

 A Conflicts Forum Monograph

Why the Saudi Shiites Won't Rise Up Easily

By Leo Kwartan

June, 2009

Conflicts Forum: Beirut - London - Washington

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Summary

Shiite citizens face considerable religious, political and social discrimination in Saudi society. In the 1970s and 1980s, this situation has instigated bloody street protests and Shia calls for an Islamic revolution. Although the Saudi Shiites have considerably moderated their position since, these incidents still feed speculations about the impact the political emancipation of the Shiites in Iraq and the rise of Shiite Iran as a regional power will have on the Saudi Shiites. Do they feel emboldened enough as to put pressure on their government by pushing through their political demands more forcefully to the point of striving for secession from the Saudi state? Leo Kwarten strongly disagrees with this line of reasoning. Making use of interviews with local Shiite leaders, he argues that the Saudi Shiites are strongly aware of their limited political options and strive to improve their position first and foremost through dialogue with the government. At the same time, they ally themselves with other neglected minorities and liberals in Saudi society hoping to change the absolutist foundations of the Saudi kingdom into a more pluralistic one.

I – Shiite question or lack of political reform?

Is it now Saudi Arabia's turn to be dragged into a Sunni-Shiite confrontation? This question forces itself upon us after clashes broke out between Shiite Muslims, religious police and Sunni extremists in the holy city of Medina in February 2009. Eyewitness accounts reported that the confrontation was triggered when Shiite pilgrims wanted to visit a cemetery containing graves of Shiite revered figures. The Shiites accused the religious police of videotaping female pilgrims – an assault on their chastity – while Saudi officials claimed that the Shiite pilgrims were to perform rituals that were offensive to other worshippers and official Saudi religious doctrine which forbids the visitation of graves and cult of saints. During the clashes that followed, scores of Shiites were injured or jailed.

The heavy-handed approach by the religious police was badly received in the Eastern Province, where Shiites are the dominant population in cities like Qatif and the Al-Hasa area. In total, they constitute between 10 and 15 percent of the total Saudi population of 23 million. The events in Medina reverberated among the frustrated Saudi Shiites who have suffered discrimination, oppression and economic deprivation at the hands of the Saudi government for almost a century. They are the frustrations of a minority that is considered by the Wahhabi dominated clergy in Saudi Arabia to be inferior Muslims, infidels even, while the

Saudi rulers have always remained suspicious about the religious, cultural and political ties of the Shiites with co-religionists in Lebanon, Iraq and Iran.

Saudi Shiites have always felt caught between an exacted loyalty towards the Saudi rulers and an urge to political activism to achieve their rights as Saudi citizens. Occasionally, this led to violence. In 1979, the Saudi Shiites for the first time demonstrated in large numbers which led to the killing of more than twenty by the Saudi National Guard. It happened during a year of great political upheaval in the region, with Khomeini coming to power in Iran and the Grand Mosque in Mecca being seized by radical Islamists, although Saudi Shiites stress that it was local Saudi policy that made them rise up. Over the last two decades however, Shiite leaders have opted for constructive opposition, engaging in dialogue with the Saudi government and adding their weight to reform-minded groups in the kingdom. The most eminent Shiite leader, Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar, even refuses to speak of a 'Shiite question'. For him Shiite emancipation equals the right of any Saudi citizen to strive for political reform, regardless of his sectarian background.ⁱ

So when Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, a traditional leader in Awwamiyah, one of the poorest Shiite towns in the Eastern Province, uttered the 'c-word' during a Friday sermon in reaction to the events in Medina, he broke a taboo that had thus far preserved the sensitive relationship between Shiites and government to deteriorate further. 'Our dignity has been pawned away, and if it is not restored, we will call for secession', the sheikh angrily declared: 'Our dignity is more precious than the unity of this land.'ⁱⁱ While most Shiite leaders immediately distanced themselves from his words and hastily embarked on a visit to Riyadh to reconfirm their loyalty to the government, many frustrated Shiites offered their support for the sheikh on opposition websites. Sheikh Nimr himself went into hiding.

The timing of these tensions is most inconvenient. At a time that the leaders of pro-western Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan never seem to miss an opportunity to stress the 'threat' that is assumedly posed by Shiite Iran and its allies, they automatically cast doubt on the loyalty of the Shiite minorities in the Gulf. The Saudi Shiites especially are often depicted in both Arab and Western media as a fifth column of Iran who will rise up or engage in terrorism as soon as some ayatollah in Teheran snaps his fingers. The image of the 'radical, revolutionary Shiite' which penetrated the western mind through the poignant pictures of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 but has since gradually faded out, seems to have returned.

For example, Seymour Hersh, the distinguished American investigative journalist whose articles are generally devoured in the Arab world, wrote in *The New Yorker* in March 2007 about the close coordination between the US and Saudi Arabia in order to contain the growing influence of Iran. Building up his argument, Hersh uncritically adopts the view that Saudi Shiites work in tandem with the Iranians to destabilize the kingdom: 'Saudi Arabia has a significant Shiite minority in its Eastern Province, a region of major oil fields; sectarian tensions are high in the province. The royal family believes that Iranian operatives, working with local Shiites, have been behind many terrorist attacks inside the kingdom (...).'ⁱⁱⁱ

I am afraid that most of us may have missed the scoop of these alleged terrorist attacks. As a matter of fact, with the exception of a few minor incidents and the bombing of a housing complex in the Saudi city of Khobar in June 1996 in which 19 U.S. servicemen were killed, Saudi Shiites have never been mentioned in relation to terrorism inside Saudi Arabia. Even the Khobar bombing cannot be irrefutably contributed to Iran and its alleged 'Saudi agents'. William Perry, who was the US Secretary of Defense at the time, admitted in 2007: 'I believe that the Khobar bombing was probably masterminded by Osama bin Laden'.^{iv} Even the Saudi government itself preferred to link the bombing to 'Saudi Islamic militants, including many veterans of the Afghan War' rather than Iran.^v

The real issue here is that for most Western journalists and policy makers the Saudi Shiites are an unknown quantity. Assumptions that the empowerment of the Iraqi Shiites after 2003 will act as an encouragement to extreme Shiite elements throughout the Arab Gulf states, are not being substantiated in their articles and reports. As not many seem to make the effort to actually talk to the Shiite leaders in Saudi Arabia and study their political agenda and strategy, their position falls prey to wild speculations about which side they are on in the current regional power struggle.^{vi} If you do make the effort however, one finds that the discourse in the Shiite salons in the Eastern Province is less about revolution or secession but more about being accepted as full Saudi citizens and political reform within the current system.

II – The position of Shiites in Saudi Arabia

In February 2009, the Saudi government carried through an important reform by opening up the Supreme Council of Ulema (*Hay'at Kibar Al-'Ulama'*) to the Maliki, Hanafi and Shafi'i schools of Islam. Previously, the Council had been the exclusive domain of the ultra-conservative Wahhabi trend which is known for its rigor. The Wahhabis are named after the preacher Muhammad ibn Abd Al Wahhab who in the 18th century started an influential revivalist movement with the aim of cleansing Islam from pagan beliefs and innovations. In 1744, the sheikh entered into an alliance with the Al Saud thereby legitimizing the state building project which led to the foundation of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Today, Wahhabism wields a near monopoly in the judiciary, education and religious matters.

Extending the Council was a wise decision by the Saudi rulers as it reflects the religious plurality of Saudi society, but they unfortunately stopped short of including the Shiites. Besides all Sunni schools of Islam, the kingdom accommodates substantial Shiite minorities of 'Twelvers', Ismailis and Zaidis. However, none of the Shiite groups is represented in the Council, much to their disappointment and despite Shiite leaders' requests. Wahhabi attitudes towards Shiites in Saudi Arabia were adequately expressed by the recently appointed Imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca, Adil Al-Kalbani, nicknamed 'the Black Obama' for being the first black person in this position though perhaps not for his ideas. Calling Shiite clerics unbelievers (*kuffar*), Al-Kalbani further stated that 'Shiites are not entitled to be represented in the Supreme Council of Ulema'.^{vii}

Although the situation has slowly improved, anti-Shiite discrimination is still widespread in Saudi Arabia. This is most visible in the under-representation of Shiites in major official functions. In the cabinet reshuffle of February 2009, which was characterized by King Abdullah appointing several moderates and even a woman as deputy minister for Education, no Shiite was nominated. At the moment, there is no Shiite ambassador. In the 15-member Regional Council for the Eastern Province, where Shiites dominate demographically, they are represented by only one member. Some positions, e.g. in the judiciary, are blocked for Shiites. Jobs in police and military are rare. Promotion prospects for Shiites in companies in the public sector are poor.

Most of this sectarianism relates back to the Saudi conquest of the Eastern Province in 1913. Although the Shiites of Qatif and Al-Hasa surrendered peacefully, they were intimidated into subservience and acceptance of Wahhabi doctrine. Abd Al-Aziz bin Saud, the founder of Saudi Arabia, is said to have guaranteed religious freedom for the Shiites in exchange for loyalty. At a later stage however, he was under enormous pressure by the *Ikhwan*, the tribal warriors on whom the Al Saud came to rely heavily and who can be regarded as the ideological army of Muhammad Abd Al-Wahhab, to 'solve' the Shiite problem by forcefully converting them to the 'true Islam' and expelling those who refused.

Ibn Saud faced the dilemma every state builder faces, being caught between being loyal to the ideology which made the establishment of the state possible and taking the practical decisions to actually run the new state. He could not afford to simply expel the Shiites, or kill them as some fanatics demanded. On the other hand would his treatment of the Shiites be considered as a yardstick for his adherence to Wahhabism which was the very foundation of the Saudi state. As Fouad Ibrahim puts it: 'A tolerant stance towards the Shiites would inevitably endanger the legitimacy of Saudi rule.'^{viii} This dilemma is still actual today and seriously impedes the Saudi rulers' will and ability to address Shiite grievances while it preserves an environment that tolerates discrimination of Shiites and vile verbal attacks.

When explaining the situation in Saudi Arabia, Shiite leaders refuse to simplify Saudi society along the lines of a Sunni-Shiite divide with Shiites being the minority in a predominantly Sunni state. Instead, they point out that Wahhabism, although it dominates in the official religious domain, is the creed of perhaps not more than 25 percent of the Saudi population, leaving the rest of the population to be divided among the Maliki, Hanafi and Shafi'i schools of Islam (Sunnis), 'Twelvers', Ismailis and Zaidis (Shiites) and communities of Sufis. Although it is hard to substantiate this claim as no concrete statistical data are available, a totally different perception of Saudi society emerges, i.e. one that resembles Lebanon. Being a society of minorities, Shiite leaders claim, the legitimacy of the Saudi state can only rest on citizenship and equality for all and never on adherence to one particular Islamic school of thought.

That they have pledged loyalty to the Saudi regime but were nevertheless targeted by discrimination and curtailment of their religious freedoms still generates reactions of indignation among Shiites, especially the older generation. As a traditional leader stated: 'Qatif sits on the richest oilfields of Saudi Arabia

and generated the money to develop the whole country, but the Shiites don't profit at all. We have been reduced to second-class citizens in our own lands being dominated by an elite from Riyadh.'^{ix} A drive through the town is revealing enough. Despite being situated in the industrial heart of Saudi Arabia, the flashy shopping malls and beautiful corniche of Dammam ten kilometers further up seem to have abruptly stopped in Qatif which looks like a town in South Lebanon instead.

For young Shiites, the intake interview is one of the most difficult obstacles for getting a scholarship or a job with the government. Rejection often takes place once the Shiite profile of the applicant emerges from one's *curriculum vitae*, answers and appearance. This hampers integration into a society where the vast majority of the workforce is employed by the government. As a result, most Shiites work in the private sector or foreign companies. Even more damning in this respect are fatwa's by some extreme Wahhabi sheikhs who describe Shiites as *murtaddun* (apostates) and *rafidah*, literally 'deserters from Islam'. In June 2008, 22 well-known and distinguished Sunni clerics issued a statement in which they considered Shiites 'the most evil, hostile and deceptive trend in the Muslim nation.'^x

III – From revolution to dialogue

When I met Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar in his salon in Qatif in 2007, he didn't cast any doubt on the fact that the Saudi Shiites recognize the Saudi state and consider themselves Saudi citizens with the same rights and obligations as others. Downplaying the existence of a 'Shiite problem' he claimed: 'The disregard of Shiite rights in Saudi Arabia is part of a larger problem, that is the absence of political reform. This is a problem for the whole country, not only for Shiites. So once there is political reform, like democracy and respect for human rights, the Shiite problems will have been solved as well (...). Our strategy is to fully participate in Saudi society, open up to Sunnis and other confessions, and raise our issues with the government and the princes.'^{xi}

Sheikh Al-Saffar's discourse has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. As leader of the Organisation for the Islamic Revolution in the Arab Peninsula (*Munazzamat al-Thawrah al-Islamiyah fi-l Jazirah al-'Arabiyah*; OIR) in the 1980s, he had been deeply influenced by the events in Iran. Considering the Saudi regime 'illegal', Al-Saffar echoed Khomeini's words by declaring that 'Islamic revolution is a religious duty on all Muslims'.^{xii} He claimed that '(...) we are part of the realm of the downtrodden while the despots of Al Saud are genuinely part of the realm of the oppressors and colonizers. The ongoing battle is now between these two realms'.^{xiii} OIR's opposition towards the Al Saud was religiously inspired. Negotiations with a regime that, according to the Shiite leaders, 'violated Islamic teachings' were impossible.

The Islamic Revolution in Iran helped bringing about the political emancipation of the Saudi Shiites. However, it would do great injustice to their cause to depict their efforts as a mere local side show. The Saudi Shiites reached political maturity by themselves through a process that had already started in 1968. In that

year, the Movement of Vanguard's Missionaries (*Harakat al-Risaliyin al-Tala'i'*; MVM) was founded in Karbala, in Iraq, under the auspices of Ayatollah Muhammad Al-Shirazi (died 2001). Belonging to an eminent scholarly family and having authored more than 1,200 books, Al-Shirazi was the *marji' taqlid* (religious reference) to millions of Shiite Muslims. Until the end of the 1990s, the MVM was regarded as the second largest Shiite movement in the Arab world after the *Da'wa*-party.

The MVM strived for revival in Islam in a response to the failure of secular ideologies which were considered being responsible for political failure, economic deprivation and social inequality. Like other politically inspired religious movements at the time, both Sunni and Shiite, adherents to the movement turned to religion as a source for cultural identity and resistance to governments subjecting them to discrimination or neglect. For Shiites in Saudi Arabia, joining the MVM also became a protest against traditional clerics in the Eastern Province who justified quietism and endurance. For them staying out of politics was the best way to fend off even harsher repression by the Saudi government. The traditional trend still wields considerable influence among Saudi Shiites.

In 1974, Shiite leaders like Hassan Al-Saffar, Tawfiq Al-Saif and others joined the MVM in Kuwait, where Ayatollah Al-Shirazi had settled after having been expelled from Iraq. The next year, they founded the IOR as a movement that was ideologically synonymous with the MVM although several important differences set the movement apart from Khomeini's. For example, Muhammad Taqi Al-Mudarrasi who was nominated by Al-Shirazi to be MVM's spiritual leader, heavily relied on books of Sunni Islamists like Hassan al-Banna, Abul Ala Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. The Vanguard's Missionaries (*Al-Risaliyin Al-Tala'i'*) in the movement's name echoed Qutb's call to create an Islamic vanguard to root out *jahiliyah* (ignorance) and restore Islamic values.^{xiv}

Moreover, the 'Shirazi's' have always felt uncomfortable with Khomeini's view of *wilayat al-faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurists). As one of Shirazi's students explained: 'We support the idea of a committee of clerics who should rule according to Shari'a as long as the Mahdi hasn't returned, but we don't believe in concentrating political power in the hands of only one cleric issuing fatwas that all should obey.'^{xv} In practice, the Saudi Shiite leaders have always kept a certain distance to the revolutionary zealots in Iran and kept focussing on the local scene. Although they preached the revolution and were thrilled by the events in Iran, they never considered Khomeini's repeated calls to remove the Saudi regime by force as a feasible option.

This trend became stronger after the riots of 1979. The subsequent arrests by the Saudi security forces drove the Shiite leadership into exile, first in Iran and later in Syria. In hindsight, one could argue that the Iranian revolution offered an golden opportunity for the Saudi Shiite leaders to mobilise the masses in the Eastern Province and position themselves as the undisputed leaders of the Shiites at the cost of the traditionalists. After that, given demographic realities, the Iranian example rapidly lost its gloss. In the 1980s, the IOR gradually moved towards moderation, away from confronting the Saudi regime and supporting

dialogue instead. It withdrew from the MVM, reducing the political impact of Al-Shirazi's *marji'iyah* – and *marji'iyah* in general - on its decisions.

In 1991, the IOR changed its name into the Reform Movement, better known as *Islahiyah*. Its name reflects the new strategy of the Saudi Shiites. The concept of an Islamic state to be ruled by *wilayat al-faqih* – ideologically pure but hopelessly unattainable - was exchanged for a demand for political and religious pluralism (*ta'addudiyah*).^{xvi} Embarking on a platform for national reform calling for political participation and civil society was a pragmatic decision indeed. Opening up to liberals, Sunnis and other groups in the Saudi kingdom would turn *Islahiyah* into a kind of de-Shiitized national player who would stand a better chance to secure Shiite rights than an internationally oriented movement that could too easily be depicted as treacherous, disloyal and an 'Iranian agent'.

In 1993, four *Islahiyah*-leaders returned to Saudi Arabia on invitation by the late King Fahd in order to discuss their grievances. *Islahiyah* promised to close their offices abroad and stop criticizing the Saudi regime in exchange for the release of hundreds of Shiite prisoners, a safe return for exiles, restoration of Shiite religious rights and measures against discrimination. Several factors contributed to the viability of the dialogue. One of them was the ideological transformation from the revolutionary internationalism of the MVM to a strategy of gradual change by non-violent means. Equally important was the loyalty the Shiites showed to the Saudi leadership during the Kuwait crisis in 1990-1991 ignoring calls by Saddam Hussain to rise up.

Among certain groups of Saudi Shiites, *Islahiyah* was criticized for selling out Shiite demands. Fouad Ibrahim, who continued his opposition from London, sarcastically wrote: 'Though the overwhelming majority of *Islahiyah*'s members endeavoured to carry some gains back home to present to the people they defended, the priority was simply to go home in safety (...).' ^{xvii} Tawfiq Al-Saif, one of the leaders who negotiated with King Fahd, in 2007 explained: 'Our aim at that time was reconciliation (...). Of course we tried a wholesale solution, but we also knew that the circumstances would not allow us to have such a big deal. So we opted for some specifics, while other issues would be dealt with later. The king, so it seemed to us, was determined to have a solution.'^{xviii}

IV – Elections, *marji'iyah* and liberal opposition

Since 1993, the situation of the Shiites in Saudi Arabia has slightly improved. There is no longer a ban on the building of Shiite mosques, although building permits are hard to obtain. Religious manifestations like 'Ashura when Shiites commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, are tolerated in areas where Shiites are the majority like in Qatif and Al-Hasa, but still forbidden in places where Shiites are few, as is the case in Medina. Shiites have gained some terrain in the judiciary with the Saudi government approving a bill for personal law issues like divorce and inheritance to be regulated by Shiite courts without supervision by Wahhabi judges. 'Piecemeal solutions', according to Tawfiq Al-Saif: 'But but we believe that this will accumulate in a larger picture.'^{xix}

Not everybody is convinced however. Although Saudi Shiites in general are

positive about King Abdullah's intentions towards them, like they were about late King Fahd's, critics point to the obstacles put in front of them by the state's machinery which is still vehemently anti-Shiite. They claim that dialogue with the Saudi leaders hardly generates tangible results. Despite this criticism, *Islahiyah* still dominates the political landscape. In 2005, the movement which has officially been disbanded but lives on as a political trend, conclusively won the municipal elections in Qatif. The enthusiasm *Islahiyah* displayed to participate was in stark contrast to the lethargy towards the elections elsewhere in the kingdom.

Many Saudi Shiites felt for the first time in their lives being recognized as citizens by the state. *Islahiyah* mobilised voters through mosques and *diwaniyyahs* where candidates presented their programmes triggering discussions. The movement took four out of five available seats, leaving one seat for a traditionalist. It was not just a show of force, but also an opportunity for *Islahiyah* to prove its readiness to fully participate in society as ordinary Saudi citizens. It also showed *Islahiyah* as being the most organized of the Shiite movements, although the outcome of the elections does not really mirror the strength of other groups, like the traditionalists and Hezbollah. These have mainly kept aloof from involvement in state affairs and hesitated too long before participating in the elections.

As mentioned, the traditionalist trend still wields quite some influence in the Eastern Province. Until his death in 1992, Ayatollah Abu Al-Qasim Al Khoe'i in Najaf was the most important *marji'* among Saudi Shiites. He was a traditional who opposed Khomeini's principle of *wilayat al-faqih* declaring that this theory was an innovation without support in Shiite theology. After his death, his student Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani took over his position as the most eminent *marji'*. His current popularity among Saudi Shiites is mainly due to the fact that people in the Eastern Province are generally not very politicized and admire Sistani's reluctance to become involved in politics. Sistani does not reject the idea of *wilayat al-faqih* outright but promotes a much lighter version than Khomeini or his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Another student of Al-Khoe'i, Ayatollah Muhammad Hussain Fadlallah in Lebanon, is particularly popular among young, educated, urban Shiites in the Eastern Province. As a Saudi observer stated: 'Fadlallah is open-minded, modern and keeps good relations with other *marji's* and religious groups especially after he detached himself from Hezbollah in Lebanon.' Fadlallah's relatively modern views on women strike a nerve among Shiite liberals. It should be noted that IOR and later *Islahiyah* assigned women a crucial role in the movement and in politics and society in general. Generally, being rooted in an Arab country instead of Iran also works in favor of certain *marji's* in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

Looking for *marji'iyah* in Iran was in the 1970s and 1980s a relatively new phenomenon. When Khomeini launched his Islamic revolution in 1979, at a time when the *marji'iyah* in Iraq fell into decline, many were excited. Khomeini's popularity wasn't passed on to his successor Khamenei however. In Iran, the revolution died out and many Shiites returned to the traditional *marji's*. Except among more radical elements, notably Saudi Hezbollah, Khamenei does not have

much appeal these days. He is considered to be too political and therefore controversial. Officially, Saudi Hezbollah doesn't exist anymore. One of the former leaders, Sheikh Hassan Al-Nimr, now says that he represents a non-political group of Saudi nationals claiming their rights as civilians.^{xx}

Casting off its past as a militant, secretive and isolated group, it seems that there presently exists some confusion among Saudi Hezbollah members about what line to follow. Turning away from politics and concentrating on education, culture and community affairs instead, some want the movement to keep to its own, while others try to reach out to *Islahiyah* and other Shiite groups and manifest itself more on the national level. Sheikh Hassan Al-Nimr's remarks about Hezbollah's involvement in the elections were telling: 'Shiites were quite suspicious about the elections. We didn't know what the state's motives were. Personally, I was positive and tried to make others enthusiastic. In the end, a few of our people participated, but only as individuals not as an organisation.'^{xxi}

With respect to *marji'iyah*, there is a trend towards conservatism among Saudi Shiites, away from politics. Local leaders who had become politicized in the past 'now return to the old castle of conservatism', as one Shiite observer commented. At the top of the league is Sistani, followed by respectively Shirazi, Khamenei and Fadlallah. Ayatollah Muhammad Al-Shirazi, the religious reformer who gave the impetus to the foundation of the MVM, died in 2001. He was succeeded by his brother Sadiq Al-Shirazi, who follows a more traditional line. Upon the death of Ayatollah Muhammad Al-Shirazi, who had been his teacher, *Islahiyah*-leader Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar started to follow Sistani. In society however, leaders like Al-Saffar and Al-Saif who were influenced by the deceased Shirazi are still referred to as 'Shirazi's'.

Shaking off their ideological ballast helped the Saudi Shiites to reach out to other reform-minded groups in Saudi Arabia. Liberal Sunni intellectuals in Riyadh and Jeddah promoting human rights, transparency in government and political reforms within the Saudi system, are obvious allies. There are many contacts and meetings. For the Shiites, mixing their specific sectarian demands into a kind of national agenda is much safer than a unilateral approach. As Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar explains: 'We are careful not to put specific Shiite demands too high on the agenda. If you do that, like Shiites have done in Iraq and Lebanon, you are asking for sectarian problems. The situation could easily explode here, like it did in Iraq.'^{xxii}

Other allies are less obvious, but are badly needed for the Shiites to bridge the gap with the religious establishment. Wahhabi clerics and independent preachers (*sahwis*) are being invited to attend sessions in *diwaniyyahs* in the Eastern Province or to engage in public meetings and conferences. With some of them, Al-Saffar conducts a direct dialogue, like Sheikh Salman Al-Awda, a popular Saudi preacher who spent five years in jail for his criticism of the system but who is now quite close to the Saudi leaders. Although they share a lot of common interests, like respect for human rights and transparency in government, both sheikhs remain uneasy bedfellows. Only a few years ago, Al-Awda advised his pupils to stay away from Shiites as much as possible.^{xxiii}

Shiites are very active in liberal networks. Najib Al-Khunaizi, a Shiite writer,

in 2004 was one of the signatories of a petition to – then – Crown Prince Abdullah calling for political, economic and social reform. They suggested democratically electing the *Majlis Al-Shura*, the advisory council whose members are appointed by the king. Khunaizi was arrested. Another Shiite activist is Muhammad Mahfoudh. In 2007, he was the driving force behind a book titled *Dialogue Between Doctrines (Al-Hiwar al-Madhabbi)* in which leaders of various sects in the kingdom express their wish for peaceful coexistence.^{xxiv} Mahfoudh is an exponent of an emerging Islamo-liberalism: ‘The only way for us, Arabs and Muslims, to evolve and to progress is to combine Islam and democracy.’^{xxv}

The influence of these intellectuals remains limited as they lack the wide grassroots support of the religious sheiks. Their efforts nevertheless show the tendency within the Shiite leadership to cooperate with other groups that are critical of Wahhabi dominance in Saudi society. Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar voices the feelings of many when he says: ‘In the future, the foundation of the state should be extended to all confessions. Why should everybody be forced to follow one religious school?’ Radical Wahhabi clerics react fiercely, not only towards Saffar but also to colleagues who are prepared to sit down with Shiite intellectuals. Some of them even refuse to attend sessions of the National Dialogue which was launched the king in 2003, because Shiites would be sitting at the same table.

V – An uphill battle

The Saudi Shiites have come a long way in order to see themselves accepted as loyal, rightful citizens in the Saudi state. Long ago, a revolutionary international orientation was swapped for a nationalistic approach and acceptance that Shiite objectives will only be achieved gradually through peaceful means. Two decades of talking and petitioning have not generated a dramatic improvement in their position, however, while the rising sectarian tensions in Lebanon, Iraq and the region as a whole have substantially complicated matters for them. The empowerment of the Iraqi Shiites after 2003 hardly acts as an encouragement for the Saudi Shiites to press harder for their rights. On the contrary, it rather triggered sectarian tensions within the kingdom.

Sunni-Shiite tensions in the region are counterproductive to the strategy the Shiite leadership embarked on long ago. How can you build bridges with the conservative Wahhabi clergy at a time when Sunni governments warn of a ‘Shiite threat’ and hundreds of young Saudi men travel to Iraq ‘to kill Shiites’ whipped up by radical Wahhabi sheikhs on websites? At the same time, the patience of young Saudi Shiites eager for change is tested to the extreme. Frustrations may lead to groups of Shiites falling out with their leaders, although it is hard to see realistic political alternatives.

Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar reacted indignantly when asked to elaborate on suggestions I heard being made in some Shiite circles that American pressure on the Saudi government may work out positively for them. ‘Wrong’, he said. ‘The US is totally unreliable when it comes to defending human rights. How can you expect the US to defend Shiites in Saudi Arabia while they target them in

Lebanon?' Fighting an uphill battle, Sheikh Al-Saffar tirelessly stresses moderation: 'Each mistake we make, may lead to a sectarian eruption.'^{xxvi} His sober words should be food for thought for those indulging in geopolitical fantasies, both within Saudi Arabia and outside.

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ENDNOTES:

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- ⁱ Personal interview, Qatif, August 2007
- ⁱⁱ AP, 1 April 2009. See: <http://www.alshayeb.org/?act=news&sec=4&id=47&exp=0>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Seymour Hersh, 'The Redirection'. In: *The New Yorker*, 5 March 2007
- ^{iv} UPI, 6 June 2007. See: http://www.upi.com/Security_Industry/2007/06/06/Perry-US-eyed-Iran-attack-after-bombing/UPI-70451181161509/.
- ^v Yousef M. Ibrahim, 'Saudi Rebels Are Main Suspects In June Bombing of a U.S. Base', *New York Times*, August 15, 1996
- ^{vi} See for example Patrick Clawson, 'Iraq's Future: A Concept Paper', MERIA, vol. 10, no. 2 (2006)
- ^{vii} Interview with BBC Arabic in May 2009: "'Adil al-Kalbani yufakkir 'ulema' al-shia'a ...' For transcription in Arabic see: <http://www.bishanet.net/news-action-show-id-890.htm>.
- ^{viii} Fouad Ibrahim, *The Shi'is of Saudi Arabia*. 2006, p. 28
- ^{ix} Personal interview, Qatif, August 2007
- ^x www.almuslim.net, 1 June 2008
- ^{xi} Personal interview, Qatif, August 2007
- ^{xii} Ibrahim, p. 125
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 132
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 84
- ^{xv} Personal interview with Sheikh Muhammad Ali Mahfoudh, leader of the *Islamic Action Society* in Bahrain, Manamah, May 2007.
- ^{xvi} An influential book in this respect is Al-Saffar's *Al-Ta'dudiya wa-l Hurriya fi-l Islam* (Pluralism and Freedom in Islam), which he wrote in 1990 and gives away the author's openness towards the ideas of the liberal Iranian Islamic philosopher Abdol Karim Soroush. See also: Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*. 1999, p. 199ff
- ^{xvii} Ibrahim, p. 208
- ^{xviii} Personal interview, Dammam, August 2007
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} Personal interview, Dammam, August 2007
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxii} Personal interview, Qatif, August 2007
- ^{xxiii} Personal interview with Sheikh Salman Al-Awda, Bureidah, January 2002
- ^{xxiv} *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 1 May 2007
- ^{xxv} Stéphane Lacroix, 'Between Islamists and Liberals: Saudi Arabia's New "Islamo-Liberal" Reformists'. In: *Middle East Journal* 58, 2004: 3, p. 357
- ^{xxvi} Personal interview, Qatif, August 2007