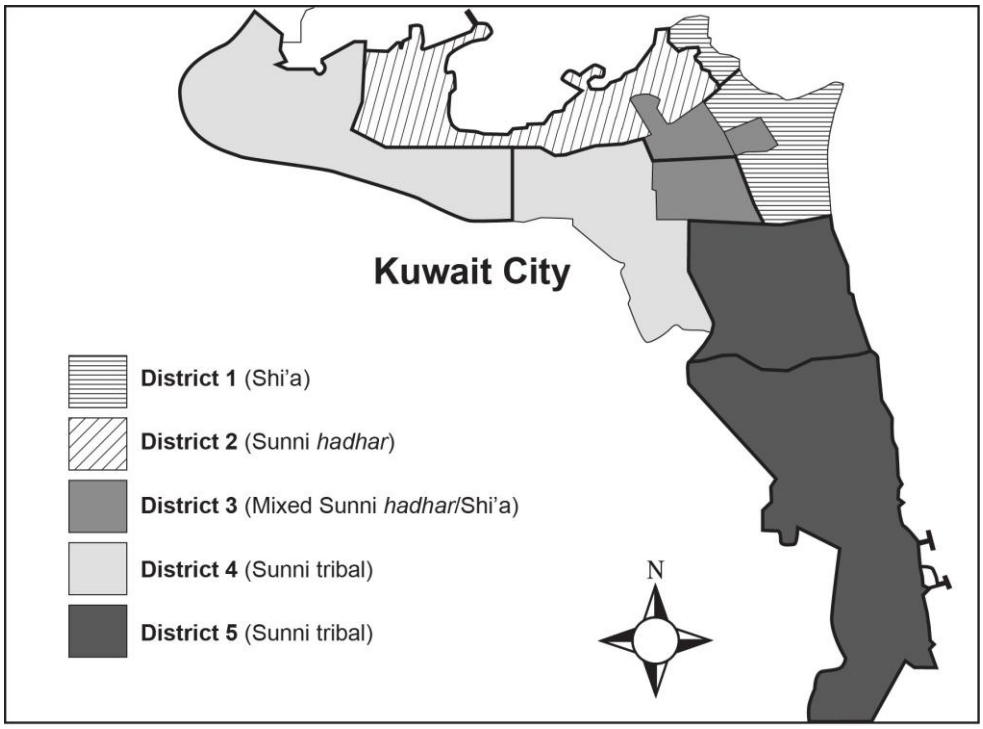

Figure 8.1. Kuwait City's Five Electoral Districts and Demographic Characteristics[517]

8.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has surveyed how the regional shocks of the Iraq War and rising sectarian tensions in the region affected Shi'a political strategies and cohesion in Kuwait. Like their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti Shi'a saw the Iraq War as an opportunity to push for increased cultural and religious rights, while at the same time emphasizing their nationalist bona fides and attempting to assuage regime and Sunni concerns about their loyalty. In tandem, the Iraq War produced increased factionalism among the Shi'a societies in Kuwait. Emboldened by the rise of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, the *Shiraziyyin* attempted to marginalize their rivals in the INA. Much of this was facilitated by the policy of increased media freedom implemented by the Kuwaiti government in the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, this openness also contributed to growing sectarianism in the emirate and the widespread Sunni perception that the Kuwaiti regime was decidedly pro-Shi'a in its orientation. Parliamentary stability was undermined by Sunni alarm

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[517] Map created by author, with data from field interviews in November 2010 and also Anon. "Kuwait: Assessment of the Electoral Framework," Democracy Reporting International – Kuwait Transparency Society (Berlin/Kuwait, November 2008).

over the local impact of the 2006 Lebanon War, the 2008 assassination of ‘Imad Mughniyah, and the approach of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2009. These regional shocks made participatory politics in the emirate increasingly contentious and dysfunctional, prompting the government in 2010 to curtail media freedoms and civil liberties. Amidst this turbulence and rising Sunni alarmism, many observers—inside the country and throughout the Gulf—wondered if Kuwait’s fragile democracy had fallen prey to regional tensions and sectarian passions. As one Kuwaiti commentator lamented in 2008:

> You love the freedom that enables you to express your opinion freely and frankly [but] you are afraid of it because it allows a person to raise the six-meter picture of Khamene’i.[518]

[518] Mamduh al-Muhayni, "Kuwait: Who is to close Pandora's Box that was opened about a month ago?” *al-Elaph*, March 17, 2008.

9 KUWAIT: THE REGIME RESPONSE AND THE SUNNI COUNTER-MOBILIZATION

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The Kuwaiti regime's response to Shi'a activism followed a pattern employed elsewhere in the Gulf—using calibrated reforms to placate Shi'a dissent, while at the same time trying to avoid provoking Sunni Islamist sensibilities. In Kuwait, this game of "sectarian balancing" had higher stakes, particularly since the royal family was confronted with a more concerted opposition from tribal Sunnis, starting in 2005. During this period, the Sunni tribes effectively withdrew from their previous alliance with the royalty, supplanting the liberals as the al-Sabah's main adversary. For these oppositionists—many of them *badu* drawn from the environs outside Kuwait City—anti-Shi'ism and *ta'ifiyya* became a "card" to discredit the royalty—specifically the more liberal leaning Prime Minister—and a tactic to win over the *hadhar* Sunnis.[519]

The regime was thus forced into the delicate role of mediating between this current and the Shi'a, whom it increasingly came to rely upon as allies. Mounting regional tensions over Iran, Iraq and Hizballah provided ample grist for the Sunni Islamists in their attacks on the government. Specifically, there were recurring charges by the Sunni tribal opposition that the Kuwaiti government was not doing enough to assist Sunnis in Iraq, was too close to the U.S., and was being too partial to Iran's interests. Ironically, the position of the Sunnis in opposition represented a role reversal with the Shi'a, particularly regarding Kuwait's policies in Iraq.[520]

Three incidents in particular highlight the way in which sectarianism became highly politicized in the tribe-versus-regime struggle. In February 2008, Shi'a parliamentarians from the pro-Iranian Islamic National Alliance (INA) attended a eulogy for the recently slain Hizballah commander, Imad Mughniyah and made a number of laudatory remarks. The statements stirred uproar in Kuwait, given Mughniyah's alleged involvement in the spate of terrorist attacks that afflicted Kuwait in the 1980s, included an attempt on the Emir's life. The event quickly escalated into a sectarian confrontation, as the Shi'a deputies attempted to qualify their remarks, while their

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[519] For background on the *hadhar-badu* divide, see Chapter Two. Also, Anh Nga Longva, "Nationalism in Pre-Modern Guise: The Discourse on *Hadhar* and *Badu* in Kuwait," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 38, 2006, pp. 171–187.

[520] This was noted by Lori Plotkin Boghart, "Key grievances of both today's Kuwaiti Sunni militants and yesterday's Kuwaiti Shiite militants relate significantly to al-Sabah policy positions, the former to the support for the United States in Iraq, and the latter to support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War." Lori Plotkin Boghardt, *Kuwait Amid War, Peace and Revolution: 1979-1991 and New Challenges*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, in association with St. Antony's College, 2006, p. 177.

Sunni opponents demanded their expulsion from parliament. In November, amidst this increasingly polarized climate, the Kuwaiti cabinet tendered its resignation after three Sunni Islamist deputies filed a motion to interpellate the Prime Minister over his decision to allow the visit of an Iranian cleric who was perceived to be anti-Sunni. And in September 2010, the specter of Yasser al-Habib emerged again. The controversial Shi'a cleric made a disparaging remark about the Prophet Muhammad's daughter Aisha—a revered figure among Sunnis, but one who is frequently denigrated by Shi'a. Among Kuwait's Sunni Islamists, the insult quickly acquired the status of a *cause célèbre*. Salafi parliamentarians demanded his immediate arrest and the revocation of his citizenship. The tension reached such intensity that the Sunni opposition demanded the government ban or censor Shi'a media outlets. By late 2010, the Kuwaiti government had barred public gatherings and drastically curtailed media freedom—restrictions that were in large measure due to the worsening sectarian gridlock.

This chapter will examine the regime's response to Shi'a activism, focusing specifically on how the government attempted to mediate the Salafi opposition's criticism of its policies. It will argue that Kuwait's openness and democratic structures helped temper the initial impact of the Iraq War, but were increasingly threatened by domestic political crises that were aggravated by mounting regional tensions and fears of Iranian power.

Importantly, this tension was not so much the result in any escalation or shift in strategy by the Shi'a but rather local power dynamics between Kuwaiti Sunni tribes and the Prime Minister. Sectarianism became the vocabulary of this struggle, but was not its immediate cause. In the context of rising regional tensions and the perception of Iranian ascendency, this opposition—particularly the tribal-based Salafis—used anti-Shi'ism as a political weapon against the reform-minded members of the al-Sabah. Faced with this pressure, the well-meaning policies of the liberal Prime Minister were gradually curtailed, to the point where, in late 2010, the government had implemented a far-reaching ban on public gatherings and significantly clamped down on media freedom.

9.2 THE SUNNI ISLAMISTS: FROM REGIME BULWARKS TO OPPOSITION

To understand the Sunni and regime reaction to Shi'ism in Kuwait, it is first necessary to examine the government's longstanding practice of co-option and divide and rule. Specifically, it is important to understand how Sunni Islamist groups—the Brotherhood-inspired *al-Haraka al-Dusturiya al-Islamiya* (the Islamic Constitution Movement, henceforth referred to by its Arabic acronym, HADAS) and the Islamic Salafi Alliance (ISA)—were transformed from loyal bulwarks of the ruling family into its main opposition.

9.2.1 HADAS: The *Hadhar* Bulwark

Inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, HADAS has traditionally been the best-organized of Kuwait's political societies. It has typically drawn its membership from the Sunni merchant and *hadhar* class and formally coalesced in the aftermath of the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, when the country's political field opened to formal "associations."[521]

One of the frequent charges by the Salafi opposition against HADAS was its coziness toward Iran and the Shi'a. These accusations stem in large part from the historic animosity between the Salafis—drawn primarily since the 1980s from the ranks of Kuwait's *badu* population—and the wealthier *hadhar*, who comprised the bulk of HADAS. But since 2003, HADAS did adopt a more nuanced and accommodative view toward the Shi'a in Kuwait. Unlike the Salafis, HADAS figures distinguished between the Shi'a minority who embraced Iranian ideology and the more nationalist *Shiraziyyin* current. According to longtime HADAS member:

> Here in Kuwait, you can distinguish the pro-Iranian Shi'a from the nationalist (Shi'a). The Salafis and the tribes don't do this.[522]

Yet for many Salafis, such distinctions fell flat. A long-time observer of Sunni Islamist politics in the Gulf and a prominent Salafi activist Muhanna Hubayl argued that the electoral decline of HADAS and like-minded Muslim Brotherhood groups on the Peninsula was due to their being on the wrong side of public sentiment with regard to the Shi'a and Iran.[523] This was nowhere as apparent as the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's support for Hizballah during the summer 2006 Lebanon War, which carried over to Gulf Brotherhood affiliates, regardless of whether their views approximated those of the Cairo-based organization. He writes:

> Islamic public opinion in the Gulf was surprised to see that the Muslim Brotherhood's support for Hizballah in Lebanon was several times stronger than its support for HAMAS. We are particularly referring to certain statements by Muslim Brotherhood officials, including statements by General Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akif who openly supported Hizballah's incursion into Beirut and the subsequent political agreement among the Lebanese parties. This showed that the brotherhood supported Hizballah's political stance and not merely its summer war against the Zionist enemy.[524]

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[521] Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, *Jami'yat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fi al-Kuwayt* (Muslim Brotherhood Groups in Kuwait), Kuwait: Dar Qurtas lil-Nashr, 1999. Brotherhood-inspired movements had existed in Kuwait since the 1960s and 1970s, particularly on university campuses and student unions.

[522] Personal interview with HADAS member, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 22, 2010.

[523] Muhammad Hubayl, "Halat al-Ikhwan fi al-Khalij: Ruwaya Naqdiya" (The State of the Brotherhood in in the Gulf: A Critical View) *IslamOnline*, June 3, 2008. .

[524] Ibid.

In contrast to the Brotherhood-inspired HADAS society, the Salafi current in Kuwait took a harder line toward the Shi'a. Much of this was due to Salafism's doctrinal intolerance of other sects and currents within Islam. More important, however, were the local socio-economic disparities which increasingly pitted the Salafi tribal opposition against the regime and its Shi'a allies.

9.2.2 The Salafis

The Salafi movement in Kuwait first took formal shape with the *Harakat Salafiyya 'Almiya* (the Scientific Salafi Movement) formed in 1997, headed by Shaykh Hamid al-'Ali from 1997 to 2000.[525] Hamid al-'Ali's resonance extended well beyond his former tenure as the secretary general of the Salafi movement and it is worth considering his background and writings.

Born in Kuwait in 1962, al-'Ali received his clerical education in Saudi Arabia and a Saudi-educated professor of Islamic culture at the College of Islamic Education at Kuwait University, and a mosque *imam* in Kuwait City.[526] In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, al-'Ali's writings and *fatawa* adopted an increasingly hostile and militant, attaining widespread notoriety among the virtual *jihadi* community as well as actual militants fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. His writings, sermons and interviews on pan-Arab media such as *al-Jazeera* have canvassed a broad swathe of topics: the legitimacy of volunteering for jihad in the Iraq War, suicide operations, globalization, personal jihadi ethics and the illegitimacy of elections.[527] Unsurprisingly, these writings attracted the ire of the Kuwait security forces. In 2003, he received a two-year suspended prison sentence for publicly opposing Kuwait's stance on the Iraq War and was released in November 2005. At times, his intellectual grist for the jihadist enterprise crossed the line into operational and material support for Kuwait's Salafi-jihadists.[528] In 2005, he was accused, but later acquitted, of conspiracy charges against the regime.[529]

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[525] As noted in previous chapters, formal political parties are banned in Kuwait; only "societies" are allowed. Salah al-Ghazali, *Al-Jam'iyat al-Siyasiya al-Kuwaytiya fi Qurn* (Political Parties in Kuwait throughout the Century) Kuwait City: Jami'yat al-Haquq Mahfudha, 2007, p. 264.

[526] Ibid., p, 261.

[527] The Norwegian scholar of transnational jihadism Thomas Hegghammer has identified Hamid al-'Ali as "the most important mufti for jihadist groups operating in Iraq." See Thomas Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism After the Iraq War," *Middle East Journal* 11:60 (2006).

[528] The exact number of armed Salafi jihadists in Kuwait is unknown. However, Kuwaitis have been captured or killed fighting alongside al-Qaida in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Additionally, Kuwait security forces have disrupted plots against U.S. military bases and Kuwaiti government facilities. According to Kuwaiti government sources, Hamid al-'Ali played a key role in recruiting and inspiring the plotters in several instances. For background, see William F. McCants, *Militant Ideology Atlas,*

It is on Shi'ism, however, where al-'Ali has been the most prolific and vitriolic.[530] Many Shi'a activists and politicians in Kuwait cited him as having the most noxious influence on anti-Shi'a tendencies within the Salafi current.[531] Like the Saudi clerics with whom he shares doctrinal affinity, al-'Ali's writings resurrect the timeworn trope of the Shi'a as internal saboteurs of Muslim unity and cohesion.[532] To this, he has added the specter of Iranian meddling in the internal affairs of the Gulf—a theme which achieved particular resonance in the wake of Mughniyah crisis of 2008. In a 2007 television interview with *al-Jazeera*, he noted that:

> [*Al-Jazeera*] How do you evaluate the stand of the Shi'a in the Gulf, who constitute a sizeable minority - in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain?
>
> [Al-'Ali] I have said moments ago, that this Iranian project has tentacles inside the Gulf states. These tentacles are there with the aim of implementing this policy, which the present regime in Iran is regrettably trying to implement. The current regime in Iran is following a very serious policy towards the region. Indeed, I believe that the danger of this policy is graver than the danger of the Western project, given the factors of urgency and proximity.[533]

From 2000 onward, the Salafi movement fell under the leadership of another cleric, Hakim al-Mutayri, who hailed from a prominent tribe. In 2005, al-Mutayri announced the establishment of a formal Salafi party, the *Hizb al-Ummah*, which adopted markedly more conservative views than the majority of Kuwait's Salafis. Indeed, many of the party's goals were aligned with the militants that, at the time, were conducting a campaign of violence on Kuwaiti soil: the eviction of foreign troops from Iraq and the Gulf, the establishment of a more just social order, and greater morality on family matters and social practice.[534] In the context of Kuwait's ongoing counter-terrorism campaign and the *Hizb al-Ummah*'s questionable legality, al-Mutayri

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Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, November 2006, available at: http://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Atlas-ResearchCompendium1.pdf.

[529] Details of al-'Ali's biography are found at <http://www.islamway.com/?iw_s=Scholar&iw_a=info&scholar_id=500> (visited Aug 9 2006).

[530] His writings frequently appear on the Islamist chatrooms *al-Meer*, http://www.almeer.net; *al-Sakifah*, http://www.alsakifah.org; and *Islamway*, http://www.islamway.com.

[531] Personal interviews with Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, December 12, 2010 and Khalil al-Haidar, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 21, 2010.

[532] For the intellectual origins of anti-Shi'ism in Salafism, see, Guido Steinberg, "Jihadi Salafism and the Shi'is: Remarks about the Intellectual Roots of anti-Shi'ism," in Roel Meijer, ed., *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 107-126.

[533] *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, April 7, 2007, Anon., "Interview with Hamid al-'Ali," *al-Jazeera* TV March 27, 2007.

[534] Al-Ghazali, pp. 265-266.

was subjected to several hours of questioning in Jahra (a predominately tribal town to the west of Kuwait City, where Salafism has attracted a strong following). Moreover, at least 15 members of the party were banned from travel.[535]

A more moderate wing of Salafis demurred on joining the *Hizb al-Ummahh* and formed their own parliamentary block—the Islamic Salafi Alliance (ISA).[536] The informal head of this grouping was Khaled al-Sultan, who hailed from a prominent Sunni *hadhar* merchant family. Another key member was Walid al-Tabtaba'i, a prominent *shaykh* from the outer districts, whose tribal background typified the profile of those joining the Salafis' ranks after 2005.[537]

9.2.3 The Tribal Defection to Salafism, 2005-2006

To fully understand the way Kuwait's participatory structures fell prey to sectarianism it is important to explore how shifting demographics impacted relations between the segments of the royalty, the urban elite and rural tribes.

Nowhere is this more applicable than in understanding how the *badu* influx to Salafism helped turn it from pro-regime force into an opposition that, by default, became increasingly anti-Shi'a in its outlook. Throughout the 1960s-70s, the *badu* were successfully cultivated as regime allies to the urban merchant class of *hadhar*. In tandem, the ruling family saw Islamists as useful bulwarks against the rising tide of Nasserism and pan-Arabism. According to Kuwait scholar Mary Ann Tétreault, "Kuwait's rulers were attracted by Islamists preaching the virtues of a hierarchical ethical order that included loyalty to Kuwait's ruling autocracy."[538] Yet by 2005, the scales had shifted. From 2005 onward, it was the tribes, rather than liberals, that dominated the opposition.[539]

Much had to do with shifts in the social and economic policies of the new Prime Minister, Nasser Muhammad al-Ahmed al-Sabah, who took office in 2006. In contrast to his predecessor, Nasser al-Sabah evinced a more liberal outlook on social policy, women's rights,

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[535] Anon., "Kuwait Ummah Party Formed," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 26, 2005.

[536] Democracy Reporting International / Kuwait Transparency Society, "Kuwait: Assessment of the Electoral Framework: Final Report," (Berlin/Kuwait City: November 2008). Also, Dahim al-Qahtain, "Reading the Structure of the Members of the 2008 National Assembly: Political Belonging, Tendency, Tribe and Sect," *al-Ra'y* (Kuwait), June 17, 2008.

[537] Al-Ghazali, p. 261. Also, Falah 'Abd al-Mdeires, *al-Jami'yat al-Salafiyya fi al-Kuwayt*, Kuwait: Dar Qurtas lil-Nashr, 1999.

[538] Mary Ann Tétreault, "Frankenstein's Lament in Kuwait," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, November 29, 2001, 1.

[539] Jamie Etheridge, "Kuwaiti Tribes Turn Parliament To Own Advantage," *Financial Times*, February 2, 2009.

and media freedom. Additionally, he launched a concerted drive for privatization and economic liberalization.[540] All of these shifts proved threatening to the *badu* tribes, who were typically more conservative on family and social matters, and who depended on state subsidies and employment in the bloated public sector. The new Prime Minister's policies appeared to directly undermine the historically privileged position of the tribes while implicitly favoring the merchant *hadhar* class. As noted by one tribal member interviewed in 2009:

> In Jahra [Kuwait's third largest city and a tribal stronghold], we have only one bilingual school and one hospital. They try to isolate us. We want to be treated like them [the *hadhar*]. We want equal access to jobs, services, and housing. We are Kuwaitis like everyone else. There is no difference.[541]

Increasingly, these socio-economic tensions took on a religious hue. The disaffected *badu* gravitated toward Salafism as a mobilizing force. This "defection" to Salafism was likely driven by several factors.[542] The first was the longstanding links between these tribes and Saudi Arabia. Throughout the 1990s, the Saudi government and semi-official charities had dispensed financial assistance to a variety of Kuwaiti Salafi networks, hospitals and mosques in the country's outer districts as both leverage against the al-Sabah and as a counterweight to Kuwaiti liberals.[543] Second, Salafism's tenets aligned well with the tribes' socially conservative outlook. Third, Salafism's doctrinaire, anti-hierarchical worldview has typically appealed to those societal segments attempting challenge political or economic power disparities.[544] In this respect, the tribes gravitated toward Salafism as a sort of de-facto alternative to the other Islamist current in the country, HADAS, which had been a longtime stronghold of the wealthier, urban *hadhar*.

Faced with this opposition, the government increasingly relied upon the urban Shi'a as allies. As noted by one informed observer:

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[540] Paul Salem, "Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate," Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006, p.1.

[541] Jamie Etheridge, "Kuwaiti Tribes Turn Parliament to Own Advantage," *Financial Times*, February 2, 2009.

[542] A prominent sociologist in Bahrain used the term, "mutiny" to describe this shift. Personal unattributed interview with a Bahraini sociologist, Manama, Bahrain, March 16, 2008.

[543] al-Mdeires, *al-Jami'yat al-Salafiyya fi al-Kuwayt*, pp. 30-50.

[544] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 232-289 and Meijer, *Global Salafism*. An important exploration of Salafism as vehicle for social mobility in hierarchical societies is found in Alexander Knysh, "Contextualizing the Salafi - Sufi conflict (from the Northern Caucasus to Hadramawt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43:4 (July 2007), p. 524.

> The Sunni *badu* tell the *hadhar*, 'watch out for the Shi'a.' The Shi'a tell the *hadhar* – watch out for the *badu*. Politics here is really contest to win over the *hadhar*.[545]

9.3 SECTARIANISM AND PARLIAMENTARY CRISES

The post-2005 period saw the growing confluence of internal and external crises that exacerbated sectarianism and threatened the nascent parliament. Specifically, the attendance by Shi'a MPs at a eulogy for slain Hizballah commander 'Imad Mughniyah, the victory of Salafi Islamists in the 2008 parliamentary election, and continued provocations by the exiled Shi'a cleric Yasser al-Habib contributed to an increasingly contentious domestic climate. Mounting fears in the Gulf about Iran's nuclear program and support to pro-Iranian proxies heightened these tensions.

In many cases, however, this alarm was used as a political weapon by the Sunni opposition against liberal factions in the royalty. Prominent Salafi MPs condemned the Prime Minister for being too cozy toward the Shi'a and encouraging pro-Iranian influence in the emirate. At first glance, this mudslinging may seem inconsequential—the normal "static" of parliamentary politics. But by 2010, the pressure had increased to the point where the government had become dysfunctional, and the Ministry of Interior took the momentous step of banning public gatherings and clamping down on media freedom.

9.3.1 The Earthquake of the Mughniyah Eulogy

The tribal Salafi bloc's escalating sectarian challenge to the government reached its pinnacle in February 17, 2008, when members of the pro-Iranian Islamic National Alliance (INA)—including two sitting MPs, Ahmad Lari and 'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad—attended a highly publicized commemoration for slain Lebanese Hizballah field command 'Imad Mughniyah, held at the al-Husayn Shi'a mosque in the Shi'a suburb of Salmiya, Kuwait City. Several former Shi'a MPs were also found to be in attendance—'Abd al-Muhsin Jamal and Nasser Sarkhu, in addition to the prominent Shi'a cleric, Husayn al-Ma'atuq, who serves as the secretary general of the INA.[546]

By itself, the incident was sufficiently inflammatory to cause a media uproar. Aside from being an affront to Sunni Arabs, the laudatory remarks, poetry, and pro-Lebanese Hizballah banners that festooned the event stirred Kuwait's collective memory—Mughniyah, after all, was

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[545] Personal interview with Salah al-Ghazali, head of the Kuwait Transparency Society, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 25, 2010.

[546] Anon., "Seven Kuwaiti Shiites to Face Trial Over Eulogy of Slain Hezbollah Militant," *Associated Press*, April 15, 2008.

the mastermind behind the spate of Shi'a terrorist attacks that afflicted Kuwait in the 1980s, including a 1985 assassination attempt on the Emir.[547] Yet the real provocation came the following day, when 'Abd al-Samad gave an interview with an Arabic newspaper *al-Elaph* denying that Mughniyah had been behind the 1985 assassination plot against the Emir and a subsequent hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner in 1988 in which two Kuwaitis were killed. Instead, he accused Sunni hardliners of trying to inflate the event to stir up sectarianism. These "parasites"—as he called them—were trying to divide Kuwait society and were unable to understand that supporting Mughniyah as a "resistance" icon against Israel was not fundamentally incompatible with Kuwaiti nationalism.[548] "When a Hizballah flag is raised," he argued, "it does not mean that one is against his country, but only that he sympathizes with Hizballah."[549]

9.3.1.1 The Sunni Counter-Reaction to the Mughniyah Episode

The regime and Sunni reaction to the eulogy was swift. In early March, the two former MPs, Muhsin and Jamal, were arrested, along with the cleric Husayn Ma'atuq (the latter's detention sparked a Shi'a protest outside the prison where he was held). Sunni MPs demanded that parliamentary immunity for 'Adnan 'Abd al-Samad and Ahmad Lari be lifted to pave the way for prosecution.[550] A tribal Salafi deputy, Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri went further, exhorting the government to strip 'Abd al-Samad of his Kuwaiti citizenship and ban the INA as an organization, on the grounds that it was effectively a front for Kuwaiti Hizballah.[551] Al-Mutayri went on to call for the Ministry of Interior to investigate the presence of purported training camps in the Kuwaiti desert that were run by Lebanese Hizballah.[552] Many of the tribal

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[547] Anon., "Hizballah Yukhatif al-Kuwayt…Mujaddan!" (Hizballah Holds Kuwait Hostage… Again!) *al-Elaph*, August 15, 2008.

[548] Anon., "'Abd al-Samad li-Elaph: Al-Tufiliyat Tasma 'Imad Mughniyah Irhabiyan!" ('Abd al-Samad to 'Elaph: Parasites Call Mughniyah a Terrorist!) *al-Elaph*, February 17, 2008.

[549] Diana Elias, "Kuwait Questions Two Members of Dissolved Parliament Over Eulogizing Hezbollah Militant," *Associated Press*, March 25, 2008.

[550] Anon., "Seven Kuwaiti Shiites to Face Trial Over Eulogy of Slain Hezbollah Militant," Associated Press, April 15, 2008. Also, Anon., "Abd al-Samad, Lari Face Rising Anger," Kuwait Times, February 21, 2008.

[551] The al-Mutayr are a historically powerful *badu* tribe, with members concentrated in the outlying fourth and fifth district. Aside from Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri, other Salafi politicians hail from the tribe—the most significant being the MP Musallam al-Barrak and Dr. Hakim al-Mutayri, who followed Hamid al-'Ali as the secretary general of the Kuwaiti Salafi movement in 2000. Anon., "al-Kuwayt: D'awat 'ila Ihtwa Azmat Ta'bin Mughniyah wa Turuk Amrha ila al-Qada'" (Kuwait: Calls to Contain the Crisis of Mughniyah's Commemoration and Leave its Resolution to Justice), *al-Hayah*, March 3, 2008.

[552] Anon., "Muhammad Hayif: Muaskarat lil-Tadrib Hizballah Kuwayti fi al-Wifara wa al-'Abdli," (Muhammad Hayif: Hizballah Kuwait Training Camps Are Present in al-Wifara and al-Abdli), *al-Seyassah* (Kuwait), February 19, 2008.

MPs, unsurprisingly, shifted the attack to the government itself, arguing that it knew about the eulogy in advance and had anticipated the Sunni backlash, but allowed it to proceed anyway.[553]

In response, the INA, through its online newsservice *al-Dar*, denied the presence of any Hizballah sleeper cells, pointing out the irony that the greatest, proven threat of sleeper cells in Kuwait had emerged from among the Sunnis, not the Shi'a—from Salafi militants who had tried to blow up the Shu'aybah oil refinery, the State Security Building, and Arifijan camp.[554] For their part, 'Abd al-Samad and Lari issued a response to the outcry. But it fell short of a formal apology and offered only a general condemnation of the terrorism that had taken place in Kuwait in the 1980s without specifying the perpetrators.[555]

9.3.1.2 The Government Response: Prevarication and Crackdown

For their part, the royals prevaricated in responding. According to one source, much of the delay was because the Ministry of Interior had initially sanctioned the eulogy, whose organizers had sought permission in advance. It was only in the face of the concerted and unexpected Sunni opposition that it retreated. In the weeks that followed a split emerged between the Foreign Minister who adopted a hardline and the Prime Minister, who attempted to defuse the situation by saying we don't have evidence that Mughniyah was involved in the 1988 hijacking.[556]

Among the key roles played by parliament speaker Jasim al-Khurafi was that of a mediator. In response to Sunni demands, he argued that any decision to lift the immunity of the two deputies would have to be made through formal channels of the Ministry of Justice.[557] The speaker of the parliament, however, appealed for calm, saying, "I call on Kuwaiti society to be solidly united and stay away from these tensions which are against our national interest. Our

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[553] Ahmad al-Khaled, "Erase Dissolution of the Parliament: al-Muslim," *Kuwait Times*, May 6, 2008.

[554] Anon., "al-Thawabit al-Shi'a: La Wajud li-Hizballah al-Kuwayti wa La-Khaliyan Shi'a Na'ima aw Mastaqidha," (The Shi'a Bloc: There is No Kuwaiti Hizballah and No Sleeping or Active Shia Cells), *al-Dar* online, October 11, 2009; http://www.aldaronline.com/Dar/Detail2.cfm?ArticleID=74089&CFID=10804983&CFTOKEN=17850428

[555] Anon., "Abd al-Samad, Lari Face Rising Anger," *Kuwait Times*, February 21, 2008.

[556] Personal interview with HADAS member, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 22, 2010. Also personal interview with Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 12, 2010.

[557] Anon., "'Abd al-Samad wa Lari Taliban min Khurafi al-Tahdi'a wa I'adat 'Alaqatihuma Ma Muntqadihuma Min al-Nuwwab … Ra'is al-Majlis: Lan Ismah Munaqisha Tabiin Mughniyah Fi Jalisa Ghadan wa La Yimkin al-Mutaliba Bihasib Jinsiyat al-Na'ibayn," (Abd Al-Samad and Lari Request Calm from Al-Kharafi and the Repair of Their Relationships with Their Critics: Parliament Speaker: I Will Not Permit Discussion of Mughniyah's Commemoration at the Session Tomorrow and the Stripping of the Two Deputies' Nationality Cannot Be Demanded), *Al-Watan* (Kuwait), March 3, 2008.

country cannot bear this… we should remember what happened to us when our country was occupied."[558]

In the end, the Emir dissolved the parliament, which effectively stripped the two MPs were stripped of their parliamentary immunity. The Popular Action Bloc, a cross sectarian parliamentary bloc that focused on welfare issues like housing and subsidies, expelled them.[559] The government's ultimate charge against the MPs was not related to the eulogy but rather for belonging to a banned group, the Kuwaiti Hizballah—a tactic that was obviously intended as sort of a compromise to defuse tension.[560] But it actually exacerbated tensions by effectively discrediting the INA as a legitimate, political party. Even more worrisomely, the government also banned the *diwaniya*, re-instating a law that outlawed public gatherings.[561] In an effort to limit the sectarian fallout of the incident, it had effectively set back Kuwaiti democracy.

Based on lawsuits prepared by the Ministries of Interior, Religious Endowments, and Justice, the authorities detained and questioned a total of eight current or former eight MPs and the cleric Husayn Ma'atuq, before releasing them on bail. In a marked escalation of the crackdown, the Minister of Public Works and Municipalities, a Shi'a, was detained briefly in March over suspected links to Kuwaiti Hizballah.[562] In April, a total of seven Shi'a—the four Shi'a MPs, the cleric Ma'atuq and two others—were formally charged with "spreading false news about the country" and "weakening the situation of the state abroad.[563] In October 2008, a court acquitted the seven defendants, arguing that attending the eulogy itself was not grounds for criminal punishment.[564]

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[558] Omar Hassan, "Shiite Crackdown Fuels Sectarian Tensions in Kuwait," *Agence France Presse*, March 13, 2008. Also, Mona Kareem, "Shiaphobia Hits Kuwait," *Jadaliyya*, May 17, 2011.

[559] The Popular Action Bloc was composed of seven members prior to 2008. Headed by former speaker of parliament Ahmad Sadoun, it included prominent Salafi MPs like Musallam al-Barrak.

[560] Diana Elias, "Government Criticizes Shiites Who Eulogized Mughniyah, Warns of Civil Strife," *Associated Press*, February 18, 2008.

[561] Ibid.

[562] Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Security, Reform and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, December 9, 2009, p. 3.

[563] Diana Elias, "Kuwait Questions Two Members of Dissolved Parliament Over Eulogizing Hezbollah Militant," *Associated Press*, March 25, 2008. Also, Anon. "Seven Kuwaiti Shiites to Face Trial Over the Eulogy of Slain Hezbollah Militant," *Associated Press*, April 15, 2008.

[564] Diana Elias, "Kuwaiti Court Acquits Shiites of Militant Eulogy," *Associated Press*, October 22, 2008.

9.3.1.3 Implications of the Mughniyah Crisis

The implications of the crisis were far-reaching on national unity and the position of the Kuwaiti Shi'a.[565] Commentators inside and outside Kuwait lamented the country's steady descent into polarization, remarking that before the incident sectarianism had been confined to "pockets", whereas now it was widespread. As in previous cases discussed in this study, moderate voices were forced to "take sides" in an increasingly polarized political landscape. "The Mughniyah episode split our society," noted a moderate Sunni parliamentarian. "It was very dangerous; the Shi'a were increasingly being treated as non-Kuwaitis."[566] For the average Shi'a, the incident and the resulting Sunni outrage forced them into daily protestations of their national loyalty—an increasingly impossible litmus test, given the paranoid political climate. "If you're a Shiite in Kuwait, you have to swear five times a day after each prayer that you hate Iran and love Israel in order to prove your loyalty," quipped the columnist 'Abdulhamid Dashti in the Kuwaiti daily *al-Nahar*.[567]

The tension quickly escalated to outside the region. In response to the Kuwaiti government's refusal to acknowledge Mughniyah as a martyr, the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut received a number of death threats. Hizballah's parliamentary bloc in Lebanon sent a cable to the Kuwaiti parliamentary speaker, Jasim al-Khurafi, saying that the 14-member bloc was "offended" by the statements of legislators, ministers and media towards a "great commander" of the Islamic resistance.[568] Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, the revered Shi'a cleric, semi-official guide to Hizballah, and *marja'* to countless Gulf Shi'a levied similar criticism.[569] Such statements only fueled Sunni suscipion that the Shi'a's provocations had been encouraged by Iran. Still others resurrected the timeworn trope that the crisis had been orchestrated by the U.S. as part of its strategy of sowing "constructive chaos" (*al-fawda al-khalaqa*) in the region, i.e. a master plan for

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[565] Mamduh al-Muhayni, "Kuwayt: Ma Huwwa li-Aghlaq al-Sanduq Bandura Alati Yatafha Qabla Nahwa Shahr?" (Kuwait: What Will Close the Pandora's Box that Was Opened About a Month Ago?" *al-Elaph*, March 17, 2008.

[566] Personal unattributed interview with a Sunni Islamist, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 29, 2010.

[567] Omar Hassan, "Shiite Crackdown Fuels Sectarian Tensions in Kuwait," *Agence France Presse*, March 13, 2008.

[568] Anon., "Hizbullah Complains to Kuwait against Mughniyeh Critics," *al-Nahar*, February 22, 2008.

[569] Ibid.

inciting ethnic and sectarian particularism inside Arab societies to increase U.S. leverage and control.[570]

For many, it seemed as if Kuwait had returned to the dark days of the 1980s. "The issue has snowballed from an action against the Mughniyah rally into a major crackdown on a political grouping known for its bold national positions," noted the chairman of the Kuwaiti Society for the Advancement of Democracy.[571] Echoing its policies in this period, the government threatened to deport foreign Shi'a who participated in the eulogy. [572] "There is regression on every level," noted one journalist. "It is obvious that Kuwait was rapidly influenced by the tense climate surrounding it in the region."[573] The greatest impact, however, was on the upcoming parliamentary elections.

9.3.2 The 2008 Elections

In the run-up to the election, the government's handling of the incident had inadvertently hardened sectarian sympathies. It allowed itself to be pressured by Salafi hardliners, creating further Shi'a entrenchment and prompting the INA and the *Shiraziyyin* to bridge their differences in support of the two parliamentarians. The result was an election that was fractured along sectarian lines and tribal lines. "I think that sectarian polarization in this election is much higher than during the 2006 polls," noted one Shi'a candidate.[574]

Much of this had to do with how the redistricting shifted the demographic distribution of Kuwaiti voters. In the past, there were two deputies for each electoral district, and the Shi'a were a majority in only two constituencies. Under the new system, each district elected 10 deputies; Shi'a constitute half the voters in the first district, covering Bayan and Rumaythia and a sizeable number in the remaining four.[575] Another key feature of the 2008 elections which resulted in further polarization was the so-called tribal primaries—pre-election voting forums where tribes hammered out a consensus about which of their *shayukh* (tribal chiefs) to support. Technically, these primaries were illegal, although they had long been tolerated at the informal level. In 2008,

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[570] Omar Hassan, "Shiite Crackdown Fuels Sectarian Tensions in Kuwait," *Agence France Presse,* March 13, 2008.

[571] Omar Hassan, "Shiite Crackdown Fuels Sectarian Tensions in Kuwait," *Agence France Presse*, March 13, 2008.

[572] Anon., "Kuwait to Deport Foreigners Who Mourned Hezbollah Chief," *United Press International*, March 2, 2008.

[573] Al-Muhayni, op. cite.

[574] Omar Hassan, "Kuwait's Shiites Seek Election Boost amid Sectarian Tensions," *Agence France Presse*, May 15, 2008.

[575] Ibid.

the government took the unprecedented step of trying to shut these down, leading to several scuffles between police and prominent tribes and the detention of key tribal figures.[576] The result was that the tribes retreated even further into the ranks of hardline Salafi candidates.

In the final tally, the biggest loser was the Brotherhood-inspired HADAS party, which had acted as a bridge between Sunnis and Shi'a and which was counting on Shi'a votes in the mixed, Shi'a-Sunni third district. Indeed, even the Shi'a had hoped before Mughniyah episode that, under the five-district scheme, their votes would elect moderate HADAS candidates to offset the Salafis.[577] Yet in the new parliament, HADAS saw its seats decreased from six to three, while Salafi candidates from the ISA, or backed by the ISA, won ten of the 50 available seats, effectively doubling their number. Another 8 seats went to independent Sunni Islamists, with strong Salafi and tribal leanings.[578] For their part, the Shi'a Islamists gained five seats. **Table 9.1** displays the results of the 2008 elections by district.

As in the case of Bahrain, the 2008 parliament became a hotly contested institution, in which Salafi leaders opposed the cabinet on virtually every issue and frequently "played the Shi'a card" to discredit the Prime Minister and undermine moderates in the HADAS. All of this mudslinging was ultimately at the expense of one of the parliament's core functions: holding the government accountable on real, substantive issues.

9.3.3 The Salafi Assault on the Government

In the new parliament, the Salafi tribal deputies mounted a concerted campaign to bring down the government, which they perceived as being hostile or unsympathetic to Sunni tribal interests, particularly with regard to subsidies and employment. As noted earlier, Sunni Islamist pressure began shortly after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when Salafis perceived the Prime Minister to be excessively deferential to the Shi'a by establishing a *Ja'afari* court, supporting the building of new Shi'a mosques and a school to teach Shi'a theology. The Shi'a were stymied in their effort to maintain a presence on the cabinet after the Minister of Information (a Shi'a) was forced to resign in 2004.

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[576] Jamie Etheridge, "Kuwaiti Tribes Turn Parliament To Own Advantage," *Financial Times*, February 2, 2009.

[577] Lamia Radi, "Sunni-Shiite Battle for Kuwait Parliamentary Seats," *Middle East Online*, June 28, 2006.

[578] BBC Monitoring, May 19, 2008; *Al-Arabiya* TV, 1910 gmt, May 18, 2008, "Panorama" program.

	District 1 (Shi'a)	District 2 (Sunni *hadhar*)	District 3 (Mixed Sunni *hadhar* / Shi'a)	District 4 (Sunni tribal)	District 5 (Sunni tribal)	Total
Sunni Islamists						
Islamic Salafi Alliance (ISA)	1	2	1			4
ISA Backed/Independent Salafis	1	1	2	1	1	6
Independent Islamists (mostly Tribal)	1			4	3	8
Islamic Constitutional Movement		1	2			3
Shi'a Groups						
National Islamic Alliance (Shi'a)	2					2
Justice And Peace Alliance (Shi'a)	1					1
Independent Shi'a Islamists	2					2
'Populists'						
Nationalist (PAB)			1			1
Other PAB Backed			1	1	1	3
Non-Islamists/Secularists						
National Democratic Alliance		3				3
'Liberal' Independent	1	1	2			4
Independents						
Pro-Government Independents		2			3	5
Independent – unclear affiliation (mostly tribal)	1		1	4	2	9

Table 9.1. Kuwaiti National Assembly (Parliamentary) Election Results, 2008[579]

In 2006, the ascension of the new Prime Minister Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah further rankled the Salafis and polarized the Kuwaiti political field.[580] As noted, the Prime

[579] Democracy Reporting International / Kuwait Transparency Society, "Kuwait: Assessment of the Electoral Framework: Final Report," (November 2008).

[580] Part of the concerted parliamentary opposition to the new Prime Minister can be explained by a law enacted by Emir Jabr al-Ahmed Jabar al-Sabah in 2003, before his death in 2006. The law effectively separated the roles of crown prince and Prime Minister; before 2003, the parliament had been unable to interpellate the Prime Minister because he was in line to become Emir and the Emir, by constitution, was off limits from questioning. Even so, the next Prime Minister, Sabah al-Ahmed (2003-2006) was not subjected to questioning because many Kuwaitis believed (correctly) that he would be the next emir. These reservations were not present during the tenure of Nasser al-Muhammad, who was subjected to questioning soon after taking office. See Mona Kareem, "Kuwait's Prime Ministerial Dilemma and the Prospects for

Minister evinced a markedly more liberal outlook than his predecessor and his policies of privatization increasingly threatened the tribes' dependence on the state sector. Compounding this, he was seen as excessively deferential to the Shi'a. He had served in Iran as Kuwait's ambassador, spoke Persian, and led several parliamentary delegations to Iran that, unsurprisingly, included Shi'a.[581] As noted by one Sunni interlocutor, "our Prime Minister is acting like a Foreign Minister and our Foreign Minister has no power."[582] Others saw him as too involved in the day-to-day affairs of state, which undermined his grasp of the emirate's larger issues. "Our Foreign Minister is a *muwadhif* (an administrator) rather than a *sahib al-qarar* (decision-maker)," noted another Shi'a Islamist deputy.[583]

In November 2008, shortly after the installment of the polarized parliament, these tensions came to a head. Three Salafi deputies from tribal districts—Walid al-Tabtaba'i, Muhammed al-Mutayr, and Muhammed Hayif al-Mutayri[584]—filed a motion to interpellate and, they hoped, ultimately force the resignation of the Prime Minister. The charge was, predictably, excessive coziness to the Shi'a. The Prime Minister's office, they alleged, had allowed a prominent Iranian Shi'a cleric, Muhammad Baqir al-Fali to enter the Kuwait, despite his having been placed on a no-travel list earlier.[585] Defending the interpellation, Walid al-Tabtaba'i argued that "Questioning is related to the political responsibility of the premier, particularly his failure to manage the affairs of the nation as well as the Shi'a cleric al-Fali, who was banned from entering Kuwait for demeaning a companion of the Prophet Muhammad."[586]

In response, Shi'a and moderate Sunni MPs organized a counter-demonstration, with protestors shouting that the questioning was a "red line" and holding placards that read, "No sectarianism."[587] Outside of Kuwait, commentators noted that although the Salafi deputies were

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Constitutional Monarchy," *Arab Reform Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 22, 2011).

[581] Anon., "Kuwait Prime Minister Survives Confidence Vote," *Al-Jazeera* (English), January 5, 2011; http://english.aljazeera.net/news/middleeast/2011/01/20111581427365727.html

[582] Personal unattributed interview with a Kuwaiti academic, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 2, 2008.

[583] Personal unattributed interview with a Shi'a Islamist member of parliament, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 8, 2010.

[584] Muhammad al-Mutayr and Muhammed Hayef al-Mutayri hail from the same tribe but are not directly related.

[585] Anon., "Kuwait Islamist MPs to quiz premier over Iran cleric," *Agence France Presse*, November 16, 2008.

[586] *Arab Times*, November 19, 2008.

[587] Anon., "Kuwait Islamist MPs to quiz premier over Iran cleric," *Agence France Presse*, November 16, 2008.

within their constitutional right to grill the Prime Minister, they had effectively fallen into a "sectarian trap." The editor of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* argued:

> The al-Fali crisis signals a dangerous sectarian escalation in Kuwait. Questioning the Prime Minister is a constitutional and democratic right but should not to be used for scoring political points and obstructing the interests of the country.[588]

The fractious parliament attracted criticism from the Gulf, lending grist to rulers who saw Kuwait's burgeoning democratic institutions as a threat to their own authoritarian power. On the sidelines of a United Nations meeting, GCC leaders reportedly cautioned the Emir about the emirate's "democratic chaos," questioning why an institution that was supposed to promote dialogue and consensus (the parliament), was sowing discord and divisions**.**[589]

In mid-2010, sectarian tensions worsened with the disclosure on May 1 that Kuwaiti authorities had disrupted a 10-person spy ring—consisting of six Kuwaitis, two stateless *bidun*, and two unspecified individuals—that was surveying U.S. and Kuwaiti military facilities on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. The Kuwaiti prosecutor general implemented a complete media ban on reporting the spy-ring, which worsened the general climate of paranoia about a lurking fifth column among the country's Shi'a.[590] In late-2010, the country's political field was shaken by its third sectarian crisis—one that would result in a significant curtailment of civic freedoms and media openness.

9.3.4 The Row over Yasser al-Habib

As noted in the last chapter, the cleric Yasser al-Habib had long existed as the radical right wing of Kuwait's Shia community, launching provocative attacks on the regime and deploying pan-Shi'a rhetoric. In hiding in London since December 2004, he resurfaced as a lightning rod for sectarian tensions in September 2010. This time it was a sermon (broadcast on his satellite station and widely disseminated on the web) in which he slandered Aisha, Muhammad's wife, as an "enemy of god."[591] The provocation followed a long history of al-Habib denigrating the Sunni branch of Islam as misguided. But in the context of regional

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[588] Tariq al-Humayd, "Irani fi al-Kuwayt" (An Iranian in Kuwait), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 17, 2008.

[589] Khalid al-Hajiri, "Loud Protest in the Gulf against the Chaos of Democracy in Kuwait," *al-Seyassah*, November 21, 2008.

[590] Anon., "Kuwaiti Media Forbidden From Covering Dismantling of Spy Ring," *Reporters Sans Frontieres*, May 10, 2010.

[591] The sermon and statement are available on his English-language website, *al-Qatra*: http://www.the-drop.net/en/edara/index.php?id=108; accessed on September 9, 2011.

tensions with Iran and an increasingly polarized parliament, this latest statement crossed a red-line in Kuwait. The reaction from Sunni Islamists and the government was swift. Sunni MPs called for the revocation of his citizenship and his extradition from the UK. As in the case of the Mughniyah episode, the Yasser al-Habib affair effectively undermined the moderate Sunnis who had served as bridges to the Shi'a. As noted by a HADAS parliamentarian: "Yasser al-Habib made the Sunnis think that he represented all Shi'as…we were backed into a corner.[592]

The Shi' reaction was to dismiss al-Habib as a marginal figure. "Al-Habib is a misguided figure," noted the cleric Husayn Ma'atuq, "who does not represent the opinion of the Shi'a scholars."[593] Other figures made counter-accusations that it was the Sunnis who were actually responsible for firing the first salvo in the sectarian strife. Saleh al-Ashur, the Shi'a parliamentarian, noted that "There is, as well, an insult to the *Ja'afari* school of thought by well-known figures in the country and by some university professors, preachers, officials, journalists on well-known satellite TV stations."[594] Other Shi'a argued for the prosecution of prominent Salafi preachers in Kuwait who had slandered and attacked the Shi'a, such as Othman al-Khamis.[595] With regard to the Salafi response, many Shi'a argued that the incident had given hardline Salafis the pretext they had always desired to pressure the government toward anti-Shi'a reforms. As noted by one commentator in *al-Dar*, the online outlet of the INA:

> Yasser al-Habib and his likes are giving an opportunity to the hidden fundamentalist Sunni state to hoist its flags and impose its own 'sect' and regime, not only on the social life…but on Kuwait's Shi'a community as well.[596]

9.3.4.1 The Government Crackdown on Civil Liberties

The response of the government was two-fold: to accede to Sunni Islamist demands and, more worrisomely, to crack-down on civil liberties and media freedom in an effort to staunch sectarian strife. On September 16, 2010, the cabinet chaired a special session aimed at curtailing media clashes over the Yasser al-Habib.[597] On September 19, the government took the extraordinary step of banning public gatherings. "This is a (sectarian) rift and it must be

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[592] Personal interview with Nasser al-Sana'i, Kuwait City, Kuwait, November 22, 2010.

[593] Anon., "Interview with Islamic National Alliance," *al-Anba* online, September 20, 2010.

[594] *Al-Jazeera*, September 8, 2010

[595] Habib Toumi, "Kuwait Government Calls for Restraint by Politicians," *Gulf News Online*, September 15, 2010.

[596] *Al-Dar* online, September 21, 2010; commentary by Hassan 'Isa.

[597] Anon., "Cabinet Session Targets Recent Media Tensions in Kuwait," *Kuwaiti News Agency* (KUNA), September 16, 2010.

stopped," a Minister of Interior representative told a press conference. The edict went on to prohibit any public gathering, procession or demonstration without prior approval from the government. Violators would face a two-year prison term.

Ironically, however, this was not due to any agitation on the part of the Shi'a in defense of al-Habib but rather because of Sunni gatherings. The edict came on the eve of several threats from prominent Islamist tribal deputies to interpellate the Prime Minister over his failure to act against Yasser al-Habib. Sunni pressure on the government continued to mount in the wake of the crisis. The prominent tribal MP Musallam al-Barrak accused the cabinet of helping to spread sectarianism by opting not to punish media outlets that publish or broadcast material that damages national unity.[598] The Islamic Salafi Alliance and HADAS had also announced several "seminars" or rallies to condemn Yasser al-Habib. In this context, the government's ban on rallies can be seen as a move against tribal opposition, rather than a measure aimed at containing sectarianism.[599]

In late 2010, this ban brought the government into direct, physical confrontation with parliamentarians when security forces scuffled with attendees at the *diwaniya* of a Sunni tribal deputy. The prominent Salafi MP Walid Tabtaba'i (and, ironically, chair of the parliament's human rights committee) suffered a broken arm and 10 other attendees were hospitalized.[600] The entire incident and its aftermath saw the country divided along sectarian lines. While Sunnis opposed the Minister of Interior's actions as unconstitutional, prominent Shi'a voices such as the INA/*Khat al-Imam* cleric Husayn Qallaf and Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri urged the citizenry to support the government in its enforcement of the ban.[601] Compounding this tension, the government withdrew the credentials of *al-Jazeera*'s Kuwait bureau and evicted its staff from Kuwait for broadcasting graphic video footage of the security forces' melee with the *diwaniya* attendees.[602]

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[598] Anon. "Barrak Demands Government Action on Sectarianism." *Kuwait Times*, September 13, 2010. Also, Anon., "MPs Criticize Government's 'Handling' of Habeeb Crisis as Weak, Inefficient," *Arab Times* (Kuwait) online, September 18, 2010.

[599] Anon., "Ban on Public Gatherings to Contain Rift," *Arab Times* (Kuwait), September 20, 2010.

[600] Anon., "Kuwait Urged to Investigate Police Raid on MPs Gathering," *Amnesty International*, December 10, 2010.

[601] B. Izzak: "MoI Cracks Down on Public Rallies," *Kuwait Times*, October 12, 2010.

[602] Anon., "Kuwait shuts down *al-Jazeera* for covering opposition protest meeting," *The Guardian* (U.K.), December 13, 2010. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/13/kuwait-shuts-aljazeera-opposition-meeting

9.3.4.2 Regional Implications of the Crisis

Aside from its toxic effects on Kuwait's domestic politics, the Yasser al-Habib incident had a far reaching impact outside the emirate. Incorrectly, the row was frequently linked to Iranian meddling; al-Habib himself adopted a dismissive and frequently contemptuous attitude toward the Islamic Republic, even going so far as to criticize the clerical credentials of Supreme Leader Khamene'i. Other respected *marja'* since Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah were also targets of his ire; Habib lambasted the the late Lebanese cleric as a misguided "innovator" (*mubtadi'*).[603] In response to these outrages, Supreme Leader Khamene'i issued a *fatwa* forbidding any Shi'a cleric from insulting the companions of the Prophet or otherwise denigrating the Sunni tradition.[604]

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the incident attracted increased attention from official and non-official voices. On October 30, 2010 a group of 60 Saudi and Gulf Arab clerics and intellectuals submitted a statement urging Kuwait's parliamentarians to desist from sectarian rhetoric and for the government of Kuwait to rescind its repressive media law.[605] From Saudi Arabia, the editor in chief of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* warned that the incident risked dragging the entire Gulf into conflict.[606]

9.4 CONCLUSION

Kuwait's participatory institutions—the parliament and the *diwaniya*—proved to be both assets and liabilities for the regime. On the one hand, these forums provided a pressure release for sectarian tensions to be aired and for criticism to be deflected away from the ruling family. The country's practice of consultation and parliamentary debate, despite its fractious nature, effectively "nationalized" the opposition and reduced its proclivity to turn to outside patronage or support. As noted by a prominent political scientist and observer of Kuwaiti politics:

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[603] Anon., "Shaykh al-Habib Hails Our Great Scholars' Refusal to Pay Tribute to Fadlullah," *al-Qatrah* website, July 7, 2010; http://alqatrah.net/en/edara/index.php?id=102; accessed on September 6, 2011.

[604] Anon., "Sunni World Welcomes Leader's *Fatwa*," *Tehran Times*, October 5, 2010; http://old.tehrantimes.com/Index_view.asp?code=227879

[605] Ahmad al-Misri, "Al-Muthaqifun Sa'udiyun wa Khalijiyun Yada'un ila Tasdi Lil-Siyasiyat al-Ta'ifiya al-Rasmiya," (Saudi, Gulf Intellectuals Urge Confronting Official Sectarian Policies), *al-Quds al-Arabi*, November 1, 2010.

[606] Tariq al-Humayd, "The Sunnis and Shiites: The Knife Has Cut to the Bone," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English), September 21, 2010.

> The regime realizes that components of Kuwaiti society have external relations—the Shi'a with Iran and the Salafis with Saudi Arabia. It has tried to temper this with institutions for dialogue, such as the *diwaniya*.[607]

On the other hand, the parliament and the *diwaniya* became vehicles for the Salafi tribal opposition to attack the Shi'a and the regime. This was particularly evident after the 2008 parliamentary elections, which handed a victory to tribal and Salafi candidates, while dealing a setback to more moderate Islamists such as the HADAS and to liberals. In the new parliament, politics became increasingly fractious, conservative, and personalized. The tribal and Salafi deputies mounted a concerted offensive against the government, using a variety of accusations ranging from criticism of the appointment of women cabinet members, corruption and partiality to the Shi'a. On sectarian issues, the friction was especially severe, in part because of missteps by the Shi'a and worsening regional tensions.

Ultimately, however, the tension and resulting gridlock in the parliament was not so much the result in any escalation or shift in strategy by the Shi'a or their susceptibility to transnational influences. Rather, it was rooted in local power dynamics unique to Kuwait—the struggle between the *badu* and the *hadhar* and between the emergent Salafi opposition and the liberal Prime Minister. Sectarianism was deployed as the vocabulary in this struggle, but was not its immediate cause. This dynamic became all the more evident in the 2011 Arab Spring's manifestation in Kuwait—a markedly non-sectarian, external event that was the nonetheless interpreted through a sectarian lens by domestic actors. The next chapter explores this phenomenon in greater depth, alongside the cases of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

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[607] Personal interview with 'Abd al-Rida Assiri, Kuwait City, Kuwait, December 12, 2010.

10 THE ARAB SPRING IN THE GULF: CONTAGION AND SECTARIANISM

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The popular revolts of 2011 that rocked the Arab world—commonly known as the "Arab Spring"—had a far-reaching impact on Shi'a-state relations in the Gulf. As with previous external shocks in the region, the contagion effect of the revolts was mediated by domestic structures in each case country. Specifically, the legitimacy and maturity of participatory institutions in each country were critical variables that explain why the Shi'a in each country did or did not mobilize against their respective regimes. In many respects, the varying levels of protest in each country can be considered the fruits of the stalled or stillborn reforms and rising sectarianism that began in 2003.

On this issue, it is important to highlight that in raising their voices, the Shi'a were not goaded or inspired by an external Shi'a patron (Iran, Hizballah or clerical authorities in Najaf) or a region-wide narrative of "Shi'a ascendancy"—despite the near-constant worries of Gulf regimes and Sunni actors. Rather, the contagion effect on Gulf Shi'a embodied a markedly *non-sectarian* blend of youthful frustration, populism, and class. Put differently, the Gulf Shi'a rose up in solidarity with the crowds of Tahrir Square and Tunis rather than—as commonly suspected—their co-religionists in Najaf, Qom or southern Beirut.

That said, the Arab Spring protests in the Gulf—particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia—quickly acquired a sectarian gloss. Regimes resorted to the time-worn tactic of portraying the protests as a bid for Shi'a supremacy, organized by Iran. For their part, radical voices in the opposition found it useful to play up Shi'a identity and, at times, threatened to solicit Iran's support. The net effect of these two dynamics was to fracture the opposition along sectarian lines, provoke alarm among the Sunnis, and play into the hands of regime hardliners. Underpinning all of this were the flawed and incomplete domestic structures in each state, which explain, to a large extent, the degree to which sectarianism became a factor in the revolts.

This was most evident in Bahrain, where a parliament devoid of actual authority effectively discredited *al-Wifaq*, particularly after its representatives produced little improvement in Shi'a living conditions during their tenure from 2006 to 2010. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia a stalled National Dialogue produced rising cynicism and encouraged the rise of a new, more radical leadership in the Shi'a movement. Even in Kuwait, supposedly a beacon of political liberalism, an increasingly dysfunctional parliament had fallen prey to sectarianism at the end of 2010. That said, the Kuwaiti Shi'a did not mobilize against the government—in large measure

due to the presence of the parliament, however flawed, and the uniquely Kuwaiti institution of the *diwaniya*.

This chapter will explore these dynamics in depth for each case study, providing a post-script for the post-Iraq period. It will highlight how the Arab Spring was received by and acted upon by Shi'as and Sunnis. A particular focus will be on understanding the role of mediating domestic structures and foreign influences. How did the parliaments, national-dialogue, municipal councils and *diwaniyas* exacerbate or temper sectarianism in each country case? Similarly, what was the role of outside actors, specifically Iran, in informing Shi'a calculations and stoking Sunni fears? As in the previous chapters, this chapter will assess how external events presented policy dilemmas to Shi'a actors, fracturing the movement in each country along moderate and radical lines. It will also explore the critical role of Sunni counter-mobilization in stoking sectarianism. A key finding is that rise of sectarianism in the wake of the Arab Spring was ultimately rooted in the flawed participatory institutions and Sunni threat perception in each state, rather than actions by the Shi'a themselves or transnational contagion.

10.2 BAHRAIN

In Bahrain, the Arab Spring represented the culmination of many of the trends discussed in this study: the exacerbation of sectarian identity because of flawed democratic structures, the instrumental and cynical manipulation of the Sunni-Shi'a divide and the specter of Iran by the regime, and the ultimate fracturing of the opposition movement. The Bahraini case is especially instructive for understanding how a sectarian narrative arose from domestic pressures and structures rather than being imported from outside events.

As the Pearl Roundabout revolt unfolded, the regime skillfully played up sectarian tensions and the bogeyman of Iran. Despite their best efforts at trying to convey solidarity with Tahrir Square and Tunis, the protestors were increasingly tarred as protégés and proxies of Iran and the Lebanese Hizballah. The tipping point in the revolt, however, was the March 17th Saudi intervention in Bahrain, which undermined the mainstream opposition, polarized Bahraini society along sectarian lines, and effectively "regionalized" the popular protests—all of which played into the hands of hardliners within the Bahraini royal court.

10.2.1 The Catalysts for Bahraini Shi'a Mobilization

The fact that the Arab Spring arrived with such force on the tiny archipelago can be explained in part by the mounting frustration among many sectors of the Shi'a populace with the mainstream Shi'a opposition bloc, *al-Wifaq*. In particular, *al-Wifaq*'s participation in the October 2010 parliamentary elections came at a pivotal time after the regime implemented a dragnet arrest

of Shi'a opposition activists, starting in August. Most of those detained were members of the outlawed *al-Haq* movement, including its spokesperson, 'Abd al-Jalil al-Sinqays. In addition, the government stripped the prominent pro-al-Sistani cleric Husayn Najati of his citizenship. One motive for the arrests was the burgeoning cross-sectarian cooperation that had appeared in recent months; Sunni and Shi'a legislators had temporarily shelved their differences to collaborate on a report that pilloried the royal family for secretly seizing public land for its princes.[608]

Despite this, the bloc won all of the 18 seats it had contested, a one-seat gain from the 2006 elections, making it again the largest single force in Bahrain's 40 person parliament. Yet the polling results are deceiving. At the same time it was being co-opted into parliament, *al-Wifaq* saw its main media outlet, a newspaper, shuttered by the government. A broad media crackdown ensued: several popular blogs were shutdown, as was the the Facebook site of the revered mid-1990s *intifada* leader 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Husayn. Blackberry service—a longtime instrument for *al-Wifaq* to reach its constituents—was effectively shuttered by the Bahraini security services.[609] In late December, the Prime Minister made public calls for greater regional cooperation on combatting "cyber terror." "The use of cutting-edge technology to undermine international relations is a dangerous phenomenon," he stated in a press interview.[610]

The net effect was that control of the Shi'a information sphere gradually fell under the de-facto control of a younger cadre of unlicensed, informal activists who had grown impatient with the older and increasingly cautious current of Shi'a clerics represented by *al-Wifaq* secretary general 'Ali Salman. Most importantly, however, the younger, unaffiliated networks were savvier in the use of Facebook and Twitter, which connected them to activists in Tunisia, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Libya.[611]

The media dimension of the Arab Spring illustrates an important point about transnational influences, contagion and territoriality in the Gulf. Despite the longstanding fears of Sunni actors and regimes in the Gulf, it was not the *fatawa* of Shi'a *maraja'* in Najaf or Qom or the exhortations of Iran's satellite TV that ultimately mobilized the Shi'a. Rather, it was the populist,

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[608] Habib Tumi, "Bahrain Pledges Zero Tolerance, Arrests Opposition Figure," *Gulf News*, August 14, 2010.

[609] Habib Tumi, "Bahrain's Candidates Hone Their Speeches," *Gulf News*, October 22, 2010.

[610] Anon., "The use of cutting-edge technology to undermine international relations is a dangerous phenomena," *Gulf Daily News*, December 7, 2010.

[611] As of January 2011, Bahrain was second among Arab countries for Facebook usage as a percentage of population (34.27 percent). Dubai School of Government, "Arab Social Media Report," Vol.1, No.1, January 2011; available http://www.dsg.ae/portals/0/ASMR%20Final%20May%208%20high.pdf

non-sectarian messages from North Africa that ultimately sparked the revolt. An *al-Wifaq* spokesperson acknowledged this dynamic during a surprisingly frank interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat* in March 2011:

> The demonstrations that took place were an extension of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. We admit openly that the political societies did not anticipate the magnitude of the events, just as the governments did not anticipate the magnitude of the existing moves. The incident erupted on February 14, at the personal initiative of young Facebook activists. Quite humbly, the political societies admit that they were not the primary political mover of the incidents.[612]

Of course, *al-Wifaq* would have an interest in portraying the revolt as a spontaneous surge of populist, cross-sectarian enthusiasm. But private accounts of negotiations between *al-Wifaq*'s senior leadership and King Hamad corroborate this account, painting the picture of an organized opposition that was utterly taken by surprise by the pace and scale of popular seething that was largely beyond its control.

10.2.2 The Revolt Unfolds: Escalation and the Fracturing of the Opposition

Shortly after the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt, groups of young, loosely organized youths established Facebook pages exhorting followers to mobilize against the regime on February 14. It is important to note that the calls for demonstrations were largely non-sectarian in outlook; most demanded peaceful reforms and refrained from directly criticizing King Hamad or calling for the overthrow of the al-Khalifa. A few pages did, however, call for "Revolution" and the "downfall of the regime" (*isqat al-nitham*). The date of the planned protests were laden with symbolism—the 14th marked exactly ten years since the vote for King Hamad's National Charter had transformed the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy. To commemorate the day, the regime had festooned the streets of Manama in banners lauding the kingdom's progress toward democracy. The planned protests, however, represented an entirely different counter-narrative—and a brazen critique of the government's failure to carry through with its promised reforms.[613]

In the run-up to the protests, the King summoned the secretary general of *al-Wifaq*, 'Ali Salman, for secret talks. The King exhorted the *al-Wifaq* chief to call off the demonstrations. For

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[612] Anon., "Ra'is Katla al-Wifaq al-Ma'arada al-Barlamaniya fi al-Bahrayn: Nabhath 'an al-Wasita al-Khalijiya ma al-Hakuma," (The Head of the al-Wifaq Opposition Parliamentary Bloc: We are Searching for Gulf Mediation with the Government), *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 26, 2011. http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=614309&issueno=11806.

[613] International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East: Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," *Middle East/North Africa Report*, Number 111, July 28, 2011, pp. 1-2.

his part, Salman pressed the King for a formal announcement of reform that would stipulate that the Prime Minister would be elected from outside the royal family. Implicit in this demand was the dismissal of the current Prime Minister, Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, in office since 1971—and a longtime foe of the Shi'a and political liberals. Deploying a time-worn pretext, the King stated the GCC states—Saudi Arabia in particular—would not countenance the removal of the Prime Minister. February 14 passed without any announcement from the King, and the protests started. *Al-Wifaq* did not publicly sanction the demonstrations, but neither did it prevent its own members from joining them.[614] On February 16, a constellation of licensed Shi'a Islamist societies and leftist groups formed an alliance calling for increased support for the Facebook activists.[615]

Yet the coalition ultimately proved temporal and fractured due to a number of factors. First, 'Ali Salman and the moderate cadre of *al-Wifaq*'s leadership entered into intense negotiations with the Crown Prince's office to discuss ways of reducing tension and moving forward on reform. Yet when the protestors moved into Pearl Roundabout—a symbolic provocation unsanctioned by *al-Wifaq*—negotiations soured and stalled. The longer the impasse persisted the more that hardliners within both the opposition and the ruling family gained the upper-hand. The unlicensed opposition adopted increasingly maximalist demands that included the ousting of the Prime Minister. Slogans circulating on the street gradually shifted from "reform" to "toppling" the regime. On March 8, the unlicensed Shi'a Islamist parties—*al-Haq*, *al-Wafa' al-Islami*[616] and the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM)—formed the *Al-Tahalluf min 'Ajal Jumhuriya* (Alliance for a Republic), which called for the ouster of the al-Khalifa and the creation of a democratic republic.[617] Importantly, the Alliance lent its support to the "14

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[614] International Crisis Group, "Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East: The Bahrain Revolt," *Middle East/North Africa Report*, Number 105, April 6, 2011, p. 15.

[615] *Gulf News* February 24, 2011.

[616] *Al-Wafa' al-Islami* (Islamic Loyalty) was originally formed in 2009 by 'Abd al-Wahhab Husayn and an influential Shi'a cleric (and former member of *al-Wifaq*'s clerical council), 'Abd al-Jalil al-Miqdad. The reported impetus for the formation was the wave of arrests against *al-Haq*'s leadership. Although some observers saw the creation of *al-Wafa'* as a challenge to *al-Haq*, the two groups are virtually indistinguishable in their ideology and rejectionist strategy, although *al-Wafa'* benefits more from al-Miqdad's clerical credentials, while *al-Haq* is generally anti-clerical in outlook. Starting in 2010, the two groups starting coordinating on protests and a boycott of the 2010 elections, along with the BFM. Information about *al-Wafa'* is scant, with the exception of a leaked U.S. Embassy cable from 2009. See International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 19.

[617] The Alliance's statement of its position was posted to various websites in mid-Apri. http://www.fajrbh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=18614 . The Alliance's Facebook page is found at, http://www.facebook.com/RepublicAlliance

February Youth Coalition" rather than the licensed Shi'a societies, whom it viewed as compromised.[618]

Al-Wifaq was thus increasingly forced to go on the defense, to explain to its constituents and to its interlocutors within the royal family—namely, the Crown Prince—that the rejection of dialogue was confined to a small fringe of the opposition. At the same time, it was forced to adopt a moderately hardline in negotiations to keep the increasingly impatient youth groups on board with its dialogue project and prevent them from potentially drifting into the camp of the Alliance for the Republic.[619] For their part, hardliners worsened the prospects for a negotiated settlement by apparently sanctioning the deployment of paramilitary gangs (*batajiya*) into Shi'a areas and Pearl Roundabout on March 11.[620] In response, the Alliance for the Republic, led principally by al-Mushayma, sent thousands of protestors into Bahrain's financial district, preventing workers from reaching their offices. The next day, a demonstration of similar size converged on the royal court in al-Rifah and the al-Safriya palace in Sadad. *Al-Wifaq* had warned against the move, arguing—correctly—that it would needlessly enflame tensions and play into the hands of royal hardliners led by the Prime Minister.[621]

At the same time this was happening, the Crown Prince—reportedly under pressure from U.S. officials—extended an offer to discuss most of the opposition's demands in a public dialogue and, significantly, to put the outcome of these talks before a popular referendum. Yet *al-Wifaq* rejected this offer out of hand, arguing that before any dialogue could proceed, the current government had to resign and elections had to be scheduled for the constituent assembly. A plausible motive for this maximalist position is *al-Wifaq*'s desire to keep the more radical currents within the opposition's ranks and the Pearl Roundabout demonstrations on board. Anything less and *al-Wifaq* feared it would lose control.

In an attempt to distance itself from the protests in front of the royal palace and perhaps assuage the concerns of the Crown Prince, 'Ali Salman rallied his followers to keep the roads open and tried to confine the protests to Pearl Roundabout.[622] But for the Prime Minister, regime hardliners and—most importantly—their supporters in Riyadh, the signal fell on deaf ears. The protestors' encroachment into the royal areas—and *al-Wifaq*'s intransigence—was a bridge too

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[618] Tahalluf min Ajal al-Jumhuriya, "Bayan al-Mawaqif," (Statement of Principles), April 15, 2011, available at http://www.fajrbh.net/vb/showthread.php?t=18614.

[619] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 12.

[620] Ibid., p. 2.

[621] Ibid., p. 13.

[622] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 13.

far. On March 14, Saudi tanks and troops, joined by a small contingent of Emirati soldiers, rolled across the King Fahd causeway into Manama, under the authority of the GCC's Peninsula Shield force.

10.2.3 The Saudi Intervention: Regionalizing the Crisis

The ostensible aim of the intervention was to shore up the Bahraini regime against an insurgency that was being allegedly incited and directed from Tehran. Evidence of Iranian support, however, has been slim to non-existent. As was discussed in previous chapters, Bahraini Shi'a actors, from both the parliamentary bloc of *al-Wifaq* and the rejectionist *al-Haq* movement, have from time to time threatened to seek Iranian patronage if their demands for reform are not met. But such warnings are mostly bluster, intended as leverage over the al-Khalifa. Moreover, in the months that followed the outbreak of the protests, *al-Wifaq* was assiduous in publicly urging Iran not to meddle in Bahraini affairs.[623] That said, on February 28, *al-Haq* leader Hasan Mushayma, in an interview with the Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar*, threatened to seek Iranian assistance if Saudi Arabia intervened.[624]

Whether or not Iran was actually involved in encouraging or stoking the revolt is beside the point. The Saudi government saw its intervention in Bahrain—a neighbor often described as its Cuba or Puerto Rico—as a strategic imperative to a restore the kingdom's prestige in the wake of region-wide setbacks to Iran in Lebanon and Iraq. The move was also calculated as a shot across the bow of U.S. in the wake of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, Riyadh's ally against Iran, whom King 'Abdallah had accused the U.S. of casually discarding. Less explicitly, the intervention was intended as a visible show of monarchical solidarity in the midst of regional tumult. And as will be discussed at length below, a third audience may have been Saudi Arabia's own Shi'a population and, more broadly, domestic opposition. [625]

The Saudi intervention's effects on sectarian relations in Bahrain were far reaching. Across the region, the intervention sent ripple effects, enraging Shi'a populations in the Gulf, Lebanon and Iraq, and prompting a war of words between Sunni and Shi'a clerical authorities. Unsurprisingly, Iran's response to the crisis was particularly harsh. Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi verbally condemned the intervention and launched a concerted diplomatic campaign

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[623] Anon., "'Stop Meddling' Call to Tehran," *Gulf Daily News*, March 31, 2011.

[624] *Al-Akhbar*, February 28, 2011

[625] Frederic Wehrey, "Uprisings Jolt the Saudi-Iranian Rivalry," *Current History* (December 2011), pp. 353-354.

to persuade the UN, the OIC, the Arab League, and even Turkey to halt the crackdown.[626] Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamene'i and President Ahmadinejad quickly joined in the chorus of Iranian condemnation.[627] Pro-regime clerics from Qom and senior Revolutionary Guards officials demanded a firmer response by Iran, while, predictably, the paramilitary vigilante group *Ansar-e Hezbollah* announced plans for a *jihad* in Bahrain.[628] Importantly, Iranian voices sought to characterize the uprising as largely non-sectarian and populist in nature.[629]

The counter-response from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia to Iran's provocations was immediate. Saudi editorialists and officials were insistent that it was Iran that was playing the sectarian game and that Saudi intervention was simply acting in the interests of GCC fraternity and common security.[630] For example, Tariq al-Humayd, the editor in chief of *al-Sharq al-Awsat* took the Iranian Foreign Minister's statement that "Iran will not stand with its hands tied" as "clear evidence of Iran's sectarian orientation."[631] He went to argue that

> The [Peninsula Shield Force] did not go to Manama to support a particular sect, but rather it went in response to an official request from Bahrain. To say that this is an illegal act, as the Bahraini opposition are suggesting, along with a Shiite MP in Kuwait is a claim that can be refuted. The Peninsula Shield went to Bahrain in accordance with the agreements and covenants of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and these were the same forces that came to Kuwait's rescue during the Iraq invasion, something that the Kuwaiti MP ought to have remembered.[632]

Elsewhere in the region, the intervention triggered similar expressions of partisanship. From Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah condemned the deployment—a statement that would later fuel Bahraini regime accusations of material support to the Bahraini protestors by the Lebanese

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[626] *Fars News Agency* (English), March 21, 2011. Also, Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA-in English), March 26, 2011.

[627] *Mehr News* (English), March 16, 2011.

[628] For a good discussion of Iran's rhetorical attacks, see Joshua Teitelbaum, "Saudi Arabia Faces A Changing Middle East," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA), Volume 15, Number 3 (September 2011).

[629] Anon., "Uprising in Bahrain Has Nothing to Do with Shiism or Sunnism: Leader," *MehrNews.com*, March 22, 2011.

[630] Moussa Mahmoud al-Jamal and Sonia Farid, "Is Iran 'Sectarianizing' Bahrain Conflict," *al-Arabiya.net*, April 20, 2011.

[631] Tariq al-Humayd, "Iran Ta'ifi …. wa al-Dira'a al-Khaliji La," (Iran is Sectarian … but the Peninsula Shield is Not), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 15, 2011.

[632] Ibid.

Hizballah. From the Sunni side, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, framed the uprising as a sectarian bid for power by Iran, thus implicitly endorsing the Saudi incursion.[633]

Yet it was in Iraq where the ripple effects were the strongest. From Najaf, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani—the most popular *marja'* for Bahraini Shi'a—took the unusual step of actively endorsing the protests, arguing that Bahrainis have an unassailable right to peaceful protest.[634] The firebrand Shi'a cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, went further, urging his followers in Iraq to mobilize in support of the protestors.[635] In the southern, predominately Shi'a city of Basra and elsewhere, the call appears to have been heeded: for three days, approximately 20,000 protestors marched to condemn GCC's intervention, shouting slogans and burning effigies of the al-Khalifa and al-Saud[636] Not to be outdone, the Shi'a politician and businessman Ahmed Chalabi purportedly formed a committee of solidarity with Bahrainis, positioning himself as a sort of godfather.[637] Throughout the Iraqi Shi'a media, comparisons were rife between the 1991 *intifada* in Iraq against Saddam Husayn and the current travails of Bahraini Shi'a. Fueling this suspicion was the longstanding rumor that the Bahraini Defense Force and even Saudi troops contained former members of the Saddam *fedayeen* within their ranks.[638]

The Saudi intervention also fatally undermined the pro-reform elements in the Bahraini royal court, led by the Crown Prince. In the months that followed, the Prime Minister appeared to gain the upper hand in deliberations about how to respond to the protests. Indeed, some observers speculated that the Saudi deployment of troops to Bahrain was as much a deterrent against further civil disturbances as it was a means to shore up the Prime Minister and his supporters against rival factions in the royal court.[639] In early June, a Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhbar* appeared to

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[633] Mohamad al-Araba, "Qaradawi Says Bahrain's Revolution Sectarian," *al-Arabiya.net*, March 19, 2011 http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/19/142205.html

[634] Anon., "Grand Ayatollah Sistani Condemns the Saudi and Bahrain's [sic] Crackdown on Bahrain's Shi'a While Kuwait Refuses to Send Troops," *JafriaNews*, March 17 2011; available at http://jafrianews.com/2011/03/17/grand-ayatollah-sistani-condemns-the-saudi-and-bahrains-force-crackdown-on-bahrains-shia-while-kuwait-refuses-to-send-troops; accessed on December 6, 2011.

[635] Anon., "Iraq's Sadr Calls for Protest Against Bahrain Deaths," *World Bulletin*, March 16, 2011. http://www.worldbulletin.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=71168. Anon., "Iraq's Zealous Sons March in Support of Downtrodden Bahraini People," *al-Amarah News Network* (affiliated with al-Sadr), March 16, 2011; available at http://al3marh.net/news; accessed on December 6, 2011.

[636] Anon., "Thousands Across Iraq Protest Bahrain Crackdown," *Agence France Presse/NOW Lebanon*, March 18, 2011.

[637] Anne Hagood, "The Narrative of Resistance: Bahrain and Iraq," *Arab Media and Society*, Issue 13 (Summer 2011), available at http://www.arabmediasociety.com/?article=774; accessed on 11 December 2011.

[638] Ibid.

[639] Off-the-record coments by an analyst of Bahrain, Washington, D.C., U.S.A., March 15, 2011.

confirm this dynamic with a story on the formation of a separate paramilitary force that reported directly to the Prime Minister.[640] The Bahrain News Agency subsequently confirmed the existence of the unit.[641] Added to this, several opposition websites reported that a series of decrees by King Hamad had not been implemented by the executive branch. Specifically, a decree to transfer the trial of arrested protestors from military courts to civilian ones went unheeded. Although none of the reports specified the culpable party inside the executive branch, the Prime Minister's office, by law, is responsible for implementing judicial decisions.[642]

10.2.4 Government Reponses: Delegitimizing *al-Wifaq*

At the domestic level, the Saudi intervention created an even starker polarization of Bahraini politics. It placed *al-Wifaq* in an untenable position toward its constituents, undermining its legitimacy and prompting its 18 delegates to walk out of parliament. Those Sunnis who had joined the protests were frightened by the specter of Iran's involvement and *al-Wifaq*'s withdrawal from politics—and the Bahraini government was able to exploit these fears to split and divide the opposition.

The vehicle for doing this was the *Tajammu' al-Wahda al-Wataniya* (National Unity Gathering) led by Shaykh 'Abd al-Latif al-Mahmud, a Sunni cleric. The coalition included two Sunni Islamist parliamentary groups—the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated *al-Minbar* society and the Salafi *al-Asala* society, as well as one non-parliamentary group, the *Jamiyat al-Shura al-Islamiyya* (the *Shura* Islamic Society). The gathering was founded on February 20, ostensibly as an "opposition" umbrella that staged demonstrations alongside those in Pearl Roundabout. In fact, it was decidedly pro-regime all along.[643] With the intervention of Saudi forces and 'Ali Salman's apparent tilt toward Iran, al-Mahmud saw an opportunity to bolster the Gathering's ranks with nonaffiliated Sunnis who were growing increasingly fearful of Shi'a power and the prospect of Iranian meddling. In an interview with *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, al-Mahmud elaborated on

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[640] *Al-Akhbar*, June 2, 2011.

[641] *Bahrain News Agency* (BNA), June 16, 2011.

[642] Anon., "Istimrar al-Hakamat Amam 'al-Salama al-Wataniya' Asrar 'ala al-Idithhad al-Siyasi," (The Continuation of Trials Before the National Safety Courts is a Signal of Political Persecution), alWefaq.net; http://alwefaq.net/index.php?show=news&action=article&id=5819; accessed on December 6, 2011. Also, Bahrain Mirror, "The Return of Military Trials: Decree # 62 Signed by the Prime Minister Disappears From the Official Gazette," August 9, 2011; available at http://bahrainmirror.com/article.php?id=1669&cid=73 | 23 September 2011; accessed on December 17, 2011.

[643] International Crisis Group, "The Bahrain Revolt," *Middle East/North Africa Report*, Number 105, April 6, 2011, p. 12.

his views that Bahrain protests were simply cover for *al-Wifaq* to implement a sectarian agenda that benefitted, ultimately, the Islamic Republic of Iran:

> The schemes of the Shi'a sect were not supposed to be carried out this year. They were planned to be implemented in the upcoming years. However, the two Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have encouraged some leaders of the Shi'a sect to carry out their schemes. Their demands exceeded the legitimate demands of the Sunni opposition; they have gone beyond this to a higher ceiling of constitutional and political demands.[644]

In tandem with the mobilization of Sunni Islamists, the government relied on other societal groups to fracture the opposition and divide *al-Wifaq* of allies. First, it attempted to create the impression of a split between *al-Wifaq* and its liberal allies, namely, *al-Wa'ad*. In an April 2004 press campaign, the regime noted that *al-Wa'ad*—along with two other liberal parties who had allied themselves with *al-Wifaq*—broke from the Shi'a society over its explicitly sectarian stance.[645] In fact, *al-Wa'ad* never broke with *al-Wifaq*—its tactics and announcements during the revolt roughly paralleled those of *al-Wifaq*, up to and including the pull-out from the National Dialogue in July 2011.[646]

Second, royal hardliners gave an increasingly prominent platform to a vocal Shi'a critic of *al-Wifaq*, a young cleric named Muhsin al-Asfur. In the summer of 2011, al-Asfur issued a number of provocative statements aimed at undercutting *al-Wifaq*. He cast doubt on the Pearl Roundabout protests as truly popular in character, arguing that they had nothing in common with the movements in Tunis and Cairo, but were rather the handiwork of a small group of provocateurs led by *al-Wifaq*. He announced the formation of a rival organization to *al-Wifaq*, a political society composed of "loyal professsionals" that aimed to fill the 18 parliamentary seats left vacant by the *al-Wifaq* deputies. In perhaps his most pointed attack on *al-Wifaq*, he cast

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[644] Anon., "Ra'yis al-Wahda al-Wataniya bi al-Bahrayn: Za'im al-Ma'arada Hadid Istijad Iran itha Dakhalat Quwat 'Dira' al-Khalij'" (Head of the National Unity Gathering in Bahrain: Leader of the Opposition Threatened to Ask for Iran's Help if the Peninsula Shield Entered), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, March 20, 2011; http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=613363&issueno=11800.

[645] Muhammad al-Ahmad, "The Democratic Alliance Secedes from al-*Wifaq* Perceiving Sectarian Danger," *al-Ayyam*, April 4, 2011.

[646] *Bahrain Online*, July 18, 2011.

doubts on the clerical bona fides of 'Ali Salman, stating in an interview that "[Salman] went to Qom for seven years and worked as an office boy. He was regarded as a joke there."[647]

In tandem with this effort, there was a widespread regime effort to tar *al-Wifaq* as proxies of foreign powers—Iran, Iraq, the Lebanese Hizballah, the United Nations and even America. This was a time tested tactic and one that was applied with great effect in the uprising of 2011. In May, the *Gulf Daily News* reported on *Wikileaks* disclosures that *al-Wifaq* had requested U.S. pressure on the Bahraini royal family and that its cadre had received training from the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) in "how to avoid the demands of its voters."[648] The report also alleged that the cables proved that *al-Wifaq* and *al-Haq* were actually two sides of the same coin. "We will not hesitate to join the Shi'a on the streets if they decide to stand behind Mushayma," according to *al-Wifaq* member cited in a cable in the report.[649] Also in May, the government sharpened its critique of *al-Wifaq*'s foreign dealings, accusing its municipal council members of meeting with the United Nations in Manama and requesting greater UN assistance.[650]

Most significantly, the Bahraini government levelled multiple accusations that Lebanese Hizballah was actively training Bahraini protestors, especially those from *al-Haq* and *al-Wifaq*. In March 2011, for example, the Bahraini Foreign Minister alleged extensive support between the Lebanese militant group and Bahraini Shi'a, going so far as to assert that the very problem of sectarianism itself had been imported to the archipelago by Hizballah and Iran.[651] In late April, the Bahraini government sent a confidential report detailing extensive evidence of Hizballah's material support to the Secretary General of the United Nations.[652] A widespread press campaign followed, via op-eds and news stories in the state-sponsored press. In one illustrative example, an opinion writer in the pro-regime daily, *al-Watan* exhorts her readers:

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[647] Ben Birbaum, "Pro-Government Cleric to Start Own Party," *Washington Times*, August 10, 2011; Sandeep Singh Grewal, "Pullout by al-Wifaq 'Selfish' Says Cleric," *Gulf Daily News* (Bahrain), July 22, 2011.

[648] Anon, "New Shock: Wikileaks Revelations," *Gulf Daily News* (Bahrain), May 24, 2011.

[649] Ibid.

[650] Mohammed Al-A'ali, "Two Civic Councils Face Dissolution," *Gulf Daily News* (Bahrain), May 1, 2011.

[651] Anon., "Security and Stability Top Priorities Now, Foreign Minister Says," *Bahrain News Agency*, March 29, 2011.

[652] Jay Solomon, "Bahrain Sees Hezbollah Plot in Protests," *Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2011.

> Let us stop calling Hezbollah an opposition. We need to remind them that their real name is Hezbollah and not *al-Wifaq*, so that the whole world knows with whom it is dealing.[653]

Yet evidence of actual material support was slim.[654] According to some sources, a major basis for the accusation was that *al-Wifaq*'s movement of protestors from Pearl Roundabout to strategic points throughout the city paralleled similar tactics employed by Lebanese Hizballah during its May 2008 incursion into West Beirut.[655]

10.2.5 Counter-Mobilization in the Media

In tandem with this strategy of trying to discredit *al-Wifaq* as an Iranian proxy, the Bahraini regime conducted an extensive media campaign against the protests, designed to isolate the movement from outside sympathizers and portray it in a negative, sectarian light. This effort took shape in two key areas: traditional news outlets and social media.

First, traditional news outlets such as satellite TV and newspaper coverage were suppressed or minimized. *Al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*, the two major pan-Arab TV outlets that covered the protests and the crackdown, did so sparingly—most of their news was focused on Libya. The result was that domestic coverage of the revolt was dominated by the official state television channel, *Bahraini TV (BTV)*, which, predictably, characterized the protestors as being Shi'a in composition and taking their cues from Tehran. Iran's *Press TV* and the Iranian-controlled Arabic satellite television station, *al-Alam*, devoted equal time to both Libya and Bahrain, covering the latter with increasingly critical and strident language. Hizballah's *al-Manar* was another important, foreign source of news on the crisis.[656] Since *BTV* and the Sunni controlled satellite TV stations did not host Bahraini Shi'a figures, those protest leaders who wanted a platform for their views appeared on *al-Manar*, *al-Alam*, or Iraqi Shi'a channels. This provided further grist to the Bahraini government's accusations that the protest movement was being directed from Iran.[657]

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[653] Sawsan al-Sha'er, "Hizballah: Min al-Rahim al-Lubnani ila al-Hidana al-Bahrayniya," (Hizballah: From the Lebanese Womb to the Bahraini Incubator) *al-Watan*, September 20, 2011. http://www.alwatannews.net/writer-read.aspx?id=0gueSqr1n1HmokSkA9wmzJRPggQS+FyZEEUoX8tV29U=

[654] Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), November 23, 2011, pp. 69-70.

[655] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 3.

[656] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 6.

[657] In March 2011, the government restricted access to the internet site of Press TV. Open Source Center, "Press TV blocked in Bahrain," *Mardom Salari* (Tehran), March 6, 2011.

In the realm of print media, restrictions were similarly draconian. On April 2, the Bahraini ministry of interior suspended the country's only independent, opposition newspaper, *al-Wasat*, whose editor in chief, Mansur al-Jamri, had been a longtime critic of the regime. The reason given by the government was the allegation, aired on *BTV*, that the paper had published reports on the unrest which had been taken from reports published at an earlier date in other countries. Al-Jamri admitted the mistake, but argued that the newspaper had been the victim of a sting operation carried out by the government because of its editorial slant that was sympathetic to the protests. Publication was resumed only after most of its senior editors, including al-Jamri, were replaced.[658] Since then, a number of outside observers, including Human Rights Watch, noted that the paper's coverage of arrests, detentions, and deaths in custody has been "considerably reduced." The report went on to note that *al-Wasat*'s coverage of events in Bahrain had become virtually indistinguishable from official Bahraini outlets.[659]

Despite these measures, the suppression of traditional media pales in comparison to the broad crackdown on social media during the unrest. The Bahraini government was undoubtedly aware of its dangerous potential for mobilizing and coordinating street protests. As noted, the government institute an internet filtering policy and shut down the websites of popular opposition leaders such as 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Husayn. It also ordered that a Blackberry service provider shut down its service.[660] In the wake of the February 17 demonstrations, this suppression intensified.

A key theme informing its policy was that social media—particularly Twitter, YouTube and Facebook—had been effectively hijacked by sectarian extremists who were using these outlets to weaken the social fabric and unity of Bahrain. It was incumbent upon all Bahrainis, the regime urged, to either actively demonstrate in opposition to these voices or to stop using social media altogether, to deny the extremists an audience.[661] On February 20, for example, a Facebook page with the title, "Silent Peace-Bahrain" appeared on the internet, exhorting Bahraini citizens to refrain from using Facebook and Twitter from the hours of 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily. The stated reason was to begin the process of national reconciliation and healing. "Enough hurtful things have been said online," the page read. "But that is the cost of having the

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[658] Human Rights Watch, "Drop Charges Against Editor of Independent Daily," April 11, 2011.

[659] Ibid.

[660] Ibid.

[661] Much of this was under the framework of Bahrain's National Dialogue Media Center, which established accounts on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook to maintain effective communication with the Bahraini public. *Bahrain News Agency*, June 22, 2011.

beautifully diverse population that we have."[662] In April, the official *Bahrain News Agency (BNA*) published an interview with a Bahraini internet user, underscoring the government's ambivalent view of social media as a double-edged sword:

> I believe that 70 percent of the Bahrain situation was segregated through the sectarian rumors and broadcast messages. Therefore, I am against them all. Unfortunately, the negative impact of Facebook and Twitter outweighed their positive ones in recent events, since people were misusing them instead of trying to fix things.[663]

At the same time, pro-regime and pro-unity Facebook sites began springing up, as a counter to the "Day of Rage" sites. According to their founders, these Facebook groups, like the appeal to stop using Facebook altogether, are intended to combat the dangerous sectarianism and extremism that has polarized the state. For example, on June 22, Bahrain's National Dialogue Media Center established a presence on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.[664] The Bahrain News Agency had announced an expanded presence on social media sites, with the aim of publicizing the "achievements … of the royal reform project."[665] The Bahraini Foreign Minister Khalid al-Khalifa became a regular presence on Twitter, with many of his tweets reposted on Bahrain's traditional media sites.[666]

10.2.6 The False Promise of Dialogue

It is important to note that the government's response was not wholly confined to repression and counter-mobilization. As discussed earlier, the opposition found in the Crown Prince's office what appeared to be a committed interlocutor and partner. But the faltering dialogue between the two sides was undone by *al-Wifaq*'s hardline negotiating position—itself a reflection of crowd dynamics beyond its control—and the strength of hardliners in the royal court, led by the Prime Minister and backed by Saudi Arabia.[667]

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[662] Anon., "'Refrain From Using Social Networking Sites' Appeal," *Gulf Daily News* (Manama), February 20, 2011; http://www.gulf-daily-news.com/ArchiveNewsDetails.aspx?date=02/20/2011&storyid=300029

[663] Anon., "Bahrain Youths Role in Social Media," *Bahrain News Agency*, April 14, 2011.

[664] *Bahrain News Agency*, June 22, 2011.

[665] *Bahrain News Agency*, March 24, 2011.

[666] See, http://twitter.com/khalidalkhalifa.

[667] *Al-Jazeera* (English), "Bahrain National Dialogue Begins," July 2, 2011. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/07/20117214754858684.html

In late May, however, the King himself unilaterally announced a "national consensus" dialogue between the government and the opposition. Unlike the informal talks between the Crown Prince and *al-Wifaq*, the new outreach was rooted in a fundamental asymmetry—the government, backed by Saudi and Emirati troops, had mounted a broad-based campaign of arrest, detentions and alleged torture, effectively degraded the scale and strength of the protests. Moreover, the terms of the dialogue were largely decided by the royal family with little input from the opposition. The topics ranged from "governance" to "electoral system" to "women's and children's rights." There was also no mention of a popular referendum, and any recommendations resulting from the deliberations would have to be approved by the King.[668]

From the opposition's perspective, the most onerous aspect of the dialogue was the regime's screening and vetting of its participants. Over 320 individuals took part, but of these, only 25 represented the opposition societies. Each society was asked to send five representatives—*al-Wifaq* ultimately only sent four, since its fifth nominee was imprisoned. *Al-Wifaq*'s participation startled many observers—a possible explanation was last minute pressure from the U.S. and the belief that participation—and then a theatrical, public withdrawal—would help strengthen its bona fides with the increasingly impatient Shi'a street.[669] *Al-Wifaq*'s ally *al-Wa'ad* also participated to the surprise of many, despite the fact its license had been revoked in March and its chairman Ibrahim Sharif, had been arrested and sentenced to five years in prison.[670]

A particularly contentious issue was the presence in the dialogue of many "oppositionists" who were in fact government loyalists. These included the aforementioned National Unity Gathering led by Shaykh 'Abd al-Latif al-Mahmud and representatives from the major Sunni Islamist groupings, *al-Asala* and *al-Minbar*.[671] Most onerously from the Shi'a perspective, the pro-government delegation included Adil Flayfil, a former Bahraini intelligence officer accused of playing a prominent role in suppressing the mid-1990s *intifada*. In the run up to the dialogue, Flayfil made a number of provocative taunts at *al-Wifaq* that ran counter to the dialogue's spirit of national reconciliation:

> I would love to sit at the table with Shaykh 'Ali Salman from *al-Wifaq* and other opposition groups for the National Dialogue. But there is an Iranian agenda in this dialogue that will be promoted and I am afraid it will cause the collapse of the entire

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[668] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," pp. 18-19.

[669] Anon., "Proposal to Expand Powers of Bahrain Parliament 'Lies': Shiite Group," *Reuters*, July 26, 2011.

[670] International Crisis Group, "Bahrain's Rocky Road to Reform," p. 19.

[671] *Gulf Daily News*, July 18, 2011.

> talks. I demand [*al-Wifaq* and *al-Haq*] to put down their weapons and stop guerrilla training in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Syria.[672]

Added to these provocations, the slate of 25 oppositions could only vote on recommendations and *al-Wifaq* in particular felt ill-suited to represent its constituents.[673]

On July 17, 2011, less than three weeks after the dialogue commenced, *al-Wifaq* pulled out. In a letter to the chairman of the dialogue, *al-Wifaq*'s delegates cited the government's non-negotiable preconditions and the regime's unwillingness to hold "fair" and "transparent" elections. According to a source present at the meetings, the trigger for the walk-out was a highly inflammatory reference to the Shi'a as *rawafidh* (rejectionists) by one of the MP Jasim al-Sa'idi, a hardline member of *al-Minbar*.[674] In a subsequent interview with *al-Jazeera*, 'Ali Salman elaborated on the deeper roots of *al-Wifaq*'s rejection of the dialogue. The society's representation in the sessions was limited to 1.6 percent of the participants, yet *al-Wifaq*, he claimed, represented 60 percent of the Bahraini population.[675] *Al-Wifaq*'s withdrawal quickly triggered a cascade of similar walk-outs by its like-minded allies. Three of the leading liberal opposition groups—the National Democratic Assembly, the National Democratic Action Society (*al-Wa'ad*), and the Progressive Democratic Tribune Association, launched similar critiques of the sessions and announced their withdrawal on July 18.[676]

When the dialogue finally concluded in late July, the government had agreed to expand the legislative and oversight powers of the parliament, according to a statement by the official news agency, *BNA*. Yet *al-Wifaq* was unconvinced and its delegates subsequently lambasted the outcome as fraudulent, since the sessions had been stacked with government loyalists or phony "oppositionists." "The dialogue is clearly theater, the goal of which was to market a particular dish," noted the *al-Wifaq* official Hadi al-Musawi in a news conference on July 24. "What came out of the official media on the dialogue exposes lies and decepit."[677]

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[672] Sadeep Singh Grewal, "Former Intelligence Officer Eagerly Awaits Beginning of Negotiations," *Gulf Daily News*, June 29, 2011.

[673] Anon., "Proposal to Expand Powers of Bahraini Parliament 'Lies': Shiite Group," *Reuters*, July 26, 2011.

[674] Sandeep Singh Grewal, "Dialogue Drama," *Gulf Daily News*, July 13, 2011.

[675] Anon., "Fariq Hiwar Rayi In al-Hiwar Lan Yantaj Halan Siyassiyan Li-al-Azma fi al-Bahrayn," (The Negotiating Team Believes that Dialogue Will Not Produce a Political Solution to the Crisis in Bahrain), al-Wifaq *Facebook* posting, July 17, 2011; http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10150318246303072&set=pu.203200448071&type=. Also, Anon., "Bahrain Shiite Opposition Pulls Out of Talks," *Agence France Presse*, July 17, 2011.

[676] *Bahrain Online*, July 18, 2011.

[677] Anon., "Proposal to Expand Powers of Bahraini Parliament 'Lies': Shiite Group," *Reuters*, July 26, 2011.

Predictably, the government's Sunni supporters seized on these withdrawals and *al-Wifaq*'s rejection of the results as evidence of the opposition's intransigence and, even more ominously, its deference to foreign powers, i.e. Iran. The Salafi society, *al-Asala*, was especially vocal on this point. Its spokesman claimed that the Shi'a Islamist group had taken orders directly from Iran, citing the fact that *al-Wifaq* pulled out of the dialogue two days after the head of Iran's powerful Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, had stated in his Friday sermon that dialogue was pointless and called for an "Islamic occupation of Bahrain."[678] Other Sunni actors were similarly critical. In an interview with *al-Arabiya*, the leader of the National Unity Gathering, 'Abd al-Latif al-Mahmud, condemned *al-Wifaq* for trying to "exacerbate the crisis" for self-serving ends.[679]

While it rejected the King's offer of dialogue as inherently flawed and stage managed, *al-Wifaq* did try to leverage external support in mediating the crisis. Specifically, 'Ali Salman tried to solicit mediation from Kuwait's speaker of the parliament, Jasim al-Khurafi—who had played a critical role, it will be recalled from the previous two chapters, in mediating sectarian tensions in Kuwait.[680] The ultimate goal, however, was to secure intercession from the Kuwaiti Emir himself. On March 27, *al-Wifaq* told foreign news sources that it had accepted Kuwaiti mediation and that an *al-Wifaq* delegation had traveled to Kuwait City for preliminary discussions with a range of officials and non-official interlocutors, including the powerful Shi'a businessman 'Ali al-Matruk. On the next day, however, the Bahraini Foreign Ministry issued a vehement denial of Kuwait's role.[681] Jasim al-Khurafi was careful to tell a Kuwaiti newspaper that he had yet to receive any formal invitation from the Bahraini authorities. "If I receive an invitation," he said on the March 26, "I will welcome it because it is from my dear brothers, but I will not accept or reject it until I have consulted the competent authorities in Kuwait."[682]

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[678] Anon., "Al-Wefaq Pulled Out on Orders from Abroad," *Gulf Daily News*, July 19, 2011.

[679] BBC Monitoring Middle East / *al-Arabiya* TV, "Politician accuses opposition party of planning Islamic Republic in Bahrain," July 14, 2011.

[680] Frederik Richter, "Kuwait to mediate in Bahrain crisis," *Reuters*, March 27, 2011.

[681] Glen Carey., "Kuwait Isn't Involved in Bahrain Mediation," *Bloomberg*, March 28, 2011.

[682] Salim al-Wawan and Ra'id Yusuf, "Kuwait Hosts Today a Dialogue for Bahrain With the Participation of *al-Wifaq* Society in Order To Outline the Initiative," *al-Seyassah*, March 27, 2011. Bahrain's state press also reported that Khurafi refused to involve the Kuwaiti emir unless the Bahraini opposition dropped its demands for a constitutional monarchy and the resignation of the Prime Minister. This assertion could not be independently corroborated and, given the proclivity of Bahrain's state press for distortion, it should be treated with suspicion. Habib Toumi, "Kuwaiti speaker wants Bahrain opposition request for mediation," *Gulf News* (Bahrain), March 26, 2011.

As of October 2011, tensions in Bahrain remained high. The Arab Spring, many commentators remarked, had foundered on Shi'a-Sunni distinctions, which were themselves aggrevated by the failure of participatory institutions in Bahrain and the "regionalization" of the crisis after the March 2011 Saudi intervention. Miscalculations and missteps by both sides contributed to the impasse. But the polarization of Bahraini politics along sectarian lines and the alleged deterioration of the protest movement into a Shi'a bid for power was rooted more in the local context than in any transnational loyalties or contagion. A similar dynamic was at work across the causeway in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

10.3 SAUDI ARABIA

Among the disaffected Shi'a of the Eastern Province, the Arab revolts were greeted enthusiastically. In particular, a younger, more rejectionist generation of activist-leaders and clerics seized on the revolts to mount a challenge against the older, more cautious *Islahiyya* leadership. Long-dormant linkages between the Shi'a and Sunni oppositionists elsewhere in the kingdom and abroad were rekindled.

Yet the planned "Day of Rage" did not materialize as expected. Protests that were anticipated were confined to scattered, isolated demonstrations in Qatif that were quickly and quietly dispersed. In part because of a concerted regime strategy to "sectarianize" the Day of Rage, Sunni protestors in the Najd and Hijaz—and the uncommitted who were still testing the political winds—never showed up. In the weeks and months that followed, the regime managed dissent through a three-pronged strategy: an intensified crackdown on prominent instigators, bloggers, clerics and lay activists; attempting to pre-emptively silence any future dissent through a package of subsidies and economic aid; and holding municipal council elections to co-opt the more moderate currents of the Shi'a opposition and isolate the hardliners. Ultimately, the failure of the protests and the ensuing sectarian tensions corroborate a key finding of this study—that the mobilization of sectarian identity is rooted more in domestic structures and institutions than in any transnational contagion effect.

10.3.1 Dissent in the Eastern Province: Local versus National Agendas

In many respects, the Arab Spring's arrival to the Eastern Province represents the culmination of several trends that had been coalescing in the area since 2008. As noted in Chapter Seven, 2008 was a turning point for the Shi'a community. The riots in Medina and the ensuing crackdown laid bare the failed promises of reform that had begun with the National Dialogue and culminated with the municipal council elections of 2005. The Shi'a attempt at unofficial coordination with Sunni reformists had also foundered in the context of rising regional

tensions over Iran and the ensuing Salafi backlash. The older cadre of *Islahiyya* leadership under Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar and Jafar al-Shayeb found itself confronting an increasingly impatient and frustrated generation of youth who had grown disillusioned at the officially-sanctioned channels for change. Web activists mounted an increasingly brazen challenge to the established order with sites entitled "The Free State of al-Qateef and al-Ahsa" and "Revolution in the Eastern Province." Even former radicals such as the head of Hizballah al-Hijaz, Hassan al-Nimr, found themselves losing support among the increasingly unquiet youth.[683]

Power increasingly shifted from the traditional centers of Shi'a activism in Qatif, al-Ahsa and al-Dammam to smaller villages: al-Awamiya, Sayhat, Safwat, and Tarut.[684] From these locations, a new cadre of Shi'a leadership arose, mounting a concerted challenge to al-Saffar and his cohort of *Islahiyyin*. Among the most significant were the aforementioned the Nimr al-Nimr in al-Awamiya, whose imprisonment sparked massive demonstrations in 2009 and 2010. The *Khat al-Imam* leader Hassan al-Nimr was overtaken by Munir al-Khabaz, a popular preacher and former devotee of Khoei who later embraced Khamene'i as his *marja'*. In terms of rallying popular support, however, the most galvanizing figure was a young cleric, Tawfiq al-Amir from Hofuf, who was bolder than the older *Islahiyyin* in calling for meaningful political reforms.[685] Indeed, it was his call for a constitutional monarchy and subsequent arrest in al-Ahsa on February 27, 2011 that prompted Shi'a activists to demonstrate in early March.[686] In subsequent months, he would continue to serve as a powerful rallying point for Shi'a mobilization.

It is important to note that the Shi'a initially planned their protests as part of a broader movement for demonstrations on March 11—heralded variously as a "Day of Rage," a "Day of Longing," and, increasingly, the "Hunayn Revolution."—an historical reference to the Battle of Hunayn fought between the Prophet Muhammad and his followers and a Bedouin tribe near Taif in 630 C.E.[687] It is unclear who started the pages, which first began appearing in late February. Many observers attributed them to opposition groups based overseas, most notably the London-based Movement for Islamic Reform.[688] Others feared that they were a deliberate ploy by the

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[683] Personal unattributed interview with Saudi oppositionist, London, United Kingdom, October 28. 2011.

[684] Personal unattributed interviews with Saudi oppositionists in Washington, D.C. and London, May and October, respectively, 2011.

[685] Personal interview with Saudi oppositionist, London, October 28, 2011.

[686] The governor of al-Ahsa reportedly summoned al-Amr to ask him to sign a pledge limiting his religious authority, but al-Amr refused. *al-Rasid*, August 8, 2011.

[687] Facebook page of "Ihtilaf al-Shabab al-Ahrar" (Free Youth Coalition), http://ar-ar.facebook.com/ksa1Freedom1day, accessed on December 18, 2011.

[688] Personal interview with Saudi oppositionist, London, United Kingdom, October 28, 2011.

Saudi regime to entrap dissidents. On March 1, many of these groups appeared to have coalesced under an umbrella page called the "Free Youth Coalition," which issued a lengthy, 24-point set of demands, including the release of political prisoners, an end to corruption, the cancellation of all "unjustified debts and taxes," an elected *majlis al-shura* and an independent judiciary.[689] Importantly, the planned demonstrations were billed as expressions of solidarity with the protestors in Tahrir Square, Tunis and Benghazi.

As March 11 approached, however, websites and Facebook pages appeared that advanced uniquely Shi'a demands and reforms specific to the Eastern Province. This development later proved to be a watershed in the subsequent fracturing of the opposition and, arguably, the ultimate demise of the Arab Spring in Saudi Arabia. The branching of the "Day of Rage" into a Shi'a-specific protest stoked significant online debate among the web-based activists in the Saudi opposition movement. Critics—many of them self-identified Sunnis—criticized the Shi'a organizers for pursuing a narrowly "sectarian" agenda that diluted the overall movement and played into the hands of the regime. Even worse, they lambasted the Shi'a for scheduling their protests three days before the planned "Day of Rage" protests on March 11—an accelerated timeline that they perceived as a brazen act of one-upsmanship.[690]

The first Facebook pages that focused specifically on the Eastern Province appeared around March 3. The most prominent and common demand was the release of Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amr—at least two Facebook pages called for daily sit-ins demanding his release in al-Hofuf. Around the same period, a larger, more expansive site was launched entitled "The Eastern Region Revolution" that is still active and includes links to video clips and publications.[691] Importantly, the key figures that appear on the site are not from the *Islahiyya* (i.e. Hassan al-Saffar, Ja'afar al-Shayeb, and Muhammad Mahfouz) but rather hail from the newer, more radical cadre of Shi'a clerics and activists: Nimr al-Nimr, Tawfiq al-Amr, and Munir al-Khabbaz.[692]

The organizers of the page made clear that their agenda was distinct from the larger "Hunayn Revolution." The site listed as its core demand the release of nine "forgotten" Shi'a prisoners who had been detained for 16 years without a trial, because of their alleged involvement in the 1996 bombing against the U.S. Air Force housing at Khobar Towers. The page also called

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[689] Facebook, "Statement by the Free Youth Coalition," March 1, 2011.

[690] Facebook, "Thawrat Mintaqa al-Sharqiya," (Eastern Region Revolution), accessed in December 2011; http://www.facebook.com/Revolution.East.

[691] As of October 2011, the site had over 15,000 followers.

[692] Facebook, "Thawrat Mintaqa al-Sharqiya," (Eastern Region Revolution), accessed in December 2011; http://www.facebook.com/Revolution.East.

for sit-ins on March 9 in Qatif—at least two days before the "Day of Rage" that was planned throughout the kingdom. In setting this date, the organizers argued that the case of the forgotten prisoners would be drowned out "among all the other slogans shouted on (March 11)." "Our Revolution," they asserted, "is a condemnation of the hideous crimes committed by (governor of the Eastern Region Prince) Muhammad bin Fahd."[693]

The reaction from other voices of the opposition was swift and vociferous. An online commentator named Salma al-Shihab demanded that the name of the "Eastern Region Revolution" be changed "because it reflects a regionalist tendency which is something that the creators of this page have complained about … that the Hunayn Revolution is sectarian based. Indirectly, you have fallen into the same trap."[694] Other Internet voices claimed to represent the sponsors of the main Day of Rage, arguing that it was founded and led by Sunnis, and that the Shi'a's own "Day of Rage" risked polarizing and spitting the movement. "(Our) movement will never agree to support a sectarian or a factional plan or a suspicious one, and will not risk backing a controversial plan," the poster noted.[695]

10.3.2 Shi'a Protests Erupt … and then Dissipate

The first Shi'a protests occurred nearly eight days before the planned Day of Rage protests, on March 3, when roughly 100 protests in al-Awamiya and al-Qatif marched in solidarity with the forgotten protestors.[696] Similar protests occurred the following day following Friday prayers in al-Qatif, al-Hofuf, al-Safwa and al-Awamiya. Facebook pages listed the release of Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amr as a core demand of the demonstrations.[697] The regime responded with the arrest of 24 protesters on the street in Qatif, including prominent intellectuals such as Husayn 'Alaq.[698] Several were reportedly injured.[699] On March 8, Saudi authorities released al-Amr, along with the 25 other detained protestors, in an apparent gesture of conciliation.[700] He

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[693] Ibid.

[694] Facebook page of "Ihtilaf al-Shabab al-Ahrar" (Free Youth Coalition), http://ar-ar.facebook.com/ksa1Freedom1day, accessed on December 18, 2011.

[695] Anon., "Movement Confirms Truth about the Hunayn Revolution in Response to Rumors and False Reports," *al-Boraq Islamic Forum*, March 6, 2011.

[696] Anon., "Shi'ites stage small protest in Saudi oil province" *Reuters*, March 3, 2011.

[697] Anon., "Yawm al-Ghadab fi al-Ahsa Ihtijajan 'ala 'Ightiqal Shaykh al-Amr" (Day of Rage in al-Ahsa Protests Against the Detention of Shaykh al-Amr), *Markaz al-Haramayn lil-'Alam al-Islami* (the website of Hizballah al-Hijaz, citing *al-Rasid*), March 3, 2011.

[698] Anon., "Saudi Arabia: Stop Stifling Peaceful Dissent," *Human Rights Watch*, March 8, 2011.

[699] Anon., "Saudi Police Open Fire During Protest," *Associated Press*, March 11, 2011.

[700] Anon., "al-Sultat al-Sa'udiyya Tatlaq Sirah Da'ia al-Haquq al-Insan Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amr," (Saudi Authorities Release from Prison Human Rights Activist Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amr,), *Markaz al-*

reportedly met with the governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Muhammad bin Fahd, who agreed to form an investigatory committee to look into Shi'a grievances.

These concessions, however, did not stem subsequent protests on March 9 and 10. Approximately 600 to 800 protestors demonstrated in Qatif, again citing the forgotten prisoners as their rallying cry. The police responded with percussion grenades and rubber bullets sparking condemnations from local clerics, most vociferously, Hassan al-Nimr.[701] By March 11, the police presence on the streets of Qatif was described as "massive," and the demonstrations had spread to Hofuf, Awamiya, Safwa, and Dammam. Importantly, the moderate Shi'a website *al-Rasid* tried to distance these protests from the broader Hunayn Revolution—perhaps to avoid antagonizing Sunni reformist allies and provoking a greater regime crackdown.[702] Sporadic protests continued through the week, but took a more dramatic turn with the intervention of Saudi forces in Bahrain on March 17. Increasingly, rally slogans and chants focused on the withdrawal of Saudi forces and expressions of solidarity with Bahrain's protestors.[703] "One people, not two," a placard in Qatif read, referring to the unity of Bahraini and Saudi Shi'a.[704] Al-Saffar himself issued a statement condemning the Saudi incursion into Bahrain.[705] Throughout the summer and into fall 2011, marches and demonstrations continued. The most common refrain was the release of political prisoners and the withdrawal of the Peninsula Shield force from Bahrain.

By late March, the governor of the Eastern Province, Prince Muhammad bin-Fahd and his deputy, Jalawi bin 'Abd al-Aziz, met with a delegation of youths and clerics and had reportedly promised to redress Shi'a grievances.[706] At the same time, however, the regime was detaining 120 protestors and maintaining a near constant presence of security forces, helicopters and armored vehicles on the streets of Qatif.[707]

Haramayn lil-'Alam al-Islami, March 7, 2011. Also, Ian Black, "Middle East Crisis: Saudi Arabia: Expectations High Before 'Day of Rage' With Modest Aims," *The Guardian*, March 10, 2011.

[701] Anon., "al-Sayyid Nimr Yastankar Muwajhat al-Ta'bir al-Silmi bi-Itlaq al-Rasas ("Sayyid Nimr Denounces Confronting Peaceful Expressions by Firing Bullets," *al-Rasid*, March 12, 2011.

[702] Anon., "Silsala Maysirat fi al-Mintaqa al-Sharqiya Tatalab bi-Islahat wa Itlaq Sujna'" (Eastern Region Demonstrations Demand Reforms and the Freeing of Prisoners), *al-Rasid*, March 12, 2011.

[703] Anon., "Al-Maysirat Tajtah Mudn wa Baldat Qatif Tadamna ma al-Sha'b al-Bahrayni" (Demonstrations Spread Across the Cities and Villages of Qatif in Solidarity with the Bahraini People), *al-Rasid*, March 18, 2011.

[704] Anon., "Shiites Protest Peacefully in Eastern Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, March 18, 2011.

[705] Hassan al-Saffar, "Nada' min al-Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar Hawl al-Ahdath al-Alima fi al-Bahrayn" (Appeal From Shaykh Hassan al-Saffar on Painful Events in Bahrain), *Saffar.org*; March 11, 2011. http://www.saffar.org/?act=artc&id=2632

[706] Anon., "Wafd Shabab al-Qatif Yaltaqi Na'ib Amir al-Mintiqa al-Sharqiya" (Qatif Youth Delegation Meets with the Deputy Governor of the Eastern Region), *al-Rasid*, March 31, 2011.

[707] Ibid.

On April 21, the Shi'a protest movement took a decisive turn when a group of 35 Shi'a clerics issued a statement calling for an end to protests in Qatif and elsewhere in the Eastern Province. The statement, posted to *al-Rasid* and communicated widely through mosques and *husayniyat* exhorted Shi'a youth to withdraw from the streets in order to give the Saudi authorities time to implement reforms.[708] Yet there was slim to little evidence of any concessions by the government. Even worse from the Shi'a perspective, the government began what appeared to be a concerted crackdown. On August 3, 2011, Shaykh Tawfiq al-Amr was once again arrested, sparking further demonstrations, particularly among his supporters in al-Hofuf, and prompting expressions of solidarity on the Facebook page, "Eastern Region Revolution."[709] On October 3, 2011, protests took their most violent turn yet, when security forces clashed with armed protestors in al-Awamiya, wounding 11 police officers and three civilians.[710] Video posted on Facebook showed masked youth assaulting a police station. The confrontation was reportedly sparked after Saudi police attempted to arrest a 60-year old man in an effort to force the surrender of his son, who had been taking part in pro-Bahrain protests.[711]

Across the Saudi blogosphere and media landscape, the al-Awamiya clashes sparked debate and reflection about the grievances behind the flare-up and whether dissent in Saudi Arabia had crossed an unprecedented threshold of violence. Predictably, the Saudi Ministry of Interior blamed the disturbances on "foreign parties," and threatened to meet the dissent with an "iron fist."[712] The ministry statement exhorted the protestors to decide, "whether their loyalty is to God and their homeland or to that state and its authority."[713] The official Saudi press largely echoed this line, with the prominent commentator Mshari al-Dhaydi arguing that it was Iran's hand, not sectarian inequality, that was driving the violence.[714]

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[708] Anon, "Rijal al-din fi-l-Qatif Yad'un li Waqf al-Tadhahirat al-Iihtijajiyya" (Religious Scholars in Qatif Call for an End to Protests), *al-Rasid*, April 21, 2011; www.rasid.com/artc.php?id=44029.

[709] Facebook, "Thawrat al-Mintaqa al-Sharqiya" (Eastern Region Revolution), http://www.facebook.com/Revolution.East, August 12, 2011.

[710] Anon., "Muwahjat bayn Ahli al-Awamiya wa Ansar al-Shurta al-Sa'udiya" (Clash Between the Sons of al-Awamiya and Members of the Saudi Police) *Markaz al-Haramayn lil-'Alam al-Islami*, October 4, 2011.

[711] Patrick Cockburn, "Saudi police 'open fire on civilians' as protests gain momentum," *The Independent*, October 5, 2011.

[712] Ministry of Interior website, www.moi.gov.sa. Also, Anon., "Foreign Elements Blamed For Qatif Riots," *Arab News*, October 5, 2011.

[713] Ministry of Interior website, www.moi.gov.sa. Also, Anon., "Foreign Elements Blamed For Qatif Riots," *Arab News*, October 5, 2011.

[714] Mashari al-Dhaydi, "Al-Awamiya: Al-Qisa Laysat Ta'ifiya," (Al-Awamiya: The Story is Not a Sectarian One), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, October 11, 2011.

From the other side, Shi'a and pro-reform voices lambasted the regime's heavy-handed response as an unmasking of its true character. Some compared the Awamiya disturbances to the Syrian protests, arguing ominously that they were a harbinger of even worse violence throughout the kingdom. Even the normally measured and reserved Hassan al-Saffar spoke out. In his Friday prayer sermon on October 7, he levied stark criticism against the Interior Ministry for its heavy-handed response, arguing that it the regime's official language facilitated an atmosphere of sectarianism.[715] These statements, in turn, provoked an even sharper escalation in the press from Sunni and pro-regime voices. The normally moderate and middle-of-the road *al-Hayah* carried an editorial on October 11 with a markedly inflammatory tone that called for the "liquidation" (*tathir*) of the Shi'a protestors and denounced them as "agents of the mullah's regime (i.e. Iran)."[716]

10.3.3 Media Counter-Mobilization

In response to the appearance of Facebook pages calling for a Day of Rage, the Saudi regime launched a campaign to discredit and undermine the protestors, deploying a wide range of themes: emphasizing the destructive nature of the protests, delegitimizing them on the basis of Islamic law, and, importantly, attempting to portray them as Shi'a-inspired. A wide-range of outlets conveyed these messages, using both traditional and social media: the Interior Ministry, the Senior Ulema Council, conservative, and reformist newspapers (such as *al-Madina* and *al-Watan*, respectively), and Facebook pages that emphasized solidarity with the regime.

On March 5, the Ministry of Interior issued a forceful statement reiterating that protests were illegal and that those participating would be subject to prosecution.[717] This missive was further buttressed by a *fatwa* issued by the Senior Ulema Council that prohibited protests by citing Islamic legal precepts against the spreading of *fitna* (chaos).[718] A succession of other *fatawa* soon followed that served to simultaneously delegitimize the protests and "remind" the royal family that the support of the Salafi establishment was a critical buffer against popular protests. The popular preacher Muhammad al-Habdan went so far on his website, *Nur al-Islam*,

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[715] *al-Rasid*, October 13, 2011.

[716] Hani al-Zahiri, "'Darajat Basij'"fi al-Awamiya!" (Basij Motorcycles' in al-Awamiya!), *al-Hayah*, October 11, 2011.

[717] Ministry of Interior website, http://www.moi.sa.gov; accessed on December 17, 2011.

[718] Anon., "Saudi Grand Mufti: Nation's 'Foes Use Protests To Create Sedition'," *Saudi Gazette*, March 10, 2011.

to argue that support from the Salafi clerics was the only reason the royalty had not gone the way of Mubarak.[719]

Elsewhere on the Internet, the regime sponsored—albeit indirectly—the creation of Facebok pages that attempted to discredit and isolate the "Day of Rage" organizers. The most notable of these was "Together Against the Hunayn Revolution," and "May Allah Blacken Their Faces." On both pages, as in a plethora of YouTube videos, there were frequent references to the Shi'a and Iran as the hidden instigators behind the "Day of Rage" protests.[720] The charges were sufficient to force the "Free Youth Coalition" to issue a statement on March 7 on its Facebook page that "all the organizers (of the Day of Rage), are Sunnis."[721] At least some observers believe that this partially explains the dismal showing of public support for the protests, particularly among Sunnis. "The Sunnis are afraid—they are caught between Sa'ad al-Faqih and the Eastern Province," noted one longtime Saudi dissident.[722]

Aside from this counter-mobilization, the regime undertook more repressive measures in the media realm. In February, it enacted a new law that requires online newspapers to be licensed by the Interior Ministry. Activists complained that the law was sufficiently vague to encapsulate many forms of online discourse, such as video messaging and mobile phone texting.[723] Even after the Day of Rage fizzled, there were calls for the organizers to be prosecuted.[724]

10.3.4 Pre-Emptive Subsidies and Reform

On February 23, following a three-month absence abroad for medical treatment, King Abdallah announced a social and economic benefits package totaling 37 billion dollars. Subsequent press releases detailed the program as alleviating the impact of inflation, introducing an unemployment benefit (an especially salient concession for the Eastern Province Shi'as),

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[719] Muhammad al-Habdan, "Li Matha Lum Tinjah al-Muthahirat fi al-Sa'udiyya?" (Why Did the Demonstrations Not Succeed in Saudi Arabia?), *Nur al-Islam* website, March 9, 2011. https://www.islamlight.net/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=21576&Itemid=23

[720] Muhammad al-Sulami, "Calls Mount For Prosecution of 'Day of Rage Dissidents'," *Arab News*, March 15, 2011.

[721] Facebook page of "Ihtilaf al-Shabab al-Ahrar" (Free Youth Coalition), http://ar-ar.facebook.com/ksa1Freedom1day, March 7, 2011.

[722] Personal interview with Saudi dissident, United States, May 25, 2011.

[723] Abeer Allam, "Online Law Curbs Saudi Freedom of Expression," *Financial Times*, April 6, 2011.

[724] Muhammad al-Sulami, "Calls Mount for Prosecution of 'Day of Rage' Dissidents," *Arab News*, March 15, 2011.

providing a state scholarship program for Saudis studying abroad, and maintaining an "inflation allowance" for Saudi state employees.[725]

Later, on March 22, the government's Ministry of Muncipal and Rural Affairs announced that the first stage of elections for the kingdom's 219 municipal councils would be held on April 23. Originally scheduled for October 2009, the elections had been repeatedly postponed, and the sudden acceleration of the timeline was seen as pre-emptive concession by the regime to the burgeoning demands for reform.[726] That said, a key reform demand—the participation of women in the voting—was not included in the initial announcement, although King 'Abdallah later announced that women would indeed be allowed to participate, albeit in the next elections.[727] Taken in sum, the announcement of the electoral timeline and the granting of suffrage to women must be seen as pre-emptive efforts by the regime to placate the opposition—at the expense of the Shi'as' more specific demands.

The Saudi regime used the failure of the protests as a validation of the benevolence and legitimacy of the al-Saud. "Everybody was surprised when this day of rage turned into a silent *baya'* (oath of loyalty) which saw the Saudi public wordlessly express their support of the leadership," noted the editor-in-chief of *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Tariq al-Humayd.[728] In a post-mortem on why the protests fizzled, the "Free Youth Coalition," blamed the regime's attempts to impugn the organizers as foreign-based, secular or Shi'a.[729] From the Shi'a side, the failure of the revolts was attributed to Sunni apathy and the historic aversion of the Najdi heartland to mounting any sort of dissent against the status quo. According to one dissident:

> Sunnis were afraid to come out—and this was not the first time they failed to protest. In 2004, Saad al-Faqih asked people to demonstrate, but only 200 people showed up in Riyadh. Najdi culture simply doesn't have the protest gene. It is shameful to protest[730]

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[725] For a good overview, Robert Danin, "Is Saudi Arabia Next?" *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 4, 2011. In March, an even more ambitious subsidy package was announced, amounting to 97 billion U.S. dollars.

[726] Abid al-Suhaymi, "Saudi Arabia Announces Municipal Elections," *al-Sharq al-Awsat* (English), March 23, 2011. The elections were not actually held in April, but rather September.

[727] Walaa Hawari, "Women Launch Facebook Campaign To Participate in Municipal Elections" *Arab News*, February 7, 2011.

[728] Rashid Abul-Samh, "Saudi Smoulders But is Not On Fire," *al-Ahram*, March 17-23, 2011.

[729] *Itilaf al-Shabab al-Ahrar* (The Free Youth Coalition), "Li Matha Fashalat Da'wa Li Tadhahir Yawm 11 Mars?" (Why Did the Call for Protest on March 11 Fail?), April 19, 2011; http://www.saudiwave.com/ar/2010-11-09-15-55-47/706------11--.html

[730] Personal unattributed interview with Saudi dissident, United States, May 25, 2011.

10.4 KUWAIT

As noted in the previous chapter, by late 2010 Kuwait's parliament had become increasing rife with tension and its much-heralded civic and media freedoms greatly curtailed. In an effort to placate the Salafi *badu* opposition, the regime implemented a far-reaching set of media restrictions intended to temper and mitigate sectarian tensions. When the Arab Spring broke in early 2011, these pre-existing fissures widened as a nascent protest movement within Kuwait gained steam and, more importantly, as Kuwaiti parliamentarians and citizens took increasingly partisan positions toward the unfolding conflict in Bahrain.

Ultimately, although Kuwait's fragile participatory institutions became even more polarized and, at times, dysfunctional, they acted as a critical buffer against the external contagion of the Arab uprisings. Kuwait, alone among the cases studied, did not experience significant unrest. And while its Shi'a were certainly subject to increased accusations of disloyalty to the state and fealty to Iran, their presence and participation in the parliament ensured that they did not adopt the tactics of militancy and civil disobedience seen in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. That said, a key source of friction—one which nearly paralyzed the Kuwaiti parliament—was the deployment of the GCC's Peninsula Shield force and the question of whether and to what degree Kuwait should support the intervention.

10.4.1 Polarization over the Peninsula Shield Intervention in Bahrain

For their part, the clearest expression of dissent by the Kuwaiti Shi'a came during the mid-March parliamentary debate about the deployment of the Peninsula Shield force to Bahrain and whether and how Kuwait should support the intervention. Shi'a lawmakers from across the ideological spectrum protested the GCC's intervention and objected to any Kuwaiti support to the Bahraini regime, either unilaterally or as part of the Peninsula Shield force. Adnan Abd-al-Samad described the deployment as a "flagrant intervention in the internal affairs of Bahrain and an attempt to curb the legitimate demands of the Bahraini people for reforms," while Rola Dashti said that troops should be sent "to defend Bahrain against any external aggression but sending our soldiers there for the possibility of more killings is totally rejected." On the March 15, Saleh Ashur threatened to interpellate the Prime Minister if he committed Kuwait troops to the GCC intervention.

Still others highlighted the potential contradiction of the Kuwaiti government's attempts to mediate the crisis, while participating in an operation to suppress the dissent.[731] "While His

[731] B. Izzat, "MPs Divided Over Troops in Bahrain," *Kuwait Times*, March 16, 2011.

Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah is exerting reconciliation efforts in Bahrain, some media outfits and lawmakers are doing the opposite by engaging in destructive activities," argued the Shi'a MP, Dr. Aseel al-Awadih.[732] Other Shi'a figures organized sit-ins and marches in solidarity with the Bahraini protestors.[733]

From the Sunni side, parliamentarians—particularly from the tribal Salafi blocs—argued that it was incumbent upon Kuwait to support the Bahraini government as a signal of GCC fraternity and a gesture of reciprocity for Bahrain's aid to Kuwait during the 1990-1 Iraqi occupation. Many of these figures cited the Bahrain unrest as yet another front in Iran's ongoing war against the Gulf states, with some advocating Gulf support to ethnic Arab dissidents in Iran's restive Khuzestan province as a form of retribution.[734] Others went so far as to appear on Bahraini state television in vocal defense of the al-Khalifa. Even more ominously for Kuwait's domestic stability, the Salafi parliamentarians hinted that they would file yet another interpellation against the Prime Minister if Kuwait abstained from providing forces.[735]

Faced with this domestic opposition and fearful that the Bahrain crisis would exacerbated the deepening sectarian tensions in parliament and lead to the dissolution of the cabinet, the Prime Minister's office prevaricated and delayed a decision about sending troops. When it finally acted, its contribution was limited to medical aid convoys and, later, naval forces—a sort of face-saving middle ground that was probably calculated to placate both Shi'a and Sunnis. Ironically, however, Kuwait's medical convoys to Bahrain were turned back by authorities in Manama, with press reports speculating that the Bahraini government suspected them of belonging to "Kuwaiti Hizballah."[736] Yet by late March, the royal family had adopted a posture of vocal support for the

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[732] Anon, "MPs, Media Hype Hiking Sectarian Tension Locally; Government Silence Draws Criticism," *Arab Times* (Kuwait), March 27, 2011.

[733] 'Abd al-Nasr Ibrahim, "D'awa 'ala 'Itimad al-Hiwar li Haqn Dam al-Shab wa Tahqiq al-Istiqrar," (A Call for the Adoption of Dialogue to Inoculate the Blood of the People and Achieve Stability), *al-Seyassah*, March 18, 2011; http://www.al-seyassah.com/AtricleView/tabid/59/smid/438/ArticleID/131320/Default.aspx; accessed on December 17, 2011.

[734] Muhammad Nazal, "Al-Salafi Yuhadr fi al-Rumaythiya of 'Um al-Qura al-Iraniya:' al-Khatr al-Safawi Qa'ima wa La Yuhaddna bi al-La'ib al-Nariya" (Salafis Warn in Rumaythiya of an Iranian Um al-Qura: The Safavi Threat is Coming and It Won't Threaten Us With Fireworks!) *al-Ra'y* (Kuwait) March 20, 2011; http://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=270321&date=20042011; accessed on December 6, 2011.

[735] Ibid.

[736] Marwa al-Bahrawi, "Try Again: Aid Convoy," *Arab Times*, March 22, 2011.

Peninsula Shield operation, with the Kuwaiti defense minister stated that "if Bahrain asks us for more troops, we will be more than willing to oblige them."[737]

10.4.2 Escalation and Anti-Shi'ism by Sunni Islamists

Such gestures, however, failed to placate the Salafi opposition, who used the government's prevarication as evidence of its dereliction. On March 20, Muhammad Hayif al-Mutayri and Walid al-Tabtaba'i announced their intention to interpellate the Prime Minister, citing his failure to uphold Article Three of the GCC charter, which called for the organization to extend assistance to any member nation under attack.[738] The motion was deferred, but in mid-June, the delegates launched another attack to bring down the Prime Minister, citing his cozy relationship with Iran and in particular his recent hosting of a visit to Kuwait by the Iranian Foreign Minister, at a time when Kuwait had uncovered a spy ring allegedly working for Iran's Revolutionary Guards.[739]

In the weeks and months that followed, Kuwait witnessed a dramatic upsurge in anti-Iranian, anti-Shi'a rhetoric, among prominent figures and in the media. On April 2, the Kuwaiti daily *al-Seyassah* posted the results of a poll titled, "Do you support deporting expatriate Shi'a linked to Hizballah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps [IRGC] from GCC countries?" The results indicate the poll surveyed 3,450 respondents: 90% were in favor of deporting Shi'a; 9% did not agree; and, 1% were uncertain.[740] On April 20, prominent figures from the Salafi current held a conference in Kuwait City, entitled "Kuwait and the Iranian Threat," with some going so far as to support the Ahwaz protests in Iran as a form of retribution for Iran's alleged meddling.[741] In May, parliamentary tensions reached a boiling point when a fistfight broke out

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[737] Anon., "MPs, Media Hype Hiking Sectarian Tension Locally; Government Silence Draws Criticism," *Arab Times*, March 27, 2011.

[738] Abu-Bakar A. Ibrahim and Nihal Sharaf, "Sunni and Shi'a MPs Lock Horns Over Shield Troops," *Arab Times*, March 20, 2011.

[739] Habib Toumi, "Kuwait's Parliament Wading Deeper Into Controversy," *Gulf News*, May 24, 2011.

[740] *Al-Seyassah*, April 2, 2011.

[741] Muhammad Nazal, "Al-Salafi Yuhadr fi al-Rumaythiya of 'Um al-Qura al-Iraniya:' al-Khatr al-Safawi Qa'ima wa La Yuhaddna bi al-La'ib al-Nariya" (Salafis Warn in Rumaythiya of an Iranian Um al-Qura: The Safavi Threat is Coming and It Won't Threaten Us With Fireworks!) *al-Ra'y* (Kuwait) March 20, 2011; http://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article.aspx?id=270321&date=20042011; accessed on December 6, 2011.

between Shi'a and Sunni representatives, after the Shi'a MP Husayn Qallaf referred to Kuwaiti detainees at Guantanomo Bay, Cuba as "al-Qa'ida."[742]

In many respects, the drama of Bahrain reverberated across Kuwait's factional spectrum, with destabilizing results for the fragile parliament. The fact that the Kuwaiti Prime Minister adopted a somewhat neutral stance toward the Peninsula Shield operation, sending only a token amount of Kuwaiti assistance (and no ground troops), provides an important illustration of how domestic sectarian tensions constrain foreign policy choices. The decision also exposed him to even fiercer attacks by the Salafi parliamentary opposition which, by late 2011, had devolved into violent clashes outside government ministries. That said, Kuwait's open media and parliament also played a role in mediating and tempering the contagion effect of the Arab Spring—acting, in effect, as a release valve for political pressures that, if kept suppressed and obstructed, would explode in a manner similar to Bahrain. As noted by one seasoned Kuwaiti analyst:

> Kuwait is accustomed to (sectarian) tension, but it has channels through which people can vent their grievances; particularly the media. Secrecy is what causes things to deteriorate. Here everything is out in the open.[743]

10.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the ways in which domestic institutional structures, media, and Sunni threat perception in each state affected how the Arab Spring was felt on Shi'a-Sunni relations. The contagion effect of events in Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi was ultimately rooted in a broad-based, populist appeal that spoke directly to a segment of Shi'a youth who were highly susceptible to mobilization. Frustrated by their respective regimes' failures to implement meaningful reforms, these unaffiliated youth used social media to launch an unprecedented critique of the existing order.

In short order, however, these movements were quickly seen as sectarian inspired, with Gulf media accusing Iran and Lebanese Hizballah of inciting and aiding the protests, particularly in Bahrain. The result was a fracturing of the nascent cooperation between the Shi'a cohort of the protestors and their Sunni allies—a dynamic that played into the hands of royal hardliners and, as discussed in previous chapters, had been employed by Arab regimes to great effect before the Arab Spring.

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[742] B. Izzak, "Disgraceful," *Kuwait Times*, May 19, 2011. Also, Anon, "Kuwaiti parliament scuffle reveals sectarian cleavages," *The Media Line*, May 19, 2011.

[743] Anon, "Kuwaiti parliament scuffle reveals sectarian cleavages," *The Media Line*, May 19, 2011.

In each country, domestic institutional structures—specifically, parliaments, consultative councils, *diwaniya*, and clerical establishments—acted as filters through which Shi'a and Sunni actors interpreted the Arab Spring. In Bahrain, a largely powerless parliament and a Shi'a opposition bloc that had been largely discredited meant that the Arab Spring arrived with greater force. Frustrated with *al-Wifaq*, a younger generation of unaffiliated Shi'a activists proved susceptible to the populist, class-based appeal of the Arab Spring, using it to challenge the strategies of the older, seemingly ossified leadership of 'Ali Salman. Yet whatever hopes these activists had of framing their movement as democratic and cross-sectarian were quickly dashed in the wake of the March 17 Saudi-led intervention in Bahrain, which effectively fractured the opposition and played into the hands of royal hardliners in Manama. Led by the Prime Minister, this faction mounted a concerted media campaign to denigrate the Shi'a as proxies of Iran and launching a stage-managed dialogue process that was largely stacked in the regime's favor.

Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the stalling of the National Dialogue and the weaknesses of the municipal councils—along with repeated delays in elections—enabled the rise of a younger generation of Shi'a activists who used the Arab Spring as an opportunity to revolt against both the regime and the older cadre of Shi'a leadership led by Hassan al-Saffar and Ja'afar al-Shayeb. Inspired by younger clerical figures like Tawfiq al-Amr and Munir al-Khabbaz, these activists had tried to align their "Day of Rage" within a larger, nationalist context that minimized sectarian or local specificity. Yet divisions arose over the timing and prioritization of reforms—disagreements that were skillfully manipulated by the regime to create the impression that protests were being incited by a "foreign power," i.e. Iran.

In Kuwait, a fractious and divided parliament became even more so after the Arab Spring, particularly in the wake of the Saudi-led GCC intervention in Bahrain, which pit Shi'a and Sunni parliamentarians in a fierce debate over whether and how Kuwait should support the operation. Added to this, Kuwait's media sphere became increasingly polarized along sectarian lines. That said, Kuwait's turbulence can arguably be seen in a positive light—as evidence that a relatively open political culture and media can absorb the regional shocks of revolutionary contagion that might have otherwise boiled over.

11 CONCLUSION

This study has explored the conditions under which Shi'a-Sunni distinctions became a prominent feature of the Gulf political landscape. Rather than viewing sectarian identities as primordial and immutable, it analyzed how a variety of domestic institutional factors—particularly parliaments and other quasi-democratic structures, the media, and the clerical establishment in each country—exacerbated or tempered sectarianism. Most importantly, it examined the contagion effect of regional events like the civil war in Iraq, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the Arab Spring on sectarian identity in the Gulf. At another level, the study provided a historical narrative of Shi' activism in the Arab Gulf since 2003. It discussed how events elsewhere in the region affected local Shi'a strategies and attitudes about citizenship, political reform, and transnational identity.

A central finding of the study is that domestic institutions in each state played a crucial, determinant role in the level of sectarianism that resulted from dramatic shifts in the regional environment since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I conclude that the real roots of the so-called "rise of the Shi'a" phenomenon lie in the domestic political context, rather than in the regional policies of Iran or the contagion effect of events in Iraq or Lebanon. Although the Gulf Shi'a took a degree of inspiration from the actions of their co-religionists in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon, they ultimately strove for greater rights in a non-sectarian, nationalist framework, frequently cooperating with liberal Sunni Islamists and secularists. The re-emergence of sectarianism in the Gulf has been largely the product of excessive alarm by entrenched Sunni elites or the result of calculated attempts by regimes to discredit Shi'a political actors by portraying them as proxies for Iran, Iraq, or the Lebanese Hizballah. What is qualitatively different about the post-2003 period, therefore, is not necessarily the level of mobilization by the Shi'a or any incitement strategy by Iran, but rather the intensity of threat perception by Gulf regimes and Sunni Islamists.

The Impact of Outside Actors and Events

This study has demonstrated that the sectarian divide in Gulf politics is intrinsically linked to the transnational ties of the Gulf Shi'a. Bereft of social capital and access to political power, the Shi'a have frequently turned outside the Gulf for empowering, revolutionary ideologies to challenge the status quo. At various points, these have included communism, Ba'athism, and Iran's brand of revolutionary Islamism. Much of this diffusion has been enabled by familial and clerical relationships that link the Gulf Shi'a to their co-religionists in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. Among these, the most prominent is the uniquely Shi'a religious institution of the *marja' al-*

taqlid. Because the authority of the *marja'* is theoretically not limited by national borders, the institution has proven problematic for Shi'a integration by fueling Sunni suspicions of Shi'a disloyalty to the state.

This study has shown that these cross-border ties matter, but not in the way previously assumed. In the wake of the 2003 Iraq War, Shi'a political actors actually redoubled their efforts to "nationalize" their political strategies within existing domestic institutions rather than, as was commonly suspected, seek external guidance and support from their ascendant co-religionists elsewhere in the region. Certainly, there were scattered instances of Shi'a clerical figures, usually on the fringes of the Shi'a mainstream, who appealed to Iran, Hizballah or Iraqi Shi'a authorities. But these expressions of transnational solidarity should be seen for what they are: tactics in an intra-Shi'a contest for power or means to pressure regimes into greater concessions and not as evidence of a broad shift in Gulf Shi'a proclivity to foreign influences.

In Bahrain, for example, the decision by the main Shi'a political grouping, *al-Wifaq*, to end its four year electoral boycott was legitimated by the emergence of independent Shi'a religious authorities in Najaf, Iraq. It is inaccurate, however, to say that Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani directly influenced the society's decision-making. The Iraqi cleric, as well as his local Bahraini interlocutors—'Isa al-Qasim and Husayn Najati—continually emphasized that it was not the place for foreign-based *maraja'* to interfere in local politics. The trend of local actors attempting to appropriate al-Sistani's authority for leverage is not unique to Bahrain, but is rather found throughout the region. So much so that Sistani's office has issued statements decrying the use of the cleric's imprimatur for political agendas. That said, the leadership of *al-Wifaq* did try to draw broad parallels between the electoral success of the Shi'a in neighboring Iraq and the situation of the Bahraini Shi'a as a means to bolster popular support for their decision to participate in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Similarly, the rising profile of Lebanese Hizballah and its war with Israel provided a useful model for the militant *al-Haq* movement to legitimate its own decision to boycott the elections and to contrast its rejectionist outlook with the more accommodating one of *al-Wifaq*. Yet there was little concrete evidence, however, of Hizballah's involvement in the Bahraini political scene, either rhetorically or materially. If it did intervene, it was to emphasize that Bahraini politics was the autonomous preserve of the Bahrainis themselves, and not for a Lebanese entity to influence or determine.

In some cases, non-sectarian events that were unconnected to the rise of Iran or the ascendancy of Shi'a power in Iraq had an equally strong demonstration effect on Bahrain Shi'a sensitivities. Protests in Sitra and Manama in May of 2005 were inspired more by Lebanon's Cedar Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution than any incitement from Iran or exhortation

from Najaf-based authorities. In particular, these national-based demonstrations appear to have resulted in a "re-branding" of Shi'a protest symbols, i.e. a discarding of Iranian and Hizballah flags in favor of the Bahraini flag, emblazoned with the slogan "Constitutional Reform First." In the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, these dynamics only increased. The contagion effect of the revolts in Tunis, Cairo and Benghazi on Bahraini Shi'a ultimately embodied a non-sectarian blend of populism, youthful frustration, and class. Put differently, the Bahraini Shi'a rose up in solidarity with the crowds of Tahrir Square and Tunis rather than—as commonly assumed—their co-religionists in Najaf, Qom or southern Beirut.

In Saudi Arabia, the Shi'a had a longstanding propensity to look outside the kingdom for guidance, inspiration and support given the intense pressures of religious discrimination and political exclusion. Yet in the wake of the Iraq War, Shi'a figures affiliated with Hassan al-Saffar and the *Islahiyya* trend actually intensified their efforts to ground their political strategy in the domestic context, rather than seek support from re-emergent centers of Shi'a power in Iraq or an increasingly assertive Iran. Led by the longstanding cleric-activist Hassan al-Saffar, the *Shiraziyyin* pursued a three-pronged political strategy: using the long-standing practice of the petition to voice their demands; circumscribing the transnational power of the *marja'iyya*; and participating in municipal council elections. This institutionalization of the Shi'a extended beyond the *Shiraziyyin*. Even the staunchest Shi'a defenders of *velayet-e faqih*, such as the former leader of Hizballah al-Hijaz Hassan al-Nimr, argued for a more nationalist interpretation of the concept which would allay Sunni anxieties in the kingdom.

That said, rising bilateral tensions with Iran and the stalling of 'Abdallah's reforms emboldened a more radical strain of Shi'a leadership, whose rejection of political participation stood in stark contrast to the *Shiraziyyin*. The most prominent of these was the firebrand cleric Nimr al-Nimr, who drew support from the long-marginalized town of al-Awamiya. During the 2006 Lebanon War, for example, al-Nimr instigated daily protests and shows of solidarity with Hizballah. From July to August 2008, he gave a series of speeches declaring support for Iran's nuclear program, arguing that the Saudi Shi'a should stand with Iran "heart and soul," and warning that if their demands were not met, they should turn to Iran.

Like their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, the Kuwaiti Shi'a used the invasion of Iraq as an opening to demand greater concessions in the cultural and religious sphere, while at the same time taking care to highlight their continued loyalty to the monarchy. As in the case of both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, there were instances in Kuwait where local Shi'a clerics deliberately inflated their access to foreign *maraja'* or advanced radical claims of secession in an effort to boost their authority and popularity. Key examples include Muhammad Baqir al-Muhri, who frequently claimed to speak on behalf of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, and the firebrand cleric

Yasser al-Habib, who called for an independent Shi'a state comprising the Eastern Province, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Basra. At the same time, the post-2003 period witnessed increased factionalism among the Kuwaiti Shi'a as a result of outside actors. Encouraged by the re-emergence of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani in Najaf, the *Shiraziyyin* in Kuwait attempted to marginalize their rivals in the pro-Iranian Islamic National Alliance (INA).

The Role of Political Institutions

This study has shown that the relative maturity of participatory institutions in each country is a critical factor that explains why the Shi'a in each country did or did not mobilize against their respective regimes. In each country, domestic structures—specifically parliaments, consultative councils, *diwaniya*, and clerical establishments—acted as filters through which Shi'a and Sunni actors interpreted regional upheaval. In many respects, the varying levels of Shi'a dissent—and the phenomenon of sectarianism more broadly—are the result of the uneven distribution of power in each country and the attendant frustration at the failure of promised reforms.

In Bahrain, parliamentary politics were a critical test of the state's ability to manage the shocks of the post-2003 environment. In some respects, they created a climate of hope for positive change that acted as a pressure release. Groups that otherwise might have been inspired toward radicalism by the unfolding events in Iraq and the rise of Iran were effectively "nationalized" and developed vested stakes in the Bahraini political project. At the same time, the efforts of the reformist wing of the regime—led by the Crown Prince—were undone by the disclosure of the Bandar Report and Prime Minister's efforts to play sectarian factions off against each other.

In the years following the 2006 elections, parliamentary life became increasingly polarized and rife with sectarian wrangling. Deputies spent excessive time trying to mark their identity, rather than responding to the needs of their constituents. The Salafi groups sponsored by hardline elements in the royalty became more entrenched and publicly hostile toward the Shi'a. This deadlocked and largely powerless parliament meant that the Arab Spring arrived with greater force in Bahrain than the other case countries.

In Saudi Arabia, King 'Abdallah's response has been a tenuous balancing act. On the one hand, the monarch has had to mediate between the competing demands of two important constituencies, both of whom are susceptible to external manipulation or ideological mobilization against the regime. The first are the Shi'a, whom he has tried to inoculate against Iranian-inspired agitation through political reforms and cultural concessions. The second are hard-liners within the Salafi establishment, who perceived the regional rise of Iran and Shi'a empowerment in Iraq as a net loss for Sunni Arabs. As Iraq descended into internecine strife, these domestic

pressures on the monarchy grew in intensity and Sunni-Shia distinctions became more of a marker of political and social identity inside the kingdom.

Adding to the concerted opposition to the Shi'a by the Salafi establishment, the royal family grappled with the double-edged nature of political reform. On the one hand, calibrated and managed reforms, particularly in the cultural and religious realm, could serve to bolster the legitimacy of the ruling family and mitigate Iran's mobilizing appeal among the Shi'a. On the other hand, the monarchy recognized that Shi'a activists have frequently allied themselves with liberal and moderate Sunni reformers to demand political changes that the ruling family perceives as a threat to their survival—namely, constitutionalism. What resulted from this dilemma was a Janus-faced approach toward the Shi'a and reform more broadly after 2003: co-option into a nascent participatory institution, in tandem with a divide-and-rule strategy that exploited and excacerbated sectarian tensions. The fruits of this policy—the ineffectiveness of the National Dialogue and the weaknesses of the municipal councils—along with repeated delays in elections—enabled the rise of a younger, more radical generation of Shi'a activists.

What distinguishes Kuwait from Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are the co-optive and accommodative resources available to the ruling family. Most importantly, the legitimacy of the al-Sabah has long rested on a symbiotic relationship with powerful societal segments, especially the Shi'a merchant sector. In the post-2003 era, the greatest threat to Kuwaiti stability and a major enabler of sectarianism came not from Shi'a political or economic marginalization, but from Kuwaiti tribes and Salafis, who felt excluded from the urban "center" and grew increasingly resentful of the alliance between the al-Sabah and the Shi'a merchant class.

The country's quasi-democratic structures and media freedom proved to be mixed blessing in the midst of this tension. On the one hand, they provided a pressure release for sectarian passions and a buffer against the external chaos of the Iraq War and growing alarm over Iran. At the same time, this very openness seemed to encourage and harden sectarian identities in the emirate. This was particularly so after the parliamentary victory in 2008 of a tribal Salafi bloc, which launched a campaign to bring down the government of the reform-minded Prime Minister, whom it accused of neglecting Kuwait's rural *badu*. The resulting gridlock in the parliament was not so much the result of any shift in strategy by the Shi'a or their susceptibility to transnational influences. Rather, it was rooted in local power dynamics unique to Kuwait—the struggle between the *badu* and the *hadhar* and between the emergent Salafi opposition and the liberal Prime Minister. Sectarianism was deployed as the vocabulary in this struggle, but was not its immediate cause.

This dynamic became even more evident in the 2011 Arab Spring's manifestation in Kuwait—a markedly non-sectarian, external event that was the nonetheless interpreted through a

sectarian lens by domestic actors. The fact that the Kuwaiti Prime Minister adopted a somewhat neutral stance toward the intervention of the Peninsula Shield force into Bahrain, sending only a token amount of Kuwaiti assistance (and no ground troops), provides an important illustration of how domestic sectarian tensions constrain foreign policy choices. The decision also exposed him to even fiercer attacks by the Salafi parliamentary opposition.

The Role of Sunni Elites

This study has argued that sectarian primacy has generally not been one of the central pillars of official governance in the GCC. At the ideational level, Gulf regimes have historically deployed ecumenical forms of Islam and Arabism to buttress their standing, both domestically and within the broader inter-Arab and regional arena. That said, what has been distinctive about the post-2003 environment is that the norms of Arabism and Islam in the Gulf became increasingly conflated with Sunnism by a variety of official and semi-official actors. In all three countries—but especially in Saudi Arabia—this was largely a defensive reaction to the regional rise of Iran and its usurpation of causes that had traditionally been the sole purview of Sunni Arab powers. Additionally, at the level of sub-state and non-official actors, sectarianism has been used instrumentally, as a means to rally constituents or deflect criticism over failures of governance. For certain Sunni actors, such as the Salafi clerical establishment in Saudi Arabia, sectarianism provides real material benefits. It ensures their continued and exclusive access to political power. Any formal recognition of Shi'a identity—whether in the political, legal or cultural spheres—would effectively undermine this primacy.

In Bahrain, the collapse of the Saddam regime in Iraq left the country the one in the Arab world where a Sunni minority rules over a Shi'a majority. The ensuing civil war in Iraq became a form of political theater that compelled Bahraini elites and ordinary citizens to not simply observe, but to participate and re-enact in a highly partisan manner. In particular, Bahrain's Sunni parties were animated and, to a certain extent, radicalized by the effects of the Iraq War and the regional rise of Iran. The two main Sunni Islamist parties—*al-Minbar* and *al-Asala*—proved to be critical bulwarks for the regime in both managing and exploiting the sectarian aftershocks of the Iraq War. Later, under the umbrella of the National Unity Gathering, they acted as the regime's buffer against the Arab Spring and a Sunni counterweight to the Shi'a-led protests of early 2011. Contrary to the received wisdom about Islamist groups, the inclusion of these groups into the highly polarized parliament did not make them more fervent supporters of reform and democracy, but rather more entrenched supporters of the sectarian status quo.

In Saudi Arabia, the U.S. invasion of Iraq raised the specter of Shi'a mobilization to a degree that was not found in Bahrain and Kuwait. In the run-up to the war, there was growing

fear in Saudi officialdom that, inspired by Shi'a empowerment in Iraq or encouraged by Iran (or even the United States) the Eastern Province Shi'a might move toward secession. In addition, the Iraq War, the 2006 Lebanon War, and the Zaydi rebellion in neighboring Yemen created a domestic backlash among the Salafi clerical establishment, prompting increased vitriol against the Shi'a. Many of these figures, holding powerful positions in education, censorship and social affairs, were doctrinally opposed to Shi'ism and saw any formalization of Shi'a rights as a threat to their power. At the height of the Iraq War, several popular Salafi clerics agitated for a greater government role in defending Iraq's Sunnis from Iranian-backed Shi'a militias.

To close ranks with these figures, the monarchy tacitly permitted the proliferation of anti-Shi'a tracts, sermons and web statements, many of them recycled from the kingdom's ideological counter-offensive against the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Anti-Shi'ism thus became a useful normative weapon for the monarchy—a means to silence potential critics in the Salafi establishment and deflect popular sentiment away from the regime's failings. As the regime faced a growing threat from al-Qa'ida, this tactic grew in importance. Salafi clerics became useful interlocutors and allies for the regime in the ideological struggle to turn young Saudis away from al-Qa'ida and the "price" of this cooperation was increased regime tolerance for the clerics' anti-Shi'a outlook.

In Kuwait, Sunni oppositionists played a particularly deleterious role in stoking sectarian tensions, starting in 2005. During this period, the Sunni tribes effectively withdrew from their previous alliance with the royalty, supplanting the liberals as the al-Sabah's main adversary. For these oppositionists—many of them *badu* drawn from the environs outside Kuwait City—anti-Shi'ism became a "card" to discredit the royalty—specifically the more liberal leaning Prime Minister—and a tactic to win over the *hadhar* Sunnis by enforcing a sort of sectarian solidarity. Mounting regional tensions over Iran, Iraq and Hizballah enabled this tactic. Specifically, the Sunni tribal opposition repeatedly charged that the Prime Minister was not doing enough to assist Sunnis in Iraq and was being too partial to Iran's interests.

Like any social or political fissure, sectarianism is not an immutable feature of the Gulf landscape. In times of uncertainty and upheaval, it can cynically manipulated by elites and, increasingly, by highly partisan media. Similarly, its reverberations across national boundaries are felt the most in conditions of institutional weakness, among both the politically marginalized and entrenched elites. In many respects, therefore, sectarianism is ultimately a symptom or a bell-weather of deeply-entrenched, longstanding problems of governance in the Gulf: the

legitimacy gap of Gulf rulers, anemic participatory structures, and the uneven distribution of political capital. It is these deficiencies, rather than the national loyalty of the Shi'a or doctrinal differences between Islamic sects, that should properly dominate the agenda of future reform in the region.

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