



Saudi Arabia's Shiites and their Effect on the Kingdom's Stability

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A decade has passed since Saudi Hezbollah, known locally as *Ansar Khat al-Imam* (Followers of the Line of the Imam), bombed the Khobar Towers, a U.S. military housing compound, killing 19 soldiers and injuring 350 [1]. This attack brought dramatic attention to Saudi Arabia's Shiite community and its potential for political violence and terrorism. Today, in light of an emerging power in Iran, a Shiite-dominated Iraq and an intensifying Shiite-Sunni divide, **attention has returned to the Shiites of Saudi Arabia**. Although there is little evidence of Shiite militancy inside the Saudi kingdom at present, the violence between Shiites and Sunnis in neighboring Iraq remains intense and could spill over into Saudi Arabia. Indeed, the specter of confessional violence looms as homegrown Saudi Salafi-Jihadists and the fighters returning from the jihad in Iraq could clash with the quiescent Shiites living inside the oil-rich kingdom.

As many as two million Shiites live in Saudi Arabia, where they comprise 10-15% of the population [2]. Most Saudi Shiites reside in the oases of Qatif and al-Hasa in the Eastern Province, which is also home to the world's greatest concentration of oil assets and about 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's oil production [3].

Given the extraordinarily tight world oil supply and demand balance, the kingdom's critical role as a swing producer, which enables it to quickly increase output above normal production levels to reduce the risk of an energy shock in the event of a supply disruption, makes conflict between Salafi-Jihadists and Shiites in the oil-rich province a disturbing scenario not only for Saudi Arabia's oil industry, but also for the world economy [4].

Analysts have highlighted the potential for an "Iraq effect" in which the sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq spreads to Saudi Arabia [5]. Many observers in Saudi Arabia, including the Saudi leadership, have expressed concern regarding increased Shiite and Sunni tensions.

Sheikh Hassan al-Saffar, a former Saudi Shiite dissident and now head of the Shiite Reform Movement, warned recently in *al-Quds al-Arabi* "that confessional conflict in Iraq would move to Saudi Arabia if the Saudi Sunnis were emboldened by the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and the Saudi Shiites by the backing of the Shiites of Iraq" [6]. For this reason, it is useful to examine the relationship of Saudi Sunnis and Shiites to their co-religionists and neighbors in Iraq.

The Iraq Effect

With regard to the Saudi Sunnis, propaganda intended to embolden and encourage support for jihadis returning to the kingdom from Iraq continues to proliferate. On June 30, *al-Basha'ir* (the Glad Tidings), a Salafi-Jihadist media organization, posted a statement on the Lahdud forum entitled "who we are, what we want and what our relation is to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula" (*Terrorism Focus*, July 5).

The group identified itself as supporters of the mujahideen returning to Saudi Arabia from Iraq. Its stated objective is to establish an Islamic caliphate in the land of Muhammad and to remove the *murtadayeen* (apostates) and "crusaders." *Murtadayeen* refers to the Shiite population, in addition to other deviant sects.

Since Salafis interpret Shiite devotion to their religious leaders as apostasy or polytheism, Shiites are sometimes referred to by these terms in Salafi diatribes. Although al-Basha'ir claimed no direct link between itself and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda welcomed the group and echoed its call to remove "polytheists" and "cross-worshippers" from Saudi Arabia. Through implicit but clear references, these statements indicate that Salafi-Jihadists have taken aim at the kingdom's Shiites.

The perception by Saudi Sunnis that an alliance exists between the Shiite powerbrokers in Iraq and the United States against their Sunni brethren fuels anti-Shiite rhetoric and exacerbates sectarian tensions within Saudi Arabia. Saudi Sunnis generally sympathize with the Sunni insurgency in Iraq and the jihad waged by al-Qaeda in Iraq, which explicitly calls for and carries out attacks against Shiites. Subsequently, by supporting the Sunni insurgency, Saudi sympathizers at a minimum tacitly support anti-Shiite violence. Additionally, Saudi Salafi-Jihadists have an ideological basis for targeting Shiites.

Saudi Salafis find Shiite practices and beliefs blasphemous and have a long history of persecuting them both institutionally and culturally. The Salafis consider the Shiites apostates because they display adulation for their religious leaders in a way that the Salafis see as antithetical to the concept of *tawhid* (unity of God). Therefore, events in Iraq combined with pre-existing hatreds could trigger confessional violence in Saudi Arabia.

Alerted to the shared danger of returning fighters and a new balance of power in Iraq, in 2004 King Abdullah extended concessions to the Shiites, including the right to observe Ashura, one of the most important Shiite religious days, in exchange for cooperation with the regime.

Since the Iranian revolution, the Saudi regime has questioned the Shiites' loyalty. In the face of Shiite Iraq and Iran, the regime saw it wise to temper the Shiite community's disaffection due to their second class status by addressing some of their grievances. In addition, Iranian-backed Saudi Hezbollah seems to have tactically decided that political violence is not in their current interests and members of the organization are currently participating in King Abdullah's National Dialogue process.

Due to the Saudi government's crackdown following the Khobar attack, Saudi Hezbollah may have decided to participate in the National Dialogue process as a way to bide its time and rebuild organizational strength.

Regarding the perspective of Saudi Shiites in the Eastern Province, although Iran may exert some influence on the kingdom's Shiites, mainstream Saudi Shiites are much more attuned to Iraq than Iran. For example, due to their religious school of thought, ordinary Shiites generally follow their *marja* (source of emulation) or Grand Ayatollah for direction.

For Saudi Shiites, the most prominent *maraja* happen to be from Najaf. Despite Sistani, Najafi and other major clerics having their own personal *Hawzas* (Shiite Islamic academy) in Qom in Iran, a Saudi Shiite who travels for religious study to Qom is not necessarily entering the Iranian Shiite cultural orbit. On the contrary, this reflects loyalty to a particular *marja* and not necessarily to the Iranian regime.



The Saudi Shiite political leadership, however, has a complex set of political loyalties because several former Saudi Shiite dissidents went into exile in various stages starting shortly after the Iranian revolution and through the 1980s. Many spent time in Iran but many also left complaining that the Iranians were seeking to co-opt them as instruments against the Saudi regime. Many in this group then moved to Syria or Europe. In 1993-94, King Fahd made a deal with this group and they started returning to the kingdom.

This group of people, of which Hassan al-Saffar is generally considered the head, is known locally as the "Shirazis" because they used to follow the late Sheikh Shirazi as their marja. Sheikh Shirazi was a prominent Najafi cleric who, after being exiled from Baathist Iraq, eventually landed in Qom at the time of the Islamic revolution but notably took part only as an observer. The Shirazis seem to be the dominant political force in the Eastern Province Shiite community as they control all elected seats in the Qatif municipal council.

Adding further complexity, all the elected Shiite members seem to have advanced degrees from the United States.

Apart from the Saudi Shiite leadership, the pendulum on Shiite thinking and jurisprudence seems to be swinging away from Iran and back toward Najaf. With respect to which marja ordinary Shiites follow, anecdotal evidence suggests that 70-85% follow Sistani with the remainder split between Najafi, the two Shirazi camps, Khamenei, Tabrizi and Fadlallah.

According to a government source in Saudi Arabia who wished to remain anonymous, many Shiites claim that the issue of "Who is your marja?" is of less interest and importance to Saudi Shiites than in Iraq or Iran and many point out that they are not interested enough in the finer points of theology to feel a need to "emulate" anyone. There is, however, a definite consensus that Sistani's popularity has skyrocketed in the past five years and in 2000 perhaps 30-40% of Saudi Shiites might have had him as their marja.

The assassination of prominent alternatives (al-Khoei and al-Sadr) and Sistani's perceived statesman-like role in defending the rights of the Shiites in Iraq have won him great popularity.

Many observers hypothesized that there would be expanding links between the Shiites in the Eastern Province and Najaf. Yet there is little evidence in support of this theory. Unquestionably, the prestige of Sistani has grown in the province during the last several years. Clearly, a certain percentage of khums (taxes) collected in the province ends up in Najaf, probably in institutions mostly associated with Sistani. Again, according to anecdotal evidence, there is little intermarriage, no corpse traffic and little travel to Najaf (the latter mostly for understandable security reasons and the Saudi government's efforts to discourage travel to Iraq).

Shiite-Sunni Tensions

It is unlikely that Sunni and Shiite resistance would ever unite against the regime. Sunni Islamist opposition groups in the kingdom derive their ideology from the Salafi concept of tawhid and *takfir* (declaring one as an infidel). By this principle, the Salafis generally consider Shiites apostates and rejectionists, so cooperating with the Shiites from a Salafi point of view is anywhere from awkward to unacceptable. From the Shiite perspective, there is not much to be gained by an alliance with the Salafi-Jihadist opposition.

In their view, the Salafi-Jihadists will gain strength against the regime while the Shiites will lose the gains they have made through King Abdullah's National Dialogue process. Despite the concerns of sectarian violence erupting in Saudi Arabia, current evidence of this is limited.

There are reports indicating that unknown assailants torched three Shiite places of worship in Tarut Island in the Eastern Province as a Shiite delegation was meeting Crown Prince Abdullah in 2004 [7].

Even though Saudi Salafi-Jihadists have disseminated diatribes against the Shiites, labeled them apostates and rejectionists worse than Jews and "crusaders," and have even gone so far as to circulate rumors of assassinating the leading Saudi Shiite cleric, Hassan al-Saffar, nothing critical has taken place in the three years since the war in Iraq began [8].

Although there is still little evidence of returning Saudi fighters, there is cause for concern with respect to the oil industry. The oil target is a way to attack the Saudi regime, the West and, in the Eastern Province, also the Shiites since they comprise a considerable number of Saudi Aramco's manual labor force. If Saudi Salafi-Jihadists do in fact return home and inject new blood, energy and more sophisticated techniques into homegrown Saudi terrorist movements, it is very likely that there will be increased attacks on oil infrastructure, including the enormous and exposed water-pumping installations which Saudi Aramco depends on to pump crude oil from its aging supergiant fields in the Eastern Province.

Therefore, it will be important to monitor whether returning Saudi fighters breathe new life into the kingdom's Sunni insurgency. If the violent Salafi-Jihadists returning from Iraq decide to fight the Shiites in the Eastern Province, the effect on oil prices would be dramatic and devastating for the Western economies, thus giving the Saudi jihadis one more enticing incentive to bring confessional violence to Saudi Arabia.

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Notes

1. See 2001 FBI indictments and Anthony Cordesman's *Saudi Arabia Enters the 21st Century* for the best publicly available evidence of Saudi Hezbollah's complicity.
2. According to the latest figures of the CIA World Factbook, there are approximately 23 million Saudi Arabians living in the kingdom. There are no reliable statistics regarding the number of Shiites in the Saudi Arabia. Community leaders usually put the number around 1.5 million.
3. Matthew Simmons, *Twilight in the Desert*, p.117.
4. *Saudi Arabian Oil Facilities: The Achilles Heel of the Western Economy*, The Jamestown Foundation, May 15, 2006.
5. See Toby Jones, "The Iraq Effect in Saudi Arabia."
6. For more information on Sheikh al-Saffar visit www.saffar.org.
7. John Bradley, *Saudi Arabia Exposed*, p. 85.
8. See <http://www.d-sunnah.net> and <http://www.ekhlaas.info/forum/index.php>.