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# When development threatens royal legitimacy

In the last year, an increasing number of news reports suggested that Saudi Arabia is in a financial bind. Scholarships for foreign study have been cut and government handouts lowered. Increasingly, the Kingdom is looking to diversify its economy and modernise its business sector. But is real development possible within a Saudi political system in which the Royal Family's legitimacy is largely rooted in maintaining the status quo? An examination of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a-majority Eastern Province provides some insight into that question.

The Eastern Province produces most of the country's oil yet enjoys significantly less development than other provinces. And as is often the case, less development is intertwined with fewer rights. The execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr on January 2, 2016 momentarily placed an international spotlight on the plight of Saudi Arabia's Shi'a minority, but the story was quickly overshadowed by the larger diplomatic fallout between Iran and the Kingdom.

## Saudi Arabia's compartmentalised acceptance of the Shi'a minority

How does a nation that incorporates an inherently anti-Shi'a doctrine into official religious discourse, tolerate approximately one million Shi'a? It does so by carefully compartmentalising its criticism of the Shi'a. The Wahhabi establishment directs its harshest criticism against Shi'a clerics and doctrine rather than everyday practitioners.

This aggressive stance against Shi'a doctrine falls just short of direct confrontation but is a symptom of the overall approach of Riyadh to governance. The Royal Family walks a tightrope between the liberalisation necessary for economic development and strong political ties with the West, and the more conservative demands of the Wahhabi movement. Saudi Arabia effectively coopted a majority of Wahhabi scholars into the government by employing them in official positions. However, the demonisation of the Shi'a also plays an important role in distracting the Wahhabi movement from what may otherwise be perceived as Royal misdeeds. The Shi'a then have the misfortune of serving as political scapegoats. Thus a Wahhabi-oriented pseudo-nationalism based on the leadership of the Royal Family acts as a unifier for Arabia's tribal society<sup>[1]</sup> but this is at the exclusion of the Shi'a and "the result is a pernicious, everyday sectarianism that afflicts ordinary citizens."<sup>[2]</sup>

## Evolution of the Shi'a response to persecution

Riyadh insists that all Shi'a activism in the Eastern Province is both inspired and directed by Iran. Because the center of gravity of Shi'a religious scholarship lies in the seminaries of Iran there is an inevitable link between the latter and the Saudi Shi'a. Ironically Riyadh's prohibition against establishing a Shi'a *hawza*, or seminary, only strengthened the ties between its Shi'a population and Iran. Framing the Shi'a movement for equal rights as an Iranian fifth column allows Riyadh to detract attention away from other contentious issues.

### Hollow olive branches

The royal pardon of exiled Shi'a activists in 1993 marked a sharp break in the style of resistance in the Eastern Province and the *Islahiyyun* or reformists were born.<sup>[1]</sup> An official national dialogue<sup>[2]</sup> took place between Sunni and Shi'a leaders but these initiatives have been "fundamentally cosmetic" according to most Shi'a accounts.<sup>[3]</sup> The Gulf War and awakening of a parallel anti-Royalist Salafi campaign known as the *Sahwa* movement marked a de-Shiitisation of demands<sup>[4]</sup> as the Shi'a movement shifted from a focus on Shi'a grievances to demands for general rights for all Saudis.

The strategy of nationalising demands has never once worked for the Shi'a and the Royal Family understands that any alliance between Wahhabi reformists and the Shi'a is untenable. The Shi'a have occasionally achieved some of their economic demands during transitional periods of dissent in Saudi politics but the status quo of marginalisation always returns and the Shi'a minority remain hostage to the ebb and flow of Saudi-Iranian relations.

Shi'a aspirations in Saudi Arabia are not radical. The right to work, build mosques, establish seminaries, participate in government, and worship publicly are the main Shi'a demands. Riyadh's traditional response to these demands is to (1) claim that Saudi Arabia is first and foremost a Wahhabi/Sunni state and all its subjects are held to those same standards; and (2) justify these restrictions as necessary due to a national security threat posed by the Shi'a.

The Royal Family has deceptively shifted its response towards dialogue and in some cases provided state protection in order to match newfound moderation on the part of the Shi'a. However, the vitriolic hatred that is sanctioned by the Royal Family in public schools and mosques channels the aggression of Wahhabi critics away from Riyadh.

Occasional protection from this aggression that the Royal Family extends to the Shi'a is merely a tool to remind the Wahhabi movement of its 'rightful' place, beneath the wishes of the King. Now a small number of Shi'a mosques are permitted to exist in the Eastern Province. But is a Shi'a truly equal in Saudi society when he may practice his faith publicly in the small village of al-Awamiyya but will be arrested for it in Medina? The answer is clearly that there is very little value in official protection of certain human rights within a national system that includes structural persecution.

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When the government of Saudi Arabia remains the single largest employer but rarely hires Shi'a then expansion of rights on paper provides no solace. When the Shi'a reside in the richest oil region of Saudi Arabia but most funds are diverted to other areas then any national dialogue is rendered irrelevant. As Booker T. Washington asked in his book *Up From Slavery*, "Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men?"<sup>[1]</sup> His answer was an emphatic 'No.'

### Conclusion

The case of the Shi'a of the Eastern Province is not the only fault line within Saudi society. Divisions between radical Salafism and royalist Wahhabis also threaten the dominion of the Royal Family. This is in addition to the general societal issues of the role of women, rights of foreign workers, and ability to participate in government.

The case of the Shi'a is special in that it demonstrates the intersection of rights and development while revealing that the latter may be at odds with Saudi royal legitimacy. For its part, the West bears some responsibility for the plight of all those disenfranchised in the Saudi system. So long as the West continues to criticise regional nations, like Iran, that allow women in government and permit relatively-free practice of religion but turn a blind eye to Saudi Arabia, then Riyadh receives a green light to continue its oppression. Choosing to deal fairly with the Shi'a of the Eastern Province is a gamble for the Royal Family. However, if the Royal Family chooses to prevent Saudi Arabia from developing into more than the petrol station of the West then eventually, economic collapse will ensue and its legitimacy will nevertheless be jeopardised.

<sup>[1]</sup> Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, 1, 111 (Dover Publications, Reprinted: 1995).

<sup>[1]</sup> Wehrey at 7.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Toby Matthiesen, *Hizbullah al-Hijaz: A History of The Most Radical Saudi Shi'a Opposition Group*, 64 *Mid. E. J.* 2, 189, 195 (2010) (documenting the history of the rise and fall of Hizbullah al-Hijaz in Saudi Arabia).

<sup>[3]</sup> Wehrey at 7-9.

<sup>[4]</sup> See Leo Kwarten, *Why the Saudi Shiites Won't Rise Up Easily*, *Conflicts Forum* (2009) (discussing roadblocks in organized dissent of Saudi Shi'a).

<sup>[1]</sup> See Joseph Nevo, *Religion and National Identity in Saudi Arabia*, 34 *Mid. E. S.* 3, 34, 47 (1998) (describing the link between Wahhabi doctrine and nationalism in Saudi Arabia).

<sup>[2]</sup> See Frederic Wehrey, *The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia*, *Carnegie Endowment*, 1, 2 (2013) (discussing mass protest by the Shi'a of the Eastern Province in 2011)

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